



THE SHIP TO LOOK FOR GOD

D. KRAUSS

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“This joy in God is not like any pleasure found in physical or intellectual satisfaction. Nor is it such as a friend experiences in the presence of a friend. But, if we are to use any such analogy, it is more like the eye rejoicing in light.”

- St. Augustine, The City of God

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Chapter I

Otto Passes, or He Doesn't, but He Is Certainly Somewhere Else

Otto died in his driveway. He should have died a half-mile down the road, but the indignity of crashing into a parked car and drooling all over himself while people gaped and called him an idiot had kept him going. He somehow negotiated the uphill street and reached his carport without mishap, even though a trip-hammer slammed his chest, his ears roared like a tidal wave, and his eyesight tunneled. But his legs no longer worked and the car cruised up the incline and nudged to a halt against his son's truck, supposed to be on the street but, hey, this kid.

Son, washing the truck (which explained why it wasn't on the street and maybe a good thing because, otherwise, Otto would have kept going right through the carport and into the backyard pool), jumped out of the way, carrying hose and bucket with him (lacrosse player, great reflexes), then ran up mouthing, "Are you nuts?"

Otto didn't hear a word, further evidence he was dying. He wanted to say, "Sorry about the truck and, no, I'm perfectly rational. It appears my heart's exploding. Mind calling an ambulance?" but couldn't quite muster it. He did manage a slight smile. Then, gone.

Otto had, over the years, developed certain expectations about death: it starts with severe pain, of course, because the transition from life to death must be a bit traumatic, otherwise, everyone would go right to it, but then the pain fades and a beacon appears that he is impelled to follow, while a darkly magnificent voice coaxes him along. He'd float around for a while until finally reaching Heaven, an unbelievable golden city spread along light-years of stars and clouds and nebulae, with the Light of God Himself shining out as Otto descended, in awe and rapture, to the

center. He wasn't exactly up for sainthood, but Otto had lived a good enough life to earn a spot on Heaven's portico, at least. Probably.

We'll see.

If he landed in a Buddhist or Islamic Afterlife instead, or a nihilistic vortex of chaos, or in simply nothing, well, better a letdown than a burning. Although, if the Islamic picture held, he'd burn anyway.

But nothing of the sort happened. (Except for the pain. Naturally.) Blackness enveloped him as his heart disintegrated and organs shut down, processes marked by a terrible sense of drowning while someone shoved a red-hot poker into his sternum and pried it open. Took way too long running its course and for a bit, Otto feared death was nothing more than eternal pain. What joy.

But eventually, it stopped, after what felt like twenty hours, and Otto gasped and said, "Damn."

Probably not the best first word to utter in death but nothing was following the expected program, which meant maybe he *wasn't* dead; more likely, he'd suffered through one helluva heart attack and revived, which called for appropriate commentary. But he wasn't lying in a hospital bed or an ambulance or a recovery room; he was face down on a hard surface. Best not to say any more until he figured out what in the blue blazes was going on.

So what in the blue blazes was going on?

Had he fallen out of the car? No. This surface was cool, whereas his asphalt driveway should be at summertime temps, hot enough to fry eggs. He lifted his head for a better view.

"Cobblestones." Otto rendered his second word with appropriate surprise because, yes, he lay on cobblestones, Quite well-made ones, perfectly even and free from all detritus. Well swept, too. Otto blinked a couple of times but everything remained and, so taken was he with the workmanship, he stayed there, admiring it.

He finally batted the praise out of his eyes and looked to the side. Feet. Well, shoes, lots of them, stepping quietly over and around him, sandals and boots and flats and sneakers (they don't call them sneakers anymore, do they?) of all types and colors and styles. Shoes attached to legs clothed in pants and skirts and slacks and dresses and what – a kilt? No way.

The cobblestones, cluttered with so many active feet, ran for quite a distance to a sunlit intersection bustling with brightly painted wagons rolling to and fro. Horses, beautiful dapples and greys and whites, pulled the wagons, and Otto heard the music of their hooves. Guys with very straight postures, elegantly dressed in top hats and tails and carrying long-handled whips, guided the horses with a gentle tap on the shoulder ... withers ... whatever. Otto didn't know anything about horses. Some of the wagons were empty; some had persons riding in the back while others carried nothing but flowers. One passed with someone sitting at a large piano playing it. Otto didn't recognize the tune.

