

Man-man
V.S. Naipaul

Everybody in Miguel Street said that Man-man was mad, and so they left him alone. But I am not so sure now that he was mad, but he did have some curious habits.

He went up for every election. He stuck posters everywhere in the district. These posters were well printed. They had just the word 'Vote' and below that, Man-man's picture.

At every election he got exactly three votes. That I couldn't understand. Man-man voted for himself, but who were the other two? For a long time the thought of these two mad men who voted for Man-man haunted me. Every time I saw someone doing anything just a little bit odd, I wondered, 'Is it he who vote for Man-man?'

At large in the city were these two men of mystery.

Man-man never worked. But he was never idle. He was hypnotised by the word, particularly with the written word, and he would spend a whole day writing a single word.

One day I met Man-man at the corner of Miguel Street.

'Boy, where you going?' Man-man asked.

'I going to school,' I said.

And Man-man, looking at me solemnly, said in a mocking way, 'So you goes to school, eh?'

I said automatically, 'Yes, I goes to school.' And I found that without intending it I had imitated Man-man's correct and very English accent.

That again was another mystery about Man-man. His accent. If you shut your eyes while he spoke you would believe an Englishman – a good-class Englishman who wasn't particular about grammar – was talking to you.

Man-man said, as though speaking to himself, 'So the little man is going to school.'

Then he forgot me, and took out a long stick of chalk from his pocket and began writing on the pavement. He drew a very big S in outline and then filled it in, and then the C and the H and the O. But then he started making several O's, each smaller than the last, until he was writing in cursive, O after flowing O.

When I came home for lunch, he had got to French Street, and he was still writing O's, rubbing off mistakes with a rag.

In the afternoon he had gone round the block and was practically back in Miguel Street.

I went home, changed from my school-clothes into my home-clothes and went out to the street.

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He was now halfway up Miguel Street.

He said, 'So the little man gone to school today?'

I said, 'Yes.'

He stood up and straightened his back.

Then he squatted again and drew the outline of a Massive L and filled that in slowly and lovingly.

When it was finished, he stood up and said, 'You finish your work. I finish mine.'

One day Man-man went to the big café at the top of Miguel Street and began barking and growling at the customers on the stools as though he were a dog. The owner, a big Portuguese man with hairy hands, said, 'Man-man, get out of this shop before I tangle with you.'

Man-man just laughed.

They threw Man-man out.

Next day, the owner found that someone had entered his café during the night, and had left little blobs of excrement on the centre of every stool and on top of every table and at regular intervals along the counter.

The owner of the café was the laughing stock of the street for several weeks, and it was only after a long time that people began going to the café again.

It was things like this that made people leave Man-man alone. The only friend he had was a little mongrel dog, white with black spots on the ears. Man-man loved his dog, and the dog loved Man-man.

I don't know what it was that caused Man-man to turn good. Perhaps the death of his dog had something to do with it. The dog was run over by a car, and it gave, just one short squeak, and then it was silent.

Man-man wandered about for days, looking dazed and lost.

He no longer wrote words on the pavement; no longer spoke to me or any of the other boys in the street. He began talking to himself, clasping his hands and shaking as though he had ague.

Then one day he said he had seen God after having a bath.

This didn't surprise many of us. Seeing God was quite common in Port of Spain, and, indeed, in Trinidad at that time.

Man-man began preaching at the corner of Miguel Street, under the awning of Mary's shop. He did this every Saturday night. He let his beard grow and he dressed in a long white robe. He got a Bible and other holy things and stood in the white light of an acetylene lamp and preached. He was an impressive preacher, and he preached in an odd way. He made women cry, and he made some people really worried.

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I used to get nightmares every Saturday night after hearing Man-man preach. But the odd thing was that the more he frightened people the more they came to hear him preach. And when the collection was made they gave him more than ever.

In the weekdays he just walked about, in his white robe, and he begged for food.

What happened afterwards wasn't really unexpected

Man-man announced that he was a new Messiah.

My friend, Hat said one day, 'You ain't hear the latest?'

We said, 'What?'

'Is about Man-man. He say he going to be crucified one of these days. He going to Blue Basin and tie hisself to a cross and let people stone him.'

Little hand-written notices began appearing in the shops and cafés and on the gates of some houses, announcing Man-man's forthcoming crucifixion.

'They going to have a big crowd in Blue Basin,' Hat announced, and added with pride, 'and I hear they sending some police too.'

That day, early in the morning, the big crowd assembled at the corner of Miguel Street.

When Man-man appeared, looking very thin and very holy, women cried and rushed to touch his gown. The police stood by, prepared to handle anything.

A van came with a great wooden cross.

Some men began taking the cross from the van to give it to Man-man, but he stopped them. His English accent sounded impressive in the early morning. 'Not here. Leave it for Blue Basin.'

We walked to Blue Basin, the waterfall in the mountains to the north-west of Port Spain, and we got there in two hours. Man-man began carrying the cross from the road, up the rocky path and then down to the Basin.

Some men put up the cross, and tied Man-man to it.

Man-man said, 'Stone me, brethren.'

The women wept and flung bits of sand and gravel at his feet.

Man-man groaned and said, 'Stone me, brethran!'

A pebble the size of an egg, struck him on the chest.

Man-man cried, 'Stone, stone, STONE me, brethran! I forgive you.'

People began flinging really big stones at Man-man, aiming at his face and chest.

Man-man looked hurt and surprised. He shouted, 'What the hell is this? What the hell you people think you doing? Look, get me down from this thing quick, let me down quick, and I go settle with that son of a bitch who pelt a stone at me.'

A bigger stone struck Man-man. We heard Man-man's shout, clear and loud, 'Cut this stupidity out.' And then he began cursing so loudly and coarsely that the people stopped in surprise.

The police took away Man-man.

The authorities kept him for observation. Then for good.