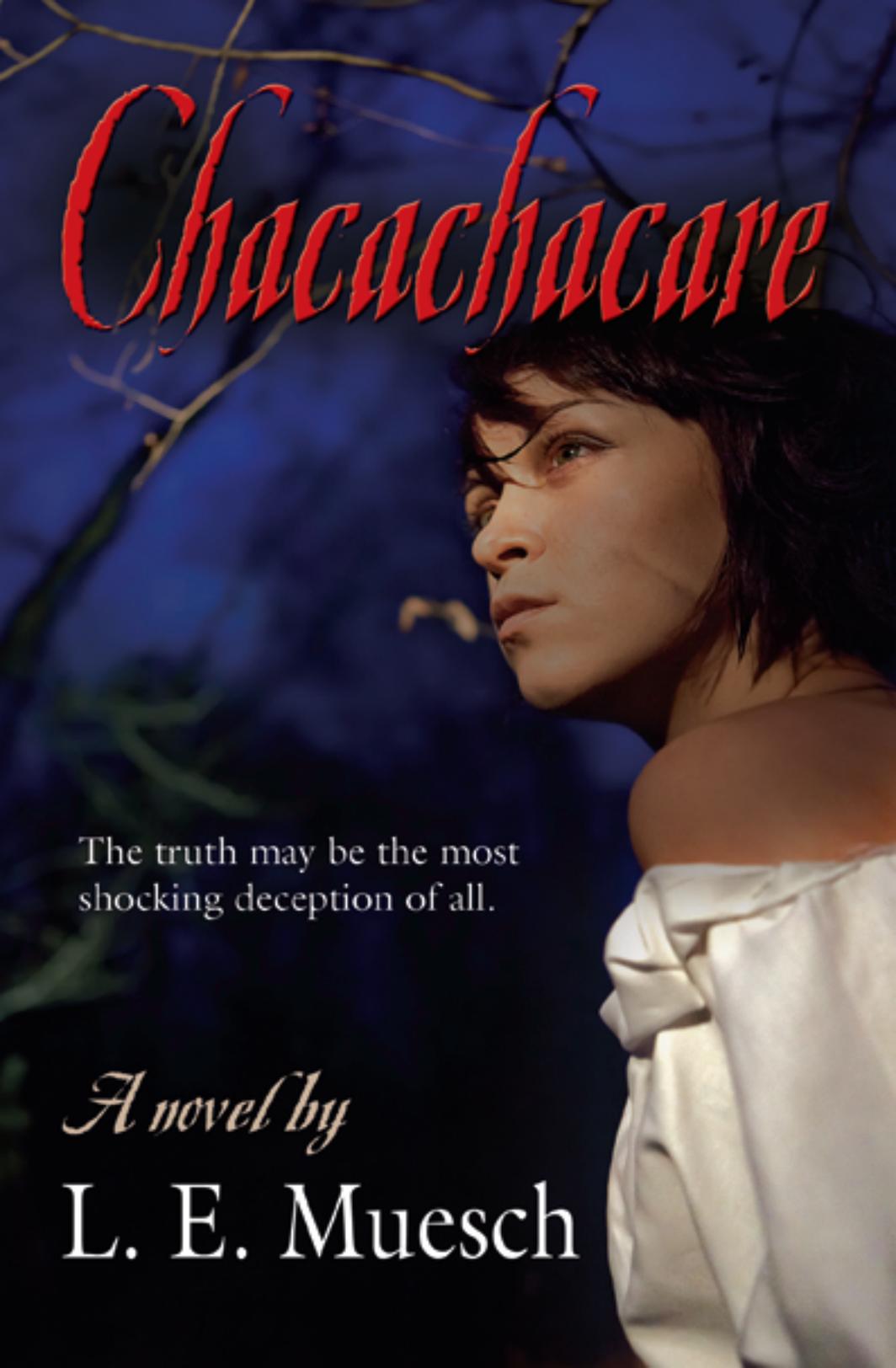


Chacachacare

A woman with dark hair, wearing a white off-the-shoulder dress, is shown in profile, looking thoughtfully to the left. The background is a deep blue, suggesting dusk or night, with the silhouettes of bare tree branches visible. The overall mood is contemplative and mysterious.

