

For the Life of Laetitia: Chapters 16-20

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Summary

Chapter 16

Form IH is beginning to show its colours. 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.

One day Anjaneer raises her hand in Mrs. Lopez's maths class to ask for an explanation. Mrs. Lopez pretends she cannot find the source of the voice, narrows her eyes, searches the classroom. When Anjaneer puts her hand up again, Mrs. Lopez gives her a scolding instead of an answer. Lacey tells Anjaneer not to worry about it, draws closer, and begins to explain the problem herself. Mrs. Lopez's voice cuts in: You are the teacher now? You taking over my job? Lacey answers that she asked the question and still did not understand. The class buzzes.

Mrs. Lopez does not send Lacey to the principal's office. Instead she gives the whole class a lecture: you can take a pig out of a pigsty, she tells them, but you cannot take the pigsty out of the pig. Some of them insisted on showing up, by their behaviour, the kind of hole they came out of. She uses the word "hole" deliberately, because people who came from proper homes knew how to behave. The government was wasting taxpayers' money sending them to secondary school. Some of them did not even have parents, she adds: mother here, father there. The bell stops her.

Chapter 17

Into the tense silence Mrs. Lopez leaves behind walks Mr. Tewarie. The class erupts. They will put a thumbtack on her chair, push her down the stairs, write to the government. Mr. Tewarie slams his book on the table, shocks them into quiet, and they learn to say "Mother is making an omelette" in Spanish. Then the chaos resumes. When Mr. Tewarie sends out Marlon Peters, Wayne Joseph, and Anderson Lewis for disruption, Marlon Peters protests that Naushad Ali and Anand Persad were just as involved. The class agrees. Mr. Tewarie, they feel, is always harder on the Black students. Marlon Peters walks out singing a verse that is openly anti-Indian. Mr. Tewarie calls him back in shock; Marlon Peters sings the second verse: anti-Black. He does an Indian dance in the aisle. The class erupts.

Chapter 18

Michael is now washing dishes with Lacey, chattering constantly at the sink, when Mr. Cephas walks in. He erupts at Miss Velma: two women in the house and his son at the sink washing wares, turning him into a cunumunu. His hand flies up twice toward Miss Velma, stopping just short both times. He knows, and Lacey knows, that she is the one who put Michael at the sink, but Mr. Cephas does not address her once during the whole outburst.

That evening's reading lesson ends with Michael beaten: belt, book, slipper, and the carved walking stick from the drawing-room decorations. Miss Velma stays hidden.

The following afternoon, Miss Velma calls Lacey into her bedroom and shows her a photograph album. The early pictures show a laughing, lively young woman, posing in gardens, in photography studios, wearing a school uniform. The wedding picture has life still shining out of Miss Velma; Mr. Cephas in a three-piece suit looks like a fattened penguin. While Lacey turns the pages, Miss Velma is sorting the laundry: Michael's and Mr. Cephas's shirts, jerseys, trousers, socks, towels, handkerchiefs. She says: You mustn't go against them. When you get big and you have your husband, you will know for yourself. Jump high or jump low, you have to please them. That is a woman's lot.

Then she takes back the album and opens it to the picture of herself in school uniform. She was bright, she says. They always said bright as a bulb. She started secondary school. But in those days you paid fees, and the schools were in the city, and when her younger brother reached the age for secondary school, they took her out and sent him: it is more important for a boy. They put her with a woman to learn sewing. Then a factory. Then she married Mr. Cephas and he made her leave the factory. She sighs, closes the album, and looks at the mountain of ironing left on the bed. When Lacey moves to help: No, child. That is my work. You take your book and study your lesson. And study it good.

Chapter 19

Anjane is absent for an entire week. The students are all sympathetic, sharing with her and trying to help her when she is present, for they can all tell that something is wrong. The class becomes quieter and more tense with each day she does not appear. On the Friday, at the start of maths, Mrs. Lopez looks around the room and says, not quite under her breath: That is one less dunce. One less headache for me. Praise God.

The class cannot contain itself. Lacey makes a loud noise with her chair to catch Mrs. Lopez's attention. Looking her straight in the eye, she pushes her pan of maths instruments off the desk. A few seconds of silence follow. Then a quiet girl who is almost never noticed positions her own pan at the edge of her desk and, with a wide sweep of her arm, sends it over. All across the classroom, pans crash to the floor, spilling compasses, set squares, pencils, and rulers. Mrs.

Lopez says she is going for the principal, gathers her things, and walks out. The class waits for the principal. Doreen Sandiford takes position at the door as lookout. Books open before them, they prepare to look studious on command. The principal never comes. As the term progresses, the class gets used to Mrs. Lopez marching out to fetch a principal who never arrives.

Chapter 20

Mr. Tewarie, after several more disruptive encounters, goes to Miss Hafeez and reports Form IH. She walks in one morning looking irritated. She asks why the class will not behave in Spanish. After a moment Marlon Peters says from behind a book that Mr. Tewarie is too "racial." Miss Hafeez asks what that word means, and Alicia Henderson helpfully repeats it for the record. The class voices its complaint: Mr. Tewarie targets the Black students while excusing the Indian boys who are equally involved.

