



Avril's Voice

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*This short story is based on Avril - a phantom character from the 2015 novel, *The Star Side of Bird Hill* by Naomi Jackson. Focusing on Avril, who largely is a silent character, was an intentional literary approach that was inspired by the iconic Caribbean book *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys. Like *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Avril's Voice* also focuses on a Caribbean woman who is experiencing an undisclosed mental illness. By amplifying Avril's voice here, we seek to make space to centre her narrative and provide a first-hand description of her mental health challenges and intersecting family issues.*

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To tell you the truth, I couldn't tell you exactly when I went mad. But I can close my eyes and remember the night I walked out of my room in that red dress. I spent hours making it with my friend Jean, and daddy showed his appreciation by throwing my perfectly matched red shoes into the cane fields. "Jezebel Shoes" he called them. Daddy thought that would kill my spirit, but I left for the dance at Queens College anyway in bare feet. I replay that moment over and over again in my mind. I don't know if it was then that I got introduced to madness, but at that moment I knew Barbados wasn't safe for me. Not in Bird Hill or Bridgetown or Bathsheba. Never mind I was born and raised right there in Bird Hill, and had never set foot out of the place before Brooklyn became home in 1976. Not even mummy could make me stay, even though she never really asked me not to go. But in my imagination, she begged me to stay, pleaded with me not to leave her alone. Bird Hill was always too small for me - a small fish with big needs in a small pond. In my mind mummy dropped to her knees, eyes full of tears, holding my hand as my other hand gripped my luggage and my baby girl Dionne. She couldn't convince me to stay in Bird Hill if she built me a house out of sweetbread and fish cakes. Not even the beach could make me stay, with its blueness and sandiness and where I felt safest, and fullest and most whole.

I am so far from the beach and sweetbread right now. Nothing feels familiar anymore. My apartment could be in Brooklyn or Bangladesh and it wouldn't make a difference to how out of place I feel in it and in my own skin. Ever since I called in sick to work and never went back, life has been so slow and nothing has meaning. Life feels heavy. It's a heaviness that hunches me over as if the entire world is resting in the small space between my lower neck and upper back. It's real pressure.

Nothing was really right before or since the girls left for Barbados to stay with mummy for the summer. As I waved goodbye to Phaedra and Dionne at the airport I knew I wouldn't see them again. I lied and told them this was an adventure. It was their chance to see where I was born and hear people with a

real Bajan accent, not like the one I managed to bury under a Brooklyn twang and that only came out when I met another Bajan or got real vex. At first they were surprised when I told them they were spending the summer in Barbados, but I swear I could see a little relief in them too. Finally, a chance to be away from their mad mother who had stopped working and cleaning and caring for them the way I used to. I sealed the deal with my youngest, Phaedra, by telling her it would be mango season when she got there, and these would be proper Bajan mangos. Nothing like the ones we get at the bodega that come from Mexico and are picked too green so they never ripen right. My girls have never eaten mango off of a tree. No Caribbean child should experience that injustice, even if they are living in Brooklyn. Dionne was a harder sell, and I could sense that she felt cast away when I hugged them each one last time at JFK. She was the one that was most like me: rebellious, wandering and born in Bird Hill, Barbados. She would have the hardest time back home, this I knew. People would try to contain her spirit and maybe even kill it but I knew she would live through it all - she had no choice. This world eats those of us who aren't strong. "Behave yourself, and be good" I whispered to her, "Take care of your sister, I love you". I meant those words when I said them.

But the real truth is I couldn't take their sad eyes anymore. Big, longing, brown eyes that hurt to look into because I could see how confused they were. What child can really deal with their mother's madness? Two months before they left I spent the entire day counting. I counted anything and everything. The tiles in the bathroom, cans in the pantry, pillows, shoes, socks, plates, rug fibres. I couldn't stop counting, and when I forgot my place I would start all over again. Madness is a funny thing you know. Because from the inside looking out it makes perfect sense to count everything. Everyone must be counted. Right? But I don't know what it looks like from the outside looking in. And I couldn't let my girls keep seeing me see myself and wondering when their mummy would be normal again and if I would ever love them like I used to. And that's why I started to disappear.

At first I disappeared to let my mind breathe. To escape my daughters' eyes watching my every move. In the beginning it was just quick walks around my building, then it was the block, then three blocks, and then Brooklyn, and then over the bridge into The City. Before I knew it I would find myself coming home when it was bright and sunny out but I could have sworn it was dark when I left. And what killed me was that every single time when I came home, night or day, I would still have to face their monitoring eyes, until finally I just stopped looking into them.

Madness is a hell of a thing. Do you know what it feels like? What it really feels like. It feels like a claustrophobic getting shipped in a box to somewhere halfway across the world. Everywhere you look you see walls, and there is no saviour coming to climb over them to help you out. That box becomes your home, and madness is the housewarming gift you never really wanted but you keep out of obligation to the giver. Madness feels like being a walking skeleton, a shell of who you were at one point. And yet still longing to be touched, acknowledged, and answered. Madness in New York is funny too sometimes. Everyone here is a little mad, so I get ignored a lot and it's easier to be carefree about my madness when I'm out. I can walk on the sidewalk or alongside traffic in the road. People just honk and drive around me if I'm in the way. I can be mad here, and no one cares. I'm just another mad Black woman.

I sometimes wonder what being mad would be like if I never got on that flight to New York. Could I be mad in Bird Hill, Barbados? In a village where everyone knows your business, yuh mudda's business, and yuh mudda's mudda's business. Bajans are so malicious, but in Bird Hill they are maliciouiser. I can imagine women talking about me after church on Sundays when they glimpsed my mother. Telling one another in hushed voices: "You! She daughta Avril real mad yuh know. I see she in town pun a Satdee and it look like she mixed up in a whole set of foolishness...". Or neighbours coming by with a share of their harvest of yams and eddoes not to make sure we had a taste of their garden, but to see if they could squeeze a little information out of my mother about me.

Or even better: to see me and my madness with their own two eyes. What would they expect to see? A mad woman with her hair unkempt, eyes wild, clothes dirty and torn? Do they think that madness is only madness when you can measure and consume it with your gaze like a recipe for bread? Don't they know that madness is wave after wave of silence and loudness drowning you like Cattlewash only to be revived and then drowned again? They will never know that madness can only be understood by the person it happens to. Not even my closest friend Jean or my children's father ever truly understood what my madness was. Because it is mine. It is the last possession I have in this world now that my daughters are with my mother, and I guard it fiercely.

I don't believe in heaven or hell. When I die I'm dead, and that's it. But just in case I'm wrong my mummy knows that I want this body to go back to Bird Hill and rest in a place where I can hear the beach. If my spirit becomes restless in the eternal darkness it can walk on those white sands I've known since I was small, smell that salty air, and maybe beg my neighbours for a piece of sweetbread.

References

Jackson, Naomi. 2015. *The Star Side of Bird Hill*. New York: Penguin Press.