

For the Life of Laetitia: Chapters 31 to End

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Summary

Chapter 31

On the first day of the new term, Lacey arrives to find the classroom full of chattering children and no Anjane. She cannot settle. She cuts Mr Tewarie's class and sits behind the music room staring into space, picturing Mr Cephas dead in a car accident or struck down in his office. Then she remembers Ma's warning: misfortune called down on others can fall on you instead. She turns her mind to home.

On Monday of the second week, Anjane slides through the door like a ghost, thinner and paler. At break Lacey asks what happened. The baby was sick; she and her mother took him to the clinic; when the doctor saw Anjane she said she looked more sick than the baby. Anaemia. Anjane sold vegetables in the market every day during the holidays to save her fare, but then had to stay home to help nurse the baby, because there was no one else. She lifts her head and listens gravely to Lacey's account of being forced back to Mr Cephas's house. You will have to do that for your mother. Just stay there for now. It wouldn't kill you. Then when you pass your exam, and your mother pass her exam, too, allyu wouldn't have to worry again.

Chapter 32

The days go by and Anjane does not look any better. She is so thin that Marlon Peters begins calling them Fatso and Thinso. She misses more days, is further behind in every subject. She sits on their log at lunch with her food almost untouched and talks in a despairing tone.

I have so much work to do home that every night I going to sleep tired and in the morning I waking up more tired. Sometimes I can't finish my work in time to get ready for school, because I so tired I can't move fast.

She says she can see herself washing clothes and cooking food for the rest of her life, just like her mother. She won't make it five years to the exam. Lacey offers to stay after school or cut Tewarie's class to study together. Anjane refuses both and begs Lacey not to do anything reckless.

On afternoons Lacey takes roundabout routes home and sometimes detours to Ma Zelline's house. Tall razor grass and dasheen bush crowd the front yard now; the door and windows are shut tight. She pauses at the gate, or walks slowly past, as if she expects to hear that scandalous

cackle from somewhere inside. Mr Cephas watches her like a dangerous prisoner out of the corner of his eye. She begins leaving her exercise books in her school locker so he will have nothing to gloat over.

Chapter 33

Whenever Anjane is absent, Lacey eats lunch with Doreen Sandiford's gang. One afternoon they are counting money. They are going to the Plaza for chicken and chips. Lacey says she has no money; Doreen says she can come, there is enough for everybody.

Inside the Plaza, the hottest calypso of the Carnival season is playing from the piped music:

I go break-out / I go break-away.

They are dancing along store windows, pretending to each other that they attend fetes and are shopping for outfits. Then Mr Tewarie shouts at them from the doorway of a bar. Everyone stampedes out. Doreen Sandiford sucked her teeth and goes back in for the chicken and chips; a few others follow. The rest hide in a back street. They eat behind a clump of bushes on the playing field, swallowing their food almost whole. The bell rings for roll call. Miss Hafeez appears as calm and pleasant as always, and they slide into their seats, winking at each other in triumph.

Chapter 34

The following morning, before she calls roll, Miss Hafeez reads out all their names and tells them to go to the conference room. They are to be suspended for a week. They must return with a parent or guardian.

Ma has never been summoned to a school for any child's misbehaviour; she has warned them that the first one to bring such shame on her old head would be the one to send her to her grave. Lacey cannot take the letter to Ma. She tells the school secretary that she now lives with her father and stepmother in La Puerta, and has the letter addressed to Mr and Mrs Orville Cephas. Then she persuades Miss Velma to open it before Mr Cephas sees it. Miss Velma sits down heavily and fans herself. Eventually she sighs: I will have to put on my clothes.

Miss Velma goes to the school and sits wringing her hands in the lobby while they wait. The vice-principal scribbles on the letter and continues on his way. They make their way home, Miss Velma walking so fast Lacey struggles to keep up, lips tightly pursed for the rest of the day.

