JOURNAL OF THE SUPERNOVA

ROBERT BRACE

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OF THE

SUPERNOVA

Robert Brace

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Front cover photograph: The Crab Nebula, the result of a supernova observed in 1054 A.D., taken from the Hubble Space Telescope
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If I held all truth in my hands, I would be careful not to open them.

—*Fontenelle*

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Author's Note

When reviewing the journal I had kept during that strange time, now with an eye to publication, it became clear that it would be unsuitable in the original: a journal is by its nature a series of disconnected entries at random intervals, not a unified whole. I therefore turned it into story form, hoping to achieve a more cogent account. However, I wanted to retain the immediacy of the original and so often leave the language unchanged—this can result in inconsistencies, such as a mixture of present tense (as is usual in a journal) and past tense (as is usual in a story). Also, I avoided referring to anything in the future, since the author of a journal cannot know what is to come, but sometimes violated this dictum to draw connections or clarify allusions that would otherwise have remained obscure. I hope the reader will forgive these anomalies as necessary for the goal of achieving coherency of narrative while remaining as faithful as possible to the original.

—H. Evans, New York, 2033

I

BETELGEUSE IS ABOUT TO EXPLODE. ALL THE FUEL AT the core has been consumed in its thermonuclear furnace, we are told, and the fires are going out—the star, once tenth brightest in the night sky, has already dimmed to just a third of normal, and it no longer possesses sufficient energy to counteract its own gravity. The star will collapse and the shock wave will be on an apocalyptic scale, hurling material the size of planets through interstellar space.

This is not without consequence for us.

Betelgeuse is a red supergiant, a thousand times the size of the Sun. If placed in our puny solar system it would encompass the orbit of Jupiter—not just Jupiter itself but the entire breadth of that planet's long twelve-year circumnavigation of the Sun. When something that big blows up, it does so with a bang.

Actually, Betelgeuse blew up long ago but, since the star is 724 light-years distant from Earth, its cataclysmic demise is only now becoming visible to us.

What will happen to humanity? Speculation—even informed scientific speculation—varies wildly from nothing much to complete extinction.

For sure there will be a supernova and for several months Betelgeuse will be by far the brightest object in the night sky. But then it will again dim, and the remnants will form a black hole with a voracious appetite that will begin engorging itself like some galactic Gargantua. It will consume everything in its path: asteroids; nebulae; whole stars.

But it will be something invisible that most threatens us on Earth. The supernova will produce a burst of cosmic radiation, that is, atomic nuclei accelerated to near light speed. The atmosphere protects us from the Sun's meager output of cosmic radiation, but the energies of these particles will be orders of magnitude greater, and nothing will stop them. This barrage, being slightly slower than light speed, will arrive shortly after Betelgeuse blows up. The result, at minimum, will be spectacular light shows—auroras everywhere, not just the Arctic—but most modern semiconductor-based electronics will likely be destroyed.

Whether life, human and otherwise, can withstand this onslaught is an open question. The radiation will rip apart the ozone layer, exposing us to a shower of secondary particles that will boost rates of genetic mutation—monsters will be born. One theory has it that the resulting increase in lightning strikes will engulf the planet in a conflagration of wildfires whose smoke, shielding Earth from solar energy, will induce a new ice age. Some say that the particles themselves will simply kill anything above ground.

Complicating the issue is the question of proximity. It turns out that the 724-light-year calculation might be wrong—a joint air force/navy research satellite took a closer look at Betelgeuse back in 2020, and analysis of the resulting data has led to a reappraisal: much of the scientific community now believes that Betelgeuse is only 548 light-years away. It does nothing to inspire confidence in their other assertions that they managed to get such a basic measurement wrong by twenty-five percent. It also means that assurances based on the premise "it's too far away to affect us" are now necessarily one-quarter less convincing.

It is an irony of history that five hundred years ago, just as Europe was emerging victorious from the millennium-long struggle against barbarian invasion, and in that expansive mood Columbus was about to sail the ocean blue, Betelgeuse was blowing up. Right when Western

civilization was hitting stride on the long road that was to lead through the Age of Reason, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the rise of the great democracies, and culminating in our own triumphant and terrible Reign of Technology, in all that time the instrument of our oblivion had been relentlessly hurtling toward us at 186,000 miles per second.

