



## Such Getting Upstairs

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One of the many joys of travel is encountering local idioms that you've never heard before. I'm talking about the colourful expressions used in a particular place to refer to things in ways that are quite unique. In Texas, for example, when making plans to be somewhere at an appointed time yet still acknowledging the unpredictability of fate, one says "I'll be there," followed by the caveat "God willing, and the creeks don't rise."

Australia has some beauties. I learned several from a friend I travelled with when I went bush shortly after arriving in the country in 1969. He had an eclectic collection of sayings that he had learned in his youth and wove them into the stories he told while we were driving across Australia's wide-open spaces. One day he said: "So there I was, carrying on like a pork chop..." I had to stop him in mid-story to ask him what he had just said. He repeated it and said it meant behaving foolishly or saying something inappropriate. I recently looked it up on the internet, which we didn't have in 1969. Apparently, it is an abbreviated version of an older expression, "carrying on like a pork chop at a Jewish wedding." The extra words provide some context that conveys more clearly the idea of uttering something inappropriate and out of place.

Some expressions are rooted in customs or traditions and can be hard to fathom if one is unfamiliar with the culture in question. The gauchos in Uruguay and Argentina, on the other hand, have one whose sentiment can be understood by anyone from anywhere: "*La vida es una cebolla y hay que pelarla llorando*", or "Life is an onion, and we must peel it and weep."

I didn't really have to travel far to find colourful expressions, because I had a fertile source of them in my own family. My maternal grandfather was born in Sheffield, Yorkshire in 1881 and was a very colourful character. He was a self-taught musician who played the piano beautifully and was

always ready to entertain his family or their friends. Grandpa Evans had a wonderful sense of humour and an easy way with children. When I asked him how old he was he'd say, "I'm as old as my tongue and a little older than my teeth." His idioms sometimes bewildered me when I was a little boy. When we were out somewhere, at an ice cream parlour for example, and I was misbehaving in some way, he would give me a stern look. "If you're going to carry on like that," he'd say, "next time I bring you I'll leave you at home."

His most bewildering expression was also his most intriguing one. Whenever there was a commotion of some kind at his house in Buenos Aires, with lots of people coming and going, all talking at the same time, disrupting his peaceful day, he would say, "I haven't seen such getting upstairs since Pa died." As with so many other things, I wish I'd asked him (or my mother) to explain this idiom while I had the chance. But I didn't, and for years I've wondered what it originally referred to. I asked my cousins, but no one could shed any light on the mystery. So, I started thinking about where he was from and how an expression like that might originate. It occurred to me that, in that place at that time, most ordinary houses probably had narrow staircases up to the second floor, where the bedrooms were located. If someone's father (or anyone for that matter) died in his bed, people from a funeral home would have to come and put him on a stretcher of some kind and carry him downstairs. This would be a tricky operation, involving much back-and-forthing, negotiating tight corners and difficult angles, and there would likely be quite a bit of chatter and all-round kerfuffle. So, it's not hard to imagine how a person, when embroiled in some sort of commotion at a later date, might think back and say, "I haven't seen such getting upstairs since Pa died!" I don't know if that is right or not, but it's the only explanation I've been able to come up with so far.