

X, Y & Z



Z HAS TAKEN the Lagonda from the garage and driven recklessly into the teeming tropical night, wheels spinning in the everywhere mud, and directly into the teeth of the typhoon.

The huge Lucas headlamps of my new 14/60 sports tourer – my pride and joy – picking up the rain driving down like innumerable needles. Giant ones, too. Her hair whipping soggy serpents, the convertible canvas top forgotten – well actually, long since rotted away. Make that my dented, imperfect pride and joy. Which sums up a lot.

Y IS GLARING at me, having just delivered a full-arm, full-throated slap to my face. Still stinging. Ears ringing.

Not speaking (neither her, nor me). Despite the seventh mint julep in my hand – or perhaps *because* of it. Further complicated because most of it is now on the floor. A slithering wee tide on the garishly-patterned linoleum. Almost immediately, two gilded geckoes are licking at it. I've given them a taste for the stuff. She grabs the keys of the Hispano-Suiza.

X I DON'T KNOW exactly where she is. Or what she is thinking. She took off in my Citroen 5CV Torpédo 11 days ago. The longest she's ever been away. I could/should/would becoming worried. But somehow, something unspoken detains me. For now, at least. I have a news despatch to make. It may be unusually garbled. Such is our circumstance.

I own three automobiles. The only man here, endowed thus. I am also the new BBC World Service correspondent. It's a useful cover. For there are greater games afoot.

Z, I know right now is driving past a wooden sculpture in the dampest dark.

The work is curious, in that it elicits as many questions as frank admiration. It's a car; twice life size, a wooden car, constructed from artfully-chosen driftwood (bent boughs as mudguards, rough planks as body panels, vines wrapped wreath-like a steering wheel), and all cunningly interlocked so the whole needs no metal fixings. Its hood ornament is extravagantly large; a spoonbill half-human-height; its wingspan of three-quarters of a yard; its stare implacable.

More intrigue is provided by the wheels, which are square. Even though they have axles to rotate on. And all placed on an elevated, generous altar the height of a child. But it's beyond the climbing on for the children of Falsa Esperanza. Secret adult stuff. Once every thirteen days, the men of the village will clamber atop the platform, and bodily lift the car, while women rotate the square wheels so they may be set down on a new side-of-the-square. And that car settles on the plinth as before. The people disperse, to go about their otherwise ordinary everyday lives. Fishing; trapping birds; tending the fields of yams, mango orchards, the thickets of wild sugar cane which is made into a fine rum; slaughtering pigs for the feast.

Now consider that all of the above is to be repeated in the plural. For there are many of these votive-less vehicles, in fact one for every small village. They line the rough roads that I drive on. That stare at me with an inexplicable insouciance, an inchoate enigma. They're everywhere. That's why I won't know exactly where Z is.

What does it all mean? I don't rightly know.

Neither, I'll wager do they. My three loves of equal measure, X (Spanish, sort-of), Y (French, half) and Z (Russian, totally).

We're just living this thing. As best – as *messily* – as we can.

If chaos is our natural state – or at least our stumbling quest towards it – then it stands to illogic we should be able to make it work. This chaos. Like a home perhaps, an untidy home, but still a place to be residing in. For us. For *all* of us.

But then, that would suppose some sort of order, some sort of lucid rationale, for this strange place we find ourselves in. And all for our own, very different reasons. This place is the provenance of absurd possibilities – and their less-than-predictable outcome. This weird place of ever-living spirits and mysteries, ethereal sand paintings, and of cargoes to be dreamed about, cargoes to be carried. Cargoes to be lost; and found again, if you so will desire. A complicated place.

Or, more specifically, for myself, here in the New Worldables – officially the Archipiélago de Nuevos Sueños, in the year of our Bemused Lord 1927. On the second-to-largest island Falsa Esperanza. Or, in the afternoons of every day, Lozhnaya Nadezhda. Or to be precise and completely correct (if such a thing were possible here) Ложная надежда.

Elsewhere, I'm told in newspapers arriving months later, 1927, well, it's a terrifically splendid year. The telephone calls, the flights across the Atlantic, the height of the jazz age, autogyros landing on rooftops, this thing called television demonstrated, the Academy of Motion Pictures established.

Such is the reason of unreasonable men. Such is the bare clothing of our otherwise fantastically-fulsome tale.

