

www.virtualbookworm.com



This

Free

Sample

Courtesy

of



Virtual Bookworm Publishing

Dancing in High Cotton

Babette Williams

“Dancing in High Cotton,” by Babette Williams. ISBN 1-58939-799-1 (soft-cover); 1-58939-800-9 (hardcover).

Published 2005 by Virtualbookworm.com Publishing Inc., P.O. Box 9949, College Station, TX 77842, US. ©2005, Babette Williams. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of Babette Williams.

Manufactured in the United States of America.

In Memory Of

Carol Spencer Mitchell

My Beloved "Middle Girl"

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	1
Prologue	3
1. The Beginning.....	5
2. The Morning After.....	13
3. Swamp Fever	21
4. Don't Think When It's Raining	29
5. Nothing But the Truth	35
6. Don't Ruffle the Boat	41
7. A Small Private Wedding.....	47
8. Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep.....	59
9. Fifty of One—Half Dozen of Another.....	65
10. Don't Throw Out the Dirty Dishwater Until You Have a New Baby	73
11. Woman is a Dog's Best Friend	77
12. Stop the Music—I Want to Get Off.....	87
13. Never Judge a Rock Star by His Cover	93
14. Snug Harbor.....	105
15. I've Found My Buttons	111
16. God Grant Me Courage.....	115
17. Old Folks at Home	121

Acknowledgments

To Aubrey, my favorite stubborn, hard-headed old man: Without your love and constant encouragement not a word of this book would have been written, and a strong desire of mine would have been quietly stifled.

My warmest appreciation and thanks to Susan K. Perry, my editor, for her guidance and patience.

And to my entire blended family—you have been part of the story, part of the book's evolving, and the most valued part of my entire life.

Prologue

Looking back, Babs should have paid more attention to the dream.

She'd been having trouble sleeping—but after all, Mike had been dead less than six months, so that was to be expected. The night of the dream she was tossing and turning when Mike suddenly appeared just below the ceiling, floating towards her. He wore a navy blue jacket and crisply pressed gray slacks. But why was Mike, the consummate dandy, wearing a baseball cap, with the visor backwards, for heaven's sake?

Now thoroughly awake, Babs gasped when she realized that Mike, hovering serenely above her, did not have feet. Before she had a chance to catch her breath, Mike stretched out his arms towards her, palms up, and grinned.

“Don't worry, Babs,” he said, “you'll be fine.” And then he was gone.

I.

The Beginning

I am stretched out on my living room couch enjoying a gin and tonic when the phone rings.

I am bone-tired. How could anyone in their right mind play three sets of tennis and eighteen holes of golf on such an unseasonably hot day in May? Well, it was one way to handle grief. I cuddle my tiny Mini-Dachshund, Dolly, more closely, and am rewarded with a kiss.

The telephone intrudes once again. Although I'm tempted not to answer, by the fourth ring I push off the couch.

"Hello."

It's Kay, co-owner of Mighty Minute Maids, the service that house-cleans for me every Thursday. "What are you doing?" she asks.

"What do you mean, what am I doing? I'm not doing anything. It's almost 8 p.m."

“Fine,” Kay quickly replies. “Aubrey and I’ll pick you up in an hour. We’re going dancing at the Ritz.” With that, she hung up.

This is ridiculous. Maybe I could get in touch with Kay and tell her I’m not interested in going out. But where was she? There had been lots of noise in the background when Kay phoned—maybe she was at a bar. Aubrey: that must be the “nice widower who loves to dance” who Kay raves about every single Thursday when she comes to clean.

God, what should I do? It looks as though I’m going out. Heading to my closet, I quickly settle on black silk slacks, a white, long-sleeved silk shirt, and a wide metallic silver belt. That’s what I would’ve worn in Princeton, or for that matter, going out on the Plantation. I add a double-strand pearl necklace and pearl-drop earrings. Slipping into low-heeled, black patent-leather shoes, I wonder about the name “Aubrey.” It sounds English and quite proper. In one of her “sales pitches” Kate mentioned that Aubrey was a native of Fernandina Beach and that he owns, among other businesses, the Palace Saloon, the oldest bar in Florida.

Fernandina Beach is the small town on Amelia Island where most of the locals live. The fact that this Aubrey person is “nice and loves to dance” is a plus, but I don’t

want to go out on a date—certainly not with a local who probably thinks the weekly *Fernandina* paper is the height of sophistication. Last week's headline was "Who Stole the Rod and Reel out of Joe's Garage." My home is The Plantation, a gated community on the south end of the island. Most of the residents are retirees from New Jersey, New York and Ohio.

Without a doubt, I shall kill Kay next Thursday when she and her two employees, in their tidy white shorts and tee shirts, come to clean. Not only that, but I'll remind her to stick to her business instead of trying to run a matrimonial service.

Quickly I apply make-up and run a brush through my hair. I know tonight is headed for disaster.



As the saying goes, there are two sides to every story. What I didn't realize was that Kay had been using every opportunity at the monthly Chamber of Commerce meeting to tell Aubrey about "this cute little widow woman on the Plantation who loves to dance." And this evening Kay seized her chance to play matchmaker. When the Chamber meeting broke up, a small group—including Kay and Aubrey—went to a bar on the beach to have a few drinks and

a bite to eat. And that's when Kay telephoned me.

Returning to the table, Kay smiled at Aubrey.