On the third day of suspension, Mr Cephas's car arrives at lunchtime. He stamps through the house. He had to hear about his own daughter's suspension from a co-worker at his office. Miss Velma comes inside and closes the door. Her mouth trembles. Then she speaks in a soft but determined voice:

Cephas, you bring your daughter here. You don't know the child, the child don't know you. But you want your daughter to come and live by you. So you bring her. And what satisfaction you get out of that? All you get is trouble. This child should go back where she belong before you really get something you didn't bargain for.

Mr Cephas stares at her with his mouth open. Then he erupts: I is the man in this house! I is the man! He rages at her for going to the school without his knowledge, tells her to stay out of it, and drives away. When he is gone, Miss Velma pulls a chair and sits down. She lets Lacey bring her juice. Child, you cause enough trouble. I not against you, but I don't want you here. Better you go back. You turning your father into a worse beast than he was to begin with.

The suspended students return just two days before the midterm test. Lacey sits the test in the same panic Anjaneer feels at every test. She has missed more classes than Anjaneer. The test papers are gibberish to her; she knows she has failed miserably. She decides she cannot go home for Carnival. She writes to Ma saying she will save the bus fare and wait until the end of term.

The school's Carnival Frolic takes place on Friday afternoon: Marlon Peters's gang brings out a Carnival band called Tails of the Meek Heroes, and Charmaine Springer enters the calypso competition as Lady Reporter with a song called The Teacher Don't Know Me. Lacey does not stay for the Frolic. On Carnival Monday and Tuesday, whenever the wind blows from Main Street it brings snatches of music. Mr Cephas left with a group of cronies on the Sunday night. Miss Velma stays in her room. Lacey stays in hers.

Chapter 35

When school resumes on Ash Wednesday, Anjaneer has softened again. She is more worried about Lacey than reproachful. She follows Lacey everywhere through the day to make sure she attends every class. But it is Anjaneer who is the one to worry about. Her school shirt, once yellow, has faded to cream and is developing holes. She is beginning to seem transparent. In class she props her head on her elbow and falls asleep. The PE teacher lets her sit and watch.

One lunchtime Anjaneer does not even open her lunch. The doctor has told her she needs to rest. But how I will rest? I have to help my mother. And I want to come to school. I want to come to school and pass my exam! She stops herself and stares across the playing field at nothing.

One Monday morning she faints in assembly, sinking to the floor without a sound. A teacher lifts her in one scoop and hurries away with her dangling body. Miss Hafeez puts her arm around Lacey's shoulders and makes her stay.

Chapter 36

Three days pass. Anjanees does not return. On Friday morning Lacey wakes with a weight like lead pressing down on her. The night before she had a dream: Mammy Patsy was sitting beside her in Anjanees's thin, faded shirt, but the Circus-horse barked something at her and then the seat was empty. Mammy Patsy was standing in Miss Velma's dasheen patch calling for a geography book, but Lacey had thrown the book in the dustbin. Running through all the back streets of La Puerta to find it, she got no nearer to the school. When she returned to where she had left Mammy Patsy, it was Ma Zelline in the dasheen patch, and Ma Zelline threw one reproachful glance at her and fell down dead from a stroke.

In Mrs Lopez's maths class, Lacey hears her name called angrily. Everyone else is writing; she is staring straight ahead. Mrs Lopez tells her that without her sidekick she is just as badly off as Anjanees. When you play with dog, you get fleas.

Your mother must be the dog! Your mother...!

Lacey is on her feet before she knows it, her chair crashing over behind her. She cannot believe she is shouting this at a teacher. She is sent to wait outside the principal's office again, with a punishment letter to take home.

She goes back to the classroom for her books. On the stairs she becomes aware of a commotion on the floor above. The whole floor is alive with noise. Children darting in and out of classrooms. Her class is on its feet, except for two girls crying at their desks and Marlon Peters rooted to his chair, thunderstruck. Nobody notices her in the doorway. Then the room falls quiet, and a girl comes to her:

Lacey! You ain't hear what happen? Anjanees drink poison!

Chapter 37

Lacey grabs her books and rushes out of the school. She crosses streets and turns corners without knowing where she is going until she finds herself at the bus station. She cannot go to Ma: Ma would be heartbroken and would have to give up Mammy Patsy's night school. She must have done it because I let her down! She turns and walks fast back through town.

