A Crime So Monstrous

A Shocking Exposé of Modern-Day Sex Slavery, Human Trafficking and Urban Child Markets

E. Benjamin Skinner

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To my mother, who is my conscience, and
To my father, who is my sense of humour

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E. Benjamin Skinner

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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There is but one coward on earth, and that is the coward that dare not know.

– W.E.B. Du Bois

Foreword

Many of us labour under the comforting myth that slavery is a thing of the past. In *A Crime So Monstrous*, Benjamin Skinner adds his voice to that of a widening movement that battles to prevent the world from being hoodwinked by that lie.

The International Labour Organization estimates that there is a *minimum* of 12.3 million slaves in the world today. These include women and children trafficked across the world for forced labour and sexual exploitation, as well as children forced into domestic servitude and bonded labourers enslaved in the brick kilns and quarries of South Asia. As this book shows, for each of these people slavery represents a brutal devastation of lives and hopes.

The abolition of slavery remains an unfulfilled promise. Historically, abolitionists have believed that there were certain ‘magic bullets’ available to them that would fatally wound the institution. In Britain at the end of the eighteenth century, abolitionists believed that prohibiting the Transatlantic Slave Trade would inevitably bring about an end to slavery in the British Empire. In the United States, some abolitionists believed that the confining of slavery to the Southern states would lead to the practice dying out in the United States. Although it is now clear that neither of these measures were sufficient to bring about an end to slavery, they did prepare the ground for much more effective action.

Today, slavery is everywhere illegal. Yet, as the estimated figures of those still held in bondage show, it is far from

eradicated. The human face of the problem is illuminated in this book; though, as the author acknowledges, given the extent and variety of contemporary slavery in the world it is an incomplete portrait. Nevertheless, he provides important insights. In his encounters with slavers, he demonstrates chillingly the banality of their evil – those who inflict such brutality on other human beings are recognisably human themselves. And in his encounters with some slavery abolitionists, he shows that the dream of a simple solution, another ‘magic bullet’, endures.

History shows us, and evidence here illustrates the fact, that slavery is one of the most pernicious and adaptable of human institutions. Yet, like all human institutions it can be changed by human action. Sophisticated responses are required to the complex of problems, many described here, that generate and sustain slavery.

In this regard also, the book is only a partial portrait of anti-slavery. The majority of those who struggle against slavery in the world today are not American government officials and evangelicals but slaves and former slaves, African and Asian civil societies and non-governmental organisations, trade unionists and some conscientious business people of all nationalities, and a diverse group of civil servants and politicians across the political spectrum.

Some governments, such as the British, have made a laudable effort to move the issue up their domestic and international agendas. In 2007, the British government signed the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings, played an instrumental role in the creation of the post of UN Special Rapporteur on Slavery and hosted a conference exploring how contemporary anti-slavery work can be mainstreamed into international development and the efforts to achieve the millennium development goals.

However, there remains an underlying cause of slavery that many governments in industrialised countries, including

Britain, have failed to adequately address. This is the insufficiency of safe migration options. This can lead to trafficking – the movement of people by force or deception for the purposes of exploitation such as forced labour or sexual exploitation. This is the most common form of slavery in Europe, and those most affected are migrant workers, including people who have travelled perfectly legally to other countries in search of work. Finding themselves socially isolated in their countries of destination, they have few places to turn to for help and have often incurred debts on their travels which are used to bond them. They are forced to pay these off often at exorbitant interest rates, using only their frequently undervalued labour. This is something that the author describes here in frightening detail.

Skinner notes how traffickers confiscate the passports of their victims in order to increase their control over them. In research carried out by Anti-Slavery International in 2006 on forced labour in Europe, a Czech anti-trafficking professional argued that, 'Undocumented status is the whip that traffickers/employers use to exercise control over migrant workers.'[1] Traffickers achieve undocumented status for their victims by stealing their passports. However, tying work permits for migrants to jobs, as occurs in the UK in 2008, means that governments implicitly legalise a potentially powerful means for unscrupulous employers to, at a minimum, exploit and, at a maximum, force labour. Consider: if non-unionised legal migrant workers raise concerns over pay or conditions they could face not only the threat of the sack but implicit in that the threat of deportation. Paradoxically, for many trafficked people the threat of deportation is more frightening than the prospect of labouring on in appalling conditions in the forlorn hope of a better future eventually arising.

