

Titanic Victim Speaks Through Waterbed

by Robert Olen Butler

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Introduction

Fiction can take readers to inaccessible places, show us strange sites, and introduce us to characters we could never otherwise meet. It operates within a creative landscape bound by different rules than those of reality. And yet, there are no other worlds than the one we inhabit, and all good stories must be about us in some way. This is the beauty of fiction—it tells us about ourselves, even if we do not realize it.

In Pulitzer Prize winner Robert Olen Butler’s “Titanic Victim Speaks Through Waterbed,” which was first published in the *Missouri Review* a year before the blockbuster film, an upper-class English gentleman who died on the Titanic finds he is trapped in a waterbed. He remembers an important meeting with a young woman the night the ship sinks and explains the strange watery afterlife he has experienced since. The occasional interruptions caused by the shifting bodies of the couple above him on the waterbed act as a frame to contextualize the narrator’s tale and the yearning that drives it.

Proving that literary inspiration can come from unlikely sources, this story, along with the others published in Butler’s collection *Tabloid Dreams* (1996), originated in headlines Butler pulled from the tabloid newspapers that line grocery checkout lanes. The story’s antique narrative voice and origin in low culture might at first seem difficult to translate into our own lives. However, the driving force of the story—the narrator’s yearning for a kind of intimacy that has been missing in his life all along—is something we can all understand. We may have even experienced a similar yearning for something unknowable that will (we are certain) make us complete. In his afterlife, the narrator slowly pieces together this thing for himself.

At the heart of the story lies the narrator’s vivid memory of his final hours—especially his encounter with a young American woman on the promenade deck just after he has noticed the ship has stopped moving. Through this brief relationship formed in the face of crisis, Butler reveals the intense power of human connection. The shared moment sparks a realization that culminates after death, when the narrator’s spirit learns that humility comes with being a part of something greater than oneself.

Titanic Victim Speaks Through Waterbed

by Robert Olen Butler

This is a bit of a puzzle, really. A certain thrashing about overhead. Swimmers with nowhere to go, I fear, though I don't recognize this body of water. I've grown quite used to this existence I now have. I'm fully conscious that I'm dead. And yet not so, somehow. I drift and drift, and I am that in which I drift, though what that is now, precisely, is unclear to me. There was darkness at first, and I failed to understand. But then I rose as some faint current from the depths of the North Atlantic and there were others around me, the corporeal creatures of the sea whom I had hitherto known strictly on fine china and dressed lightly in butter and lemon. I found that I was the very medium for the movement of their piscine limbs, and they seemed oblivious to my consciousness. In their ignorance, I could not even haunt them. But I understood, by then, of what my fundamental state consisted, something that had eluded the wisdom of Canterbury. Something for which I was unprepared.

And after many years—I don't know how many, but it is clear to me that it is not an inconsiderable sum—there are still surprises awaiting me. This impulse now to shape words, for instance. And the thrashing above me, the agitation it brings upon me. I returned to the first-class smoking lounge soon after I realized what had happened with the ship. I sat in an overstuffed leather chair and then looked about for a dry match to light my cigar. But I was well aware of what was going on out in the darkness beyond the window.

Perhaps that accounts for the slight betrayal of fear, something only I could notice, since on the surface I seemed to be in control: I sat down and reached for a match. But I sat down already fearing that the matches would be wet. I should have searched for the match and then sat down. But I sat. And then I looked about. And, of course, the room was quite dry. Just at arm's length was a silver-plate ashtray on the table with a silver matchbox engraved with the flag of the White Star Line rising on a pedestal from its center. It was full of matches. I took one and struck it against the side of the box and it flared into life and I held it to my cigar and I thought, What a shame that this quite charming ashtray will be soon lost. My hand was steady. To anyone watching, it would seem I had never doubted that the matches in this room were dry. Of course they were. At that hour the ship was beginning to settle into the water, but only like a stout fellow standing in this very room after a long night of cards and feeling heavy in his lower limbs. It was, of course, impossible for water to be in this room as of yet. That would come only very near the end. But still I feared that the matches would already be spoilt.

