



# Ole Man River

By  
Steve Roberts

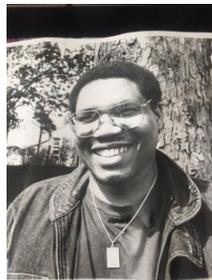
*Steve Roberts' story, 'Ole Man River', is written in the dialect spoken in Dominica, an island in the West Indies. In the story, a young man in search of hope returns to a river of his youth, which speaks to him about himself, his past and the history of Dominica.*

The man climbed gingerly down the riverbank, his new trainers seeking the least muddy path to the river. The afternoon sun glistened on the water flowing downstream against a backdrop of birdsong. He felt a sense of calm, as he jumped from rock to rock to nestle on the biggest rock in the middle of the river. The river seemed much narrower now, than back in the day, and the gushing current also felt less powerful. The roaring bass in the river's voice, was as strong as ever though.



*1 River in Dominica - Photo by ISAW Company on Unsplash*

Is way u woz boy? Long time self i doh see you. U look like u was in forin doh. I sense u crossin de bridge over the years, sometimes regular, regular, an den dere would be a gap. I suppose de gaps is wen u out dere in your new world. Ah remember wen u woz a likkle boy, an u use to come wid your Aunty Dolly an dem, an all u would sometime have a run in wid de stingin nettle on my bank. You know dat Gabo mention your Aunty Dolly, in one of his stories in his book call *Rain on a Tin Roof*. Yes, she use to run de clock shop by de ole market, in de middle of Roseau. A slim but tuff woman wid a very kind heart. Den wen u woz older u use to come by here regular, wid Nattii Mervin an dem Canefield posse - is posse allu use to call it, yes? Is a long time since a lot of dem fellas visit, so it make it even more special to have you. I feel well good dat u remember me, an come to spen some time wid me.



*2 Steve Roberts as a young man*

So way u be now? How forin treatin u nah? I hope u come n spen some good time wid me eh, it have so much for me to tell u boy. Is what year u leave us nuh? Mus have been bout 75 or 76, innit? Ah remember all u use to come down here from Roger an Canefield, an allu would cook pot full ah dumpling, beans an pig snout. Ah wonder if you still jamming on de pork? Allu would eat an bade an use Glory Cedar bush an locks allu head, tauntin de police n allu parents. It woz a dangerous game to play doh. It was a tyme wen babylan police was chasin down Rasta, all ova de place. Ah even hear people seh dey use to kill dem Rasta in de hills, an bury dem dere self. Man an man was jus disappearin an dem family doh know wat happen to dem. Wen ah chill out in de hills wid dem other river, we

doz talk about all dem Rasta babylon shoot down in de hills. Tings was dread in dem tymes what wid de Dread Act an all dat. Anyways Jah live, an de Nyabinghi live. It does be so nice wen Rasta come an free up in my fresh waters, praising His Imperial Majesty to de Most High. He did come to de Caribbean in 1966 you know, but he nevah reach us here in Dominica.

I remember how one Sunday, after allu leave me, allu walk down to Donkey beach, round by Domcan. Talkin about Domcan, u know is a airport dat dere now? Yes boy, de government close down de timber business, dat was usin de hard woods in de forest to make board an other tings. Dey seh Patrick John build dat airport to make it easier for him to slip outta de country, when he want to go an meet dem man he was plottin an scheming to sell de country to. Where I was nah? Oh yes, dat Sunday after allu finish badin, allu gone up de shortcut to go Roger, but Edward decide to go Massacre on his own, he had proper locks u know? So nex ting Sogofly an dem odder Babylon headin down town from Massacre. Dey pull up n grab Edward to take him down to police headquarters in town. Dey rough him up in de van, an wen dey reach headquarters dey chop off his dreads n chuck him in cubosse for de night. It was a really dreadful time eh boy.



*3 Flag of Dominica*

So way yu seh yu be? Englan? De moddalan eh? Wey papa, u in de heart ah de empiah! Well ah hope u keepin out ah trouble out dey. I hear so much whispas

thru de waters about how Babylon ova dere partial to pullin blackman an ting so. So much story ah hear bout youtman dat die, afta a run in wid de police. Ah hope u nevah take part in dem riot an burn down yu own neighbahood eh? You know, like de one dat happen after dey shoot down dat Duggan guy, out dey in Tottinham back in 2011. Anyways, like I was sayin, down here de Dread Act stay on de books for a long time. Ah bwoy, politricks is a strange ting. Labour an Freedom couldn't agree but dey come togedder to allow babylon to chant down, an abuse an kill Rasta. An we did have our riots too, yes man. Back in May 1979 when Patrick an dem decide to get all tough on de people dem, de people come out on de street to say enough is enough, an dey demonstrate an cause plenty disturbance. Nex ting yu know Babylon was shootin at de people. Dis guy call Moses get his han shoot up. Ah hear he was from Marigot u know, de same place where u grow up, an he was your Granfada godson. It was a tuff time self. People was hardly comin an spen time wid me.

