

Donald Allen
2153 Lido Way, Apt. A
Pittsburg, CA 94565
(415) 432-8264

THE CALIFORNIA STREET PEOPLE

by

Omar Hassan

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My childhood was a very tough one in more ways than one. I was an only child reared by my mother, a single parent. I never knew my father. I was born and raised in the very toughest section of Cincinnati, Ohio. Because I was an only child and not too big in size, I had to be smart and daring in order to survive. The neighborhood which I lived, was gang oriented. One gang, to which I belonged, was the PW's. Many times, had it not been for my club association, I would not have eaten.

My mother was a prostitute, who stayed busy in the streets. At the age of around nine years old, I can remember my mother coming in our one room apartment and setting a small can of pork and beans and a box of saltines, equally as small, on the table saying, "Don't cut yourself when you open the can." She then rushed back out in the streets to sell her body and give the money to her pimp who less than a year later, nearly cut her to death.

I did as I was told, I took a dirty knife and opened

the beans, after splitting the top of the can four ways. After eating the beans and crackers, I would wash out my overalls I had on by rubbing them together under tap water with lye soap in a sink that was in the hallway for use by the other tenants on that fourth floor. The next day, I had to wear those same overalls to school camp. As a youngster, the gang was closer to me than a family. This is why I decided to do field work among the street people; maybe I can find some answer to why me and Mom existed as we did.

Since I am not a trained anthropologist, only a student in class, my research technique will most likely resemble that of a novice. However, I will give it my best according to what I have read and learned from my instructor, Ms. Boucher.

To begin my field work, I went to Oakland and drove down San Pablo where the working girls line the streets, trying to attract customers. They are dressed in a manner which reveals as much of the body as possible without going to jail for indecent exposure. As I drove, I saw all types of girls in the streets: Some I considered good looking and some were not. I saw a few who might even be considered well dressed and others who looked downright whorish. I saw what appeared to me as men dressed as women, mixed with the girls. However, there were girls who seemed to remain alone

and did not want to intermingle with any of the rest of the girls. The girls were average looking and seemed to range between 16 and 40 in age. Eighty percent of the women were black and twenty percent were white and a couple were oriental.

As I drove, checking out the girls' faces, looking for one I thought I could talk with, I noticed that men were picking these girls. I must say, I was surprised to see more men who were white middle class businessmen than any other group. I almost hit a girl who ran out to a possible customer. As I was looking in my mirror behind me, I saw a nice looking, young white boy pick up a very unattractive girl; I wondered why. This was one of the questions I had hoped to learn. The girl I almost hit called me some names I had never heard. I yelled at her that I was sorry. She yelled back, "Fuck you, and if you'd get out of your car, I'd kick your square ass." I believe she would have tried. I continued to drive. Two blocks later I saw a million and one shot, a girl I was sure I knew. She was standing near three or four more girls. She was tall for a girl, about 5'10", wearing high heels and an auburn wig. She wore a gray dress made of silk-like material which hugged her body snugly. When standing in the light, one could see she wore no underclothes. She carried a purse that matched her black

shoes. Where she stood was a no parking zone. I parked at least 30 feet from where she stood. I used my index finger and beckoned her to come. A slight smile crossed her face, as she stared at me for a few seconds. She diverted her attention from me long enough to look left, then right, up and down the streets, then she did a small strut and came up to the car, and asked me, "What's happening?"

I blurted out, "How much?"

"God," she said, "at least I know you are not a cop; even the squares like you don't ask that way any more. Listen," she continued, "there's a restaurant down the street. Let's go down there and let's get some coffee."

"Fine," I answered, "hop in."

"No funny stuff," she said, getting into the car, keeping close to the door handle and her eyes paying close attention to my hands. From a distance she was attractive, but under close scrutiny one could see at one time she had taken a bad beating which she covered well with makeup. She even had cuts in her eyebrows like some boxers I had seen. She led me to a restaurant on the corner of San Pablo by some railroad tracks. I parked almost right in front of the door. As I was parking, I noticed her staring at me. Just as we were getting out of the car, she said in a sincere voice as her eyes tightened up, "Man, you look familiar. Do

I know you? Have we been on a date before?"

I smiled and said, "Let's get that coffee."

She was curious now, and I felt like I was in charge for a minute. I went to the door and held it open for her. "Thanks, baby," she said to me, entering the restaurant.

Once we were in, the odor of heavy grease and smoke immediately filled the air. The place was just above a dive, so to speak. I followed her to a small empty table toward the back with two wooden chairs. The place reminded me of something out of the '40s, in an old Bogart movie. The room could seat at least 60 people, and it was half filled. Most of the girls seemed to be working girls with other Johns conducting business in a smooth way. The people pretended not to see us as we passed them. One thing I had made my mind up to, was I was not eating. I was going to be just as careful about drinking. As soon as we were seated, she asked me how much I could spend on a nice girl like her. I replied, "How about I give you \$20 if you spend some time talking to me right here?"

