An Embarrassment of Riches

a novel by

JAMES HOWARD KUNSTLER

THE DIAL PRESS
Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York
1985

Printed in the United States of America
First printing

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Kunstler, James Howard.
An embarrassment of riches.

1. United States—History—1801–1809—Fiction.
I. Title.
PS3561.U55E46 1985 813'.54 84–17671
ISBN 0-385-19696-2

AN EMBARRASSMENT OF RICHES

Also by James Howard Kunstler

THE WAMPANAKI TALES

A CLOWN IN THE MOONLIGHT

THE LIFE OF BYRON JAYNES

This book is for Muriel Glaser,
my mother

The bones of the mammoth which has been found in America are as large as those found in the old world. It may be asked why I insert the mammoth as if it still existed. I ask in return, why should I omit it as if it did not exist?

—Thomas Jefferson
Notes of the State of Virginia

Prologue

In the spring of 1803, I, Samuel Walker, and my Uncle William were sent by President Jefferson into the wilderness between the Ohio River and the Gulf of Mexico to find specimens of the animal called the giant sloth. This is the record of that misadventure, whose strange annals are otherwise lost to history.

I was born at Grandfather's farm, Owl's Crossing, outside Philadelphia on the River Schuylkill, in the year that the Articles of Peace certified our nation's independence, 1783. The toils of farming did not suit my father, John Walker, and so four years later our portion of the family moved to the village of Oyster Bay, Long Island, where my father entered the mercantile trade and prospered.

I was an unremarkable boy, perhaps a little headstrong with my playmates after suffering the tyranny of two older brothers. I joined in all the youthful recreations of the day, fished for sea trout off Lloyd's Neck, played at "Indians" in the cornfields above the Sound, or at "Hessians and Continentals," adventured in the hardwood groves of our paradisical township in search of bear and panther, long exterminated, and shot whole thundering herds of bison—they looked suspiciously like cows—with my broomstick musket.

From age eight to sixteen I attended an academy in our village operated by the erudite but clownish Venetian, Constantine Lupino, beloved butt of a thousand pranks of the practical kind, florid-faced, round-bellied in his bursting, ink-spotted waistcoat, spouting the most gorgeously incomprehensible oaths at us boys as he found yet another frog or snake or stinking sea robin in the drawer where he kept his lesson book. I scraped by at Greek and Latin, enjoyed vastly Dante and Shakespeare, and daydreamed through the dreary Bunyon and his plodding pilgrim. Mathemat-

ics left me flummoxed. My passion above all was painting, and as the years advanced I happily forsook the company of my playmates to ramble the woods and shores with my sketchbook.

My father, a kind and liberal gentleman, did not press me to labor in his store, which flourished as New York City rose in influence. But when I wished to work behind Papa's counters, it was always at a rate of pay equal to that of his clerks. I suppose it was his generous way of prompting my interest in the family business, for brother Charles already treaded the righteous path toward the ministry, while brother James's love of ships and ballistics had already propelled him toward that fatal appointment with a salvo of grapeshot aboard the armed yawl *Repulse* on Lake Champlain, 1814.

At eighteen, I enrolled at Columbia College in the sylvan heights of upper Manhattan, there to study philosophy and the nascent sciences toward a useful career in God-knows-what. The first year, hoping not to disappoint my father, I applied myself in all fields of study with astounding success (even at the calculus!). But the next, following a disastrous love affair in the intervening summer, I neglected my lectures, forsook even my sketchpad, and wandered the gloomy cliffs above Spuyten Duyvil declaiming poetry after the style of Cowper. I soon adopted vices, squandered Papa's stipends on shandygaffs in the city's taverns, gambled at cards with classmates far richer and more experienced than I and lost, and, in short, educated myself not to the way of a gentleman but of an ass.

In January of that hapless year I was seen entering a theater by one of the Columbia masters. It was, at that time, against the rules to attend such corrupting entertainments. I was sternly warned to mend my ways. Three weeks later, I was espied buying a ticket to *The Prince of Parthia* and was expelled the next morning.

This disgrace quickly sobered my mind. I removed into the city proper and launched a career as a painter of minature portraits. When I had exhausted distant relations as clients (mother's great-aunt Mrs. Gribble, her niece the bovine Fanny Dawes) my commissions grew strangely scarce. Too short of coin now to attend the theaters, I haunted the coffeehouses where raged the political controversies of the day, and attached myself into the Hamiltonian fold—for like the great Bahamian bastard, I believed that a little democracy, like a little knowledge, is a dangerous thing. Had it gone on like this I might have abandoned my easel for the rough and tumble of politics, but a scheme for my rehabilitation had already been set into motion by Papa, and on a rainy March morning I received a letter from his brother, my uncle, summoning me to Owl's

Crossing, where "fruitful employment of a patriotic nature" was promised to "an ambitious and able-bodied young man eager to issue upon the world's attention."