Look now ah hear dem politriksian talking about legalisin de ganja for medical purpose, for de country to make money from it. De whole world dat was telling us to burn de weed plantation, legalising it, and will end up sellin de medicine back to us. Is a world order ting papa! Talking about world order, dey have to try different tings as the tourist trade could suffer. I hear people getting more choosy about where they visit. They don't want to come to a place where de community and de law doh accept same sex relationships, an people can be victimise because of dere sexual preference. De other day, dey refuse to let a cruise ship land, because de passengers was mainly same sex couple. De Church wouldn't have none of it! Meself, I not throwing stones eh, but it have so much ah could tell you about some ah dem preachers. Dey chant down things from de pulpit on Sunday, and den get up to de same tings, on dese banks right here, under cover of darkness.

Anyways, after de upheaval tings quiet down, den dey form govanment of national unity. Yes papa, dem poltriksian dem come togedda an put Patrick in

jail. In 79 dey had Oliver Seraphin as intarim prime minister, before Eugenia Charles, or Mamo as dey call her, win her firs election in 80. Mamo do three session as prime minister, before de pardner from Marigot, ahmm, Edison, yes Edison James take over. You know he was Mamo bes fren for a time, until dey fall out and he form he own party? UWP, United Workers Party. Well, he only las one term. He run an call election early 2000, tinkin he would win, but Rosie knock him out. So Labour end up in power again, an de Freedom party go down hill from de time Mamo lef.



*4 Map of Dominica*

Ah doh know what happen but all of a sudden dem Prime Minista start to drop like fly. Rosie las eight months before he dead. Pierot, Pierre Charles replace him, an was doin well well, before he too drap down an dead in 2004. Osborne Riviere was a stop gap, for two days before de man dat still dere now, Roosevelt Skerrit take over. Anyways, it soun like de politricks different now eh, de kinda tings I doz hear people talkin bout wen dey come an see me. Lennox Linton, de leader of UWP an Skerrit doh seein eye to eye at all, but somehow Skerrit still dere. Even

wen hurricane mash up de island, dem man couldn't come togedder and work for de good of de country. Because dey say if you wasn 'red' an votin for Labour, you wasn getting nuttin from aid dat come fram forin. Nowadays is blue dis an red dat while de sufferers continue to struggle.

Now allu have allu own problems wid political federation. Politriksians at work still. You know back in 1958 we had a West Indies Federation? That was like a Caribbean version of your European Union. Now dem countries couldn't agree, so dat federation only las four years, although dey have Caricom now as a common market ting. Now allu British vote to come out of de European one. How allu call it again? Brexit, yea man Brexit.

So de moddalan goin and stand up strong again in de worl. But dem returnees dat down here dey worried, bekase now dey can run to Martinique or Guadeloupe wen dey sick. Wen dey feel like a likkle brek dey can go an buy a ferry ticket and go for a weekend or whatever. Now wen allu come out afta de Brexit, dey doh know where dey will stand because France might decide allu have to make queue, to get visa an ting so, jus to visit. An wen dey sick dey will have to fly back to Englan to get treatment. I know, wen allu was havin allu debate about Brexit, dem Returnees say nobody never pay dem no mind, an dey never consider how de Brexit goin an affect dem. Dat is assuming de Windrush trap doh ketch dem, and send them back to dere homeland, dat dey did leave since dey was likkle.

And de toing an froing giving dem Returnees plenty stress because dey doh know what de future hold for dem, while dem British politriksians takin dere time to decide how dey going to play. You should hear dem complain wen dey come for a little picnic on a Bank Holiday. Is not cricket at all, but doh get me on to de cricket, because West Indies doh have a cricket team no more. We use to rule the cricket world you know, we was de kings, now everybody beatin us, unless is dat twenty twenty bish bash ting dey playing. Well, we survive de break up of the Federation, so I suppose allu will survive de Brexit too, even though de ordinary people an dem might well continue to suffer.

