

# **Myopia**

Jeff Gardiner

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Printed in the United Kingdom

*First Silver Line Edition, Crooked Cat Publishing Ltd. 2012*

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For  
Janet and Gerald Gardiner,  
my Mum and Dad.  
Thanks for your endless  
love and support.

## About the Author

Jeff Gardiner was born in Jos, Nigeria, although his formative teenage years were spent in West London. Now living in Crawley, West Sussex with his wife and two children, he teaches Drama, English and Film Studies in a secondary comprehensive school. He enjoys listening to rock music and is even willing to confess to having a passion for progressive rock. His favourite authors include Mervyn Peake, Graham Joyce and Haruki Murakami.

His first writing achievement came with an adaptation of his MPhil thesis, *The Age of Chaos: the Multiverse of Michael Moorcock* which has recently been expanded and revised in preparation for republication, now retitled *The Law of Chaos*.

Jeff has already enjoyed success with his short stories. His collection *A Glimpse of the Numinous* containing horror, slipstream and humour, has been described as: “genuinely fascinating, weird and original”. Many of his stories have appeared in magazines, such as *Twisted Tongue* and *Estronomicon*; on websites such as [www.raphaelsvillage.com](http://www.raphaelsvillage.com), and in anthologies, such as the award-winning *The Elastic Book of Numbers*.

*Myopia* is his first novel. Jeff is currently writing a work of fiction set in Nigeria during the Biafran war, as well as preparing another novel for teenagers. For more information visit his website and blog at [www.jeffgardiner.com](http://www.jeffgardiner.com)

## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to Laurence Patterson and Sue McCaskill for their expertise and editing skills.

And to Sandy for her patience and encouragement.

Love and hugs to Emily and Bethany for all the laughter we share, which brings me so much joy.

Jeff Gardiner  
December 2012

# Myopia

## Chapter One

“Here comes four-eyes.”

“What, that speccy git in our technology group?”

“Yeah. Oi! Goggles! Where’d you get the space visors from? NASA?” Cruel sniggering filled the corridor.

As Jerry looked up his glasses slipped down his nose, so all he could see was a fuzzy mix of shapes and colours. He wrinkled his nose to lift his glasses back into his sightline but then remembered how it made him look haughty, so he prodded the central frame with his forefinger to slide his glasses back up his nose. Now he made out a double line of pupils, mostly from his year, making a tunnel leading to the outside door to the field. It looked like the rows guests make when a newly married couple leave their wedding reception, only Jerry didn’t think there would be as much jollity – or kissing.

This gang, made up of boys and girls, often stood here, threatening younger pupils who made the mistake of walking past. He knew he should be worried.

“Oi, you four-eyed freak.”

One of the boys grabbed his blazer. Jerry let himself go limp. He’d been in this situation before.

“I’m talking to you, dickhead.”

Jerry knew the speaker only too well: Wayno. Their noses almost touched. Wayno’s breath reeked and Jerry guessed brushing teeth was not a priority for him.

He wanted to walk away but Wayno held him tightly. Where were the bloody teachers when you wanted them? Always there when you don’t need them.

Wayno suddenly let go but Jerry felt himself tugged backwards until he stumbled into the corner under the staircase, surrounded by about half a dozen boys and a few girls. He was now being manhandled by a different boy known as Rhino, Wayno’s bodyguard.

“On the way to the library are you, you boff?”

The library was actually in the opposite direction but Jerry guessed this wasn’t the time to be pedantic.

“Are you gonna answer or what?” Rhino snarled, spitting as he spoke. A fleck of saliva landed on Jerry’s cheek. His eyes flicked quickly between the framed limits of his focal range. As he began sweating he felt his glasses slip back down his nose. Too scared to push them back, he maintained his silence, glad the marauding bullies stood before him in a blur.

Before he knew it a hand appeared in front of his face but not with the velocity he imagined. Instead the hand hovered at Jerry’s eye-level, tilted with fingers pointed towards him. Then suddenly some fingernails clicked against the lenses of Jerry’s glasses.