The truth may be the most
shocking deception of all.

A novel by

L. E. Muesch



Off the coast of Trinidad lies an abandoned leper colony, Chacachacare. Ely returns after a thirty-year absence, believing his young lover, a patient on the island, died. But, all records of her life and death are missing. Is she dead as he believes, or is she alive? Ely seeks clues in the crumbling buildings left by the last of the lepers. A medieval Dominican Conversei stop at nothing to prevent him from discovering the truth.

Chacachacare

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CHACACHACARE

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L. E. Muesch

CHAPTER ONE

Elias James attempted to move. He couldn't. He felt the rough grain of wood against his bare arm. Through the thin veil covering his face, he saw light. Someone was with him.

"Put dem hands together," a woman with a harsh Trinidadian accent demanded.

A man stuttered, "Ah ... Ah ... I'll ... I'll do it."

"They together now."

"I ... I ... be ... better get the ... the lid on so ... so we can get them in ... in the ground before dark."

The light dissolved into foreboding darkness. Hammering sounded. My god, he was being buried. He tried to scream, but couldn't. Concentrate, make noise, or they'd never know he was alive. Someone squeezed his hand. Had they discovered? No ... wait, it was dark. A hand stroked his face. Oh my god, what was happening?

"Don't be frightened, Elias," a soft and gentle voice said. "I'm here with you."

"Rebecca, is that you? Oh god, please tell me it's you."

In the darkness he felt the comforting warmth of her gentle caress as her fingers glided across his cheek, and her beautiful long hair brushed his face. Her lips touched his. He struggled to reach out and take hold of her, to embrace her, but he couldn't move. A sharp pain throbbed in his head. The image faded into blackness.

Someone slapped his face.

"Hey, you okay?" a man said.

He opened his eyes. He was leaning down on the dashboard holding his head. My god, he'd never had a dream so real. What in hell happened?

“Here, let’s see how bad that is,” Jesse, his youthful West Indian driver said, as he wiped the blood off with a handful of tissues. “You were out for a while. Ah ... you’ll survive. I was worried there for a minute. You hit that dashboard pretty hard. Lucky for you, you’re a West Indian. We have pretty hard heads. Sorry I had to stop like that, but he cut me off. For a minute there I thought he’d done it on purpose.”

Snapping the two ends together, Ely said, “It’s my own fault. I should have been wearing a seatbelt. Did you get the asshole’s license plate number?”

“Unfortunately, the guy didn’t stick around long enough. Now that I think about it, he didn’t even bother to slow down. The limo was black with tinted windows, so I couldn’t see the driver. He hit my bumper pretty hard, but didn’t do much damage. The dumb bastard broke his own headlamp.” He leaned over to check Ely’s forehead. “How about I stop at the hospital and you can have that looked at? It’s on the way.”

Massaging his forehead, he said, “I’ll be all right. Just take me to the inn.”

Twenty minutes later they pulled beneath the Crew’s Inn veranda. Jesse said, “We’re here. I’ve already arranged for your room like you asked. You want to freshen up first, or go meet Rachel, the skipper of *Sea Mist*?”

“Thanks, but I better go clean up first; kind of get my bearings.”

“All right here’s my card. Don’t forget, its *Members Only – MaxiTaxi Service*, Jesse James. Call me if you need anything.”

Ely tucked Jesse’s card into his pocket and walked into the inn. He handed his passport to an attractive young West Indian reservations clerk. She studied it, looked up and smiled.

“What’s the matter? It doesn’t look like me anymore? A little less hair and more grey,” he said with a chuckle. “Gettin’ old I guess.”

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“Are you kidding? You look good to me.” She laughed.

The check-in completed he went to his room to wash the blood off his forehead and freshen up. His reflection showed a cheek imprinted with the pattern of Jesse’s dashboard. He threw water on his face, downed an aspirin, put on a clean polo shirt, and set off to the marina.