In bringing the issue further into the light Benjamin Skinner renders the struggle against contemporary slavery

a great service with this book. But the tragedy, horror and complexity that he describes should not obscure the fact that the elements of a comprehensive response to slavery are already clear in outline.

Anti-Slavery International argues that there are four strands of human action that are required to eradicate contemporary slavery. The first is labour organisation: where workers are organised, the possibility of forced labour is exponentially reduced. Significant parts of the international trade union movement are already grappling with these issues. For example, in South Asia, elements of the labour movement are at the forefront of the struggle against slavery, and in the UK and Ireland, trade unions have been active in exposing and tackling the challenges posed by forced labour.

The second strand is business engagement: where business executives proactively seek to identify areas of risk for forced labour in their supply chain and seek to address these problems. This strand is currently nascent, but the businesses and civil society organisations involved in the Ethical Trading Initiative have been particularly important in initiating action.

The third strand is social development. Slavery tends to emerge at the conjunction of vulnerability and prejudice. For example, poor people from minority tribes and scheduled castes are enslaved in South Asia. Generally, but not exclusively, vulnerability arises as a result of material poverty. Therefore, giving priority to reducing the poverty of those who are enslaved, or most likely to be enslaved, would be a crucial advance towards slavery eradication.

Finally as alluded to above, there is a need for increased government action, particularly in investigation and prosecution of trafficking, protection for the victims of trafficking, establishment of sufficient means of safe migration for poor people in the globalising economy and,

again as shown in this book, the holding of one another to account internationally.

In 1787, Thomas Clarkson and his, mostly Quaker, colleagues set themselves the task of abolishing the slave trade, something that was, arguably, as fundamental to the economy of the Western world then as oil is today. Yet within a mere twenty years they had achieved their goal, and not only that but they had helped establish a human rights paradigm upon which all subsequent struggles for justice and anti-poverty have been built. It is unacceptable that today we do not show the same audacity of ambition in trying to end the struggle that they began. The truth that they knew still pertains: when we act together, we *can* overcome.

For more information please visit www.antislavery.org

– Aidan McQuade
Director, Anti-Slavery International

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1 Anti-Slavery International, *Trafficking for forced labour in Europe*, 2006

Foreword to the US edition

Of course, we all know what slavery is. We've read about it in countless history books, seen it in documentaries and films. Slavery is awful. Slavery is inhuman. Slavery is dead.

But that last point isn't true. In fact, slavery is very much alive on every continent. In fact, as Ben Skinner points out, there are more slaves in the world today than ever before, although they represent a smaller percentage of the world's population than in the past.

Widespread calls for abolition, of course, began in the nineteenth century. In those years, slavery was legal and open, and defended or participated in by men like Thomas Jefferson and the powerful English parliamentarian Banastre Tarleton. Today, no one can openly condone any form of slavery. But it still exists, usually ignored by most people and the media. How widespread is it? How can we stop it? These remain huge, shamefully ignored questions. Ben Skinner seeks nothing less than to change that.

But there are complications. Among activists and policymakers, even the definition of slavery is disputed. Some people maintain that every prostitute is a slave; some go so far as to assert that the only present-day slaves are prostitutes. This absurd view in effect consigns to limbo millions of men and women who are, by any standard, living in slavery but not working in the sex trade. In Uganda, for example, when the Lord's Resistance Army seizes a fourteen-year-old girl and forces her to be an unpaid porter and a concubine, that is, by any definition, slavery. In New York City, in the 1990s, one crime family forced hundreds of

deaf and mute Mexicans to peddle trinkets on the subway. At the end of each day, if the men and women did not meet their daily quotas, their traffickers beat them or shocked them with stun guns. That, too, is slavery.

Ben Skinner takes the reader into some of the world's worst hellholes. By going inside the minds of modern-day slaves and traffickers, by taking long, difficult roads to find the roots of the problem, Skinner exhumes ghosts that walk today's world.

Those who understand slavery best have seen slaves or survivors – or escaped bondage themselves. Take Tom Lantos. During the Second World War, the Nazis forced the sixteen-year-old Lantos into a slave labour unit in his native Hungary. Millions of other Jews never escaped bondage. But Lantos not only survived, he fought the Nazis and eventually made his way to America. Today he is the only former slave (and only Holocaust survivor) in the US Congress, where he chairs the powerful House Foreign Affairs Committee. Through sponsorship of anti-trafficking legislation, Lantos continues to fight for other victims of what he experienced. But Lantos is a rare exception – a man of passion and power and personal experience, who can talk freely about his past.

