

Story in  
Harlem Slang

Zora Neale Hurston

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# STORY IN HARLEM SLANG

BY ZORA NEALE HURSTON

(Drawings by Hirschfeld)

*New York's Harlem, the nation's largest Negro community, is a city within a city: an amazing place of beauty and squalor, heaped-up hopes and despairs. Out of Harlem comes a constant flow of legend, music and picturesque language which has deeply influenced American life. Miss Hurston has for many years studied the curious and colorful argot of Harlem which has enriched the American vocabulary. Here she offers a sketch of Harlem life couched in Harlesemese, together with a glossary of this slang based on her research. The drawings are the work of the gifted Albert Hirschfeld. Except for the few reproduced from his recent book, Harlem As Seen By Hirschfeld (Hyperion Press), these illustrations were drawn especially for THE AMERICAN MERCURY.—*  
THE EDITORS.

Wait till I light up my coal-pot and I'll tell you about this Zigaboo called Jelly. Well, all right now. He was a sealskin brown and papa-tree-top-tall. Skinny in the hips and solid built for speed. He was born with this rough-dried hair, but when he laid on the grease and pressed it down overnight with his stocking-cap, it looked just like that righteous moss, and had so many waves you got seasick from looking. Solid, man, solid!

His mama named him Marvel, but after a month on Lenox Avenue, he changed all that to Jelly. How come? Well, he put it in the street that when it came to filling that long-felt need, sugar-curing the ladies' feelings, he was in a class by himself and nobody knew his name, so he had to tell 'em. "It must be Jelly, 'cause jam don't shake." Therefore, his name was Jelly. That was what was on his sign. The stuff was there and it was mellow. Whenever he was challenged by a hard-head or a frail eel on the right of his title he would eye-ball the idol-breaker with a slice of ice and put on his ugly-laugh, made up of scorn and pity, and say: "Youse just dumb to the fact, baby. If you don't know what you talking 'bout, you better ask Granny Grunt. I wouldn't mislead you, baby. I don't need to—not with the help I got." Then he would give the pimp's[1] sign, and percolate on down the Avenue. You can't go behind a fact like that.

[1] In Harlesemese, pimp has a different meaning than its ordinary definition as a procurer for immoral purposes. The Harlem pimp is a man whose amatory talents are for sale to any woman who will support him, either with a free meal or on a common law basis; in this sense, he is actually a male prostitute.

So this day he was airing out on the Avenue. It had to be late afternoon, or he would not have been out of bed. All you did by rolling out early was to stir your stomach up. That made you hunt for more dishes to dirty. The longer you slept, the less you had to eat. But you can't collar nods all day. No matter how long you stay in bed, and how quiet you keep, sooner or later that big gut is going to reach over and grab that little one and start to gnaw. That's confidential right from the Bible. You got to get out on the beat and collar yourself a hot.

So Jelly got into his zoot suit with the reet pleats and got out to skivver around and do himself some good. At 132nd Street, he spied one of his colleagues on the opposite sidewalk, standing in front of a café. Jelly figured that if he bull-skated just right, he might confidence Sweet Back out of a thousand on a plate. Maybe a shot of scrap-iron or a reefer. Therefore, Jelly took a quick backward look at his shoe soles to see how his leather was holding out. The way he figured it after the peep was that he had plenty to get across and maybe do a little more cruising besides. So he stanced out into the street and made the crossing.

"Hi there, Sweet Back!" he exploded cheerfully. "Gimme some skin!"

"Lay de skin on me, pal!" Sweet Back grabbed Jelly's outstretched hand and shook hard. "Ain't seen you since the last time, Jelly. What's cookin'?"

"Oh, just like de bear—I ain't nowhere. Like de bear's brother, I ain't no further. Like de bear's daughter—ain't got a quarter."

Right away, he wished he had not been so honest. Sweet Back gave him a top-superior, cut-eye look. Looked at Jelly just like a showman looks at an ape. Just as far above Jelly as fried chicken is over branch water.

"Cold in hand, hunh?" He talked down to Jelly. "A red hot pimp like you say you is, ain't got no business in the barrel. Last night when I left you, you was beating up your gums and broadcasting about how hot you was. Just as hot as July-jam, you told me. What you doing cold in hand?"

