Life Interrupted

Brennan, Denise

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Chapter Three

Imagining the Possible

CREATING HOME

I want to eat New York! — GLADYS, a twenty-one-year-old woman from Mexico who had been trafficked into domestic work

I was done thinking about this and was healing. But it’s like you have a kind of tape in your head, like you are making a movie. It’s like you are running back and forth. And you are still lost because you are in a kind of veil. You have a veil over your face and you are seeing through this veil. You see only through this veil. You don’t really see things. You think that you see everything, but no. — TATIANA, a Russian woman in her mid-twenties who had been trafficked into dance clubs

Moving into the Possible

As they look forward, formerly trafficked persons are enmeshed in and at times overwhelmed by setting up a new life in a new country. Tatiana’s and Gladys’s expressions of what lies ahead capture both the excitement of moving forward after forced labor and the challenges of putting the past entirely behind. Most days are unremarkable, filled with mundane tasks. With enduring effects of emotional abuse and physical injuries as well as travel debts, life after trafficking in the United States is not necessarily the fresh start that Carmen wants (see introduction). With no clear path ahead and no family or friends in the United States, formerly trafficked persons begin building a sense of place and home on their own. Those who had migrated to
the United States intending to work only for a short while must now assess what life would look like if they stayed. Staying involves seeing whether there are new and better possibilities than those available in their home country. As they set about “the delicate work of self-creation,” what I call lifework, they must believe that these possibilities are worth resettling on their own, with no money, and far from family.1

After spending years of living under the control of her abuser, Gladys is now living on her terms. Particularly outgoing, she actively puts herself in unfamiliar social spaces, and seeks out new experiences. Enrolling in English classes and then courses to prepare for a GED, Gladys works to create opportunities for herself. She eventually wants to open her own store and has been fortunate to have found a mentor in her boss, the owner of a small retail store that sells perfume and other cosmetics. This mentor has been teaching Gladys how to run her own business and is willing to share her wholesale contacts. She also enables Gladys to schedule her work hours around her school schedule.

Gladys exudes confidence—in herself and in the possibilities ahead of her. Not everyone moves forward with as much enthusiasm and forethought, but social workers emphasize that their trafficking clients move forward nonetheless. These clients have little time to waste since U.S. government assistance that accompanies their status as “trafficked persons” runs out quickly—in about a year.2 They begin with their resettlement checklist—housing, job, English-language classes—right away. While a variety of programs around the world that assist trafficked individuals use the language of recovery, not everyone feels the need to “recover” or to “heal.” This language of recovery and healing pathologizes individuals at a time of acute economic uncertainty and legal limbo.3 There is extreme dissonance between what formerly trafficked persons say they want and need and what some antitrafficking organizations claim they need.4 Social workers and case managers at direct-service providers, however, take cues from their clients who often defer mental health counseling until their material needs are settled. “Clients say to me,” explains a social worker in New York, “I’m not crazy! I’m in touch with you and talking with you all the time. I don’t need therapy.” Formerly trafficked persons are clear about what they want: steady jobs that pay well, legal assistance, and their abusers put in jail. They want to regain control over all aspects of their lives and to resolve their legal status. Like Gladys, they want to make up for lost time.
A problem arises when clients decide to seek counseling at a later date but they have already timed out of their eligibility for benefits. In such cases the trafficking care regime falls short of what clients need, particularly in the long term. There is constant tension between social workers trying to create an environment in which clients make decisions on their own and the reality of the benefits clock pushing both assistance-givers and clients to get the clients settled quickly. Even the best-trained and most seasoned social workers regularly encounter new issues and needs. They are kept on their toes by the diversity of this client base and restricted, time-sensitive funds. Thus both trafficking clients and those committed to assisting them have to improvise as they navigate bureaucratic agencies that are often unfamiliar with these clients’ legal rights and ill-equipped to serve their needs.

After Violence: Living with Loss and Suffering

The formerly trafficked persons I have met, like Gladys, emphasize that they look forward and try not to dwell on past abuses. As a consequence, the remaining chapters of this book address how individuals who suffered through abuse and possibly violence begin to move through the world again. I take as a starting point that formerly trafficked persons have had widely divergent experiences in forced labor and thus face different challenges settling in the United States. Since each trafficking case has its own characteristics, it is not possible to assert that forced labor presents a particular or fixed set of traumas. The analytical limitations of the “trauma concept” remind us that suffering through abuse does not necessarily render individuals “traumatized.” Rather some people end up profoundly sad, scared, or lonely. I heed Derek Summerfield and other mental health professionals’ warnings about the overapplication of a PTSD diagnosis to all who have experienced traumatic events. For many, it is possible that what medical doctors refer to as somatic signs of stress and anxiety—such as stomach, head, or back aches—would dissipate with greater economic and legal security.

Tatiana’s struggles, however, are evidence that moving beyond traumatic events is not something one simply wills. Immediately after exiting her situation of forced labor, she found herself drinking before going to sleep to help her “forget about things.” She describes having nightmares that transported her back to her time in forced labor: “I was depressed. I had certain things in my dreams. People telling me scary stuff. One time I saw my traf-
ficker and he was talking to me as a friend and was saying 'I need your help.' It was kind of weird because it was in the dark and the police came and I disappeared from the scene.” She wanted to rid her life of these nightmares.10 “I’m trying to put an end to them. Like any stage in your life, you have to fight with the monsters. When you fight them, you go to another level, like in a game; then I start to be stronger.” Tatiana’s difficulty moving forward illustrates Das’s critique of “sanitized” terms like posttraumatic stress disorder and her embrace instead of Langer’s description of pain and loss after the Holocaust as “the ruins of memory.”11 Writing is one way to relax. “Sometimes when I feel bad I write poetry or I write something,” explains Tatiana. “When something hits me like a flash, I write it down.”12

Esperanza sees a therapist. She thinks that she would put her experiences in forced labor behind her, however, if she were reunited with her children. I am not suggesting that individuals like Esperanza would not benefit from seeing a therapist even after they are reunited with their families or have secured well-paying jobs. Indeed Tatiana’s description of seeing through a “veil” is troubling.13 But formerly trafficked persons—and their social workers—often reject the mantle of “traumatized victim” and bracket their time in forced labor as a break from their past that does not irrevocably determine their future. For them, this time of “emergency” was not “the rule” but “the exception.”14 As formerly trafficked persons express their feelings of extreme loneliness, concerns about their future, and sadness and anger over the time their abusers stole from them, they do not put their suffering at the center of their lives. They describe hesitancies, anxieties, and fears about their future—as do many new migrants finding their way in a new country—but are not necessarily chased by their past. Rather, they throw themselves into anchoring their future in the United States.