Interspersed among the wagons were other vehicles, including a 1961 Volkswagen Bug, exactly like his first car, down to the same crap baby-blue paint job. Otto smiled. Good ole Buggy. What a great car. It had no working instruments. For heat, he screwed open a floor valve to let in engine fumes, and only one wiper functioned. (Passenger side, of course). Otto ran Buggy like a madman over south Jersey roads with frequent stops at Seaside, Groveton and the Spectrum, or merely tooled around the Barrens, pulling in WMMR with an FM converter lying on the passenger floor. (Which made changing over to that upstart WYSP a hazardous proposition.) After about a week of said tooling around, he'd figure he needed gas, the useless gauge offering no clue, so he'd pull into the Getty station and yell, "Fill it up!" Eighty cents, dollar twenty, that was it.

Buggy met its demise at the hands of Otto's sister's

idiot boyfriend, speed-shifting it in the parking lot and thereby destroying the transmission. Otto's last sight of Buggy was heading down Route 38 toward Mt. Holly, dangling from a tow truck. Be something if that was her, lovingly restored, a member of the distant parade.

The other cars ranged from vintage to ones so sleek and modern, they had to be experimental. Bicycles zipped among them, half the riders layered up in safety equipment like plastic knights, the other half in barely-there shorts and Tees, the barely-wearers such beautiful specimens of humanity that Otto was grateful they'd chosen so little clothing.

"I'm in Central Park," Otto concluded.

Had to be: strange parade of ill-suited vehicles flanked by unconcerned crowds meandering across tasteful sidewalks ... yep, fitted the description. Not that Otto knew; he'd never been to Central Park, although he'd gotten close, when Sherry and he drove to New York City a very long time ago in her 1969 Dodge Coronet, looking for a party that his crazy friend, Tree, was throwing somewhere near Battery Park. (Or was it *in* the Park?) Hopelessly lost, they ended up in Harlem. Gulp. But a festival of some kind was in full swing and crowds danced up and down the streets in full rainbow colors and everyone was in a good mood. A delivery guy cheerfully gave them directions. Never did find Tree, but Otto's impression of NYC ever afterward was of a town overrun with street festivals peopled with nice guys.

This looked like that.

Which prompted a few questions, such as how in the heck did he end up in Central Park? And where was Sherry? God, she was going to *kill* him. This wasn't an unfortunate over-drinking episode where he ended up passed out in the back of his car somewhere near Bethesda. (Never do that again.) He was hundreds of miles away without a single clue about how he got here. The first order

of business, then, develop said clue. That way, when he called her, he'd have a story. Maybe not a plausible one, but one nonetheless.

Otto turned over, staring straight up, and froze. Wow. The sky.

All the colors of cold-stirred winter air spread above him, shades of the wine-dark sea that he and Homer had the privilege of sailing on, thousands of years apart, of course, he with Sherry on that Greek Island cruise. Not the pale-blue-almost-white of the current summer diffused by haze and particles, but an endless dark blue. Otto could almost see through it, sense and touch its texture, four- and five-dimensional soaring to heights well beyond the point it should dissolve into the blackness of space. It glowed with beauty, with health, if that were possible.

"Good God in Heaven," he whispered, awestruck. He had an overpowering urge, like coming across a clean pool on a hot day, to swim in that live, caressing, rich blue; to jump up and find the stairs of a tall building and burst through the roof and launch himself over the side because a sky like that would reach down with gentle, loving fingers and catch him and he would soar in blue streams of air forever, riding its currents across a world of many colors.

He looked at the surrounding buildings for a set of convenient stairs and gasped. Not your run-of-the-mill office or apartment towers bordering the Park, these. Temples, enamel and pearl and crystal against the living sky, diamonds running up and down edge inlays which might be copper or gold or ruby, Otto couldn't tell. Thousands of windows caught the blue and cast it back in celebration, like sheer panes of pale opal under fluorescent light.

Marvelous and stunning and nothing like he had ever seen, Otto wanted to know what genius, what overwhelmingly brilliant architect, designed them, but they weren't the point. The buildings inclined in his direction as

if to urge him to spend a moment admiring the workmanship: such lines, such craft, the obviously precious materials woven into perfect form asked to be ignored, gently nudging the eye to something even they, in their glory, thought more glorious. Yes, Otto, don't forget the sky.

The sky.

"What is this?" Otto whispered. The buildings caught his question and offered it to the deep, deep blue and Otto, for a moment, believed he would actually get an answer. The expectation was delicious. But nothing spoke, nothing explained. He was not disappointed. Somehow, keeping the mystery of the sky was more important.

