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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. 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.

I'm through talking too. Like I've said, a conversation with me is you talking while I hum. Anybody who remembers what my real name is is dead now and nobody inquires. Even children—who have a world of time to waste—don't ask me anymore. Some think its Louise, or Lucille because they used to see me take the usher's pencil and sign my tithe envelopes with an L. Others, from hearing people mention or

call me, believe its Ellen or Elvira. L is fine with me. Anyway, they gave up. Like they gave up calling Maceo's Maceo's, or supplying the missing letters. Café Ria is what it's known as. And I glide there still.

Women in love like the place a lot. I hear them. 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 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 Junior-- 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. I had finished my work and was waiting for Maceo, resting by the sink and blowing on a cup of pot liquor before dipping my bread in. Through the kitchen door--I never closed it--I could see the girl pacing before the food trays--like a panther or some such. The big hair was gone. Tk And although the leather jacket still covered her upper half, and her skirt was long, it was a complete see-through, a flowery nothing swinging just above her boots.

One of Maceo's no-count boys leaned up against the wall while Miss Junior 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. I just cooled my liquid and watched to see which one would behave normal first.

She 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 wall to load up the styrofoam plate. He let the stewed tomatoes slide over the compartments to discolor the potato salad, and forked the barbecue on top of the gravied chicken. ("Only dark meat," she'd said.) I got so heated watching Theo disrespect my food I dropped the bread into my cup where it disintegrated like sand.

Junior never took her eyes off the trays. 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."

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 me into his car and get me back home before the after-church 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 the Wheatie people too.