All through that night, the fear was never physical. I didn't mind so much, in point of fact, giving up a life in my body. The body was never a terribly interesting thing to me. Except perhaps to draw in the heavy curl of the smoke of my cigar, like a Hindu's rope in the market rising as if it were a thing alive. One needs a body to smoke a good cigar. I took the first draw there in that room just below the fourth funnel of the largest ship in the world as it sat dead still, filling with the North Atlantic Ocean in the middle of the night, and the smoke was a splendid thing.

And as I did, I felt an issue of perspiration on my forehead. This was not unpleasant, however. I sat with many a fine cigar on the verandah of my bungalow in Madras, and though one of the boys was always there to fan the punkah, I would perspire on my forehead and it was just part of smoking a good cigar out in India. With a whiskey and soda beside me. I thought, sitting on the sinking ship, to pour myself a drink. But I didn't. I wanted a clear head. I had gone to my cabin when things seemed serious and I'd gotten into evening dress. It was a public event, it seemed to me. It was a solemn occasion. With, I assumed, a King to meet somewhat higher even than our good King George. I didn't feel comfortable in tweeds.

What is that thrashing about above me now? The creatures of the sea are absent here, though I'm not risen into the air as I have done for some years, over and over, lifted and dispersed into cloud. I'm coalesced in a place that has no living creatures but is large enough that I don't quite sense its boundaries. Perhaps not too large, since I am not moving except for a faint eddying from the activity above. But at least I am in a place larger than a teacup. I once dwelt in a cup of tea, and on that occasion, I sensed the constraints of the space.

I yearn to be clothed now in the tuxedo I wore on that Sunday night in April in the year of 1912. I must say that a body is useful for formal occasions, as well. All this floating about seems much too casual to me. I expected something more rigorous in the afterlife. A propitiatory formality. A sensible accounting. Order. But there has been no sign, as yet, of that King of Kings. Just this long and elemental passage to a place I cannot recognize. And an odd sense of alertness now. And these words I feel compelled to speak.

There. I think I heard the sound of a human voice above me in this strange place. Very briefly. I cannot make out the words, if words this voice indeed uttered. It's been a rare thing for me, in all this time, to sense that a living human being might be close by. On that dark night in the North Atlantic, at the very moment we struck our fate out somewhere beneath the water line on our bow, I was in the midst of voices that did not resolve themselves into clear words, and none of us heard anything of that fateful event. I was sitting and smoking, and there was a voluble conversation over a card game near to me. It was late. Nearly midnight. I was reluctant to leave the company of these men, though I had not said more than two dozen words to any of them on this night, beyond "Good evening." I am an indifferent card player. I sat and smoked all evening and I missed having the latest newspaper. I don't remember what I might have thought about, with all that smoke. India perhaps. Perhaps my sister and her husband in Toronto, toward whom we had just ceased to steam.

What did become clear to me quite quickly was that we had stopped. I looked at the others and they were continuing to play their game unaware of anything unusual. So I rose and stepped out under the wrought iron and glass dome of the aft staircase. I had no apprehensions. The staircase was quite elegant with polished oak wall paneling and gilt on the balustrades and it was lit bright with electric lights. My feeling was that in the absence of the threat of native rebellion, things such as this could not possibly be in peril.

That seems a bit naive now, of course, but at the time, I was straight from the leather chair of the first-class smoking lounge. And I was tutored in my views by the Civil Service in India. And I was a keen reader of the newspapers and all that they had to say about this new age of technology, an age for which this unsinkable ship stood as eloquent testament. And I was an old bachelor whose only sister lived in the safest dominion of the empire.

Owing to the lateness of the hour, there was no one about on the staircase except for a steward who rushed past me and down the steps. "What's the trouble?" I asked him.

He waved a hot water bottle he was carrying and said, "Cold feet, I presume," and he disappeared on the lower landing.

