

Hometown Backstory

By Lawrence D. Reynolds

I settled in Ocean Springs long ago. It's the closest place to New Orleans I could find in Mississippi, and I can walk to the Gulf. I live in a little trailer house my Aunt Blanche left me when she passed. It's the prettiest one in the park, pink outside, rose beige inside, small but intimate, plenty big for me. I kept all Aunt Blanche's trademark paper Chinese lanterns. Some people think they're pretentious, I find them comforting. Aunt Blanche was always kind to me and Mama.

I had a man named Howard for a while. We never had children. Howard pulled my trailer house down here from Laurel with his truck. He hung around long enough to level it, and stretch the skirts around the wheels, before he ran off.

My Mama named me Eunice after her upstairs neighbor back in New Orleans. I don't remember my Daddy other than in photographs, but Mama was crazy for him. They stayed together long enough for me to start walking and talking, then he was gone and Mama moved back to Laurel. Aunt Blanche was waiting for us there in this very same trailer.

I never heard from Daddy growing up. When I was in high school, Mama got a letter from the State of Florida saying Daddy died in Raiford State Prison, with no explanation as to how he died, or why he was there.

We did OK on our own. Mama worked the breakfast shift at Duncan's and ran a register at McCrory's in the afternoon. She was quick, and good at math. Every morning, she waited on a lawyer, Mr. Barton Douglas, Jr. at Duncan's. He had just moved to Laurel from Baton Rouge where he had learned lawyering from his Daddy. I hear that's a family thing.

One day as she poured his coffee, he said, "Stella, would you like to try working in my office?" She did not hesitate to say yes. She started the next week. Like I said, she was quick.

Not long after, he turned to her and said, "Stella, will you marry me?" She said yes. He was not her type, more than a few years younger, but he was kind to us, and a good provider.

He adopted me and I became Eunice Douglas instead of Eunice Kowalski. I called him Daddy B.

Mama worked with him in his office until she smoked herself to death in 1993. Daddy B. died a year later. Not long after, Aunt Blanche passed. I've been alone ever since, except for Howard, who doesn't count.

I never heard anything about the rest of my family. Mama said the Dubois family had been prosperous back in the day when yellow pine ruled Laurel, but they scattered long ago.

I started out here in Ocean Springs waiting tables, just like Mama, then managed a small oceanfront motel, the Ocean Crest. That did until the casinos came in the 1990s and I could make more money in Biloxi. Now every morning I drive across Biloxi Bay to the Golden Nugget Hotel and Casino. I started on the front desk. They made me housekeeping manager in less than a year. I like staying busy. I'm not rich, but I make enough that I don't have to put up with a man.

First thing all my girls do when they clean a room is turn on the TV. It helps pass the time. The Golden Nugget has 704 rooms, so it feels like cleaning the same room over and over and over. I know. I clean rooms myself when I'm short on help, not bad for a woman my age.

I leave HGTV on all the time in my office. I love seeing what can be done with a little imagination (and a lot of money) to make a house a home. Most of the houses are in California or Florida or New York.

My favorite HGTV series is called "Hometown," and it is set in my hometown, Laurel, Mississippi. A cute couple, Erin and her bear husband Ben Napier, host the show.

One day I heard Erin say they were fixing up a home called Belle Reve. Belle Reve! I turned up the sound. My Aunt Blanche told me stories about Belle Reve. She claimed it was the magnificent mansion our family had lost but she never took me there. I thought it was another one of her affectations. Aunt Blanche saw things and heard things that I did not. Her make-believe world was much more glamorous than the one I lived in. Sometimes Mama would join Aunt Blanche, telling stories about their days at Belle Reve. I thought she was humoring Blanche, just showing love for her sister. I never believed it was a real place. But there it was on my TV, sitting at the end of a long drive lined with live oak trees, like Tara in *Gone with the Wind*, but gone to seed, ramshackle and run-down.

I turned up the sound again to hear Erin say, "The plantation home was once owned by the Dubois family. Their daughter Blanche taught school here in Laurel for many years, but no one knows what became of her. We learned this when Ben was demo-ing a wall to create an open-concept-kitchen and he came across a bundle of letters hidden in the wall."

I dropped a pile of dirty sheets and picked up my phone. I had to contact Erin. TV stars don't answer their own mail, so I called the Laurel TV station. I left a voice mail for Erin saying that I was Blanche Dubois' niece, Eunice Kowalksi Douglas, spelled it all out, and repeated my number twice. I didn't really expect to hear back from anyone after talking to that machine.

Much to my surprise, I did. Not from Erin, but from a woman named Angela Tarrant, who said she was the “executive producer.” She said Erin would call me.