Then Marlon Peters says his father says the only good coolie is a dead coolie. In the next moment, Anand Persad's uncle has been reported as wanting to go to South Africa to help the white people kill Black people. Peters and Persad are boxing each other playfully. Miss Hafeez, who is usually tough, sinks into her chair and says: Lord have mercy. When the laughing stops she tells them that the word they want is not "racial" but "racist." The class objects: "racist" is for the Ku Klux Klan and South Africa; what they experience is just something local. Miss Hafeez shakes her head: People talking about killing off one another and you laugh kya-kya and you say "just"? That is racism, children, and it is dangerous.

She asks all the students with one African parent and one Indian parent to stand. Several do. Peters bobs up as a half-dooгла. She asks them whether it would be amusing if one half of their own family were to kill the other. When she finishes, Peters and Persad are shooting imaginary guns at each other. The bell rings before she can return to the subject of Mr. Tewarie.

Analysis

The instruments protest in Chapter 19 is the novel's most precise image of collective action. Lacey does not organise it; she acts on her own fury, and the class follows. The detail of the quiet, near-invisible girl being the second one to push her pan is especially telling: this is not a movement led by the brave. It is one that the bravest person's action makes possible for everyone else. The class acts together because someone went first.

Mrs. Lopez's one less headache for me line is the scene's catalyst, but its significance goes beyond cruelty. She is a teacher expressing relief that a struggling student is absent. She has not failed Anjanee in any neutral way; she has actively worked to make Anjanee feel she does not belong in a classroom. The instruments protest is the class recognising this and refusing to accept it.

The Miss Hafeez scene in Chapter 20 is the novel's most complex and uncomfortable treatment of race. Miss Hafeez is right: what happens in their classroom is racism, not merely something "racial," and it is not a laughing matter. But the scene does not allow the reader to settle comfortably into that lesson. Peters and Persad are playing with ideas about killing each other's communities while laughing. The class deflects moral responsibility by locating racism in South Africa and America. Miss Hafeez's doogla exercise attempts to make the students feel the logic of racial violence in their own bodies, but the final image is Peters and Persad shooting imaginary guns at each other. The novel is honest about the difficulty of changing a mind in a classroom.

The photograph album scene in Chapter 18 is Miss Velma's autobiography told in a single extended image. The photographs cover a whole life from brightness to diminishment. The wedding picture still has life in it. The mountain of ironing is present tense. Miss Velma does not complain explicitly; she articulates a philosophy: That is a woman's lot. Then she sends Lacey away to study. The contrast between what Miss Velma accepted and what she is trying to give Lacey is the chapter's entire meaning. She cannot free herself, but she can try to protect the girl from the same trap.

Mr. Cephas's reaction to Michael washing dishes in Chapter 18 is the clearest single expression of his values: a son doing household work is a cununu, an effeminate disgrace. He shakes his hand at Miss Velma, who had nothing to do with it, because the real target (Lacey) cannot be punished without exposing his own loss of control over his daughter. The twice-raised hand is chilling in its precision: not once but twice, a pattern of threatened violence rather than actual, which may be worse in its sustained effect.

The Marlon Peters episode in Chapter 17 is the novel's most direct treatment of racial tension. The songs are uncomfortable to read, and deliberately so. Marlon Peters is not presented as straightforwardly wrong: his complaint that Mr. Tewarie targets the Black students while excusing the Indian ones is shared by the whole class, including Lacey. But his response, a song that degrades Indian people, is immediately answered by a second verse that degrades Black people. The exchange is circular and destructive, and everyone knows it even as they are laughing.

Themes

- **Collective resistance and what makes it possible:** The instruments protest shows that collective action requires someone to go first, not someone to organise. Lacey does not lead a protest; she acts from anger, and the class sees that the action is survivable. The quiet girl following immediately is the scene's most important detail.
- **Institutional racism as everyday practice:** Miss Hafeez's lesson distinguishes between racism as spectacular (the Klan, apartheid) and racism as ordinary (Tewarie's

differential treatment, the class's comfortable racial insults). The students resist the second categorisation because accepting it would require them to confront their own participation.

- **Gender roles and the household:** Mr. Cephas's cunumunu outburst and Miss Velma's photo album are two faces of the same system. He enforces gendered boundaries violently; she enforces them by philosophy, having internalised them as unavoidable. Both confirm that the household is a site where gender is policed before children get old enough to question it.

- **The cost of a woman's brightness:** Miss Velma was bright as a bulb. Her brother was less bright but he was a boy, so she was withdrawn from school for his sake. Miss Velma's story is told in the same chapter as Michael's reading lessons and the mountain of ironing: this is what happened to one bright girl, and Hodge is clear that the system that produced it has not changed.

Study Vault