In the parking lot he saw a black limo with dark tinted windows and broken headlamp parked near his room. Curious, he walked to the limo, cupped his face against the side window, but couldn’t see inside. A small white cross decal was pasted on the upper right hand side of the windshield. He took notice of the license plate, and entered the number into his IPod, planning to give it to Jesse later. As he walked toward the marina, the sound of a car engine caused him to turn in time to see the limo drive away. What in hell! Someone must have been inside the whole damn time.

Ely walked the docks until he found himself standing behind a large white sailboat trimmed with teak. The name *Sea Mist* was painted in gold leaf on the side. He stared, stem to stern, at the yacht he’d arranged to charter for the next two weeks. She had one tall mast, an hour glass stern, and graceful lines that disappeared beneath the water line. Without doubt, he wasn’t going to have any of the modern conveniences he was used to having back in his New York apartment. The yacht wasn’t new, but seemed to be in seaworthy condition. The fiberglass didn’t sparkle any more, but she was clean. Lines were neatly coiled. A wash bucket and hose sat on the foredeck.

An attractive young woman emerged through *Sea Mist*’s companionway clutching a cell phone to her ear. A small diamond chip pierced the side of her nose. Running her long fingers through her short brown hair, she said, “Sister Claire, I’ll call you back tomorrow.” Glancing up, she said, “You must

be Ely. I'm Rachel. Come below and put your stuff in the cabin."

A tall, thin man, wearing a worn-out cap on the sailboat next to *Sea Mist* called over, "I'm glad to see Rachel has a man in her life again."

Smiling, Ely said, "I'm afraid I'm just a passenger for --

"Throw your duffel down here." Rachel reached to grab the bag. "What happened there? Looks like you've whacked your forehead."

"Had a near miss on the drive over with Jesse. Did he tell you I've never been on a sailboat before?"

"Well, you'll get used to it. Besides, we're not crossing the Atlantic ... Throw your stuff in that cabin behind you there. I have a fresh pot of coffee brewing. I'll go pour us some." She turned and walked away.

His cabin looked as if it had been built for a person half his size. Once he managed to put his clothes into the hanging locker and drawer located beneath his bunk, Ely returned to the main cabin. A vase filled with pink frangipani rested on the salon table.

"Here, it's hot," she said, carefully passing the cup.

Rachel saw him stare at the sun-faded photo on the bulkhead. She turned and said, "That was my husband ... He died two years ago in a motorcycle accident."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to --

"I'm going topside and get things ready. We leave at 10 sharp. I've gotten used to doing things myself, so just relax. You'll hear the engine when it's time to leave." She scurried up the companionway.

The picture of Rachel and her husband could easily have been from a fashion magazine. Embracing, they gazed lovingly into one another's eyes. Her smile, straight white teeth, full lips

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and youthfulness, enhanced her natural beauty. Her husband was tall and had an exceptionally powerful build.

The engine started and a vibration surged through the boat. He joined Rachel as they were moving away from the dock and into the bay. Small white caps lapped against the hull.

"It's that island in front of us. We'll be there in forty minutes," she said. Her silver earrings swung as she spun the wheel to work her way through a maze of anchored yachts. Her speech was unimpeded by a thin cigarette-sized cigar she masterfully clamped between her full lips.

He'd grown quiet, so Rachel kept looking over at him. "Jesse tells me you're making a documentary about Chacachacare. That true?"

"Sure is ... that's why we're here."

Keeping an eye on other yachts coming through the Boca from the open sea, she said, "Maybe we can help each other. Did the charter people explain I'm a photographer?"

"Jesse mentioned something about it. So what have you done?"

"I'm working on one of those coffee-table books about Chacachacare. I've taken a lot of pictures. I'll show them to you later if you're interested?"

His eyes widened. "A coffee-table book of a leper colony! Now there's a first. I'd love to be at the ladies high tea when someone picks up that one." He waited for her to say something, but she didn't. "Why do you think people would buy a book about an old deserted leper colony?"

