



The Cure

"Jupiter Crash"

Wild Mood Swings

05/1996

Fiction / Elektra

Trajectory

Jamie A. Hughes

One night. If I hadn't been killing time online, I might never have been invited to the party. Had the group gotten together without me, his life might have gone on uninterrupted. We could have slipped past one another on a busy street, a dull ache behind our ribs the only sign that something connected us but had somehow been lost.

But I did go, and it changed everything.

I was only in Savannah for four short weeks while we waited for my brother to finish his sophomore year of high school. I had completed a year at a community college in Florida, and when my father got promoted and sent to Valdosta, I decided to finish my studies at the university there.

Savannah was a pit stop. With neither job nor classes to worry with, I was in a holding pattern, hovering over a city I never planned to call home. But thanks to the communication powers of an online chatroom, I met a young man named J.T. who invited me to a gathering of his friends and familiars. With nothing better to do during my last few days in town and tired of solitude, I told him, "Sure. Just give me the address, and I'll be there."

When I arrived, however, J.T. wasn't the one who opened the door. Chris did. And over the course of that single night, we became utterly besotted with each other.

During those last few days in town, I spent my free time (which was plentiful) with Chris. He took me to all his favorite haunts down on the waterfront, eating an appetizer in each while he enjoyed a beer that he'd slip to me when no one was watching. We walked the historical squares, talking about books and music. Every so often, he'd stop and point out an interesting shrub, tree, or flower, telling me the scientific names he'd learned as a landscape designer.

Caryopteris clandonensis are great if you want to attract butterflies.

Ceratostigma plumbaginoides is the richest blue you can imagine. We should come back in the daytime when you can really appreciate it.

Verbena canadensis. These look great when you plant a lot of them, and they grow like crazy.

I grew more impressed as facts spilled out of his mouth, but he spoke unassumingly, seemingly embarrassed to be in possession of such a treasure trove of horticultural knowledge. He always talked with his head cocked slightly away from me, as if his pale blue eyes couldn't bear to see a look of judgment on my face.

He was a contradiction to say the least. Tattooed and pierced, he kept his head shaved and his nails painted black. This hulking, barrel chested man who knew how to use his fists and freelanced as a bouncer prattled on about colors and scents, what worked well in his city's climate and soil and what tended to wither under the scorching summer sun. He listened to metal and hip hop but also enjoyed Langston Hughes, Carl Sandburg, and Walt Whitman. He wrote poetry of his own in a strangely fastidious all-caps hand. He

played bass in a local band. Loved animals and gangster films. Smoked too much and drove too fast.

The night before I left, we decided that we'd try "the long-distance relationship thing" as he called it. Chris did delivery runs between Savannah and Atlanta every other weekend and thought he could manage to squeeze a visit in as part of the route. We promised to call and to write, too. That night, after the last kiss was exchanged and final promise made, he put the first of what turned to be many white envelopes in my hand.

"Open it tomorrow," he said, and then he turned and walked back to his truck.

The next day was a blur of moving boxes and odd jobs, and it wasn't until my father and I were on the road in the moving van that I had time to open the letter. I don't know what I expected. A few sappy lines about what he was going to miss or was looking forward to, maybe even a romantic line about the kisses we'd shared the night before. A poem perhaps. But when I opened the envelope, I found only one sheet of paper, covered in a few lines of his neat, geometric script.

*She follows me down to the sound of the sea,
Slips to the sand and stares up at me
"Is this how it happens? Is this how it feels?
Is this how a star falls?
Is this how a star falls?"*

I read them several times over, and while the words were haunting, I couldn't quite understand what he was trying to tell me. Was it sexual? The five lines certainly had something of the erotic to them. Did I fascinate him like that falling star? Was he falling for me, and did the thought scare him? I'd followed him for days. Was he now wishing he could follow me?

In an era without smartphones, I had no way of researching the lines and assumed the beautiful words were his and thanked him for them that evening.

"Oh, no," he said with a laugh. "Those words are Robert Smith's. You know, the lead singer of The Cure?"

Of course I knew them. I had *Disintegration*, *Wish*, and *Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Kiss Me* packed away somewhere in the stuff I'd brought from my efficiency apartment, but this song wasn't familiar. He told me it was from *Wild Mood Swings*, an album that had just come out the year before, one that I'd missed in the chaos of uprooting myself twice in the span of a few months.

