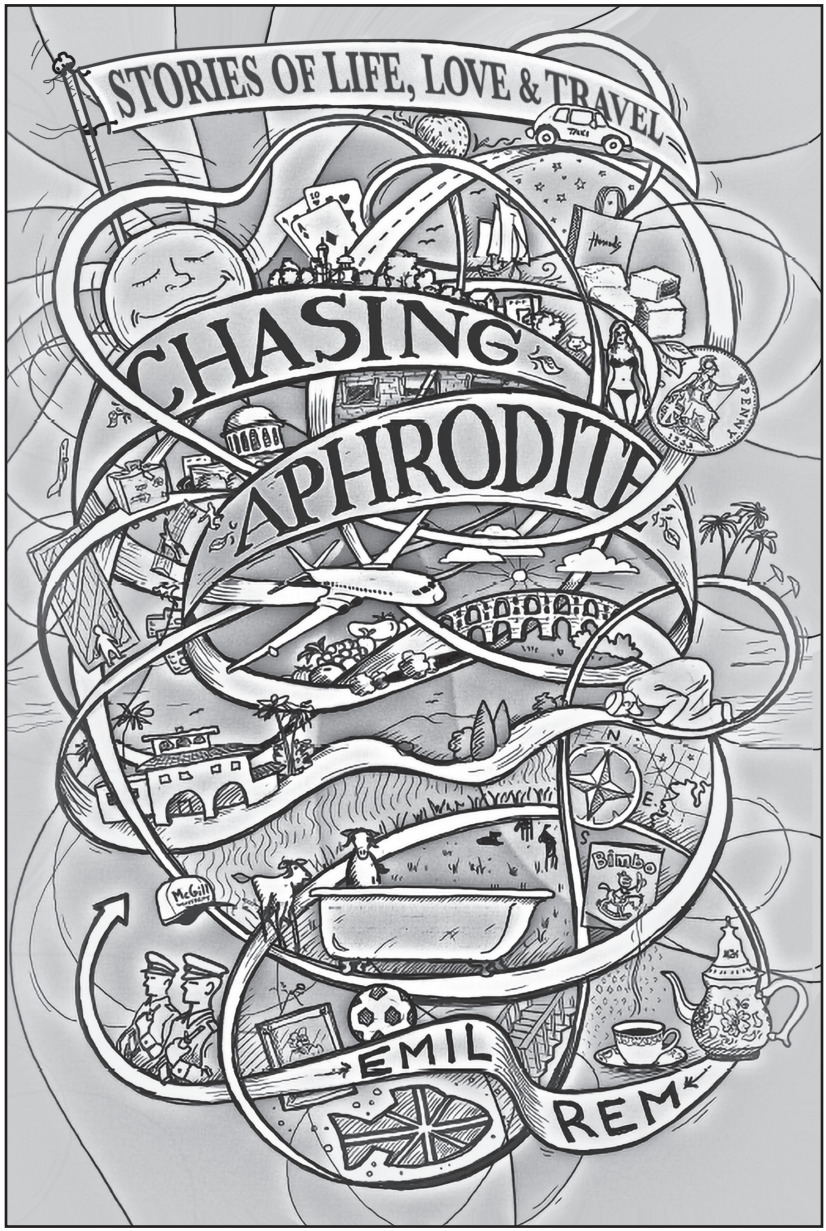

STORIES OF LIFE, LOVE & TRAVEL
CHASING APHRODITE
EMIL REM
Bimbo
McGill

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For the son who always asked
where he came from.

From the father who never forgot.

