



## Sp. W

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hopping john and almost anything you could name would have put this generation of take-out brides to shame if they had any. Every house had an L kind of cook in it once. Now, well, it's all over. People wait for July 4 or Thanksgiving to give their kitchens proper respect.

Otherwise they go to Maceo's Café Ria and hope L hasn't dropped dead at the stove. She could. Probably will because nobody is older. Not an original tooth in her head, so she hasn't eaten a thing but combread dipped in pot liquor since 1978. Well, she does like those

[STORYVOICE] like at Christmas. She walked three miles to Café Ria for X years--then her feet swole up and she quit again. Maceo, who saw

The sign read "Maceo's Café..ria" but the diner belonged to L Indeed, if not in deed. She was still cooking there when Bill Cosey died but his funeral flowers were still fresh when she fell out with his widow.

Later, much to the relief of everybody in Harmony, L agreed to Maceo's pleading. He had a certain reputation for fried fish (sooty black and crisp on the outside; flaky tender on the inside) but his side orders let you down every time. What L did with okra, with sweet potatoes,

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hopping john and almost anything you could name would have put this generation of take-out brides to shame if they had any. Every house had an L kind of cook in it once. Now, well, it's all over. People wait for July 4 or Thanksgiving to give their kitchens proper respect. Otherwise they go to Maceo's Café Ria and hope L hasn't dropped dead at the stove. She could. Probably will because nobody is older. Not an original tooth in her head, so she hasn't eaten a thing but cornbread dipped in pot liquor since 1978. Well, she does like those peppermint sticks at Christmas. She walked three miles to Café Ria for X years—then her feet swole up and she quit again. Maceo, who saw his life's work as empty as the rickety tables drove to Up Beach to get her and persuade her once more to save him. Now he picks her up everyday and L sits in a high chair with wheels, scooting from stove to sink to cutting table. Her feet are OK now but she's used to the wheel transportation and won't give it up.

She's through talking too. Says it wears her out. So a conversation with her is mostly you talking while she hums. Not loud,



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though. L hums softly and you feel encouraged by this background music and tell her all you know or heard of. Anybody who remembers what the L stands for is dead by now and its hopeless to inquire. Even children—who have a world of time to waste—don't ask her anymore. Some said it was short for Ellen, or Ellie or Elvira but can't anybody recall a time when she didn't take the usher's pencil and sign her tithe envelopes with an L We gave up. Like we gave up calling Maceo's Maceo's, or supplying the missing letters. Café Ria is what it's known as. And L glides there still.

The food is displayed in steam trays, and after your plate is heaped you take it to the cash register for cost analysis done by Maceo, his wife or one of his no-count sons.

The girl--she called herself Toby-- came in one Sunday just before church let out. She walked the length of the steam table checking the menu with the kind of eyes you see on a "Save This Child" commercial. L, her work finished and waiting for Maceo, was blowing cool air on a cup of pot liquor before dipping her bread in. Through

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the kitchen door—never closed—she saw Toby pacing before the food trays—like a panther or some such. The big hair Sandler Gibson saw she was gone. Tk And although the leather jacket still covered her upper half, the skirt was a see-through, flowery thing swinging just above her sandals. gave her change at the register. Then she looked right at him

and One of Maceo's no-count boys waited while Toby made up her mind. He never opened his lips to say good afternoon may I help you? anything in particular? or any of the welcoming things you're supposed to greet customers with. L [said she?] just cooled her liquid and watched to see which one would behave normal first. car and get her

home Toby did. customer lines started forming. Theo was dribbling air balls Her must have been for herself and Heed because Christine is a champion cook. Anyway she chose three sides, two meats, one rice pudding and one chocolate cake. Maceo's boy, Theo they call him, smirking more than usual, moved from the cash register to load up the styrofoam plate, carelessly or deliberately letting the stewed tomatoes slide over the plate's partitions to discolor the potato salad, forking the



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barbecue on top of the gravied chicken. ("Only dark meat," she'd said.) L said she got so heated watching Theo disrespect her food she dropped her bread into her cup where it disintegrated like sand.

CHAI Toby never took her eyes off the food. Never met Theo's eyes until he gave her change at the register. Then she looked right at him and said "I expect you do better with a posse. You seem kind of helpless by yourself."

help Theo said something mean to Toby's back but it fell flat with no audience insight to appreciate it.

throw When Maceo walked in ready to bundle L into his car and get her home before customer lines started forming, Theo was dribbling air balls in his dream court behind the register as if he'd just been signed by the X and a cereal company too.