

"Erma Lee Jacobs is a wonderful character full of strength, vulnerability and possibility, all in equal measure. It is hard to believe that *A Place Called Wiregrass* is a first novel." —ANNE RIVERS SIDMONS,
AUTHOR OF *NORA, NORA*



A PLACE
CALLED
WIREGRASS

M I C H A E L
M O R R I S

A Place Called Wiregrass

By Michael Morris

“What you wearing them sunglasses for?”

I'd felt Roxi's shifty glances for the past thirty minutes. I knew the square, black frames with gold specks made me look like a June bug, but I still hoped Roxi would drop the subject. As I figured things that morning, I had two choices: either wear the insect spectacles or miss a day of work. And I never missed work.

The thunderous drill of sewing machines provided an easy out. I proceeded to sew another zipper and added the completed product to the bushel of blue rayon slacks piled in a plastic carton at my tennis shoes. *I'm gonna get wrote up if I don't hustle*, I thought and tried to dismiss Roxi's coal-eyed glances.

“Erma Lee, you fixin' to be a movie star or something?” Roxi asked with her rugged laugh. I didn't know anybody else who could laugh and talk at the same time. Glancing at the big white clock on the factory wall, I knew I couldn't ignore her any longer. It was another twenty minutes until Roxi's smoke break. The comments mixed with her cigarette-induced laugh would only get stronger.

“Yeah. I'm on the first bus to Hollywood this evening.” I avoided her stare and concentrated on my machine. The hammering needle put a perfect stitch in the crotch of a pair of navy pants.

Her gravel laugh let loose again. “I know that's right. Take me too.” Roxi tossed a pair of khakis into the carton.

The zigzag of sixty industrial needles was the only sound I heard. *Good, she'll be on to something else directly.*

“You got home trouble?”

I shot a quick look across at Roxi's station. She wasn't laughing anymore. Her silver-framed glasses perched on the edge of her nose. The way her black eyes rolled upward made me feel like a school teacher was getting on to me.

“No.” To make it look like I was really telling the truth I shook my head.

I don't need her getting all in my business.

“Girl, you forget I been here as long as you. I hope them sunglasses ain’t a return to when you...”

“I’m gonna miss my quota if we keep flapping our jaws like this.” I was scared to death to look at Roxi. Terrified she’d know the truth.

Who are you fooling? She already knows, I told myself. And so does everybody else in this metal building. Why didn’t I just call in sick?

Roxi sighed and for a couple of minutes focused again on the khaki slacks. “I ain’t seen no woman who’s tough as you put up with crap like that. You know what I’m saying?”

I shifted my eyes behind the dark bug frames. Roxi was hunched over the white sewing machine, smacking a piece of gum. “My cousin, Darlene--you know the one I’m talking about. She put up with that same mess. And then one day she just hauled off and knifed that no count husband of hers.” The rugged chuckle erupted again. “Yes ma’am. He punched her one too many times is all. You know what I’m saying?” Roxi suddenly stopped sewing and put both hands on her seated hips. “And she not half the woman you are.”

Roxi’s unexpected glare made me flinch. Just when I turned to look back at the strip of metal zipper, it happened. Like a mosquito gone mad, the steel needle pounded my right index finger. Numbing pain shot up my fingernail to the top of my shoulder. Snatching my foot off the control pedal, I flew backwards and screamed, “God Bless America!”

Roxi jumped to the rescue and pried the needle off loose, bloody skin, tearing more in the process. I moaned, trying not to call more attention than was already coming my way. When I looked up and saw the crowd of women gathering, my right hand began to throb. It was almost worse than the throbbing I’d felt the night before, when Bozo slammed his fist into my eye.



The passenger's seat in Mama's silver Escort pressed hard against my back. I stroked my hair, which draped over my shoulder in a ponytail. Mama said long hair was a luxury we didn't have time for. Mama always used the pronoun *we* when setting ground rules for herself.

