

Penny For the Guy

Ivan wasn't crazy about the idea from the start. He couldn't see that there was much difference between making a guy in the usual way - with straw, a couple of sticks, some old cast-offs and so on - and having someone dress up as one. The effect, after all, would be much the same: the objective being to push the guy around the neighbourhood in a billy cart, going from door to door and soliciting donations, either in cash or kind, on the strength of their creation, for the fireworks the kids would use to make the most of the festivities at that night's bonfire.

But Al, who had taken on himself the role of the group's leader, insisted. "It'll be something different, man - a live guy! Who else is going to have anything like that? Besides, we haven't got time to put a real guy together. We'll make a killing. I'll do all the talking. All you have to do is sit in the cart, look like a guy and keep your mouth shut."

Dougie and George agreed, and Ivan, who always seemed to be on the fringe of acceptance by the other members of the group, reluctantly accepted the role.

They got started early. Al's brother owned the billy cart, so everyone gathered at Al's place at six-thirty and started preparations. Dougie brought along an old sports jacket and trousers that he'd borrowed from his father's wardrobe, George contributed an old sunhat and gloves from his mother's garden shed, and together they fitted out their reluctant mannequin. The clothes were grotesquely oversize, even over the top of Ivan's school clothes, but Al reckoned that if they collected a bit of long grass from down around the gasworks and stuffed them into the sleeves, hat and trousers of the costume, the effect would be pretty effective.

When they finally coaxed Ivan into the billy cart, though, it was apparent that something still wasn't right. "It's his face," Georgie concluded. "He still looks too much like a real person."

The others considered this. They tried pulling an old stocking over Ivan's head, but Ivan reckoned he couldn't breathe, and when they cut a piece out for his large bulbous nose, it only served to highlight the fact that there was a human being within the costume. In a flash of inspiration, Al sneaked back inside the house and emerged with a couple of sticks of his mother's make-up; but even this didn't do the job, so they resorted to handfuls of mud, which they plastered over their model's face and neck.

This, they agreed, was much better, although Ivan complained that pieces of dirt kept falling into his eyes. He sat uncomfortably in the cart, brushing ineffectually at his eyes and the long strands of thin, straggling blonde hair protruding from beneath the hat's brim. Every time he moved, the grass in his sleeves and trouser legs fell out, a problem the others managed to rectify by stuffing more grass into his socks and gloves and tying bits of string around the guy's wrists and ankles. Al found an old fruit tin in the garbage, which with the contribution of a few coins (mainly from Ivan,

who always seemed to have more money in his pockets than the rest of them), made a satisfactory rattling sound, and the party was ready to go.

By the time they set off, the sun was up, and the heat was making itself felt. Ivan was a big kid, and pulling the cart proved to be harder than they'd counted on. Dougie and George did most of the heavy work, while Al walked in front with the donations tin, all three chanting the traditional mantra "Guy, guy, penny for the guy!" in time to the rattling of the coins.

Things started well enough; they were up earlier than most of the other kid's in the neighbourhood, so the pickings were pretty good. At the gate of every house they approached, Al would check to see that Ivan was properly positioned, and issue a strong warning for him to keep still. Al did most the talking, looking suitably pathetic as he presented the reluctant guy.

It wasn't long, though, before Ivan started complaining. He was sweating profusely, the make-up and dirt running down his face and into his eyes, which Al refused to let him wipe clear. The grass in his clothing, too, was becoming a problem, itching unbearably and causing a rash that Ivan insisted on scratching at the most inappropriate moments.

Al's script, therefore, began to take on a less impressive tone, his soliciting interrupted by constant muttered threats: "Penny for the guy, Mrs Hancock... Shut up, Ivan! ... What? Oh yes, we made him ourselves... Ivan, shut up! ... Yes, he is a bit unusual, isn't he? ... Ivan, for god's sake, sit still and shut up! ..." And so on.

Before long the donations started to dry up, and when they got back to Al's place their haul was only moderate. Ivan leapt out of the cart, scratching furiously as he tore the costume from his body. He took the blame for his poor performance well, and with the appropriate level of apology, but Al hadn't finished with him yet.

"You can make it up to us, Ivan. They're giving a prize tonight for the best guy. I reckon we could win that easy. All you 'd have to do is put the stuff back on for a while, until the judges have a look at you."

Ivan face went paler than usual; but the others were looking on expectantly, and in the end his need to be part of the group outweighed his reservations about Al's proposal. "Okay," he said miserably. "I'll do it."

The bonfire was being held, as usual, at the local school. By the time Al's group turned up, pulling the re-costumed Ivan in the billy-cart, the fire was already well alight. They parked the cart at the end of a row of a dozen or so others waiting to be judged.

The school's headmaster was in charge of the judging party, and he slowly worked his way along the line of contestants, a huge bag of fireworks clenched enticingly in his fist. As he approached, Al bent down and hissed in Ivan's ear: "Remember, don't move; don't even breathe... and keep your mouth shut." Ivan nodded grimly.

Finally their moment arrived. The headmaster squinted as he bent down over the cart. "That's amazing," he said appreciatively. "Very lifelike." He turned to the other members of the judging party. "What do you think – have we got a winner?"

There were nods and smiles all round. Beneath his mask of make-up and dirt, Ivan was turning bright red as he tried to hold his breath. "Okay," the principal said, drawing Al aside and addressing him confidentially, "here's how we'll do it: I'll announce the winner, and then you wheel your guy out and collect the prize. Then we'll do the usual."

Al hadn't entered the contest before, and he had no idea what the man was talking about. "What d'you mean, 'the usual'?"

The headmaster laughed. "Throw him in the fire, of course."

Al heard a stifled moan behind him. He stared blankly at the principal, trying to get his head around the proposition. It crossed his mind that it might just be possible: a quick foray into the edge of the flames, perhaps, then a subtle rescue.

But he needn't have bothered; when he turned around to talk it over with the others, the occupant of the billy-cart was nowhere to be seen.

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