Bear with me (with *us*) dear reader as we try to untangle this empire of love – or at least a yearning, temporary semblance of it – during the heady, hapless days of La Colaboración.

Or La Catástrofe. Such as it sometimes seems.

We could well call it La Hazmerreír.

It certainly does lend itself to us being one long laughing stock. But it's more like a forced and maniacal laughter, responding to the grand and epic cosmic joke we find ourselves in. For we somehow seem to prevail, albeit in a state of ongoing absurdist humour. Which is something the locals specialise in, too.

If the world would even care. If the world had just an inkling that we are here. But we exist as if living in suppressed history under a dark cloud of laughing ink. And at the times of the typhoons, this is more than an apt analogy. We are oft times covered in the darkest clouds I have ever known. Heavy with hurt. With raindrops the size of hip flasks.

The locals call our situation Basket Blong Giggly. Translation: a basket that's full of weirdness. The kind of weirdness that only us waetmans and waetmiss's can muster up. So it seems we do amuse each other.

Or Сотрудничество – if you were speaking in the second half of the day.

You see, this country, this colony – such as it is – finds itself a dual one. A yin and yang of competing 'civilising' influences. Almost a case of split personalities; or in the new lingo Dissociative Identity Disorder. With giant, tropical-sized quotation marks. Those of the ironic kind. Good luck to us.

Nuevos Sueños is in a position unique in the annals of colonialism. We were desired by two bit-players in this part of the world – for different reasons. The Spanish wanted to cling to some faded imperial glory. And they wanted the rubber. The Russians felt for a foothold in the tropics. And a conduit to slake their newly-acquired taste for bitter coffee. (Ours isn't the best; but just fine for the Russian palette). The French and the English, masters of this colonial schtick, naturally they got the best islands, elsewhere.

So Nuevos Sueños has become a part-time colony of each. Weekdays, and only weekdays, we are a Spanish colony in the mornings; and a Russian possession in the afternoons. Weekends are our own. This works fine, for our Spanish administrators take a siesta each afternoon (weekends too); and the Russian, never good at early mornings, can take their time coming into office. Which they do, literally. At the stroke of 12 noon every day, a gun goes off, (well should do – mostly it misfires because the gunpowder is tropical damp), the Spanish flag is lowered, the Spanish language shelved, and Russian sensibilities hoisted.

It's been decades; and the islanders have lived through three-and-a-half generations of La Colaboración.

Or La Catástrofe. Take your pick. They did, the locals. And that's why, eventually, they booted us all out. A terminal disassociation, elegantly handled. But that comes after this story, so we can overlook that chapter here.

It's an odd circumstance, I'll allow. But strangely, it seems to work. I especially like the weekends. Which are neither Spanish or Russian. Or natural. Or neutral. Take your pick.

Not X though. She is full of a passionate Spanish intensity

Y is an artist. Or is she a muse? I'm never quite sure. A French flapper.

It's hard work keeping them apart in our small expats community.

Z is a pilot. An aviatrix. (I love that word!) She is a benefatrix – if that is an accurate description – of the Soviet initiatives towards equality. Women can fly! I believe them. And her. I have flown with her many times. A Dornier seaplane. Which delivers normal and diplomatic post between the archipelago's outposts. With stop-offs at enticing, private lagoons.

I am enamoured by the all of it – the heady universe that is X Y & Z. And each woman in equal measure. Which is to say, a lot. Or mucho. Or mnogo.

But I am too busy, currently, dealing with the unstable intricacies of my own making. Within the X, Y & Z thing.

For Z has uncovered classified material. That has nothing to do with being about me.

And X has unearthed unnerving personal truths. That contain demons that are possibly not mine.

While Y has learned other new state secrets. Again, not necessarily concerning me.

And at least, in the telling of it, I may be able to make a smidgeon of sense of it all.

Even if this will probably elude, possibly in its entirety, X, Y & Z.

But right now, I must go find Z and X, and at least keep away from Y.

For a while.

Wish me luck.

For 74 years, from 1906 to 1980, Vanuatu was a colony, simultaneously, of two distant powers France and England. This was called the New Hebrides Condominium.

X, Y & Z, and the love quadrangle within the story, is inspired by this extraordinary situation.