I adjusted the sunglasses, hoping she would notice the big square frames and ask why I was wearing them. I mapped out my response. I'd say, "I got a bandage to cover twenty stitches, just like I got a disguise to cover my banged-up eye."

But Mama never was one for questions about cosmetic matters.

"That hospital ain't nothing but a first aid clinic," Mama yelled. "We coulda got the same treatment at the factory clinic and saved me hauling you into town. As it is, I'll get docked for the past three hours."

"Well I'm so sorry Mama. Let me just see if I could've planned it a little better for you." I edged closer to the passenger window. A haze blanketed the cold glass.

After a few miles, the hum from the engine filled the car. She could care less if Bozo had hit me or not. Mama made her opinion known the day after Bozo and me adopted our granddaughter, Cher.

"You cause him to leave you and you're up the creek. And now you with that grandbaby to raise."

I still remember Mama shaking her silver head like she had hornets flying around the boyish mane. "And don't think I can take care of you and that youngun. No siree, not me."

Not that Mama would realize it, but whenever there's been any caring to do, it's been me. I pulled tighter on my ponytail. Ever since Daddy walked out, I was expected to step up to the plate. Mama took a job at the new Haggar factory and at fourteen I took a job raising my six brothers and sisters. "If we plan to eat, you gonna have to sacrifice," Mama reminded me on her way out the door each morning.

I married Bozo two years later to escape the toll of being a full-time mother. Of course, Bozo wasn't his real name. His birth certificate read Bozell Jacobs. He only put

up with a nickname best known for a clown because he thought his given name sounded too much like a sissy.

A year after we said our, "I dos," I resumed the duties of mothering all over again with my own daughter. But this go-round, I had to work for a paycheck too. Bozo told me flat-out that babies were expensive and if I planned on having them, then I had to help pay the bills.

After we married, Mama was decent enough to recommend me at the factory and ever since that's where we've spent eight hours a day together.

The little green clock on the dashboard informed me it had been ten minutes of silence. "I guess you know why I'm wearing these sunglasses."

"Didn't reckon it was none of my business," Mama said. I saw her hand move upward on the steering wheel, gripping the leather tighter.

"He's back to drinking again." I sighed and sent dust on the car dash flying in a million directions. "Hanging out at the Brown Jug. Nothing but trash."

Mama adjusted her black cat-eye glasses and continued to stare at the asphalt ahead of us. "A man will get into a mess once in awhile, Erma Lee. At least he won't lay up. He will hold a job."

"I decided on that hospital table, there's gonna be some changes around here. I'm not having Cher raised up in this mess. I made that mistake once already."

"Now Bozo's drinking ain't got a thing to do with Suzette's trouble. The girl was always into something or other."

Mama never did believe the letter that prison psychologist sent me. "A head shrinker," she called him. The psychologist wrote me on the thick beige prison stationary stamped with the seal of Louisiana. His typed words explained that the abuse I endured while Suzette was at home made her also seek abuse. Put in those terms, my daughter was a major success. And I guess so was I.

"Look, Mama..." I shut my mouth when I looked out from the windshield and spotted the Haggar Factory. Being so close to our destination, I wasn't in the mood to fight and hear the same lines over and over. Instead I chose to notice for the first time that the bright green building didn't have any windows.

“All I’m saying is you can’t go blaming everything on somebody else. Look at me, Erma Lee. I got dumped with seven younguns. You do what you got to do.”

I did look at Mama then. Her cropped silver hair with yellow streaks was cut above her ears and close to the back of the lined neck. The deep-seated wrinkles on her face looked like scars from some horrific car wreck. I looked at her battle wounds and thought how sad this woman of sixty-four had turned out. She looked more like one of the oil riggers Daddy used to work with instead of the feminine creature I once thought she could be.

There were only sixteen years between Mama and me. A chill snaked down my spine. I pulled the zipper of the gray flannel jacket up to my neck.