Others’ Suffering

Some formerly trafficked persons do not dwell on their suffering because they see other migrants in their communities with the same struggles, scratching out a living in low-wage work while separated from their family. There is a common longing for good jobs, decent pay, citizenship, and family reunification. At an event hosted by a Filipina domestic workers’ rights organization, the key topic of discussion was the fate of family reunification policies under different immigration reforms proposals bandied about in
Washington, D.C. Living without family members or chronically worrying about possible separation by arrest and deportation permeates everyday life in migrant communities. In light of these common worries, trafficked persons’ particular forms of grief and loss may not stand out. Thus we cannot compare formerly trafficked persons’ past abusive experiences with one another nor with the experiences of their migrant roommates, coworkers, and friends. They are not the only group of migrants to wrestle with past experiences of suffering; many others have experienced civil war, other violent conflicts, or state-sponsored persecution.

The consequences of experiencing or witnessing violence are multiple, not just for individuals but also for communities. Linda Green’s ethnography with widows in post–civil war Guatemala, for example, shows that violence was not “simply the historical background” but that “violence and fear suffused people’s everyday lives.”15 The violence during the civil war in Peru was so inconceivable that one woman told Kimberly Theidon that it “was another life.”16 Traumatic events and chronic emotional and physical abuse can have both short-term and long-term effects. Individuals may not be stopped by abuse, but they are changed; violence can be “formative” such that it “shapes people’s perceptions of who they are.”17 Yet, although individuals and communities must cope with the violence that they endured, there is no monolithic response to violence.18

Challenges Particular to Formerly Trafficked Persons’ Resettlement

Up to this point I have argued that it is not possible to assert that trafficking into forced labor causes a particular set of traumas. But there are characteristics of formerly trafficked persons’ resettlement that diverge from other populations that have experienced violence, such as refugees displaced after war or genocide. Unless they were prisoners of war or pressed into fighting, other migrants’ experience with violence may not have included the experience of being held against their will.19 And while violence that splits apart communities usually involves multiple members of a community who may be targeted because of their alleged political affiliations, ethnicity, or religion, trafficked persons are not singled out for abuse because of their group identity.20 Nor do they undergo resettlement collectively, as members of a group that experienced violence in a particular locale.21 As a result, their experiences are individuated and typically are not understood
as part of a common and known experience among a group of migrants. In contrast, migrants and refugees may discover that their new neighbors and coworkers are familiar with their home country’s struggles, for example, with war or natural disaster.

To add to their isolation, formerly trafficked persons describe not telling their new friends in the United States about their experience in forced labor. Most do not tell their families back home either. Their legal designation of “trafficked” largely remains on paper; they do not reference it in their daily social interactions but usually only in private bureaucratic encounters. With fewer than four thousand individuals in the United States with this legal status, it is likely that no one in their social circle has the same legal designation. They remain silent about their past abusive experiences and present immigration status in part because, under current immigration laws, their new friends and coworkers may have little chance of obtaining documentation to live and work legally in the United States. T visa holders report that their exceptional legal status has sparked gossip and jealousy among coethnics. They also may conceal their status for fear that it may signal some kind of weakness or foolishness on their part that they were not able to outwit their abusers. And of course, confiding in others requires trusting them, which can be a fraught proposition for those whose trust has been so profoundly broken.

Step by Step: Building a Sense of Home and Belonging

A group of best friends living in Los Angeles who met at the only shelter in the United States dedicated to trafficking clients explain how they approached piecing together their lives after forced labor: “You take it step by step. You need to survive first. And send money to family back home. And learn English.” The making of home—and feeling at home, what I refer to as “home-sense”—involves concerns related to housing, work, legal documentation, and health care as well as trusting others and making new friends. All these issues affect formerly trafficked persons’ safety, peace of mind, and well-being. Although the trafficking legal regime opens a legal place in the United States for these exceptions to the immigration regime, legal residence does not necessarily convey a sense of belonging, or what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo refers to as “cultural citizenship.” Alone in the United States, formerly trafficked persons become immersed in legal issues as an individualized pursuit, not a shared project with family or larger commu-
nity. Rather the pursuit of the legal right to stay in the United States evolves among them, their lawyer, and possibly a social worker. Building a sense of home and belonging is intimately tied to resolving their legal status. While they wait for word on their legal fate, the uncertainty can intensify what already is a disorienting time.

Research on refugee resettlement provides some insights into understanding formerly trafficked persons’ resettlement into new communities or into the same communities where they had been living while they were in forced labor.24 Writing about Ethiopian refugees returning to their old communities, Laura Hammond found that a degree of uncertainty creates “confusion” that can be “uncomfortable, dangerous, and at times even life threatening.”25 In an “unstructured transitional state,” these Ethiopian refugees were “like actors rehearsing a play, holding a script in their hands, but not sure whether they would be required to read from the script in its entirety or would be compelled to improvise here and there in order to enact a new story.”26 Unlike refugees, however, formerly trafficked persons have no such script. Where their resettlement significantly diverges from refugees’ and other migrants’ home-making is the extent and form of ties to a larger community.

Home, by definition, implies a shared life with others.27 The “refrain of home” that Ilana Feldman heard among Palestinian refugees was not singularly expressed but was constructed and reproduced by many members of this displaced community. Engaging together in the “repetitive details of daily interaction” was essential not only to reconstitute a sense of home for Palestinian refugees but also to “hold chaos at bay.”28 Many of the women and men I have met do not have a ready-made community with whom to share, inherit, reconstitute, or invent the practices of home-making. As the first in their immediate family and kin networks to migrate to the United States, they navigate the United States on their own as “pioneers.”29 Those who are fearful to tap into coethnic social networks in their new community relinquish ties to assistance, knowledge, or friendship that well-established migrant networks potentially could provide. And since most do not know a single other formerly trafficked person, they cannot look around at members of a community of formerly trafficked persons and see how they are doing after years of living in the United States. Instead they have to build new networks by opening themselves up again—a trying process for individuals who have been lied to, taken advantage of, and cheated.
Trust in a Time of Confusion

Every formerly trafficked person I met talks about how difficult it is to trust again. I use the term trust in ways similar to the anthropologists Valentine Daniel and John Knudsen, who write about how refugees “mistrust” and are “mistrusted,” to capture both how difficult it is for someone who was duped and abused to trust others as well as the role that community support can play. Almost immediately after they exit their situation of forced labor, formerly trafficked persons are asked to put their trust in a cast of strangers: local police, immigration officials, state and federal prosecutors, their own attorneys, and social workers. Many talk about how hard it was to trust others—anyone—again. When speaking with FBI agents, one woman from the Philippines, Eliza, feigned not being able to speak English, explaining, “I could not trust anyone!” She describes being alone and “scared and nervous” and also not having any of her possessions with her: “I had nothing. Not even a change of underwear.” Nor did Suzanne, from Indonesia, know whom to trust: “Especially after I got out of that place and there were all these people asking me questions. I was not sure if I had to talk to them and tell them what happened or not.” Julie, also from Indonesia, echoes this confusion: “You do not know anyone. It’s hard to trust other people. After I got out, everyone was asking me questions. I thought what if they do the same thing to me again?” Formerly trafficked persons who today self-identify as antitrafficking activists and speak at law enforcement trainings about how to identify trafficking into forced labor have urged police officers to call them when they encounter formerly trafficked persons who are scared. Kathy, from the Philippines, explains, “I told the police and FBI how scary it feels. It is a really scary time. I told them to give women my telephone number if they ever want to talk. Especially women from the Philippines who may not speak English.”