“Pretty useful in a fight these visors,” said Wayno. “I can’t poke your eyes out – so I’ll just have to rip your whole head off.”

Many responses flashed through Jerry’s mind but he sensibly kept his mouth shut. It meant his tormentors assumed him stupid or easy prey but saying the words out loud would only earn him a visit to intensive care.

Suddenly his whole world fuzzed into a kaleidoscope of blurs as Wayno removed his glasses, leaving Jerry standing in a lonely world of short-sightedness. He could no longer see the bullies at all; not even sure any more of his location in school, having lost all visual markers normally putting things into context.

The crowd around him became unidentifiable blobs – weird creatures continually contorting, ebbing and flowing. It was impossible to see where one of them began and another ended; they all just merged into an insignificant mass of blobbiness. Jerry imagined them as one giant monster made of snot, which made him smile.

Although he couldn't focus on faces he became aware of movements. Voices murmured, overlapped and buzzed but Jerry chose not to listen, preferring his own thoughts as he blocked out the world around him.

Where the hell were those stupid teachers?

Jerry hoped silence and inertia would bore the bullies into giving up. Although the theory sounded good it never worked in practice. Responding didn't work: it just made them more determined to hurt you. Ignoring didn't work either. Jerry had already learnt that bullies were angry individuals who couldn't be reasoned with. Whatever he did would be wrong, so doing nothing and conserving his energy and sanity appeared the best policy.

What they did to his glasses concerned him most. Please don't break them, he pleaded silently. He didn't have a spare pair.

"You're a sad little swat aren't you?" Wayno's voice rudely interrupted Jerry's thoughts.

Not really, thought Jerry. He was mainly in middle groups and didn't do any more work than most. Just because he didn't hang around with Wayno's gang and do what he said, they had to find some stereotype to label him with.

"What a little mummy's boy," Wayno teased, slapping Jerry on both cheeks. As Wayno's face got closer, Jerry realised his tormentor was wearing his glasses.

"God, your eyes are bad. You could do welding in these." The inane giggling from the others encouraged their leader, who started to perform to his audience. "These speccies are thicker than magnifying glasses." After another round of titters and sniggers, Wayno's voice became aggressive.

"Say after me, four-eyes, 'I'm a little saddo'. It's not hard."

"Yeah, but you are, eh, Wayno," chipped in one of Wayno's toadies. "Rock hard."

What a snivelling little brown-nose, thought Jerry.

Jerry stuck to his silence and hung on for dear life. It would all be over soon: surely the bell should go any minute now.

Jerry guessed Wayno would hate 'losing face' in front of his cronies. Wayno – snorting and still wearing Jerry's glasses – leaned right in to Jerry until their noses touched.

"You're bloody dead, mate. D'you hear?" Wayno head-butted Jerry with some force, ripped off the glasses and then punched his victim hard in the stomach. Jerry wanted to fall over, but Wayno's mates held him up.

"Debag him," Wayno ordered with a gesture, before striding away like some mafia Don, content for others do his dirty work.

Jerry felt his trousers and underpants being whipped down to his feet – probably by Rhino – whilst his hands were held. Screams of laughter erupted in the corridors, echoing up the stairwell. By the sound of it quite a crowd gathered to witness his humiliation. Eventually, his arms were freed, allowing him to double over and collapse. Jerry managed to pull his trousers back up swiftly then do up his button and zip before attending to his aching head and burning midriff. With his head throbbing he got on all fours and scabbled about for his glasses. He patted the filthy floor in all directions. The corner had been quickly vacated by the crowd and Jerry patiently swept both hands to and fro with no luck. Still not having found them when the bell rang, Jerry cursed his short-sightedness.

Lots of pupils rushed past him and he wanted to scream for them to stop, fearing his glasses would be crushed underfoot. Couldn't they see he needed help? Jerry wanted to cry when he remembered the pain in his head and belly, but he refused to do so. Crying really was not the done thing in school – especially not for a boy.

