



CHALLENGER

short fiction by

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Cover by Paul Stack

They were doomed. Any idiot could see that.

Miles LaPine was sixteen. It was October, 1986, and he was walking in the woods in what was left of his new body, with his new fourteen-year-old girlfriend, on the way to smoke pot for the first time. All these beginnings, so why did it feel like he was walking into an ending?

Crystal said, “Are we even fuckin’ there yet?”

“A little longer,” Miles said. They were nearly a mile in. The woods began up the street from his house, but he hadn’t been up here since before the summer. Things had changed, and he wasn’t the same person who used to spend all day on one-man outdoor D&D campaigns, having dangerous encounters with gelatinous cubes beneath the pines.

“It’s like, we’re gonna get there and I’m gonna be too *tired* to get stoned,” she said. At this she pulled a pack of Marlboro reds from her little purse and used her lips to fish one out.

It was Columbus Day, and they were both home from school. Miles’ mother had left for work at 8:45. By 8:47 Miles and Crystal were in his room, doing it. Now it was just after 11 and they were coming up here to sacrifice yet another of Miles’ firsts.

This wasn’t ever how it was supposed to go. Miles had had a clear path carved out for himself: Stay fat and greasy through high school, have most of his social interactions happen at gaming conventions and weekend roleplaying marathons, go to Worcester State College if he could (his grades, he was frequently told, were terrible for such a smart person), and then hope something radical happened to the standards for male attractiveness.

Then, over the summer, he'd contracted viral pneumonia and nearly died. It was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

He was in Intensive Care for three weeks, stayed in the hospital another two. When he came out, he was not the same Miles LaPine. He was forty pounds lighter. His skin had cleared up. While he was in his coma, a nursing student had cut his hair so that it looked *good*. He returned home and found that while his homemade chainmail tunic was now tent-y and unsatisfying, he could fit into his father's old denim jacket, a thing so beautifully worn it felt like a pajama shirt.

When school started back up in September, things were different, mostly. Some of the kids in his class still referred to him as Miles LaPie, or Piles. Others, even if they hadn't heard about his illness, were now decent to him.

Over the summer, before he got sick, he'd worked at the supermarket downtown and made friends with the burnout kids. They didn't mind his weirdness and didn't care that he didn't smoke with them. This was where he'd learned the secret to romantic success among stoner guys: Go younger. They all had girlfriends, not one from their same class. Coming back to school that fall, this had made sense to Miles. The girls in his class and the one after it all knew him as he'd once been. A freshman girl, though? As one of the grocery-crew guys would say, Clean slate, baby.

Right now he watched Crystal squinting behind her smoke as she held the brown filter between the top joints of her index and middle fingers. She held these fingers upright to smoke, the way people's mothers did. Right now he guessed he'd landed a little more than he'd bargained for with her. Crystal Parker was easily the best-looking

girl in her class, but she'd already been suspended twice in her month-old high school career, once for smoking in the bathroom and once for punching another girl in the face.

Crystal came from Clarendon Street, the rougher part of Hillsville—or rather, the only rough part in their little central Massachusetts town. Most people in Hillsville had one-family homes or condos; the people in Crystal's neighborhood all lived on top of each other in triple-decker apartment houses. Her street, on any weekday afternoon, was filled with men working on motorcycles, tuning and revving and banging so that it was the loudest neighborhood in town. At night, most of these guys were in the four bars that comprised the business district on Clarendon Street. Miles often wondered what the hell they were readying their bikes for. He'd yet to see someone from Clarendon actually riding anything.

If Miles' own neighborhood was quieter, his family situation wasn't. Crystal had a sister and a mother, a stepfather and stepbrother, and a real father. Miles had his mom. His sister had run away at the end of last year to find a guy named Dallas, and before that his father had run away to no one knew where. Or who. Miles had his mom, and he was not allowed to run away.

And now he had Crystal, the first girl to kiss him, the first to touch his body, the first to have sex with him. It never occurred to him to wonder how a fourteen-year-old girl should be showing anyone the ropes.

By bringing her up here to the woods he'd always held sacred, he'd been trying to show her some of *his* ropes. Then she went and decided it would be the perfect place to get him high.