Tatiana was overwhelmed by the many questions posed by lawyers and law enforcement officers soon after she left the dance club. “I had to start to trust people, the people trying to help me out. They were asking me questions. They needed information to help me.” Adept at lying to her abusers to protect herself, she described feeling “lost” during this time that she was expected to trust those helping her. “It’s hard when everybody is asking questions and trying to get to know you. They ask about things you cannot really answer.” After lying to her captors for so long, she continued “to make up stories” and say that everything was all right. “It was hard to trust anyone
at first because I was thinking maybe I said too much because I am a very talkative person. I thought, you have to keep information a secret because you never know where it goes. You can’t control it!”

Just how much information individuals should reveal in order to make a legal case can be particularly difficult to gauge since doing so challenges their instincts for self-preservation. Trusting others—whether a police officer, social worker, bunkmate in a temporary shelter, or coworker—runs contrary to the techniques of concealment that may have helped them endure abusive conditions. In Tatiana’s case, her abusers had deepened her anxieties by lying to her about the police: “They told us not to trust the police—that they [the police] would take us to jail and then send us home with stamps in our passports that would make it impossible to come back here again. And they told us we would be sent home as prostitutes—that the stamp would say this!” The notion of building a legal case with law enforcement’s cooperation also can be perplexing for individuals from countries where law enforcement officers do not actually conduct the investigations that they claim to be pursuing—and may in fact be working alongside traffickers. Tatiana explains, “In my country you cannot trust anybody. So you think, ‘Oh my god, maybe these government people don’t want to do anything for me.’”

Tatiana ultimately decided to talk with law enforcement: “I made the decision to go and talk about this, and to be protected. It was the right decision, but it was hard for me to realize it. If your life is controlled by other people, you can’t do anything. You know people are using you, and you never know when it is going to stop. But you have to realize that it won’t change.” When prosecutions are possible, T visas can be quite hard-won, entailing a demanding and frightening process of interviews with investigators and lawyers, and testifying against one’s abuser. Tatiana took many risks by providing evidence. She also put her faith in law enforcement’s relocation plans for her. “They told me if I was not comfortable here I could move somewhere else. They were really nice.” She began to cry, recalling that she would not leave without her cat: “They even helped me to live with my cat. I said I will not move without my cat. They had to run around and catch him. He was scared and running, but we caught him.” She brightened when recalling the comical scene: “They told me it was the first time they had to run after a cat. It was like a movie, watching them run all over. Like Kindergarten Cop!”

Much like refugees and migrants after forced displacement, formerly
trafficked persons face a “remaking of self” while enduring multiple losses. First leaving Russia after losing both her parents, and then the midwestern city where she had been in forced labor, Tatiana has been through several rounds of losses. She took a huge leap of faith by trusting her assistance-givers’ relocation plans for her. Skilled assistance-givers recognize that their role may not be apparent to trafficking clients nor their trustworthiness evident. A staff member of a domestic violence shelter in Los Angeles describes how a trafficking client became agitated when someone on the staff asked her for a receipt for reimbursement. The client believed that the staff member had doubted her. The staff member explains, “These clients have been emotionally battered. Some, like one of our clients who had to sleep on the floor, were treated like dogs.” It takes time for formerly trafficked persons, she emphasizes, to “breathe” and to trust again. “It doesn’t matter if people tell them they can be trusted. It only happens over time.”

Trust: Over Time

Although social workers, attorneys, and other frontline assistance-givers may see themselves as trustworthy, new trafficking clients may not see them as such. While some, like Maria, talk of their social worker or case manager as a valued friend, others keep their private lives private. Peers—coethnics or fellow workers in the same labor sector—can also represent support. Of particular relief for Flo, for example, was the opportunity to meet other domestic workers who also had been exploited by their employers. She began attending Sunday potlucks at a domestic workers’ rights organization in Washington, D.C.: “I realized that I am not the only one, that there were many others who have gone through the same thing.” Those who experienced abuse may find calm and connection with those who have had similar experiences, while they also may feel “different and misunderstood by others who had not shared their experiences,” including “friends, doctors, or lawyers who were trying to help.”

But communities of coethnics are not unproblematic and all-embracing; they can be sources of judgment, stigma, and gossip. Migration scholars long have heralded social networks within coethnic communities as a way to facilitate finding jobs and housing. When formerly trafficked persons turn their backs on these communities, they have to start making new friendships from scratch. Running from gossip in their own coethnic com-
munities, the group of friends who met at the shelter for trafficking clients in Los Angeles found that they could trust one another with anything. Although they are from different backgrounds in Latin America, Indonesia, and the Philippines, they describe having more in common than they do with their compatriots who had not been in forced labor: “Your own community can judge you. They blame you.” “They say you knew you were here illegally, and look what happened! They make it your fault.” These friends explain how their coethnics harshly criticized them for receiving benefits that eluded others in their communities. “With one another and other survivors, we feel free. We can cry. We can help one another. We understand. We can share with one another like a family.” One woman, who had experienced particularly vicious scorn from her community of coethnics, explains, “With [formerly trafficked persons] I am not ashamed. I never feel judged. But I do with others in my community.” As if on cue, her friends jumped in: “There is nothing to feel ashamed about. We have nothing to be ashamed about.” They emphasized that they were there for her, reminding her, “We are a sisterhood.”

With intense distrust of coethnics comes increased isolation. Knudsen found that when Vietnamese refugees mistrusted their communities of coethnics, they saw their problems shift from being “shared ones” to private ones, and they became “alone in a new and heightened sense.”38 Those betrayed by close friends or relatives in particular “may never again have quite the same confidence in anyone” and “may also find [their] personal world philosophy is irreparably dented by the experience.”39 When coethnics have perpetrated violence and killings, it becomes even more difficult to trust compatriots.40 In such cases of pervasive and profound distrust and disconnection, meeting others with similar experiences can provide a lifeline.

Opening up about one’s past may be off-limits. Suzanne explains, “It takes longer to trust others than before. You just don’t tell people about your life.” Nor did she share details with her new friends about the benefits her legal status carries: “I don’t talk to them about how the [social service] agency has helped me.” Guarded, Suzanne has decided with whom and in what settings she will open up. Moving in and out of multiple social spaces, she meets many people through her job, her children’s schools, and her advocacy work in the trafficking community. She is outgoing and charismatic, and people gravitate to her. While Suzanne can choose whom to let in to her life, most formerly trafficked individuals meet fewer people. One trafficking
client takes risks and opens herself to new relationships, but with extreme caution. She is dating a man but will not let him know where she lives. On their first date, she had a friend with her to greet him and to write down his car’s license plate. After months of dating, they still meet in locations where there are security cameras and a lot of other people. This relationship unfolds on her terms. “Who else is going to take care of me?” she asks. “No one—just me.”