But he really, really needed an explanation because this was all too weird. Fortunately, lots of people walked about so, ask. Otto sat up. An Asian man dressed in jeans and a pullover, about to step over him, smiled politely and stepped around instead. Otto watched him stroll nonchalantly away. Several other people passed around Otto just as politely: this was a very busy street and he served as a speed bump. Oddly, no one seemed to mind. That wasn't in keeping with even a cheerful vision of New York, where he should have gotten, by now, "Gedouddadaway" from at least one or two of the not-so-cheerful. These people were excessively tolerant; if Otto wanted to lie down in the middle of a busy cobblestoned thoroughfare, well, fine, they'd simply go around him.

"Definitely not New York," he concluded, as if the sky and the buildings had not so convinced him before.

All right then, one scenario considered and discarded, leaving him with ... what? He peered at the street and the buildings and the people, avoiding the poetry of the sky because he'd get lost in it and he needed answers right now, not rapture. No street signs, no billboards, no marquees and no flyers pasted to telephone poles.

Hmm ... no telephone poles For that matter, no power

poles either.

No wires crossing the streets and interlacing the sky, black-line weavings cutting his view of it, sectioning the azure diamond of the forever sky while the buildings bent in worship and pointed him once again to that lovely, wonderful, soul-filling blue ...

He shook his head hard. Concentrate, dammit!

He took a deep breath and, while focused on the wagons and cars in the distance, rapidly shuffled through all possible scenarios and reached the only possible conclusion.

He was in a coma. Had to be.

There was no location on Earth even remotely like this, not even Paris, Otto's idea of the Most Beautiful City Possible. Their first night there, Sherry and he stood on the steps of the National Museum across the Seine and watched the full moon rise behind the Eiffel Tower, a tableau that had taken his breath away. It remained for him the perfect image of what a city should be, and he'd always meant to go back on the full moon and see if it had been the moment, or illusion, or was standard fare. Because, if that was normal, then Parisians were the luckiest people in the world.

But this place beat that all to hell with magnitudes of beauty well beyond what he idealized in Paris, and well beyond human capability; either this was the most intense heart-attack-coma-induced hallucination ever, tapping areas of his brain he had never accessed before, or he was no longer on Earth. With no experience of either coma or extraterrestrial travel, he could not say which was which. The latter was ridiculous, the former more likely.

Let's find out.

"Excuse me," he said, raising a finger at a woman walking by.

She stopped and smiled, middle-aged and sun-freckled with bronze hair and perfect teeth. "Yes?"

Otto swallowed because, wow, she was quite beautiful. “Uh, sorry to bother you and I hope this doesn’t sound like a stupid question, but can you tell me where I am?”

She laughed aloud, ice cubes tinkling on crystal, and Otto’s heart melted. Good God! How was such beauty possible?

“You’re new here, aren’t you?” she said.

He nodded dumbly, struck through, Sherry forgotten.

She reached down and patted him gently on the shoulder, “You’ll be all right,” and walked away.

He sat dumbfounded, whether from her sheer beauty or sheer cheek unsure. Probably both. He watched her retreating form appreciatively but c’mon, what’s this? His hallucinations should be a little more cooperative.

“Excuse me,” he said again, more insistently, to a black man with the most luxurious set of dreds he’d ever seen flowing and shaping around the guy’s head like they were separately alive.

“Yes?” The voice of a tenor sax, smile of pearls.

My God, is everyone in my head beautiful? “Uh ...” Otto was in danger of getting lost in the man’s eternal black eyes. “Can you tell me where I am?”

“Ah!” The man roared out a laugh of pure delight. “You are new here!” He reached down and vigorously shook Otto’s reluctant hand. “You will be all right!” And he walked away.

“What the hell?” Otto spoke to the man’s back. No response except a cheerily waved hand as the man kept going. Well, good to know everyone thought he’d be all right. Too bad no one offered much more info than that. Didn’t need to get hit with a board to deduce that if he wanted to know what was going on, he’d have to figure it out himself.

Otto stood up and brushed at his clothes, the same ones he was wearing in the driveway during the heart attack, he noted. Botany blue suit, white shirt, blue tie: day uniform

of the mid-level DC government worker. He checked himself thoroughly but there wasn't a speck of dirt on him, nor an abrasion, heck, not even a wrinkle.

Odd. Should be some sign of wear or trauma, like a ripped-open shirt as EMTs applied CPR and defibrillator paddles, gunk all over him, tubes shoved down his throat, that sort of thing. But no. Strong evidence this was, indeed, happening in his mind while he sprawled in an ICU, airways and cords poked into him, grim-faced doctors walking in and out while Sherry stood outside the glass wringing her hands. Anoxia-induced daydream. Sit back and enjoy it then, man. Otto hoped he remembered it all when he came around because, man, what a story!