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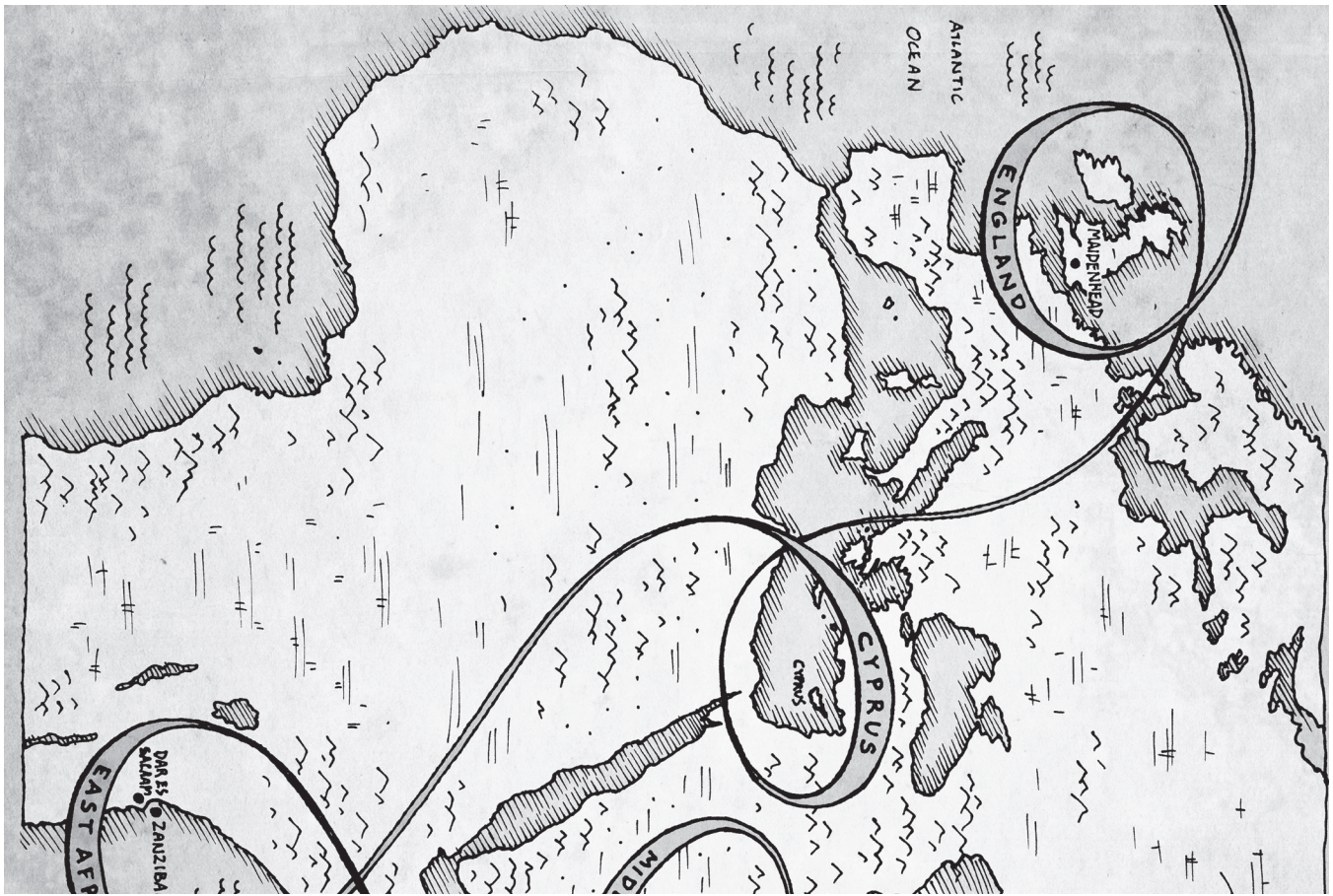
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