

“A Bad Sickness”

from *Hustling Is Not Stealing*
Part Three: Into the Life Again
Chapter 8, pp. 305-12

Excerpted in *First of the Month* 4, no.1 (6.1.2002): 17-19
Introduction by Benj DeMott, editor of *First of the Month*

John Chernoff’s *Hustling Is Not Stealing* tells the story of a West African woman from her childhood to her late twenties . She grew up in Ghana and Burkina Faso. She rebelled against her family by refusing to remain in an arranged marriage, and she began to live as an “ashawo” woman, a woman outside the institutions of marriage and family.

Chernoff’s book about her life is not an easy one to summarize, as he himself has noted: “Is it about an African woman, about prostitution, about young people in modern African cities, about the Third World in general? Is it an autobiography, a chronicle of exploitation and self-justification; is it a critique of African society and culture by a seeker with an intuitive ethnographic purpose; or is it a broad satire, a comedy about an irrepressible spirit in impossible circumstances?”

The answer is that it is all of these things. A glance at some of Chernoff’s chapter titles – “Killer Girls from Ghana,” “Fish From the Sea in Vaginas,” “A Nice Prison in Togo,” “A Beating Among Friends,” “Virginity as a Fatal Disease,” “Fucking French People,” “Fucking English People” – hint at the book’s range and depths. In the tradition of Equiano, *Black Boy*, *Manchild in the Promised Land* (and recent West African films like *Faat Kine* and *The Little Girl Who Sold The Sun*), *Hustling Not Stealing* is sure to become a Black Atlantic classic. We’re honored to print the first of what we hope will be a number of chapters from this work. In the following excerpt, Chernoff’s heroine has just moved from Ghana to Togo in search of a better life, but she faces an unimaginable crisis.

A Bad Sickness

The Treatment

I was in the Royal Hotel in Lomé¹ when I came to have a *ba-a-d* sickness. I came to pass menstruation, but this menstruation lasted three months. *Three good months!* There wasn't any blessed day when I didn't see blood. Every time I went to hospital and they gave me an injection, that was the day I would bleed more. I thought that all my blood would finish. *Ah!* And people were telling me that a doctor can't get the medicine for this sickness, so I must find African medicine. And I didn't have anyone to ask. Everybody said, "Go back to Ghana. You will die here. It's not good."

That was the time I was coming to be friends with Mama Amma, when I was sick. I knew Mama Amma in Accra, but we were not friends like now. Before I went to Lomé, Mama had been in Lomé, and she was at Lomé when I got there. When I saw her there, I just said, "Eh! Mama, I have come here." And the time I was sick at Lomé was the time when we were coming to be good friends. One day I was sitting in front of Royal Hotel, and I saw Mama pass, and I called her.

She said, "Um-hmm. I saw you have some trouble."

So I told her all my problem. "You see now what is with me? Yeah, Mama. I've had menstruation for about three months now. It doesn't stop for any medicine."

Then she said, "You don't know Togo! Togo is like that. It's somebody who did you.² We have one girlfriend who had the same thing. You can go to every doctor: they can't do anything with it. But I know a boy called Brazil. He's a musician. See him."

This Brazil used to come to Royal Hotel, but I didn't know his house. So I said, "I don't know his house."

And Mama said, "OK. Tomorrow morning I'll come and take you there."

1. small hotel in Lomé, where many Ghanaians lodged

2. did you: did this to you, i.e., made medicine against you

The next morning Mama came and took me to Brazil. This Brazil's father was Togolese and his mother was from Dahomey,³ and he took me to a Dahomey man. And this man said, "Bring 200 francs."

200! I didn't have even 200! I had three good months without going anywhere. Even to eat was hard. I had a big flask and I used to boil tea and fill it. Maybe for four or five days, it was my food. Tea! No milk. And sugar, only if I asked somebody to buy me sugar. Just like that, and I was living. *Heh!* And I didn't want to go to Ghana either. If I would go to Ghana, I could get some money; I could just go to the bank and get money to spend. And I wanted to go. But if I thought about it, the way I came out of Ghana, to come out with this small plastic bag and then go back there with this same bag again? No. I thought, "No, I won't go. I will stay here and die. It's good when I die in Togo. In Lomé." That's what I thought.

So when we went to this Dahomey man, he said I should bring 200.⁴ *Ah!* How could I get 200? Then I told Brazil, "Truly, I haven't got a penny."

Then Mama said, "Oh, for me too, today is not good. I have only 100."

