

For the Life of Laetitia: Chapters 11-15

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Summary

Chapter 11

Anjanees is not at school. The social studies teacher sticks a large poster to the blackboard: a square-jawed white man, a small yellow-haired woman, and two round-cheeked children. She tells the class to study it and draw a Happy Family. To Lacey's left and right, children produce obedient copies: square-jawed men, flowing yellow hair, children with cheeks like apples. When the teacher comes to stand over Lacey, spread over two pages of her notebook are Ma, Pappy, Uncle Leroy, Mammy Patsy, Uncle Jamesie, Tantie Monica, herself, her sister, her brother, Carlyle, and all her first cousins, with more still to add. The teacher asks where the husband and wife are. Lacey points out Ma and Pappy. The teacher exclaims in mock alarm and says the family looks like the Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe. Lacey decides it is not worth her while explaining anything to this woman, and waits for her to move on.

In their first literature class, Mr. Joseph tells the class to leave Tales of the Greek Heroes on the shelf for now. They will write their own book first. He calls for folktale suggestions and nobody will speak. Then he says the word Ladjablesse. The class erupts in embarrassed laughter. Mr. Joseph writes the name on the board, and the Soucouyant, and Douenn, and Anansi, writing them as seriously as if they were on an examination paper. The laughter dies. Then he opens the Greek Heroes and reads a passage about the Cyclops eating two Greeks for breakfast, and asks the class why they are not laughing now.

Chapter 12

On the first Friday home, at the bus station, Lacey notices that Anjanees is walking with a heavy step and answering in a small, dull voice. When pressed, Anjanees says she does not know if she will get to keep coming to school. Her family lives in Orangefield, where no buses run; she depends on a taxi to Caigual and then a bus to La Puerta. Her brothers and father have told her she has enough schooling: she can already read, write, cook, and wash, so why should they waste money on secondary school? She does not say this calmly; she stares straight ahead with filled eyes. They sit in a helpless silence until it is time for her to go.

Lacey takes her own bus home with a heavy heart. When she reaches Rampie's corner and turns in, evening is falling on the Trace. Children are bringing in goats. There is woodsmoke in the air. Ruth and Kenwyn are on the front steps in the near-dark; they run inside screaming to

Ma that she is here, then run out again and stop in their tracks, overcome with shyness. Uncle Leroy appears from nowhere and takes her bags. Ma stands at the front door and beams. They stay up very late, and Lacey has to tell everything she can remember about the school and the Cephases. Uncle Leroy says he will have to come and see the Circus-horse himself one day.

On Sunday, Uncle Jamesie takes photographs of Lacey in her school uniform to send to Mammy Patsy. Ma constantly asks whether Mr. Cephas is treating her well.

Chapter 13

In the weeks that follow, Anjane becomes withdrawn. She does not talk about herself any more; she feels she has said too much already. She is reluctant even to share Lacey's textbooks. Lacey eventually notices that Anjane has only one school shirt, for every day she sees the same pattern of ink dots on her sleeve from the day their pens spattered.

One lunchtime on the playing field, Lacey presses Anjane and gets the full story. On the Monday she had no taxi fare, she went to each brother in turn and then to her father. Her mother had been saving money from the weekly grocery allowance, a few cents at a time, and passing it secretly to Anjane. That week there was nothing left over. The biggest brother, the one with the County Council job, made a scene: he would break her foot if that was the only way to keep her home, because she was leaving her mother to do all the work and he was not going to waste good money on a girl who already knew everything a girl needed to know. Her father and one brother left for the garden. Anjane and her mother sold vegetables from the kitchen garden for two days, and on the third day Anjane was flat in bed with fever and a headache.

I don't want to end up like my mother! I not going to end up like my mother, I rather dead.

Anjane says her mother works from before sunrise until after dark without being seen. The men come home, eat, mess up the house, and drop their clothes. Anjane knows that she is the only thing standing between her mother's fate and her own. She also knows that without the fare and the books and the family's permission, she cannot get to school.

The chapter also establishes Form IH's social landscape. Doreen Sandiford and her gang have been to the Plaza more than once for chicken and chips; nobody will tell on Doreen Sandiford. Marlon Peters's group disrupts class on schedule, but never in Miss Hafeez's room or Mr. Joseph's. In literature, Mr. Joseph is reading *The Year in San Fernando* a chapter at a time, and when he reads, Marlon Peters and Naushad Ali pull their chairs to the front of the room and sit still as statues.

Chapter 14

Michael is a changed boy by any practical measure: the bed is made, the toys are put away, he bathes without being asked. Lacey has begun bringing him books from the school library as bribes, and he tackles them on his own between visits. But when Mr. Cephas is at home, the household contracts. His reading lessons with Michael are not lessons; they are performances of rage. Michael stumbles through every sentence, and Mr. Cephas gets louder and louder, clapping him behind the head, bellowing about shame, asking if he wants to cut cane. When the belt comes out, Miss Velma emerges from wherever she has been hiding and begs. Mr. Cephas shakes the belt in her face: Is you that spoiling him!

Ma, when Lacey is home for the weekend, observes that Mr. Cephas is one of those people who believe that white people sit at the right hand of God and black people underneath His chair, and that the next best thing to being white is to marry someone white or whitish. He married Miss Velma because she is red-skinned. Lacey thinks about this. There was nothing up about Miss Velma. Looking at her, you would think instead that something was pressing her down, pressing down her whole life, like a plant in too much shade.

Chapter 15

At home on weekends Lacey tends her garden: there is always something new, a hard, round baby pumpkin the size of a marble, yellow-and-maroon flowers brightening the pigeon-pea trees, a bunch of baby bananas that seemed to have sprouted out of nowhere. The weekends are much too short. Ma makes Lacey leave for La Puerta on the Sunday afternoon.