Boy, as we talkin dere ah feelin me water risin. I hope it not rainin too hard in de mountains eh. But yu wasn here for David in 1979 man? Garson, dat was a hurricane oui! Wey papa! I seen plenty hurricane and storm but dat one was dreadful. Before dat I nevah carry so much tree trunk an big boulder in my life. Wen yu look at me now, you would nevah tink I reach over de bridge. David mash up de country bad bad but de country strong an it recover from dat. We was hoping not to get another hit like dat again, but in 2015 tropical storm Erica come, and although it didn't have strong winds, de rain fall an fall like it was remakin de floods of Noah. Dere was water and more water, de more I carry water, de more it come from de mountain with some force I never see before that. As de rain fall de land slide all over de place mashin down houses, killing people an destroying roads and bridges, it even take out de whole village of Petit Savanne.

After that, us rivers was saying we shouldn't have nuttin so bad for a long while, because de country need time to recover. Little did we know dat by 2017, Maria would become a most unwelcome guest. Hurricane Maria hit de islan full on at Category five! De tings that pass down here on de way to de sea, I doh even want to talk about dem. I hear de wind talk language I never hear before, you know, some ah de people dem say it was like demons from hell was havin a battle on de islan. Everybody still talkin about de noise, de different kinda noise dey hear dat night. By de time Maria leave most of the country was mash up, de houses, de forests, de bridges, de roads, everyting. It was jus a disaster. You lucky you wasn't here to live thru dat boy, so much people dead. Things settlin down now, and de whole world try an help us recover, but if you look around, you will see it still have plenty work to do.



*5 Mango Tree with a bit of Someone's roof, 3 years later*

Things coming back on a even keel again, de festival an carnival dis year was more like normal times. You can hear music in the air again. Although dese days I not hearin as much of de music as I used to, because now everybody comin and sit down wid dere earphones, keepin dere music to deyself. You must remember all dem good musicians we have all over de world. People does wonder how a little island like us have so much good musician. Dey playing not just our local music, but all kin of music in all corners of de world. De other day some of dem people from cultural division come for picnic an I hear dem talkin, about how dey want to support de music and de arts and culture to put de country centre of de world stage, and bring some foreign currency to de country. Dey see dey cannot jus rely on de tourism and de sellin of passport. So dey want to get dem young musician to think more about de business side of de music, an de culture. I just hope dey not jus talking, and dey really do someting positive.

Boy I know you spen some time wid me, an you probly have to get back to you people an you friens an dem, befoe de sun go an hide behind de horizon. I well glad to see u eh, but listen nuh, as u going back out dere, bway lemme tell u, u have to look out fuh yourself. You have to look afta yuself, an u love ones u know,

u gonna have to take plenty care boy. Cause it have a rumor in de waters. De waters have a rumor, it have someting big coming, something big, big self.

Doh know what, doh know how. But wen it hit, de worl not goin an be de same again afta dat. Dem dark waters she, is plenty deat dat goin an follow dis big ting here, yu undastan? So look afta yuself boy. Dey sayin it goin to start in China somewhere an work it way roun, all roun de world, all roun de globe, an nobody not goin to be immune. Everybody goin an suffah. Is plenty plenty misary dat comin, an de world wont be de same afta. So bwayy, as you journey out dere, tek it easy. Ah doh know wen ah go see you again, but ah lookin forward. Ah hope ah go see you. Wateva it is, ah hope wen it come, you survive it.

As the man cupped some water in his hands, to wash his sweaty face, the river whispered to him lovingly - Gad bless you bway, an tek it easy nuh.

## Biography

Steve Nii Kwashi Roberts was born and grew up in the Windward Island of Dominica. In summer 2020 he completed the MA in Creative Writing and Education at Goldsmiths. His work featured in the Goldsmith's Issue 3 of Story Makers' Dialogues. His poetry was first published in Rampart 1 & 2 - a collection he edited in the 1980's for the Frontline Co-operative in Dominica. He performed at the Domfesta Poetry Against Violence Festival in Dominica in 2016.

Steve is still developing his debut choreo poem Black Reflections which he premiered at the Woodford Festival in October 2018. "Mama", one of the poems from Black Reflections, is included in A River of Stories vol 4, Alice Curry's compilation of tales and poems from across the Commonwealth, published Jan 2016 <http://www.ariverofstories.com/the-books/a-river-of-stories-4>.