

Chapter Extract from *The Man with Eyes like Windows*:

Fourteen year-old Louie is trying to find his father who has left home to join a band. In Birmingham the bus is full. A car draws up and the driver asks Louie if he wants a lift. Against his better judgement Louie accepts:

Chapter 7

Five minutes after accepting the lift from him I knew I was in trouble. I knew how you had to be careful about getting into cars with strangers. Only last year there'd been that trouble at school when Dave Maddocks had disappeared. We'd been playing with him in the same park twenty minutes before he'd got in the car. The man told him that his mother had been taken to hospital and that he'd come to drive him there. He'd asked Noel Curry if he'd go with him too. But he'd said no. They'd found Dave Maddock's body five days later in the old air raid shelter by the canal.

But this bloke hadn't looked like that. You'd expect a pervert to be old and ugly with a long raincoat and thick glasses. The man in the car didn't look like that at all. He was young for a start and was wearing a suit. Anyway I was fed up with waiting for the Liverpool bus. Southport was only twenty miles from Liverpool. I'd decided to phone my Mum from a kiosk. I was in the middle of telling her I was all right, when the bus drew in. I said goodbye. She kept asking me where I was.

'I'm all right,' I kept saying. I had a feeling she was crying. I had a feeling if I carried on talking to her I might tell her where I was going to. I was quite glad when the coach pulled in because it gave me an excuse for saying goodbye.

But the coach was full. I followed the driver round as he was putting everybody's luggage in the back. Couldn't he squeeze me on? I didn't mind standing.

'There'll be another one along in three hours,' he said. 'Your best bet is to go to the bus station in Digbeth. It's only about a mile and a half from here. You've got more choice there. They'll tell you what to do.'

It had taken me an hour to find this bus stop. I didn't want to walk a mile and a half through Birmingham again.

The bus drew out. I sat down on a bench by the stop. Everywhere you went it seemed to be windy. Across the dual carriageway a priest came out of the church and walked along the pavement. His black robes whirled out behind him. An ambulance came out of the hospital behind me, its siren blaring and blue light flashing. Then the car drew up. The driver wound down the window. 'Going anywhere I'm going?'

I was so fed up I didn't think. 'Southport', I said.

'Hop in,' he said.

Just as I closed the door I had this strange feeling. I can't say what it was. It was a kind of warning. I almost got out of the car straight away; and then I thought how embarrassing it would be. I looked round. It was a big car.

'Just get my clobber out of your way.' He bent down and picked up a sports bag full of clothes. There was a pair of football boots and a hockey stick on the top. He slung it on the back seat. I thought, if he plays football he must be all right.

'I'm going to Liverpool. The 'Pool,' he said in a mock Liverpool accent and laughed. I smiled. 'You can easy get a lift from there.'

'Thanks,' I said.

'Not much fun waiting out there. Waiting long? By the way my name's Jim, what's yours?'

'Louie.'

'Louie,' he said as if he was surprised. 'That's an unusual name. A very unusual name. I bet your Dad gave it to you.' He patted my knee and laughed.

I didn't give a very good smile back.

He kept asking me questions and listening to me as if what I was saying was very important.

'How d'you get a name like Louie?' He said it in a funny way that made me feel embarrassed. I got fed up with explaining about my name. In fact my Dad *bad* chosen it. He'd once met a trumpet player called Louis Armstrong and had told him if he had a son he'd name him after him. He did the same with Jo. She was called Jolene after Murray Palermo's sister but everybody called her Jo. I didn't want to tell Jim all that. I didn't like him touching my knee like he did.

'My Dad just liked it, that's all.'

'Good name. Good name,' said Jim. 'At least it's different. Anybody calls out Jim and twenty guys turn round. At least with Louie you know who they're talking to. Am I right? I'm right.' He laughed again.

He took a cigarette case out of his inside pocket and pressed the cigar lighter.

'Cigarette?' he asked, flicking the case open.

'No thanks,' I said.

He took a cigarette and lit it. 'Very wise,' he said.

There were initials stamped on the cigarette case. C.G.R.' Why did he have that on when his name was Jim?

'Wish I'd never started,' he said, 'specially if you do a bit of kicking the old ball about.'

I wish that there'd been someone with me. Even Billy Fa Fa.

'You play football at all, do you? I notice the sports bag.'