One Friday a letter from Mammy Patsy is waiting. She wants to know about Lacey's school, and she has news of her own:

Now that your father is helping you and the government is giving you your secondary education, I can try to do something for myself. I enrolled in night classes for the High School Diploma. So you see, the two of us are going to secondary school together. But it is hard, hard, hard. After I finish work at the hospital, sometimes five, sometimes six o'clock, I eat a sandwich and I run to the subway to get the train. When I reach the school I am tired, tired. Sometimes I fall asleep in class. One of the teachers is a lady from Antigua, and she takes pity on me and helps me with what I don't understand. I wrote an essay about Pappy and it got an A.

When Ma reads the letter she sits holding it for a long time, talking to herself, smiling and then sighing and then smiling proudly again.

Ma makes sugar-cakes to sell at the bus station in Junction: coconut, sugar, and spice boiled together on the fireside, dropped onto fig leaves, dried, packed into biscuit tins. Mammy

Patsy used to help with this work. Now Ma takes Carlyle. When Lacey offers to come along on Saturdays, Ma sends her back to her homework and her book.

Analysis

The social studies scene in Chapter 11 is the chapter group's thematic centerpiece, and what makes it precise is not the act of defiance alone but the manner of it: Lacey does not argue, does not explain, simply does not see any reason to draw anything other than what is true. The teacher calls it wrong. Lacey waits for her to move on. The composure is more powerful than any argument would be.

Mr. Joseph, introduced here as a counterpoint to the social studies teacher, inverts the same logic. He takes the folklore of the students' own culture and puts it on the board in the same chalk as the Greek myths. The class laughs at the Ladjablesse; they do not laugh at the Cyclops. Mr. Joseph makes them ask why. The question he poses is whether their own stories are worth taking seriously, and the answer he gives by his conduct is yes.

Anjanees disclosure at the bus station in Chapter 12, and the full account on the playing field in Chapter 13, together form the novel's clearest statement of what the plot is actually about. Lacey's difficulty is Mr. Cephas's cold household. Anjanees difficulty is that the people who are supposed to support her want her life to be smaller than she is. Both girls are in secondary school on scholarship, but only one of them is going to be allowed to stay there if things do not change. The contrast between Lacey walking almost skipping to the bus station and Anjanees walking with a heavy step is not melodrama; it is the novel's central structural divide made visible in two bodies going in the same direction.

I not going to end up like my mother, I rather dead. This is the most important line in these chapters, and the reader cannot yet know how precise a forecast it is. Anjanees says it with vehemence, as motivation, as a refusal. Later, in a different context, it will turn out to be accurate. Hodge plants it here as the thing Anjanees means most sincerely: she would rather any fate than her mother's. What she does not yet see is that the fate she most fears is being arranged for her by the men in her household faster than she can resist it.

Mr. Cephas's reading lessons in Chapter 14 are not about Michael's education. They are about Mr. Cephas's anxiety that his son will reflect badly on him. The "cane cutter" line, repeated as a threat whenever Michael stumbles, is not concern for the child's future; it is concern for what the child's failure says about the father. The belt shaken in Miss Velma's face, stopping just short of contact, is the chapter's most precise detail: not a blow delivered but a threat maintained, which accomplishes the same control at lower cost.

The contrast Ma draws in Chapter 14 between Mr. Cephas marrying a light-skinned woman to "move up in the world" and what Lacey actually sees in Miss Velma is important. Ma's

explanation is the sociological one: colorism as a route to imagined proximity to whiteness. Lacey's response is the psychological one: a woman that pressed down, that hidden, has not moved up anywhere. The two observations are both true.

Mammy Patsy's letter in Chapter 15 places her in direct parallel with Lacey. While Lacey goes to school in La Puerta on the arrangement Mammy Patsy approved, Mammy Patsy is working toward her own diploma in a New York night class after a day of mopping floors. Both of them are pursuing the same thing: a life that does not depend entirely on what men decide to provide. The sugar-cake detail at the end of the chapter is not incidental; it is the domestic economy that makes Lacey's schooling possible, and Ma has already re-organised it around Lacey's absence.

Themes

- **Education as cultural battleground:** The social studies teacher's poster and Mr. Joseph's blackboard represent two opposing orientations toward the students' identity. The poster asks them to measure themselves against a white European model of the family and find themselves wanting. Mr. Joseph's board says that what they already carry is worth studying. The contrast is intentional and structural.
- **Education as survival:** Anjanees does not pursue school because she enjoys it (though she does); she pursues it because she has correctly identified it as the only instrument that can open the cage her family is building around her. Her declaration that she would rather die than end up like her mother is the logic of someone who has understood her situation with complete clarity.
- **The inheritance of diminished lives:** Miss Velma, Anjanees's mother, and Anjanees herself are three versions of the same trap: the woman whose labour sustains a household that does not acknowledge her, whose own aspirations have been closed off by the men around her. Ma's plant-in-too-much-shade observation makes this visible in a single image.
- **Violence and the household:** Mr. Cephas uses the threat of violence rather than violence itself, mostly. The belt shaken at Miss Velma, the hand that flies up and stops short: the threat is enough. This is how authoritarian domestic control works at its most efficient. It does not require constant physical force; it requires that the force is always available and always implied.
- **The quiet heroism of mothers:** Mammy Patsy's night-school enrolment places her in direct parallel with Lacey. Both are pursuing education under conditions designed to make it difficult. Anjanees's mother's secret savings, passed cent by cent from the grocery allowance, is the same impulse: every woman in these chapters is trying to carve out some possibility for the next generation, at personal cost they cannot easily afford.