Nuts and Bolts Resettlement Issues

A social worker in New York expressed discomfort with the advocacy necessary to get more resources for her trafficking clients: “Do my trafficking clients need more assistance so that they can stabilize? Yes. Should we ask for more for these clients? Yes. But all my clients need more resources. This is the idea behind the social safety net.” An attorney in Washington, D.C., who has been on the front lines of advocacy for greater social and legal benefits for individuals trafficked into forced labor acknowledges that many U.S. residents are struggling in poverty. As a result, the social service community needs “to spell out why trafficked persons are a population that needs substantial assistance for a long period of time.” She, like every other attorney and social worker working with trafficked persons, emphasized that these clients have few or no social ties in the United States, no place to go, and often do not have a single possession with them other than the clothes they are wearing. “Trafficked persons are victims of crime who have nothing. They are a fragile population who, since they are not U.S. citizens, would not qualify for social assistance without a trafficking designation.” While U.S. citizens living in the same shelters as trafficked persons are in a desperate situation, “they may have some family somewhere.” “They can apply for food assistance. They may speak English. But trafficked persons have no one to turn to. They do not trust a soul. Some are highly traumatized. At the same time they have no resources to take care of themselves.” Distinguishing trafficked persons from other migrants, she points out: “Trafficked persons are not going to the church, market, or community center so they don’t run into anyone associated with their abuser. Think about it, they may not even be able to eat their own food if they feel they can’t go to the markets. And, on top of facing poverty, trafficked persons also may be waking up with nightmares every night.”
The First Night

Immediately following their exit from their abusive situation, trafficked individuals have no place to stay for the night. They have little choice but to follow the advice and arrangements of law enforcement agents and the attorneys and social service providers whom law enforcement officers contact. At this point they may not know what trafficking is, that their abusers have committed a crime, or that they may qualify for social services as well as for immigration relief. Even if a plan had been in place ahead of time, decisions happen quickly. When law enforcement or a social service organization is not involved, and individuals leave on their own, they have to figure out where they are going to stay and how they are going to get there. In the previous chapter, I recounted how Flo had duped her abuser at the airport and took an airport shuttle to her sister’s friend’s house, as well as how Liza had spent the night on the couch in the lobby of an apartment building within walking distance of the apartment in which she had been abused. These on-the-fly plans can intensify an already frightening and profoundly uncertain moment. If a social service organization is involved, its staff may make housing arrangements, but their choices are often few and ill-fitting for this particular population with its particular needs. With only one shelter in the United States, in California, that provides housing exclusively for trafficked persons (women only), there is a chronic shortage of housing for individuals exiting forced labor. This housing shortage for this population unfolds within a larger landscape of poverty, deprivation, and struggle that the New York–based social worker points to: “It’s not just about trafficked persons and housing. This is about a housing crisis and shelter crisis for many!”

Since trafficked individuals leave forced labor in large cities and small towns all over the United States, the local organization assisting them may not have emergency housing plans in place, let alone plans for clients who may need housing assistance for months or longer. With waiting lists throughout the country for a handful of temporary apartments owned or rented by social service organizations, assistance-givers often have to improvise and collaborate with other organizations. Social workers’ and other first responders’ breadth of experience, contacts, and goodwill all come into play as they try to locate housing.

In some instances, social service organizations use hotels, but for the
most part they turn to shelters, both domestic violence and homeless shelters. A case manager in New York also reports that there have been instances when convents, seminaries, and private housing have been available for short-term stays. With no other housing options, shelters have become more than a stopgap in emergency situations; rather trafficking clients end up staying in shelters much longer than they or their assistance-givers had intended. Suzanne, from Indonesia, lived in a domestic violence shelter for about fourteen months. Trafficking clients like her stay in shelters longer than expected in part because they have no family or close ties to anyone or any place in the United States. Yet, staying on the couch or floor of relatives or friends from one’s hometown is a common housing solution for new immigrants. Refugees too benefit from previously established social networks. The logistics of their resettlement usually are worked out through voluntary agencies long before they even travel to the United States. Once in the United States, refugees can tap into a network of coethnics where they are settling, or if they are among the first from their country to move to a particular town or city, their resettlement agencies can put them in contact with compatriots in other locales. These are highly bureaucratized processes that have been hammered out over time, not pieced together with little time to prepare, as they often are with trafficking clients.

Housing: Homeless Shelters and Domestic Violence Shelters

Social workers around the country insist that homeless shelters can be a particularly bad fit for trafficking clients. Staff at a domestic violence shelter in Orange County, California, who have assisted trafficking clients (both men and women) expressed concern about the safety of trafficking clients in homeless shelters: “We knew one woman who had to be at the Salvation Army shelter by seven every night, and out by eight. How can this be a safe and secure arrangement? She had no place to go during the day.” Their residents also have complained about the lack of privacy in homeless shelters: “Homeless shelters generally do not have private rooms, so clients say, ‘I didn’t feel safe that everyone was always looking at me.’” “If they don’t feel safe,” the staff worried, “how are they going to work with you to move forward?”

Nor can homeless shelters provide the one-on-one case management that trafficking clients often need. “Our trafficking clients have at least one question every day,” explains the domestic violence shelter staff. One of their trafficking clients had been living in a homeless shelter when he
needed assistance with his legal case. But since the staff at the homeless shelter was not trained on issues related to trafficking cases, he missed a series of deadlines and opportunities. Without trained staff available around the clock, “some clients actually feel that their trafficker was more available for them than the staff at homeless shelters.” Alone in the United States and living on the streets, one client told the domestic violence shelter staff in Orange County that he would have killed himself if he had not found out about their shelter.

Nor do the rules that are appropriate for domestic violence clients work well for trafficking clients. Staff at domestic violence shelters throughout the country have learned through trial and error that the guidelines for their domestic violence clients can backfire with trafficking clients. A staff member of the Orange County shelter explains, “If we applied the same rules, our trafficking clients would have to leave the shelter before they are ready.” Instead staff improvise with their trafficking clients: “There are rules and protocols, but we also need to look at the client and possibly look beyond the rules. We want these clients to get on their feet. We want them to have saved money, and to have housing lined up. We don’t want them in the streets.” Thus the shelter operates according to clients’ needs, not according to a one-size-fits all timetable that is largely dictated by state and federal funding guidelines for domestic violence shelters. “We had one trafficking client here for two years, long after our other clients.” Of course this timetable-blind approach is costly and requires unrestricted funding sources. “[The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops] gives us very little money. We make it stretch.”

