



## Sp. W: L

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July 28, 2000

L

The sign reads "Maceo's Café..ria" but the diner belongs to me. Indeed, if not in deed. I had been cooking for Bill Cosey tk years when he died but his funeral flowers were still fresh when I fell out with his widow. Later on I stopped working for tk and gave in 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 I do with okra, with sweet potatoes, hopping john and almost anything you could name would have put this generation of take-out brides to shame if they had any—which they don't. Every house had a serious 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 I ain't dropped dead at the stove. I could.

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Probably will because nobody is older. Not an original tooth in my head, so I haven't eaten a thing but cornbread dipped in pot liquor since 1978. Well, I do like those peppermint sticks at Christmas. I used to walk the three miles to Café Ria—then my feet swole up and I had to quit. A few weeks into my bad health, Maceo stopped in and said he just couldn't take the empty tables any more. Said he was willing to drive back and forth to Up Beach every day if I would save him one more time. I told him it wasn't only the walk; it was standing too. But he had a plan for that, too. So I work in a high chair with wheels, scooting from stove to sink to cutting table. My feet are fine now but I got used to the wheel transportation and don't plan to 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, 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.



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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.

Women in love like the place a lot. Over iced tea with a clove in it, they join girl friends to repeat what he said, describe what he did and guess what he meant by any of it.

He didn't call me for three days and when I called him he wanted to get together right then! See? He wouldn't do that if he didn't want to be with you. Oh, please. When I got there we had a long talk and for the first time he really listened to me. Sure he did. Why not? All he had to do was wait til you shut up then he could work his own tongue. I thought he was seeing what's her name. No, they split. You lying! He asked me to move in. Sign the paper first, honey. I don't want anybody but him. It's like that huh? Well no joint accounts, hear? You want

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porgies, or not?"

They spice the lunch hour and lift the spirits of broken-hearted men eavesdropping at nearby tables.

There are no waitresses at Café Ria. 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 those "Save This Child" commercials. L, her work finished and waiting for Maceo, was blowing cool air on a cup of pot liquor before dipping her bread in. Through 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 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 boots.

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?



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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.

Toby did.

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

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."

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Theo said something mean to her back but it fell flat with no audience in sight to enjoy it.

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.