“What happens if I freak out?” he said now. She trudged along in front of him in her denim miniskirt and black cowboy boots.

She laughed. “Why would you freak out? It’s *pot*, not acid.” She took a last drag off her cigarette and flicked it away in an impressive arc.

“What are you doing?!” he yelled. “That’s dry grass!”

She looked toward where the butt had gone. “I smoke them down to the filter. Filters don’t burn, dummy.” She shook her head, staring at him. “Jeez, Dad.”

She had to mention acid. This was a sore spot between them. Crystal had been drunk more times than she could count and she smoked pot almost daily, and these were all things Miles could live with, because duh, naked girlfriend. But she’d also done acid a half-dozen times, usually with her eighteen-year-old stepbrother and his buddy Jeff DuBrow. Miles knew who Jeff DuBrow was.

Jeff DuBrow was a year older than Miles’ sister, Carrie, and had gone out with her when she was a sophomore. On their first date, he’d left Carrie drunk on the lawn while he peeled away in his Duster. She went out with him again after that. Jeff DuBrow was handsome, in a California kind of way, with his chest hair and his mustache, and his apparently limitless supply of free drugs for anyone he liked. Miles had thought about forbidding Crystal to be around Jeff DuBrow again, but knew this wouldn’t go over well. So he’d told her about one of Carrie’s friends, who’d become a schizophrenic after a bad trip. Which, as far as he knew, was true.

Crystal had shrugged. “I like drugs,” she said. “I like doing them. I’m gonna keep doing them. I figure I can either do them with my stepbrother and his friends, or I can do them with my boyfriend. Your choice.”

So Miles had agreed to smoke pot on Columbus Day, and this had appeased the goddess. But what then?

“You ever hear those stories?” he said now. They were on the matted grass path to First Cave, chosen site for the Smoking of the Drugs. “About pot getting spiked with angel dust or Drano and stuff?”

She stopped and looked up at him with her massive pale eyes. They were like twin skies. “And I could get hit by a bus today. Or we could get shot up here by hunters. Or struck by lightning. Undo your belt.”

“What?” He looked around. They were in a wide-open area, a bare path flanked by fields of scrub and brown, foot-high grass. There was a pair of tall oak trees a few yards to the left of them, bare against a white sky.

“I’m gonna relax you,” she said, and then it was too late because she was undoing his belt in a deft, one-handed motion. But he knew there was another reason she was doing this.

Crystal kept a list going – an actual list, handwritten on a sheet of grayish composition paper. Things she wanted to try in her life. At the top it said, in block letters, CRYSTAL TO DO. Below that were the items, including but not limited to:

- Make pot brownies
- Give a bj on the bus to Worcester
- Have sex under the bleachers
- Steal a car (for a night!)
- Get high at school (lunchtime)
- Do a guy in the woods

Miles had seen the list during his first visit to her house on Clarendon Street. He hadn’t been snooping: she’d showed it to him, biting her lip in delight as she watched him read through it. “I used to have another list,” she said, “but I had to update it.” In the

weeks since, he'd avoided looking at the list. The words *a guy* haunted him for some reason.

She was going down on him now. Sex with her was complicated. Or maybe sex itself was complicated; he had nothing to compare. Miles had grown up reading the books his mother left on his bedroom desk – *Am I Normal?*, *Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex (But Were Afraid to Ask)*, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* – and he had a head full of written (and artlessly photographed) knowledge about sexual activity between humans. And when Crystal had laid back naked on her bed and pulled him onto her that first time, he'd been stunned to find he was not quite hard as a rock, but twice as numb. In his head it was like a chorus of horror-movie voices all talking over each other: *Is this okay? Do I smell? Is she gonna come? You have to make her come. Don't come first, do NOT come first, Miles.*

No worries about that: after she announced that she'd come, he kept flopping away against her until he realized he'd fallen out.

Crystal took this very personally. When he'd dried her tears and assured her this was not her fault, that he did find her very attractive (and he did believe she was perfect), she'd become twice as aggressive and pounced on him, determined to make it happen. And so it did, but he continued to have trouble the times after that. He wondered if he'd ever feel worthy of doing this act with someone.