I picked up every call that day on the first ring until Erin was on my line. “Miss Douglas, I am so glad you called. I have some interesting news for you,” she said, “You are not the only relative who called the Laurel TV station about Belle Reve. We heard from a gentleman, too.”

I remained silent.

“Mam, do you know him?”

I said, “I don’t believe I do, Miss Erin.”

There was a pause.

“He tells us that he traces his roots back to the Dubois family of Laurel!”

I was stunned. I couldn’t tell her my mama, Stella Dubois Kowalski Douglas, my Aunt Blanche Dubois and my Daddy Stanley Kowalski, the only family I knew, had been dead for years.

A few minutes passed, then Erin said, “He tells us that he was adopted by a lovely couple. He was their only child, and he never married. Late in life, he set out to find his birth parents. He worked with a professional genealogist and a DNA test led him to the Dubois line. Would you like to meet him?”

“Miss Douglas?”

I could not speak. My heart was pounding.

“Miss Douglas?”

I regained my composure.

“Yes, Miss Erin, I’m still here. Of course, I’d love to meet my newfound kin!” I said, as if I meant it.

“Awesome,” Erin said. “I’ll have Angela call you back as soon as the studio can make arrangements,” Erin said, “Don’t worry if it is not right away. We usually run about three months behind production.”

I thanked her and hung up.

It took me a few days before I could even talk about all this. I keep to myself, especially around my Golden Nugget girls, except for Fay Rene. We knew each other long before we worked together. She is big and tough and makes me feel safe, so I confided in her. "Check this man's story out!" she said without hesitation. "Get online, Google 'DNA Test,' you spit in a vial and mail it back to them, next thing you know you have a list of relatives you've never heard of! You can see if this man is really related to you!"

A month later I had my list. There was only one very close relative, a male. I don't understand the percentages they give, but it looked like we couldn't be closer without being the same person. They didn't give his name, unless you consider 2078333 a name.

I found my way to the DNA website message box and wrote:

"Dear 2078333, You don't know me, and I don't know you, but the test says we are related. Do you know how?" Sincerely, 2054603

Two days later I got a response.

"Dear DNA 2054603, Did your mother or father ever live in New Orleans?" Sincerely
2078333

I let this response sit four days before I could respond. That was over seventy years ago. Mama was so young. Did she have another baby before me? No. She would have told me. We were so close. This man had to be Daddy's baby. Mama said Daddy was a rake and looked like a young Marlon Brando and that no woman, or man "that way," could resist him. This newfound relative had to be my stepbrother by way of Daddy. Mama had no other children, and Lord knows, Aunt Blanche never kept a man long enough to have children (except for that one Mama said liked to wear her clothes).

The next time it was slow at The Golden Nugget I responded:

"Dear DNA 2078333, My parents lived in New Orleans at the time of my birth. I am their only child. My parents separated when I was young. My mother had no other children. It is possible my father had another family later in life. Sincerely, 2054603"

The next morning, I found this response:

“Dear DNA 2054603, Let me tell you what I know. I was adopted by a wonderful couple in Huntsville Alabama. They never told me that I was adopted. After my mother died, I found a file in her closet from a lawyer in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. My birth mother lived in Birmingham until I was born. All her living and medical expenses were paid. My birth certificate was sealed. It would be wonderful to speak with you in person, but if you do not want to do so, I will understand. Sincerely, 2058333”

I let this sit for a week. I did not know this man from Adam. Daddy never bothered to visit me, much less tell me about the rest of his life before he ended up dead at Raiford State Prison. I confided in Fay Rene. “Eunice, what is that man going to do to you at this late date? she said, “Even if he is your stepbrother, he’s got to be over the hill himself. Granted, he might have been wild like your daddy Stanley, fifty years ago, but men calm down if they live long enough. What harm could there be in satisfying his curiosity? And you’d rather wonder about it yourself the rest of your life? I’ll go with you if you would like me to, you know no one messes with Fay Rene!”

Fay Rene had saved me again. I went back to the office and responded:

“Dear DNA 2058333, Yes, I will meet you in person; however, a friend will accompany me. Please provide your name, address and phone number and I will contact you. Sincerely, 2054603”

Before I turned off my monitor and packed up to go home, he responded:

“Dear DNA 2054603, Thank you for agreeing to get together. My name is George Huntleigh. Since retiring, I’ve lived at 510 Sandhill Church Road in Soso, Mississippi. My phone number is (601) 729-2958, just so you know I am on the up and up, my birth date is 9/28/1948. I can meet anywhere that is convenient for you. With much appreciation, DNA 205833”

I caught Fay Rene just as she was leaving for the day.