Soothing and gentle, like the whisper of a child, she said, "It's hauntingly beautiful and it's taken hold of me. I suppose it all comes down to making a record of Chacachacare before it's all gone. Those people have a right to be remembered. I've written a poem to include in the book. Maybe I'll share it with you sometime." She stared ahead at the island. "The problem

I've run into is there isn't much I can find out about what life was like there. Everyone just seems to have disappeared one day. When we get to the Island you'll understand."

Taking notice of her slight build, light tanned skin, and dark brown eyes, he said, "You look like you could be a Trini. Are you?"

"The truth is I don't really know what I am." She spun the wheel, and pushed forward on the throttle to avoid another sailboat. "I never knew who my biological parents were. I was raised by the Dominican Sisters at the convent in Port of Spain." Crushing her lips together, she hesitated. "I guess it's obvious that I'm at least half West Indian."

"Don't look so upset. I'm a full-blooded West Indian myself. As a matter of fact, I was born right here in Port of Spain."

Taking notice of his dark eyes, short black hair, and tan skin, she chuckled. "I would never have guessed."

"Have you tried to track down your parents? The nuns must have some record—after all— they did raise you."

She removed the small cigar from the corner of her mouth and appraised its red tip. She leaned forward, flicked it overboard, and exhaled a stream of smoke in one long continuous breath. Throwing her head back, she said, "Believe me, I've tried."

"A few of the nuns I once knew might still be alive. Don't we have to return to Port of Spain for supplies in the next few days?"

"Not really—well—I'm not sure." She smiled. "Maybe we could use more beer."

"I'd enjoy a visit to the convent. I'd like to see it again after all these years."

He decided against making any suggestion he planned to see what he could find out about her parents. He would go

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alone. After all, why raise her hopes when it was unlikely he'd learn anything.

In the sunlight a flickering dazzle of bright colors sparkled off the diamond piercing on the side of Rachel's nose. As she stretched to fold a mast-step, her shirt rose up. Half concealed beneath her denim shorts, were the distinctive wings of a Harley Davidson tattoo on the small of her back. Not unusual in New York, but this wasn't New York. It was Trinidad. He concluded this was her rebellion against the strictness of growing up in a convent. He'd always respected people who dared to be different, and he was beginning to realize that Rachel wasn't your average young West Indian woman.

* * *

The green, steep, brooding hills and lighthouse of Chacachacare came into view. The sky was clear and blue, and the air soft as milk. Ely grew rigid. Dazed, he wandered in a mist of memories. Scenes from the past returned slowly, and then raced through his mind as though they happened only yesterday. He reached into his pocket and withdrew an old photo given to him by Rebecca the day he left. He looked into the hazel eyes of the young girl in the picture, and remembered their last kiss. A tear welled up and blurred his vision. He brushed it away with the back of his hand, and carefully tucked the photo back into his pocket. "You know where Sanders Bay is?"

"Yeah, sure. It's over there," she said, pointing to the eastern corner of the anchorage. "It's a lot nicer to anchor beneath the old convent at La Chapelle Bay."

"We need to anchor in Sanders Bay." His voice deepened. "It's important."

To the west, sat the three large convent structures where the Dominican Sisters had once lived. From this distance, they

appeared to be in better condition than the others. The doctor's house was to the right in Rust Bay. Straight ahead was the receiving building with its long concrete pier. Here supplies were delivered, and here was where Ely snuck ashore when he first arrived in search of his mother in 1974. As he looked at the crumbling buildings along the shoreline, he imagined hearing the voices of the people he once knew. He remembered the women strolling together as they often did, holding hands, talking, and laughing. The very place he'd tried so hard to forget beckoned him home.

Many crumbling structures with rusted metal roofs sprawled far back into the jungle. Rising from the thick veil of undergrowth were the remains of the decaying hospital, the disintegrating dispensary, the rotting morgue, and the small collapsing building where movies were shown. A street and a traffic light had been reclaimed by the jungle. Only a small number of the original buildings remained. Rebecca's small wooden cottage was still standing. Unable to bear looking at it, he turned away.