She tells Miss Velma she has belly pains and asks for a tablet. Miss Velma brings her to the kitchen and gives her two large spoonfuls of yellowish medicine, then leaves for the market. Lacey goes into the bedroom and sits on the bed. When she looks down, she sees a bright pink stain: she has got her monthly. For one brief moment she is thrilled. She cannot wait to tell Anjanees. But Anjanees is not there for her to tell anything, in her whole life, ever again.

She shoots up to find Miss Velma's medicine box on top of the wardrobe. Dragging down a shower of old papers, she scatters them across the floor: newspapers, receipts, Christmas cards -- and a photograph of Miss Velma in her high-school uniform. Her head is getting bigger, stretching and stretching like a balloon. It is Anjane's eyes looking at her reproachfully out of the photograph. Her head seems to burst into pieces and she starts to scream until everything goes dark.

Final Chapter

It is not until the Easter holidays that Lacey starts to go out into the yard again. She had spent weeks indoors after coming home from the hospital. She lay on the bed staring up at the underside of the roof for hours, tracing imaginary tracks across the galvanize. She hardly ate and did not talk. Ruth and Kenwyn came to the door and stared at first; then they began coming in at night to curl up beside her and tell her about the pigs and the dogs. Ma lay on the bed too, some nights, chatting with Pappy through the partition, telling them stories of when she was a little girl, humming drowsy hymns. Pappy sat in the chair by the bed for hours until he fell asleep. Uncle Leroy would bring a mango or a ripe fig and coax her to eat.

One afternoon Ma and Pappy are talking quietly in the gallery and Lacey hears Ma saying she cannot bring Charlene for Easter while Lacey is still so sick. She climbs slowly down from the bed, stands for a moment to steady her legs, and appears in the doorway. Ma flies up and takes hold of her, calling: Leroy! Leroy! Come quick, Leroy!

I was glad to be in the world again. Every morning she gets up early and goes down to the kitchen with Ma and Pappy. They let her have a little coffee with plenty of milk. She kneads flour for bakes, helps make chocolate tea for the little children. When Charlene comes, Lacey takes over bathing the little ones at the end of each day. She begins helping again with the sugar-cake.

One morning, Uncle Leroy tells her about the office meeting: Pappy, Uncle Jamesie, and Uncle Leroy went to see Mr Cephas while Lacey was still ill. They told him she could not live with him, but that he still had to help with her schooling or she would not be able to finish. He is to buy her books and uniform each year; that is all. Uncle Leroy grins: Oh, we just make him sweat a little bit. Lacey laughs so loudly that Ma pokes her head through the kitchen window: Well, hear you, eh girl? You alive!

Ma gives Lacey the frizzled fowl and her brood of chickens. When the hens start laying, she can sell the eggs at market for taxi fare. Ma frets about the early mornings and curses Mr Cephas's stinginess. Lacey says:

Don't mind that, Ma. Anjane used to have to wake up four o'clock in the morning to go to school.

She thinks about Anjanee a great deal. She is not afraid to think about her now. Sometimes she still dreams that the two of them are on a bus together, talking. As the school reopening draws closer, she feels as though she is taking up Anjanee's life: she will set out early in the dark, travel miles to school, come home to work, and help with whatever Ma and Carlyle are selling during the week, so that Mammy Patsy can have her chance.

On the weekend before school reopens, Uncle Leroy and his friends build a bamboo tent in the yard for a thanksgiving. Ma plans to feed everyone in Sooklal Trace. The Saturday after school reopens is Lacey's birthday, and that is the day Ma is keeping the thanksgiving.

Analysis

The Plaza trip in Chapter 33 is the novel's clearest image of Lacey's state of mind at that point in the term. She has been stranded, lonely, and angry for months. She goes to the Plaza not because she particularly wants chicken and chips but because someone opens a door and she walks through it. The calypso lyric -- I go break-out, I go break-away -- is placed in the text deliberately, and not ironically. Lacey is breaking out. The novel is honest that this is both understandable and self-destructive, and that both things can be true at the same time.

