

For the Life of Laetitia: Chapters 6-10

Matthew Williams • English Literature • May 11, 2026

Summary

Chapter 6

The first Sunday at Mr. Cephas's house makes visible what Lacey could only sense before. Miss Velma gets up early, goes to church, and returns to find the house still closed and quiet. She opens the front door carefully and tiptoes through the drawing room. In the kitchen she works on both breakfast and lunch, listening to Sunday Theatre on a little radio kept at the faintest possible volume, too low to hear. When Mr. Cephas wakes up, he turns on his own music: "Nearer, my God, to Thee" blares through the house. Miss Velma turns off her little radio.

He does not sit down to Sunday lunch until quarter past three, and no one eats before him. After lunch he polishes his car for two hours with the hymns turned up full blast. Then he brings friends home and shows off Lacey as "the little scholar," steering her from guest to guest so she can top up their glasses while he tells them again about her brains and her books. Michael comes home unnoticed through the back door, covered in the day's dust, while Mr. Cephas's voice brims over with jauntiness in the drawing room.

Chapter 7

Lacey sets about managing Michael with calm efficiency. She tells him his bed looks like a sea under hurricane, and he looks as if he is going to cry. Together they match the corners of the cover; she shows him how to pull the sheet taut and tuck it in. Then she tells him he is too nasty to lie on the bed and he needs to bathe first. He disappears, and she assumes he has gone to complain to his mother. A little later a figure draped in a towel tiptoes in with soap still in his hair. She promises him a story if he puts on his clothes. His face becomes one big eager smile. By the end of the week she has him making his bed without being told. The reading of stories becomes the bond between them.

Chapter 8

A busy week before school. Miss Velma takes Lacey to buy books and school clothes: yellow shirts and the yellow-and-brown plaid of the uniform. She also slips aside extra money of her own to buy material so Lacey can have new dresses. She gives Lacey a tour of La Puerta and walks her to the school gates to show her the route. When Lacey puts on the new uniform, she wishes Ma and Pappy and Uncle Leroy and everybody back home could see her right now. She

does not say this out loud. The thought makes clear that she does not consider Mr. Cephas's house her home, even as she is getting ready for school from it.

Chapter 9

The first day. The new students are assembled in the main hall. The principal explains that each form is named after a flower, and the partners will be called in alphabetical order. Laetitia is placed in Form IH, for Hibiscus, and her partner is a girl named Anjaneer Jugmohansingh, who comes towards her smiling as though she already knows her. Lacey notices that Anjaneer's smile looks like Tara's: not happiness exactly, but goodness of heart, a goodness that nothing could kill. Miss Hafeez, their short form teacher, introduces herself and takes them on a tour of the school's maze-like corridors.

At lunch, Anjaneer wants to eat outside. She walks quickly past the other students with her brown paper parcel held under an exercise book. Out on the far side of the playing field, she hesitates to open it: Don't laugh at my lunch, you hear? Is not like what you have. Is only roti and talkarie. Lacey's luncheon-meat sandwich turns tasteless in her mouth. She tells Anjaneer it is the best lunch. Anjaneer blushes and mentions town people. Both girls discover they are from village communities outside La Puerta. Each would rather be where the other is: Lacey would prefer the long journey from home to living at her father's; Anjaneer would prefer living in town to the exhausting commute from Orangefield.

Chapter 10

The next morning Anjaneer arrives halfway through geography, flustered and avoiding Lacey's eyes. She has no geography textbook. By the end of the week Lacey has understood that the textbooks are not coming next week either. On Friday morning Lacey gets up before anyone else: she is going home for the weekend, the travelling bag Mammy Patsy sent from New York still smelling of mothballs from where Ma had kept it hidden for emergencies. She cannot concentrate on anything. At school she asks Anjaneer what happened the day before. Anjaneer says she missed the bus, and something in her voice closes the subject.

At home the garden has a hard, round baby pumpkin the size of a marble, new flowers on the pigeon-pea trees, and a bunch of baby bananas that seemed to have sprouted from nowhere. The weekends are much too short. Ma makes Lacey return to La Puerta on the Sunday afternoon.

Analysis

The radio scene in Chapter 6 is the novel's most economical image of the Cephas household's power arrangement. Miss Velma has a radio. She listens to it at the lowest possible volume. When Mr. Cephas wakes up, he puts on his music at full blast and she turns hers off. Nobody in the text comments on this. Lacey simply observes it and the reader is left to understand that this is not one incident but the pattern of every day. The contrast between the volume of his presence and the near-inaudibility of hers is the marriage in a single Sunday morning.

Mr. Cephas's use of Lacey as a social prop, steering her from guest to guest to top up drinks while telling them how bright she is, shows the same logic operating in a different register. He is not proud of her for her sake; he is proud of her as an extension of himself. The timing is telling: he shows up in her life the week her name appears in the newspaper, and the first thing he does is take the cutting to his boss.

Lacey's management of Michael in Chapter 7 is the novel's first glimpse of what she is capable of independently of Ma. She does not beg him or report him to his mother; she simply assumes authority in a calm and practical way. The bedmaking scene is specific and precise: she holds one end of the cover and makes him hold the other, matches corner to corner. The offer of a story once he bathes is not a reward but an understanding between them. She has assessed what he needs and provided it. The bond formed here, over bedmaking and storytelling, will be one of the warmest relationships in the novel.

Anjanees hidden parcel at lunch is a small but exact detail. She carries her roti and talkarie under an exercise book because she expects to be looked down on for it. She has already learned, before she has been to a full week of this school, that what she comes from is liable to be considered inferior in this place. Lacey's response, that it is the best lunch, is genuine and immediately recognised as such. The friendship is established in this moment, over shared food.

Themes

- **Patriarchy in the domestic space:** The radio scene reduces a complicated social structure to a single concrete image. He plays loud; she plays quiet; when he plays she stops. Hodge does not editorialise. The image carries the full weight of what is happening to Miss Velma.
- **Class and cultural confidence:** Anjanees shame about her roti is the same structure as Uncle Leroy's bhaji and spinach joke, but experienced rather than observed. She has internalised the hierarchy before the school has even been in session a week. Lacey's response, refusing to accept that hierarchy, is the same refusal she makes in the social studies notebook.

- **Friendship as mutual recognition:** The pairing of Lacey and Anjanee is the school's administrative decision but it names something real. Both girls are scholarship students from villages outside La Puerta, both are readers, and both are out of place in exactly complementary ways. Their friendship is founded on recognising this in each other.
- **The quiet heroism of mothers:** Ma's constant question -- whether Mr Cephas is treating Lacey well -- is an expression of care that cannot reach across the distance. She sent Lacey away to an arrangement she has never seen and cannot monitor, held in place by the knowledge that it is the best chance Lacey will have. The anxiety in the repeated asking is the novel's first portrait of how much it costs Ma to have made this decision.

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