Let me sketch for you a portrait of Uncle William as he stood in his garden under the white oak tree *(Quercus alba)* so many years ago.

He is dictating a letter intended for Professor Doctor Olaf Lagerlöf of Upsala, Sweden, heir to the university chair of the demigod Carolus Linnaeus, father of modern natural science. Why? Because this humble Quaker husbandman is himself the new nation's preeminent botanist! A charter member of the American Philosophical Society, soldier in the War of Independence, friend of Dr. Rush, Charles Willson Peale, and Ben Franklin, correspondent to all the great scientific minds of his day, founder of the Philadelphia Society for the Recovery of the Recently Drowned, Uncle William is recognized by all the great European citadels of learning—Edinburgh, London, Paris, Leipzig, Upsala. He is the discoverer of no less than 1,488 species of New World plants. Before his death in '78, the great Linnaeus himself christened three species after Uncle: a spike-leafed dogbane *(Apocynum walkerania),* a showy pogonia *(Triphora walkera),* and a downy bladderwort *(Utricularia walkerania).*

Where Papa is tall and trim, Uncle is five feet, five inches and as stout as a cask. Yet a zest for the labors of botany keeps him stronger than men half his age, which is sixty-one years. At home this first warm day of spring, he wears his linen shirt open at the throat, for he has been working among the plantings of his reknowned garden since breakfast. His breeches are buff velvet, once part of a fine suit, now patched and threadbare. His old cocked hat shows the remnant of an egret plume. Now it merely serves to ward off the sun's chastening rays. His boots are muddy and cracked. None of this should suggest that Uncle has fallen upon evil times, nor that he is any species of sloven. He owns, as a matter of fact, several good French suits. These are work clothes.

In coiffure, Uncle bears a striking resemblance to Dr. Franklin. He is bald—the family curse!—and wears what remains to his shoulder, sans queue. His prominent chin bears a deep cleft. As he smiles, two even rows of teeth are displayed. Uncle has never smoked tobacco (though he grows specimens of *Nicotiana* in his garden), and likewise avoids sugar, which he claims has a degenerative effect. He is thus better equipped for chewing at sixty-one than myself at nineteen—I having surrendered three inflamed molars already to the surgeon's terrible tongs!

It was in Uncle's garden that I learned of our forthcoming interview at

Washington City with his friend President Jefferson, upon what business he would not say (for at that time he did not know the reason for his summons). Because I was a Hamilton man, such a prospect for me compared as a meeting with Beelzebub himself, and I said so.

"Thy Papa writes that thou art quite an ardent of the Federalist faction."

"I read the *Evening Post,*" I replied coyly, alluding to the newspaper that published my idol's writings—he owned it. "And you are a Republican, sir?"

Uncle smiled.

"I am as much an admirer of Mr. Jefferson, Sammy, as thee of Publius," Uncle wryly bandied one of Hamilton's noms de plume. "Two days hence thee shall meet thy devil in his own sulfurous chamber, ho ho . . . !"

And so we did.

1

In the year 1803, our nation's capital was less a city than an idea for a city. Upon a hill at one end stood the one-story brick monstrosity built for the deliberations of Congress. It was dubbed "the Oven" by those condemned to sit in it through the hellish Potomac summer. At the other end of the Columbian District lay Georgetown, described by Abigail Adams as "a dirty little hole." In between Congress's hall and Georgetown ran a muddy wagon road, now called Pennsylvania Avenue.

Not far from the brackish tidal swamp that was the Potomac, abode of oysters, gulls, and raccoons, stood the President's house. It was not only unfinished, but the work was going ahead so slowly that portions had already begun to collapse. The ceiling above the public audience chamber, for instance, had recently caved in. Living in this fashion was nothing new for the great renovator of Monticello. He was well used to life among the scaffolds and falling brickbats and might have felt uneasy in a dwelling that did not admit the seasons as well as the sunlight. But here I revert to the sarcasms of my youth; for though an eccentric, Massa Tom, as he was then disparaged by his Federalist foes, was anything but a fool.

