



a storm is coming...

BIG SLIDE

by JAMES HOWARD KUNSTLER

Big Slide
A Play in Three Acts

By James Howard Kunstler

SAMPLE
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Cast of Characters

Clifford Freeman, 79, patriarch, dying

Andrew Freeman, 42, Clifford's youngest son

Daniel Freeman, 53, Clifford's oldest son

Mary (Freeman) Jonah, 49, the middle sibling

Etta Freeman, 62, Clifford's baby sister, aunt to the preceding three.

Abby Freeman, 52, Daniel's wife

Barry Jonah, 48, Mary's husband

Nina Schilling, 32, Andrew's girlfriend

Rachel Jonah, 17, Barry's daughter by a previous marriage

Zach Baylor, 19, Mary's son by a previous marriage

Charlie Holmes, 64, Clifford Freeman's doctor

Tom Godwin, 58, the longtime caretaker of Big Slide

Bob Farnum, 56, an Essex County Sheriff's Deputy

Goose and Perry, young paramilitary men

SAMPLE

Act I
Scene 3

The great room immediately following. All present except CHARLIE HOLMES, NINA, and ABBY. A buffet table is set up with plates and things awaiting only the arrival of the food itself from the kitchen. ANDREW, BARRY, DANIEL, RAVEN, MARY, TOM, and ETTA all crowd around ZACH who is seated holding a Walkman-type radio and wearing earphones. He has to keep changing the angle of the radio to retain the station signal.

DANIEL

It's disgraceful that we don't have a single decent portable radio here.

ETTA

We always had regular electricity until now.

DANIEL

I remember plenty of storms when the juice went out.

ANDREW

Ssshhhhhh. . . .

When we were in Sri Lanka during the Tamil uprising —
Will you shut up.

DANIEL
MAY

SAMPLE

DANIEL

I'll thank you not to use that tone of—

ANDREW

We'll all thank you to pipe down, pretty please with sugar on top.

ZACH

(Reporting loudly what he hears over the headphones) Something about Chicago. The drinking water.

DANIEL

It comes from Lake Michigan—

ANDREW

Ssshhhhhhhh. . . .

ZACH

Roughly one hundred dead so far. Thousands clogging Chicagoland hospitals.

RAVEN

Chicagoland? What's that? Some theme park?

ANDREW

Ssshhhhhhh. . .

ETTA

That's what they call the metropolitan region.

RAVEN

What a dumb name.

MARY

Will you shut the hell up.

BARRY

Be nice!

ZACH

Something botch something. Botchling?

Botulinum.
Omgod!

ANDREW
MARY

SAMPLE

RAVEN

What's that?

ANDREW

Deadly poison from a common anaerobic microbe.

DANIEL

How the hell do you know that?

ANDREW

I'm a magazine editor. We know all kinds of things.

ETTA

When I was a girl there was a certain gourmet line of canned soup that poisoned dozens of people. It was a bad batch of vichyssoise.

ANDREW

Botulin likes a non-acidic growth medium. They can't live in a can of tomatoes, for instance, or pineapple rings. But potato soup. . .

DANIEL

Okay, pipe down now—

ZACH

It's all static. Wait! No. I'm losing it.

ANDREW

Get up. Go up the stairs. It'll improve the reception.

ZACH leaves his seat and hurries up the big staircase. He stops halfway up to listen.

ZACH

Still nothing but static.

DANIEL

Go up to the top landing.

ETTA

It was Bon Vivant.

ANDREW

What?

SAMPLE

ETTA

Bon Vivant brand vichyssoise. I remember now.

ZACH

I'm getting something again.

ETTA

It was a public relations debacle.

ZACH

Listen!

ETTA

I never cared for vichyssoise, personally.

MARY

Shut up about it already!

ZACH

(Narrating what he hears) “. . . and when he had opened the fourth seal . . .” something something “. . .the fourth beast said come and see. And I looked and behold a pale horse, and his name that sat upon him was Death, and Hell followed with him . . .” something something. It's fading in and out. I'm sorry—

MARY

You're doing a great job.

DANIEL

Move around up there. Change the angle of the antenna.

ANDREW

A Pale Horse. . . .

RAVEN

Sounds like Shakespeare. Must be NPR.

