

For the Life of Laetitia: Chapters 1-5

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Summary

Chapter 1

The novel opens mid-journey. Laetitia is in her father's car, travelling down Sooklal Trace toward La Puerta. The Trace is rough and the car is noisy, but neither of these is the source of her discomfort. The discomfort is Orville Cephas himself, who cannot stop turning to grin at her and trying to make conversation. He mentions that he boasted about her to his boss, that her half-brother Michael will have to work hard not to be beaten by a girl, and that his wife Miss Velma once attended high school and is looking forward to measuring Lacey up for her uniform. On the way, he passes Miss Adlyn struggling down the road with a baby and a bulging bag and does not stop. Lacey cannot even wave at her.

Chapter 2

The narrative breaks to provide the background. Lacey's name appeared in the newspapers among the scholarship winners: JOHNSON, LAETITIA CHRISTINA. Pappy made speeches until dark. Uncle Jamesie and Tantie Monica had to leave before they were caught in the Trace by nightfall. Two days later Mr. Cephas arrived for the first time in many years, the back seat of his car full of presents. Ma received him at the door with her hands on her hips and a face of stone. He grinned and called her "Ma Willie."

Ma questioned him methodically: what did his wife think of Lacey coming to live there? Would he buy the books and uniform? Would he make sure she didn't run wild in the town? He agreed vigorously to everything. She still didn't give him much of an answer, saying she would have to write to Mammy Patsy first and consult Pappy and the uncles. When Mammy Patsy's letter arrived from New York, it was decisive: It is high time that man do something for the child. She wrote that if Mr. Cephas would help support Lacey, she might finally be able to give up mopping the hospital floor and come home to her garden.

Chapter 3

Ma takes Lacey to register at the school. The school is enormous, more impressive than anything Lacey had imagined, with several two-storey buildings and a playing field that runs to the bush. At the registration table, a woman loaded with gold earrings and three colours of face paint looks up just long enough to throw them a look of disgust when she hears that

Lacey's parents are not married. When Ma gives the address as "Sooklal Trace, Balatier," the woman sucks her teeth. Ma barks a single word at her. A man at the same table steps in calmly, takes the form, and fills it in himself. On the bus home Ma calls the woman a salope and a damn circus-horse. The name sticks.

After the registration Ma visits Ma Zelline, her macommère in La Puerta. Ma Zelline is a woman who lives entirely on her own terms: no husband, no children by choice, her own garden and her own bookcase. The two women sit in the kitchen talking and laughing in patois while Lacey drinks stout with milk. Before they leave, Ma Zelline gives Lacey a present for passing her exam: a book about Marie Curie.

Chapter 4

The week before school opens, Lacey gets up before dawn to weed and mould her little garden, which Uncle Leroy has agreed to tend in her absence. Charlene, Ruth, and Kenwyn come out to help and quickly lose interest in favour of the plum tree and the dogs. Uncle Leroy inspects the garden, calls Lacey the Minister of Agriculture, and says she needs to carry some of her produce for her father. Lacey suggests bhaji. Uncle Leroy says that is poor-people food; high-class people eat something called spinach, which is the same thing but comes from America. She brings ochroes instead.

In the kitchen Ma and Pappy talk in their quiet, unhurried way, and Lacey is overcome by the familiar drowsiness of a household she has always felt safe in. The contrast with what is ahead of her is not yet named, but it is felt.

Chapter 5

The car ride ends. Mr. Cephas pulls up at a house in La Puerta. Miss Velma appears in the doorway, described by Lacey as seeming to smile and sorrow at the same time, with bright eyes in a face that looks sick or burdened. She shows Lacey to the bedroom she will share with Michael. One bed is neatly made and one is in the state Michael has left it. There are two shelves cleared in the cupboard for Lacey, and empty hangers on one side of the wardrobe. Lacey looks around and decides she does not want to unpack anything. She puts her box of books under the bed.