"Are you okay, Jerry?" He heard a female voice above him but couldn't identify the speaker. Her voice sounded kind and at first he thought it might be a teacher or one of the office ladies. A hand took firm hold of his and hauled him up. Close up, he vaguely recognised Parminder Sidhu. She sat



near him in English and he knew her immediately as he screwed up his eyes and smiled. He could just make out her long, black, glossy hair; nut-brown eyes and cheeks which dimpled when she smiled. Right now her huge eyes stared into his in genuine concern.

“Okay, mate?” Parminder dusted the right arm of his blazer still grey with muck and fluff. “Shall I take you to the office?”

“No ... no thanks. I’m fine. I just need to find my glasses.”

Before he knew it, she fell on her hands and knees.

“Here we go,” she said, jumping nimbly back to her feet and patting her stockinged knees. “They’ve seen better days, I think.”

Gratefully accepting the wire frames Jerry inspected them carefully. One arm now bent completely the wrong way and both lenses were badly scratched. In fact one lens looked cracked beyond repair. He’d have to carry on now with just one eye.

“Thanks Parminder,” Jerry said weakly.

“I prefer Mindy,” she replied, rewarding him with her dimpled smile.

He realised this might be the first time he’d properly spoken to her and he wished it could have been under better circumstances. He could only hope she hadn’t been there earlier to witness his public exposure. “I’m fine. Really. Thanks ... Mindy.”

“Well, you take care, hun.” Mindy strolled out of his range of vision.

His misery reached completion when he put on his glasses.

Jerry could see nothing out of the left eye except fog and a cracked line across the middle of the lens. The view through the right lens appeared slightly better although a few scratches to one side gave a kind of starburst effect when looking at light. Taking them off to inspect them, Jerry peered closely at each lens and saw white lines etched onto the transparent plastic as well as smears and blobs; they needed a thorough clean. Well, it could be worse, he considered.

Huffing loudly over each lens, Jerry then tugged his shirt out from his trousers to use the hem as a polishing cloth. This only smeared the dirt making them even harder to look through. He needed the special spray and soft material in his cupboard at home. After several rubs they became vaguely translucent. A small clear gap meant he could see through a small round window in the right lens. That would have to do for now.

With the bell having gone ages ago, it left him late for Science. Head down, he ran to his locker, grabbed his Science books and pencil case then sprinted along the playground, through the double doors and up the stairs to Lab 5.

“Hough! You’re late. Stay behind at the end. And tuck your shirt in – it looks like you’re wearing a skirt. What are you? A girl?”

The whole class laughed as Jerry prodded his shirt into his trousers then sat down.

What a crap day this was turning out to be.

## Chapter Two

After lunch came tutor time, which basically involved twenty-eight students piling in to a run-down mobile classroom, screaming and sitting on desks, while Miss Powys attempted to tick off names. As soon as the second bell went they all disappeared whether she'd completed the register or not, and without a word being emitted by the tutor. She'd given up attempting to control them in year 8, having tried being friendly; being strict; bribing; shouting; humour; sarcasm and emotional blackmail. Her last hope had been that the girls might view her as an older sister and the boys might fancy her in her tight, low tops. None of these tactics worked. Notices and messages put in her register by the office or other members of staff remained unread, so nobody in her tutor group attended clubs or extra-curricular activities. Miss Powys came to the conclusion it wasn't worth her health or sanity, and so now saw registration of S10 as something to survive: to get through unscathed.

With the rest of S10 gone, Jerry ambled up to the front desk hopefully.

"Miss – I want to report some bullying ..."

"Oh, Jerry, I really don't have time for this right now. I have to get to my lesson. I tell you what – you go down to the school office and ask for an incident form. Fill it in and give it to Mr Platt. Okay?" Miss Powys looked at her watch and grabbed her bag. "Oh, and as you're going that way anyway could you take the register for me? Ta." And with that she swept out.