“You like that?” she whispered now. This was her vocabulary: *You like that? Is that good? I wanna go somewhere, where can we go?* Always a need disguised as a question, and behind those eyes, nothing. Not even a flicker of acknowledgment for what you'd just given over. He looked down and there were those blue skies looking up at him.

Some people had eyes that seemed to warm you, friendly eyes with endless reach. Hers were sky-colored, but in fact they were more like satellite dishes, always aiming, always pulling something out of you.

This was not the thing to be thinking of while he was getting his blowjob from the girl who kept lists of all her blowjobby ambitions, and that's when he looked up and saw the glove in the tree.

It was nestled in the crotch of one of the empty oaks about fifteen feet away. It was high up, higher than Miles could reach, even without a person attached to his wiener. The glove was upright, as if on display, and a flicker of breeze gave it a queenly wave. It was white, parts of it blinding, others dingy. It was for a big hand, too, and the cuff was unusually long, nothing you'd see on a regular glove.

A chill spiked through him. He knew what this was.

As a kid, long before discovering fantasy and sci-fi, he was a space nut. Rockets, satellites, and the new shuttle program. You could write to NASA, he read somewhere, and they'd send you a packet of goodies. So he wrote NASA every week and a month or so later he'd receive another long envelope of photos, information sheets, historical diagrams, pictures of equipment and uniforms.

This thing in the tree fifteen feet from him? This was a NASA glove.

Crystal was standing up now, smoothing her skirt down over her legs. Had she seen it too? But she was heading on toward First Cave. "Let's get stoned," she said. "Then we can both have some fun."

When he was a kid, he used to convince himself he could see problems with the space shuttle, things only he could see. He'd tell his older neighbor, or his mother, and

then he'd write an urgent letter to NASA. They'd just send back another packet. When the Challenger blew up earlier this year, he'd been horrified like everyone else, but also he'd felt weirdly guilty.

Now he didn't feel guilty, just little and stupid. It was a white glove in a tree. All it was for sure was another sign that he was slipping. He'd noticed lately that he was starting to get doughy again, and while he hadn't played D&D since before his sickness, he'd found himself doodling squares on his notepaper in class. How long before fake graph paper became real graph paper, and then how long before that was penciled in with tunnels and chambers? The pneumonia "cure" was wearing off. In no time, he'd be the big weird troll again and Crystal would find someone else to do her list with. And yeah, sex was weird. But there was a part of him that was already missing it like a loved one.

He ran to catch up with Crystal. "Let's go get *very* stoned," he said.

First Cave wasn't a cave at all, but a jumble of a dozen or so hatchback-sized boulders close-bunched on a low hill under a canopy of trees. They were full of crevices and pathways that were carpeted year-round with layers of brown pine needles, creating a hush that enveloped you as soon as you stepped into it. It had been Miles' special place since his father had brought him here at three years old. Now Crystal Parker was next to him, rolling a joint on her lap.

They sat together in the Dish, a boulder with a huge, angled divot carved out of its top, making a bowl that was perfect for lounging. It was also one of the few sunny spots in First Cave, not that today was sunny. Crystal put the joint to her lips and lit it.

She inhaled with the tight *fiiiiip* of the practiced smoker. After a long while of watching to see when she'd exhale, Miles realized he was holding his breath, too. This

made him dizzy, and he wondered how much crazier he was going to feel once he had some pot in him. When she finally exhaled, it was a long, guttural sound that seemed to come from her feet. “Shit, man, this is nice here.” She shook her head at the trees above. “Long way from Clarendon.” Miles wondered if she would always talk like this, as if Clarendon weren’t just a street in the same town as these woods, as if she couldn’t just walk up here anytime from ten minutes further away. He’d spent a lot of time wondering when she’d realize she’d paired up with a weird, unpopular, potential fat person. He hadn’t wondered just how much more of her he could take.

“Now you,” she said, and then he was pinching the burning joint between his fingers. He thought of his mother, going through his sister’s room when she ran away, looking for clues, finding a stash of pills and burnt roaches and embarrassing poems about drugs. He thought of her, back in her drinking days, when she used to cry and tell Miles he was the only one in the world she could count on.

“Like this?” he asked Crystal, and then he puffed at the joint. More specifically, he blew into it. The lit end crackled.