Someone cleared a throat and Otto looked up. A brown-skinned young man stood in front of him; Asian-looking, Filipino or Indonesian, maybe Vietnamese, had that look. In his twenties, wearing a colorful short-sleeve shirt and white Dockers, brown sandals. Reminded Otto of a business owner he once knew who owned a building outside the Mabalacat gate of Clark Air Base, further evidence this was a coma.

"Hi," the young man said.

"Hi," Otto replied.

"You all right?" The young man showed genuine concern.

"That seems to be the general opinion."

The young man chuckled. "Yeah, you get a lot of that around here." He reached out a hand. "My name's Frank."

"Otto." They shook. Firm and friendly, two good guys meeting each other for the first time. Okay, relax.

"You're probably a little disoriented," Frank said.

"That's a good call, Frank." Otto looked around. "Where exactly am I, and, yes, I am new here, and please don't tell me I'm going to be all right."

Frank laughed, "Okay, okay. You *will* be all right, by the way, but everyone quickly forgets how confused they

were when they arrived and, well ...” he made an amused gesture at the passing crowd.

“So where am I?”

“The City.”

“The city ... where?”

Frank smiled. “The City. That’s all, just the City.”

“Oh, you say it with a capital ‘C’, huh? Cities have to be somewhere, Frank.”

“In one way of thinking. Not in every way.”

Otto shook his head. “Metaphysics. Oh, no. What’s the sound of one hand clapping, then?”

Frank regarded him warmly. “I think that’s one of those unanswerable questions. Are you hungry?”

“Frank, why won’t you tell me where I am?”

“Because that’s a hard question to answer, Otto. Best I can do right now is to ask you where you think you are.”

“Strapped in a bed in ICU.”

Frank approved. “That’s good for now. Question stands, are you hungry?”

Otto considered. “I could use a cheese Danish.”

“Okay. I know a good place. C’mon.” Frank turned, waving a “come along” hand, and headed toward the intersection of piano-playing wagons and cars.

“Great,” Otto muttered.

This was all so stupid. But, the thing about dreams, you play along, trying to figure out the ham-handed metaphors one’s overly theatrical brain presents. So be it. He lurched behind Frank’s receding back.

Characters

The People of the City

1. Otto Boteman. Recently arrived.
2. Frank Vaughn. Greeter. Beaten to death by his mother in 1965, when he was ten years old.
3. Ferdinand Silva de Astorga. Purveyor of fine wines and tobaccos. Eighteenth-century explorer of the Plata.
4. Ian. Carriage driver. Engineer from Glasgow.
5. Claudia. Barkeep and brewer. Fourth-century Christian martyr.
<http://www.holytrinityorthodox.com/calendar/los/May/18-01.htm>
6. Ralph Hamor. Drinker. Helped found Jamestown.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph_Hamor
7. Steward. Australian transportee, gov'nor
8. The conductor. Nineteenth-century clipper ship crewman.
9. Cyril the Greek. Train rider. Nestorian evangelist of China in the seventh century.
<http://www.syriacstudies.com/2013/12/14/the-nestorian-church-the-ancient-christians-church-of-mesopotamia-the-early-nestorians/>
10. Theodore. Cyril's pal.
11. Doc Holliday. Gambler. Noted Western gunman.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doc_Holliday
12. Augustus. Cardplayer. Dutch settler of New York.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Netherland
13. Frank. Cardplayer. WW2 vet. Interested in Frida.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Bulge
14. Frida. Twelfth-century Maltese interested in Frank.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malta>
15. Big Nose Kate. Occasional train passenger. Noted Western figure.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Nose_Kate