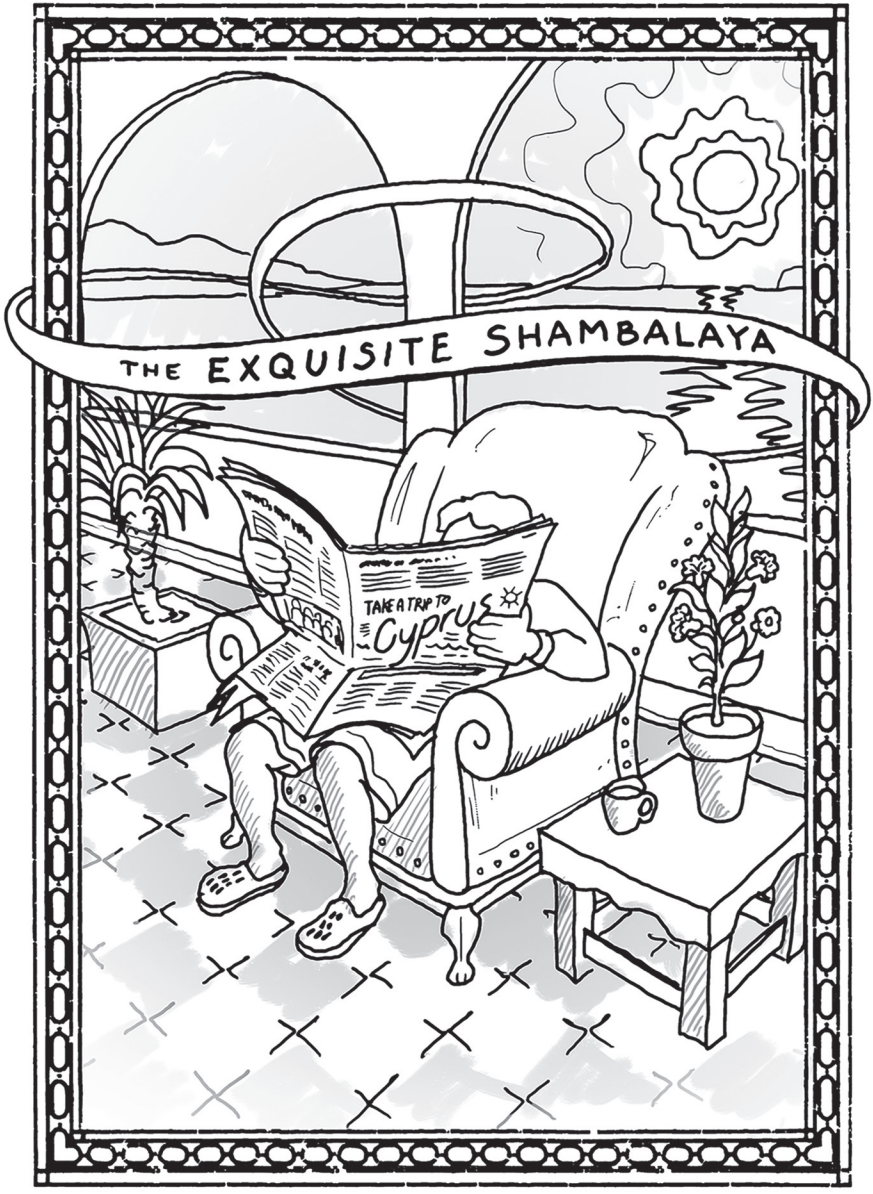
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CHASING APHRODITE