"Aw, man, can't you take a joke? I was just beating up my gums when I said I was broke. How can I be broke when I got de best woman in Harlem? If I ask her for a dime, she'll give me a ten dollar bill; ask her for drink of likker, and she'll buy me a whiskey still. If I'm lying, I'm flying!"

"Gar, don't hang out dat dirty washing in my back yard! Didn't I see you last night with dat beat chick, scoffing a hot dog? Dat chick you had was beat to de heels. Boy, you ain't no good for what you live."

"If you ain't lying now, you flying. You ain't got de first thin. You ain't got nickel one."

Jelly threw back the long skirt of his coat and rammed his hand down into his pants pocket. "Put your money where your mouth is!" he challenged, as he mock-struggled to haul out a huge roll. "Back your crap with your money. I bet you five dollars!"

Sweet Back made the same gesture of hauling out non-existent money.

"I been raised in the church. I don't bet, but I'll doubt you. Five rocks!"

"I thought so!" Jelly crowed, and hurriedly pulled his empty hand out of his pocket. "I knowed you'd back up when I drew my roll on you."

"You ain't drew no roll on me, Jelly. You ain't drew nothing but your pocket. You better stop dat boogerboosing. Next time I'm liable to make you do it." There was a splinter of regret in his voice. If Jelly really had had some money, he might have staked him, Sweet Back, to a hot. Good Southern cornbread with a piano on a platter. Oh, well! The right broad would, or might, come along.

"Who boogerboosing?" Jelly snorted. "Jig, I don't have to. Talking about me with a beat chick scoffing a hot dog! You must of not seen me, 'cause last night I was riding round in a Yellow Cab, with a yellow gal, drinking yellow likker and spending yellow money. Tell 'em 'bout me, tell 'em!"

"Git out of my face, Jelly! Dat broad I seen you with wasn't no pe-ola. She was one of them coal-scuttle blondes with hair just as close to her head as ninety-nine is to a hundred. She look-ted like she had seventy-five pounds of clear bosom, guts in her feet, and she look-ted like six months in front and nine months behind. Buy you a whiskey still! Dat broad couldn't make the down payment on a pair of sox."

"Sweet Back, you fixing to talk out of place." Jelly stiffened.

"If you trying to jump salty, Jelly, that's your mammy."

"Don't play in de family, Sweet Back. I don't play de dozens. I done told you."

"Who playing de dozens? You trying to get your hips up on your shoulders 'cause I said you was with a beat broad. One of them lam blacks."

"Who? Me? Long as you been knowing me, Sweet Back, you ain't never seen me with nothing but pe-olas. I can get any frail eel I wants to. How come I'm up here in New York? You don't know, do you? Since youse dumb to the fact, I reckon I'll have to make you hep. I had to leave from down south 'cause Miss Anne used to worry me so bad to go with me. Who, me? Man, I don't deal in no coal. Know what I tell 'em? If they's white, they's right! If they's yellow, they's mellow! If they's brown, they can stick around. But if they come black, they better git way back! Tell 'em bout me!"

"Aw, man, you trying to show your grandma how to milk ducks. Best you can do is to confidence some kitchen-mechanic out of a dime or two. Me, I knocks de pad with them cack-broads up on Sugar Hill, and fills 'em full of melody. Man, I'm quick death and easy judgment. Youse just a home-boy, Jelly. Don't try to follow me."

"Me follow *you*! Man, I come on like the Gang Busters, and go off like The March of Time! If dat ain't so, God is gone to Jersey City and you know He wouldn't be messing 'round a place like that. Know what my woman done? We hauled off and went to church last Sunday, and when they passed 'round the plate for the penny collection, I throwed in a dollar. De man looked at me real hard for dat. Dat made my woman mad,

so she called him back and throwed in a twenty dollar bill! Told him to take dat and go! Dat's what he got for looking at me 'cause I throwed in a dollar."

"Jelly, de wind may blow and de door may slam; dat what you shooting ain't worth a damn!"