Jerry's heart sank. Mr Platt was his Head of Year. All year 10 pupils laughed at the prospect of being sent to Mr Platt. If you were sent for discipline you could breathe a sigh of relief as he would only end up giving you a lecture, during which you could switch off, and then be cautioned with an empty threat of getting your parents in. With Mr Platt you had to look sorry, promise never to do it again and you'd be off and away.

If you went to report something you knew it to be a futile endeavour. If he'd been a year older then he would report to Miss Harvey – definitely a woman of action. She would do anything to help bring bullies to justice. Miscreants in year 11 trembled at the thought of being sent to Miss Harvey. But he must report to Mr Platt and he didn't feel too hopeful. Still it gave him good cause to miss the beginning of Geography.

Once he'd obtained an incident form from the kind Mrs Billington in reception, he made his way to the office of his Head of Year.

"Come in."

Jerry leant on the handle and pushed the door inwards. Mr Platt sat with his back to Jerry, head down, scribbling furiously at his desk. Shutting the door carefully behind him, Jerry stood patiently, waiting for the teacher to stop writing; any minute now a natural break or convenient moment should occur when Mr Platt would stop and look up.

And he waited ...

It seemed bad manners to interrupt an important adult very clearly hard at work, and Jerry wondered if he should just creep away and leave it. Instead, he decided to clear his throat loudly and hope it wouldn't be deemed disrespectful. Mr Platt's head flicked round at the sound and he must have caught sight of Jerry's shoes, as his eye-line never raised above ground level.

"Mmm. Yes?"

Jerry expected Mr Platt to spin round and offer him a seat, but it seemed he must talk to his back as the Head of Year returned to his writing.

"I've come to report an incident," Jerry stated clearly.

"What sort of incident?" Scribble, scribble, scribble.

"Um ... bullying, sir."

"Now then, young man," Mr Platt stopped writing but kept his back to Jerry. "You know the school has a zero-tolerance approach to bullying and we will not allow defiance to infect the

foundation and infrastructure of this institution. You know the rules and yet you dare to ...”

“No sir, sorry, but I have been bullied,” Jerry raised his voice to interrupt this inanity.

“Ah, right ... I see.” Mr Platt finally turned round and grabbed an official form from one of the pigeon holes on the wall, conveniently within arm’s reach from his swivel chair. “And you are?”

Blimey, thought Jerry. You’ve been my Head of Year for over three years, yet still have no idea who I am. He toyed with the idea of making up a name just to see what would happen.

“Jerry Hough, sir.”

“Hough?” it clearly meant nothing to him. Jerry felt depressed by the realisation that he was one of the invisibles in school: not naughty enough but also not quite clever enough to make his mark above the rest; one of the grey folk who slipped through the middle. How embarrassing.

“A bullying issue should be dealt with by Mr Finn.” Mr Platt pushed the form towards Jerry. “Fill in this incident form and take it to Mr Finn.”

Jerry thought he should explain how he had already obtained a form, but kept it to himself. Two is always better than one. The prospect of seeing Mr Finn made him feel more hopeful. Mr Q Finn was always willing to help, and, as Deputy Head, he cut an imposing figure – about six foot five and with a very pointed chin. Everyone assumed the Q stood for Quentin as it fitted his character; but when the staff suddenly took to wearing security badges with their full names, it came to light that the Q actually stood for Quincy. Then last year he turned into Mr Quincy Finn OBE, for his tireless work for charity and the community.

Unsure whether to say thanks or apologise for time-wasting, Jerry took the form and trudged towards the door. Before exiting the office he considered bowing with a sarcastic flourish, or even sticking up two fingers. It wouldn’t have mattered if he’d done both because Mr Platt sat with his back to him again now, having returned to his psychotic scribbling as if Jerry never existed.

The prospect of seeing Mr Finn became an entirely different matter. Jerry sat patiently outside his office trying to fill in one of the incident forms, which proved to be more difficult than it first appeared. Name and date were easy enough, but when it came to describing ‘the nature of the incident’ he began to struggle.

