



LUCY
GREEN
EYES

Paulette Benjamin

Not everything green is gold.

LUCY GREEN EYES

The story of Merlene McDaniel Benjamin

by

Paulette Benjamin

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awcmonn@gmail.com

Cover Art by Pamela E. Benjamin

<http://pamelaspets.com/>

I dedicate this book to my Mama, Merlene, (even though it's her story), and to the women who helped to shape her into the beautiful person that she is today – my grandma, “Wuta”, my Aunt Toy and my great grandma, “Granny”.

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About the Author

“Hey, Merlene, where you goin’ with those high-top suedes? To a funeral?”

“Well if I’m goin’ to a funeral, you must be go’n preach it, with that big ole overcoat you got on.”

Imagine being the missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle. Okay. Now imagine walking up to each and every unfinished puzzle, trying to mold yourself to fit into the only remaining space, just to be plucked out of the way by the piece that fits.

There is a puzzle out there that's not yet complete, and there is a piece that's still in search of it.

This is the true story based on actual events in the life of Merlene McDaniel Benjamin as depicted from her eyes. Some of the names have been changed to protect the innocent, *and the guilty*.

Prologue

From the time that I was a very young girl, I would hear the phrase, “*the grass is always greener on the other side*”. Back in those days, children knew better than to butt into grown folk’s conversation. So instead of asking what the phrase meant, I just assumed that greener things were automatically better. And things could only be greener if you had green eyes with which to look at them. Well, I for one did not have green eyes, nor did my grandmother, the woman who raised me, nor did any of my aunts, uncles or any of the other folks that were black like us.

But Mr. Belkin had green eyes. He was the man who owned the land that my grandmother picked cotton on. He and his kids had green eyes, and those kids would sometimes give me their hand-me-down shoes and clothes, but never their toys. And they had so many toys. Clothes, toys, and I imagined a nice big house in which they had plenty of food to eat, too. And all because of their green eyes. From that time on, I made up in my young mind that I was going to have green eyes too, because people with green eyes were happier people.

The first thing that I did with my first box of crayons, *hand-me-down crayons*, was picking out the green one and rubbing it over my eyelids. I was determined to achieve what none of the folks in my family had, and that was to make my eyes green. At three years old, I guess it was a good thing that I was too young to bother looking into a mirror to check whether or not my eyes really were green. But at least I could imagine things being greener, and better.

THE BEGINNING

Chapter 1

Country Life

I was born in the small town of Pelion, South Carolina on December 12, 1939 and grew up on the outskirts of Swansea South Carolina. I don't believe there was a name to the area where I lived. As far as I was concerned, it was just The Woods. Our official address was Route Two, Box 92. The old wooden house had no number. It was nowhere. Just woods and an old cemetery from the 1700's set deeper within the woods.

Because I was born out-of-wedlock, my grandparents gave my mother a very difficult time. My grandmother, whom everyone in the family referred to as "Mama", had an intimidating disposition which was usually enough to keep her children in line. But my mother was different. She would back-talk Mama even if it resulted in consequences. When I was just a couple of weeks old, my mother and grandmother had gotten into such an argument that my mother wrapped me up in a blanket, packed a bag and left to go and stay with her older brother, Bill. It was so cold that she buttoned my well-wrapped body inside her coat. She stayed gone from my grandparents' house for about a week. And when she did return, my grandmother was so glad to see me that she told my mother, "I don't care where you go, but you ain't takin' this child again."

I used to cry a lot as an infant. I'd cry all night and sometimes all day. There were times when my grandmother was the only person who could quiet me down. One day while Mama was out working, my mother and aunt could do nothing to stop me from crying. So they found someone to give them a ride into town where my grandmother was, and as soon as I saw her, I immediately stopped

crying and started grinning. It was after a few months of unfulfilling motherhood that my mother decided to hand me over to my grandmother.

“Take her, Mama. You can have her.”

“You *sho*?” my grandmother asked.

“Yes, ma’am. You can have her.”

“You sho, now?”

She was sure. She was a twenty-two-year-old woman who wanted to be out from under her parents’ roof. But she knew she wouldn’t be able to do it with an infant to care for.