I almost stepped back into the smoking lounge. But there was no doubt that we had come to a full stop, and that was unquestionably out of the ordinary. Two or three of the card players were now standing in the doorway just behind me, murmuring about this very thing. "I'll see what's the matter," I said without looking at them, and I descended the steps and went out onto the open promenade.

The night was very still. There were people moving about, somewhat distractedly, but I gave them no notice. I stepped to the railing and the sea was vast and smooth in the moonlight. There were shapes out there, like water buffalo sleeping in the fields in the dark nights outside Madras. I would drive back to my bungalow in a trap, my head still cluttered with the talk and the music from the little dance band and the whirling around of the dancers, and I would think how the social rites of my own class sometimes felt as foreign to me as those of the people we were governing here. These pretenses the men and women made in order to touch, often someone else's spouse. I am not unobservant. But I would go to these events, nevertheless. Even if I kept to myself.

I looked out at these sleeping shapes in the water. A woman's voice was suddenly nearby.

"We're doomed now," she said in the flat inflection of an American.

It took a moment to realize that she was addressing me. She said no more. But I think I heard her breathing. I turned and she was less than an arm's length from me along the railing. In the brightness of the moon I could see her face quite clearly. She seemed rather young, though less than two hours later I would revise that somewhat. The first impression, however, was that she was young, and that was all. Perhaps rather pretty, too, but I don't think I noticed that at the time. There were certain things that I suppose were beyond my powers of observation.

When I realized to whom she was speaking, her words finally registered on me. "Not at all." I spoke from whatever ignorance I had learned all my life. "Nothing that can't be handled. This is a fine ship."

"I'm not in a panic," she said. "You can hear that in my voice, can't you?"

"Of course."

"I just know this terrible thing to be true."

I leaned on the rail and looked at these sleeping cattle. I knew what they were. I understood what this woman had concluded.

"It's the ice you fear," I said.

"The deed is done, don't you think?" she said.

Her breath puffed out, white in the moonlight, and I felt suddenly responsible for her. There was nothing personal in it. But this was a lady in some peril, I realized. At least in peril from her own fears. I felt a familiar stiffening in me, and I was glad for it. Dissipated now were the effects of the cigar smoke and the comfort of a chair in a place where men gathered in their complacent ease. But I still felt I only needed to dispel some groundless fears of a woman too much given to her intuition.

"What deed might that be?" I asked her, trying to gentle my voice.

"We've struck an iceberg."

I was surprised to find that this seemed entirely plausible. "And suppose we have," I said. "This ship is the very most modern afloat. The watertight compartments make it quite unsinkable. We would, perhaps, at worst, be delayed."

She turned her face to me, though she did not respond.

"Are you traveling alone?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Perhaps that accounts for your anxiety."

"No. It was the deep and distant sound of the collision. And the vibration I felt in my feet. And the speed with which we were hurtling among these things." She nodded to the shapes in the dark. I looked and felt a chill from the night air. "And the dead stop we instantly made," she said. "And it's a thing in the air. I can smell it. A thing that I smelled once before, when I was a little girl. A coal mine collapsed in my

hometown. Many men were trapped and would die within a few hours. I smell that again. . . These are the things that account for my anxiety."

"You shouldn't be traveling alone," I said. "If I might say so."

"No, you might not say so," she said, and she turned her face sharply to the sea.

"I'm sorry," I said. Though I felt I was right. A woman alone could be subject to torments of the sensibility such as this and have no one to comfort her. I wanted to comfort this woman beside me.

Is this an eddy through what once was my mind? A stirring of the water in which I'm held? I ripple and suddenly I see this clearly: my wish to comfort her came from an impulse stronger than duty would strictly require. I see this now, dissolved as I have been for countless years in the thing that frightened her that night. But standing with her at the rail, I simply wished for a companion to comfort her on a troubling night, a father or a brother perhaps.

"You no doubt mean well," she said.

"Yes. Of course. "

"I believe a woman should vote, too," she said.

