

For the Life of Laetitia: Chapters 26-30

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Summary

Chapter 26

A second weekend passes and still nobody comes to take Lacey home. Mr Cephas attempts small talk, praising her for the neatness of the drawing room and asking when the teachers will give another test so she can beat everyone again. She answers in as few words as possible.

The following week she makes sure to get every maths assignment wrong. She writes neatly, draws tidy margins, and follows the method obediently up to a point, then deliberately spoils the answer. Mrs Lopez is driven to despair.

Anjanees is in a worse state than ever. She talks about dropping out of school: she is only wasting taxi fare, she says; she is too far behind to catch up. Lacey refuses to hear it. They arrange to stay back in the classroom every afternoon until Anjanees's four o'clock bus -- daily after-school lessons covering every subject from scratch. Miss Velma is uneasy about Lacey arriving home so late, but she does not stop her.

A letter arrives from Uncle Leroy with Ma's instructions: stay put until Christmas, now only a few weeks away. Enclosed is emergency bus fare, not for casual visits. Immediately, in what feels like the only gesture available to her, Lacey hands in a blank assignment in Mrs Lopez's class -- her name and address written neatly in the top right-hand corner, nothing else. Then she joins Marlon Peters and Naushad Ali in a campaign to disrupt Mr Tewarie. Miss Hafeez summons all three to the conference room and tells Lacey plainly that she is messing herself up and, if she does not stop, her parents will have to be involved.

One afternoon, Mr Cephas comes home early and has already seen Lacey at the bus station with Anjanees. He rants: out of all the children in the school, the only one she can find to friend with is a coolie. Miss Velma hides. Lacey stares at him coldly and says as little as possible. He tells her that when school is over she is to come straight home.

With after-school sessions finished, Lacey persuades Anjanees to cut Mr Tewarie's class instead. They sit on a bench behind the music room. Once, Lacey loses patience and shouts at Anjanees over a maths operation she cannot grasp. Anjanees's eyes fill with tears. Lacey apologises immediately, but the day is already spoiled.

Lacey's new maths strategy: two days of perfect scores, two days of zero, then back to perfect. Mrs Lopez washes her hands of her. Mr Cephas, unable to find fault with her conduct at home, takes his frustration out on Michael. Lacey has resolved that she will not be coming back after Christmas. She starts attending Spanish again and becoming polite to Mrs Lopez, for she needs a good report to take home.

Chapter 27

Two weeks before the end of term, Lacey is already fully packed. She has her plan: take one bag to school on the last day and use the emergency bus fare. Uncle Leroy will come to fetch the rest of her things during the vacation.

The Christmas atmosphere is softening Mr Cephas. Parang is in the air. Miss Velma is sewing cushions and curtains. The neighbours have colourful lights in their Julie mango tree. One evening Mr Cephas hints that Lacey will be spending Christmas with him and Miss Velma for the first time. She tells him plainly: no, she is going home. He insists on driving her; he will not have Ma saying a word against him.

The end-of-term exam comes and goes. For the last day of term, Form IH holds a class party. Everyone is asked to bring something. Anjanee, flustered, tells Miss Hafeez she has no money for anything. Miss Hafeez asks if she has any sour lemons at home. Anjanee brings the lemons; they make lemonade for the class together in the home-ec room.

At the party, Marlon Peters performs. He has smuggled out every item of clothing from his big sister's wardrobe -- three skirts of different colours worn at once, any number of blouses, bangles from wire and plastic and twine, flour-powdered face, bright red lipstick on his mouth and cheeks. He is wearing the headpiece from a Carnival costume: a wig of hanging black string with Christmas-tree ornaments tied on as earrings. He wobbles in on pointed heels carrying exercise books, flings them on the floor, and delivers a speech in a ridiculous lady-voice about how everyone is too dunce and too ugly to be in his class. Then he wobbles out as his grandmother's stocking falls around his ankle. The whole class is almost rolling on the floor.

Afterward, Miss Hafeez distributes report books. Neither girl opens hers. Lacey walks with Anjanee to the bus station. They mimic the Circus-horse's walk until they cannot breathe for laughing. Then Anjanee says, with a mischievous face, that Lacey has not got her monthly yet. Lacey asks: have you? Yes, Anjanee says. Lacey feels a blow of sadness, as though Anjanee has taken one big step away from her.

Anjaneer wonders aloud what would have happened if she had had a different last name -- one further along in the alphabet -- and had been paired with someone other than Lacey on the first day. They both know what she means. They walk arm-in-arm to the station. Through the window of the moving bus Anjaneer shouts back: Happy Christmas! Lacey shouts back: Next term! Next term!