'I play a bit. For the School, under-fourteens.'

'I bet you do too. You've got the look of a footballer. **Good** strong legs I bet.' He squeezed my leg again. I flinched away. He didn't seem to notice but carried on pressing. I started to get really frightened. He opened the window and blew smoke out. 'I bet you're an inside forward. Am I right? I'm right aren't I?'

'Goalkeeper,' I said.

'Ah,' he said, 'that makes sense. You've got the hands. Just look at the size of those hands.' He laid his left hand across on top of mine. 'Need big hands of course, if you're a goalkeeper. And agility of course. Bet you're pretty agile when you get between those sticks Louie.'

I took my hands away. He laughed.

'Don't like to be touched, do you?'

I thought of Dave Maddocks lying dead in the air raid shelter.

'Have to get used to the old physical contact. Football's a very physical contact game. Oh yes, the old phys con is the name of the game.'

He was turning off the motorway. Why was he turning off? I remembered the newspaper hoarding I'd read outside the Town Hall. 'Parent's Agony over Murdered City Schoolboy.'

My mouth had gone dry. We were driving down a country lane. I wondered if he went slowly enough round a corner I could throw myself out. But he looked strong and fit. He was looking at me and smiling. He ran his fingers through his hair.

'You got a girl friend, Louie?'

I thought of Sheila Whiteley. I didn't want to mention her name in his car. Didn't think it was right to think about her. 'No,' I said. As soon as I said it I knew I'd said the wrong thing.

'Don't blame you, Louie. Don't blame you. Too much trouble, women. Take my advice, nothing but trouble. Better *off* without 'em.'

He had a suit in a cellophane hanger against my door post. As we swung past a pub and round a corner it tilted and struck me.

'That in your way, is it?' He leaned across and pushed it back then rested his hand on the back of my neck.

‘You boys like to wear your hair short these days. Not like when I was a kid.’ He tugged gently at the hair on the back of my neck. ‘If you can believe it Louie, when I was your age I had it down over my shoulders. Right down over my shoulders. Fashion. That’s all it was Louie. Fashion.’ He pulled my hair sharply. I reached up and took his hand away. He laughed.

‘You really are very touchy. Louie. You must learn not to be so touchy.’

My palms were sweating and my heart pounding.

‘Here, you know what I reckon your problem is. You got knocked about when you was a kid. I’m right aren’t I, Louie? I reckon,’ he paused as he turned a corner looking left and right, ‘I reckon you was one of those battered babies you read about. I think that’s a shame Louie, I reckon that’s a real shame because what that means is that you can’t bear anybody touching you, after.’

I had to say something. The roads were becoming more and more deserted. ‘Why have we come off the motorway?’ I tried to say it as if I wasn’t worried.

‘Jimmy boy knows a short cut.’ He glanced down at the instruments in front of him. ‘Need a drop of the old gasolino, Louie.’

He tapped my knee again. ‘I have an idea. My sister has a house near here. I sometimes stay there when I’m on business near Liverpool. Now she’s away at the moment so what we could do, what we could do, Louie, is to stop over there tonight and then I can drive you to Southport tomorrow. How does that grab you?’

I could see myself lying in a field my arms spread-eagled; see my picture in black and white on the front page of a newspaper. I’d rather take the risk of throwing myself out on to the road and making a run for it. Keeping my eyes on the winding road in front I let my left hand slide down an inch at a time towards the door handle. I felt the cold metal beneath my fingers. Suddenly, as hard as I could, I pushed down and put my shoulder against it. It didn’t give.

‘Child lock,’ said Jim smiling. ‘Very handy. Stops kids falling out. Could have a very nasty accident. Kids falling out into the road as you’re going along.’ He suddenly put his foot on the accelerator and the bonnet of the car lifted under the roar of power. He smiled. ‘Especially if you’re going fast.’ He suddenly slowed again. A small country service station lay in front of us.

‘Ah, gasolino.’

He pulled up by the pumps.

‘You stay there Louie boy while Jim fills her up.’

He got out, removed the hose from the pump and moved to the rear of the car. I knew there was a button in the door sill that you lifted if you wanted to unlock the door from the inside. I couldn’t see it because it was behind my left shoulder. I looked in the rear view mirror. Jim was leaning over the petrol filler. He noticed me looking and smiled and winked at me. Very slowly I let my right hand creep across my body to the door and then upwards. I could hear him screwing the filler cap back on. Soon he’d be back. My fingers inched up the door until they reached the sill. Slowly, a millimetre at a time I felt behind me. Where was it? I’d reached the window frame. I should have found the button by now. The driver’s door opened.