He recalled that the nun's referred to the island as the Hansen Settlement, in honor of the Norwegian doctor and bacteriologist who in 1873 discovered and isolated the bacterium that resulted in the disease. In this way, those living there didn't have to be reminded each day they were lepers. Some of the nuns ruled the island with an iron hand, and others sided with lepers for their rights. Sister Catherine, herself a Trini, never reported clandestine affairs. The women could always confide in and reach out to her for help.

"The bottom here is rubble. We only have a light CQR anchor, so we're going to have to keep an eye on things for an hour or so. I don't want to drag. I'll go get us a cold one?" A few minutes later, Rachel returned, and with a loud thud, slapped a beer down on the teak cockpit table. "Here, you look

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like you could use a cold one. You were looking pretty spooky a few minutes ago.”

“Yeah—well—what can I say ... Damn, that’s good,” he said, gulping down his first mouthful of beer.

Phone ringing. “Hello ... Oh hi, Michelle. I got in around 6 this morning ... The trip was fine ... Yes, I’m on the charter boat now ... I’ll call you as soon as I have a chance. Take care hun.”

Rachel hesitated, her eyes in search of a comfortable place to rest, she asked, “Do you have a family?”

“Not a family, I do date a few women friends.”

He strangled a fierce tide of emotion that welled up within him. He’d always wanted a family. He looked up at the windswept hill overlooking the bay where Rebecca lay buried. A murmuring of soft winds swept through the trees tops. He dug his nails into the palms of his hands. He’d been up there a thousand times in his mind, but never had the courage to return and visit her grave.

Swallowing hard, attempting to hide his emotions he turned to Rachel and said, “How long have you been working on your coffee-table book?”

She shrugged. “I guess it’s been almost three years now. Things went well the first year.” She paused. Her eyelids flickered as she stared into space. “Then everything changed.”

“You mean with the death of your husband?”

She nodded, but said nothing.

Movement on the shoreline caught Ely’s attention. There was a young girl dressed in white, watching them. Wanting to be friendly he waved, but got no response.

Turning to look, Rachel said, “Who are you waving at?”

“Hmm ... there was a young girl there a minute ago. She must have walked into the woods. I got the impression she was trying to get your attention. Have you seen her before?”

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Rachel's face paled. She leaned forward and massaged the back of her neck. "Maybe you just thought you saw someone. There are no boats so it's unlikely anyone's here, especially a young girl by herself."

Ely was about to say he knew what he'd seen, but thought better of it. Still, Rachel seemed just a little too anxious to dismiss the young girl dressed in white. Why?

CHAPTER TWO

An hour passed while they waited to be certain that the anchor was holding. The stillness of the water, and serenity of their being alone in the anchorage made it a time for reflection. Ely suspected their discussion earlier about seeing the young girl dressed in white had for some reason hampered any conversation.

Ely observed Rachel writing in a small field book. “Are you writing in your diary?”

“I enjoy writing poems, but they’re only for me.” She made eye contact and offered the hint of a smile.

“I’d enjoy hearing one of your poems sometime.”

“I’ve never shared them with anyone.” She tucked the small book into her back pocket.

He wanted to ask why, but held back. Instead he said, “I suppose growing up in Port of Spain was a lot different when I was a kid. After all, that was a while ago ... So what was it like for you?”

“For me? It wasn’t like most people think. People always seem surprised when I tell them that Sister Claire saw to it that I grew up like most kids. I had my own room, and they encouraged me to bring girlfriends over any time I wanted. My friend Ann has been my best friend since we were in the first grade.” She cocked her head and squinted. “And how about you? A lot of people here dream of making it to the U.S. and finding a good job. I guess you were one of the lucky ones.”

Ely smiled. If he were one of the lucky ones then how come he couldn’t escape the nagging feeling he wished he’d never left Trinidad. As a young kid on the streets, when his once in a lifetime opportunity did come, it was the answer to all

his prayers. After thirty years, in one sense it was, and another it wasn't.

Rachel waited patiently for his answer.