And then I said, "No. Keep your 100. If I'm going to die, I must die. If I'm going to die, this man will take the 200 and I will still die."

Then Brazil said, "No. I have 200."

So Brazil gave the man 200, and this man brought a mirror, just the small one we look at our faces with. He put it down and he told me to put the 200 on top. I put the 200 on top, and he put some powder on the mirror, and then he rubbed it together with the money, and then he took the money. And he said, "Look inside the mirror." And I looked, and he said, "Do you see something?" I didn't see anything. And he said, "All you people are how many in the hotel?"

And I said, "We are many."

"Do you know all of their names?"

3. former name for Benin. Dahomey also refers to the traditional state of the Fon people, Dahomey, in Benin.

4. francs CFA, Francophone African currency. At the time, before the devaluation of 1994, 50 CFA were equal to one French franc, and CFA generally varied between 200 and 300 to the dollar.

I said, "I think I can remember some of their names, but I can't remember all."

So this man said I should start to call the girls' names. And when I called every girl's name, I looked on the mirror and I saw a picture like a photo, just standing on the mirror. Yeah, it's something like belief, you know. And I came to one girl called Love. I think now she's in Cotonou. She's a very *smart*⁵ girl, very fast. I liked her a lot. When she came to the mirror, she was making something like snapping her fingers and dancing.

And then this man said, "Yes. This is the girl who did you."

I wondered! I wondered because when I was sick, every morning, sometimes this girl would ask me, "Have you milk?" I would say "No," and she would buy me milk. And she would buy me sugar to make my tea. And now this man was telling me that she is the one who did me to pass menstruation like that. These Dahomey people say the thing is in the hand, that if they make it, they put it in your hand. If you don't want someone to play with you, you touch her with this, and it's finished. She will be in menstruation, and it doesn't stop. If she doesn't find medicine, she will bleed until she is dead. So I wondered. How can she make me like this and then spend on me? But this man said she was the girl.

Then I said, "OK. What shall we do now?"

He said, "I will give you something to bathe in." And he said I should go and bring a certain African pot, the clay one they cook in.

"How can I get the money to go and buy this thing?! I don't even have 200 francs to give you! Can I get money to buy this thing?"

And he said I must bring it along with 500 francs, and he would go and buy the things to make the medicine for me.

And I didn't have money, so I said, "OK, Mama, let's go." And Mama followed me back to the hotel. When we got there, I said, "Mama, I think you must go home. Any time when I find the money, I will go and find the thing for the man."

At that time the fellow who had the Royal Hotel was a Yoruba man. I went to him and told him, "You know, these days I can't pay my hotel bill because I am sick. And I went to someplace, and they showed me something to do. But it's about 1000. If you like, you can give me the

5. fast, quick; fast-moving, on top of things, hip

1000." That time I had three full pieces of this African cloth, and so I said, "You can take this cloth and keep it; then you give me 1000. If I finish, I will pay you and take my cloth back."

And he said OK, he will give me the 1000, but he doesn't want the cloth; I can keep it.

And I said "Thank-you."

I took 500 to go and buy the pot, and I took it together with the other 500 to this Dahomey man. This man said I should come back at four o'clock. Four o'clock I got Mama and we went. Then he got some leaves, and then he spread the leaves and put them in water in the pot. You know, this is why I believe a little bit of African medicine. He cut a big hole in the bottom of the pot. He was holding half, and I was holding half. Then he was putting water, and the water was coming out the hole. Then he was talking, some kind of Dahomey language – I don't know what language he was talking. If he put water, then the water would come out. Four times. Then the fifth one, the water started to fill up the pot, without coming out the bottom. So I was looking at it.

Then I said, "*Hey! Mama!*"

Then Mama too said, "*Hey! This man is strong!*"

We looked under, and we saw the hole, and we saw the water, but the water didn't come out. I put my hand inside to see whether he had put some mirror there, but when I put my hand, it was water. But this kind of water didn't come out. Then the man said I should take this water to the bathroom⁶ in his house and bathe with it. So I went and bathed with this water. When I came back he put down a broom, and he said I must go on top of the broom. I stood on the broom, and then he took some threads, and he gave me the threads to tie around my waist.

And when I did that, he said, "Go. Three days, you come back."

Ah! When I got home I started to *bleed!* It even passed the way I used to bleed. I was afraid, and I started crying, "*Yee-i! I die finish!*"⁷
Hey Mama! I'm finished!"

Then Mama said, "Let's wait for tomorrow."