One must never forget that slaves are first and foremost people. Their lives are filled with sorrow and injustice – but also, as Skinner shows, they are touched with humour and joy. Just like regular people. Just like free people.

Those who profit from the misery of slaves are here, too. As the first writer who has observed the sale of human beings on four continents, Skinner lays bare the trade. In Port-au-Prince, a human trafficker offers him a ten-year-old girl for $50. In Bucharest, a pimp proposes to trade a young woman for a used car.

Despite the horrors they endure, some slaves overcome. After a daring rescue, a Haitian child slave recovers and becomes an internationally acclaimed drummer. An Eastern European sex slave finds freedom, then finds the courage to

testify against her traffickers. A young girl freed from bondage in a suburban Miami home performs the ultimate act of defiance by healing herself, getting an education and daring to dream.

The cause of abolition may sometimes seem hopeless. Slavery is a slippery and confounding evil, and persists despite twelve international conventions banning the slave trade, and over 300 international treaties banning slavery.

Still, this is a fight we must win. Global abolition must remain a priority until the last slave is freed. Because slavery is a hidden crime, the greatest challenge is to raise consciousness, to expose it in all its forms. When Americans feel it in their gut, they will understand that ending this crime so monstrous is not a political issue; it is an American imperative, and a human responsibility.

This is why there are still modern-day abolitionists. And this is why the rest of us should join them.

– Richard Holbrooke
Former US Ambassador to the United Nations

Author's Note

Imagine that, in 1785, the assigned topic for Thomas Clarkson's university essay was fox hunting rather than slavery. Imagine that, two years later, William Wilberforce, then fumbling about for a cause, had read Clarkson's essay and found it wanting. Imagine that the leaderless abolition movement in England dissipated amid Napoleon's wars. Across the Atlantic, imagine that the South had won the American Civil War and spread slavery to the Western Territories.

Imagine that, eighty years later, Japan limited its racist empire to Asia, rather than attacking Pearl Harbor. Imagine that Hitler, unchecked by the Confederate States of America, rolled across Europe. Imagine that England's finest hour was not fine enough.

Imagine, in other words, a world where the ideologies that endorsed slavery still stood.

None of these scenarios happened. And yet: there are more slaves today than at any point in human history.

In his book *Disposable People* (1999), an unassuming scholar named Kevin Bales claimed that there were then 27 million slaves – whom he defined as human beings forced to work, under threat of violence, for no pay – worldwide. His figure was staggering, even when measured against other terrible epochs. At its height under Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Gulag held 5 million slaves. The Nazis enslaved 12 million in total but culled them so rapidly that far fewer were alive at any given time.

The year 1861 was the only one when the total slave population rivalled that of today. That year, there were 3.8 million slaves in the United States – a greater number than in the rest of the world combined. In Russia at the time, though most of Europe had abolished slavery, there may have been 23 million serfs. That estimate, from a Bolshevik writer justifying the excesses of the Communist revolution, is deceptive. A serf was a subject, albeit diminished, under law and often owned property; a slave was himself mere property under law.

Human bondage is today illegal everywhere. But if we accept that one slave exists in a world that has abolished legal slavery, then, if we look closely, we soon must accept that millions of slaves exist.

Bales acknowledges that his figure is far from exact. John Miller, America's anti-slavery czar, told me, 'These victims don't stand in line, Ben, and wait for a census to count them.' Bales pleaded for criticism, hoping to be proved wrong. Subsequent regional studies have only buttressed his claim. A detailed 2005 International Labour Organisation report found 10 million forced labourers in Asia alone. Whatever the total number, it was big. And, to me, meaningless.

'The death of one man is a tragedy,' Stalin, who knew something about the subject, supposedly maintained. 'The death of a million men is a statistic.' Hence the first reason for this book. I could not prove the definite number of slaves, and I would not try. But I might show what their slavery meant.

The second reason for paying attention was because my government did. A week before the 2000 election, President Bill Clinton signed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA). For the first time, an American president assumed global abolition as a national burden. The new law called for programmes to eradicate slavery and mandated that the State Department annually rank countries based on their

efforts. Tier One was for those showing progress toward abolition. A Tier Three ranking, reserved for reprobate nations that countenanced bondage, could trigger sanctions. John Miller, whose office wrote the report, intended to ‘name and shame’ foreign governments.