“You retard!” she laughed. “Put your lips tight against it and sip.”

“Sip?”

“Like a fish. Teeny. But do it longer, like *hiiiiip*.”

This made zero sense.

“But sip? Like I *am* a fish? Or like I’m sipping a fish?”

She whacked him in the chest. “No, dummy, like you *are* a – oh, wait! Do that! Like you’re sipping a tiny fish! But with the *hiiip*.”

None of this made it any better, and he was getting annoyed with her. But he did exactly what she said, and suddenly his lungs were filled with gritty fire.

“Jesus!” he choked, and the smoke poured out of his face.

She fell over, laughing. “That’s how you know you did it right!”

He sputtered and gagged. He felt like he’d been kicked in the chest. “How do you ever get used to that?” he moaned. But he knew how. Practice, practice, practice.

They finished the joint together and five minutes later Miles felt nothing. A minute after that he realized he felt *nothing*. His skin was numb everywhere and his ears were blocked. But his nose tingled a little, and his throat was sore, as if he’d just spent a night throwing up. This was how he knew he was still alive.

So this was pot.

He’d had expectations. He remembered now that, even amid all the fears of brain damage or psychosis, he’d imagined it would lead to all kinds of realizations. Like how air and bricks are both made of matter, yet we can pass through only one of them. Or how he and his mom had been abandoned by his dad and his sister, and yet some girl down on Clarendon Street with a dad and a stepdad thought she had the roughest life in the world. Or how Crystal, doing sex the same every time, even saying the same things at the same moments, was like a practiced cheerleader, or like...like...like. He couldn’t think of it. Something to do with food.

Because now he was hungry.

He said as much, or tried to. “Uh bwuh bwuh,” he said. His voice sounded like a French horn played under water. So this was pot, and he wanted out now, please. Also,

he'd dropped the last of the joint into a fold in his dad's denim jacket, and now he was trying to get his tingling nose to smell for smoke.

She was rubbing his head. He thought back to the weird glove in the tree. Here was the thing that nagged at him: It wasn't that someone had placed it there to mess with him. It wasn't that someone had somehow misplaced an adult-sized glove that looked exactly like the gloves in his NASA literature. It was that there was one distant, but possibly possible, explanation. Earlier that year, Challenger had exploded. Not over Massachusetts, but high up over the whole East Coast. It was a big sky up there, and who knew where the wind had taken things?

His father, a high-school history teacher, had once told him how, minutes after the Marine barracks bombing in Beirut, a pedicab driver all the way across that city had seen a strange cloud rolling toward him. As the cloud passed overhead, the driver had no idea it was made of gypsum and steel and the dust of exploded human bodies, and he dipped his hand up into it, the way you might test the water at a pool. But not everything was dust, because out of the cloud the man plucked a birthday card, almost perfectly intact. Then his father had shown Miles the picture in *Newsweek* of the smiling, squinting driver standing astride his bicycle-cab, holding up a mildly ragged card of Snoopy dressed as Joe Cool.

Miles had doubted this story, even after seeing the picture. "When a thing gets blown up," his father had said, "not everything in it blows up the same size." But Miles could never get his head around this.

"Mi-les," sang Crystal. He sat up. She was lying back on the rock now, and she was doing a little peek-a-boo show with the hem of her denim skirt. She had a lit cigarette

in her mouth, and she was trying not to squint from the smoke pouring out of it. Then he realized she was no longer wearing a top, or a bra.

This was insanity. He'd been worried for so long about being fat and weird, but what *was* this? He'd never had a girlfriend before, but he was pretty sure this wasn't really okay. And he'd been hungry, starving, a minute ago, but now he was thinking of the time when he was little and his health-conscious parents relented and got them fast-food chicken. Everyone was allowed two pieces each, and then young Miles watched as the bucket of leftover chicken went into the refrigerator. He sneaked down that night, intending to pick at some crispy skin, and ended up eating everything in the bucket. Then he crept back upstairs, coughed once, and threw up chicken all over his bed.

"I think you remind me of Kentucky Fried Chicken," he told her now.

