

The Boy with the Glass Eye

by Stuart Finegan

In the summer of 1976, the pavements cracked beneath the heat, and the grass on the council estate had turned the colour of dry straw.

Eleven-year-old Danny Keegan spent most evenings in the back garden with his dog. It was little more than a patch of muddy grass, a rusting washing line, and a leaning fence that separated one family's troubles from another's. Yet, to Danny, it was a place of escape.

His dog, Dougal, lay beside him beneath the fading light. Danny sat on an overturned bucket, one real eye fixed on the sky. The other, made of glass, stared slightly to the left.

People often thought he wasn't looking at them. That suited him. It showed him what kind of people they really were.

The estate was full of people pretending. Men pretending they still had work. Mothers pretending there was enough food in the cupboards. Kids pretending they weren't frightened of the older boys who hung around the shops.

Danny watched them all.

His glass eye seemed to notice things differently. Not better—just differently. While his real eye saw the world as it was, the glass one seemed to show him what people wished the world could be.

At least, that was what he liked to imagine.

A distant rumble rolled across the evening sky.

An aeroplane.

Danny leaned back and squinted upwards. There it was—a silver shape moving slowly beyond the estate, away from the rows of pebble-dashed houses, the abandoned factory, and its statue-like chimney.

"Where d'you reckon they're going?" he asked Dougal.

The dog opened one eye, then promptly fell back asleep.

“Spain, maybe. Or Russia?”

To Danny, the names felt enormous. Skyscrapers. Bright lights. Places where people probably never argued about money.

The plane disappeared into the clouds. Danny imagined the people inside wearing smart clothes, reading newspapers, and drinking cold drinks served by smiling stewardesses.

Nobody on that plane knew his estate existed.

Nobody knew about the damp walls in Number 42.

Nobody knew about the broken cooker.

Nobody knew about his mother counting pennies at the kitchen table.

The thought made him sad, but only for a moment. He could still imagine himself aboard that plane, and his imagination cost nothing.

Behind him came the familiar crash of a cupboard door being slammed.

His body stiffened.

The arguing had started again. It nearly always began around teatime. First came the raised voices. Then the accusations, followed by silence. Then louder voices.

The walls of their small house seemed to hold every bitter word.

“You can’t spend what we haven’t got!”

His mother’s voice—cutting and tired.

His father’s voice followed.

“What d’you want me to do, Maureen? Work another bloody shift?”

“You already do, Pat!”

Danny sighed.

The same argument as yesterday. The same as last week. It was always about money—or, rather, the lack of it.

His father worked mornings at a warehouse and evenings driving delivery vans. His mother cleaned offices before dawn and stacked shelves at weekends. Both of them worked until their backs hurt and their faces looked older than they should.

Still, there never seemed to be enough.

The arguments weren’t because they hated each other. Deep down, Danny knew that. They argued because they were exhausted.

Dougal lifted his head as the shouting continued. The dog looked towards the house. Danny scratched him behind the ears.

“It’s all right, mate.”

Neither of them believed it.

The sun dipped behind the factory chimney. Long, thin shadows stretched across the garden, and the air suddenly cooled.

The estate always changed character at night. Children disappeared indoors. Televisions flickered behind curtains. The streetlights buzzed into life, one by one.

This was Danny's favourite time.

Somewhere, a train horn screamed. He buried his hands in the long grass and looked up at the stars beginning to emerge. Then he whispered the words he always thought but never said aloud.

"Here, in the garden at night, it is another world—strange, yet friendly and familiar. Never frightening."

The words felt true every time he told himself.

Out here, there were no bills. No debt. No shouting. Just the night sky stretching as far as he could see.

Another plane crossed overhead, its lights blinking red and white. Danny followed it carefully.

Perhaps someone aboard was looking down at the scattered orange streetlights below. Perhaps they wondered about the people living beneath them.

Maybe not.

Dougal shuffled closer. Danny rested a hand on the dog's neck. His glass eye reflected a small piece of starlight.

Sometimes people made fun of him because of it. Somehow, they always saw the eye first and the boy second.

But Danny had discovered something they hadn't.

His glass eye made him an observer. A collector of details. A dreamer.

It had taught him that the world could be viewed from more than one angle. That there was always another way to see things.

Even hardship.

Even poverty.

Even hope.

Inside the house, the arguing had finally stopped. A silence settled over the evening. It wasn't a happy silence, but it was a peaceful one.

For tonight, anyway.

Danny stood. The grass was damp around his school shoes. The plane had vanished into the darkness, carrying strangers towards places he could only imagine.

One day, he promised himself, he would see those places.

One day, he would leave the estate behind.

Not because he hated it, but because he wanted more than it could give.

The stars brightened overhead. Dougal wagged his tail.

For a little while, beneath the clear summer sky of 1976, a young boy with one real eye and one glass eye stood dreaming of a bigger world, already believing that somewhere, a different life was waiting for him.