

ENCOUNTERS: STORIES

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Encounters: stories by Elizabeth Bowen

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ELIZABETH BOWEN

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by Elizabeth Bowen



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BREAKFAST

“**B**EHOLD, I die daily,” thought Mr. Rossiter, entering the breakfast-room. He saw the family in silhouette against the windows; the windows looked out into a garden closed darkly in upon by walls. There were so many of the family it seemed as though they must have multiplied during the night; their flesh gleamed pinkly in the cold northern light and they were always moving. Often, like the weary shepherd, he could have prayed them to keep still that he might count them.

They turned at his entrance profiles and three-quarter faces towards him. There was a silence of suspended munching and little bulges of food were thrust into their cheeks that they might wish him perfunctory good-mornings.

Miss Emily further inquired whether he had slept well, with a little vivacious uptilt of her chin. Her voice was muffled: he gathered that the contents of her mouth was bacon, because she was engaged in sopping

BREAKFAST

up the liquid fat from her plate with little dice of bread, which she pushed round briskly with a circular movement of her fork. It was not worth sitting down till she had finished, because he would be expected to take her plate away. Why was the only empty chair always beside Miss Emily?

Last night in the lamplight he had almost begun to think he liked Miss Emily. She was the only lady present who had not beaten time with hand or foot or jerking head while they played "Toreador Song" on the gramophone. But *here*, pressed in upon her by the thick fumes of coffee and bacon, the doggy-smelling carpet, the tight, glazed noses of the family ready to split loudly from their skins . . . There was contamination in the very warm edge of her plate, as he took it from her with averted head and clattered it down among the others on the sideboard.

"Bacon?" insinuated Mrs. Russel. "A little chilly, I'm afraid. I do hope there's plenty, but we early birds are sometimes inclined to be *rather* ravenous."

She added: "There's an egg," but there was no invitation in her tone.

BREAKFAST

She could never leave a phrase unmodified. He could have answered with facetious emphasis that he was *almost* inclined to believe he would *rather* have enjoyed that egg.

Dumbly, he took two rashers of the moist and mottled bacon.

"And then," Hilary Bevel was recounting, "it all changed, and we were moving very quickly through a kind of pinkish mist—running, it felt like, only all my legs and arms were somewhere else. That was the time when *you* came into it, Aunt Willoughby. You were winding up your sewing machine like a motor car, kneeling down, in a sort of bunching bathing dress. . . ." She dared indelicacy, reaching out for the marmalade with a little agitated rustle to break up the silence with which her *night's* amazing experiences had been received.

Miss Emily, always kindly, tittered into her cup. She kicked the leg of Rossiter's chair and apologised; and he watched her thin, sharp shoulders shining through her blouse.

Mrs. Russel's eye travelled slowly round the table; there slowed and ceased the