Crystal smiled and played with the hem of her skirt with one hand. Her other hand thumbed the ash off her cigarette. Miles watched it tumble down past the rock, down toward the fallen leaves and brown needles. "Cuz I'm finger-lickin' good?" she said.

He shook his head at her. "No."

He didn't know how far he'd walked, or how long, because his thoughts were laid out like meats and cheeses on a really big deli tray. All there, nothing touching. He really was hungry.

He'd heard her calling after him for a while, but then it was gone and it was just him, concentrating super-hard on the brown grass path ahead. He looked back and there was First Cave, right behind him, Crystal still in The Dish. She was turned away. Was she crying? He couldn't think about that now. He wasn't sure how he could be walking so hard and make so little ground, but he turned back to the path and plowed ahead.

The numbness of his body had left, and that's how he knew none of this would be permanent. Which was comforting, the way it was comforting to know he'd be calling up his gaming buddies tomorrow and setting up a D&D night. This was his fate and there was no changing it. He could go have sex with a calendar model and he'd still be the same guy who felt his blood jump every time he paged through his dungeon modules and handbooks with their Dave Sutherland and Darlene Pekul art. Crystal would have a new boyfriend by second period tomorrow, probably a senior this time, or a football guy. Miles would remain untouchable the rest of the year, his weeks with her a quirk no one would be willing or able to explain. Like a UFO sighting, or like the NASA glove in the tree directly in front of him.

He stopped and looked up at it. It really was there. No one would believe him. Even if he could get up there—fifteen feet of bare trunk on flat ground—no one would believe it had come from a tree, never mind how Miles had suspected it'd arrived.

He was still standing there, looking up, when Crystal came running by. He didn't know she could run. There were girls who would scowl through an entire gym class with their arms folded over their chests. Crystal was one of these, but she was surprisingly fast on her feet.

“Hey!” he said.

She stopped and glared at him.

“Why are you running?”

She'd sped past like a bug, but now that she'd stopped, she bent over, hands on her knees, heaving for breath like an old man. She tried to speak, then just nodded with her head back toward First Cave.

Deeper into the woods, there was a practice range, and hunters occasionally roamed looking for deer. But he hadn't heard a gunshot, so she must've seen an animal. Poor little Clarendon Street girl.

She'd caught her breath and was upright again. "I'm never getting you stoned again," she said. "You're mean. You don't just walk off from a person."

Wait. Why was there future-talk?

"I'm sorry I left you there," said Miles. "And you're right, you don't just walk off."

He felt twin disappointments in himself, one because he was Miles and he was not allowed to run away, the other because it was like watching himself slide back into a chasm he'd just climbed out of. But her forehead was shiny with sweat and there were brown needles in her hair, and she was too tired from running to make a tough face or a sexy face. She was just making a face, for a change, and it was nice.

She glanced back again toward First Cave. "How far are we from the start?"

"Five minutes or so," he said. It was more like twenty, but he felt a need to be gentle.

"How come you stopped?" she said. "Were you waiting for me?"

He almost told her yes, he'd been waiting for her. Then they could walk back to his house and have more sex. *Do you like that? Is that good?* Instead, he nodded toward the tree. "Lookit," he said.

She looked up. "What the fuck is that? Is that a Hamburger Helper toy?"

"No. Jesus. It's a space glove." He waited for her to smirk, but she did not. "You know, NASA? National Aeronautics and Space Administration? That's one of theirs, I

think.” He forced himself to keep eye contact with her. “And I also think it could’ve come from the Challenger explosion.”

“Huh,” she said. She was still looking at the glove. “I’ve always wanted to go to space.”

“Come on.”

“Really. It’s on my master list, has been since I was five. My dad took me to see *Star Wars* in the theater.”

“No shit.” He hadn’t known there was a master list.

“Yes shit. You could ask me a question now and then. I’m an interesting young lady.”

“Help me get it down?” he said.

“How?”

“Stand on my shoulders.”

She looked at the glove. “Still won’t reach.”

Miles looked around. There was a branch about three feet long sitting in the grass beside the tree. “You’ll poke it down.”

She looked yet again toward where they’d been. “When’s the last time it rained, do you think?”

“Last week, maybe? Why?”

She shook her head and went to collect the branch.

