



Before Breakfast  
Eugene O'Neill

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## CHARACTER—MRS. ROWLAND SCENE—

A small room serving both as kitchen and dining room in a flat on Christopher Street, New York City. In the rear, to the right, a door leading to the outer hallway. On the left of the doorway, a sink, and a two-burner gas stove. Over the stove, and extending to the left wall, a wooden closet for dishes, etc. On the left, two windows looking out on a fire escape where several potted plants are dying of neglect. Before the windows, a table covered with oilcloth. Two cane-bottomed chairs are placed by the table. Another stands against the wall to the right of door in rear. In the right wall, rear, a doorway leading into a bedroom. Farther forward, different articles of a man's and a woman's clothing are hung on pegs. A clothes line is strung from the left corner, rear, to the right wall, forward. It is about eight-thirty in the morning of a fine, sunshiny day in the early fall.

Mrs. Rowland enters from the bedroom, yawning, her hands still busy putting the finishing touches on a slovenly toilet by sticking hairpins into her hair which is bunched up in a drab-colored mass on top of her round head. She is of medium height and inclined to a shapeless stoutness, accentuated by her formless blue dress, shabby and worn. Her face is characterless, with small, regular features and eyes of a nondescript blue. There is a pinched expression about her eyes and nose and her weak, spiteful mouth. She is in her early twenties but looks much older.

She comes to the middle of the room and yawns, stretching her arms to their full length. Her drowsy eyes stare about the room with the irritated look of one to whom a long sleep has not been a long rest. She goes wearily to the clothes hanging on the right and takes an apron from a hook. She ties it about her waist, giving vent to an exasperated "damn" when the knot fails to obey her clumsy fingers. Finally gets it tied and goes slowly

to the gas stove and lights one burner. She fills the coffee pot at the sink and sets it over the flame. Then slumps down into a chair by the table and puts a hand over her forehead as if she were suffering from headache. Suddenly her face brightens as though she had remembered something, and she casts a quick glance at the dish closet; then looks sharply at the bedroom door and listens intently for a moment or so.

MRS. ROWLAND—(In a low voice) Alfred! Alfred! (There is no answer from the next room and she continues suspiciously in a louder tone) You needn't pretend you're asleep. (There is no reply to this from the bedroom, and, reassured, she gets up from her chair and tiptoes cautiously to the dish closet. She slowly opens one door, taking great care to make no noise, and slides out, from their hiding place behind the dishes, a bottle of Gordon gin and a glass. In doing so she disturbs the top dish, which rattles a little. It this sound she starts guiltily and looks with sulky defiance at the doorway to the next room.)

(Her voice trembling) Alfred!

After a pause, during which she listens for any sound, she takes the glass and pours out a large drink and gulps it down; then hastily returns the bottle and glass to their hiding place. She closes the closet door with the same care as she had opened it, and, heaving a great sigh of relief, sinks down into her chair again. The large dose of alcohol she has taken has an almost immediate effect. Her features become more animated, she seems to gather energy, and she looks at the bedroom door with a hard, vindictive smile on her lips. Her eyes glance quickly about the room and are fixed on a man's coat and vest which hang from a hook at right. She moves stealthily over to the open doorway and stands there, out of sight of anyone inside, listening for any movement.)

(Calling in a half-whisper) Alfred!

(Again there is no reply. With a swift movement she takes the coat and vest from the hook and returns with them to her chair. She sits down and takes the various articles out of each pocket but quickly puts them back again. At last, in the inside pocket of the vest, she finds a letter.)

(Looking at the handwriting—slowly to herself) Hmm! I knew it.

(She opens the letter and reads it. At first her expression is one of hatred and rage, but as she goes on to the end it changes to one of triumphant malignity. She remains in deep thought for a moment, staring before her, the letter in her hands, a cruel smile on her lips. Then she puts the letter back in the pocket of the vest, and still careful not to awaken the sleeper, hangs the clothes up again on the same hook, and goes to the bedroom door and looks in.)

(In a loud, shrill voice) Alfred! (Still louder) Alfred! (There is a muffled, yawning groan from the next room) Don't you think it's about time you got up? Do you want to stay in bed all day? (Turning around and coming back to her chair) Not that I've got any doubts about your being lazy enough to stay in bed forever. (She sits down and looks out of the window, irritably) Goodness knows what time it is. We haven't even got any way of telling the time since you pawned your watch like a fool. The last valuable thing we had, and you knew it. It's been nothing but pawn, pawn, pawn, with you—anything to put off getting a job, anything to get out of going to work like a man. (She taps the floor with her foot nervously, biting her lips.)

(After a short pause) Alfred! Get up, do you hear me? I want to make that bed before I go out. I'm sick of having this place in a continual muss on your account. (With a certain vindictive satisfaction) Not that we'll be here long unless you manage to get some money some place. Heaven knows I do my part—and more—going out to sew every day while you play the gentleman and loaf around barrooms with that good-for-nothing lot of artists from the Square.