"Yeah, I suppose I was one of the lucky ones all right." Ely looked up at the sky, then down to imagine himself as a young boy playing cricket in the gutter. "A man was making a documentary on life in the West Indian slums of Port of Spain. He hired me to arrange interviews with street gangs. Before he left, he gave me his card, and said if I could find a way of getting to New York, he'd hire me. I saved every penny I could, and when the time came, I went. He and his wife gave me a spare room to sleep in. He paid me out of his own pocket until I could prove myself, and he could get his company to hire me. That's the whole story."

"Wow! I know a few people who'd do anything for a chance like that."

He nodded and smiled.

Satisfied that the anchor was holding, Rachel grabbed her camera bag, and motioned for Ely to follow. She climbed down into the dingy. "I learned that the Dominican nuns, with help from the governor at the time, built the leprosarium to house 500 patients back in 1922. Chacachacare replaced the Cocorite hospital on the mainland after there was a widespread outbreak of leprosy. The fear was that if they didn't forcibly isolate lepers somewhere, then the outbreak would become worse. Chacachacare was the perfect place to banish lepers. It was like being given a death sentence."

He took a good hard look at what was left of the leper colony. How tragic that back then they weren't aware that leprosy was rarely transmitted from one person to another. He thought of the needless suffering and cruelty that was mired in the quicksand of ignorance.

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Ely jumped down into the dingy. “It’s so overgrown. Most of the buildings are on the verge of collapse.”

“Unfortunately, since the last people left in 1985, townspeople began coming here to strip the waterfront buildings of everything of value. Since I’ve been taking pictures here, I’ve seen more and more destruction by vandals. The buildings in the jungle are still untouched. You’ll understand later.”

Stoically she said, “I’ve always wanted to publish a photo book of Chacachacare Island so the people that once lived here would be remembered.” Shaking her head, she said, “I haven’t been able to find out anything about what life was like here. All that people can tell me is that the island was at one time a whaling station, and later cotton was grown here in the 1780s, a major export for Trinidad before oil was discovered. You can still see evidence of the cotton cultivation along the roadside near the lighthouse. That’s how the island got its name, from the Amerindian word for cotton, Chaca.”

“Rachel, when you told me that it appeared to you that the people here just one day disappeared, you said you would explain.”

She paused, bit her lip and said, “I’ll explain when we get there.”

They slowly made their way to an arc of an almost circular beach. The white churning surf fell silent along the shore. Ely took one long deep breath of the refreshing forest air, and held it as long as he could. It was a familiar smell. The wet leaves and soggy moss squished beneath his feet. The earth was so soft that he sunk into the ground. Thick vines hung down from the massive tree limbs high overhead. The forest was so overgrown that light barely penetrated to the ground and darkness oozed out from between the trees. Parrots nesting in the high branches looked down at them with bold interest. As they made their way

deeper into the forest, the undergrowth became almost impenetrable. A hare stood frozen in fear because they blocked its escape.

“There’s no way in hell we’re going to get through that,” he groaned.

“Just follow me. I know a way.”

With each step he took, thorny brambles cut through his pants to prick his skin. He began to brush away large black spiders, and other bugs crawled up his arms and legs with increasing frequency. When something crawled across the back of his neck, he smacked it. The squashed, but still moving legs attached themselves to his fingers. Wiping them off on his pants leg, he continued to follow Rachel.

She stopped, pulled a thorn from her leg, and said, “All right, we’re here.”

“What the hell are you talking about? There’s nowhere to go.”

Rachel pulled away a large clump of brush. When she’d finished, Ely saw that it had been intentionally placed over a man-made opening.

“Malc, a friend of mine, cut the tunnel with a chainsaw. It’s the only way in. He camouflaged the entrance to prevent anyone from reaching the other buildings.”

Ely couldn’t believe that a road he’d walked so many times had been totally reclaimed. Lying on his belly, he crawled through the tunnel behind Rachel. After five minutes of crawling in darkness, he said, “I don’t think I can go on much further. My damn arms and legs are killing me.”

“We’re almost there. Just keep moving.”