Five centuries of remarkable human progress, but mankind's fate had been sealed before it even began.

Everything is changing. Canned goods are in short supply; lead shielding is unobtainable. In a reversal of the usual practice, basements now command a premium in real estate, and in New York the penthouse apartments atop tall towers, once billionaires' trophy homes, have become unmarketable—the billionaires have moved on to lavishly equipped caves or abandoned mine shafts. Electronic vacuum tubes, impervious to radiation but last manufactured in bulk in the 1960s, are suddenly worth more by weight than gold bullion. The suicide rate has doubled. Even the word *supernova*, whose role was once restricted to that of a noun, now does steady duty as a verb—*Betelgeuse is to Supernova* one tabloid headline read.

But for all that, most people, like me, have done nothing other than carry on as normal and wonder what will happen. The one change I have made is to commence this journal, something to chronicle such events as are worth recording. In the interests of preservation, I am writing it the old-fashioned way, ink on paper, composed in laborious longhand and already bearing the cross-outs and corrections of someone long-used to keyboards. The book itself is a fine Italian volume bound in soft black leather and further secured with an elasticized band to help withstand the rigors of whatever is to come.

There is a second and more personal reason that I chose to begin this missive to an uncertain future, and which is why I am starting it today: an invitation arrived in the morning mail, a strange and unanticipated one. A double invitation, to be precise, and into these pages I paste the original of the first and transcribe the text of the second.

Mr. Rothesay Ambrose Urquhart

Cordially requests the pleasure of the company of

Dr. Hugo Evans

On a summer cruise with him & his guests
aboard the

Motor Yacht Mulvane

Departing from the harbour at Monaco on the
First of July
And thence exploring the Eastern & Western
basins of the Mediterranean Sea while observing
the coming Apocalypse
before terminating at the Piraeus, on or about
the Twenty-sixth of September.

No RSVP, but its absence was explained by the second invitation, this one handwritten with nib and ink on a sheet of notepaper slipped inside the envelope with the first.

> *I am sure that this invitation must come as something of a bolt from the blue, but I have been asked to explain the circumstances and fill in the details, after which perhaps it will seem less peculiar. I wonder if afternoon tea at my club might be convenient? Would 4:00 P.M. suit?*
>
> *O. Welles*

O? Orson? It made me wonder if I had become the butt of a practical joke. Someone at the gallery, perhaps, although I knew of no one likely to be behind such a thing.

Attached to the note with a paperclip was a business card, quite striking, the front rendered in a textured gold covering as if embossed with genuine gold leaf, like a Byzantine icon. It had a large black CC in the center and four small symbols at each corner. The back was plain stock bearing the name Cato Club and below that an address on Pall Mall in St. James's.

I had never heard of the place, although it was within walking distance of where I work on Portman Square. I looked it up. There was a website but it required a login to access anything other than the landing page. The only information on that first screen was an explanation of the club's name.

Cato the Elder (234-149 B.C.)
Roman senator who rejected all novelty that debased citizenry

Absolutely no electronic devices of any kind
are permitted on the club premises

There was no telephone number or email address, either on the note or the business card, perhaps unsurprising given the warning on the website. Their presumptuous absence tempted me to walk over and leave word at the front desk that it would not be convenient for me to call this afternoon. But I was going to do no such thing, and maybe this O. Welles already knew there was nothing that would have kept me away, given the role that Rothesay Ambrose Urquhart has played in my professional life.

II

I JUST NOW REALIZE THAT I HAVE FAILED IN THE FUNDAMENTAL requirement of any first-person narrative: to explain who it is doing the narrating.

My name, as will have already been noted by the observant reader from the invitation, is Hugo Evans. Do not ask why my parents chose to burden their only child with *Hugo*—it is a mystery to me. There is a middle name too, even worse.