"Wow!" she said, "Man, you black dudes are getting more freaky all the time. What you want me to do, step on your feet or something, while you eat?"

I had a hearty laugh.

"You may laugh," she said, "but I meet some weird people in this business."

"Yeah, I suppose you do," I said while wiping tears from my eyes after my laugh. "like in Alaska," I dropped on her.

Her eyes popped open, and she seemed to jump in her seat. She half shouted, "Alaska, Fairbanks, Alaska; you were a teamsters working on the pipeline? I met you in that bar on 2nd Street?"

"That's right," I said.

"What was the name of that place?" she asked.

"I can't remember either, but do you remember what I said to you when you asked me was I dating?"

She looked thoughtful for a moment and said, "No, I don't."

"I told you I was living with a girl and had no need to pay for it, but if I ever did decide to buy it, it sure would be from a nice lady like yourself."

"Yeah," she shouted again. "Now I really do remember. We talked a few times, and you introduced me to your girlfriend. Let me see," she said, looking up in the air, "you got a funny name like somebody overseas, uh, uh, Omar."

I said, "Omar Hassan."

She slapped the table and said, "That's it. What's mine?" she asked.

"Jewel," I said.

"Damn, man, you got it right; however, I'm Helen now, but that was back around '74 or '75 when we met at that bar."

"The Flame Bar," I said.

"That was the name of that place we were," she said, smiling. "I made good money there. I loved that place. Hey," she asked, as if to snap herself back to the present, "where's your girl that was with you up there?"

"She's dead," I answered.

"Dead," she repeated. "How? What happened?"

I proceeded to answer her questions. "When she came back home in San Jose, I came with her. Her ex-boyfriend came by her mother's house to see her when he heard she was home. It was a Sunday afternoon; we had just finished dinner. To make a long story short, she went to his car to talk to him in private because he wanted her to come back to him. I felt funny about it, but she said she was all right and that he had never hurt her. She felt she owed him a few minutes of conversation because of the way she left him. Well, after a lot of talk, he shot her in the head and put the pistol in his mouth, killing himself. Her mother went into shock and had a stroke. I'm just now getting over it."

She put her hand on top of mine and said, "God, Omar, I'm truly sorry."

"Yeah, Helen, me too, but let's not talk about that."

"Well," she said, "what is it you were asking me to do?"

Before I could answer, a sad-eyed and tired looking waitress came up with a pad and pencil. Helen said, "I'm hungry, Omar, how about buying me a meal?"

"Sure," I said, "anything."

Helen said, "Give me a steak dinner, Margaret, Thousand on the salad, and some grapefruit juice."

Margaret looked at me. I said, "Just coffee, please."

Without a word, the waitress walked away.

Helen pulled a mirror from her purse and began touching up her makeup. "Don't pay no attention to Margaret. She's a burnt out old whore, working for peanuts in here, and these cheap assholes never even tip her."

"She doesn't bother me none," I replied.

"Now, what is it you want from me?"

"Oh yes," I said, "well, I want to have an interview with you."

"A what?" she asked.

"An interview," I repeated. "Well, you see, I live in Pittsburg, California now, and I'm going to college out there. I'm in an Anthropology class, and each student has to do a project in the field, so to speak. You see, Helen,

I want to know the real reason why the ladies and men go into business like this. What a square like me would call this tough business. I want to hear the truth, not bullshit. You understand what I mean?" The white chick who wrote The Happy Hooker didn't tell nothing but a lot of uninteresting bullshit. I found no answers in that," I said.

Helen started digging in her purse, and said, "Yeah, I read the book and saw the movie she made. It wasn't shit, either. I bet she made a million on that bunk." She flicked her Bic lighter, lit her cigarette and glanced at me. "Are you doing this for money?" she asked.

"No, I answered, but one never knows what may come of it."

"Well, Omar, if you make some money, remember where I am. I'm not looking forward to retirement just yet," she said smilingly.

"I take it that you will give me the interview?"

"Yes," she replied, "just what is it you want, without using my name."

"No, no, I won't let anyone know who you are without your agreement."

Just as she was about to say something, the sad-eyed waitress brought her food and my coffee and to my surprise, the food looked really well prepared. And the coffee wasn't

bad either. She went right after the food, excusing herself by saying how hungry she was and that I was only the second money she made all day.

"O.K.," she asked as she went on stuffing herself, "what is it that you want to know, again?"

"I want to know everything. Why a girl turns out and why she gives the money away after working all day and night, sometimes; her family life, her kids, about her man or pimp. I want to interview pimps, other girls, men who are dressed in dresses and competing with girls. As I said, I want to know it all, from the black side mostly."

She wiped her mouth with a napkin and kept chewing. She said, "You may have some trouble trying to talk to some girls. I really don't know everybody's got something to say, but getting them to tell you is going to be your problem. Yes, and that word pimp--well, in my opinion, it's only a very few of those around these days. Them niggers out there ain't shit." Her entire attitude seemed to change. She went on, "They can talk that shit to them weak ass white girls, but they can't bring that shit to the sister no more. And another thing," she said, with her cigarette dangling from her mouth and punching her finger on the table, looking me straight on as if telling me off, "that thing you mentioned, about the girl giving away all

her money to a pimp. Look," she said, "when a girl is in the room with a trick, do you think her man is in there?"