Back at the house, Mr Cephas is thrilled by Lacey's report book and wants to keep it to show his boss on Monday morning. He cannot: it is addressed to Mrs Wilhemina Johnson, Sooklal Trace, Balatier.

On the Saturday, Mr Cephas drives Lacey and Michael home. He off-loads her and pays the briefest of visits, much to Michael's disappointment. Coming home after such a long time, the house looks different to Lacey: the board walls seem more mildewed, the bathroom and latrine seem to have moved farther away, everything looks a little rickety and old. Ruth is taller and is carrying water now. But she is home.

The Christmas work begins. The whole family gathers: Uncle Jamesie brings his children; Ma's godson Anthony arrives on foot from Maitagual, twenty miles away, limping and close to tears, his clothes in a paper bag because his mother could not pay his fare. Everything is dusted, scrubbed, polished, mattresses hauled into the sun, yard weeded bald. Uncle Leroy brings red paint for the front steps. He spreads it as thinly as it will go to make it stretch, and the children stand in held-breath silence as he works down to the final step. When the tin is clean and the steps are clothed in colour from top to bottom, everyone shouts Ray! Uncle Leroy takes off his cap and scratches his head: When Lacey pass her high-school exam and get her big-work, she will buy paint and do the whole house.

Chapter 28

Ma goes to La Puerta for the day to visit Ma Zelline and collect Charlene. She returns with news that unsettles Lacey: Ma Zelline had fallen in her dasheen patch while digging and is spending Christmas with one of her sisters. Lacey girl, you mightn't find no Ma Zelline when you go back to Puerta.

Charlene arrives shouting Uncle Leroy's name from around the bend in the road. Ma sits down heavily and takes her big cup of water, fanning from the children. The house fills. On Christmas Eve, no one wants to miss a minute: Tantie Monica laying down the new linoleum in the gallery, Ma and Uncle Leroy killing the pig, Uncle Jamesie on the roof nailing down galvanize. By evening the drawing room is dressed; the children get their Christmas tea -- bread, the first pieces of ham from the pitch-oil tin, cool sorrel smelling of clove. They go willingly to their beds so that Father Christmas can make his visit. The big-people stay in the drawing room, opening the barrel from Mammy Patsy and talking in low voices. Then Uncle Leroy's friends fill up the gallery,

clinking glasses and singing parang, Pappy's voice leading the songs, the fellas cheering him loudly at the end of each one.

Chapter 29

Christmas passes and Lacey has to start thinking about La Puerta again. She looks so miserable that Ma calls her to the back steps to shell peas together and talk. Lacey says she wants to stay home. She cannot point to anything specific that happened; she just does not want to live there anymore.

Ma speaks in the voice she uses when she has already made up her mind. She tells Lacey about Mammy Patsy as a small girl, when her great-grandmother's false teeth kept falling out. Patsy used to hug the old woman and promise: When I get big I will 'come a dentist and stick back your teeth in your mouth for you. Ma is overcome with giggles, then sobers: none of them got further than Balatier Government Primary School, bright as they were. Uncle Leroy wanted to be an aeroplane mechanic. None of it came to pass.

Now Mammy Patsy is finally going back to school herself -- because Lacey's father is minding Lacey and Mammy Patsy can afford the fees. If Lacey leaves, her mother will have to give up night school and come home. Lacey already knows she will go back. She does not argue. Ma turns a wistful face to her: And we want to let Mammy Patsy get her chance, too, not so?

Ma has sent a message for Mr Cephas to arrive at four o'clock the Saturday before school reopens. He is punctual. Ma is gracious; she has banished all the children to the back yard. She tells him she has given Lacey bus fare to come home for Carnival. He agrees with everything and nods vigorously.

Pappy comes out of the bedroom and Mr Cephas springs to his feet. Pappy looks at him for a moment, then says calmly:

You be sure to give due care and attention to our child, you understand? If any harm befall this child of ours, you shall answer for it. You have much to atone for.

Mr Cephas replies: I know, sir. He is only too glad to take his leave. The whole family follows Lacey down to the car in a noisy procession. Just before she gets in, Ma puts her arms around her and rubs her back, not so much as looking at Mr Cephas.

Once past Junction and out of Ma's sight and hearing, Mr Cephas delivers his speech. First Ungratefulness: look at the opportunity she has to live in a decent home instead of that low-class hole. Then Disrespect: he is her father, her grandmother and mother are teaching her to disobey him, but he will show them. It is a very uncomfortable journey.