Jelly slammed his hand in his bosom as if to draw a gun. Sweet Back did the same.

"If you wants to fight, Sweet Back, the favor is in me."

"I was deep-thinking then, Jelly. It's a good thing I ain't short-tempered. 'T'aint nothing to you, nohow. You ain't hit me yet."

Both burst into a laugh and changed from fighting to lounging poses.

"Don't get too yaller on me, Jelly. You liable to get hurt some day."

"You over-sports your hand your ownself. Too blamed astorperious. I just don't pay you no mind. Lay de skin on me!"

They broke their handshake hurriedly, because both of them looked up the Avenue and saw the same thing. It was a girl and they both remembered that it was Wednesday afternoon. All of the domestics off for the afternoon with their pay in their pockets. Some of them bound to be hungry for love. That meant a dinner, a shot of scrap-iron, maybe room rent and a reefer or two. Both went into the pose and put on the look.

"Big stars falling!" Jelly said out loud when she was in hearing distance. "It must be just before day!"

"Yeah, man!" Sweet Back agreed. "Must be a recess in Heaven—pretty angel like that out on the ground."

The girl drew abreast of them, reeling and rocking her hips.

"I'd walk clear to Diddy-Wah-Diddy to get a chance to speak to a pretty lil' ground-angel like that," Jelly went on.

"Aw, man, you ain't willing to go very far. Me, I'd go slap to Ginny-Gall, where they eat cow-rump, skin and all."

The girl smiled, so Jelly set his hat and took the plunge.

"Baby," he crooned, "what's on de rail for de lizard?"

The girl halted and braced her hips with her hands. "A Zigaboo down in Georgy, where I come from, asked a woman that one time and the judge told him 'ninety days.'"

"Georgy!" Sweet Back pretended to be elated. "Where 'bouts in Georgy is you from? Delaware?"

"Delaware?" Jelly snorted. "My people! My people! Free schools and dumb jigs! Man, how you going to put Delaware in Georgy? You ought to know dat's in Maryland."

"Oh, don't try to make out youse no northerner, you! Youse from right down in 'Bam your ownself!" The girl turned on Jelly.

"Yeah, I'm *from* there and I aims to stay from there."

"One of them Russians, eh?" the girl retorted. "Rushed up here to get away from a job of work."

That kind of talk was not leading towards the dinner table.

"But baby!" Jelly gasped. "Dat shape you got on you! I bet the Coca Cola Company is paying you good money for the patent!"

The girl smiled with pleasure at this, so Sweet Back jumped in.

"I know youse somebody swell to know. Youse real people. You grins like a regular fellow." He gave her his most killing look and let it simmer in. "These dickty jigs round here tries to smile. S'pose you and me go inside the café here and grab a hot?"

"You got any money?" the girl asked, and stiffened like a ramrod. "Nobody ain't pimping on me. You dig me?"

"Aw, now, baby!"

"I seen you two mullet-heads before. I was uptown when Joe Brown had you all in the go-long last night. Dat cop sure hates a pimp! All he needs to see is the pimps' salute, and he'll out with his night-stick and whip your head to the red. Beat your head just as flat as a dime!" She went off into a great blow of laughter.

"Oh, let's us don't talk about the law. Let's talk about us,"

Sweet Back persisted. "You going inside with me to holler let one come flopping! One come grunting! Snatch one from de rear!"

"Naw indeed!" the girl laughed harshly. "You skillet is trying to promote a meal on me. But it'll never happen, brother. You barking up the wrong tree. I wouldn't give you air if you was stopped up in a jug. I'm not putting out a thing. I'm just like the cemetery—I'm not putting out, I'm taking in! Dig?"

"I'll tell you like the farmer told the potato—plant you now and dig you later."

The girl made a movement to switch on off. Sweet Back had not dirtied a plate since the day before. He made a weak but desperate gesture.

"Trying to snatch my pocketbook, eh?" she blazed. Instead of running, she grabbed hold of Sweet Back's draping coat-tail and made a slashing gesture. "How much split you want back here? If your feets don't hurry up and take you 'way from here, you'll ride away. I'll spread my lungs all over New York and call the law. Go ahead, Bedbug! Touch me! And I'll holler like a pretty white woman!"