My parents are otherwise sensible people. Both are academics, both English, but early in his career my father was offered a position at Harvard, too prestigious to decline, so my parents moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and never left. I was born during a blizzard at Mass General (a favorite story of theirs: the struggle to make it to the hospital before I emerged—my father has only owned four-wheel-drives ever since). And so, with the characteristic generosity of Americans, I acquired U.S. citizenship from the geographical accident of my birth in addition to the U.K. citizenship inherited as part of my patrimony. This transatlantic dipole has been a defining framework of my life ever since.

My early education took place in the local elementary and middle schools, but when high school approached my parents, perhaps feeling

that it was time I acquired a modicum of Englishness, packed me off to the U.K.

I became a boarder at Harrow.

Harrow is a "public" school, which in Britain, with the deceptive circumlocution of the English, actually means a private school. Every day as school uniform I wore a shirt and tie, navy blazer, gray trousers, polished Oxfords, and a varnished straw boater—an outfit that was unamusing to a thirteen-year-old used to jeans and sneakers.

The food was a shock to an American kid—about as gray as my pants and as flavorful, too. Worst were the sandwiches: miserable little things composed of two thin pieces of over-processed bread containing just a single slice of filling. The "ham" in a ham sandwich came from a gelatinous block extracted from a tin can. No mayo or mustard but instead butter, the only ingredient provided in abundance, and something that gave an already strange foodstuff a highly unpleasant mouthfeel. We were assured that, despite appearances, the food provided nourishment, and it is true that no student died of malnutrition during my time at the school, but there was no such thing as a fat kid.

At Harrow, I learned rugby, dead languages, how to behave like a gentleman, and to spell color with a *u*: "colour"—something that still looks strange to me on the printed page, all this time later. And so passed the next four years, digesting the indigestible by way of food, but the standard of instruction was high, and intellectually we boys feasted like princes.

It had always been assumed that I would follow my parents into university life, but then I unexpectedly found myself heading down a different path.

I cannot say what got me interested in art. Like a thousand others before me, I fell first for the Impressionists—the only worthwhile subject of art was light. Then, with the transitory passions of youth, it was on to the post-Impressionists, and nothing painted before Cézanne would do. Next came the early Florentines, above all Botticelli, plus the contemporaneous Venetians: those multiple Bellinis and the impenetrable Giorgione.

But in general I was indiscriminate, and with London so near I soon devoured the capital's art institutions. By my junior year—Harrow's "fifth form"—I was spending term breaks on the Continent combing through the great museums, although not Saint Petersburg's Hermitage: the House Master resolutely denied that request, refusing to allow one of his charges to step foot onto soil controlled by that nasty little troll in the Kremlin.

Despite this fascination with art, I never had the urge to myself be an artist. Instead, I wanted to be an art historian, to unravel that mysterious creation of meaning from a few simple brushstrokes or blows of the chisel's blade—cracking the code, so to speak. I suppose I wanted to be a detective of sorts, a skill which I was soon to use in a more practical sense.

So I immersed myself in Ruskin and Berenson and studied with envious wonder the career of Kenneth Clark. But when I graduated from Harrow with helpful references from the beaks—intended to ease my way into Oxbridge—I confounded both them and my parents: I returned to Massachusetts.

But not Boston; instead, I enrolled at Williams, a liberal arts college nestled among the distant Berkshire Mountains. Williams had two attractions: an excellent art history program and the Clark Art Institute, which is both a first-rate museum and an advanced research institute—an amazing thing to find in the remote pastoral countryside.

At Williams, I gradually acquired the fundamentals of my chosen trade, but there was to be a fateful interruption: during my junior year, traditionally spent abroad, I again crossed the Atlantic: I went to Oxford University.

This was not without reservations, especially about the food.

It was one of those decisions, seemingly unimportant at the time, which in retrospect illustrates the profound role that chance plays in life. Williams maintains an exchange program with Oxford's Exeter College, and so it was to Exeter I went, especially welcome as that institution counts among its alumni William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, twin pillars of the first organized rebellion against the Old Masters, the Pre-

Raphaelite Brotherhood, antedating as it did the Impressionists' revolt by a generation.

At Exeter, I was to discover something that would change my life. Two things, in fact, both of them encountered on the same day and at precisely the same moment.