“I was walking innocently down the corridor,” he began to write, “when I was accosted...” (no hang on – accosted? No-one writes that. What does it mean anyway? Jerry crossed the word out) ... “threatened by a large ...” (massive? huge?) ... “group of pupils.” (Should he specify a number? Or write “boys”? He preferred not to mention that some of the bullies were girls). “I was stopped by the doors near room 42 and they called me names – particularly referring to my glasses.” (Should he quote some of the names used? He remembered “dickhead”.)

Then Jerry reached the quandary regarding whether he should ‘grass-up’ Wayno and Rhino at all and risk their vengeful wrath. This remained the ultimate paradox – a major problem for any victim of bullying. Should he tell all and sod the inevitable retaliation, or should he take the law into his own hands? The only other option was to keep quiet and hope the bully gets bored and goes away, perhaps even respecting the fact the victim hasn’t dobbed him or her in.

As Jerry juggled these thoughts in his head and whilst worrying about how to explain his debagging on the form, Quincy Finn stepped out of his office in a sprightly manner.

“Jerry is it?”

Smiling and nodding, Jerry felt a sense of relief that someone important in school knew his name. On the other hand Quincy possessed an awesome photographic memory; his brain was a computer memorising every single detail, fact, figure and statistic required for running the school – which he seemed to do more than the Head. It always seemed odd to Jerry to think Quincy had been a PE teacher, although apparently he once played basketball for England. Now he just taught RS to years 7 and 8.

“Yes sir, Jerry Hough, sir.”

“Come in, come in. Sit ye down. What can I do you for?”

Unsure whether this counted as a joke (Quincy wasn't laughing) or whether this giant of a man just derived a great deal of pleasure from scaring children, Jerry sat down and tried to stop blinking uncontrollably. Aware again of his damaged glasses, his right eye darted to the small window through the lens which afforded him a restricted view of the world.

“I want to report an incident of bullying ... I mean I have been bullied, sir. I saw Mr Platt and he told me to see you, sir.”

“Did he now? Did he indeed?” Quincy Finn sat down, but even in a seated position with his long limbs dangling in all directions, he still seemed to take up most of his office. Jerry took a deep breath in, trying to occupy the least amount of space he could in his little corner.

“Tell me all about it, Jerry. I want you to be assured we will not tolerate any kind of bullying in this fine academic institution. We take all accusations very seriously and the person who did this to you will be severely punished. You're not alone – we are all here to listen and to support you. Do you understand?”

Jerry nodded.

“I feel moved to add here that you are also never alone, Jerry. Whilst you do have parents, family, teachers and friends who remain an active network of support, it is worth remembering, Jerry, in those lonely, frightening moments in the early hours of the morning when you're lying awake in bed tossing and turning...”

Jerry looked up bemused, but of course stayed silent.

“...there is one who holds you in his loving arms. He cradles you, comforts you and whispers in your ear.” And Mr Finn actually leaned in close to Jerry and whispered: “I love you, my child. You are mine. Don't be afraid. Trust me and enter into my eternal bliss.”

It struck Jerry that if a social worker had popped a head round the door at this very moment and heard the Deputy Head's whisper, then Quincy Finn would be reported, sacked, put on a list and attacked by a mob of bigoted tabloid readers. However, Jerry liked to think himself more sophisticated than to laugh at someone who used the word ‘tossing’ correctly; and he knew damn well Quincy didn't fancy him, so he expelled these puerile thoughts.

In actual fact, QF was being very kind by offering him the love, hope and security that faith in God brought to millions of people. There were times when Jerry did indeed lie awake at night wondering what the hell (perhaps not such an appropriate term in these circumstances) love, life and existence were all about.

“Let me pray for you Jerry.”

Not being a church-goer, Jerry felt uncomfortable if a little intrigued. As a child his Granny said prayers when putting him to bed and Quincy Finn always ended assemblies with a prayer – being the only teacher to do so.