Michael erupts into the house, drives an imaginary vehicle past them both, and when called to introduce himself, asks what Lacey's name is. He is told. He calls her Lettuce and drives back to the bedroom. Lacey decides that if she is going to be living here, she will have to squash this little boy as soon as possible.

Analysis

The novel's opening is structurally precise. Hodge begins mid-journey and in the present tense, which puts the reader immediately inside Laetitia's discomfort without explanation. The car ride down Sooklal Trace is uncomfortable not because of the road but because of who is driving. The opening scene establishes the novel's central tension: Laetitia is being taken from the place she belongs to by a man who has no real claim on her.

The flashback in Chapter 2 earns its place by revealing how conditional the arrangement is. Mr. Cephas arrives with presents only after Lacey's name appears in the newspaper. He has been absent for years and returns not because of paternal feeling but because she has become someone he can use. Ma's interrogation makes this visible without saying it. The polished table and the face-of-stone greeting are Ma's way of conducting the negotiation on her own terms. She does not refuse him; she makes him understand who is in charge.

Mammy Patsy's letter is one of the novel's most quietly significant documents. She is thousands of miles away, mopping a hospital floor in New York, and she knows exactly what Mr. Cephas is. Her approval is not warmth toward him; it is a calculation that Lacey's education is worth the cost of letting him back in. Her line about coming home to her garden when she is finally free contains more longing than the whole letter she is responding to.

Mrs. Lopez at the registration desk is introduced before she is named, and she is named by Ma before any other character names her. The word "circus-horse" comes from Ma, from the bus home, born out of indignation at a woman who sucked her teeth at a grandmother who had walked into a government school to register her scholarship grandchild. The name reaches the classroom. That is how effective Ma's assessment is.

Ma Zelline's introduction is brief but carefully placed. She comes directly after Mrs. Lopez and functions as her counter-image: another woman in La Puerta, but one who lives entirely on her own terms. She gives Lacey a book about Marie Curie, a woman scientist who worked in conditions of exclusion and succeeded. The gift is not accidental.

The bhaji and spinach exchange between Uncle Leroy and Lacey is the novel's first explicit articulation of the class division that underlies much of the story. Bhaji is nutritionally identical to spinach; the difference is that bhaji grows in the back yard and spinach comes from America. The joke is affectionate but it names something real: the world Lacey is moving into will find ways to make her feel that what she comes from is inferior.

Miss Velma's introduction prepares the reader for everything that follows in the Cephas household. She smiles and sorrows at the same time. Her eyes are bright but her face is burdened. Lacey reads her immediately: this is a woman whose life has been reduced by the

man she lives with. The radio, still to come in Chapter 6, will make the precise mechanics of that reduction visible.

Themes

- **Belonging and displacement:** The novel opens with Lacey leaving the only home she has known. Chapters 1-5 establish, with great precision, what she is leaving: Ma and Pappy's voices humming in the kitchen before dawn, the warm chaos of Ruth and Kenwyn and Carlyle, the garden she has tended herself. What she is arriving at is introduced through its absences: a bedroom that cannot be unpacked, a drawing room nobody sits in, a woman who tiptoes through her own house.
- **Patriarchy and the performance of ownership:** Mr. Cephas reappears in Lacey's life at the moment she becomes worth boasting about. His pride in her is real, but it is the pride of possession rather than parenthood. He shows her to his friends; he carries the newspaper with her name in his pocket to work. The interrogation Ma puts him through is the novel's first act of resistance to this logic.
- **Class and cultural shame:** Uncle Leroy's bhaji and spinach joke names the colonial inheritance at work in the society: things with roots in the Caribbean are coded as poor-people things, while their identical equivalents, if they come from America or England, acquire respectability. The joke is gentle, but the structure it describes is not.
- **Women and their resources:** The first three women Lacey encounters outside her home form a spectrum. Mrs. Lopez wields institutional authority but uses it to humiliate. Ma Zelline has built a life of complete self-determination. Miss Velma has given everything to a household that does not see her. These three figures bracket the range of women's lives the novel will explore.