‘Name and shame.’ It’s a far cry from the nineteenth-century interdictions of the Royal Navy. Over a period of seventy years, the West Africa Squadron captured some 1,400 slave ships and freed nearly 160,000 slaves. But the modern American war on slavery was nonetheless historic. Whereas President Lincoln used emancipation to win foreign government support for the Union, President George W. Bush used the nation’s strength to win foreign government support for emancipation. John Miller, his knight in the effort, began working on the issue at the same moment I did. Thus, in this book I have woven his years of discovery in with my own.

Three caveats. First, regarding language. For Bales’s statistic to mean anything, ‘slavery’ has to mean something. I adopt his definition. I met dozens of people who described themselves as slaves. Their stories were often tragic. Many were child labourers. Many faced terrible abuse. But, in this book, those who failed to meet all of Bales’s three criteria – compelled to work, through force or fraud, for no pay beyond subsistence – are not slaves.

Second, regarding scope. The book is grossly insufficient in its reach. Over five years, I visited twelve countries and recorded interviews with over a hundred slaves, slave dealers and survivors. They were not a monolithic bunch. They had lives. Herein I tell the stories of only a few. There are millions that I never reached and dozens of afflicted countries that I never investigated.

Finally, regarding facts. I changed eight names. In Europe, ‘Tatiana’ asked that I use pseudonyms for her and her fellow slaves as well as her traffickers; and I changed the names of my fixers in the Romanian and Turkish underworlds. In India,

‘Gonoo’ asked that I change his name and that of his eldest son. Slaves in pre-industrial societies like those in front-line southern Sudan rarely shared a Western sense of time, thus their personal chronologies may be imprecise. I was able to cross-check most of their stories, but not all, and I have noted inconsistencies when they occurred. I converted currencies into dollars, adjusted for inflation. I altered no other details.

The first thing that John Miller ever said to me was that slavery is the greatest human rights challenge of my generation. He was right. But in the first couple of weeks in any new country that I visited, my greatest challenge was finding a single slave. After talking to the right people, often shady characters, I went through the looking glass. Then the slaves were everywhere. I often wondered whether I might have saved those that I found in bondage. With one exception, I did not. I withheld action to save one person, in the hope that this book would later save many more. Writing that now, it still feels like an excuse for cowardice.

1

The Riches of the Poor

For our purposes, let's say that the centre of the moral universe is in Room S3800 of the UN Secretariat, Manhattan. From here, you are some five hours from being able to negotiate the sale, in broad daylight, of a healthy boy or girl. Your slave will come in any colour you like, as Henry Ford said, as long as it's black. Maximum age: fifteen. He or she can be used for anything. Sex or domestic labour are the most frequent uses, but it's up to you.

Before you go, let's be clear on what you are buying. A slave is a human being who is forced to work through fraud or threat of violence for no pay beyond subsistence. Agreed? Good. You may have thought you missed your chance to own a slave. Maybe you imagined that slavery died along with the 2,000 Royal Navy sailors who perished to fulfil the promise of the 1807 Slave Trade Act. Perhaps you assumed that there was meaning behind the dozen international conventions banning the slave trade, or that the deaths of 30 million people in world wars had spread freedom across the globe.

But you're in luck. By our mere definition, you are living at a time when there are more slaves than at any point in history. If you're going to buy one in five hours, however,

you’ve really got to stop navel-gazing over things like law and the moral advance of humanity. Get a move on.

First, hail a taxi to JFK International Airport. If you choose the Queensboro Bridge to the Brooklyn–Queens Expressway, the drive should take under an hour. With no baggage, you’ll speed through security in time to make a direct flight to Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Flying time: three hours.

The final hour is the strangest. After disembarking, you will cross the tarmac to the terminal where drummers in voodoo get-up and a dancing midget greet you with song. Based on Transportation Security Administration warnings posted in the departure terminal at JFK, you might expect abject chaos at Toussaint L'Ouverture Airport. Instead, you find orderly lines leading to the visa stamp, no bribes asked, a short wait for your bag, then a breeze through customs. Outside the airport, the cabbies and porters will be aggressive but not threatening. Assuming you speak no Creole, find an English-speaking porter and offer him $20 to translate for the day.