Chapter 30

When they arrive at the house, Miss Velma is in her rocking chair in the gallery, head tied, Daily Word on her lap. The scene looks very much the same as the first day Lacey arrived, but things are not the same. Miss Velma is uncomfortable. When she turns her eyes on Lacey they are half pleading, half reproachful.

The house has been repainted over Christmas. There is a new carpet in the drawing room deep as grass, and the Christmas tree is still up, enormous, covered in decorations. Miss Velma explains, with her back to Lacey at the sink, that Mr Cephas was miserable all Christmas because his friends kept asking where his daughter was and he had no answer. He boast so much about his daughter that now he don't know how to tell people he not really in charge of you. It spoil his whole Christmas.

Michael bursts in through the kitchen door, stops, grins, then darts off to bathe. He comes back with his jersey back-to-front and inside-out and leads Lacey immediately to the bedroom to show her his Christmas things: toy vehicles missing their wheels, guns, games too difficult for him. He finds the storybook his godmother gave him. He talks without stopping, still talking when Lacey gets into bed and drifts off to sleep. The following morning, Miss Velma dresses and leaves for church without looking in on Lacey to ask if she wants to come.

Analysis

The class party in Chapter 27 is one of the novel's most sustained moments of joy, and it is carefully placed. Just before it, Anjanees was on the verge of dropping out. Just after it, the bus station scene carries a note of mourning: Anjanees's monthly, the "different last name" speculation, the shout through the bus window. The party itself, with Marlon Peters's Circus-horse impression -- the stockings sliding, the flour face, the ridiculous lady-voice -- is Form IH creating solidarity through mockery of their tormentor. It is temporary, and the novel knows it. The lemonade Miss Hafeez arranges for Anjanees is the chapter's other image: what a teacher who is actually on your side looks like.

Ma's back-steps conversation in Chapter 29 is the novel's most complex portrait of Ma. She loves Lacey and she is sending her back anyway. The argument she makes is correct: Mammy Patsy's night school depends on Lacey staying at Mr Cephas's house. What Ma is describing is a structural trap -- one woman's education contingent on another woman's endurance -- and she is honest about it. She does not pretend it is fair. She tears the pea pods with violence when she talks about how little Mr Cephas has contributed, and then she turns a wistful face and says And we want to let Mammy Patsy get her chance, too, not so? That shift -- from outrage to resignation to love -- is Ma in full.

Pappy's speech to Mr Cephas is the novel's most formal exercise of authority from Lacey's family. It does not argue or threaten; it names what it expects and what the consequences of failure will be, and it uses the word "atone" deliberately. Mr Cephas has a history with this family. Pappy does not spell it out. He does not need to. Mr Cephas replies I know, sir, and leaves as quickly as he can. The scene restores, briefly, a sense that Lacey has people who see what is happening.

The bus station goodbye in Chapter 27 is the novel's last extended scene between Lacey and Anjanee before the deterioration of the next term. The laughter, the mimicry of the Circus-horse, the arm-in-arm walk, the shouting through the bus window -- all of it has the quality of a scene the reader will come back to, because the novel is planting it here for that purpose.

Themes

- **The cost of one person's education on another:** Ma's pea-shelling speech makes the novel's structural bind explicit: Mammy Patsy's night school depends on Lacey staying in Mr Cephas's house. Education is not free in this novel; it costs someone something, usually a woman, usually the one with the least power to bargain.
- **Solidarity and what threatens it:** The after-school tutoring, cut short by Mr Cephas's surveillance, and then the cutting of Tewarie's classes, cut short again when Lacey loses her temper -- each attempt to keep Anjanee in school is interrupted by the structures around them. The bus-station walk is all that is left: two girls going arm-in-arm toward the terminus, shouting Next term! out of a moving window.
- **Joy and its precariousness:** The class party is the novel's most sustained joyful scene. It is also placed between Anjanee's near-dropout and a goodbye that has a mournful underside. Hodge does not let the reader settle into the joy; she frames it carefully so that its value is felt at the same moment as its fragility.
- **Authority and its forms:** Pappy's speech to Mr Cephas represents the authority that Ma's network holds over him -- historical, quiet, and without any need to raise a voice. Mr Cephas's authority runs on volume and surveillance. The contrast is visible in how each one ends a conversation: Pappy says Go in peace and Mr Cephas obeys; Mr Cephas lectures all the way to Junction and Lacey says nothing.