They get around these government restrictions by holding fundraisers. They also rely on volunteers from the community who donate money as well as clothes and household items specifically designated for their trafficking clients. Outraged that some of their clients “had earned tens of thousands of dollars for their traffickers,” the Orange County shelter staff fumed, “There should be a way to take money from busts and put it into clients’ care.”

One-on-one case management is not only costly but is also time-intensive. Like their counterparts at social service organizations, shelter staff working with trafficking clients around the country report a tremendous learning curve. The director of the Orange County shelter needed two hands to hold up a weighty three-ring binder bursting with papers outlining guidelines for assisting trafficked persons. She explained, “Everyone said it wouldn’t work, that this population is too different from our domestic violence clients. But
we have been assisting them for years now—we never turn down a client. But it’s not easy. The regulations for our trafficking clients are always changing.” For the shelter staff, whether or not their clients have an experienced attorney matters. The shelter works closely with an organization that specializes in trafficking, and their attorney “files everything for us—from soup to nuts.” But with other clients who have attorneys with little or no experience with trafficking, the staff “had to take the lead and learn what needs to be done and when.” This kind of dedication to shelter residents, from fundraising to getting up to speed on their legal cases, underscores the pivotal role particular experts may play in the trafficking care regime. This model is not easily replicable around the country, especially for shelters with smaller staffs.

Without access to organizations that have enough staff and sources of unrestricted funding to do whatever it takes to get clients stable, trafficking clients’ legal, health, and other needs may go unidentified and unaddressed. This story of slipping through the cracks of the trafficking care regime, however, is not reported by the media. But saving money for a rental deposit or to purchase a mattress, kitchen pots and pans, or bus fare is the main story line in these first weeks and months of formerly trafficked persons’ exit from forced labor. It is the difference between living indefinitely in shelters and living on one’s own. While they work through these mundane challenges, formerly trafficked persons begin to make the United States their home.

Relationships with Social Workers

Social workers and case managers are among the first individuals in whom formerly trafficked persons put their trust. These social service providers not only facilitate access to a range of services, but they also become confidants and cheerleaders. Vigilant against their clients becoming overly dependent, staff at social service organizations and shelters walk a tightrope as they set professional boundaries. Ultimately their role is to help their clients make decisions on their own, pointing them to the resources necessary to do so. They try, as a social worker in Washington, D.C., explains, to provide services “but not meddle.” A California-based social worker echoes this goal: “Clients need to make their own decisions. There are limits on what we can do. Some refuse, for example, to address mental health issues, which can lead them to hop from job to job. If they don’t address the cause of destabilization, we’ll sit down and try to work out another plan. This is a
big moral, philosophical, and professional issue. They have to make things happen for themselves. We can’t do that.” “Ultimately we are working up to not being that first call when they have a stomach ache,” explains a social worker in New York. “Eventually they should be calling a neighbor or friends.”

Getting to this point in a trusting relationship with trafficking clients takes time. “We are strangers, and they do not know who to trust,” explains a staff member at the shelter in Orange County. “We have to gain their trust. It’s about proving ourselves.” One trafficking client who had a bad experience at another shelter was particularly wary, as the director explained: “She wanted to know how we were different. We don’t expect people to trust us immediately. We know it will take time. We emphasize letting them take part in this process — making a phone call, speaking a bit of English. In this way they do things for themselves.” Their assistance begins by handing over the reins of their clients’ cases to the clients themselves. At the same time they try to always be there, just as the clients’ abusers were. Caught in the confusing logic of various bureaucracies, trafficking clients — like any vulnerable client — can get lost in and pushed around by institutional exigencies. While the shelter staff has their clients make their own phone calls, for example, they suggest using a speakerphone together so that they can chime in on their clients’ calls if necessary. They also accompany their clients to face-to-face appointments. The director explains, “Our domestic violence clients know the system and they will speak up.” U.S. citizen domestic violence clients also may have jobs, family and friends, a faith community, and other sources of information and support. But with trafficking clients they start in an information vacuum. It does not help that “the process is confusing, and takes longer (than with domestic violence clients) because often the agencies don’t know how to fill out the forms. And different agencies will ask them, ‘Are you legal? Do you have children? No, okay, you don’t qualify for anything.’ They then shrink and stay quiet.” The staff’s own credibility is on the line: “If we don’t go with them, it can compromise their trust in us. They will come back to us and say, ‘Why did you send me there? They didn’t help me.’”

As much as they try to stay in the background of their trafficking clients’ lives, social workers and case managers find that their clients may place them in prominent roles. Some clients insist that their only “real” friend is their social worker and that they cannot talk about their experiences in forced labor with anyone else. It is easy to understand how some organiza-
tions and individuals on staff become a lifeline for their clients. Suzanne describes crying at a graduation ceremony that marked the formal closing of her case management: “I was crying both because I was sad and also out of happiness and thankfulness. It was a bittersweet day. They have helped with a lot of things. Not just about trafficking, but with everything.” Similarly Maria, from the Philippines, has told me on many occasions how much her case manager and attorney have done for her. She is in awe of their kindness, skill, and loyalty. After she received her green card, she said, “I can’t thank them enough. They have done so, so much for me. For nothing.”

Trafficking clients’ gratitude can sometimes get in the way of their fully disclosing their needs or concerns. As one trafficking client in California explains, “I did not want to tell my social worker that I was having a hard time in the shelter. She was already doing so much for me. I did not want to complain.” A social worker in Chicago worries: “These clients are not complainers.” Once they start working, her trafficking clients often “are so grateful for opportunities that they won’t tell us about any bad conditions at work. So we have to be very aware of their needs, because they won’t present them to us. For example, if they have an accident at work, they will not tell us.” Not only do most formerly trafficked persons regularly talk about how thankful they are for their assistance-givers, but they also often describe feeling lucky. “I’m just so lucky,” explains Esperanza in Los Angeles. “I’ve been helped so much.” In the midst of setback after setback, Maria finds strength in being grateful and emphasizing how lucky she is. “I’m luckier than others. I have my son and my friends at Philippine Connections.”

But thankfulness not only empowers but also can indebt. Assistance-givers may make arrangements on which their clients have no intention of acting. Enrolling clients in English-language, computer, or other skill-building courses may place the clients in an uncomfortable position. Not wanting to disappoint their assistance-givers, clients may not know how to turn down these opportunities. A social worker in New York City learned, for example, that one of her clients had not been attending a course only when the program director phoned her. Perhaps knowing that her social worker had lobbied the director to take her name off the waiting list and that the social service organization had paid the course fees, the client did not know how to tell the social worker herself. Clients’ gratefulness and worries about losing their assistance-givers’ respect, consequently, can constrain them from speaking up. Anticipating what clients need takes skill and experience. Seasoned social workers and case managers have a kind of sixth
sense with their trafficking clients and have learned to ask questions about issues their clients may not have brought to their attention. When clients still do not make clear their worries, needs, or plans to their social workers or attorneys, being around other trafficking clients and shelter residents can open channels of advice and support.