Ask your translator to hail the most common form of transport, a tap-tap, a flatbed pickup retrofitted with benches and a brightly coloured canopy. You will have to take a couple of these, but they only cost 10 gourdes (25 cents) each. Usually handpainted with signs in broken English or Creole, tap-taps often include the words MY GOD OR JESUS. MY GOD IT'S MY LIFE reads one; another announces WELCOME TO JESUS. Many are ornate, featuring windshields covered in frills, doodads and homages to such figures as Che Guevara, Ronaldinho or reggae legend Gregory Isaacs. The driver's navigation is based on memory, instinct. There will be no air conditioning. Earplugs are useful, as the sound system, which cost more than the rig itself, will make your chest vibrate with the beats of Haitian pop and American hip-hop. Up to twenty people may accompany you: five square inches on a wooden bench will miraculously accommodate a woman with a posterior the size of a tractor tyre. Prepare your spine.

You'll want to head up Route de Delmas towards the suburb of Pétionville, where many of the country's wealthiest thirty families – who control the nation's economy – maintain a pied-à-terre. As you drive south-east away from the sea, the smells change from rotting fish to

rotting vegetables. Exhaust fumes fill the air. You'll pass a billboard featuring a smiling girl in pigtails and the words: *Give me your hand. Give me tomorrow. Down with Child Servitude.* Chances are, like the majority of Haitians, you can't read French or Creole. Like them, you ignore the sign.

Heading out of the airport, you'll pass two UN peacekeepers, one with a Brazilian patch, the other with an Argentine flag. As you pass the blue helmets, smile, wave and receive dumbfounded stares in return. The United Nations also has Jordanians and Peruvians here, parked in APVs fifteen minutes north-west, along the edge of the hyperviolent Cité Soleil slum, the poorest and most densely populated six square miles in the poorest and most densely populated country in the hemisphere. The peacekeepers don't go in much, neither do the national police. If they do, the gangsters that run the place start shooting. Best to steer clear, although you'd get a cheap price on children there. You might even get offered a child gratis.

You'll notice the streets of the Haitian capital are, like the tap-taps, overstuffed, banged up, yet colourful. The road surfaces range from bad to terrible and grind even the toughest SUVs down to the chassis. Parts of Delmas are so steep that the truck may sputter and die under the exertion.

Port-au-Prince was built to accommodate about 150,000 people and hasn't seen too many centrally planned upgrades since 1804. Over the last fifty years, some two million people, a quarter of the nation's population, have arrived from the countryside. They've brought their animals. Chickens scratch on side streets, and boys lead prizefighting cocks on string leashes. Monstrously fat black pigs root in sooty, putrid garbage piled eight feet high on street corners or even higher in enormous pits that drop off sidewalks and wind behind houses.

A crowd swells out of a Catholic church broadcasting a fervent mass. Most Haitians are Catholic. Despite the efforts

of Catholic priests, most also practise voodoo. In the countryside, voodoo is often all they practise.

You may see a white jeep or van with a siren, a red cross and the word AMBULENCE handpainted on it. You might assume this is an ambulance. It is not. These private vehicles only carry dead people. Public health is patchy at best. The annual budget for the health care of the UN peacekeepers in Haiti is greater than the annual budget for the country's Health Ministry. It's a bad idea to get sick here, as I was to find out.

At night, those with homes pack into tin-roofed, plywood or cinder-block dwellings, on dirt roads bisected by gullies of raw sewage. Most people loot electricity from street wires to enjoy a light or two until rolling blackouts enshroud the city and end the sounds of dancehall reggae and hip-hop. Then total darkness reigns, and total silence, save for the spasmodic barking of dogs and the nightly gunfire that can be heard from Cité Soleil to Pétionville. Only the generator-driven lights of the fortified UN compounds illuminate the haze over the city.

But now, in the daytime, many Haitians, particularly the seventy per cent with no formal employment, will be on the sweaty, steamy, dusty streets. When either gender needs to urinate, they simply find a quiet pole or a ditch. No point going home for relief since few have indoor plumbing. Haitians take great pride in their appearance, but as more than three-quarters live on less than $2 per day, they don't have many pieces in their wardrobe. Some beg, like the thirty-something woman sitting in the middle of Delmas, one horribly infected breast, glistening with pus, hanging out of her shirt.