"No," I answered.

"Ha!" she said, and pressed on. "Well, who do you think gets the first count on the money?" She leaned back and looked at me. "And man, don't nobody give up all their money but young up-starts, fools and a lot of white girls."

"You are not mad at me," I asked, with a smile.

She dropped her head and came up with a big, kind hearted smile, revealing all the beauty of her soul. "No, I ain't mad at you, it's just that I got to let out somewhere. You are asking me about things we don't talk about outside our circles and not even to ourselves, sometimes. So, you'll be touching some nerves."

"I take it you don't have a man," I said to her.

"No, shit, man, I done paid my dues. I ain't going to be pimped no more, except by my kids."

"You got kids?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied, "two of them."

She quickly changed the subject by saying, "I am what the niggers in the streets call a renegade whore. They try to keep me and my kind away from around their girls."

I asked her why.

"Because," she said like I should know, "the so-called

pimps don't want us to tell their girls they ain't got to give their money away and how to handle them jive niggers. They call us poison bitches."

"You mean to tell me there's no man in your life, only the tricks you turn or do you have a girlfriend?"

"No, I don't dig no girls like that; however, a few of the girls out here do, too many. I've turned a few tricks with women, but I ain't no funny. It was just for the money. Besides, I got a man, but he ain't my pimp. He works every day."

"Does he know what you do?"

"Of course he knows," she snapped at me.

"Well?" I asked.

"Well, what?: she replied.

"Well, why and how does he let you do it?"

She became silent and just gazed at me as she put out her cigarette and lit another. When she did answer, I detected a little anger in her face and voice. "He don't tell me what to do or how to make a living. That's how I met him, and that's how it is. Now, besides" she continued, "you want to know the truth. Maybe if he had backbone, he'd make a way for me not to be out here and stop me. He works in the steel mill. He could afford to take care of me and my kids, but no, in his heart he likes the money I make, my

independence." She raised her voice a little and said, "Besides, I don't need him and no man, and niggers ain't shit. They are not taking care of their babies." She crossed her legs, turned her anger away from me and puffed on her cigarette.

We both became silent. I could feel a cool sensation come over me. It was as if I could feel what she was feeling, and yet, I knew that was not the whole story. However, I knew a little bit of this woman. I wasn't as square as she thought I was. I broke the silence.

"That's a strong indictment against all of us black men. We're not all the same, no more than all black women are the same."

"Oh, is that right," she said with a slight smile on her face as if she were playing a game with me. "Well," she continued, "you're so strong, gods, supposed to be men, big, black and bad, you know how to handle a bitch, kick her ass and take her money; what else do you do?" Now she was beginning to annoy me. She wanted to play games.

"So," I said, "the snake that bit you, bit me."

She closed her eyes and shook her head slowly, remarking, "That's a cop out."

The interview was taking a change in direction of which I was not prepared to allow, so I asked, "Why don't you get a job?"

"For what, and do what?" she asked.

"Well, go back to school," I suggested, "if you need to."

"Man, I ain't going back to school, and I ain't working no two cent ass job. They can take Burger Kings and stick it up their ass. Listen, man, I get welfare for me and my two kids, plus I make from \$60 a day out here and up. I like what I do, and I don't have white folks standing over me and I ain't worried about his taxes or money or the rest of his bullshit."

"Who keeps your kids while you work?" I asked her.

"My mom."

"How old are they?"

"Ten, the girl; fifteen, the boy."

"Do you live around here?"

"No," she said, "I live in Hayward." She lit another cigarette.

"Do your mother and children know what you do?"

"Man, you want to know it all, don't you?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Cmar, if you sneak and take a picture of me or use my real name, I'll . . ."

I held up my hand and stopped her. "Hey," I said, "I would never, O.K.?"

"O.K.," she said, "but if you sell a book, like I said, don't forget me."

"And that's a deal," I said.

"Yes, my mother knows what I do, and she's learned to live with it. She's stuck with me when there was trouble and very hard times. Kids, these days, are no fools. They know."

"What do you mean when you say your mother stuck with you during the hard times, like what?"

"Oh, like when I first turned out, it almost killed her. It was as if I was testing her love for me, pushing that black woman to the limit. The hard drugs, the pimps, the police, and the cases, leaving my kids, not being heard from for weeks. God, she's stronger than I have ever been. See my face, these scars?" she asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"I wasn't messed up like this the last time you saw me."

"No," I answered.

"When I got back from Alaska, I had plenty of money, even after spending tons of it, flying back home and partying, giving Mom some for the kids and my man, at that time, his money. This pimp, Cole Johnson, took me and two others girls from Seattle, Washington, to Alaska with him. Well,