ZACH

Hold it! I got the signal back. *(Resumes narrating)* “. . . and the sun became black as a sackcloth of hair, and the moon became as blood, and the stars of heaven fell unto the earth. . . “ something something “. . . And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men. . . “ something blah blah “. . . and hide from us the face of him. . . “ blah blah something “. . . for the great day of his wrath is come and who shall be able. . . ” ah shit. I think the batteries just tanked.

RAVEN

Zach, you did that so brilliantly. You should get!

ZACH

I've got some more batteries in my room.

SAMPLE

DANIEL

Go get them, goddammit! Go on, move!

MARY

Don't you order him around.

BARRY

He didn't mean to—

ZACH

Relax, I'll get the fresh batteries. *(Exits.)*

ANDREW

A pale horse. . .

ETTA

Yes, it's so familiar yet I—

MARY

(To DANIEL) You're not in charge here, pal.

DANIEL
Don't you 'pal' me, sister.

TOM
It's from the Book of Revelation.

MARY
(To DANIEL) You goddam martinet—

DANIEL
You goddam harpy—

TOM
(Loudly) Revelation, Chapter Six.

DANIEL and MARY stop bickering. All are silent a moment.

ANDREW
Of course, the Bible.

BARRY
People turn to religion in times of distress.

DANIEL
Can we agree not to do that here?

BARRY
What's so terrible if it gives someone a little comfort?

DANIEL
I doubt you'd feel so comfortable living under a theocratic regime of tin-horn Bible thumping despots. I know these clowns. Washington was full of them under the Bushes, and Reagan before them. Corn-pone Nazis is what they are.

Enter NINA and ABBY carrying respectively a large, deep baking pan and a large bowl, which they set on the buffet.

ABBY
Come and get it everyone.

ETTA
Smells divine!

BARRY
Looks scrumptious.

Are you a vegetarian? NINA

Vegan, actually. RAVEN

Oh dear. . . . ABBY

If it comes from an animal, we don't eat it. RAVEN

Not even eggs? ETTA

Oh, God, no. RAVEN

Sounds rather. . . stringent. ANDREW

Will see how long your little food neurosis lasts up here. DANIEL
 Do you have to be so harsh? ETTA

SAMPLE

Wait until she discovers how harsh things could get. DANIEL

What's the other dish? BARRY

It's a lovely three-bean salad. ABBY

There's a definite theme here, babe. ANDREW

It tastes much better than it looks, I promise. NINA

ZACH re-enters above and comes downstairs.

There's nothing on but this Bible stuff. And I can barely get three stations. ZACH

ANDREW

The reception was always terrible here. We're hemmed in on all sides by mountains.

NINA

Please, everyone, get a plate and dig in.

BARRY whispers something in RAVEN'S ear, while the others serve themselves.

RAVEN

No, Daddy. It's not something you just "put on hold." It's a commitment. Besides, it could make me sick. *(She moves across the room.)*

DANIEL

I must say. . . uh, what's your name?

NINA

Nina Schilling.

DANIEL

Of the Lloyd's Neck Schillings?

NINA
No Mamaroneck.
DANIEL
Oh. Well, I must say this is a tasty dish.

SAMPLE

NINA

Thank you.

DANIEL

Andrew said you were quite the cook.

NINA

I once worked at Dean & DeLuca. You're around good cooks all day there. You learn by osmosis.

DANIEL

I'm going to bring in some game for you to work with. Think you can do something with a lake trout?

NINA

Sure.

DANIEL

How about venison?

NINA

Probably. If someone else butchers it.

DANIEL

You just stick with me, kid.

Another part of the room.

BARRY

(To ETTA and TOM) I was talking earlier to Tom here about maybe getting the old greenhouse up and running again.

ETTA

Why that's a lovely idea. Father grew orchids there after the war.

BARRY

I had something more practical in mind. Vegetables. Things to get us through the winter.

ETTA

What a lovely idea. Can it be done, Tom?

We can clean her up, putty up the old panes, rig up a stove all right. I don't know about vegetables though.

BARRY

Why not? Think positively.

TOM

Not enough hours of daylight to set fruit.

BARRY

What does that mean: to set fruit?