Some hustle. There are more than 10,000 street kids, mostly boys as young as six, some selling unprotected sex for $1.75. Haiti has the highest prevalence of HIV infection outside sub-Saharan Africa, and Haitians who believe sex

with virgins protects against, or even cures, AIDS have driven up the price of such intercourse to $5. Haiti has also become a magnet for sex tourists and paedophiles. One left a review of the children in an online chatroom: ‘The younger ones are even more kinker [*sic*] than the older women … Park on the street and tell them to go at it!!!!!!!!! If anyone sees you they just ignore you. No police but the multi-national military force is still here.’ Locals say that the main contribution of the peacekeepers to Haiti’s economy comes via the brothels. Opposite a UN camp on an otherwise desolate road outside Port-au-Prince, Le Perfection nightclub does booming business.

Most city dwellers who work do so on an ad hoc basis. A doubled-over, shirtless man strains under a donkey cart laden with the burnt-out carcass of a car. An elderly woman balances a hundred eggs in five tiers on her head and nimbly navigates a pulverised side road. A young man pushes up the bustling sidewalk with two queen-sized mattresses on his head. The tinkling of shoeshine bells is constant. An old man – probably no more than fifty-seven, the average life span for a Haitian – pushes a wheelbarrow filled with empty bottles. He catches you smiling at his threadbare, oversized T-shirt bearing an image of Snoopy, Woodstock and the words WORLD’S MOST HUGGABLE GRANDMA. Bubbling with good humour, he shoots back a toothless grin. Many peddle trinkets, bouillon cubes, single-shot plastic bags of water, plantain chips, ‘Megawatt’ energy drink or vegetables in various states of decay.

A man hawks mobile-phone chargers with which he swats stray dogs as they slink by. Another man on Delmas sells cowhide *rigwaz* whips and leather martinets. Those are for beating a different kind of creature. ‘*Timoun se ti bet*,’ a Haitian saying relates: ‘Children are little animals.’ ‘*Ti neg se baton ki fe I mache*,’ goes another: ‘It is the whip which makes the little guy walk.’

You are now about halfway up Delmas, and slaves are everywhere. Assuming that this is your first trip to Haiti, you won't be able to identify them. But to a lower-middle-class Haitian, their status is 'written in blood'. Some are as young as three or four years old. But they'll always be the small ones, even if they're older. The average fifteen-year-old child slave is 1.5 inches shorter and forty pounds lighter than the average free fifteen year old. They may have burns from cooking for their overseer's family over an open fire, or scars from beatings, sometimes in public, with the martinet, electrical cables or wood switches. They wear faded, outsized cast-offs and walk barefoot, in sandals or, if they are lucky, oversized shoes.

If you arrive in the afternoon, you may see their tiny necks and delicate skulls straining as they tote five-gallon buckets of water on their heads while navigating broken glass and shattered roads. Or you might see them picking up their overseer's smartly dressed children from school.

These are the *restavèks*, the 'stay-withs', as they are euphemistically known in Creole. Forced, unpaid, they work from before dawn until deep night. The violence in their lives is unyielding.

These are the children who won't look you in the eyes.

At Delmas 69, yell '*merci*', hop out, pay the driver and turn left onto the relatively well-kept side street with overhanging but not overgrown trees. Any time of day, you will find here a group of four or five men, standing in front of Le Réseau (The Network) barbershop.

As you approach, one man steps forward. 'Are you looking to get a person?' he asks.

Meet Benavil Lebhom. Hail-fellow, he smiles easily and is an easy man to do business with, if not an easy man to trust. Benavil, thirty-eight, has a trim moustache and wears a multicoloured striped polo shirt, a gold rope suspending a coin and a cross, and Doc Martens knockoffs. His colleagues

approach. One extends his hand, offers his card and introduces himself as a ‘businessman’.

Benavil is what is known in Haiti as a *courtier*, a broker. He holds an official real estate licence and calls himself an employment agent. But most employees he places are atypical job seekers. Two-thirds of his sales are child slaves.

Like most Haitians, Benavil is from the countryside, but he moved to Port-au-Prince twenty-five years ago. He started in construction, but in 1989 he switched to real estate sales and founded a company called SOPNIBEL. Soon he discovered a more lucrative commodity: human beings. The biggest year for child selling was 1995, shortly after President Jean-Bertrand Aristide returned to power and UN sanctions were lifted. In the cities, people had a bit more money and could afford small luxuries again. Benavil sold twenty to thirty kids in a good week then and made upward of $200 per month. Nationwide the number of restavèks ballooned from 109,000 in 1992 to 300,000, or one in ten Haitian children in 1998, to 400,000 in 2002.