"Quite," I said. This was a notion I'd heard before and normally it seemed, in the voice of a woman, a hard and angry thing. But now this woman's voice was very small. She was arguing her right to travel alone and vote when, in fact, she feared she would soon die in the North Atlantic Ocean. I understood this much and her words did not seem provocative to me. Only sad.

"I'm certain you'll have a chance to express that view for many decades to come," I said.

"The change is nearer than you think," she said with some vigor now in her voice, even irritation. I was glad to hear it.

"I didn't mean to take up the political point," I said. "I simply meant you will survive this night and live a long time."

She lowered her face.

"That's your immediate concern, isn't it?" I asked, trying to speak very gently.

Before she could answer, a man I knew from the smoking lounge approached along the promenade, coming from the direction of the bow of the ship. He had gone out of the lounge some time earlier.

"Look here," he said, and he showed me his drink. It was full of chipped ice. "It's from the forward well deck," he said. "It's all over the place."

I felt the woman ease around my shoulder and look into the glass. The man was clearly drunk and shouldn't have been running about causing alarm.

"From the iceberg," he said.

I heard her exhale sharply.

"I never take ice in my scotch and soda," I said.

The man drew himself up. "I do," he said. And he moved away unsteadily, confirming my criticism of him.

She stood very still for a long moment.

All I could think to say was something along the lines of "Here, here. There's nothing to worry about." But she was not the type of woman to take comfort from that. I knew that much about her already. I felt no resentment at the fact. Indeed, I felt sorry for her. If she wanted to be the sort to travel alone and vote and not be consoled by the platitudes of a stiff old bachelor from the Civil Service in India, then it was sad for her to have these intense and daunting intuitions of disaster and death, as well.

So I kept quiet, and she eventually turned her face to me. The moon fell upon her. At the time, I did not clearly see her beauty. I can see it now, however. I have always been able to see in this incorporeal state. Quite vividly. Though not at the moment. There's only darkness. The activity above me has no shape. But in the sea, as I drifted inexorably to the surface, I began to see the fish and eventually the ceiling of light above me. And then there was the first time I rose—quite remarkable—lifting from the vastness of an ocean delicately wrinkled and athrashed with the sunlight. I went up into a sky I knew I was a part of, spinning myself into the gossamer of a rain cloud, hiding from the sea, traced as a tiny wisp into a great gray mountain of vapor. And I wondered if there were others like me there. I listened for them. I tried to call to them, though I had no voice. Not even words. Not like these that now shape in me. If I'd had these words then, perhaps I could have called out to the others who had gone down with the Titanic, and they would have heard me. If, in fact, they were there. But as far as I knew—as far as I know now—I am a solitary traveler.

And then I was rain, and the cycle began. And I moved in the clouds and in the tides and eventually I became rivers and streams and lakes and dew and a cup of tea. Darjeeling. In a place not unlike the one where I spent so many years. I had recently come out of the sea, but I don't think the place was Madras or near it, for the sea must have been the Arabian, not the Bay of Bengal. I was in a reservoir and then in a well and then in a boiling kettle and eventually in a porcelain cup, very thin: I could see the shadow of a woman's hand pick me up. I sensed it was Darjeeling tea, but I don't know how. Perhaps I can smell, too, in this state, but without the usual body, perhaps there is only the knowledge of the scent. I'm not sure. But I slipped inside a woman and then later I was—how shall I say this?—free again. I must emphasize that I kept my spirit's eyes tightly shut.

That was many years ago. I subsequently crossed the subcontinent and then Indochina and then I spent a very long time in another vast sea, the Pacific Ocean, I'm sure. And then, in recent times, I rolled in a storm front across a rough coast and rained hard in a new land. I think, in fact, I have arrived in the very country for which I'd set sail in that fateful spring of 1912.