ANDREW

The plant needs so many hours of daylight to blossom. They're genetically programmed. No blossoms. No fruit.

BARRY

I'm talking vegetables, not fruit. Tomatoes, peppers.

ANDREW

They are fruits, botanically. They have to blossom first.

BARRY

Our houseplants blossom in winter and there's not appreciably more daylight down in Westchester than there is here.

TOM

No natural pollinators around after October. No bees or other insects.

BARRY

Maybe we could keep a beehive in the greenhouse—no. I guess, that's a stupid idea.

ETTA

Perhaps we could pollinate them by hand. I think Father raised his orchids that way

BARRY

It's worth trying. Isn't it? I mean as opposed to doing nothing. Think positively.

TOM

You got seeds?

BARRY

We can send away. Can't we?

Across the room.

SAMPLE

(To DANIEL) So how did this place get the name Big Slide?

DANIEL

It's the name of the mountain that we're at the base of. You can't see this from around the main lodge, but if you go out on the lake in a boat a ways, there's a big rocky scar on the west face about a thousand feet up. That's the Big Slide itself.

NINA

Oh gosh, I thought they named it after the stock market crash.

DANIEL

Which one?

At the buffet table

RAVEN

(To ZACH) I'm telling you, it's got meat in it. Salami and some other shit.

ZACH

(Loading his plate) I don't care. I could eat that deer head I'm so hungry

RAVEN

You rat fink bastard.

ZACH

I'm taking a time-out on veganism. I'm adjusting to new circumstances. And you should, too.

RAVEN

I'm afraid it'll make me sick.

ZACH

It won't make you sick

RAVEN

Would you like to have me for dessert? You can, you know.

ZACH

Do you have to be so obvious? Everybody here is already weirded out enough.

RAVEN

I suppose love is only for normal times, when everyone's sleepwalking through their existence. Hey, if they didn't see what was going on between us before, what makes you think they'll notice now, when they're terrified that their mutual friends might be confused and their best snooty-ass jobs might vanish?

SAMPLE

ZACH

If you really loved me, you'd quit demanding my constant attention, like a four-year-old.

RAVEN

Is that why you seduced me last spring? Because I was so immature?

ANDREW

(Coming to the buffet for more food) I hope you two aren't freaked out over everything that's been going on.

RAVEN

Would it shock you if I said it was all rather. . . exciting?

ANDREW

Even young people have a limit for novelty.

RAVEN

We'll find out, I guess.

ZACH

I've already had enough, Uncle Andy.

RAVEN

He's so involved with college. I was supposed to start this fall.

ANDREW

Where?

RAVEN

Brown.

ANDREW

Lucky you. A good school and Providence is a sweet little city. Say, don't you go to Brown, too, Zach?

ZACH

Oh, I go there all right.

RAVEN

That's why I picked it.

ZACH

Do you believe that the President committed suicide or that he was killed?

Huh. **SAMPLE**

ANDREW

RAVEN

He can't stand the idea of me being there.

ZACH

It doesn't affect me one way or the other?

ANDREW

It's a big campus. You can stay out of each other's way.

RAVEN

I don't want to stay out of his way. I want us to stay close.

ZACH

I think they killed him.

ANDREW

Who?

ZACH

The President.

ANDREW

I don't know. He was a troubled man in a terrible situation with a lot of enemies.

RAVEN

I would have voted for him next year. He stood up to the oil gang.

ZACH

I'll be surprised if we get to vote for anybody next year.

RAVEN

If that happens, I'll join the Underground.

ZACH

I can just see you crawling under the razor wire outside a nuclear facility with a knife in your teeth.

RAVEN

You can see me any way you want to. Anytime you want.

ZACH

I'd better go see if there's anything more on the radio. *(ZACH goes back upstairs and exits.)*

SAMPLE

ANDREW

When did your brother become so depressed and cynical?

RAVEN

Well, you know he's not actually my brother.

CHARLIE HOLMES enters onto the second floor landing, passes ZACH as he exits, and starts wearily downstairs

MARY

(To ETTA) You must feel as though your domain has been invaded and occupied by an alien army.

ETTA

It's your domain too, dear.

MARY

Legally, I suppose, but after all, you're the one who actually lives here full time.