I remember the day exactly: it was Thanksgiving. Because of its American associations, Exeter celebrates this essentially U.S. holiday: turkey, cranberry, cornbread, the whole shebang. Before the feast the Rector invited us American students to drinks in his quarters. I should explain that to the English, I sound American; to Americans, I sound English—it is my curse to always have to account for my accent. The college's prize paintings are usually hung in the Dining Hall, but in the Rector's Lodge I found a portrait that eclipsed them all.

It hung above the fireplace in the drawing room where we were gathered, and I was standing there staring at the thing, sherry in hand, when the Rector joined me.

"I wanted to ask you about this painting," he said. "It was donated to the college by an alumnus during my predecessor's time. He had it hung here and then promptly forgot about it—the old boy was about to retire and was too distracted to have the matter seen to properly. I was going to ask a friend from the Slade to come up and take a look, but since you're here..."

It was not a large work, less than two feet a side, depicting a young woman. She was standing side-on but looking back over her left shoulder, gazing at the viewer in mild surprise. She was dressed in what might have been medieval finery, richly embroidered robes, a wreath-strewn headscarf with long tails reaching down her back and which completely concealed her hair, rendering the face in vivid relief: a girl portrayed playing dress-up, or perhaps on her way to her first costume ball.

"It's after Vermeer, I think."

"Vermeer?"

"The *Girl with a Pearl Earring*," I explained. "In the Mauritshuis."

"You mean it's a copy?"

"No, Rector, not at all. But I do think that the composition is based on that painting. A deliberate quotation: the posing of the figure; the exotic clothing; the rich coloration, particularly the Prussian blue; the expression on the girl's face."

But even as I said it, I knew that this last was not strictly accurate. In Vermeer's painting, the girl's expression radiates a fresh and unencumbered alertness, someone taking quiet pleasure in discovering life, but you knew that, for all her present charm, in twenty years she would have devolved into a sturdy Dutch matron. In the painting before me there was something different, a more formed inner life and a sense of underlying intelligence that would have shunned anything bourgeois. Whatever the girl in this painting was destined for, it would not be matronhood.

"Do you think it has any artistic merit?"

"Yes, very much so."

"Fine enough to be hung in Hall?"

"Yes, Rector," I replied. "Fine enough to be hung in Hall. Who painted it?"

Given the college's associations, I assumed that it would be a Pre-Raphaelite, particularly with the sitter's medieval dress harking back to chivalric times, a traditional trope of the Brotherhood. Not one of the big names, since I was already familiar with their works, but a painter belonging to the same period and sharing their sensibility, someone yearning to break from the patriarchy of Mannerism and revert to something more fundamental.

"Can't remember the name," the rector replied, "but I'll look it up in the alumni records."

"The artist was an alumnus?"

"Yes, it's one of the fellow's own paintings, you see, hence my predecessor ignoring it, assuming that it was a conceit on his part to have burdened us with the thing."

"You mean it's contemporary?"

"Certainly, if three years ago counts as contemporary."

I was left more-or-less speechless and gazed anew at this artifact from a previous age that had apparently time-traveled to the present. The

artist was living, and I sensed without consciously thinking it that I had suddenly found the subject for a doctoral dissertation.

And the sitter: she existed, too. A girl at the time—fifteen or sixteen, say—but if the painting was three years old then currently at least eighteen, and assuming that it had not been given to the college before the artist had lived with the work a while, then in her early twenties by now.

"Are you alright, Mr. Evans?"

The Rector's wife had joined us, and I realized that apart from the porters clearing up everyone else had left, and we three were alone. The other students had already made their way to Hall, their departure unnoticed by me in the thrall of this amazing find.

"I wonder if I could take some measurements?"

I meant if I could come back at some convenient time and take measurements, but the Rector's wife immediately slipped from the room, returning a moment later with a tape measure. I took the two basic dimensions, height and width—17.5 by 15 inches—thanked my hosts, and left the Rectory.

I must have walked around the Front Quad and over to Hall that day, but I have no recollection of doing so because by then I was enraptured—doubly enraptured: by the painting, and by the girl that it depicted.