Opening Up while Maintaining Privacy

“In shelters, the clients, no matter their past, naturally bond,” explains a social worker in New York. Shelter life for trafficked persons “can help create a sense of community where clients learn that ‘I am not the only one.’ You find community and sisterhood and become a resource for one another.” But there can be a fine line between not feeling alone and feeling overly scrutinized. Social workers and shelter staff worry about their trafficked clients revealing too much, too fast—which clients later regret. As the social worker in New York City explains, “It can feel funny if someone knows too much. The same is true with domestic violence survivors. If you form friendships too fast, and someone knows a lot of horrific things about you, [you] may regret it later. Privacy is power.” And for trafficking clients who had experienced sexual abuse “there can be such shame that it is very hard for them to tell anyone.”

Consequently bringing clients together in a support group setting is a potential minefield. The social worker in New York cautions, “Clients must be ready for it; they must be able to tolerate other viewpoints and disagree with others and have a sense of boundaries. Otherwise group sessions could make things worse, and the participants could retraumatize one another.” Suzanne, the woman from Indonesia who had lived in a domestic violence shelter for over a year, participated in a support group at the shelter: “We talked about our experiences.” She found, “It helps a lot to talk, especially since some people want to keep it inside. But it’s good to let it out. This way people are not wondering, ‘Why is she acting like this?’” Suzanne saw commonalities between herself and the domestic violence clients: “Most of the women there had experiences like me. You know, they had been abused by their husbands. It is kind of similar.”

Staff at a shelter in Los Angeles that has a range of clients echo Suzanne’s positive experience with a support group: “Whether living homeless with kids, or living through trafficking, everyone here has horrors behind them.” A staff member at the domestic violence shelter in Orange County notes particular benefits of these larger support groups: “Our trafficking clients
prefer the larger empowerment groups, so that they are not singled out as trafficking clients.” They also doubt the value of a trafficking-only group: “Even if we had a trafficking support group, these are cases that are all so different that it would be hard. And some clients are here with a family member—and they don’t want them to know. There also is the problem of sharing with other clients who could become witnesses and subpoenaed. It’s a problem because we have their trust, and they want to tell us everything. But we are here as advocates, not to determine if they were trafficked. You have to know the boundaries.”

*Home Is Where the Space Is*

Having a place to meet for social gatherings can make a significant impact in formerly trafficked persons’ lives. Community organizations are more likely than social service agencies to have space where its members can meet for formal meetings, workshops, or social events that they themselves organize. Social service agencies generally do not have spaces or ongoing formal or informal events to bring clients together. Since they are not membership-based, these organizations tend to be hierarchical and funding-driven. In other words, social service organizations’ staff, not their clients, design programs and organize events. If staff do not seek funds for and implement programs that bring together clients—for example, skill-building workshops, empowerment support groups, or a speaker’s bureau—they will not happen. Clients otherwise have no way of meeting one another and possibly organizing an event together. One social service organization in New York City set aside some unrestricted funding to hold yoga and relaxation sessions and empowerment groups for their Spanish-speaking trafficking clients. But the timing was difficult—both for the clients, many of whom worked evenings and weekends, as well as the staff, who were donating their free time to hold these extra activities.

The design of the one shelter in the country that is dedicated to trafficked persons is perfect for hosting small intimate activities as well as larger events. Its kitchen, living room, and patio are well used as the staff, current and past residents, and current and former clients—some of whom never resided there—organize all kinds of events. Its presence in these clients’ lives cannot be overstated. One of Suzanne’s friends moved quite a distance away, but Suzanne could count on seeing her at the big parties held by the shelter: “If they have a Mother’s Day party or a Christmas party, I know I’ll get to see her.” Holiday parties and other special celebrations not only are
opportunities to catch up with old friends, but are events at which clients can feel understood and at home. They can let their guard down. Esperanza met her closest friends at the shelter in Los Angeles: “I’ve made friends in different ways. I have friends at school, and I have friends in my neighborhood. Different kinds of friends.” But it is with friends that she made through the trafficking shelter that she feels particularly understood: “We feel very close even when we just talk by phone. We are confidants. We know each others’ secrets and worries, everything.” In contrast, she is careful with friends she meets outside of the trafficking community. “I really care about confidentiality, so I tell them some things but not a lot about my past situation.” At the shelter, where she makes a point to not miss out on any potlucks and other events, she feels at home, trusted and trusting. “I feel like I can trust the women there because in some way we all identify ourselves in the same way, so I feel comfortable with them.”

Elsewhere in the country, I have heard over and over again from trafficking clients that they met their closest friend in a shelter. Many of the former clients at the domestic violence shelter in Orange County, for example, have moved into apartments near the shelter, fostering a tight-knit community. There also are a number of cases of formerly trafficked persons now living together as roommates, such as two women who met in a shelter in Los Angeles who are from the same country. Older, and with limited English skills, they look out for one another and even traveled to their home country together soon after they received their green cards.

Language

Shelter clients come from different countries and speak different languages, so they often have no choice but to speak English with one another. Esperanza, a native Spanish speaker who now lives in a Spanish-speaking neighborhood, looks back on her time in a domestic violence shelter as prompting her to learn English: “Most of the people in the shelter spoke English. I was the only person who spoke Spanish, so it was difficult for me at the time.” In fact some of the other residents took advantage of her limited English and bullied her to clean up the kitchen. Esperanza explains that this dynamic pushed her to study English: “I learned English because I wanted to speak up for myself. This was my main motivation.” As part of her activism on antitrafficking issues, Esperanza now encourages other formerly trafficked persons to make learning English a priority: “The huge, huge barrier
to everything is English. Without it, I don’t know where I would be. English was the number one thing that I had to learn because everywhere you go, you need it. If you go for an appointment, you have to speak English. If you ask someone a question, they answer in English. You have to know it.” She dedicated herself to continue studying English, even though Spanish was spoken all around her in her neighborhood. “When I left the shelter it was hard to be in a new country and learn the language. It was a challenge because I could say, ‘Oh, I don’t need to learn language because I am living in a neighborhood where everybody speaks Spanish.’”

Getting together at events sponsored by social service or community-based organizations also often entails speaking in English. And some formerly trafficked persons use English on Facebook with one another and with one another’s teenage and young adult children. While hanging out at a McDonald’s in downtown Los Angeles where their children could run around in an indoor playground, a group of friends who met at the trafficking shelter laughed as they told me—in English—that their older children have “friended” one another on Facebook. “We can tell anything to one another. We understand one another,” they said. They rely on one another, communicating daily through texts, email, Facebook, telephone calls, and outings like this one—all in their shared language, English.

Living on One’s Own

A constant challenge for service providers and shelter staff is how to arrange their trafficking clients’ long-term housing while meeting their immediate need for shelter. A social worker in New York is upfront about how long it takes to “stabilize” sufficiently to earn enough money to cover one’s rent without assistance: “Realistically no organization can continue to pay rent for years until someone has stabilized.” She is frustrated that her organization does not offer enough assistance to their clients. As a result, she believes, her trafficking clients leave her office’s programs only steps away from the economically vulnerable position that they were in when they first sought assistance after forced labor.

