**Glossary for A Haitian Girl**

Susan Polizzotto

***Pancaked*** is how rescue workers described the Hotel Montana’s condition after the 2010 earthquake. Floor upon floor of concrete collapsed accordion-style into a flat slab. When the earth convulsed, the roof merged with the foundation. Rescuers had to dig through rubble and twisted steel to find everyone trapped inside. Chambermaids, bartenders, an Air Force officer, AIDS relief and humanitarian workers, a pediatrician, a solar electricity expert, a Taekwondo Grand Master, college professors and their students… it took weeks to find them and most were unrecognizable, except for their DNA. I’ve never set foot in the Hotel Montana or Port-au-Prince, but I anchored in the harbor on the Coast Guard Cutter *Mohawk* years ago when I took you and your mother back to Haiti. The earthquake killed thousands. Did you survive?

***Repatriate*** is an official term meaning to return someone to their country of origin, as in “the Coast Guard rescued and repatriated a group of Haitian migrants.” It sounds like we restored your citizenship after you and your fellow travelers had been banished and asked for our help and a ride home. The truth is boatloads of people leave Haiti every month. In 2007, you were among them, a child traveling with your mother who risked everything for a chance to start anew and we repatriated you to the starting line. Do not pass go, do not collect American dollars.

***Sail freighter*** is the type of boat we hunted in the Windward Pass, the narrow strait between Haiti and Cuba. Smugglers stitched together a patchwork sail of worn canvas and hoisted it on a tree branch. It wasn’t much of a freighter, more like a skiff with a deep hull to maximize storage — layer upon layer of human cargo crammed together like tinned herring. You and your mother were stacked near the bottom of the jam-packed boat — a textbook Haitian sail freighter.

***Executive Officer*** is the second person in command, one rank below the Captain. As Executive Officer my primary job was safety. I stood on the bridge wing looking down at the tangle of limbs and human faces looking up, watching for desperadoes who might leap overboard and try to swim. No one was going to drown on my watch. Our lookouts counted thirty-two migrants, and that number grew as we ferried them over in our small boats. It climbed to forty, then fifty. I kept expecting the sail freighter to empty, but as each group stepped off more people surfaced.

***Tyveks*** is a one-size-fits all jumpsuit migrants wear on the cutter. We instructed the Haitians to take showers and put their salt-soaked clothes and personal belongings into plastic garbage bags. We tagged the bags and promised to return them when they left. Meanwhile, we gave each migrant a towel, soap, toothbrush, toothpaste, wool blanket, flip-flops, and a papery Tyvek jumpsuit — except you, because one size did not, in fact, fit all. After you showered, your mother dressed you in your original clothes. A little pink butterfly fluttered among seventy-nine caterpillars cocooned in Tyveks. Unlike the caterpillars, the butterfly refused to eat.

***FS*** are Food Service specialists, also called cooks. They plan menus, order food, and prepare meals. The menu for migrants is beans and rice, served twice daily. The rules dictate this meal because of its nutritional value, ease of preparation, and long shelf life. Our Chief Cook, the mother of two grown sons, made it her mission to concoct something tempting enough to lure you from your hunger strike. She wouldn’t dream of breaking the rules in ordinary circumstances, but this was unusual. The rules did not apply.

You were formidable. You turned up your nose at chicken fingers, apple slices, peanut butter and jelly. Armed security guards stood on the flight deck wearing body armor and webbed belts that held pepper spray, police batons, and handcuffs, but they could not defuse your power struggle. Morning came and you sat on your mother’s lap on a gray wool blanket on the steel deck. Your pale curls shimmered in the hot sun like a halo, and you stared at us in our dark blue uniforms and baseball caps and sunglasses that concealed our eyes.

“Maybe she’s not hungry,” I said, hoping for the best, but worrying you might be sick or in shock. Our Corpsman examined you and found no sunburn, scrapes or infections, a steady pulse, nothing visibly wrong. Yet the foods most children love failed to entice you.

Our Chief Cook arrived with a paper plate, on it a sandwich sliced in half with molten cheese oozing out. I watched, riveted, as you selected a triangle, bit into it and chewed with satisfaction. My heart sang for this tiny victory.

“I should have known,” she said. “My boys loved this when they were little.”

***Northern and Southern Claws*** are the two peninsulas that define Haiti’s coastline. We anchored in the gulf between them, returning you to their clutches. I scanned the dilapidated piers of Port-au-Prince with binoculars and took in the treeless slopes outside the city.

Everything looked scorched and brittle brown.

The Haitian Coast Guard arrived to ferry you and your fellow travelers ashore. When you had gone, our crew dismantled the tent and washed the flight deck, and as we weighed anchor, I wondered if anyone would undertake the high-seas journey again. I imagined a superhero heart beating under your mother’s Tyvek suit, fueling her resolve.

***Gyrocompass*** is a navigational instrument we used to find true north. Regardless of the weather, ship’s movements, or magnetic force exerted by the steel hull, it helped verify our location, maintain course and pinpoint the time to turn. As we combed the Windward Pass, the gyrocompass spun freely in a way that seemed to defy gravity and the laws of physics. On the

*Mohawk*, we followed our rules and compass. The Haitians followed theirs.