My mother’s name was Ruth McDaniel, the eldest daughter of Henry and Florence Estelle McDaniel. She wasn’t married to my father, which was why I was given her maiden name. I think that she and my father would’ve gotten married had it not been for my grandfather. I heard that whenever my father would come near the house to see my mother, Papa would get the shotgun after him and chase him away. My grandparents were angry at my father because he didn’t want to claim me until after I was born, at which time he would’ve been able to see whether or not I resembled his people. The insinuation caused my grandparents to despise him to the point where they wanted nothing to do with him. So my father stayed away for the next three years. Nonetheless, he would still be a part of the family because his older brother, Freddie Lee Dunbar, got married to my mother’s younger sister, Flossie McDaniel. So like it or not, my grandparents were stuck with him.

My father’s name was Lonnie Dunbar. I don’t remember actually meeting him until I was around three-and-a-half years old. It was at a family gathering. I recall my Aunt Toy pointing him out to me. “That’s your daddy over there.”

Although I had never heard anything good said about him, I was very glad to see him.

“Hey - you wanna come see the pigs?” I said to him. For whatever reason, I was in love with our pigs as a child, which could have been one of the reasons I was nicknamed “Pig”. The other reason may have been because I loved to eat.

“Come on,” I continued, pulling my father by the hand. “Come and see them.” He was so tall and handsome. He smelled good, too, like sweet soap and cigars. “We got pigs.”

“Oh, yeah?” he laughed as I pulled him by his seemingly large hand over to the pig pen.

“Mama said the rain send the pigs down,” my baby-voice squealed with excitement. “They come from the rain-clouds.”

It seemed that my father would smile or laugh at whatever I’d say. Although I didn’t understand why at the time, I knew that it made him happy to see me. The feeling was mutual, and on this particular day, I wouldn’t allow anyone except for Lonnie Dunbar to prepare my food when it was time to eat.

“Can I have some more *’mata* and rice Mr. Lonnie Dunbar?” I would say. I didn’t actually like eating tomatoes with rice, but just knowing that it pleased my father to serve me, made me happy. He’d laugh when I’d ask for more food, and the more he laughed, the more I’d ask for. I was so full that I could barely breathe. I was also well aware that no matter how badly I wanted to, I could not call him “Daddy” because I had already been warned by my grandmother to refer to him as Mr. Lonnie Dunbar.

It was at this very same gathering that I recall receiving my first whipping. It all started when I got upset because my grandfather wouldn’t give me another

biscuit. “You done had enough,” he told me. Well, as far as my three-year old self was concerned, my daddy, Mr. Lonnie Dunbar, was there to watch me eat. Therefore, I had not had enough. So, out of anger, I spat in Papa’s face. He wasn’t going to say anything about it, but one of my cousins who was just a couple of years older than I was, took it upon her fat self to inform my grandmother.

“Grandm-a-a-a,” she yelled as she wobbled, “Merlene spit in Papa’s face.”

It didn’t just come out as spoken words. I’m guessing that in her haste to tattle, my fat cousin added her own musical notes to it. “Mer-LENE spit IN Pa-PA’s f-a-a-a-ce.”

I, meanwhile, ran over to Aunt Toy because she would usually be the one to protect me from my grandmother.

“Toy,” I said, “it wasn’t but a lil’ bit, Toy.”

When I was learning how to talk, I could never pronounce her name, Flossie, correctly. So I just started calling her “Toy”. And soon afterwards, everyone else began doing the same. Unfortunately, Toy wouldn’t protect me on that day. Mama got a switch to me before anyone could come to my rescue. When she was done, I remember sitting on the ground pouring handfuls of sand over my legs to cool down the stinging. I could hear my grandfather in the background actually yelling at Mama, going so far as to call her a ‘fool’ for whipping me the way she did.

Years later after I was grown, Mama admitted to me that she was afraid that Papa was going to whip her for whipping me. But what I found ironic was to learn that Mama once scolded my own mother for spanking me.

I was very young, maybe two-and-a-half. We were at a country store in the town of Swansea and my mother had me by the hand as we walked the aisles.

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