"The good news is that I've just spoken to Babs, and we're going to pick her up in one hour to go dancing at the Ritz."

"I'm not dressed to go to the Ritz," Aubrey protested. "I've got on these junky old clothes I've been wearing all day. And what will I have in common with a lady from Princeton who lives on the Plantation?"

"We can't change plans now. I've already made the date. She's in the shower. We've got to go out there and pick her up."



Peeking between the slats of my living room blinds, I see headlights. I hope none of my neighbors notice his car. Even though my two-story stucco house is on a secluded cul-de-sac, someone may be out walking their dog, and word spreads fast. I quickly let the blind fall back in place—I don't want anyone to catch me peeking out the window.

Standing in the doorway I see a tall, overweight man get out of his car. Even though the sky is darkening, outside lights illuminate my driveway. Good Lord, the man

is absolutely dragging his feet. Does he think I'm some kind of ogre? He's practically walking backwards! His shoulders slump and even the corners of his mouth are turned down. Judging by his body language, he's not so thrilled about a blind date, either.

I introduce myself, and he mumbles his name in reply. At least, I think he said his name. It's hard to tell, with his soft voice and Southern accent. Too bad he can't talk more clearly, like a Northerner. I sneak a better look at my date. Yes, Aubrey is tall. Maybe 6'1", definitely overweight, with tousled grayish hair. He's dressed in a dreadful Hawaiian guayabera shirt, over a pair of ancient khaki pants in need of pressing. The shirt is a faded blue with white embroidery, distinguished by red spots that most likely are dried catsup stains. His scuffed brown loafers are badly in need of a shine. He certainly doesn't care about appearance, I think, but I shall try to be civil and adult. I vow again to kill Kay next Thursday. This is going to be worse than I imagined.

Dolly has been sitting quietly at my feet, but now she tries her best to provide an enthusiastic welcome for our visitor. She sits up, lets out small "Woofs," and goes all out to be her most adorable self. Aubrey bends down to pet her, which seems to

brighten him up a bit. Obviously Dolly is doing a better job of being hospitable than her mistress. I notice Aubrey's round blue eyes twinkle when he smiles.

Somehow we manage to close my door and walk to his car, an old gray sedan badly in need of a wash. I settle into the front seat, hoping the grease spots and dog hair won't attach themselves to my black slacks. The floor on my side is interesting. I notice several tattered maps, four empty cups, a roll of paper towels and a bottle of sunscreen.

On the way to the Ritz, we attempt to carry on a conversation. Thank heavens it's only a ten-minute ride as we don't understand one word the other utters. He drawls and mumbles and I speak with a clipped twang.

The sprawling six-story Ritz Hotel, barely two years old, feels elegant. As our car pulls up to the hotel, a valet quickly comes around to open my door. Aubrey, moving with surprising agility for a man of his size, is pushing the door handle. He nods pleasantly at the valet, who says, "Evening, Mr. Williams." This is interesting. Does he know the young man?

Aubrey grips my elbow firmly and leads me into the lobby of the Ritz.

As we walk in, a three-piece band is finishing "New York, New York." Aubrey

exudes politeness and charm as we head towards a group of his friends. They seem glad to see him, but I'm aware that everyone has stopped talking to look me over.

We sit down on the fringe of the group. Aubrey orders drinks. I barely manage to take a few hefty swallows of my bourbon and coke when the music starts. It's a rock and roll favorite of mine, "Mustang Sally."

"Would you care to dance?" Aubrey asks. I nod my head in acceptance. We walk onto the dance floor and the bandleader smiles at Aubrey.

"Good evening, Mr. Williams." I wonder if everyone at the Ritz knows this man.

Aubrey holds out his arms, I walk into them, and within one minute we're rocking and rolling. Although he makes at least two of me, and he definitely has big feet, he's a supple yet masterful leader. "Mustang Sally" is fast, but his signals are firm and clear so I know which way to turn. He "hears" the music. This guy can flat out "get it."

We don't talk—we just enjoy the music and dance. I feel a grin stretch across my face. It's rare to dance with a new partner and effortlessly pick up his rhythm. I look up at Aubrey, and darned if he isn't cute when he smiles. And he is smiling—from

ear to ear. Kay is absolutely right—this man can *dance*.

The band moves into a Jimmy Buffet medley and we stay on the floor, feeling more relaxed with each other as we swing to “Cheeseburger in Paradise,” “Margaritaville,” and “Son of a Son of a Sailor.” I glance around and realize we’re the only couple still dancing. People are grouped around the dance floor watching us, clapping to the beat of the music.

We dance for more than two hours until I beg for mercy. I can’t believe this overweight man is outlasting me, the athlete, on the dance floor.

“Let’s take a break,” I suggest, afraid that if we don’t stop, I may faint.

Aubrey immediately leads me onto the verandah overlooking the ocean. As we settle ourselves on two comfortable deck chairs, the roar of the surf provides a comforting background. We’re quiet for a few minutes. Then, although Aubrey doesn’t know it for many a month, he wins my heart.

Looking straight into my eyes, he says, “Babs, I am enchanted. Will you do me the honor of going out with me again?”

Truly, there *is* something to be said for a Southerner. Maybe I won’t kill Kay after all.

*To purchase the full version of this book
or browse through other offerings, visit
www.virtualbookworm.com/bookstore*