“And what you gonna do now? Quit him? You ain’t got no education. No training. The next time Bozo comes at you, just do what you did last time.”

In Mama’s mind there was only one last time. Bozo hadn’t come home from work for two days. When I finally found him in a shack behind the Brown Jug, he was laying on a floor pallet with two hussies. He wore nothing but a once white T-shirt, now stained with a cocktail of mud, liquor, and body fluids. He was so drunk, I pulled a muscle dragging him, buck-naked out of the house. A group of black men stood outside, passing a wrapped brown sack around their makeshift bonfire. When I think back hard enough, I can still hear their howls of laughter--entertained by watching me load my better half onto the tailgate of his pick-up as though I had just purchased a sack of feed. The men weren’t the only ones entertained. Cross City, Louisiana, was a small town where gossip spread overnight.

The next day, Bozo managed to show up for work and he spent the entire day being made fun of by members of his logging crew. That evening he entered the house with an all-too-familiar stagger. I quickly tried to shoo the kids outside, but he blocked the door with his left hand and used the right one to strip off his belt. “I’ll learn you to make a bunch of pulp-wood no-counts laugh at me.” The sweet lilac smell of whiskey moved closer. He yanked my hair and ordered Suzette and Russ to watch. “I catch any y’all not looking, I’ll give it to you next. This here’s what you get when you go behind Pop’s back.” After four stinging licks to my back, I dug my nails in his arm and managed

to reach for the stove. The iron skillet seemed weightless when I landed it against the side of his head. My only regret was that it wasn't loaded with hot grease.

While Bozo recovered from his hairline fracture in the hospital, I packed up our meager belongings and set off for Mama's. "All I need is a couple of days till I can get an advance in my pay." I always hated to beg. Especially standing there on the front porch I used to oversee.

"I ain't getting in the middle of this," Mama said. Her thick arm stretched across the width of the front door frame. "He might tie one on and burn my place down. Then we'd all be in a fix."

We returned home with a fracture of our own. Russ ran right back inside the house, but Suzette lingered. During late nights when sleep won't come soon enough, I close my eyes and try to erase the picture of Suzette sitting in that back seat staring right through me.

Bozo got better, sort of. He was never going to be one of *Family Circle's* "Top Ten Husbands." Still, he did promise to stop drinking. I even noticed a newfound respect from him. But Suzette never got better. Her troubles had just begun.

When we turned into the factory entrance, the roughness of the gravel made Mama's steering wheel vibrate. She kept control by squeezing harder and jerked her head towards me. "And what you and the girl gonna do for groceries? Now, you with this bum finger. If this just ain't one big mess."

My eyes landed on the dusty back window of my 1984 Monte Carlo. My one piece of property, bought five years ago with cash. I ignored Mama's shaking head and sat in silence until her car had reached the employee parking lot.

"Don't come crying to me. Cause I ain't got it. You got a man who makes a good living. But no, that ain't good enough for you."

I snatched the car door open and slammed it so hard, I thought I heard the window shatter. Roxi and the usual group were gathered under the metal awning taking a cigarette break.

Roxi held a cigarette in two fingers and cupped her mouth. "How many stitches?"

Mama jumped out, screaming, "Your problem is, you're never satisfied. One of them kind ain't nobody can please."

A hush fell over Roxi and the others. Their necks craned towards the once candy red Monte Carlo, now a faded orange.

I looked at the group and then at Mama. She stood behind the open car door and her hands rested on her hip-hugging navy pants. “How do you know? You sure never tried,” I screamed and jumped into the one thing with my name on the title.

When my foot slammed the gas pedal, the car skidded to the left and then to the right. Tightening my grip on the steering wheel, I screamed right out loud. It felt good to be out of control.

In the rearview mirror, I saw gravel and dust form a cloud that floated over the smokers. I imagined Roxi tilting her head back like African royalty and blowing smoke from her lips, “*You go, Girl.*”