16. Jacob Schiff. Financier. Noted philanthropist of the 1890s. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob_H._Schiff
17. Carl Jung. Maybe.
18. Rousseau. Definitely.
19. Unathi. Proprietor of crystal. Nineteenth-century Zulu warrior.
20. Grace. House mom. Sam's wife.
21. The kids. Unathi and Grace's, that is. Not the murderous little trolls in the desert.
22. A redneck jester. Formerly of the Stonewall Brigade, died at Second Manassas.
<https://www.battlefields.org/learn/civil-war/battles/second-manassas>
23. William Godwin. Librarian. English philosopher, father of Mary Shelley.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Godwin
24. Admiral Zeno. Good-natured smart-alec. Defender of Venice.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/656525/Carlo-Zeno>
25. A kimono-wearing Incan. Curro Occlo, wife of Incan emperor Manco who fought the Spanish to a standstill.
<https://www.thoughtco.com/manco-incas-rebellion-1535-2136544>
26. A couple of drunk Umbrians.
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umbria>
27. A tender of street lamps. William Murdoch, first to use coal gas to light his home.
<https://intriguing-history.com/gas-lights-lamplighters/>
28. Charles Darwin. Librarian. Naturalist.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Darwin
29. Ralph Waldo Emerson. Librarian. Philosopher.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph_Waldo_Emerson
30. Madalyn Murray O'Hair. Librarian. Troublemaker.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madalyn_Murray_O'Hair
31. Testy fifteenth-century Russian nun.

32. Georges LeMaitre. Library patron. Astronomer.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georges_Lema%C3%AAtre
33. Edmund Hoyle. Gamester.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund_Hoyle
34. Fred Hoyle. Another astronomer. What's with all the astronomers? http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fred_Hoyle
35. The green-and-gold barista. A mariner with Dias.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bartolomeu_Dias
36. Ebenezer Cook. Carriage driver. Factor by trade.
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ebenezer_Cooke_\(poet\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ebenezer_Cooke_(poet))
37. Carlton, the doorman. Former hitman.
38. George "Machine Gun" Kelly. Cardsharp. Criminal.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Machine_Gun_Kelly

The People of Out

1. Nellie Cashman. Hotel proprietor. One helluva woman.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nellie_Cashman
2. Charley Utter. Cartage. Friend of Wild Bill Hickock.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlie_Utter
3. Moy Jin Mun. Stationmaster. Among other achievements, built the first Chinese railroad in the US.
<http://www.threetoughchinamen.com/moybrothers.html>
4. Pashtun. Traveler of Out. Eighteenth-century Maratha Lancer. Not a fan of the British.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maratha_Empire
5. Cook.
6. Henry "Box" Brown. Proprietor. Had an interesting escape from slavery.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Box_Brown
7. Sir Edmund Hilary. Guide. Climber of mountains.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edmund_Hillary
8. H. Rider Haggard. Mapper. Writer of early action thrillers.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Rider_Haggard
9. Christopher Columbus. Famous explorer.
10. Angela. Secretary. Likes Pashtun and red licorice.
11. Konstantin Tsiolkovsky. Manager of Star City. Pioneer

rocket man.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Konstantin_Tsiolkovsky

12. Robert Heinlein. Needs no introduction.

13. C. S Forester. Admiral of the new British Navy. Noted author. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/C._S._Forester

14. Oslava. Mining administrator. Good friend of Harold Hadrada.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harald_III_of_Norway

15. Gene Roddenberry. Mining engineer. Also needs no introduction.

16. Prester John. Boss of the Works. Noted King.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prester_John

The Crew

1. Gustavo Guerricaechevarria. Fabrics. Tenth-century Basque weaver.

2. Karl Voorsen. Structural repair. Falkenberg blacksmith of the nineteenth century.

3. Amelia Earhart. Captain of the ship. Famous aviatrix.

4. Marc Aaronson. Astronomer.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marc_Aaronson

5. Ho. Fourteenth-century Chinese scribe.

6. Hongi Hika. Noted nineteenth-century Maori warrior. Pretty good warrior here, too.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hongi_Hika

7. Akiko. Twelfth-century geisha. Soon to be a lot of trouble.

8. Sergeant Krauss. Reluctant Wehrmacht soldier.

9. Bernard of Cluny. Medieval poet.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernard_of_Cluny

People of the Desert Tribes

1. Kenny. Chief of the Tartars. Goths, before that. 1970s accountant from Illinois.

2. Moses. Harem guy. Slave in 1830s Louisiana.

3. Jakto. Harem guy. Soldier of Axum.

4. Sam. Harem guy. St. Louis train porter in the 1930s.

5. Flicka. The mischievous horse.
6. Erick the Viking. No, not the Monty Python one.
7. Tabitha. Seventeenth-century party girl.
8. Kastor. Part-time Tartar. Prince of the Tectosage.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tectosage>
9. John Myers. Guide. Old West scout.
<http://www.history.idaho.gov/sites/default/files/uploads/reference-series/0290.pdf>
10. Tyrus. Balearic slinger.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balearic_Islands
11. Captain John Augustus Oldham. Cavalry officer. Was in the Light Brigade.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/13th_Light_Dragoons
12. Vachir. A real Mongol.