

What Happened to Alice?

By Jana Jones

Episode 2 - Excellence in the Genes

“So, how old are you?”

Ami continued filling the brightly colored plastic tubs with ice. She knew the conversation was about to go where it normally goes after someone inquired about her age.

“I’m thirty-one.”

“No babies, huh? Mmph.” A look of pity quickly flashed across Uncle Clinton’s face.

“Well,” Ami fought to remain expressionless, “I believe my calling is to do right by the children who are already here.”

This response didn’t seem to satisfy Uncle Clinton, who made some kind of tutting sound while continuing to prep the wood chips for the smoker.

Other Dawson kin slowly started coming in. A charming older man with a ready smile came through the house with boisterous greetings. Aunt Darlene introduced him as Cousin Edgar. He played defense for South Carolina State in his younger days. He and his wife were enjoying retirement life by traveling the country in an RV, chronicling their experiences on a YouTube channel with over 50,000 subscribers.

There was Cousin Ramona, who’d worked as a journalist with news bureaus throughout the United States. As the newspapers started being bought out and shut down, she made the return back to Faidley to host a weekly radio show discussing local news.

Ami felt at ease. Even around people who had lived such fascinating lives, at no point did she feel out of place or in the way. Aunt Darlene introduced her as “Ami, John-John’s daughter who lives in Philadelphia,” and that seemed to be enough.

“What exactly is it that you do?” one of the cousins whispered to Ami, curiosity covering the woman’s pleasant, round face.

“I work for a nonprofit organization that serves children of incarcerated parents. I’m a Program Director. I’ve been on board for about five years now. It’s good work.”

Nonprofits, ah!" Aunt Darlene laughed. "I know all about those so-called nonprofits. Shuffling papers all day, thinking they're saving the world."

"Some could say that," Ami conceded, "but many of us are doing the work. We're standing in the gap."

"Half of the time, those nonprofits are led by people who don't look like the population they call themselves helping. Treating the people like pets or something."

"Valid point, but there really are many of us who genuinely care." Ami hadn't prepared for a stump speech defending her work, but she was ready if it came to that. Ami could see she was in the company of people who took their professions seriously and she was no different.

A few of the cousins were interested in Ami's journey to locate her father. One relative mentioned that an adoptee had reached out to him on a genealogy site trying to get information about their birth family.

"I tell ya, man, those family search websites blow the doors wide open. All of the skeletons just come right on out," a relative said as he slathered more marinade on the meat. "One of the guys at my job told me about a buddy of his who just found out he has eight siblings. Daddy was working overtime on and off the clock!"

"I think John-John may have a few more out there, to be honest," another Dawson spoke up. "He always had a way with the ladies. Charming, even as a little boy."

"John was aimless just like his father." Cousin Ramona plopped down in an open seat at the table, disappointment in her voice. "Could never seem to get his act together. You said you were adopted? Those people saved you from a whole heap of disappointment dealing with that man."

"Ramona." Darlene shooed at the woman. "That's not fair, don't be that way. Everyone didn't inherit the Dawson drive. It happens. What can you do?"

Ramona pursed her lips as she reached down to get a soda from one of the plastic tubs. Ami tried to maintain a gracious veneer as the family earnestly debated amongst themselves as to whether or not her father was trifling.

Just then, a man stepped out onto the top step of the back porch. Tall and taut, the man's charm was effortless. He could have easily been a model for a high-end cologne ad. Ami knew not to stare too hard because he was for sure family.

"And look at you making an entrance. This cookout isn't even for you!" Uncle Clinton jokingly yelled.

"I heard we have some new kinfolk here." The man smiled. His teeth were the most dazzling shade of white.

"Here goes Mr. Cool!" someone else yelled to the man whose presence seemed to fill the entire outdoor space. "Too big for ol Faidley."

"I'm global," the man countered without missing a beat.

"Shawn William, come here, baby," Aunt Darlene cooed, "You have to meet your cousin Ami!"

"Hey, family." Shawn was able to give his cousin a close-up of his picture-perfect smile.

Ami had to remind herself that just about everyone in that backyard was blood, and this man was no different.

"We Dawsons have always been an enterprising lot but Shawn William here—"

"Auntie, it's nothing." Shawn tried to wave it off, but Aunt Darlene would hear none of it.

"Absolutely not, and don't interrupt me." Aunt Darlene stood more erect and turned to get a full view of the growing crowd of cousins. "This man, Shawn William Dawson, is a mogul in the making. A community-minded one." Aunt Darlene looked over at Ami.

"There's Little Walter's, and soon the Pavilion development will be up and running. Not to mention all of the work that he and his business friends do with the youngsters at Langley Prep. This right here. *This* is why it is essential to have a standard of excellence. It benefits the whole."

A round of applause went up after Aunt Darlene finished her stump speech. Ami was impressed by her cousin's accolades. After the earlier debate about her father's ineptitude, a small part of her began to wonder what contributed to him not being able to hold up his end.

"You're doing big things," Ami commended her handsome, enterprising cousin. "What's Little Walter's?"

"It's a juke joint jazz bar." Cousin Edgar cackled.

"It's a blues lounge," Shawn corrected his cousin. "It has the spirit of a dirt road juke but for the modern, professional crowd."