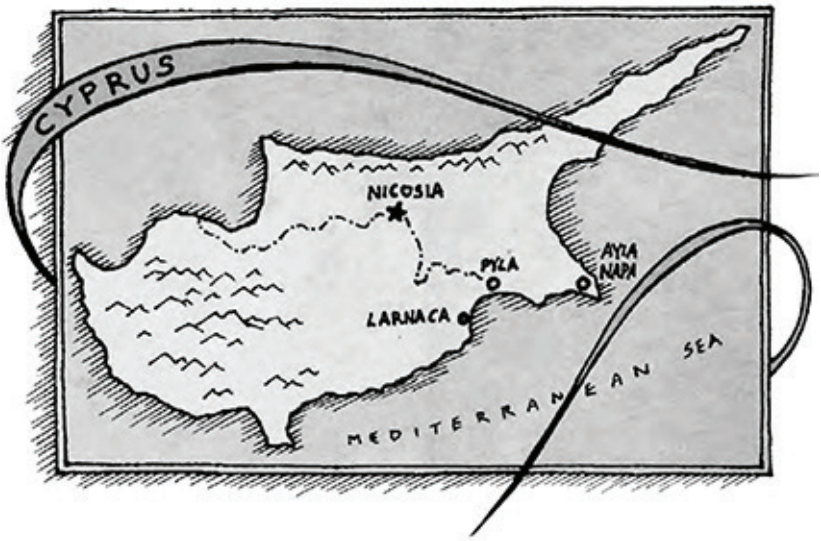


ROAD MAP

CYPRUS
NICOSIA
PYLA
AYIA NAPA
LARNACA
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
DUBAI
ABU DHABI
MUSCAT
MIDDLE EAST
INDIAN
OCEAN
N
ZIBAR
AFRICA



"What do you mean, am I for real, Sir?"



CHAPTER 1

The Exquisite Shambalaya

HE RETURNED TO Cyprus, this time to Pyla, a seashore village twenty minutes by bus from Larnaca. Hazel had lived here, had recommended the Sandy Beach, a beautiful old mansion turned hotel. At its back lay a deep blue swimming pool fringed with palms and topless East Europeans—an all-inclusive package.

As he entered his room, he succumbed to the rigours of travel and jet lag. Not bothering to unpack, he fell spread eagled onto the bed and closed his eyes.

Instantly, he was in a taxi, this time being ferried to downtown Larnaca. The town seemed to have imported its dust directly from Dubai, yet had none of its glitz and glamour. There was

no escape from the sun; desiccated trees led them past a dried up salt lake, its salty crust all but obscured by the fine grey dust that swirled above it, like steam lingering above the liquid in a simmering pot. Larnaca baked in its own heat.

"How long has that lake been dried up?" he heard himself ask the driver.

"About a month, now," he said. *"It's summer."*

As they skirted the expanse of the salt lake, the Kamares Aqueduct, its graceful arches soaring over fields, seemed to beckon him to walk the paved hiking trail at its feet. He struggled to stand up, and the dream drifted off.

Hunger woke him up a few hours later. He opened his balcony to the Mediterranean, and although evening had crept in, its cooler air hadn't. He skipped down the marbled stairs to the lobby.

A waif-like concierge looked up at him, her high heels and ramrod back not quite giving her the authority she demanded.

"So, where can I find a restaurant?" he asked.

"The Shambalaya's just down the road, but it's high-class Indian."

High-class Indian. His mouth watered as he remembered the handmade *dhebras*, flour cakes, his *nanima* made especially for him and how hurt she was when he didn't finish them off in one sitting. Perhaps the Shambalaya would make him his favourite dish—*masala* fried fish with fried potatoes and *kedgeree*, which he had been looking for in an Indian restaurant since her death.

He smiled politely at her and nodded, wondering if she'd ever even been out of her village. As a child, summers had always been red banner days for him. He would leave his adopted English family to fly home to his father in Africa. His school exams finished on a Thursday, and by Friday, he was on bus B, leaving Maidenhead for Heathrow: his family had no car. Once at the airport, he was on standby 'til the very last minute—

a privilege of his father's employment with East African Airways Corporation, endearingly referred to as *"Europeans, Asians, Africans and Chaos"* by its captains and stewardesses.

He knew the crew of the Comet 4 by name. Three-quarters of them were family friends based in Africa and flying this route weekly, and he'd taken this trip since he was five. As he was always on standby, his father never knew exactly when he would arrive. One time, he got to Dar-es-Salaam (Arabic for Haven of Peace) just before lunch. His uncles, who supervised the airport, were delighted but surprised to see him at this odd time and were immediately sworn not to call his father.