6. In houses without running water, the "bathroom" does not have a toilet but is rather an enclosed area with a place for water to run outside the house. One bathes from a bucket, using a smaller container to wet oneself, then soaping oneself, then rinsing oneself with the remaining water.

7. (Pidgin): I'm dying, I'm dead.

When I bled like that, the next day I didn't see anything. And the next day, too, I didn't see anything. Then I said, "Ah, well, maybe it will be all right."

On the third day when I went to the man, he said, "Oh?"

And I said, "The first day I had much bleeding, but from yesterday up to today the third day, I don't see anything at all."

Then he said, "OK. You know what you will do? You must bring me 5000 francs. 5000, with two chickens, one red and one white." 5000 with two chickens!

"Ey! Papa! You don't pity for me? How can I get that 5000?"

So he said OK, if I don't have the 5000, I must say to his juju that I will bring the 5000 but today I don't have it. But I should know the time I'm going to have it. I should say the truth always. If I don't say the truth, this thing will come back and nobody will be able to cure it. *Ee-eh!* What day should I give now? Then Mama said, "Oh, it's nothing. You can give two weeks. Even if you don't get it after two weeks, if I get it I can lend it to you, then you can come and pay." So I gave two weeks. Then we went back home.

Then, this thread. You know, if I don't pay this money, the man cannot cut the thread. It must be on my waist. But to go with somebody to see this thread on your waist, he will suspect that you have juju or something, and he will be afraid of you. So I couldn't go out. I stayed home for one week. Then, one day we were at the hotel, and some Nigerian people came there and stayed at the hotel. The one man said he was a contractor, and he came to me and said he liked me and this and that. We drank up till midnight, and he said he wanted to go with me. Then I said, "Oh, I am in menstruation. Today I cannot sleep with a man. Maybe I will finish tomorrow or after tomorrow."

Then he said, "OK. Take 5000 and go and eat."

EEE-ey! I had the money! It was left only with the two chickens, right? So I was very happy that day.

Early in the morning about six o'clock, I ran to Mama. She was sleeping. *Tat-tat-tat-tat-tat!* "Hey! Mama! Mama! *Mama Mama Mama Mama!*" *Ha!*

Then Mama said, "Who?"

"It's me! Mama!" Then she opened the door. I said, "Mama, I have the 5000, but I don't have the money to buy the chickens."

Then Mama said, "OK. Take 1000." I took the 1000, and I went and bought the chickens, then I went and gave it to this Dahomey man. And this man cut the thread. So that time I was free.

Love and the Banana

Then this man said, "OK. Now, what do you want to do with Love?"

I said, "Oh? What should I do with her? This girl has done good to me when I was sick. Maybe somebody made me like this, but I don't believe it's this girl. So I don't want to do anything with her."

Then this man said, "The way you say you don't believe, I want to show you something. You will see that Love will suffer in Lomé. If you want, you can take your eyes and watch."

"OK, but as for me, I don't want you to do her something bad."

Then he said, "No! I'm not going to do her something! I'm just going to show you a movie. OK? Something like comedies.⁸ Eh?"

Then I said, "OK."

It was about three days and Love conceived. She used some medicine to take it out, and everybody thought she was going to die. We carried her to hospital that very night. Then she was in hospital. Nobody was going there because none of us had money to go and greet her.⁹ So, that finished all right, but she also didn't have money to pay the hospital and come home, so she had to run away from the hospital in the night and leave everything there.

That very day when she came home, she went to Pussycat and some thief boys beat her and took her wig and tore all her dresses off. Ah!

Then I went to this Dahomey man. I said, "No! This girl! What you are doing, if you are the one doing it, you must stop. I don't want to see her like that in this world. Yesterday she went to the nightclub and they beat her, tore her dresses and wigs and left her in the gutter. Even her pants, she didn't have them."

8. short subjects or ads or diversions before the main film at a movie theater

9. The "greeting" is a presentation, in this case money to give her as a gift to help her with her expenses.

Then this man said, "You say you don't believe, so I also wanted to show you."

Then I said, "No. If that is the case, then it's OK. This girl, I like her a lot, so I don't want you to do something bad to her."

Then this man laughed. "OK. I will leave her. I won't do anything."

Getting to one week — *ah!* — the police people caught Love. When they took her to police station, they said she must pay 5000. And she didn't have the 5000, so they just kept her there. It was this Yoruba man whose hotel we were staying who was the one who went and paid the 5000 to take Love out from the police station.