Establishing economic stability takes time—for any low-income client, not just trafficked persons. Thus the domestic violence shelter in Orange County prepares all its clients for life after the shelter. They require all residents to save 30 percent of their benefits and/or paychecks so that they have money available for security deposits for their housing after they leave the
shelter. The residents are able to put money into this rent fund because the shelter provides a variety of on-site services, including a preschool offered free of charge so that parents can go to work or attend school, support groups, and appointments related to their legal cases. The staff also encourages them to enroll in free English-language classes, held within walking distance from the shelter, while they are waiting for a work permit or looking for a job. They explain, “Learning English is critical. It also helps them feel busy. We don’t want them just staying in their rooms watching television. Going to classes gets them out every day.” Before they live on their own, the shelter transitions these clients to a second-step program in which they move out of the shelter and into a rent-subsidized apartment complex. The complex has a courtyard in the center, with picnic benches and a barbecue. There is also a small, enclosed playground for children. In this space that facilitates community but also provides privacy, clients can choose how much time to spend on their own or with others. Impromptu barbecues and play-dates at the playground offer opportunities for the women to socialize as much or as little as they want.

Romantic Partners, Friends, and Housing
Subsidized long-term housing options such as this second-step program are rare. Once trafficking clients leave shelters or other temporary housing arrangements, finding safe, affordable housing is a monumental challenge. Some women elect to work as live-in child care providers or housekeepers. Living-in allows them to save money toward their own apartment. Others move in with friends they meet at a shelter or at work. Carmen has had many different types of shared living arrangements since I met her in 2004. When she exited forced domestic labor, she lived in a domestic violence shelter outside of New York City. Then she moved in with a friend she made there. When her friend remarried, Carmen moved to an apartment with another friend, whom she had met through her housekeeping job in a hotel. In both situations she only had to furnish her own bedroom, since her roommates had furniture for the living room as well as items for the kitchen. She then moved in with her boyfriend (whom she also had met at work). Like many in New York City, where housing is expensive and leases difficult to break, she remained living with her boyfriend even after their relationship ended. She eventually moved out and lived on her own, which she found lonely and expensive. She now lives with a few friends she met through work.
In many U.S. cities, the rents are so high that it is not financially feasible to live on one’s own. Consequently romantic partners have figured prominently in many formerly trafficked persons’ housing arrangements. Francisco relied on his older girlfriend to pay the bulk of the rent in the New York area. While he worked intermittently in construction, she had a steady job. Living on one’s own requires a security deposit plus first and last month’s rent, as well as cash to set up even the barest of households. Suzanne could not afford to move straight from the shelter to her own apartment; instead she moved in with her boyfriend (who eventually became her husband). They paid $650 for a one-bedroom rent-controlled apartment in Los Angeles. (Most apartments in her neighborhood cost $900 to $1,000 a month.) Yet she worried about how safe their neighborhood was for children. With no outdoor space for kids to play nearby, her toddler’s only play space was in the building’s large lobby.

Sharing household expenses also allows formerly trafficked persons to take time out of the labor market to go to school. It is not only romantic partners with whom they may share expenses. Although most do not have family members in the United States—a factor that may have shaped their vulnerability to their abusers in the first place—those with family in the U.S. experience less social isolation and fewer financial pressures. Eva and her son moved in with her brother in New York City. Her brother not only paid their rent but also took care of his nephew while Eva worked the night shift bartending. With this significant savings, Eva was able to pay tuition for English-language classes, preparation courses for her GED, and eventually a nursing assistance program. Flo saved money for tuition for GED classes, driving classes, and a nursing assistance program by living rent-free with the family she met through her church (they also helped pay for her various classes). During the time that she lived with her friends she also was able to save enough money to eventually live in her own apartment, without a roommate. This head start paid off considerably in the long run, when, years later, Flo’s husband moved to the United States and Flo had to support them both until he could find work in construction.

Not only do soaring rents and gentrification make living on one’s own impossible for many working low-wage jobs, but anti-immigrant politics also prevent formerly trafficked persons from moving to more affordable towns. For example, Prince William County, Virginia, has a 287(g) agreement, making it difficult for social workers to suggest living there, even though rents are cheaper there than in nearby Washington, D.C. “When we
say, ‘Why don’t you go to Virginia?’,” explains a D.C.-based social worker, “our clients are afraid. They have heard about the new policies. They know that the police ask for ID. Even though they have green cards, it is a scary situation they want to avoid.” Having a severely limited housing budget also pushes formerly trafficked persons into arrangements they otherwise would not have chosen. Gladys, whose eagerness to “eat New York” opens this chapter, faced rental prices she could not afford when she first relocated to New York City after exiting a situation of forced labor in the Midwest. She knew no one in New York except for an old boyfriend. She moved in with him but soon found herself the object of his wife’s wrath when she unwittingly answered the phone when the wife called from Mexico. To avoid further drama, Gladys scrambled to find other living arrangements.

Tatiana had a different set of concerns: she was sheepish about telling people where she lived after restaurant coworkers questioned how she could live in an enviable neighborhood on their meager paychecks. “They talked about how I could afford to live there because they know I don’t make much money.” A former client from the club in the Midwest where she had danced helps pay her rent. He visits her from time to time in Washington, D.C., and drops by the restaurant. She did not tell her colleagues that he helps pay the bills and is rattled by their eager interest in her personal life. “One time it was really hurtful. They asked, ‘Are you a prostitute?’” She cried as she continued, “Maybe they were joking, but you know, I took it seriously. It took a little bite out of me.” She decided to protect herself by staying silent: “It’s better to be quiet and not say anything so that they don’t hurt me.” Her decision to not socialize with her work colleagues (who are not coethnics) illustrates how formerly trafficked persons often choose to keep themselves and their business private and apart. Relationships thrive on openness and honesty, and yet dissimulation and evasion often help individuals survive persecution, violence, and genocide.47 Hurtful encounters like Tatiana’s can result in even greater isolation and loneliness. She feels watched: “Other people are watching this, and I don’t know what they think.” She started to cry. “It’s just like bombs. [They] go off. You are trying to do something positive and [they] go off.”

**Being around Others**

Feeling watched is a common paranoia among formerly trafficked persons. They describe feeling that “Everyone is looking at me.” Some express a desire to retreat from the world.48 Being around others, particularly in
crowds, can be difficult. At the other extreme, some search for public spaces so that they are not alone. Before they have permission to work, trafficking clients usually have a lot of free time on their hands. Those living in the suburbs tell of going to the mall, while those in cities describe riding public transportation with no destination in mind. When Tatiana first arrived in Washington, D.C., for example, an FBI agent had told her that admission to the museums was free, and she went to the Smithsonian every day. “The agent thought I would like all the history there. They have everything! I was not working and I just moved here and I did not know what to do. I would walk around and meet people when they would help me out, you know, getting directions.” Heading out to the museums those first days when she had nowhere else to go gave a rhythm to her otherwise unplanned days. She spent all day there. “It helped me relax. I never had enough time; you just start to think and then it’s five o’clock, everything closes, and you have to come back the next day.”