Her country. I'm digressing now. I see that. I look at her face in this memory that drifts with me—I presume forever—and I am ready to understand that she was beautiful, from the first, and I look away, just as I did then. I talk of everything but her face. She turned to me and the moon fell upon her and I could not bring myself to be the pompous ass I am capable of being. I said nothing to reassure her. And that was an act of respect. I see that now. I wonder if she saw it. But neither did I say anything else. I looked away. I looked out to the sea that was even then trying to claim us both, and I finally realized she was gone.

She had said nothing more, either. Not good-bye. Nothing. Not that I blame her. I'd let her down somehow. And she knew that we were all in mortal peril. When I turned back around and found her gone, I had a feeling about her absence. A feeling that I quickly set aside. It had something to do with my body. I felt a chill. But, of course, we were in the North Atlantic with ice floating all about us. I wished I were in my bungalow near the Bay of Bengal, wrapped in mosquito netting and drifting into unconsciousness. I wished for that, at the time. I did not wish for her to return. I wanted only to be lying in a bed alone in a place I knew very well, a place where I could spend my days being as stiff as I needed to be to keep going. I wanted to lie wrapped tight, with the taste of cigars and whiskey still faint in my mouth, and sleep.

And now I feel something quite strong, really. Though I have no body, whatever I am feels suddenly quite profoundly empty. Ah empty. Ah quite quite empty.

I have cried out. Just now. And the thrashing above me stops and turns into a low murmur of voices. The water moves, a sharp undulation, and then suddenly there's a faint light above me. I had rushed through dark tunnels into this place and had no idea what it was, and now I can see it is structured and tight. The light is a square ceiling above me. I see it through the water, but there is something else, as well, blurring the light. Mosquito netting. A shroud. Something. It is quite odd, really.

I want to think on this place I'm in, but I cannot. There's only the empty space on the promenade where she'd stood. I turned and she was gone and I looked both ways and there were people moving about, but I

did not see her. It was then that I knew for certain that she was right. I knew the ship would go down, and I would die.

So I went to my cabin and closed the door and laid out my evening clothes on the bed. There were footfalls in the hallway, racing. Others knew. I imagined her moving about the ship like some Hindu spirit taken human form, visiting this truth upon whomever would listen. I once again stood still for a moment with a feeling. I wanted her to have spoken only to me. That we should keep that understanding strictly between the two of us. I straightened now and put that thought from my head. That thought, not the sinking of the ship, made me quake slightly inside. I straightened and stiffened with as much reserve and dignity as possible for a man in late middle age standing in his underwear, and I carefully dressed for this terrible event.

When I came out again on the promenade deck, I hesitated. But only briefly. Something very old and very strong in me brought me to the door of the smoking lounge. This was the only place that seemed familiar to me, that was filled with people whose salient qualities I could recognize easily. I stepped in and the card game was still on. Several faces turned to me.

"It's all in for us," I said, matter-of-factly.

"Yes," one of them said.

"You can bet rather more freely," I said to him.

"Don't encourage him," said another at the table.

"Right," I said. Then I stood there for a moment. I knew that I'd come to join them. My chair sat empty near the card table. And I began to worry about finding a dry match. Force of habit—no, not habit; the indomitable instinct of my life—moved me into the room and to the chair, and I sat and I worried about the matches and then I found that they were dry and I lit my cigar and I took a puff and I thought about getting a drink and I thought about meeting a King more powerful than King George and then I suddenly turned away from all that. I laid my cigar in the silver-plate ashtray and I rose and went out of the lounge.

It took me the better part of an hour to find her. At first, things were civilized. They were beginning to put women and children into the boats and people were keeping their heads about them. These were first class passengers and I moved through them and we all of us exchanged careful apologies for being in each other's way or asking each other to move. With each exchanged request for pardon, I grew more concerned. From this very sharing of the grace of daily human affairs, I responded more and more to the contrast of the situation. I could tell there weren't enough lifeboats for this enterprise. Any fool could tell that. I searched these faces to whom I gently offered my apologies and who gently returned them, but I was not gentle inside. I wanted to find her. I prayed that if I did not, it was because she was already in a sound boat out on the sea, well away from what would soon happen.