"Trying to get that high dollar, banking industry money out of Charlotte," Uncle Clinton chimed in. His hands folded comfortably atop his round belly.

“Hey! This family has always been the forward-thinking, entrepreneurial type, right? I’m just trying to hold up my end of the legacy.” Shawn gave a humble shrug.

Ami was curious to know more about Shawn’s blues lounge. He told her he and one his best friends since grade school had always talked about starting a business together. They both enjoyed music and felt that there weren’t many nightlife options for the area’s growing Black professional class. Little Walter’s came from their brainstorming sessions. Business was going well and there was talk of expanding in the coming years.

A game of dominoes started up at a table of older relatives who initially were keeping an eye on the smoker. Every so often a cousin would walk up to Ami to make small talk and get a closer look at this new person their prodigal John-John had brought to the family’s door. Ami was enjoying herself and slowly getting used to this new branch. She was still a little sad that this wouldn’t be a moment that she could enjoy with her father or her sister, but everything was working out just the same.

An older man who resembled a taller version of Uncle Clinton stepped out into the backyard wearing a blue and white “DAWSON - GET THE LAND BACK” t-shirt. Seeing the shirt jogged Ami’s memory. She leaned over to ask Aunt Darlene the story behind the slogan that seemed to be posted everywhere in Faidley.

“It was the other branch of the Dawson family tree. Tried to pull the okey-doke on my father and his siblings. The courts, the land department, all of them worked together to snatch what rightfully belonged to us. It was collusion. They hated the fact that Mr. Dawson left property to his Negro son. Made them furious. The blood that runs through their veins runs through ours.”

A few of the cousins gathered closer to Aunt Darlene as she continued. “Of course it took one of our own, the brilliant Lenora Dawson-McKay, being elected to public office to get things moving in our direction. But it got done, praise God. Everything worked out in our favor in the end.”

The theft of land owned by Black families was so prevalent in the South. Ami remembered reading a case of a another family who sued to receive land once owned by their grandfather, who was ran off in the dead of night by the Klan.

“This is why it’s so important for us as a people to take education seriously. We are owed so much, and in order to get back what’s ours, it’s crucial to know how the game works.” There was fire behind Aunt Darlene’s round eyes as she spoke.

“This family has given so much to this town, to this state,” another elder relative declared. “We’ve proven our value time and time again. We were always taught that you teach people how to treat you, which is why we were always told to carry ourselves with pride. Allowing riff-raff causes others not to take you seriously.”

“You must have a standard,” said Aunt Darlene. “It is essential.”

Someone turned up the music, and a line dance started.

“How long are you going to be with us?” Shawn slipped into a seat closer to Ami as she went to work on her second plate of ribs, sausage and other delicious offerings. “We’re having an open mic night tomorrow at Little Walter’s. I’d love for you to come through as our special guest.”

Shawn texted Ami the location of the lounge and told her things generally got started around 8 pm. He told her food and drinks would be on the house the entire night, and to bring a friend if she wished. Ami thought about who was nearby. There was a friend from undergrad but he lived near Wilmington. Ami didn’t mind an evening out solo, although it had been a while. Being partnered meant not having to think about finding a plus-one.

Ami watched the family line dance in the rather spacious backyard. She wondered if Uncle Darlene and Uncle Clinton shared the ranch home. When she met them the previous day, Ami figured they were husband and wife, but now she knew they were siblings. Ami’s thoughts drifted to what she would wear to Little Walter’s. Had she packed anything nice enough for an evening of good drinks and good music? If not, her day would likely be spent on a shopping run.

Eventually, Ami decided to call it a night. She did a round of goodbye hugs and shoulder squeezes as she promised to keep in touch with her Dawson kin. Aunt Darlene was happy to hear Ami would be visiting Little Walter’s. She was confident Little Walter’s was the start of something big. The blues lounge would be on the national scene one day, just like the Hard Rock chain.

Ami rocked in her seat as upbeat music filled the car. Happiness poked and pinched at her like a playful lover. Being a member of a family whose reputation precedes them. In a good way. Ami felt she was part of something far greater than had been initially expected.

Ami’s thoughts wandered about until she heard the quick blip of a police siren, then the intermittent flashing of lights. She sucked her teeth while taking a quick mental inventory of where everything was. A police stop on a country road was not how she wanted to close out what had been a joyous day. The officer, a young man of average height with a noticeable gait, sidled up to the vehicle. Her eyes locked in on the officer’s nameplate illuminated by the flashing lights— Dawson.

Officer Dawson informed Ami that she’d gone over the speed limit by about fifteen miles. Never much of a speeder, Ami figured her foot got a little heavy while lost in the music. The officer told Ami she would be let off with a warning but advised her to be mindful of her speed.

Despite one of Ami's cardinal rules being to avoid lengthy interactions with law enforcement, she had to ask. "Umm, sir, I see your last name is Dawson. Are you related to the Dawson family out of Faidley?"

"Distantly, perhaps." The officer gave Ami a thin, reluctant smile before heading back to his car.

Ami shrugged off the vague answer. She was still floating on the good feelings from the barbeque. She decided to drive the rest of the way in silence. The sound hit Ami's ear just as she pulled her car back onto the main road. Hissing. It came through clear and sharp from the trees. Easily rising above all of the other sounds of the night. As if something in the woods was bidding Ami to venture into the darkness.