ETTA

Family should be together in troubled times.

MARY

I feel like a trespasser. I mean, this idea that we might actually stay up here indefinitely is absurd. For one thing, we'll starve.

ETTA

I think we made a pretty good start tonight. Cassoulet.

MARY

Cassoulet my ass. That was every stray canned thing in the pantry.

ETTA

You have to admire her resourcefulness, though, her pluck.

MARY

A week from now we'll be eating our shoes. By Thanksgiving, each other.

ETTA

Funny, you know, all these years I imagined myself to be such a woods-woman, living here at the edge of the wilderness. But the truth is I was just a suburban girl on a longish life-support tether. It was all about style. Tom's run out of tobacco.

SAMPLE

MARY
I think we should try to run into La Mac and see what's what. They have stores here. One of the cars must have some gas left. We should go and buy every damn thing we can lay our hands on. What do you think, Tom? You're local.

TOM

I think folks are pissed off at the rich. They see someone in a Toyota Landcruiser that's still got gas. . . I don't know what might happen.

ETTA

They do know who we are around here.

MARY

So are you saying we just hole up here at Big Slide, and wait? Wait for what? To see if they come here and try to kill us? Or put on a siege?

CHARLIE has come down the stairs and joined them.

ETTA

Oh, Charlie, I'd completely forgotten about you up there. How is Clifford?

CHARLIE

He's been asleep more than awake. But when he's awake, he's alert, lucid. He knows what's going on.

DANIEL

Knows what's going on in what sense?

CHARLIE

He knows you're all here. He wants to come down, actually.

MARY

I hope you won't let him.

CHARLIE

You know your father—will of iron.

MARY

Heart of granite.

DANIEL

Mind of Machiavelli.

ETTA

Machiavelli was a great man! Charlie, you must be famished.

I could use a meal, in—

CHARLIE

Bad news, Auntie and Charlie. I'm afraid the grub's all gone.

CHARLIE

(To ETTA, wanly) You didn't put aside a plate for me?

ETTA

Oh, Charlie, I'm mortified.

DANIEL

We've got the plate. Just nothing on it *(nobody laughs)*. It's the national dish of Burkina Faso, ha ha—

ABBY

Daniel !

DANIEL

You hear much crueler jokes on cable TV, for godsake, I assure you.

RAVEN

There is no cable TV up here.

MARY

And you're not much compensation, buster.

DANIEL

Oh for crying out loud. Does everyone have to be so glum and dreary? Lighten up. Get yourself another drink if you have to. Charlie, we'll rustle up something very nourishing for you. Don't worry. And tomorrow you will all eat like dukes and duchesses. This I solemnly promise.

ABBY

Do you suppose they hate us for it?

ETTA

Hate us for what? Who?

ABBY

The common people. For being dukes and duchesses. That's what we are, really. In the true order of things.

RAVEN

Of course they do.

SAMPLE

BARRY
Let me tell you a secret about the lower classes in America. They love the rich. They want to be rich just like the rich are. You weren't there they'd have no role models. You're their American Dream.

RAVEN:

You're so wrong, Daddy.

BARRY

Honey, what do you think Ralph Lauren is all about?

RAVEN

Well let's ask Tom. He was born and lived his whole life here in the Adirondacks. Do the woodchucks hate us?

A collective gasp of embarrassment.

RAVEN

Come on, everyone knows that's what you call them.

DANIEL

You don't have to dignify that with an answer, Tom.

TOM

No, it's fair enough. Well, young lady, the woodchucks, they've got to feeling a little peevish lately, I think. In the old days, when Big Slide was built, these mountains were just opening up. Every rich sport that came through brought a bonanza of jobs and work. Nowadays, though, nobody wants that kind of work—being of service.

RAVEN

What about you, Tom?

TOM

I'm old fashioned, I guess.

A beat.

ANDREW

Nina, Darling, surely you can rustle something up for the good doctor.

CHARLIE

My patient could use a bite, too. If I can get him to eat.

NINA

Do you like pancakes?

CHARLIE

Now you're talking.

SAMPLE

ETTA

Hey, can't we have some, too?

NINA

I'll make some for dessert for everybody. There's plenty of jam. We can call them crepes.

MARY

Yahoo.

Curtain