Originally from a hamlet called La Vallée in the underdeveloped and forbidding southern highlands of La Selle, Benavil sired two children there although he never married. It is from those fertile mountains that he and his fellow courtiers harvest their best-selling crops.

Benavil’s business works like this: a client approaches him about acquiring a restavèk. Normally, this client is lower middle class – a UNICEF study found the average income for a slave-owning household in Haiti was less than $30 per month. After per capita GDPs were torpedoed by the economic chaos that followed two coups, sanctions and colossal government mismanagement even in peacetime, the monthly incomes sank further. Lower-class urbanites also acquire restavèks, but, unable to afford a middleman like Benavil, a friend or relative performs his service free of charge.

A child’s price is negotiable, but Benavil is bound by agreements – which he won’t detail for you – with the capital’s other courtiers, whom he estimates number at least 3,000. ‘We do have a formula,’ he says.

Clients then place their order. Some want boys; most want girls. Some want specific skills. ‘They’ll ask for someone who knows how to bake,’ says Benavil. ‘Sometimes they’ll ask for a boy who knows how to work an oven.’ Most want children from the countryside. No one wants children from urban blights like Cité Soleil. Although their parents would give them away, clients know street-smart kids would escape at the earliest opportunity. Older kids, too, are out of favour as even rural ones will be wilful, independent. Most children Benavil sells are around age twelve. The youngest slaves he brokers, he claims, are seven.

After a client has ordered, Benavil’s colleague in La Vallée begins working to convince an impoverished rural family to give up its child. Normally, all it takes is the promise that the child will be well nourished and educated. Urban Haitians are poor; rural families are dirt-poor. Out of every 1,000 urban children, 112 will die before age five; in the countryside, the figure is 149. By comparison, in the neighbouring Dominican Republic, it’s thirty-five; in war-torn Congo, 108.

Rarely are the parents paid. They yield their children because courtiers dangle the promise of school like a diamond necklace. More than 80 per cent of Haiti’s schools are private, and urban high schools cost $385 per year; this sum is beyond the annual income of the typical Haitian and particularly out of reach for rural parents, most of whose income goes toward food. The average Haitian boy receives 2 years of schooling; the average girl, 1.3. In the countryside, where only a handful of schools exist, most children never attend school at all.

But the dangled diamond necklace is a fake, as 80 per cent of restavèks do not go to school. Those who do must

fight to go, are only allowed to attend when they finish their labour and have to find the tuition money on their own. The slave's role in the master's house is to work, not to learn.

Occasionally, when parents agree to give up their child, Benavil treks to the countryside to ensure that he is providing a quality product to his clients. 'Sometimes I go out to make sure it's a healthy child I'm giving them,' he says. Then he makes his delivery. Sometimes the customer isn't satisfied. 'They say, "Oh, that's not the person I want,"' he sniffs. Benavil tells them, 'You can't say, "I don't want this one," because you didn't have any to begin with, so how do you know you don't want this one?' Some refuse to pay. Some of his clients take their slaves with them to the north. 'Some to the States, some to Canada. They continue to work for the person. And sometimes, once the person brings them over there, they'll let them figure out how to live. They'll give them their freedom. Sometimes.'

But not always. Restavèks live as slaves to this day in Haitian communities across the United States. Most don't make headlines. One little girl in Miami was an exception. On 28 September 1999, police rescued a twelve year old from the suburban Miami home of Willy and Marie Pompee. The Pompees acquired the girl in their native Haiti and took her to the United States, where they forced her to keep their $351,000 home spotless, eat garbage and sleep on the floor. Like many female restavèks, she was also considered a '*la-pou-sa-a*' or a 'there-for-that'. In other words, she was a sex toy. When police, acting on a tip, rescued her that day in September, she was suffering from acute abdominal pain and a venereal disease: since age nine, the couple's twenty-year-old son, Willy Junior, had regularly raped her.

Like many human traffickers, Benavil describes his work in euphemistic, even humanitarian terms. He claims that what he does helps the children. 'Because the child can't eat' while they're in the countryside; 'because there are people of good faith that will help them'. He claims to tell clients,

‘Life is something spiritual, it’s not something in a store you can buy.’ ‘I don’t sell children,’ he says without prompting, ‘although it would seem like it.’ He ‘places’ them.