Then Love came to me. She said she was in Cotonou for three years and she had two babies with one Dahomey boy, then she ran away from this boy to come to Lomé. Since the time she came to Lomé she didn't have any problems. And now all this. And she told me she went to some place and they told her that I was the one who was doing her like that. *Ah!*

"How?" I said, "What did I do you?"

She said, "Yes. I found out. They said that you are the one."

So I went back to this Dahomey man and said, "Look, this thing you are doing, I don't want it. This girl has come and given me warning. She said that they say I am the one who is doing her. She has been in Cotonou and all these places. Don't let her come and kill me here. I told you to leave this girl alone. If you are the one who is doing it, then leave her!"

Then this man said, "OK. I will leave her. But I want to show you the last point. It's something very nice!" Then he gave me a banana. You know, it was very, very funny. I still have interest in this banana. He said, "OK. I want to cut everything short, and so when you take this banana to the nightclub and do something, everything that I have been doing to Love will go away." This is what he told me, but I didn't know that he was going to disgrace her. He told me that when I go to the nightclub and I see Love dancing with somebody on the dance floor, I must put the banana down and press it with my foot. Yeah? It was just a banana like any banana.

That night I put the banana in my bag and went to Pussycat. Love was there dancing with some white man. Then I didn't know what was

going to happen, but I thought that when I pressed this banana, it was going to be something nice. So I put the banana down and pressed it with my foot. Then this girl started to *shit! On the floor!* In Pussycat! Then everybody started shouting, "Hey, hey!" This white man left Love on the floor and went and sat down. Love was standing there. She was wearing trousers, and they were all full of shit. Then she ran outside. Everybody was following her, saying, "Hey, Love! What is wrong with you? What is wrong with you?"

Then I was afraid. I picked up this banana quickly and went and put it in the toilet and pressed the water.¹⁰ *Ha!* That very night I took a taxi to this man and said, "Why should you do that?!"

Then he said, "Yes. It's finished now."

And from that day, until I left Lomé, I never saw Love with my eyes again. They said the next day she left Lomé for Cotonou. If you ask Mama about this case, she will tell you. I never saw this girl again. I heard that she said she was going to Cotonou, and I don't know whether she's in Cotonou or she's in Ghana or she's somewhere. I don't know. This banana was a very big disgrace for her in Lomé.

And so from there, I thought, if I'm sick, I don't want to ask who made me to be sick, but I just want to be cured of my sickness. Yes. It was a very big disgrace for Love. *Heh, heh, heh!*

Yeah, so it was in Lomé when I came to have belief in this thing. In Accra my friends used to tell me, "Let's go to this place; this man is good, and all this."

I used to say, "Oh, what is good: it's good if the money you are going to give to these people to chop, for them to lie to you, it's better you buy a fine dress and fine shoes. You will get somebody who likes you."

Then this Dahomey man showed me something which I have believed. I used to have belief about their things, but not to make them myself. I just thought: maybe. Then you know, when this thing finished, I thought that maybe it's like when you do bad to somebody, and God is going to punish you. And if God doesn't do anything, it can come like that. Maybe it's like that, and this Dahomey man has been doing that. But I didn't think that this man and this banana could do all that. And so I

10. flushed the toilet

think maybe it was true that this girl was doing me bad, eh? That's why God agreed to see these things.

If it's not so, I don't think that this man, or this juju, can work like that. You know, where this man was living is not a nice house. An ugly house, dirty, and all! So, I wondered. Why don't you let this juju find you money to prepare your house nicely, you know? *Eh-heh!* This is what I say. This man: where he's living is not a nice house; it was a very dirty house. And this juju you have can work like this? Why don't you let it find you some big money to make a building, a big nice house to live? They can kill somebody with it, but they cannot find money with it? It's not possible. I think that if this thing works truly, if I have something like this, I will find money with it. I won't do people bad. And so this sickness, I thought that when he did the thing for me, gave me three days and then it finished, I had belief that he had juju and his juju was working. But I didn't know how the juju can take care of the sickness, and the juju cannot take care of the master to get the master money.

Heh-heh! Yeah, he took my 5000, and I think that this 5000 didn't do anything for him. When he does the same thing to everyone to have five thousand, five thousand, from everyone, if he's saving the money well, he can do something with it. So I don't know what such people do. Or maybe he gets 5000 in a year: maybe the 5000, in the whole year it was only this 5000 he got from me, because he cannot live well with that to make his house fine.