“I have his name! He is only 100 miles away from here, just outside Laurel!”

Fay Rene hugged me, then sat at my desk and read the message carefully. She looked up at me and asked, “Eunice, when were you born?”

“January 2, 1948,” I replied.

“Interesting,” she said, “So your Daddy really was a rake!”

We both laughed as we packed up for the day.

Before I could set up a time for me and Fay Rene to meet George Huntleigh, Angela called from HGTV.

“Miss Douglas, we are ahead of schedule!” she said with enthusiasm, “Can you be at Belle Reve next Thursday at 10am to meet with Erin and Ben? We’ll cover your expenses.”

“Of course! Is it OK if I bring a friend with me?” I asked.

“Yes, please do. Just so you know, you might be on camera,” Angela replied.

“Will do, see you then,” I said as I hung up, trying to sound casual even though this last remark threw me. Most days I wear my Golden Nugget sweatsuit, so I dug through my closet until I found a navy-blue suit that still fit, before I called Fay Rene and asked if she could go with me, “I’d love to go, Eunice! I’ll drive; I just got my Camry serviced,” she said without hesitation.

Thursday came fast. We got an early start and arrived in less than two hours.

We had no trouble finding our way. We pulled into Belle Reve’s front drive under a canopy of live oak trees stretching across the manicured lawn. The house was nothing like it was when I saw it last on TV. It was freshly painted, the pillars restored, windows replaced, and a new door installed. I was so enthralled by its beauty I did not notice the television cameras surrounding the front porch.

As we got out of the Camry I saw him, a man resembling Daddy in Mama’s photographs. He was much older, but he had a way of carrying himself, a bit of what Mama called “Daddy’s swagger,” as he walked toward the car.

“I’m George Huntleigh, you must be the other Belle Reve descendant, it is a pleasure to meet you,” he said extending his hand to me, then turning to Fay Rene with a questioning look.

“Mr. Huntleigh,” I responded, “I’m Eunice Douglas, and this is my dear friend Fay Rene. She was so kind as to drive me up from Ocean Springs.”

George shook Fay Rene’s hand, then we stood awkwardly, trying not to be obvious about looking each other over.

He was a fine-looking man. And well preserved.

Then Miss Angela came out the front door of Belle Reve, with a big smile, and said, “So you two have found each other? It is wonderful to have had something to do with this reunion, right here on the front porch of your family home!”

I didn’t want to remind her that I’d never been here, much less met this man who she was describing as my family. My family was long dead. But before I could say anything, Erin and Ben popped out the front door. I was starstruck. They were cuter in person than on TV!

“Miss Eunice, Mr. George, welcome to Hometown!” Erin said with a twinkle in her eye. “Let’s all sit on the porch to talk. I created a lovely conversation area here where you can enjoy the front lawn and these beautiful oak trees!”

Everyone gazed out over the lawn.

Breaking the silence, Angela said, “I’d like to get this moment on film for you to remember. You do remember the paperwork you signed allowing us to film you? We might use a little clip here and there for our upcoming special on Belle Reve!” she said with such enthusiasm that I could do nothing but nod my head and smile.

So, there I was, sitting on the porch as Erin looked directly at the cameraman, and said, “I am thrilled to bring together two descendants of the Dubois family, the original owners of Belle Reve! First let me introduce, Eunice Douglas,” she leaned forward and said, “Tell me about your family.”

“Mama met Daddy down in New Orleans,” I said, doing my best to hold in my stomach, “Everyone went there during World War II to work. They lived in a tiny little apartment downstairs from Mama’s best friend and my namesake, Eunice.”

Everyone laughed so I continued. “Mama and Daddy had a passionate relationship, but they hit some rough spots after the war. I suppose they couldn’t get along, so Mama took me back home, right here, well not right here in Belle Reve, but to Laurel to live with my Aunt Blanche.”

Erin laughed and said, “So you’ve never been to Belle Reve?”

“No,” I said firmly, but I could tell that I must have said enough because Erin turned her attention from me and was looking directly at George.

“George,” Erin said with that sweet twinkle in her eye, “You’ve never been to Belle Reve before now?”

“No, Mam,” George said, “I was raised over in Huntsville, Alabama, then I retired in Soso, not far from here, but I’ve never been to Belle Reve. I never knew about Belle Reve until I saw it on your show.”

Erin stopped smiling in a way that made it clear he had said enough. So, he stopped talking. George caught my eye, and we laughed.

Erin stood up and walked away with the cameraman. Ben pulled his chair closer and told us all about what they had done inside the house. Then he offered to take us on a tour, so we stood up and followed Ben inside.