We arrived at the President's mansion shortly before eleven o'clock in the morning, April 10, after a pleasant walk of several miles from our lodgings at Rupert and MacSneed's Hotel, near Congress's chamber. Spring comes earlier to the Potomac Valley than to New York, or even Philadelphia, and was already well under way, botanically speaking. The dogwoods *(Cornus)* were abloom and the magnolia *(Magnolia)* buds as big as sugarplums. The air resounded sweetly with the melodies of songbirds. Uncle plucked two new species before we even reached our destination—a creeping pink wood poppy *(Stylophorum)* and a lance-leafed buttercup

(Ranunculus)—and he was therefore in gay spirits when we arrived at the President's gate.

We entered the mansion via a temporary wooden staircase at the unfinished north front. Inside was a gloomy jumble of furniture covered with plaster dust. Sawdust motes danced in a column of sunlight that came down through a hole in the roof. The *thump* of carpenters' hammers echoed from a distant wing. Suddenly there was a rumble, and then a thundering crash, as of falling lumber.

"Listen, Uncle, to the Republican method of house-building, ha ha!"

"Mind thy tongue, nephew!" he rejoined in an amiable, jesting spirit. "Does thee know what the President does with agents of the opposing faction? Eh?"

"No, Uncle."

"Why, he has a big strapping buck of a slave, fully seven feet and a half, and keeps the brute in an earthen pit back of the mansion, where the wretch is starved and made delirious with hunger. To this forsaken devil, Mr. Jefferson delivers all those who would oppose his schemes for selling the nation to the Spaniards, ho ho."

"That is dry humor," I observed. A howl of pain erupted from the distant wing and the hammering stopped.

"Why, there goes one now," Uncle exclaimed with delight.

"Pshaw," scoffed I. " 'Tis only a carpenter."

"Vengeful Tom is not choosy," Uncle drew out the conceit. "A carpenter here, an editor there, every so often a young painting-fellow as thyself. 'Tis all the same to him."

A servant in the President's livery took our names and escorted us to a waiting room beside Mr. Jefferson's office chamber. We were shown chairs. A score of gentlemen (and a few not so gentle) stood gravely or sat around the room. The smoke from their pipes reminded me of the political evenings in the taverns and coffee shops of New York. One whiffed in it the very odor of intrigue, schemes, hugger-mugger, playing for advantage. Footsteps sounded within the office chamber. The door swung open. Idle chat ceased instantly.

From where we sat, I could see only two officers speaking to a concealed third figure behind the doorjamb. Both officers were tall and youthful, in their twenties. The first was a dark-haired, olive-complexioned captain with a distinctly sad countenance. His companion was fair, with a face full of sunshine. Their arms pumped a concealed hand, then both turned to depart. The next moment, Diablo himself stepped into view.

"My dear William!" he cried and took Uncle in his embrace. The score

of other waiting gentlemen (et al.) froze like statues at the Chief Magistrate's presence. I stood behind Uncle, nervously fingering the brim of my hat. The devil was a big fellow, all right. He peered at me over Uncle's shoulder and, to my horror, winked as if to a cohort. "And you, sir, are young Samuel," the archfiend said to me, releasing Uncle.

"Samuel Walker, Excellency," I affirmed and bowed.

"Excellency, ho!" Beelzebub declared delightedly.

"Thee must call him Mr. President, Sammy," Uncle explained aside.

"While it is excellence we strive toward, you'll find no Excellencies here, young man. This is a *democratic* republic now."

"My nephew is a worshipper of Publius," Uncle said to my chagrin.

"Ho, indeed!" Satan relished the thought and rubbed his hands together. My knees knocked. I was furious with Uncle for betraying me. "Well now, should we boil him in oil? Douse him with molasses and bind him to an anthill? How *shall* we correct his philosophy?"

"How about the pit?" Uncle suggested.

"The pit . . . ? Ah, yes, the pit!" Mephisto played along. "But I cannot send off an erring calf on an empty stomach. If the two of you will join me at table, perhaps we can stay the . . . philosophy lesson."

Uncle glanced at me, his eyes moist with merriment. Jefferson awaited our reply.

"Lead the way, Thomas," Uncle said. "Why, I'm as hungry as *Ursus americanus!* I could eat an horse."

With that, the three of us entered the President's private chamber, myself tripping on the doorsill, to the mirth of those scheming politicos without.

What I recall most vividly about Jefferson after all these years was the placidity, the calmness, the near-beatitude of his manner, his voice in particular. In this respect I believe he was as skilled as any actor who ever trod the boards. His part: the Democrat Zeus.