The next day, I drove to the nearest Sam Goody and got a copy of the album on CD, and sitting in a sea of unpacked boxes, I listened to the album three times straight through. Not all of the tracks were winners, but I did rather adore "Want," "Treasure," "This Is A Lie," "Bare," and of course "Jupiter Crash" — the first lines of which I knew by heart before I ever ripped off the cellophane wrapper. Before I went to bed, I had the rest of the song committed to memory.

*The night turns as I try to explain
Irresistible attraction and orbital plane
"or maybe it's more like a moth to a flame?"*

*She brushes my face with her smile
"forget about stars for a while"
As she melts*

*Meanwhile millions of miles away in space
The incoming comet brushes Jupiter's face
And disappears away with barely a trace*

*"Was that it? was that the Jupiter show?
Kinda wasn't quite what I'd hoped for, you know."
Pulling away, she stands up slow
And round her the night turns
Round her the night turns*

*Yeah, that was it
That was the Jupiter crash
Drawn too close and gone in a flash
Just a few bruises in the region of the splash*

*She left to the sound of the sea
She just drifted away from me
So much for gravity*

I couldn't explain how I felt about it. Like most things The Cure created, it was melancholy and pensive. There was the brooding darkness I'd come to expect from them and that, as a nineteen-year-old short on life experience, I unashamedly adored. But this was a song about the end of a love affair, not the first days of infatuation.

I called him the next night, told him I'd heard the song in its entirety, and asked why he'd chosen those exact lines to send me off with.

He told me about the Shoemaker-Levy 9 comet, the one that inspired the song. It had broken apart in July of 1992 and slammed into Jupiter roughly two years later, creating the first direct observation of two colliding objects in the solar system.

"That's what meeting you felt like," he said. "We were drawn to each other. I could no more have turned away from you than that comet could have pulled away from Jupiter. And after that crash, you walked away from me."

"So much for gravity, huh?" I said.

"Yeah," he said, a chuckle low in his throat. "There's that."

We continued revolving around one another for a year—me visiting when I had a break from school, him dropping by my place when he was out on a run—and eventually we decided that it was silly to keep going the way we were. The distance had been managed, and love had grown in between us, just as expected. Letters and poems sailed between mailboxes in a steady stream, and he tended to me with the same fastidious care he showed the plants in his company's greenhouse.

Despite my family's wishes, I packed my stuff up in a U-Haul trailer once again and drove the few hours back to Savannah, thinking it was the place where I would put down roots and flourish.

But what I didn't realize was that some part of me had already settled where I was, with the friends I'd made in college and with the double major I was pursuing. I'd found a new and exciting facet of myself in that year, and though I didn't know when I made the choice to leave, I felt the loss of that life more keenly than I ever anticipated.

I'd been cut off financially, so both of us worked three jobs to pay the rent on a one-bedroom apartment and keep gas in the cars. Grocery money came from twice-weekly plasma donations I made down at a local clinic. (He said he couldn't do for religious reasons, but I think it had more to do with needles than scruples.) Chris picked up extra gigs as a bouncer, sometimes sitting in with the band when the next guy came on shift. As always, he was tired at day's end, but he was satisfied with his work. With me. With life.

I, however, had discovered I was actually a good student, one with a keen eye for literature, and I was loath to give it up. That meant squeezing in classes where I could, often coming back to campus between shifts or late in the evening. And though I still loved English, my chosen major, I could feel it slipping away from me. I was often too exhausted to focus on the texts I was reading. My contributions to discussions were lacking, and though the grades never slipped, I was losing momentum. I had been thrown off the right trajectory. Something essential was slowly being pulled away from me or me from it.

With Chris, who I loved deeply, there was happiness. We were irresistible attraction and orbital plane. But because of the strong pull of that love, I was also becoming someone who settled, who was content to let the days ebb past. I'd jettisoned myself in pursuit of him, of us, and though I was content in that moment, a day came when that wasn't the case.

One night before Christmas, after a long double shift waiting tables, I came home to an empty house. Chris was out working, playing a gig, or out with friends. I wasn't really sure, and it didn't matter. That pull between us, once overpowering, was gone. I could imagine life elsewhere in the universe. That night, I sat alone in the quiet of our apartment, surrounded by the warm pulse of Christmas lights, and "Jupiter Crash" popped in my head.

*"Was that it? was that the Jupiter show?
Kinda wasn't quite what I'd hoped for, you know."*

This life we'd made together was everything I'd thought it would be, and strangely, it was nothing I wanted. The girl who left Savannah and the one who returned were not the same, no matter how much I wanted that to be the case. Something turned around us that night, and once again, I drifted away from him, pulled out of his orbit by a force more powerful than love.