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Diaspora

This first-person narrative describes the life of immigrants from Haiti living in Boston. It also captures the feelings shared by many immigrant children and youth as they try to maintain their native culture, but struggle to be accepted by their peers, even those peers who are from the same racial group.

When you are in Haiti they call you *Diaspora*. This word, which connotes both connection and disconnection, accurately describes your condition as a Haitian American. Disconnected from the physical landscape of the homeland, you don't grow up with a mango tree in your yard, you don't suck *kenèps* in the summer, or sit in the dark listening to stories of *Konpè Bouki* and *Malis*. The bleat of *vaksins* or the beating of a *Yanvalou* on *Rada* drums are neither in the background or the foreground of your life. Your French is non-existent. Haiti is not where you live.

Your house in Boston is your island. As the only Haitian family on the hillside street you grow up on, it represents Haiti to you. It was where your *granmè* refused to learn English, where goods like ripe mangoes, plantains, *djondjon*, and hard white blobs of mints come to you in boxes through the mail. At your communion and birthday parties, all of Boston Haiti seems together in your house to eat *griyo* and sip *kremas*. It takes forever for you to kiss every cheek, some of them heavy with face powder, some of them damp with perspiration, some of them with scratchy face hair, and some of them giving you a

perfume head-rush as you swoop in. You are grateful for every smooth, dry cheek you encounter. In your house, the dreaded *matinèt* which your parents imported from Haiti just to keep you, your brother, and your sister in line sits threateningly on top of the wardrobe. It is where your mother's *andeyò Kreyòl* accent and your father's *lavil* French accent make sometimes beautiful, sometimes terrible music together.

On Sundays in your house, "Dominika-anik-anik" floats from the speakers of the record player early in the morning and you are made to put on one of your frilly dresses, your matching lace-edged socks, and black shoes. Your mother ties long ribbons into a bow at the root of each braid. She warns you, your brother and your sister to "respect; your heads" as you drive to St. Angela's, never missing a Sunday service in fourteen years. In your island house, everyone has two names. The name they were given and the nickname they have been granted so that your mother is Gisou, your father is Popo, your brother is Claudy, your sister is Tinou, you are Jojo, and your grandmother is Manchoun. Every day your mother serves rice and beans and you methodically pick out all the beans because you don't like *pwa*. You think they are ugly and why does all the rice have to have beans anyway? Even with the white rice or the *mayi moulen*, your mother makes *sòs pwa* – bean sauce. You develop the idea that Haitians are obsessed with beans. In your

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house there is a mortar and a pestle as well as five pictures of Jesus, your parents drink Café Bustelo every morning, your father wears *gwayabèl* shirts and smokes cigarettes, and you are beaten when you don't get good grades at school. You learn about the infidelities of husbands from conversations your aunts have. You are dragged to Haitian plays, Haitian *bals*, and Haitian concerts where in spite of yourself *konpa* rhythms make you sway. You know the names of Haitian presidents and military leaders because political discussions inevitably erupt whenever there are more than three Haitian men together in the same place.

Every time you are sick, your mother rubs you down with a foul-smelling liquid that she keeps in an old Barbancourt rum bottle under her bed. You splash yourself with *Bien-être* after every bath. Your parents speak to you in *Kreyòl*, you respond in English, and somehow this works and feels natural. But when your mother speaks English, things seem to go wrong. She makes no distinction between he and she, and you become the pronoun police. Every day you get a visit from some *matant* or *monnonk* or *kouzen* who is also a *marenn* or *parenn* of someone in the house. In your house, your grandmother has a porcelain *kivèt* she keeps under her bed to relieve herself at night. You pore over photograph albums where there are pictures of you going to school in Haiti, in the yard in Haiti, under the white Christmas tree in Haiti, and you marvel because you do not remember anything that you see. You do not remember Haiti because you left there too young but it does not matter because it is as if Haiti has lassoed your house with an invisible rope.

Outside of your house, you are forced to sink or swim in American waters. For you this means an Irish-Catholic school and a Black-American neighborhood. The school is a choice made by your parents who strongly believe in a private Catholic education anyway, not paying any mind to the bus-ing crisis that is raging in the city. The choice of neighborhood is a condition of the reality of living here in this city with its racially segregated neighborhoods. Before you lived here, white people owned this hillside street. After you and others who looked like you came, they gradually disappeared to other places, leaving you this place and calling it bad because you and others like you live there now. As any *dyaspora* child knows, Haitian parents are

not familiar with these waters. They say things to you like, "In Haiti we never treated white people badly." They don't know about racism. They don't know about the latest styles and fashions and give your brother hell every time he sneaks out to a friend's house and gets his hair cut into a shag, a high-top, a fade. They don't know that the ribbons in your hair, the gold loops in your ears, and the lace that edges your socks alert other children to your difference. So you wait until you get to school before taking them all off and out and you put them back on at the end of your street where the bus drops you off. Outside your house, things are black and white. You are black and white. Especially in your school where neither you nor any of the few other Haitian girls in your class are invited to the birthday parties of the white kids in your class. You cleave to these other Haitian girls out of something that begins as solidarity but becomes a lifetime of friendship. You make green hats in art class every St. Patrick's Day and watch Irish step-dancing shows year after year after year. You discover books and reading and this is what you do when you take the bus home, just you and your white school-mates. You lose your accent. You study about the Indians in social studies but you do not study about Black Americans except in music class where you are forced to sing Negro spirituals as a concession to your presence. They don't know anything about Toussaint Louverture or Jean-Jacques Dessalines.

In your neighborhood when you tell people you are from Haiti, they ask politely, "Where's that?" You explain and because you seem okay to them, Haiti is okay to them. They shout, "Hi, Grunny!" whenever they see your grandmother on the stoop and sometimes you translate a sentence or two between them. In their houses, you eat sweet potato pie and nod because you have that too, it's made a little different and you call it *pen patat* but it's the same taste after all. From the girls on the street you learn to jump double-dutch, you learn to dance the puppet and the white boy. You see a woman preacher for the first time in your life at their church. You wonder where down South is because that is where most of the boys and girls on your block go for vacations. You learn about boys and sex through these girls because these two subjects are not allowed in your island/house. You keep your street friends separate from your school

friends and this is how it works and you are used to it. You get so you can jump between worlds with the same ease that you slide on your nightgown in the evening.

Then when you get to high school, things change. People in your high school and your neighborhood look at you and say, "You are Haitian?" and from the surprise in their voice you realize that they know where Haiti is now. They think they know what Haiti is now. Haiti is the boat people on the news every night. Haiti is where people have tuberculosis. Haiti is where people eat cats. You do not represent Haiti at all to them anymore. You are an aberration because you look like them and you talk like them. They do not see you. They do not see the worlds that have made you. You want to say to them that you are Haiti, too. Your house is Haiti,

too, and what does that do to their perceptions? You have the choice of passing but you don't. You claim your *dyaspora* status hoping it will force them to expand their image of what Haiti is but it doesn't. Your sister who is younger and very sensitive begins to deny that she is Haitian. She is American, she says. American.

You turn to books to lose yourself. You read stories about people from other places. You read stories about people from here. You read stories about people from other places who now live here. You decide you will become a writer. Through your writing they will see you, *dyaspora* child, the connections and disconnections that have made the mosaic that you are. They will see where you are from and the worlds that have made you. They will see you.