

The Tomato on the Seder Plate

Immokalee (rhymes with broccoli), Florida is the tomato capital of the United States. Most of the fresh domestic tomatoes Americans eat come from south Florida. It is also “ground zero for modern slavery.”

For two and a half years, Mariano Lucas Domingo a slave. Lucas had slipped across the border to make money to send home for the care of an ailing parent in Guatemala. He expected to earn about \$200 a week in the fields. Cesar Navarrete agreed to provide room and board.

Lucas’s “room” turned out to be the back of a truck, shared with other workers. It lacked running water and a toilet, so they used a corner. For that, their pay was docked \$20 a week. Cold showers from a garden hose were \$5. Everything had a price. Lucas was soon \$300 in debt. After a month of ten-hour workdays, he figured he’d have paid that debt off.

But when Lucas inquired about the balance, Navarrete threatened to beat him should he try to leave. Navarrete took Lucas’s paychecks, cashed them, and doled out pocket money, \$20 some weeks, other weeks \$50. Over the years, Navarrete deprived Lucas of \$55,000.

Taking a day off was not an option. If Lucas became ill or was too exhausted to work, he was kicked in the head, beaten, and locked in the back of the truck. Other members of Navarrete’s crew were slashed with knives, tied to posts, and shackled in chains.

Slavery is alive and well in Florida. Since 1997, more than 1,000 slaves have been freed. And those are only the instances that resulted in convictions. Frightened, undocumented, mistrustful of the police, and speaking little or no English, most slaves refuse to testify, which means their captors cannot be tried. “Unlike victims of other crimes, slaves don’t report themselves,” said one of the prosecutors on the Navarrete case. “They hide from us in plain sight.”