Then I came up on the boat deck below the wheelhouse and I could see forward. The lights were still quite bright all over the ship and the orchestra was playing a waltz nearby and before me, at the bow, the forecastle deck already was awash. It was disappearing before my eyes. And now the people from steerage in rough blankets and flannel nightshirts and kersey caps were crowding up, and I felt bad for them. They'd been let down, too, trying to find a new life somewhere, and the gentlemen of the White Star Line were not prepared to save all these people.

A woman smelling of garlic pressed past me with a child swaddled against her chest and I looked forward again. The anchor crane was all that I could see of the forecastle. The blackness of the sea had smoothed away the bow of our ship, and I wanted to cry out the name of the woman I sought, and I realized that I did not even know it. We had never been introduced, of course. This woman and I had spoken together of life and death, and we had not even exchanged our names. That realization should have released me from my search, but in fact I grew quite intense now to find her.

There was a gunshot nearby and a voice cried out, "Women and children only. Be orderly." There was jostling behind me and voices rising, falling together in foreign words, full of panic now. I had already searched the first class crowd in the midst of all that, and I slipped through a passage near the bridge and out onto the port side of the boat deck.

And there she was. There was order here, for the moment, women being helped into a boat by their husbands and by the ship's officers, though the movements were not refined now, there was a quick fumbling to them. But she was apart from all that. She was at the railing and looking forward. I came to her.

"Hello," I said.

She turned her face to me and at last I could see her beauty. She was caught full in the bridge lights now. I wished it were the moon again, but in the glare of the incandescent bulbs I could see the delicate thinness of her face, the great darkness of her eyes, made more beautiful, it seemed to me, by the faint traces of her age around them. She was younger than I, but she was no young girl; she was a woman with a life lived in ways that perhaps would have been very interesting to share, in some other place. Though I know now that in some other place I never would have had occasion or even the impulse—even the impulse, I say—to speak to her of anything, much less the events of her life or the events of my own life, pitiful as it was, though I think she would have liked India. As I float here in this strange place beneath this muffled light I think she would have liked to go out to India and turn that remarkable intuition of hers, the subtle responsiveness of her ear and her sight and even the bottoms of her feet, which told her the truth of our doom, she would have liked to turn all that sensitivity to the days and nights of India, the animal cries in the dark and the smell of the Bay of Bengal and the comfort of a bed shrouded in mosquito netting and the drifting to sleep.

Can this possibly be me speaking? What is this feeling? This speaking of a bed in the same breath with this woman? The shroud above me is moving in this place where I float. It strips away and there are the shadows of two figures there. But it's the figure beside me on the night I died that compels me. She stood there and she turned her face to me and I know now that she must have understood what it is to live in a body. She looked at me and I said, "You must go into a boat now."

"I was about to go below and wait," she said.

"Nonsense. You've known all along what's happening. You must go into the lifeboat."

"I don't know why."

"Because I ask you to." How inadequate that answer should have been, I realize now. But she looked into my face and those dark eyes searched me.

"You've dressed up," she said.

"To see you off," I said.

She smiled faintly and lifted her hand. I braced for her touch, breathless, but her hand stopped at my tie, adjusted it, and then fell once more.

"Please hurry." I tried to be firm but no more than whispered.

Nevertheless, she turned and I fell in beside her and we took a step together and another and another and we were before the lifeboat and a great flash of light lit us from above, a crackling fall of orange light, a distress flare, and she was beside me and she looked again into my eyes. My hands and arms were already dead, it seemed, they had already sunk deep beneath the sea, for they did not move. I turned and there was a man in uniform and I said, "Officer, please board this lady now."

He offered his hand to her and she took it and she moved into the end of the queue of women, and in a few moments she stepped into the boat. I shrank back into the darkness, terribly cold, feeling some terrible thing. One might expect it to be a fear of what was about to befall me, but one would be wrong. It was some other terrible thing that I did not try to think out. The winch began to turn and I stepped forward for one last look at her face, but the boat was gone. And my hands came up. They flailed before me and I didn't understand. I could not understand this at all.

