

What Happened to Alice?

By Jana Jones

Episode 1 - A Town Called Faidley

Faidley, South Carolina - 1931

The old man sat in darkness holding a dirt-stained Mary Jane shoe. A shoe that his beloved granddaughter once wore.

"They already told you what they know. We're not doing this again with you." the woman, her face twisted with rage, sneered at him before slamming the door shut.

Earlier that day, he'd decided to go back to the family home a second time because nothing made sense. Where was his baby? Surely the parents of the children she was last seen with would know something.

He cradled the shoe as if it were made from the most precious of jewels. When he closed his eyes he saw her— running, jumping, laughing.

His wife sat beside him in silence as she lovingly rubbed his arm. The room was filled with equal parts anger and sorrow. A second generation of the family was gone. First, their daughter left the family for the bright lights of a cold city, and now it was her daughter who was removed from the couple's embrace.

"We have nothing left." The man spoke more to the shoe than to his wife.

The little girl wanted to play with her "friends". Neither grandparent had the heart to tell their little girl that those children would never be her friends. Through the circumstances of her birth, she would be a perpetual outsider.

The community formed a search party. It yielded nothing besides the retrieval of her shoe. The couple bought her new shoes because her mother, their daughter, was supposed to come back for a visit. She never came. They told the little girl her mother had gotten sick and needed time to recover. The innocent child looked sad for a moment but quickly shrugged it off. She put on her new shoes and ran around the house made of clapboard. Determined to create her own fun in her own world.

When they were her age, war was on the horizon. Their little angel was the second generation in the family to be born free. They hoped to see their children and grandchildren grow and thrive in this new world.

"We will see her again," his wife whispered softly. Assuredly. "Every goodbye ain't gone."

"Never Too Much" thumped out of the car speakers as Ami Johnson drove along the narrow country road. According to her GPS, she was about twenty minutes away from Faidley. A small houseplant she'd purchased along the way sat on the passenger seat.

Ami was in Charlotte for a work conference she attended almost annually, but this would be the first time she would be visiting family in the area.

That past year, Ami had connected with her biological father and, well, as a sister. For a while, Ami kept her search for her birth family to herself. She didn't want to hurt her parents and make them feel that they had failed her in any way.

Ami's first in-person meeting with her father, Jonathan, was smooth sailing. They met for coffee in University City. She learned her parents met each other when they were both enrolled at Cheyney University. Neither graduated. After leaving school, her father lived a somewhat nomadic lifestyle, moving back and forth between Philadelphia and South Carolina.

Ami learned her mother passed away from complications stemming from her lengthy battle with substance abuse. Her mother had been a beautiful woman. Built slim and sturdy like she could have been a dancer.

Ami glanced down at her phone. She sent her sister, Faith, a text before she left Philadelphia and when she arrived at the Charlotte-Mecklenburg airport. The two sisters had discussed Ami stopping by, and Ami meant to make good on her promise.

Ami's phone buzzed. It was a text message from her line sister's wedding planner. The wedding rehearsal was scheduled for the first Saturday in June. This would be Ami's ninth run as a bridesmaid. She could do the job with her eyes closed at this point.

"Welcome to Faidley" was painted in blue on a wooden sign on the side of the road. Ami exhaled, gripping the steering wheel a little tighter. Ami thought about all of the history that was in that soil. To walk the land where her ancestors toiled for generations.

Ami drove down a stretch of road surrounded by dense forest that gave way to landing with neat, ranch homes on both sides of the street. She sent a text to the group chat she shared with her parents letting them know she'd arrived. Ami noticed each home had a blue and white sign posted in the front yard: DAWSON - GET THE LAND BACK. Figuring it was a political issue, she made a note to ask Faith about it when they sat down to talk.

The brick ranch-style house with a Fisher-Price playhouse in front rested at the address Faith texted Ami a little over a week ago. There wasn't much activity happening on the

street, but it was also Wednesday afternoon so many of the residents were likely at work or school. Ami made sure not to park in the driveway and, instead, found a spot further up on a patch of gravel.

"Alright, chick, let's do it," Ami whispered to herself as she took the houseplant and began walking toward the front porch of her sister's home.

She knocked on the door while shifting her weight from foot to foot. Silence. A few light taps on the glass window pane. In her peripheral vision, Ami noticed movement. She turned her attention from Faith's door to the street. Two people, an older couple, were walking toward her. The woman walked slightly ahead with a sure gait while the man moved a few paces slower with the help of a cane.

