



# A Cookie Is at the Center of a Lonely Woman's Fortunes in "Fremont"

NEWS

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PARK CITY, UTAH – JANUARY 20: (L-R) Chris Martin, Rachael Fung, Babak Jalali, Sudnya Shroff, Laura Wagner and George Rush attend the 2023 Sundance Film Festival "Fremont" Premiere at Prospector Square Theatre on January 20, 2023 in Park City, Utah. (Photo by Steven Simione/Getty Images)

By Peter Jones

"A ship at harbor is safe, but that's not why a ship is built."

If that sounds like tired wisdom from a fortune cookie, it is — sort of.

When Donya, a young Afghan refugee, is promoted to chief fortune writer for a Chinese-owned cookie factory, her bland therapist seems to think he can get through to the stoic insomniac if he counsels her with his own self-penned fortune-cookie cutouts.

Donya just wants a refill on her sleeping pills.

This woman's safe "harbor" is a lonely workaday existence, broken up only by flat conversations with her chain-smoking apartment neighbor, the detailed life and times of a talkative co-worker, and her dinners alone at a desolate Middle Eastern eatery to the company of Arab soap operas.

The 20-something single woman lives alone in Fremont, an industry-driven Bay Area city where more than half the population is of Asian descent. The town is a supporting character in the film, aptly called *Fremont*, which premiered January 20 at the 2023 Sundance Film Festival.

*Fremont* is the film debut for Afghani Anaita Wali Zada, who plays Donya with earnest realism. In the Q&A after the screening, Iranian director Babak Jalali says it was a "miracle" that he found such a perfect person to play the lead part.

"We saw a lot of potential people for this role — and then she appeared," Jalali says. "I Zoomed with her, and then I heard her whole-person story, which is not too dissimilar to Donya's."

Zada is remarkable in the role, even if she is effectively playing herself.

"[English] is not my first language. I'm trying my best," she says. "... I'm glad to be a part of this contemporary movie. We all know about Afghanistan, what's going on. I hope women in Afghanistan will receive their rights."

Veteran character actor Gregg Turkington plays Donya's earnest but ineffective therapist. In working with the first-time actor from Afghanistan, Turkington says he had to turn down his usual tendency to broadly improvise.

"I was really struck with her as an actress and as a person," he said, "and I realized that improvising dialogue is not going to work because she's memorizing the script, sometimes possibly syllable by syllable. For me to come in and just go off is not going to work."

Shot in stark black and white, the offbeat drama's atmospheric darkness sums up the essence of Donya's colorless life. The former translator for the U.S. military now just makes it up as she goes along, crafting random after-dinner insight for Americans in Chinese restaurants.

As she tries to convince her therapist, Donya is too busy with her "social life" to think about whether she had ever been a traitor to her people.

One day, troubled by the past and longing for some kind of future, lonely Donya sends out her own special message to the world in one of her fortune cookies.

Replete with quirky people and droll wit as gray as the cinematography, *Fremont* never loses its empathy for the lead character — Donya, though Fremont fares well also.

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