In appearance he was a tall, raw-boned farmer. His brown coat, like Uncle's gardening frock, was old and threadbare. He wore a soot-colored, hairy-textured waistcoat with a scarlet underwaistcoat lapped beneath it. His green velvet breeches with pearl buttons at the calf looked like a fairly recent acquisition, but his stockings were coarse, gray, and riddled with holes, while his slippers were decidedly down at the heels. It has become public knowledge since that time that Mr. Jefferson lived constantly under the Damoclean sword of debt. His wine bills alone, during the years of his presidency, were staggering. Yet it is characteristic of him that a man who

could import fifty cases of the best claret on credit would not order a few suits of clothes to go with it. The threadbare raiment, of course, was the actor's costume.

He led us from the door to a table set with implements of ringingly undemocratic silver. Servants appeared bearing silver trays.

"While in Europe, I often amused myself with contemplating the characters of the then-reigning sovereigns of the continent," Jefferson spoke as we began a luncheon of venison chops, risotto, Virginia asparagus, and a bottle of his excellent Meursault. "Louis the Sixteenth was a fool of my own knowledge. The King of Naples was a fool, and the King of Spain. The King of Sardinia was an imbecile. All these were Bourbons. The Queen of Portugal, a Braganza, was an idiot by nature, and so was the King of Denmark. The King of Prussia, successor to the great Frederick, was a mere hog, in body as well as in mind. Joseph of Austria and Gustavus of Sweden were really crazy. And George of England, you know, was in a strait waistcoat."

The President lifted a spear of asparagus to his mouth, displayed momentarily a mischievous smile, then ate the pale green shoot. Uncle guffawed and dabbed his chin with his napkin. I tried to show a smile of appreciation, but it was a timid, cracked, pitiful thing.

"Reports sometimes reach my desk alleging that the seventeenth Louis, the lost Dauphin of France, is at large here in America. I say he is welcome, but let us hope, gentlemen, for the sake of the national intellect, that he does not reproduce," our host added in postscript.

All these calumnies by Jefferson on the monarchs of Europe were delivered in a tone of voice as soft as lambskin, in that Virginia dialect at once tuneful and lulling. His mouth, even in repose, had a slight upturn at the corners that conveyed perpetual delight in its own ingenuity. This was, in fact, the most appealing element of that pale, freckled face. For the hazel eyes, though sparkling with wit, never rested on an object or a person more than a moment. Like the eyes of a great wary bird of prey, they shifted continuously, ever alert to danger. What a contrast to his lulling voice. I admit, its seductive power had already begun to scale the redoubt of my obdurate Hamiltonianism.

"You see, Samuel," he turned to me, eyes flitting everywhere about the room, "society simply divides itself between sheep and wolves. Officials of whatever stripe, monarchs or otherwise, tend to become the wolves, so that government, like the wolf pack, becomes an engine perfectly suited for the devouring of sheep. Is it not, therefore, our duty to make a govern-

ment too weak to aid the wolves in their depredations, and yet strong enough to protect the sheep?"

"O, absolutely," I agreed without hesitation. Picturing the soft-fleshed visage of my hero, Alexander Hamilton, sprouting fangs and coarse wolf's hair, I shuddered.

"This is why we must keep the ship of state on the Republican tack," Jefferson concluded the lesson with a flourish. He had finished his asparagus, sampled his risotto, and disdained his meat altogether. "Hector!" he called musically. A servant reappeared, swept all three of our plates into his grasp, like an osprey snatching herrings off the surface of the Sound, and vanished into the pantry. I had barely addressed my meal. Though he was reknowned as a gourmet, the President suffered a poor digestion and his interest in cuisine was largely theoretical. "Now," he resumed, leaning forward over the cleared napery, "what I am about to tell you must be held in the strictest confidence." He glanced my way, that wry smile upon his lips, eyes darting everywhere. "Do you understand, my boy?"

I could only wince in reply.

"Good," Jefferson said, that single word so drawn out and melodic. He rose from the table, seized a thick volume from his desk, and returned. "You are familiar with Buffon?" he said, more a statement than a question. His referent here was George Louis LeClerc, Comte de Buffon, esteemed *philosophe* and autocrat of the infant science of zoology. The President did not wait for us to affirm, but went straight to the point: "The opinion advanced by the Comte de Buffon is that (1) the animals common both to the Old and New Worlds are smaller in the latter, (2) that those peculiar to the New are on a smaller scale, (3) that those that have been domesticated in both the Old and New show signs of having degenerated in America, and (4) that on the whole we exhibit fewer species."

"Rot!" Uncle said.

Jefferson opened the heavy volume to a dog-eared page.

"Listen to this," he said and proceeded to read aloud. " 'In thinly inhabited regions'—America, he means—'nature is always rude and sometimes deformed. The air and the earth are overloaded with humid and noxious vapors, unable to purify themselves or profit by the influence of the sun, who darts in vain his most enlivening rays upon this frigid mass.' "

The President glanced up at us.

