

SYNOPSIS OF MR. BURNS, A POST-ELECTRIC PLAY

Act I

The United States has experienced a widespread and catastrophic nuclear-plant failure that has destroyed the country and its electrical grid. After the disaster, a group of five survivors—Matt, Jenny, Maria, Sam, and Colleen—gather around a fire and recount the episode entitled “Cape Feare” from *The Simpsons*, Matt Groening’s popular animated series about a dysfunctional American family and the zany community of Springfield. In the episode, young Bart is stalked by the murderous Sideshow Bob. The episode contains a dense collection of many stories that came before it; most prominently, it is a riff on the 1991 Martin Scorsese film *Cape Fear* (starring Robert De Niro), which is a remake of the 1962 film (starring Robert Mitchum). The episode also contains kaleidoscopic cultural references to Mitchum’s earlier role in *The Night of the Hunter*, as well as Gilbert and Sullivan operettas.

As the survivors attempt to remember the events of the episode, they discover that memory is unreliable, disagreeing over who said what and how significant punch lines were worded. They are interrupted by the entrance of a new survivor, Gibson, who offers them information about what is happening outside their camp and tells them stories of destruction, evacuation, and power plants taken offline. The survivors have filled their personal journals with the names of their loved ones, as well as the names of everyone they have met after the disaster. It is customary to compare notes with any new person’s list of loved ones, and vice versa; the survivors go through this ritual with Gibson, but find no crossovers in the people they’ve encountered. The group soon comes back to the original topic of conversation: “Cape Feare.” Gibson helps them remember a punch line, the words of which they’d previously mangled. Act I ends with Gibson entertaining the rapt survivors with a Gilbert and Sullivan song: “Three Little Maids from School Are We,” from *The Mikado*.

Act II

Seven years later, the shared experience of recounting “Cape Feare” has been formalized into a much larger endeavor. The same group of survivors has formed a theater company that specializes in performing a small repertoire of *Simpsons* episodes, spliced with “commercials” about bygone luxuries (hot baths, cold Diet Coke, and Chablis, to name a few) and pre-disaster top 40 hits (sung a cappella). As they rehearse together, we learn that *Simpsons* episodes are being performed by others, as well. Lines from the episodes are currency; the characters compete with several itinerant troupes for the best and most accurate lines, paying audience members who can offer them long-forgotten *Simpsons* snippets, for which they will then have exclusive rights. The troupe is anxious about whether or not their shows are good enough to maintain an audience. In the outside world, food is scarce, nuclear plants have completely melted down, and chaos and danger reign. Act II ends with the troupe under attack by a mysterious, unseen group of criminals. Shots ring out and many of the troupe members fall.

Act III

It is 75 years after Act II. *The Simpsons* has assumed mythic proportions, and the “Cape Feare” episode has transformed into an epic opera in which Homer, Marge, Lisa, Bart, and Mr. Burns (the show’s heartless nuclear power plant owner, who has since replaced Sideshow Bob) are figures cobbled together from elements of the television show and the aftermath of the apocalypse; in addition to the morphed version of “Cape Feare,” the chorus recounts the names of people killed in the nuclear meltdown and dramatizes events of the past several decades. The musical is a mash-up of hip-hop, Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, and dialogue that the original survivors in Act I spoke around the campfire.