

For the Life of Laetitia: Chapters 21-25

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Summary

Chapter 21

Lacey has been going home on weekends all term. Then Mr Cephas puts his foot down. On a Friday morning, with her bag already packed, Miss Velma tells her apologetically that her father has sent word: she is not going home this weekend. Lacey opens her mouth to protest, then closes it. Miss Velma looks so sorrowful that Lacey cannot add to her distress.

At school, Lacey runs through scheme after scheme: beg the driver to wait for his money, slip home at lunchtime, persuade Miss Velma to lend the fare. Then she thinks of Ma Zelline. Ma had told her to go there if she was in real trouble, and added, with careful emphasis, only if you in real trouble, meaning trouble with her father. Ma and Mammy Patsy often talked about Ma Zelline, a woman who chose not to have children and who, when another woman once called her a mule to her face, hiked up her skirt and fired a kick at the woman backwards. The story always made Lacey smile.

She tells herself that her situation is nothing compared to Anjanees. Midterm tests are coming, and Anjanees, who has missed so many days, is behind in everything. Lacey promises to spend their lunch hour drilling geography, and to send home the science textbook for the weekend.

Chapter 22

That same Friday evening Mr Cephas comes home so early that he startles Miss Velma. Lacey, at the dining-room table revising, hears the car and thinks, for a hopeful moment, that it might be Uncle Leroy and Jai. It is only Mr Cephas, stepping through the door with a nervous smile.

Michael creeps in through the back, catches sight of his father, and scrambles for a copybook. Mr Cephas shouts at him about ambition, about earning his keep, about feeding loafers. Then he stays home all evening, cleans the car, reads the newspaper. He does not go back out. Lacey knows he is there to make sure she does not escape.

The next morning she wakes early, washes her clothes, and sweeps the drawing room. Mr Cephas wakes at ten, shouts at Michael again, eats his fill, and then, after a long time in the bathroom and even longer in the bedroom, steps out through the front door smartly dressed and smelling sweet. It is clear that he is going out properly, and for some time. Lacey seizes the moment and sets out for Ma Zelline's.

Chapter 23

Ma Zelline welcomes Lacey and dismisses any thought of hurrying back for Mr Cephas's sake. Vex? You gone by your family. She calls him a worthless man and frets at him in patois as she marches Lacey through the house. They go out to the big breadfruit tree in the yard. Using a long bamboo rod with a cocoa knife at the top, they jab at the stem of a breadfruit until it crashes down through the leaves. Ma Zelline picks thyme from a tub of herbs under the eave; Lacey finds a green pepper; they cut dasheen bush and dig up a dasheen from the front yard. Back inside, everything goes into the pot together with salt meat and coconut milk.

As they move around the yard and kitchen, Ma Zelline asks after everyone in the family. She is delighted to hear that Mammy Patsy has enrolled in night school: Well, praise God! I did always tell Patsy, don't mind you miss your chance as a young girl, you have your brains. Then she straightens up from the dasheen patch and turns to Lacey directly.

You have the best chance. You see and do good! Don't mind no Cephas, no Circus-horse... Look how hard your mammy have to work to get a little education, and you get it right in your hand. Don't throw away that!

Chapter 24

The midterm tests begin on Monday. Spanish is first. Mr Tewarie is absorbed in his newspaper, mouth hanging open. Anjanee arrives late; Lacey has already finished the ten sentences about Mummy in the supermarket and Daddy in his office, and she quietly slides her translation within Anjanee's reach.

At break, Anjanee is pale with dread: maths is next. On the way back to the classroom she suddenly turns and runs in the opposite direction. Lacey finds her outside, bent over a drain, vomiting. They arrive five minutes late. Mrs Lopez, in the middle of giving out papers, stops with a paper held in mid-air: So where Miss Mastana Bahar and her shadow just coming from? A few children giggle. Lacey informs her curtly that Anjanee was sick. Mrs Lopez sucks her teeth and continues.

The results come in before the end of the week. Mrs Lopez walks in heavily and drops the papers on the table. She reads the marks aloud after a speech about secondary school being for people with brains. She targets Marlon Peters (four marks) and Anjanee (five marks), telling Anjanee

she has no use for secondary school and should stay home and help make garden. Anjanees sits with her head bowed, still as a statue. Every mark in the class is read out except Lacey's. Then Mrs Lopez rearranges her face into a pleasant expression and announces: ninety-eight percent.

Afterward, Mrs Lopez calls Lacey to the Courthouse for a private conversation. She tells her she is a bright girl, way above the other children. She should pick her friends, stay far from these children, they have no ambition and will drag her down. The more Mrs Lopez talks, the more determined Lacey becomes: she will show this woman she is no friend of hers.

