

Synopsis

"Eye Candy" by Sarah Lumba-Tajonera is the story of a self-righteous forty-something banker who is living a contented life—or so she thinks. For in a high-class restaurant, she becomes a voyeur, keenly observing a cougar and her boy toy's every move. The May-December affair riles her sensibilities and pushes her to doubt her own sense of right and wrong. But more than that, it stirs up desires she thought had long been buried in the past.

Eye Candy
Sarah Lumba-Tajonera

It was the kind of place where ladies kept their backs straight and their legs crossed the whole time. Ceramic tiles on the floor, a pattern of snowflakes in burnt orange and green; sconces on brick walls, silver on linen; at the center of it all, a wrought iron chandelier. It was like dining in church, Maya thought. And so, to show some reverence, she ordered a glass of merlot, instead of her usual iced tea.

When her drink arrived, she went through the motions, first raising her glass and holding it up against the light as if consecrating it to some higher power, and then lowering it on the table to gently swirl the red liquid around. After a second or two, she raised it again, this time closer to her face, the wine almost touching her nose. She took a sniff and took a sip. Was it rounded or semi-fruity? Or rich with a hint of oak and spice? Maya, for the life of her, never bothered to learn such subtleties. But she knew that all these little gestures mattered. The dim yellow lighting and the distance between the hardwood tables gave the restaurant some semblance of privacy, but Maya was certain people were watching. It was that kind of place.

Under the chandelier, the place of honor, a group of middle-aged women in *batik* skirts and giant wooden beads or pearls around their white necks, wives of diplomats, Maya guessed, spoke in hushed tones. On the next table, a young lady and her date held hands, half-eaten steaks on their plates momentarily forgotten. Soft piano music played in the background. A waiter in his crisp white shirt stood nearby, eyes alert for a helpless glance, a missing cutlery, a glass half-empty. Across the room from where Maya sat, a huge hand-etched glass mirror hung. She could imagine a smaller version of it in the rest room, together with a wide porcelain sink perhaps, a woven basket for trash, a bronze latch. Maya leaned back on her upholstered seat and smiled to herself. She liked places that were so put together.

It was the cackling that drew her attention toward the corner near the wine rack—the confident laugh of a woman with money to burn or an old witch ready to devour her prey. A well-preserved witch, Maya saw, with hair the color of chestnut, skin like ivory, eyebrows carefully sculpted. A bit lumpy in the middle—the midnight blue peplum dress wouldn't hide that—but still shapely. Maya glanced at the woman's companion. He was much younger than anyone else in the room.

“Oh, Andrei, this place is just lovely,” she heard the witch say, his name, so European, so romantic, Maya thought, that it made her husband’s sound so old, unmanly even. And the way the witch said it, *Oh, Andrei*, said it with so much breath as if she’d just climaxed or experienced some spiritual awakening right there and then. Why, it riled Maya in some way and stirred something else in her that she could not quite put a finger on. Instinct set in. She rifled through the files in her head. She always had a need for order, to put everything in neat little columns: profit and loss, asset and liability, henpecked husbands and philanderers.... This was how she had always balanced the books, had always kept a well-balanced life. Ah, there it was! The perfect column for the witch, with the Demi Moores and the Chers of the world, waiting for fresh meat to arrive while lazing in stilettos in their parlor. Maya quickly tossed her in there and glanced at her watch. It was already past seven. Richie was late again.

The waiter arrived with a complimentary basket of warm bread. “Looks great, thanks,” she told him automatically. *Looks great, That’s great, Great job*—words she relied on whenever there was really nothing to say. She knew they made people feel good and kept her from overthinking things. She used them for just about anything in the office—the new AVP’s proposal for downsizing, the purchase of a new photocopying machine, her boss’s plan to re-arrange his own desk—everything was just plain great in the office. Those words, together with all her little gestures in her fifteen years at the bank, the way she, with hands loosely

clasped in front of her skirt, listened to her assistant's marital woes, how she patted the little backs of underlings in the elevator just to say hi, the little key chains and fridge magnets she gave away to managers after her annual trips abroad...all these gave her an edge, assuring her of a comfortable retirement. People always remembered those little, meaningless things.

She took another sip and called Richie on her smartphone. He was not picking up. Another long-drawn conference call with Frankfurt or London, she figured. She should be used to it by now, she supposed, all that waiting for him in restaurants or at home. Most nights he came home tired from wining and dining stakeholders from their branches around the globe or from managing people and covering his ass the whole day, he would always say. She shouldn't complain, she knew. Their life, so far, had been great.

There was the cackling again. How annoying it must be to be in bed or in the hot tub with someone who sounded like that, Maya thought. Andrei didn't seem to mind. That kind of woman was a conquest, a check mark on a young man's bucket list. Young fools like him were always in search for someone to both mother and smother them with warm expert kisses plus a Gucci pair or two. She looked at the witch again who was waving the waiter over with determined strokes, loose skin jiggling under her arm. Someone accustomed to ordering

people around, Maya figured. At least VP level or an utterly pampered housewife. Her companion was indeed beautiful—thick eyebrows, a finely chiseled nose, a well-defined chest that seemed ready to burst from his shirt—but Maya would have thought that someone of her stature, well, no less than separated directors or lonely expats would do. He wasn't a call center agent—no, he didn't have that unhealthy paleness on him—or worse, an insurance salesman. He looked more self-assured, with some thinking going on up there. An artist, perhaps? At best, an entrepreneur with a staff of two. She noticed his chest again and imagined the perfect companion for that: a well-rounded behind nicely squeezed into a pair of skinny jeans. What am I thinking? Maya scolded herself. She quickly finished her drink and asked for the menu. She was getting hungry.