“Lord we just want to lift up your holy name and ask your spirit to come down upon us.”

Jerry looked at Mr Finn who closed his eyes and held one hand up with fingers splayed. Wondering whether to do the same, or put his hands together like his Granny taught him, he decided in the end to just look down into his lap.

“Bless Jerry here in his plight,” Quincy Finn continued with a deep intonation. “Give him a feeling of confidence so he can face his persecutors with his head held high. Be with him so he knows your love and wisdom. Help him to respond in the best way without anger or hatred, but so he can continue to become the best person he can. Let this bullying stop, Lord. Send your spirit on to these bullies and let them see with shame what misery and torment they are creating. We put this problem into your hands, Lord. Amen.”

Jerry made a guttural sound which he meant as ‘Amen’ but sounded more like clearing his throat. In actual fact Jerry felt a lot better. He knew Mr Finn meant well, doing what he thought best, but he

felt a tad sceptical that one prayer would bring about an end to the bullying.

However, one thing old Quincy said in his prayer struck Jerry: he said about responding “without anger or hatred”, which made sense to Jerry. A bully only wants you to get scared or angry, so it made sense not to show either. And if you hate the bully back then you become just as bad as the bully. He knew that many victims just went on to bully other, smaller kids, but Jerry refused to become another statistic or stereotype. He fervently believed the chain of bullying must end with him. Thus he should not feel hatred or anger.

“Now then Jerry,” Mr Finn said, reaching over to an in-tray on his desk and tweaking out a piece of paper containing very familiar grids and line-spacing. “I need you to fill in an incident form, and this issue really needs to be dealt with by your Head of Year. Mr Platt really must learn to deal with these things himself. It is, after all, part of his job description.” Jerry detected more than a little tension in his voice. “I shall email him to make sure he keeps me in the loop,” Mr Finn continued. “Good luck young man and God bless.”

So with three incident forms in his possession Jerry left the Deputy Head’s office confused. The prayer had been unexpected if strangely helpful; he did feel a little less anxious now. However, the prospect of returning to Mr Platt filled him with a sense of complete hopelessness, so he decided not to bother.

A check of his watch confirmed that half an hour still remained of Geography. It seemed pointless going in half-way through – he’d only have to explain in front of everyone where he’d been and why. No doubt some of the pupils in there had been witnesses to his debagging and he’d never hear the end of it. A much better use of his time would be to go home and do his homework.

It amazed him how easily he could slip out of school. He walked past the Head’s office and down the corridor by the hall. He knew if he used the further door then he could get outside without going past reception where Mrs Bilington would ask awkward questions before he hit the door-release button. The side door allowed him to walk around the technology workshops and down a small avenue of trees to the wide open front gates. From there five swift strides took him round the corner and out of sight.

As he turned the corner he heard a raised female voice.

“Oh, that’s right ... typical bloke – running away ...”

Jerry wondered initially if this comment was aimed at him. He kept walking and saw a figure ahead with her back to him talking into a mobile whilst vigorously brandishing a cigarette in her other hand. As his bus stop lay further up on the same side of the road he felt forced to walk past her.

“Yes, the test was positive ... Of course it’s yours. What, you calling me a slag?”

Just then she turned round and he instantly recognised Miss Powys, his form tutor.

Startled by Jerry’s presence, she quickly hid the cigarette behind her back and snapped her phone shut.

“You never heard a thing okay?” Miss Powys snarled waving her fag in front of his face before realising her mistake and flicking it into the road.

Jerry shook his head solemnly.

“One word and you’ll be doing detentions for the rest of your life, you understand? You keep quiet about this and I say nothing about you bunking off. Agreed?”

Jerry nodded. “I never saw you, miss.”

The relief on Miss Powys’ face was palpable.

“Good lad.”

Jerry walked on and peeked quickly behind him to see Miss Powys deftly lighting up another cigarette whilst dialling her phone. Then the number 17 bus appeared and Jerry ran whilst fumbling for his bus pass.