The boys were ready to flee, but she turned suddenly and rocked on off with her ear-rings snapping and her heels popping.

"My people! My people!" Sweet Back sighed.

"I know you feel chewed," Jelly said, in an effort to make it appear that he had had no part in the fiasco.

"Oh, let her go," Sweet Back said magnanimously. "When I see people without the periodical principles they's supposed to have, I just don't fool with 'em. What I want to steal her old pocketbook with all the money I got? I could buy a beat chick like her and give her away. I got money's mammy and Grandma change. One of my women, and not the best one I got neither, is buying me ten shag suits at one time."

He glanced sidewise at Jelly to see if he was convincing. But Jelly's thoughts were far away. He was remembering those full, hot meals he had left back in Alabama to seek wealth and splendor in Harlem without working. He had even forgotten to look cocky and rich.

## **GLOSSARY OF HARLEM SLANG**

Air out—leave, flee, stroll

Astorperious—haughty, biggity

Aunt Hagar—Negro race (also Aunt Hagar's chillun)

Bad hair—Negro type hair

Balling—having fun

Bam, and down in Bam—down South

Battle-hammed—badly formed about the hips

Beating up your gums—talking to no purpose

Beluthahatchie—next station beyond Hell

Big boy—stout fellow. But in the South, it means fool and is a prime insult.

Blowing your top—getting very angry; occasionally used to mean, "He's doing fine!"

Boogie-woogie—type of dancing and rhythm. For years, in the South, it meant secondary syphilis.

Brother-in-black—Negro

Bull-skating—Bragging

Butt sprung—a suit or a skirt out of shape in the rear

Coal scuttle blonde—black woman

Cold—exceeding, well, etc., as in "He was cold on that trumpet!"

Collar a nod—sleep

Collar a hot—eat a meal

Color scale—high yaller, yaller, high brown, vaseline brown, seal brown, low brown, dark black

Conk buster—cheap liquor; also an intellectual Negro

Cruising—parading down the Avenue. Variations: *oozing*, *percolating*, and *free-wheeling*. The latter implies more briskness.

Cut—doing something well

Dark black—a casually black person. Superlatives: *low black*, a blacker person; *lam black*, still blacker; and *damn black*, blackest man, of whom it is said: "Why, lightning bugs follows him at 12 o'clock in the day, thinking it's midnight."

Dat thing—sex of either sex

Dat's your mammy—same as, "So is your old man."

Diddy-wah-diddy—a far place, a measure of distance. (2) another suburb of Hell, built since way before Hell wasn't no bigger than Baltimore. The folks in Hell go there for a big time.

Dig—understand. "Dig me?" means, "Do you get me? Do you collar the jive?"

Draped down—dressed in the height of Harlem fashion; also *togged down*.

Dumb to the fact—"You don't know what you're talking about."

Dusty butt—cheap prostitute

Eight-rock—very black person

Every postman on his beat—kinky hair

First thing smoking—a train. "I'm through with this town. I mean to grab the first thing smoking."

Frail eel—pretty girl

Free schools—a shortened expression of deprecation derived from "free schools and dumb Negroes," sometimes embellished with "free schools, pretty yellow teachers and dumb Negroes."

Function—a small, unventilated dance, full of people too casually bathed

Gator-faced—long, black face with big mouth

Getting on some stiff time—really doing well with your racket

Get you to go—power, physical or otherwise, to force the opponent to run

Ginny Gall—a suburb of Hell, a long way off

Git up off of me—quit talking about me, leave me alone

Go when the wagon comes—another way of saying, "You may be acting biggity now, but you'll cool down when enough power gets behind you."

Good hair—Caucasian-type hair

Granny Grunt—a mythical character to whom most questions may be referred

Ground rations—sex, also *under rations*

Gum beater—a blowhard, a braggart, idle talker in general

Gut-bucket—low dive, type of music, or expression from same

Gut-foot—bad case of fallen arches

Handkerchief-head—sycophant type of Negro; also an *Uncle Tom*

Hauling—fleeing on foot. "Man! He cold hauled it!"