As Rachel pulled herself through the end of the tunnel, a burst of bright light blinded him. He was looking directly into the sun. Now he understood why nothing had been taken. He stretched to pull himself the last few feet. Something took hold

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of his ankle. He felt fingers tighten their grasp. “Something has my foot!” he cried out. He clawed desperately to avoid being pulled back into the tunnel. As the earth slipped between his fingers, he felt Rachel reach in to grab his arms.

Tugging to pull him out, she said, “You’ve got to help me. I can’t do this alone.”

His hand caught hold of a root. He kicked furiously to free himself.

Rachel tugged at him until he lay in the open. She dropped to the ground. Struggling to regain her breath, she panted. “What the hell was that all about?”

Ely sat up, and looked back into the tunnel. “Someone was in there behind me. Whoever it was grabbed my ankle, and tried to pull be back.”

A hard deep frown formed across Rachel’s brow. “The only thing that grabbed your ankle was that thick brush. There’s barely enough room to get through anymore. I think it’s time for Malc to clear it again. As for a hand grabbing your ankle, I’d say your imagination is better than most.”

Something caught his eye. He reached into the tunnel and pulled out a small piece of white cloth hanging from a thorny bramble. Thinking it might belong to whoever he struggled with, he put it into his pocket for safekeeping, stood, and brushed himself off.

Ahead was a two-story building with a sign that said: “Medical Clinic.” Inside a small wooden plaque read: “Dr. Welch, Medical Superintendent.” He’d accompanied his mother here many times. In the corner was a narrow metal table with leg rests still extended. It had been used to examine patients, and to restrain them when cutting off their limbs. As a child, he feared the sight of that table worse than anything on the island. He had nightmares of being strapped down while they

amputated his limbs. Heart pounding, he closed the peeling wood door and walked away.

Carefully climbing up the rickety wooden steps, they saw hospital beds that had once been separated by privacy curtains side by side. Because the main ward was open to the veranda, patients had enjoyed the ocean breeze that kept them cool during the hottest summer months. Valuable medical equipment had been left in the ward, and remained untouched. The swelling tide of memory overwhelmed him. He imagined he could hear patients calling to nurses for morphine.

Leaving the hospital ward Rachel followed him as he headed toward a small building.

“We came here to see newsreels, and sometimes we were treated to an old out-of-date movie brought here from the mainland. The nuns would watch these to be sure they were okay for the patients. Comically, they cut out any scenes considered un-suitable and re-spliced the film. This often resulted in big gaps, making the story jump all over the damn place. Sometimes we booed and then laughed hysterically.” The rusting projector was still in its place. “Now I understand what you were talking about. Look here, the film is still in the projector.” Ely ran his fingers over the rusting reel, and peeled away a length of film. “You’re right. It’s as though one day everyone disappeared, leaving everything behind.”

Her mouth fell open. “I don’t understand. You never told me you lived here in the leper colony!”

“It was a long time ago, and before you ask, no I don’t have leprosy.”

“Then you know more about this place than you’ve let on?” Shaking her head, she said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for it to come out that way.”

“Let’s just leave it at that. If I want to talk about it, I will. Okay?”

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The wrinkle on her brow disappeared and a slight smile appeared at the corner of her full lips. "Okay."

Later, Ely momentarily forgot he wasn't alone, mopped his face with his hand, and blurted out, "Rebecca!" His voice was thick with sadness. It seemed so intolerably tragic that even his personal thoughts betrayed him. He hoped that Rachel hadn't heard him call out.

* * *

He followed Rachel along a path to the doorway of a two-story building. Patient records were scattered on the floor. The dispensary shelves were still filled with hundreds of medicine bottles. Unopened cardboard boxes labeled morphine, aspirin, and promin were stacked everywhere.

Rachel put her hand on her hip, and said, "Everything was left here like this. The first time I came, I saw that the patient's names, and everything about them was written in these records."

He paused to look around and realized that if it hadn't been for the overgrown jungle, looters would have taken everything. For sure the drugs could have been sold on the black market. It's not every day you come across boxes of morphine ampoules.