The house was like a beautiful dream. I could not believe that anyone in my family had been so prosperous. It made me sad that Mama and Aunt Blanche never saw it this way. I noticed the cameramen were following us, so I discretely adjusted my skirt and jacket. Ben led us to the large open concept kitchen. He pointed out where the wall had been where he had found Aunt Blanche’s letters. Then we followed him up the long winding staircase to the second floor. The bedrooms were so spacious, although one had been converted into an extra-large master bath with a separate tub/shower wet area. Once we had all taken a close look, Ben led us back down the stairs and out the front door to the porch and excused himself.

I sat down in the same chair. George followed me and sat next to me. Just then, Angela came out of the door with a tray, smiled and said, “I brought you two coffee and a little something to eat. It’s been a long day. I thought it would be nice if we left you alone to talk since you’ve never met. This is so much to absorb in one day!” She turned and went back into the house.

Fay Rene winked at me, excused herself and went inside the house to take another look. I didn’t notice that the cameramen were still there.

I smiled at George. He sat up and poured me a cup of coffee, then offered the tray. I took the coffee and a ham biscuit. He did the same. We were silent for a moment, then he launched into his story.

“Miss Douglas,” he said, not looking at me directly.

“Please call me Eunice, George!” I replied.

“Yes, Eunice,” he said, smiling and looking me in the eye, “We’ve had so much to absorb since we learned about Belle Reve. I never imagined I would find my family. And yes, even though we haven’t acknowledged it, I am DNA 2058333. Let me explain how I fit in.”

We both laughed.

I smiled, sure of what I thought he was going to say. Looking at him from the side, he had Daddy's profile.

"When I cleared out my mother's home," he said, "I found a letter dated 1950 from a woman by the name of Blanche Dubois of Laurel Mississippi wanting to know if I was healthy and happy. I could find no response. This is all I knew until by coincidence, I turned on the TV in a motel room in Texas where I was travelling and saw a segment on HGTV about a home in Laurel Mississippi being restored and a woman by the name of Blanche Dubois."

I sat up and leaned forward.

"This leads me to believe that your Aunt Blanche was my mother, making us first cousins."

We are closer than that I thought.

I let him think for a moment, then I said, "Tell me more about the Huntleighs."

"They were older, very kind, and I was their only child," George said, "Dad was a furniture salesman, and my mother kept our home. Dad had a brother, my Uncle Shep who was very well to do. He loved my parents and was always generous. They all died many years ago. Because of Uncle Shep I was able to go to college and become an engineer. That made my life much easier than it was for my parents. I worked at the Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville until I retired a few years ago. I was always drawn to Mississippi, I don't know why, I just had the sense I belonged here. Now I know why," he paused, "How about yourself," he said looking kindly into my eyes.

I exhaled and unbuttoned my jacket, no longer caring how I looked. I felt a calmness I had never experienced, like all would be right with the world.

"George, I feel the same way. Just so you know, my Aunt Blanche lived with my Mama and Daddy in New Orleans just before and after I was born in early 1948," I said as he nodded, "Aunt Blanche was a special soul, I loved her dearly. Mama said it was rough going because she and Daddy were like oil and water, and their apartment was just two small rooms. They rented it from my namesake, their upstairs neighbor Eunice Hubbell. Mama said Daddy would get to drinking, and Aunt Blanche would get to drinking and she never knew what to expect. And like I said it was a small apartment. Aunt Blanche had her ways, but now that I've seen Belle Reve I understand where she got them."

George put his hand on mine. “Eunice, I think we know how we are related. It doesn’t matter how it happened, but I am glad we found each other.”

I smiled and said, “George, even though we never knew all of them, our family was there for us.”

I could see tears in his eyes, but not for long. Erin popped out the front door and the cameramen swung to attention. He looked at me and we laughed.

“This has been such a happy day,” Erin said, smiling at the camera, “You may remember the letters we found here at Belle Reve. You know I love to decorate for new owners in keeping with the history of their house. I had an idea. I took my favorite letters from long-time Laurel High School teacher Blanche Dubois’ students and made them into a decoupage to display in the kitchen at Belle Reve!” She held them up as the cameramen moved close in on one letter:

Dear Miss Dubois, how can I ever show you my appreciation for all the time you spent with me this year. I never expected my English class to be more interesting than shop. You taught me things I will enjoy the rest of my life. Sincerely, Tom Lester

“And thank you for joining us today on HGTV’s Hometown Makeover,” Erin said as Ben shook our hands, “Another successful renovation and a happy family reunited!”