A family friend had driven him down palm lined, dust ridden and rutted roads to his home downtown, where an aunt let him in to await his father's return from work for his afternoon siesta. Family and servants fussed and hovered around him, opening windows and laying out delicacies and rose water for him to inspect and approve. As he sampled the treats, cousins and aunts laid bare the latest news and gossip for his ears only. His favourite toys lay spotlessly clean in a corner waiting for him, even though he hadn't played with them for years. The little prince had come home.

The visits were a cherished oasis from life in England, a life among strangers, the only family, his natural (Indian) mother who flitted about the periphery of his life. African summers, he spent his mornings visiting his *nanima*, and took lunch with his father every midday. Each weekday afternoon, there was soccer practice, with a match to win on Saturday. His father came by scooter to watch him, sputtering up to the edge of the field, his hat at a rakish angle. On the way home, they would stop for snacks of kebab and *muhogo*— cassava grilled on discarded metal trunks filled with charcoal, while IIala sat on his haunches in a corner brewing strong Arabic coffee for them in a brass minaret of a pot. Then, it was time to go home, to shower and to change into long pants and short-sleeved shirts and fol-

low the sunlight across the harbour to the marbled palace they called their mosque.

The baronial steps leading to the prayer hall had been swept clean. Rush mats covered the hall, and glassless filigree windows let in the cool sea breeze, a barely audible song that cocooned him in peace and tranquility. Thirty years would pass before he would find that peace again.

An adult now with a thriving business thousands of miles across the ocean in Canada, he'd stopped on the last morning of a business trip to Dubai to catch his breath and read the local newspaper. He'd just concluded a successful meeting with a colleague. As he sank into an exquisitely tooled leather arm-chair on the concourse and opened the paper, an advert for a three-day excursion that promised a respite from the sweltering summer in the desert caught his eye. It was just a short flight to Cyprus.

He'd met Hazel early next morning on that first trip. Thin and white haired, she strode the promenade in front of his hotel in Larnaca, her beige McGill University cap matching her shorts. She came to his attention by annoyingly outpacing him two-to-one on her walk. This octogenarian was definitely on her way to shattering a speed record. He decided she had to be slowed down.

"Excuse me," he asked, *"did you attend McGill?"*

"No, a friend gave this to me. My married name was McGill."

She was a delight, an English expat in retirement (it was cheaper and warmer here), still adventuring and loving her life. Hazel was the consummate gossip, but try as he may, he could detect no malice in her. She seemed to know everyone and everything about Cyprus. She spoke to him of bus drivers who never came on time, yet detoured several streets to deliver elderly women safely to the Carrefour supermarket; of the taxi driver who felt sorry for a customer and loaned him fifty euros; of the

village she now lived in, twenty minutes away by bus, where the local hotel allowed her to use their pool and gym at no cost. She spoke of local restaurant owners, of flea market operators and the Russian nouveau riche taking over; of the hostility between the Greeks and Turks on this divided island. Once started, Hazel showed no sign of reticence.

"So Hazel, what sites would you recommend in Cyprus?"

"Why, Kourion of course. It's the excavation site of a Roman colony. You take a bus to the church in Limassol, wait an hour and catch the bus to Kourion." Did he really want to spend his last day here commuting to see a wrecked village?

It was high noon when he got there. No one dared to be out at this time of the day, and Hazel hadn't told him about the hill. A modern road hair-pinned its way up, but he decided to take a short cut. A stony footpath intersected the road straight to the top. The weather was too hot and dry for grass to grow, and he cursed his decision to wear Crocs—they really did nothing to cushion the bite of the stones he stepped on.