Miss Velma's speech to Mr Cephas during the suspension confrontation is her only moment of open defiance in the novel. She steps, as Hodge puts it, out of her half-dead, frightened self. The speech is not dramatic in the usual sense; it is short, specific, and delivered in a quiet voice. What makes it remarkable is what surrounds it: this is the woman whose whole life has been organised around not making exactly this kind of speech. The novel does not reward her for it. Mr Cephas erupts, she stands her ground in silence, and then she sits down alone and asks for juice. Her private comment to Lacey afterward -- Better you go back. You turning your father into a worse beast than he was to begin with -- is not a betrayal; it is the assessment of a woman who has been living with a difficult man for a long time, and who knows what provocation costs.

The news of Anjanee arrives not as a scene but as a sentence a classmate says: Anjanee drink poison. Hodge makes a precise choice not to write the scene of Anjanee's death or to give the reader any access to it directly. We learn of it the way Lacey does -- in a school corridor, from a classmate, as an event that has already happened -- and the restraint is exact. The death is not given as a spectacle. It is given as a fact that has to be absorbed in the ordinary flow of a school day, and the shock is in that ordinariness.

The guilt Lacey carries -- She must have done it because I let her down -- is not accurate. Anjanee's death has structural causes: her family's refusal of taxi fare, the labour that wore her to nothing, the poverty that left her without textbooks and without rest, Mrs Lopez's sustained cruelty, the anaemia that the doctor said required rest she could never get. Lacey did not cause any of these. But the guilt is psychologically exact: it is easier to turn a loss into something you could have prevented than to face the structural forces that caused it. Lacey's breakdown is, in

part, the mind refusing that easier explanation -- the mind insisting that what happened is too large to be held as guilt -- and breaking under the weight of both at once.

The recovery is not triumphant. It is a gradual return to appetite: coffee with plenty of milk, flour for bakes, Charlene's bath, a mango from Uncle Leroy. The detail of the frizzled fowl and her chickens -- Ma assigning Lacey her own source of income so she can pay her own taxi fare -- is a practical act of love. The final image of Mrs Lopez, transformed in Lacey's memory into a Carnival character beating on a pitch-oil tin, is the novel's last word on her: not a figure of power, but a figure of noise.

Themes

- **Grief and the limits of guilt:** Lacey's identification of Anjanees death as her own failure is the breakdown's trigger, but the novel does not endorse it. By the end, Lacey can think about Anjanees death without being destroyed by it. The recovery is partly the process of learning to hold a grief that is not, at its root, a crime she committed.
- **The cost of survival:** Lacey survives. The novel frames this as something worth celebrating -- a thanksgiving, a birthday -- but does not pretend it came free. She has absorbed a breakdown, weeks in hospital, and Anjanees death. She will wake before dawn and carry Anjanees memory to school with her. This is what survival looks like in the novel: not triumph, but continuation.
- **Miss Velmas one act of bravery:** The speech to Mr Cephas is Miss Velmas only moment of standing ground. The novel places it in the context of everything the reader knows about her -- the photo album, the mountain of ironing, the twice-raised hand -- and so its significance is felt not as ordinary courage but as something that cost her something real, which makes it matter more.
- **The structural causes of Anjanees death:** Hodge has spent the entire novel showing exactly what killed Anjanees death: her brothers' refusal of taxi fare, her father's contempt for her ambition, domestic labour that exhausted her past the point of recovery, and a teacher who used every opportunity to make her feel she had no right to be in a classroom. The sentence Anjanees death is the result of all of that. The reader is not permitted to be surprised.
- **Return and continuation:** The thanksgiving at the novel's end is not a resolution of what happened to Anjanees death. It is a recognition that Lacey survived, and that this is worth marking. The final connection -- Anjanees death used to have to wake up four o'clock in the morning to go to school -- is the novel's last and most precise statement of what Lacey is carrying forward: not just her own education but the specific conditions of Anjanees sacrifice.