"The entire island is like this." Picking up a small bottle off the floor, she added, "I understand the morphine for pain, but the Promin, was it a cure for Leprosy?" Rachel was taking notes on a small pad she carried in her back pocket.

"It wasn't just one drug, but a combination of three drugs administered over a period of several months. At least the injections weren't painful like the earlier drugs. They were discovered in the 1970s, and once they became available it marked the beginning of the end of places like this. Over time the population declined. It's a terrible disease, some types worse

than others. When I left here a cure had been found, but it was already too late for my mother and many more like her. Some who could leave chose to remain, because they knew they couldn't survive outside this settlement. Many of those who did leave found it impossible to blend back into society because of the social stigma associated with having had leprosy."

"When did you leave?"

"I left in 1980." He winced and said, "Leprosy is still one of the most misunderstood diseases, and sometimes it's not diagnosed in time to reduce nerve damage. Even today there are 500,000 new cases of leprosy in underdeveloped countries like India, Brazil, and Nepal each year. Some experts are predicting that the number of leprosy cases will rise soon ... I suppose I'm sounding like a documentarian, huh?"

Ignoring his question, Rachel continued writing on her pad. When she'd finished, she asked, "I found a small dormitory with children's clothes. Were their parents allowed to stay with them or at least visit them?"

"Up to the time I left the police were still going to homes and telling the parents that if they didn't voluntarily bring the child to the wharf, then an ambulance would be sent, and the child removed by force. They always made it clear to the parents that if they cooperated no one would know there was leprosy in the family." He paused to imagine hearing the voices of young children. "If a parent wanted to visit a child it usually took three months to get permission and they could only stay until the launch left the same day. There weren't enough nuns to take care for patients and children so a few of the woman lepers cared for them."

Ely remembered asking Rebecca why they couldn't visit the children, and she answered that because they were younger, the nuns segregated them from the rest of the community.

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“Were the patients ever allowed to leave to see their families?”

He smothered a feeling of harrowing sadness and said, “If a woman were in the early stages of the disease she could be given a one week pass to visit her family, but passes were rarely given. Because men never returned after a week, the police had to track them down. Rarely were men ever given a pass to leave. Some of the leper’s eyes, tongue, and faces were so badly swollen with sores that most of them didn’t want to be seen on the outside anyhow.” Ely saw that Rachel was about to ask another question. Beating her to it, he said, “Talking about all this is getting to me so please, no more questions.”

She nodded, and put her journal in her pocket.

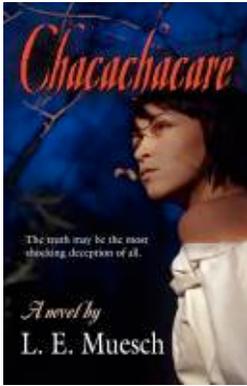
The wall cabinets were filled with brown glass bottles of all shapes and sizes, many unopened. White labels described their contents. He turned to a metal desk littered with dispensary records. Removing the top sheet from a stack, it read: “Daily Treatment Records” and beneath the words “Leprosarium – Chacachacare.” There were patients’ names with hundreds of boxes having Xs, noting what medications were dispensed each day and to which patient. A common note written in the boxes was “Rest week” or “Patient Uncooperative.” Afraid he might recognize a patient’s name, he laid them back down.

“The name you called out, what was her name?”

He felt a flush of heat rush through his body and settle in his throbbing head. She’d heard him call out Rebecca’s name. He turned to see Rachel kneeling on the floor, holding patient records in her hand. He said, “Rebecca ... Rebecca Parratrah”

She nodded, and thumbed through the folders. Rachel paled. She held out a folder for him to see.

He barked, “Put the fucking thing back! I don’t want to see it.”



Off the coast of Trinidad lies an abandoned leper colony, Chacachacare. Ely returns after a thirty-year absence, believing his young lover, a patient on the island, died. But, all records of her life and death are missing. Is she dead as he believes, or is she alive? Ely seeks clues in the crumbling buildings left by the last of the lepers. A medieval Dominican Conversei stop at nothing to prevent him from discovering the truth.

Chacachacare

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