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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 close to fifty years when he died and his funeral flowers were still fresh when I turned my back on his widow. I'd rather starve and I took in laundry so I wouldn't have to. But having customers running in and out of my house was too bothersome so I gave in to Maceo's pleading. He had a certain reputation for fried fish (sooty black and crisp on the outside; flaky tender 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 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; somebody who toasted bread under an oven

flame not in an aluminum box; somebody who beat air into batter with a spoon instead of a machine. Now, well, it's all over. People wait for July Fourth or Thanksgiving to give their kitchens proper respect. Otherwise they come to Maceo's Café Ria and hope I haven't dropped dead at the stove. I used to walk all the way to work until my feet swole up and I had to quit. A few weeks into daytime tv and my bad health Maceo knocked on the door and said he couldn't take the empty tables any longer. Said he was willing to drive back and forth between Up Beach and Silk every day if I would save him one more time. I told him it wasn't only the walk; it was standing as well. But he had a plan for that, too. He got me a high chair with wheels, so I could scoot from stove to sink to cutting table. My feet healed but I got so used to wheel transportation I couldn't give it up.

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 anymore. Some think it's 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 it's El for 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.

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

He didn't call me for three days and when I called him he wanted to get together right then. See, there? 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. 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?

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

We never had waitresses at the diner. 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. Then you

can eat here or take it on home.

The girl with no underwear—she calls herself Junior—comes in a lot. The first time I saw her she looked to me like somebody in a motor cycle gang. Boots. Leather. Wild hair. Maceo couldn't take his eyes off her either—had to lid her coffee twice. The second time was on a Sunday just before church let out. She walked the length of the steam table checking the trays with the kind of eyes you see on those "Save this Child" commercials. I was resting by the sink and blowing on a cup of pot liquor before dipping my bread in. I could see her pacing like a panther or some such. The big hair was gone. It was done up in a million long plaits with something shiny at the tip of each one. Her fingernails were painted blue and her lipstick was dark as blackberries. She still wore that leather jacket, and her skirt was long this time, but you could see straight through it--a flowery nothing swinging above her boots. All her private parts going public along side red dahlias and baby breath.

One of Maceo's trifling 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 her self and a friend because Christine came back home a champion cook and Heed won't eat my food. 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 plates. He let the stewed tomatoes slide over the compartments to discolor the potato salad, and forked the barbecue on top of the gravied chicken. I got so heated watching Theo disrespect my food I dropped the bread into my cup where it disintegrated like sand.

She never took her eyes off the trays. Never met Theo's hateful stare until he gave her change at the register. Then she looked right at him and said, "I see why you need a posse. Your dick don't work one on one?"

Theo shouted a nasty word to her back but it fell flat with no audience but me. Long after the door slammed, he kept on repeating it. Typical. Young people can't waste words because they don't have too many.

When Maceo walked in, ready to take over 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 Orlando and the Wheatie people too. Not a bad way to work off shame.

Young people, Lord. Young love. It leaps over anything, takes the biggest chair, rules the ground wherever it walks from a mansion to a swamp. Before I was reduced to sing-song, I saw all kinds of loveplay. Most are two night stands trying to be important enough to last. But I've witnessed the truest ever and some so narrow they didn't deserve the name. Mr. Cosey suffered both kinds. Which puts me in mind of Celestial, whom this Junior girl reminds me of. When she was young, that is. But I doubt if any of these modern tramps could live up to that sort of woman. Depends, I guess, on where she came from, who first broke her heart. And how.

MTK