(A short pause during which she plays nervously with a cup and saucer on the table.)

And where are you going to get money, I'd like to know? The rent's due this week and you know what the landlord is. He won't let us stay a minute over our time. You say you can't get a job. That's a lie and you know it. You never even look for one. All you do is moon around all day writing silly poetry and stories that no one will buy—and no wonder they won't. I

notice I can always get a position, such as it is; and it's only that which keeps us from starving to death.

(Gets up and goes over to the stove—looks into the coffee pot to see if the water is boiling; then comes back and sits down again.)

You'll have to get money today some place. I can't do it all, and I won't do it all. You've got to come to your senses. You've got to beg, borrow, or steal it somewheres. (With a contemptuous laugh) But where, I'd like to know? You're too proud to beg, and you've borrowed the limit, and you haven't the nerve to steal.

(After a pause—getting up angrily) Aren't you up yet, for heaven's sake? It's just like you to go to sleep again, or pretend to. (She goes to the bedroom door and looks in) Oh, you are up. Well, it's about time. You needn't look at me like that. Your airs don't fool me a bit any more. I know you too well—better than you think I do—you and your goings-on.

(Turning away from the door—meaningly) I know a lot of things, my dear. Never mind what I know, now. I'll tell you before I go, you needn't worry. (She comes to the middle of the room and stands there, frowning.)

(Irritably) Hmm! I suppose I might as well get breakfast ready—not that there's anything much to get. (Questioningly) Unless you have some money? (She pauses for an answer from the next room which does not come) Foolish question! (She gives a short, hard laugh) I ought to know you better than that by this time. When you left here in such a huff last night I knew what would happen. You can't be trusted for a second. A nice condition you came home in! The fight we had was only an for you to make a beast of yourself. What was the use pawning your watch if all you wanted with the money was to waste it in buying drink?

(Goes over to the dish closet and takes out plates, cups, etc., while she is talking.)

Hurry up! It don't take long to get breakfast these days, thanks to you. All we got this morning is bread and butter and coffee; and you wouldn't

even have that if it wasn't for me sewing my fingers off. (She slams the loaf of bread on the table with a bang.)

The bread's stale. I hope you'll like it. You don't deserve any better, but I don't see why I should suffer.

(Going over to the stove) The coffee'll be ready in a minute, and you needn't expect me to wait for you.

(Suddenly with great anger) What on earth are you doing all this time? (She goes over to the door and looks in) Well, You're almost dressed at any rate. I expected to find you back in bed. That'd be just like you. How awful you look this morning! For heaven's sake, shave! You're disgusting! You look like a tramp. No wonder no one will give you a job. I don't blame them—when you don't even look half-way decent. (She goes to the stove) There's plenty of hot water right here.

You've got no excuse. (Gets a bowl and pours some of the water from the coffee pot into it) Here. (He reaches his hand into the room for it. It is a sensitive hand with slender fingers. It trembles and some of the water spills on the floor.)

(Tauntingly) Look at your hand tremble. You'd better give up drinking. You can't stand it. It's just your kind that get the D.T.'s. That would be the last straw! (Looking down at the floor) Look at the mess you've made of this floor—cigarette butts and ashes all over the place. Why can't you put them on a plate? No, you wouldn't be considerate enough to do that. You never think of me. You don't have to sweep the room and that's all you care about.

(Takes the broom and commences to sweep viciously, raising a cloud of dust. From the inner room comes the sound of a razor being stopped.)

(Sweeping) Hurry up! It must be nearly time for me to go. If I'm late I'm liable to lose my position, and then I couldn't support you any longer. (As an afterthought she adds sarcastically) And then you'd have to go to work or something dreadful like that.

(Sweeping under the table) What I want to know is whether you're going to look for a job today or not. You know your family won't help us any more. They've had enough of you, too. (After a moment's silent sweeping) I'm about sick of all this life. I've a good notion to go home, if I wasn't too proud to let them know what a failure you've been—you, the millionaire Rowland's only son, the Harvard graduate, the poet, the catch of the town— Huh! (With bitterness) There wouldn't be many of them now envy my catch if they knew the truth. What has our marriage been, I'd like to know? Even before your millionaire father died owing everyone in the world money, you certainly never wasted any of your time on your wife. I suppose you thought I'd ought to be glad you were honorable enough to marry after getting me into trouble. You were ashamed of me with your fine friends because my father's only a grocer, that's what you were. At least he's honest, which is more than anyone could say about yours. (She is sweeping steadily toward the door. Leans on her broom for a moment.)

You hoped everyone'd think you'd been forced to marry me, and pity you, didn't you? You didn't hesitate much about telling me you loved me, and making me believe your lies, before it happened, did you? You made me think you didn't want your father to buy me off as he tried to do. I know better now. I haven't lived with you all this time for nothing. (Somberly) It's lucky the poor thing was born dead, after all. What a father you'd have been!

(Is silent, brooding moodily for a moment—then she continues with a sort of savage joy.)