But, Benavil admits, ‘you have people that mistreat’ the children he doesn’t sell. When he drops children off, he notes they often will be forced to sleep on the floor with any other domestic animals the client has.

It’s time to buy a slave. Your negotiation might sound a bit like the following exchange.

‘How quickly do you think it would be possible to bring a child in? Somebody who could clean and cook?’ you ask. You don’t want to stay in Haiti too long. ‘I don’t have a very big place; I have a small apartment. But I’m wondering how much that would cost? And how quickly?’

‘Three days,’ Benavil says.

‘And you could bring the child here? Or are there children here already?’

‘I don’t have any here in Port-au-Prince right now,’ says Benavil, his eyes widening at the thought of a foreign client. ‘I would go out to the countryside.’

‘Would I have to pay for transportation?’

‘*Bon*,’ says Benavil. ‘Would you come out as well?’

‘Yeah, perhaps. Yes, I would if it’s possible.’

‘A hundred US.’

‘And that’s just for transportation?’ you ask, smelling a rip-off.

‘Transportation would be about 100 Haitian,’ says Benavil, or around $13, ‘because you’d have to get out there. Plus food on the trip. Five hundred gourdes.’ You’ll be travelling some distance, to La Vallée. A private car, Benavil explains, would be faster but pricier. You’ll have to pay for gas, and that will cost as much as $40. Plus hotel and food.

‘OK, 500 Haitian,’ you say. Now the big question: ‘And what would your fee be?’

You just asked the price of the child. This is the moment of truth, and Benavil's eyes narrow as he determines how much he can milk from you.

'A hundred. American.'

'A hundred US!' you shout. Emote here – a sense of outrage but with a smile so as not to kill the deal.

'Eight hundred Haitian.'

'That seems like a lot,' you say. 'How much would you charge a Haitian?'

'A Haitian? A Haitian?' Benavil asks, his voice rising with feigned indignation to match your own. 'A hundred dollars. This is a major effort.'

'Could you bring down your fee to 50 US?' you ask.

Benavil pauses. But only for effect – he knows he's got you for way more than a Haitian would pay for a child. '*Oui*,' he finally says with a smile. The deal isn't done.

'Let me talk it over. It's a lot of money, but I understand that you're the best,' you say.

'*Oui!*'

He gives you his number and, as he's left his business cards at the office, writes down his name for you as well. Benavil leans in close and whispers, 'This is a rather delicate question. Is this someone you want as just a worker? Or also someone who will be a "partner"? You understand what I mean? Or is it someone you just really want to work?'

Briefed as you are on the '*la-pou-sa-a*' phenomenon, you don't blink at being asked if you want the child for sex as well as housework.

'I mean, is it possible to have someone that could be both?' you ask.

'*Oui!*' Benavil responds enthusiastically.

'I think probably a girl would be better.'

'Just one?' Benavil asks, hopefully.

'Just one.'

'When do you need it by?' he asks.

‘I can’t say that right now, but you say you could have one ready in three days?’

‘Um-hmm.’ He nods.

‘I’m not actually sure whether a girl or boy would work better,’ you, the doubting consumer, say. A slave is a serious purchase. Best to acquire the right one the first time. ‘I’ll decide that later. Do you want to ask me any other questions about what I want?’

‘What age?’ Benavil asks.

‘Younger better,’ you say. ‘Probably somewhere between nine and eleven.’

‘What kind of salary would you offer?’

Unlike the sex question, this surprises you. But you figure it’s just Benavil doing his humanitarian shtick again. ‘I could give food and I could give a place to stay, and I might be able to pay for school. But in terms of salary, even though I’m American, I’m a poor writer. But perhaps school and food.’

‘Perhaps when you leave the country, would you take the person with you?’

‘I think I could probably do that. It depends on visa issues, but I think I could probably work it out. Any more questions?’

Benavil tells you that he can ‘arrange’ the papers to make it look as if you’ve adopted the child. That will make it easier to take your purchase home. He offers you a thirteen-year-old girl.

‘That’s a little bit old,’ you say.

‘I know of another girl who’s twelve. Then ones that are ten, eleven and twelve,’ he responds.

You say you’d like to see what’s on offer in the countryside. But then you tell him not to make any moves without further word from you.

Here, 600 miles from the United States, and five hours from the desk of the UN Secretary-General, you have