He squatted at the base of the tree and she sat on his shoulders. He stood up, lifting her as if she were made of balsa. It was hard to believe a mostly-grown human could weigh so little.

“That didn’t hurt your back?” she said.

“I only look weak.”

“You don’t look weak,” she said. He reached up and she held his hands as she sat on his head and got her feet up on his shoulders. It occurred to him that they’d somehow never held hands before. They’d gone straight to the making out and the touching of boobs and the fucking. So why did this feel so much more personal?

“I don’t have to smoke pot again?” he said. Future-talk.

“It makes you a dick. You shouldn’t be a dick, Miles. I was counting on you to be the one un-dick I know.”

“I was fat,” he said. “Until the summer. I had no friends.”

“All right.”

He looked up at her. “I might be fat again. Soon.”

“Okay,” she said. He couldn’t tell what her tone meant. Was it really okay, or was it *Okay, thanks for the warning?*

Now he could smell the burning jacket. It was some kind of crazy delayed reaction. Stupid pot. He didn’t know where he’d dropped the lit roach, but clearly it’d sat long enough on this old, soft denim to singe something so badly he could still smell it.

Wait, though. That didn’t make sense.

She was standing upright on him now. “Yeah, hand me the thing. No way I’m reaching from here.”

Trying to remain as stable as he could, he felt in front of him for the stick she’d leaned against the tree trunk. Then he fed it up to her.

“No More Pot,” she sang, and he smiled. “Acid is what you need. It’ll set you right. We’ll come back here Friday after school and I’ll take you on a trip. It’ll be nice. Is there a Second Cave? Like, further in?”

“Yeah,” he said. “My dad took me there once, and I’ve been up there on my own a few times.” This was when he realized two things: One, he’d never told her his dad had left. And two, he knew it didn’t make sense for his jacket to smell singed, but he could definitely smell something like pot burning. A lot. It was kind of like when you burp watermelon taste all night. But this was smoke, and it wasn’t coming from inside him, he didn’t think.

He got a new grip on her shins and took a look around, as best as he could.

Trees. Trees. Trees. A column of smoke coming from the direction of First Cave.

“I can’t look up or I’ll fall,” she said. “Am I close?”

She was almost there with the stick. If she moved it just a few degrees to the left, she’d be able to put it inside the cuff and pull the glove out of the Y of the tree.

He looked back at the smoke. It was big now, more like a thunderhead, and it was rolling toward them. In another minute she’d smell it or see it, too. His heart rattled like a windup toy in an empty bathtub. A thought did enter his brain—maybe I won’t have to take acid on Friday—but then it slunk right back out. They were going to die here, or die slightly closer to the entrance of the woods, or not die at all but go to jail for burning down the forest. Was it the roach he’d dropped, or had she done *something*?

They couldn’t leave the glove here now. Maybe things could survive being blown up, but nothing survived fire.

“Mi-les,” she called. “Hell-o. Do I have it yet?”

He looked up, trying not to look back toward the cave.

“A little to the left,” he said.

Of course she'd done something with her stupid cigarettes, either from carelessness or worse, because he'd hurt her. And she knew what she'd done. But here she was, standing on his shoulders poking at a dead person's space glove for him. Or a glove Miles wanted to look like a space glove. Either way. He made a bargain with whomever: Get us out of this, with the glove, and I will love her for at least a year. A drop of sweat rolled down his forehead and into his right eye. Was the air getting hazy now? Was it harder to breathe, or was she just finally getting heavy on his shoulders? And what else was on her master list?

He gripped her legs tighter, feeling tiny pinpricks against his slippery palms.

“How we doing?” he said.

Matt Debenham is the author of *The Book of Right and Wrong* (2010 OSU Press), winner of the Ohio State University Press Prize for Fiction. He is also the author of the Kindle story "The Advocate." His fiction has appeared in such publications as *The Pinch*, *The Battered Suitcase*, *Roanoke Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, and others. He has been a scholar at the Sewanee Writers' Conference and received a Fiction Fellowship from the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism. He teaches in the Western Connecticut State University writers' program, as well as the Westport Writers' Workshop, and he has taught for the UCLA Extension Writers' Program. He lives in Westport, CT, with the writer Caissie St. Onge and their kids.