"You lost?" The older woman stood a few feet away from Faith's bottom step. She looked at Ami.

"Umm, no, ma'am. I'm okay. Thank you for checking." Ami flashed a friendly smile and waved with her free hand. She still had Faith's plant clutched close.

"She's not home, baby. They go on vacation around this time every year." The older woman clasped her hands behind her back. "Are you a friend?"

Now Ami was at a loss. "I'm...I'm Ami. I'm her sister."

"Sister?" This time the man spoke up. His wizened salt and pepper hair reminded Ami of the Troll Dolls that were popular when she was a little girl.

"I don't know an Ami." The woman tilted her head, covered with a wide-brim straw hat, and gave Ami a quizzical look.

"I'm John Dawson's daughter." Ami felt like a child. Like a child who just got caught stealing. Demoralized.

"John-John." This time the woman spoke to the older man, and the two exchanged a knowing glance.

"Yup," the man looked Ami up and down. "Got his round face and she stands like him, too. Feet pointed out and everything."

Ami looked down at her feet. She never knew her feet pointed out when she stood. What other tics and traits had she pulled from the Dawson side of her tree?

"Well," the woman seemed to soften up just a little, "if you're Faith's sister and John-John's daughter then that makes you our niece. I'm Aunt Darlene and this ol' coot is your Uncle Clinton."

They both were short and round. Ami could already see that Aunt Darlene had been a formidable presence in her heyday. She was golden brown with piercing eyes and a heart-shaped mouth. Ami thought she saw a few freckles spotted along Aunt Darlene's full cheeks. Her freshly manicured nails were painted soft pink. Uncle Clinton was a little more reddish-brown in skin tone. His stomach protruded out as if he were smuggling a beach ball.

"We live across the way. You can come sit a bit with us. Sorry about Faith." Aunt Darlene waved Ami over as she began to walk back to her house.

Ami's mind raced. What about the Facebook message? She wondered if she said anything wrong. Maybe Faith wasn't as ready as Ami thought she was. She prayed that her sister hadn't felt pressured to meet with her. Everything was going so well.

"Yeah, all of 'em are up at Great Wolf. That's where they go," Uncle Clinton mentioned as he waddled behind Aunt Darlene.

Ami fought to keep her feelings from showing on her face. While she wasn't meeting her sister she was connecting with her aunt and uncle. It would still be a win. Aunt Darlene gingerly walked up her own set of brick steps and into a ranch house with a metal roof painted green.

"You live nearby?" Aunt Darlene took off her straw hat to reveal a chic, tapered afro with equal parts silver and dark brown hair.

"I actually live in Philadelphia." Ami was still holding Faith's plant. "I'm down here for a conference. I'm staying in Charlotte."

"Philadelphia, that's where John-John ran off to for a little while. Trying to find himself, that's what he said. That must be when you came in the picture." Uncle Clinton settled into a comfortable-looking recliner while Aunt Darlene moved around in the kitchen.

"Yes," Ami sat on the couch across from her uncle. "He and my mother met at Cheyney. Things didn't really work out, apparently. I was put up for adoption."

"That damn John." Aunt Darlene came back into the living room with a chilled bottle of water for her guest.

"Where's your mama?" Uncle Clinton continued.

"She passed on. But my adoptive parents are absolutely wonderful! I've been with them since I was an infant. I had a great childhood. My life has been good. I can't complain. It really all worked out."

"That's good to hear." Aunt Darlene nodded at her newly-found niece. "Not everyone has that story, I'm sure you know. Especially when it comes to Black children in the system. It can be a hard road."

“Yes, ma’am. I’m grateful for them. Everyday. I’m glad that I’ve been able to connect with my Dawson side, too. Ami rubbed her jean-covered thighs and exhaled. She was ready to go back to Charlotte.

“Well, Faith is off the scene for a bit but all is not lost,” Aunt Darlene clapped her hands.

“We’re here and there are plenty of others. You can still meet your people.”

“That...that would be good. I’d like that.” Ami was beginning to feel reassured.

“Great, come back tomorrow. We’ll tell the folks. Put some meat on the grill and do this the right way.” Aunt Darlene patted her knees. It was settled.

As she drove back toward the road that led to the highway, Ami glanced up at her rearview mirror. For a quick second, she thought she saw someone in white running from one side of the dense forest to the other.