Everything looked good on the menu. *Pork sisig with quail eggs, kitayama beef with mushrooms, sprinkled with roasted garlic...* But it had to be a salad again that night. She sighed. There was no joy in trying to squeeze out some heavenly grease from arugula, but she felt bloated again. Her hormones had betrayed her when she hit her thirties, and so she had decided some years back that it was simply time for her to start eating like a goat.

When she looked up, all the guests' faces seemed flush. The diplomats' wives held their glasses of wine or San Miguel halfway in the air, a chuckle or

two escaping from their loosened tongues. The young couple next to them was in a hurry to leave. A date gone awry, it seemed. Then Maya's eyes strayed again toward the corner of the restaurant. She caught Andrei reaching out to stroke the witch's cheek. Maya quickly looked away.

How childish! she thought as she fidgeted with her linen napkin. So inappropriate! She would hate it, for sure, if Richie would touch her like that in a public place. Not even in front of the children! It was an unwritten rule. Sure, when they were young and naïve, when on a whim, they would drive up to Antipolo, binge, then fall asleep in the car or on some hill overlooking Marikina, and upon waking up, she would rub his flat tummy, play with his hair, and they would walk in for coffee with hair disheveled, still with morning breath, and she would revel in the envious glances of lonely waiters doomed to the morning shift, sure. But now, there was no need for that. There was no need when one felt secure.

She tried to focus on the menu again. Maybe not just a salad for tonight, she began bargaining with herself. How about an appetizer, just a slice or two of crab cake? Or some teensy-weensy fried *lumpia* served individually in those little shot glasses—just a bite or two, she swore to herself. Richie could finish the rest. She quickly motioned to the waiter, already imagining the taste of meat in her

mouth. But at the very last second, reason prevailed. She ordered the salad with spicy tomato sauce instead.

When the waiter left, Andrei was gone. Outside for a cigarette break, she figured. The witch, looking amused and fiddled with her pearl earring while looking through the tinted glass windows in front. Was she watching him, Maya thought, making sure nobody steals him away? Was she thinking of how lucky she was or how she was going to undress him that night? What could couples like them talk about anyway after the undressing and the heaving and all those *Oh Andrei?*

The witch's order arrived. Maya watched her smile at the waiter and saw a few crinkles appearing near the sides of her mouth. Maya instinctively touched her own lines, crow's feet that suddenly showed up after she had her second child. It was not the only token of motherhood she had. There was the grey hair that had begun to sprout here and there, nothing though that could not be solved by a trip to her stylist; and the ten or so stubborn pounds that have chosen to remain on her hips. There were still a few men who looked at her, she knew, reluctant predators but predators nonetheless, with leaner bodies and faster cars. They circled her workstation, inviting her for a Starbucks run, a working lunch, a cigarette break in-between meetings. They knew she was married, of course, but

men, well, they are insatiable. Sure, she had thought about it—what married woman hasn't? But it was an idea easily tossed out of her mind.

She recalled the first time she and Richie met—oh, that seemed like eons ago!—one of those office parties thrown by her boss. There was Richie in his crisp polo and paisley necktie, a new hire rushing straight from work, both of them reluctant guests...Richie and his piercing eyes and those dark wavy locks that grazed his forehead, curled around his ears, and rolled lazily toward his nape.... She remembered that night quite well—a time for exhilaration and *carpe diems* it was! She gushed when they were introduced, so unprepared was she for him and his glorious hair, a rare sight in the bank, a sea of receding hairlines and greasy comb overs. But those kinds of time, those had already passed. For Maya, life moved in a linear path. There was a time for childish games, but at her age, it was already time to settle down and grow in wisdom. One could always look to the past if there were ever a need to feel alive.

And what about the children? she thought. What about those fifteen or so years invested in just one man? What will other people say? As the witch powdered her nose, Maya felt a growing irritation. There was simply no excuse—no excuse whatsoever!—for bad behavior for a woman their age. She was

glaring at the witch without realizing it. *Not the time, not the time*, the phrase kept playing in her head that she didn't realize the witch had already closed her compact and was looking straight at her.

Their eye contact was brief. But there was an exchange, an immediate understanding between them, the way it had always been among women. Maya controlled her breathing, her face unflinching, the pride in her conviction winning over the shame of being caught. The woman slowly sat taller and held her chin high.

Her phone rang. It was Richie. He was five minutes away. Maya picked up her purse and stood up to go to the rest room. She bumped into someone rushing out of the passageway, and her purse fell. "Oops, sorry," a man said and picked it up. He smelled of sandalwood with a hint of lemon. Maya looked up and there was Andrei and his well-moisturized face and his hair all ruffled, glorious. She said a quick thank you and closed the rest room door behind her.

The rest room was clean but disappointing. White tiles. White light which could not conceal huge pores or dry patches on skin. A nondescript mirror in

front of the American Standard sink. She washed her hands and then began to powder her nose. Her face was flushed. It was the wine, she was certain.

As Maya walked back to her table, she saw them from the corner of her eye one last time. The woman was whispering something in Andrei's ear. Then he looked at her as if she was the only one in the room.

Maya walked quickly back to her table. Her salad had arrived. She stared at the fresh leaves and the generous amount of blue cheese. She couldn't eat just this, not for tonight.

Richie arrived at the restaurant a few minutes after. When he entered, he carried with him the weight of all his years. His hair, his flat tummy, the sparkle behind his eyes gone, all gone. Nobody noticed him, save for his wife. Maya stood up to meet him. She kissed him firmly on the lips, kissed him with her wet, needy lips, trying to bring back what had been lost before it was too late, before she was too old to want.

Richie kissed her back but noticed nothing. And though she didn't see if anyone was watching them, Maya felt someone cackling behind her.