So I went back to the smoking lounge, and the place was empty. I was very glad for that. I sat in the leather chair and I struck a match and I held it before my cigar and then I put it down. I could not smoke, and I didn't understand that either.

But above me there are two faces, pressed close, trying to see into this place where I float. I move. I shape these words. I know that they heard me when I cried out. When I felt the emptiness, even of this spiritual body. They were the ones who thrashed above me. Not swimming in the sea. Not drowning with me in the night the Titanic sank. I stood before her and my arms were dead, my hands could not move, but I

know now what it is that brought me to a quiet grief all my corporeal life long. And I know now what it is that I've interrupted with my cry. These two above me were floating on the face of this sea and they were touching. They had known to raise their hands and touch each other.

At the end of the night I met her, I put my cigar down, and I waited, and soon the floor rose up and I fell against the wall and the chair was on top of me, and I don't remember the moment of the water, but it made no difference whatsoever. I was already dead. I'd long been dead.

Robert Olen Butler has published twelve novels and six volumes of short fiction, one of which, *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. His latest novel is *A Small Hotel*, set in New Orleans. Butler has also published a volume of his lectures on the creative process, *From Where You Dream*. Among his many other awards are a Guggenheim Fellowship in fiction, the Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and two National Magazine Awards in Fiction. His stories have appeared widely in such publications as *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *GQ*, *The Paris Review*, and *The Georgia Review*. His works have been translated into twenty languages. He teaches creative writing at Florida State University. His website is www.robertolenbutler.com.

Interpretive Questions

- 1) The story opens with the line, “This is a bit of a puzzle, really.” What is the puzzle? How could this statement apply to the narrator’s identity as well as to his own story?
- 2) What has the afterlife been like for the narrator? How does it compare to what the narrator expected to find after death?
- 3) Each of the characters in this story responds differently to the crash, from the man who puts bits of iceberg from the forward deck in his scotch to the orchestra members who continue to play on the boat deck. What does this range of reactions say about the way people respond to crises?
- 4) While searching for the American woman on the boat deck, the narrator says, “I wanted to cry out the name of the woman I sought, and I realized that I did not even know it.” Describe the interaction between the narrator and the woman he meets. Why is it so important to the narrator? What does it reveal about his character?
- 5) How does the couple on the waterbed function as a part of the narrator’s story? What role do they serve in the narrative?
- 6) The story’s last lines seem significant: “I was already dead. I’d long been dead.” What does this tell us about the narrator’s life before the Titanic, as well as the short period of it that is narrated to us?
- 7) This story takes place in various settings, both grand and minute, as the narrator travels through his afterlife in the water cycle. How do these changes in scope—for example, from the Pacific Ocean to a teacup—help the reader understand what the narrator most desires?
- 8) How does the title shape the reader’s experience of the story?

Craft Questions

- 1) Common advice for writers is to “write what you know,” but aspects of this story are beyond plausible experience. What components of human experience might have informed or inspired this story?
- 2) This story is written from a unique perspective—the main character no longer has a solid, discrete body. How does Butler maintain a strong voice in such an ephemeral narrator?
- 3) How important is the historic event of the sinking of the Titanic to the structure of the story? How might the story’s themes been conveyed without this frame?
- 4) This story begins with the narrator in a waterbed and traces through the last hours of his life to various experiences after death. Track the temporal shifts in the story. How does Butler indicate each shift to keep readers from getting confused?

Writing Prompts _____

- 1) This story, along with others in Butler’s collection *Tabloid Dreams*, was inspired by a headline in a tabloid. Try this technique yourself: Using a headline as a title, write a story based on it.
- 2) From Dante’s nine circles of hell in the *Inferno* to Alice Sebold’s vision of heaven in *The Lovely Bones*, representations of the afterlife in literature vary greatly. Create your own version of the afterlife and narrate one character’s experience there. Remember that even in imagined or fantastic settings, concrete details are necessary to convince readers of the truth of a place.