Chapter 25

Thursday night. Tests over, no homework. Lacey packs her bag for the weekend and lies in bed reading, imagining how she will tell the family about the ninety-eight percent. Pappy might make a speech. Ma will only say Hmph, but with a little smile pulling at the corner of her mouth.

Then Mr Cephas comes home too early. Miss Velma appears at the bedroom door, whispering nervously, and leads Lacey to the drawing room. Mr Cephas opens with a complaint about her greeting: she has not named him. When she says Good evening, sir, his mouth falls open. When she tries Father, he gives up on that line of attack.

He asks what she is doing in the bedroom. Reading. A storybook, not a schoolbook. He narrows his eyes: You lying down in your bed reading storybook and Miss Velma in the kitchen with all the work! You going to be a worthless woman? That is how your mother and your grandmother bring you up? Lacey stares back and says nothing.

He tells her his house is not a hotel. She cannot lime for the week and then joy-ride home weekends. He is doing his duty feeding and clothing her and paying for her schooling; in return she will have to stay and give a hand in the house. He fidgets in the armchair, then bends down to fuss with his shoelaces, looks up, and finds her still standing rooted to the spot. His manner shifts. You finish reading? Go ahead and done, na.

Lacey goes home to no one.

Analysis

The "worthless woman" confrontation in Chapter 25 is the chapter group's sharpest irony. Mr Cephas accuses Lacey of idleness while his own contributions to the household are invisible. He did not raise her, did not provide for her, and is absent from the house most evenings. Ma Zelline, who is not known for restraint, has already named him plainly: he is a worthless man who does not deserve to call Lacey his daughter. That he uses the word "worthless" to describe a girl reading a book is the kind of dramatic irony the novel sets up without underlining.

The three modes of female authority in these chapters stand in direct contrast. Ma Zelline is self-sufficient, opinionated, and unafraid: she dismisses Mr Cephas's possible anger before Lacey can finish the sentence, refers to herself cheerfully as living "in bachie," and delivers her advice with the confidence of someone who has already decided not to let any man define her. Miss Velma, by contrast, is the novel's image of what happens when a woman accepts the opposite arrangement: she is sorrowful, whispering, and can do nothing more than pass on bad news gently. Mrs Lopez occupies a third position -- she has authority, but chooses to use it to enforce the same class hierarchy that the system used against people like her students.

The oil-down in Chapter 23 is the warmest domestic scene in the novel. Lacey has been in La Puerta for months. The household she lives in is cold, the family she lives with is either distant or hostile, and her own home is a day's travel away. Ma Zelline's yard, the breadfruit crashing down through the leaves, the tub of herbs under the eave, the dasheen weighed with pride -- all of it is an alternative to the Cephas household, one where a woman's space is her own, her choices are her own, and a visitor is fed from pleasure rather than obligation.

Mrs Lopez's private conversation with Lacey in Chapter 24 is the novel's clearest image of how systems perpetuate themselves. She is not asking Lacey to be good; she is asking Lacey to separate herself from children like Anjaneer, to make a class choice, to accept that her intelligence is a ticket out of solidarity. Lacey's response -- to deliberately get every maths assignment wrong in the following week -- is one of the novel's most satisfying acts. It is the only retaliation available to her, and she takes it at personal cost.

The midterm test scene distils Anjaneer's situation into a single image: grey-faced, trembling, twisting her fingers over a question paper she does not have the textbooks to prepare for, she earns five marks. Mrs Lopez reads the result aloud to the entire class. Hodge does not ask the reader to feel indignant; she simply shows what happens, and trusts the reader to feel it without guidance.

Themes

- **Female independence and its models:** Ma Zelline is the novel's most complete picture of what a woman's life can look like when it is not organised around men's expectations. The contrast with Miss Velma -- who appears in this section only to deliver bad news in a whisper -- makes the comparison explicit without any commentary from the narrator. Two women, two lives, two different degrees of permission.
- **Education and class loyalty:** Mrs Lopez's private talk is the system making its offer to Lacey: intelligence buys you a way up, but only if you stop associating with people who are falling behind. Lacey refuses. She does not break with Anjaneer; she breaks with Mrs Lopez, by making herself look less capable than she is. The sabotage of the maths work is a quiet, precise act of solidarity.

- **Power through control of movement:** Mr Cephas's ban on weekend travel is one of the most effective forms of control in the novel. He does not beat Lacey or threaten her; he simply removes the one thing that makes the arrangement bearable. Lacey cannot go home, and the house becomes a cage by that single decision.
- **The justification of authority:** Mr Cephas frames every act of control as duty. He feeds her, clothes her, pays for her schooling. The logic is transactional: care given requires labour returned. The novel shows the flaw in this framing by showing what his "care" looks like in practice -- a cold house, a sorrowful wife, a child who counts the days until she can get on a bus.

Study Vault