But I'm not the only one who's got you to thank for being unhappy. There's one other, at least, and she can't hope to marry you now. (She puts her head into the next room) How about Helen? (She starts back from the doorway, half frightened.)

Don't look at me that way! Yes, I read her letter. What about it? I got a right to. I'm your wife. And I know all there is to know, so don't lie. You needn't stare at me so. You can't bully me with your superior airs any longer. Only for me you'd be going without breakfast this very morning. (She sets the broom back in the corner—whiningly) You never did have



any gratitude for what I've done. (She comes to the stove and puts the coffee into the pot)

The coffee's ready. I'm not going to wait for you. (She sits down in her chair again.)

(After a pause—puts her hand to her head—fretfully) My head aches so this morning. It's a shame I've got to go to work in a stuffy room all day in my condition. And I wouldn't if you were half a man. By rights I ought to be lying on my back instead of you. You know how sick I've been this last year, and yet you object when I take a little something to keep up my spirits. You even didn't want me to take that tonic I got at the drug store. (With a hard laugh) I know you'd be glad to have me dead and out of your way; then you'd be free to run after all these silly girls that think you're such a wonderful, misunderstood person— this Helen and the others. (There is a sharp exclamation of pain from the next room.)

(With satisfaction) There! I knew you'd cut yourself. It'll be a lesson to you. You know you oughtn't to be running around nights drinking with your nerves in such an awful shape. (She goes to the door and looks in.)

What makes you so pale? What are you staring at yourself in the mirror that way for? For goodness sake, wipe that blood off your face! (With a shudder) It's horrible. (In relieved tones) There, that's better. I never could stand the sight of blood. (She shrinks back from the door a little) You better give up trying and go to a barber shop. Your hand shakes dreadfully. Why do you stare at me like that? (She turns away from the door) Are you still mad at me about that letter? (Defiantly) Well, I had a right to read it. I'm your wife. (She comes to the chair and sits down again. After a pause.)

I knew all the time you were running around with someone. Your lame excuses about spending the time at the library didn't fool me. Who is this Helen, anyway? One of those artists? Or does she write poetry, too? Her letter sounds that way. I'll bet she told you your things were the best ever, and you believed her, like a fool. Is she young and pretty? I was young and pretty, too, when you fooled me with your fine, poetic talk; but life with you would soon wear anyone down. What I've been through!

(Goes over and takes the coffee off the stove) Breakfast is ready. (With a contemptuous glance) Breakfast! (Pours out a cup of coffee for herself and puts the pot on the table.)

Your coffee'll be cold. What are you doing—still shaving, for heaven's sake? You'd better give it up. One of these mornings you'll give yourself a serious cut. (She cuts off bread and butters it. During the following speeches she eats and sips her coffee.)

I'll have to run as soon as I've finished eating. One of us has got to work. (Angrily) Are you going to look for a job today or aren't you? I should think some of your fine friends would help you, if they really think you're so much. But I guess they just like to hear you talk. (Sits in silence for a moment.)

I'm sorry for this Helen, whoever she is. Haven't you got any feelings for other people? What will her family say? I see she mentions them in her letter. What is she going to do— have the child—or go to one of those doctors? That's a nice thing, I must say. Where can she get the money? Is she rich? (She waits for some answer to this volley of questions.)

Hmm! You won't tell me anything about her, will you? Much I care. Come to think of it, I'm not so sorry for her after all. She knew what she was doing. She isn't any schoolgirl, like I was, from the looks of her letter. Does she know you're married? Of course, she must. All your friends know about your unhappy marriage. I know they pity you, but they don't know my side of it. They'd talk different if they did.

(Too busy eating to go on for a second or so.)

This Helen must be a fine one, if she knew you were married. What does she expect, then? That I'll divorce you and let her marry you? Does she think I'm crazy enough for that—after all you've made me go through? I guess not! And you can't get a divorce from me and you know it. No one can say I've ever done anything wrong. (Drinks the last of her cup of coffee.)

She deserves to suffer, that's all I can say. I'll tell you what I think; I think your Helen is no better than a common streetwalker, that's what I think. (There is a stifled groan of pain from the next room.)

Did you cut yourself again? Serves you right. (Gets up and takes off her apron) Well, I've got to run along. (Peevishly) This is a fine life for me to be leading! I won't stand for your loafing any longer. (Something catches her ear and she pauses and listens intently)

There! You've overturned the water all over everything. Don't say you haven't. I can hear it dripping on the floor. (A vague expression of fear comes over her face) Alfred! Why don't you answer me?

(She moves slowly toward the room. There is the noise of a chair being overturned and something crashes heavily to the floor. She stands, trembling with fright.)

Alfred! Alfred! Answer me! What is it you knocked over? Are you still drunk? (Unable to stand the tension a second longer she rushes to the door of the bedroom.) Alfred!

(She stands in the doorway looking down at the floor of the inner room, transfixed with horror. Then she shrieks wildly and runs to the other door, unlocks it and frenziedly pulls it open, and runs shrieking madly into the outer hallway.)

(The Curtain Falls)