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78 YEARS
IN THE
LOST AND FOUND

BABETTE WILLIAMS

Also by Babette Williams

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Memoir of a Privileged King Charles Spaniel

78 YEARS
IN THE
LOST AND
FOUND

BABETTE WILLIAMS

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DEDICATION

Not very long ago, my daughter Carol succumbed to cancer after a heartbreaking two-year struggle. Some time afterwards I discovered this passage she had written:

I think about the choices I've made and wonder how it might have been different.

I think about how I've changed and whether anyone noticed.

I think about these things and know that I want someone to speak about what I still hoped for rather than what I did—not about who I was, but rather that I cherished the adventure of trying to become.

Her sisters and I have always felt that Carol was born with an “old soul” as she was wise in so many ways. We have each promised to treat every day as a cherished gift.

This at least we can do for Carol. And for ourselves.

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INTRODUCTION

If you picked up this book, chances are that you are one of *us*: a member of the aging population in the United States. I don't feel like a statistic, and you probably don't either.

When I was young, our aging parents came to live with us when they needed help, and we cared for them the best we could until they passed away. Didn't even think about it; we just assumed it was our responsibility.

Times have changed and today we have options when the roles begin to shift so that the child becomes the parent, such as moving to a retirement community or an assisted living facility.

In our case, my husband Aubrey and I decided we'd prefer to make our own choices while we were able, thus relieving our youngsters of a burden we both under-

stood so well. Of course our youngsters are now in their fifties, but that's irrelevant.

This book relates the changes in our lives since we moved to Oak Hammock at the University of Florida, a Continuing Care Retirement Community in Gainesville, Florida. I have altered a few names and places, but all the happenings are factual.

The title, *78 Years in the Lost and Found*, is simply my way of expressing wonder at how the years have disappeared and of raising the question of what on earth I did with my life.

Enjoy reading—this may be *you* one day.

PROLOGUE

I have a fear of abandonment. Instead of recognizing its existence, I've always kept my anxiety well hidden, submerged under layers of protection. All these years my *image* has been that of a self-confident, capable woman. Finally I am able to recognize the fear beneath the bravado and to understand its origin.

I was eleven years old and my family lived in Houston, Texas. My father owned a successful art gallery, my mother and Aunt Gert stayed at home, my sister Joyce was a seventeen-year-old with her own car, and I had a horse. To outward appearance, we seemed to be a normal, happy family. One day my father abruptly sent my mother, my Aunt Gert, my sister Joyce, and me, to Florida. The only memory I have is that we left in a hurry in Joyce's car and traveled to Coral Gables. After a few days in a hotel

room, we moved to a one-bedroom apartment in a dingy building.

We understood that this was a temporary relocation for “business reasons” and that my father would be down for us before Christmas.

And sure enough, a few days before the holidays my father walked into our apartment—he was buoyant, jovial, and affectionate—and we knew everything would be all right.

My mother sent me to the park to play tennis. When I came back home my father was gone. He had given my mother a hundred dollars and then left with all her jewelry and the keys to Joyce’s car. He said he needed to have a stake for a new deal he was putting together.

We never saw the car or the jewelry again. The next time I saw my father was at my sister’s wedding in New York several years later. That turned out to be the last time.

This fear of abandonment, which has been a part of me all my life, spurred me always to try to excel and achieve. If I did, maybe then no one would ever leave me.

I.
IMAGE

My family has always called me Babs, a diminutive of my given name, Babette. To this day my sister Joyce says I tell “Babs’ stories,” which is her way of saying that I have a strong tendency to exaggerate. She may be right, but none of my far-out fantasies ever included a mental picture of me living in a Retirement Community. Impossible! Not me.

After all, I am the “*younger* sister.”

Yet here I am, relaxing on the tiny back porch of our house at Oak Hammock, in Gainesville, Florida. Aubrey and I have been residents for more than three years. What is shocking to me is that the median age of the inhabitants of our community is approximately seventy-four, and I, the “*younger* sister,” am now approaching seventy-nine, which makes me one of the *elder* residents!

How ridiculous.

An optimist by nature, and someone who has always enjoyed living in the moment, I never considered the possibility that one day I would be “mature” (good), “getting on” (not as attractive), or, God forbid, “elderly.”

Occasionally I’d notice blotchy purple spots on people’s hands and wonder why they didn’t take better care of their health. Or someone with fingers that arthritis cruelly bent out of shape. Or I’d see a feeble grey-haired lady at the checkout counter in the supermarket who needed help with her packages. And some folks I knew were uncomfortable driving at night because of the glare. Still I didn’t equate any of them with myself.

Isn’t it amazing how the march of time alters one’s perspective? Overnight those once-alien descriptions fit me much too well. Whether I’m ready or not, “maturity” is no longer an adequate description. While it is a bit harsh, “getting on” is closer to the truth, and I’m beginning to realize that “elderly” lies in wait.

So here we are in Gainesville, of all places. I can understand Aubrey’s affinity for this town: He’s a Floridian, a graduate of the University here, and a rabid Gator fan. I am grudgingly classified as a “nouveau Floridian” and always will be (fifteen years’

residence doth not a native make, but it's a tad better than being called a snow bird). Marriage to Aubrey immediately improved my status, but not to the degree of being titled a native.

Oak Hammock offers many plusses for the over-seventy crowd, but perhaps the most significant reason for our choosing to live here is the knowledge that no matter how sick we may ultimately become, we are assured of the finest care for the rest of our lives, and the comfort of knowing that our children will be spared the burden of "what to *do* with Mom and Dad."

To all outward appearances, Oak Hammock looks like a five-star vacation resort. The main floor of the Commons Building resembles a first-class hotel, while the upper three floors contain a multitude of apartments that are home to the majority of residents.

The guarded entrance gate is handsome, and once inside the enclave, roads curve gently through grounds that are lush with large oak and pine trees. Walking trails meander through the woods, circling around a half-acre lake, while the single-family homes and villas—fifty-seven in all—are grouped attractively throughout the community.

Several months ago in what I interpret as a moment of jest, an apartment dweller

christened all the villa and house residents as “street people.” To me, the nickname conjures up an image of shabbily dressed old folks sorely in need of a bath and a hand-out, wearily pushing their belongings along the roadside in a supermarket cart.

Nevertheless, that silly tongue-in-cheek designation spread through the enclave like wildfire.

Street people!!!! Indeed!

It didn’t take long to retaliate—those of us who live on the street promptly dubbed the apartment occupants “inmates.” And as an afterthought, we labeled ourselves the “trustees.” In our opinion, that served up a more upscale, likable image.

However, the war of words was far from over. It took a few weeks until the inmates bestowed a name to the cluster of homes isolated on a quiet street behind the Commons: “The Outback.” The entire population applauded a name that was so fitting.

There are eight houses on the cul-de-sac where we live. It happens to be situated on the highest point of ground at Oak Hammock, which is actually a barely noticeable incline. Nevertheless, we have been given the title “Snob Hill.” Ouch.

Image is everything. Or is it?

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