Flo too was not used to having free time. “The first days after I had left I was feeling scared. Even once I could go out, I did not want to.” It was hard for her to forget her abuser’s lies. “She had told me over and over how people in the United States do not like people from my country and how they could do all kinds of terrible things to you. I was scared at first, even to say hello to people.” When her friend from church with whom she was living wanted to take her shopping, Flo balked. “She said, ‘Let’s go to Walmart.’ I did not want to go. I was too shaky. And when I went, I saw somebody that looked just like my employer and I thought she was looking at me. She [the friend] laughed. She tried to calm me down. She said, ‘Flo, you know that wasn’t a normal time.’ It wasn’t. I wasn’t normal.”

Since her abuser was a diplomat and did not go to jail, Flo also avoided going to places her abuser had frequented. She was unprepared, however, when she actually ran into a friend of her abuser in a store. “She [the abuser’s friend] must have told my employer that I was still in the United States. She [the abuser] sent me an email and told me that I might think I’m clever for not leaving, but that I really was stupid.” The abuser also called the pastor of Flo’s church and complained, “That lady is illegal. She needs to leave because if anything happens to her, I am the one that is going to be in trouble.” Once the abuser figured out Flo had been living with a family from the church, she also telephoned them. “She called my friend. She [the abuser] tried to be nice on the phone. She tried to get information. She said to my friend, ‘Oh, Flo is a good lady; she looked after my children nicely.’
But my friend never revealed that she knew where I was. She told her, ‘I don’t know where she is.’ But I was standing right there!” As her abuser called all over town for her, Flo was on edge. “She tried and tried to find me. By then I had been working with a lawyer and my case was moving fast.” After Flo began conversations with social workers and an attorney, she found some peace of mind. Up to then, in legal limbo, she had been losing a lot of weight. After her legal case was under way, she was able to eat again. Flo says of this legal and emotional turning point, “I was relieved, finally.”

Time and Freedom to Explore

Formerly trafficked persons may not know much about the towns or cities in which they had been living when they were in forced labor. Only after their exit do they have the opportunity to move about in their new country. Suzanne, who was from a rural village in Indonesia, spoke about how overwhelming it was to get accustomed to living in Los Angeles. “The first time I was traveling by myself it was difficult. I was trying to go to Hollywood and I got lost. I took the train back and forth three times. I did not know which train to take. Finally, the conductor asked me where I was going. He saw me ride the train for so long and never get off!” There were many firsts for Suzanne. “Everything is hard the first time you have to do it. I had not really had any experience being on my own. And I did not have experience working other than housekeeping or babysitting. And if you don’t speak English, it’s hard to get around.” Tatiana tells a similar story of getting lost when she was on her own for the first time in a new city: “Somebody told me which train to take. And I got a map in one of those stores that sells souvenirs. But I still got lost.”

Driving affords a considerable amount of independence and cuts down on commuting time. Tired of waiting for the bus at late hours after work, Tatiana was taking driving lessons when I met her. Flo’s plans to become a nursing assistant hinged on her getting her driver’s license. With little time to spare between school during the day, studying in the afternoon, and working the night shift at a nursing home, having control over her transportation relieved a great deal of stress. She could even squeeze in a quick nap. Moreover it was safer. Once she got her license, she no longer had to ride the bus late at night to her shift at a nursing home. Although she had liked taking trains and buses around town and felt that it had helped her learn her way around Washington, D.C., she could not have juggled work,
school, and studying without a car. Taking driving classes and passing the test to obtain a license also provides a kind of gateway school experience. The driving test is often the first formal test formerly trafficked persons take in the United States. But enrolling in driving school and buying a car and insurance require savings—money that Jamie, from Malaysia, lamented she did not have. She had no choice but to spend a couple of hours every day taking several buses to get from her home in Virginia to her job as a child care provider in Maryland.

While most formerly trafficked persons had not traveled within the United States until they exited their situation of forced labor, Sofia had learned how to traverse the country by bus, visiting over a dozen states to work short stints in brothels both before and after forced sexual labor. Self-reliant and daring, she explains, “I had the courage. Not everyone is willing to travel far.” She quickly learned to protect herself: “When I first came to this country, I was in Nebraska for Christmas. A client tried to take advantage of me. He was drunk and insulting. I said I have to handle this situation well. I knew I would have to find a way other than yelling and hitting. Girls end up dead or beaten up. So you have to learn many ways to survive.” She also outsmarted law enforcement in Cleveland when they boarded the bus and inspected luggage. “I had a lot of condoms, so I went to the bathroom and put them in a cereal box.” “I learned how to take care of myself,” she proudly asserted, “so I’m not scared of anything.”

Conclusion

Sofia now lives with a boyfriend. She had to move in with him when she left behind the steady money she was earning in sex work. It was not an easy decision for her to leave the sex sector, as she explains: “It takes a lot of strength to not return to it. You get used to the money. And life is very expensive here.” Since making this move, she has been exploring New York City for the first time, with her boyfriend, a welcome break from always working: “I never took the time before to see New York. I only thought of work.” They have walked over the Brooklyn Bridge, visited Central Park and the Empire State Building, and gone to movies. She lights up when she speaks of her boyfriend. “[He] is so different than my husband!” (We learned in the previous chapter that Sofia’s “husband” had beaten her regularly and forced her into the sex trade, first in Mexico and then in the United States). Her new boyfriend is a former client: “He was unlike other clients. He was
always polite. He is a good person, a good man. He doesn’t yell. If he gets angry he goes into the street and then cools off. And when I yell, he says, ‘Are you done yet?’ I was afraid to get into a relationship again. But he has a very calm way about him. And he accepts me for me.” She also has opened herself up to friendships with women she has met from around the world in her English class. “They are from India, Bangladesh, Ecuador, Colombia, Sri Lanka. We all went to a Mets game together. I told them I didn’t have the money, and they said, ‘You’ve got to go with us.’” They chipped in and bought her a ticket.

Enjoying a new city and marveling at its sights comes with time; so does entering new romantic relationships and friendships. Over time, formerly trafficked persons become less scared and jumpy and more trusting. They begin to feel at home. But as much as Sofia describes feeling supported by her new boyfriend and new friends, she desperately misses her children: “I wanted to live differently than in the past. And I am. But I want to be a mother to my children; they’ve never been with me.” Without her children with her in the United States, Sofia has a hard time putting her experiences in forced labor completely in the past. Living with grief and such devastating loss is a constant: “I try [to move forward]. But because I am not with my children, of course the past is in some ways in my present.”