I don't deal in coal—"I don't keep company with black women."

I'm cracking but I'm facking—"I'm wisecracking, but I'm telling the truth."

Inky dink—very black person

I shot him lightly and he died politely—"I completely outdid him."

Jar head—Negro man

Jelly—sex

Jig—Negro, a corrupted shortening of zigaboo

Jook—a pleasure house, in the class of gut-bucket; now common all over the South

Jooking—playing the piano, guitar, or any musical instrument in the manner of the Jooks (pronounced like "took") (2)  
Dancing and "scronching" ditto.

Juice—liquor

July jam—something very hot

Jump salty—get angry

Kitchen mechanic—a domestic

Knock yourself out—have a good time

Lightly, slightly and politely—doing things perfectly

Little sister—measure of hotness: "Hot as little sister!"

Liver-lip—pendulous, thick, purple lips

Made hair—hair that has been straightened

Mammy—a term of insult. Never used in any other way by Negroes.

Miss Anne—a white woman

Mister Charlie—a white man

Monkey chaser—a West Indian

Mug man—small-time thug or gangster

My people! My people!—Sad and satiric expression in the Negro language: sad when a Negro comments on the backwardness of some members of his race; at other times, used for satiric or comic effect

Naps—kinky hair

Nearer my God to Thee—good hair

Nothing to the bear but his curly hair—"I call your bluff," or "Don't be afraid of him; he won't fight."

Now you cookin' with gas—now you're talking, in the groove,  
etc.

Ofay—white person

Old cuffee—Negro (genuine African word for the same thing)

Palmer House—walking flat-footed, as from fallen arches

Pancake—a humble type of Negro

Park ape—an ugly, underprivileged Negro

Peckerwood—poor and unloved class of Southern whites

Peeping through my likkers—carrying on even though drunk

Pe-ola—a very white Negro girl

Piano—spare ribs (white rib-bones suggest piano keys)

Pig meat—young girl

Pilch—house or apartment; residence

Pink toes—yellow girl

Playing the dozens—low-rating the ancestors of your opponent

Red neck—poor Southern white man

Reefer—marijuana cigaret, also a *drag*

Righteous mass or *grass*—good hair

Righteous rags—the components of a Harlem-style suit

Rug-cutter—originally a person frequenting house-rent parties, cutting up the rugs of the host with his feet; a person too cheap or poor to patronize regular dance halls; now means a good dancer.

Russian—a Southern Negro up north. "Rushed up here," hence a Russian.

Scrap iron—cheap liquor

Sell out—run in fear

Sender—he or she who can get you to go, i.e., has what it takes. Used often as a compliment: "He's a solid sender!"

Smoking, or *smoking over*—looking someone over

Solid—perfect

Sooner—anything cheap and mongrel, now applied to cheap clothes, or a shabby person.

Stanch, or *stanch out*—to begin, commence, step out

Stomp—low dance, but hot man!

Stormbuzzard—shiftless, homeless character

Stroll—doing something well

Sugar Hill—northwest corner of Harlem, near Washington Heights, site of newest apartment houses, mostly occupied by professional people. (The expression has been distorted in the South to mean a Negro red light district.)

The bear—confession of poverty

The big apple, also *the big red apple*—New York City

The man—the law, or powerful boss

Thousand on a plate—beans

Tight head—one with kinky hair

Trucking—strolling. (2) dance step from the strolling motif

V and X—five-and-ten-cent store

West Hell—another suburb of Hell, worse than the original

What's on the rail for the lizard?—suggestion for moral

turpitude

Whip it to the red—beat your head until it is bloody

Woofing—aimless talk, as a dog barks on a moonlight night

Young suit—ill-fitting, too small. Observers pretend to believe you're breaking in your little brother's suit for him.

Your likker told you—misguided behavior

Zigaboo—a Negro

Zoot suit with the reel pleat—Harlem style suit, padded shoulders, 43-inch trousers at the knee with cuff so small it needs a zipper to get into, high waist-line, fancy lapels, bushels of buttons, etc.

[The end of *Story in Harlem Slang* by Zora Neale Hurston]