



## Penny For The Guy

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**M**y mother loved living in Montevideo. But she missed her parents and her old life in Buenos Aires, so she took my brother and me to visit them a couple of times a year. The highlight of those visits, for me, was spending time with my grandfather, who was a most interesting man.

When the weather was good, he took us for walks around the neighbourhood. Sometimes to Coghlan railway station where we stood on the platform and watched the trains clattering back and forth. On one particular visit, in early November, we walked to a nearby street with lots of shops and restaurants and cafés. “Here we are,” he said as he opened the door of a place called La Martona. It was a milk bar with the largest selection of ice cream flavours I had ever seen. I ordered one scoop of strawberry and one of pistachio. We took our cones to a table by the window and sat licking them and smiling and trying to catch the trickles that ran down over our hands. When we had finished, Grandpa asked, “Do you know what today is?” We had no idea. “It’s Guy Fawkes Day,” he said.

He went on to tell us the famous story about the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, when a group of conspirators planned to assassinate King James I by blowing up the Houses of Parliament. They leased a space right beneath the House of Lords where they stored about three dozen barrels of gunpowder. One of the men, Guy Fawkes, was assigned to stand guard over the barrels and wait until the 5th of November, when the king would be in attendance, at which point he was to light the fuse. But word of the plot was leaked, and Fawkes was discovered. He and his partners were arrested and executed.

The king survived the assassination attempt, and Londoners celebrated by lighting bonfires that evening. This became a tradition that eventually included fireworks and the practice of burning Guy Fawkes in effigy. Children made a “Guy” out of old clothes stuffed with rags and newspapers.

They paraded it out on the street and asked passersby to donate a penny for the Guy. The pennies were used to buy

fireworks to light up the sky on Bonfire Night (and possibly some chocolate). But the custom has largely died out, for several reasons. In modern times, safety concerns prevent children from using fireworks as they once did, and parents no longer feel comfortable with the idea of their kids begging on the street. Grandpa ended the story by quoting the rhyme people used to recite: “Remember remember the 5th of November, gunpowder treason and plot. I see no reason why gunpowder treason should ever be forgot.”

I was about ten at the time, and had been brought up as an English boy, despite the fact that we lived thousands of miles and an ocean away from England. I had never even been there at that point but had heard a lot about it from my grandmothers. They described it as a sort of paradise where everyone was polite, everything was clean, and the buses all ran on time. I had read Enid Blyton’s books about the adventures of intrepid young English boys, and longed to be like them. The idea of being on the street calling out “Penny for the Guy” thrilled me to the core. It was just the sort of thing I would love to do. Why did we have to live so far from where those kids were having all the fun? I had by now forgotten all about my delicious ice cream. I just wanted to be transported to England, where I would spend my days doing what English children did, and life would be perfect.

Grandpa could see that I was miserable and came up with a plan. That evening he took us down to an open field beside the railway line and built a bonfire and let us play with fireworks. “Just like in England,” he said. It wasn’t really, but it was great fun, and Grandpa was so cool, and I was sure I’d get to England one day. And by the time I went to sleep that night I was over my fit of the gloomies.