Halfway up the hill, he came upon a wooden gazebo—open and empty. A sheer cliff edged to one side overlooking a strip of beach. He felt like Gulliver on the island of Lilliput as he watched a couple of bathers far below, crawling out of the water and under a rainbow-coloured sun umbrella. According to his pocket compass, he was facing the African coast. Could he see it through the afternoon haze? He convinced himself he could. At that instant, the memory of his mosque and the peace it had brought him came to his rescue: it descended on him, shielding him from the day's heat and glare.

A light breeze from the Mediterranean had begun to cool the streets of Pyla by the time he stepped outside The Sandy Beach Hotel. The Shambalaya stood like a Victorian *grande dame* in mourning, its austere silhouette darkening the shoreline. Too late, he remembered the concierge's words—"high-class"—

and today of all days was Friday. He had neither shaved nor showered. He still wore the same shorts he had worn for two days, and his sweaty T-shirt clung to him as though it would never let go. Dust and sand had greyed his golden Crocs and scarred his feet.

A tacky, flickering orange neon sign hung on the grimy wall above its entrance. Unlit steps led down to a basement. In the unaccustomed gloom, he saw what appeared to be a nymph carved in obsidian. All of a sudden, she sprang to life.

"Can I 'elp you?" she asked in a sordid East London Cockney accent. This wraith, no more than shoulder height, sported a short, short black mini-skirt and black satin top. Her white powdery make-up contrasted sickly with her cropped black hair. She had a black satin sisterhood at her beck and call, and handed him off to be led through a maze of teak tables, intricately laid with glimmering crystal and cutlery. The heavy scent of frankincense candles hung in the air, their flickering flames reflected in the jewellery, satin, and silk worn by the Shambalaya's ever festive patrons parading to and from their designated rendezvous. Passing a gilded mirror, he looked at himself in dismay. Neither hair nor apparel nor footwear came close to competing with that of the present company. His unshaved chin began to itch.

He was finally laid to rest in a cubby hole beside a storage room, where he was promptly forgotten. His stomach began to rumble again as he tried to gain a server's attention. He felt like a parcel dropped off in a corner waiting to be picked up the next day.

His eyes swept the room, taking in the gaudy rendition of *"high-class"* in this village, and remembered his father, who owned no car, waving and whistling as they stood by the roadside for someone to stop and give them a ride; his nanima, whose husband had been robbed and killed after a card game, bringing up six kids, throwing metal weights at them if they did not obey her every word; the missionary, Abu Ali, who was commis-

sioned to knock some religion into him each summer; and the continuous friction between the Africans and Asians, evidenced in robberies and violence. His fellow diners strutted about displaying their finery, caught forever in their own reflection.

A shimmering movement caught his eye. Through the gloom, a mirage wafted towards him—a young girl carrying water to revive him. The only Indian in sight. Her height and slimness, the lilt of her body, reminded him so much of long-lost cousins, now scattered across the world, that his eyes welled with tears.

"Are you for real?"

"What do you mean, am I for real, sir?"

"Are you a real Indian?"

"Yes, I am, sir, from Gujarat." She bore no evidence of Cockney heritage, not even in her speech.

Gujarat! His ancestors had migrated from there to East Africa where he had been born so many lifetimes ago.

"And where are you from, sir?" she asked innocently.

He didn't think of Canada, where he had married and raised a family for thirty years, nor of England, where he had lived for the previous twenty. Instead, her voice carried him back to that marble hall beside a harbour, its floors covered in rush mats, its shutters open to let in the sea breeze and a girl singing a lullaby of hymns to soothe and comfort him.

The water girl stood beside him, patiently waiting for a reply.



Author's Note

I had no idea of what to write

In five weeks, despite bringing along five note books, I'd succeeded in carving out a mere six hundred words.

It wasn't thevlife I had led for over 30 years that came to mind when the water girl asked where I came from. It was a place I had banished from my mind since leaving England for Canada in1980.

It was then that the story gelled.

"Shambalaya" came from my take on Shambhala, a mythical kingdom in Tibetan Buddhism.



"...their future as self-assured as they were..."