

the beginning of

AFTER BREAKFAST (from **FEMALE PERSUASION**)

a play by Rich Orloff

adapted from the short play
"Before Breakfast" by Eugene O'Neill

Time: Morning
Place: A breakfast table
Characters: HELEN, 40 or so

HELEN sits at the breakfast table staring at several unpaid bills. Each bill is in a separate area, lying on its return envelope. Also in front of her is a checkbook and pen. On the opposite side of the breakfast table is a setting for breakfast: a cereal bowl, coffee cup, spoon and napkin. Near the setting are a jar of preserves and a vial of medicine. There are four chairs around the table.

Helen looks at the bills as if she's adding up the total amount due. She calls out to someone in a room down the hall.

HELEN

So which bill do *you* think we should skip this month? I mean, we have to pay *something* on our Master Card. And Visa. And this card which gives double the frequent flyer miles to places we couldn't afford once we landed.

(looking at one of the bills:)

Do you really think we need electricity? We'll just remind the kids Lincoln studied by candlelight, and he got good grades. They'll probably ask how he recharged his laptop, but...

(looking at one of the bills:)

Maybe we can skip a car payment. Or give up one of our cars. Which car should we sell: the Pontiac they no longer make or the Chrysler they never should've made in the first place? We should walk more; it's only three miles to the bus stop.

We're just going to have to tighten our belts more. I know we're trying to sell our espresso maker on E-bay, but it's not enough.

(cont'd)

HELEN (cont'd)

(looking at one of the bills:)

I think we need to give up cable. George Washington lived without cable, and he fathered a whole country – probably because he wasn't busy watching cable. Of course, given the price of movies, I do appreciate how cable is the most cost-effective way to numb our minds.

(mostly to herself:)

It's certainly become *your* favorite.

(calling out:)

Gary, could you at least *look* at the bills with me? I'm sick of having to come into the bedroom every time I want to discuss something. Our mortgage is for the whole house; you might as well use it.

I know you're up. I heard you on the toilet. And rustling in the closet. Just because the TV's off, I still know you're up.

In the bedroom, the TV is turned on. As always, Gary watches a news broadcast about the economic situation.

HELEN (cont'd)

Honey!

In the bedroom, the TV is turned off.

HELEN (cont'd)

(looking at one of the bills:)

We do have to pay Angie's orthodontist *something*. He's threatening to repossess her braces.

(looking at another one of the bills:)

How about we fall another month behind on our mortgage? The bank has such a backlog of homes to foreclose, I'm sure they won't even notice ours for awhile. Besides, with your connections, I'm sure they'd make an exception for *you*. That's the great thing about America. We have great values... and we're willing to make exceptions to them.

Please come out. I've set the breakfast table for you. You can have a hearty, balanced, American breakfast: coffee, juice, Paxil. I bought a new brand of jelly. I know it's not the organic brand, but maybe we're not getting enough chemicals in our diet.

I promise to let you eat your breakfast in peace. After breakfast, though, we have to talk. After breakfast, we really have to face things.

In the bedroom, the TV is turned on.

HELEN (cont'd)

Honey! It's not your fault you lost your job. And it's not your fault other people got screwed either. It's not. *It's just not.* Will you come out?

(listens for a response, then:)

You know, there are millions of people who are much worse off than we are! People without electric coffee grinders. People without juicers. There are people in Haiti who are so hungry they make pies out of mud. That's right – they bake them in the sun for hours and then eat them. You and I and the kids, if we were ever forced to make mud pies, we could microwave them in minutes.

In the bedroom, the TV is turned off. Helen resumes looking at the bills.

HELEN (cont'd)

Do you realize how much a cup of coffee costs when you pay interest on it for two years? Next time you want to charge a mocha cappuccino, double the price. Double the price of anything we charge. Or maybe we should just go on a binge, buy everything we want and then declare bankruptcy. If we owe enough, maybe the government will consider us too big to fail. Or we could threaten to move somewhere where they have lots of jobs. Maybe China – we love ordering out Chinese.

Do we really need our home phone *and* cell phones? We could get rid of our home phone, but the cell costs so much more. Maybe the kids should learn to sacrifice and go through childhood without texting. I mean, Grover Cleveland didn't have a cell phone, and he still had a city named after him. And if he had been a better president, maybe it wouldn't have been Cleveland.

I vote for getting rid of electricity. We have way too much light in this house. And it's not like you act like I'm much to look at anymore.

Helen hopes for a response but hears none.

HELEN (cont'd)

That was a ploy for you to come out
and act reassuring.

(picking up the vial of Paxil:)

Maybe, maybe we should talk to the doctor
about upping your dose. Are you remembering
to take these every day? Should I buy one
of those little plastic things with boxes for
each day of the week? I know you hate
how these affect your libido, but, but...

Did you know Josh wanted to go to school today
in his *robe*? He asked me why he *had* to put on pants.

(in Josh's voice:)

"Dad gets to stay in his robe all day."

(in her voice:)

"Dad doesn't have to go to school," I said.

(in Josh's voice:)

"Why do *I* have to go to school?"

(in her voice:)

"To learn and become smart."

(in Josh's voice:)

"Dad's smart and he gets to stay in his robe."

What can I say to them? What do *you*
think I should say to them?

In the bedroom, the TV is turned on.

HELEN (cont'd)

Honey?... Honey?... Damn it, all those people
wanted mortgages. Everyone believed. If you
had balked about pushing them, you would've
been fired. It's not your fault so many people
went under. If it's anyone's fault, it's your bosses,
not you. I'm sure they didn't retreat when the bank
collapsed; I'm sure *they'll* never have to work again.

(listens for a response, then:)

Damn it, I'm not going to go through this
by myself! I've given up getting my nails done
and lunches with the girls and suddenly I'm clipping
coupons to save fifty cents and and I'm not only
tightening my belt, I can't tell you the last time
I bought a belt! What precious thing are you willing
to give up, huh? Could you *live* without cable?
Without being able to lie in bed all day and watch
our large-screen TV which we're still paying for?
Or would life be hopelessly bleak if you couldn't
spend all day in bed surfing for the latest economic
news? Huh?! At least *I'm* looking for work.

(cont'd)

HELEN (cont'd)

I go on Craig's List more than Craig does, and and I've become Facebook friends with people I hate just *in case* they can connect me to *something*.

In the bedroom, the TV is turned off. Helen is becoming more raw.

HELEN (cont'd)

Do you, do you how humiliating it was yesterday trying to impress some, some *inhuman* resources woman that I'm more qualified than all the kids in their twenties waiting in the hall to be interviewed for a *part-time* job?

(imitating the job interviewer:)

"So, Helen, according to your *résumé*, there appears to be a gap since your last job. What have you been doing the last... 15 years?"

"Well, I chauffeured the kids to play dates a lot. Each time we moved, I remodeled the kitchen." She actually had the nerve to ask why we hadn't saved for a rainy day. I said we live in California; there aren't supposed to *be* rainy days.

Will you stop pitying yourself and come out? We can't afford cable and electricity and braces and the house and two cars *and* self-pity. If you could tell me at the end of the day you applied for *one* job, if you sent out *one* application, if you had made *one* phone call... There *are* jobs out there. You just have to be more - .. more -... you just have to think harder and try harder than -

(sighs)

than every other person looking for a job.

(simply, accepting:)

Every other goddam person.