‘Not going anywhere are you?’ he said.

I scratched at my left shoulder as if it was itching.

‘Forgot the money,’ he said. He reached into the glove compartment and took out a wallet. He winked at me again then closed the door and locked it. I looked behind me at the door. Where the button should have been was a hole. I glanced across to the driver’s door. It was the same. Both buttons had been removed on purpose. That meant that Jim had planned this. That he’d done it before. There had been others before me. There was blood on my lip. I’d bitten it so hard that it was bleeding. In the rear view mirror I could see him walking towards the kiosk. A pickup truck pulled in, towing behind it a high sided trailer. A boy of fifteen clambered out of the passenger door. I banged on the window and waved for him to come over. He smiled at me and walked past towards the kiosk. He thought I was being friendly. I wiped the blood off

my lip with the back of my hand.

'Oh God,' I said out loud. It was funny how you only prayed when you were in trouble. Mum believed in God. I wondered if he was up there somewhere, watching me. I looked up. Light was coming through a crack in the roof. He'd left the sunroof slightly open. I looked round. I could see his back in the queue. I stood up and pressed with all my might on the sliding panel. It moved a few inches then stopped. I looked round. On the back seat was a hockey stick. I wedged it hard into the crack and jerked it back with all my strength. It slid a few more inches but still not wide enough for my body to get through. I glanced at the kiosk once more. He was talking to the girl at the till. I threw all my weight and strength on to the stick. There Where was it? I'd reached the window frame. I should have found the button by now. The driver's door opened.

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I could see Jim at the desk of the kiosk. He was saying goodbye and turning. I ran as fast as I could round the further side of the building. I pushed my back against the wall. I could see Jim's legs under the high-sided trailer. He was getting into his car. His feet left the ground. He'd soon be gone. I let my breath out in relief. Then I heard footsteps.

'Louie, Louie. I'm waiting for you.'

He was walking towards me. Any second he'd be round the side of the building. I edged along the wall, my back to it. I found a door. Another door. I turned the knob and fell into a small whitewashed room with a washbasin. At the back was a door with a foot of space at the top and the bottom. It was a toilet.

'Louie. Come on Louie.'

I pushed through the door and shot the latch. If he came in here there was nowhere else I could run to. I heard his footsteps stop outside. I could picture him looking this way and that.

'Louie that wasn't very nice. Scratching the roof of my motor. Not very nice at all. If you'd wanted to go Louie, you only had to tell me. I'd have understood. But now you owe me. D'you understand, Louie?'

I held my breath. I could hear the tap dripping.

'Louie.' There was silence.

Then I heard him bang the door open. Heard his footsteps on the concrete. Another door banged open. I expected to see his face staring at me. But it didn't. I heard him swear. 'Bloody kid.' Funny how his voice sounded fainter though he was inside. Then the door closed and I heard his footsteps disappearing. He'd gone. I counted up to a thousand. And then another thousand for luck. I unlocked the cubicle and opened the outside door a crack. The pick-up and trailer was still there. I craned my neck to see round the corner of the building. The pumps were deserted. Jim had driven away. A lady walked towards me. She stopped and looked at me. What was up with her? I stepped out into the sunlight. 'Well I never!' she said and walked past me shutting the door. I looked at the closed door. It had 'Ladies' written on it. Jim hadn't thought to try that one. No wonder the lady had given me that funny look. I walked across towards the kiosk. My heart stopped. Jim's car was over by the fence. Jim was leaning over away from me putting air into the rear tyres. He hadn't seen me yet. I tried the door of the high-sided trailer. There was a lock on it but it wasn't padlocked. I unhooked it, opened the door and slipped inside pulling the door shut behind me. It was almost pitch dark in there. After the brightness of the sunlight I was blind. Something moved. There was a rustling and creaking sound. I wasn't alone in there. Somebody else was moving about.

'Hello', I said softly.

A huge dark bulk struck me. My head struck the wooden side of the trailer with a crack. I felt a slight sickness in my throat and then I was on the floor and the darkness became total.