Uncle crossed his arms and pursed his lips. "Twaddle!" he pronounced.

"A libel!" I affirmed loyally.

"Ah, there is more. Much more," our host said with a gleeful smile. " 'All that America can produce are reptiles and insects. The place affords nourishment only for dwarfish men lacking in virility and carrying milk in their breasts. The animals, wild and domestic, are feeble and likewise dwarfed. All are tractable and timid, very few ferocious, and none formidable. There is no North American animal comparable to the elephant, no giraffes, or hippopotami. All animals are smaller in North America than in Europe. Everything shrinks under a niggardly sky in an unprolific land.' "

Jefferson slapped the volume neatly shut.

"Scandalous!" I observed.

"Horsemint!" Uncle muttered.

The President sighed.

"I have always admired the French," he said, "but they are an obdurate race, especially in matters of scientific theory and particularly when they are wrong. When I was ambassador to the court at Versailles, I endeavored to dispute these falsehoods by presenting a specimen of moose to the Comte de Buffon, to show him that the largest European reindeer could easily walk 'neath the belly of our great native ruminant. I asked General Sullivan of New Hampshire to procure one for me. The bones and hide were shipped to Paris and mounted. Unfortunately, the moose in question was a cow of the species and, thinking to correct this deficiency, they had screwed the antlers of a common deer to the beast's skull. The result was droll. Buffon pretended to be impressed and said he would mention the beast in his revised edition of *Histoire Naturelle.* He died shortly thereafter and his uncorrected slanders still stand, persisting across Europe to dangerous effect. How, gentlemen, are we to command the respect of other nations in the face of these scurrilities? Milk in our breasts! Feeble? Dwarfed? Tractable? Timid? These lies must be extinguished so that no one will dare mistake America for a land of stunted feeblings!"

"Hear, hear!" I applauded as though at a performance in the Park Theatre, so persuasive was Jefferson's oratory. Uncle reproved me with a sharp glance. Jefferson stood staunchly at his place, whitened knuckles pressed against the tabletop, his face firm with determination, as though he were posing for a statue. A moment later that opaquely seductive smile returned to his lips, and he invited us to step across the room.

Beside his desk was a large box about the size of a sea chest. We gathered 'round it. The President lifted its creaking lid. Inside was a heap of huge bones, gray, dusty, cloaked with grit and sediment. Many were larger than the bones of cattle.

"Here," he intoned, "is the colossus that will change the world's opinion!"

Uncle bent to inspect the moldering artifacts. He sifted through the contents and withdrew what appeared to be a digit bone, but attached to which was a terrifying claw fully ten inches long.

"Good heavens above, Thomas!" Uncle gasped. "What monster is this?"

"Is it not a prodigious wonder, William?"

"I am stupified."

The President took the gigantic claw from Uncle and held it to the sunlight in the window, running his index finger up the burnished brown, scythelike weapon.

"A few years ago," he said, "two neighbors of mine in Albemarle discovered the skeleton of this colossus in a saltpeter cave. There were, in addition, etchings of a lionlike beast upon the walls of the cave—it had been the haunt of Indians some years previous. White men in the locality, hunters of the Blue Ridge, had long reported horrible roaring noises quite unlike the shriek of panthers or the howl of wolves. It seemed evident to me that these bones were the remains of a native cat of the lion family, but"—Jefferson's voice grew hushed—"but as preeminent over the panther as the mastodon is over the wild pig!"

"We are astounded, Thomas," Uncle said.

"These bones came to light in '95," Jefferson went on. "I took the liberty of dubbing the beast 'megalonyx'—giant claw—but, before I could read my paper at the Philosophical Society, a young Frenchman named Georges Cuvier discovered an identical set of bones in the South American country of Paraguay. This Cuvier asserted that the creature was an herbivore, not a cat but a great lumbering ruminant ground sloth. I shall not bore you with the details, gentlemen, except to say that his arguments were sound. He called it . . . 'megatherium.' Giant beast."

"This claw, then, is a digging apparatus and not a weapon of predation," Uncle adduced out loud.

"I suppose so," Jefferson replied wearily and tossed the fearsome-looking thing back into the chest as though it were a potsherd. He took his seat behind the presidential desk, tilted the chair on its rear legs, clasped his hands behind his head, and gazed dreamily into the ceiling. "If only we could somehow procure a specimen of this beast," he mused. "What victorious evidence it would be."

"It would compare to thy moose as a white-headed eagle to an housefly," Uncle declared.