

BRIDGING THE GAP

A New Addendum to
Curse of the Starving Class by Sam Shepard

An Original Stage Play by Alexandro Pacheco

In remembrance of the philosopher Stuart Troy, a friend of mine and so many others, who invented the following new characters over 40 years ago and gave me license to do what needed to be done with them. To his memory and , I dedicate this work.

THE CHARACTERS

PETER – aged 25. An ex-Jew and a scientific genius. No longer a student, he is a drug dealer, and he has brought a new dimension of professionalism to the business. He keeps records, not incriminating in nature, but rather, clinical records. He has established a laboratory as a front and distributes esoteric chemicals as well as certain more popular ones. He feels he does this, not for any sense of income, so much as out of a calling, a sense of duty.

HOWARD – aged 19. Short-haired, small, rigid, wears sunglasses at all times. His sexual energies are re-directed into rational-logical pursuits. Therefore, he can be a chess-master, electronic designer and Bach-O-Phile, but not happy playing poker with the fellows, nor can he accept jazz as a legitimate art form.

NORMA – aged 22, Howard's wife. A very pretty black woman who could pass for about fifteen. She has the "street smarts" and toughness (when necessary) of a forty-year old hooker. She has a severe identity problem and can curse a person out in black street talk or Yiddish with equal ease.

DAVE – aged 23. The philosophy major. No longer disturbed by internal adolescent conflicts, he seems a bit of an outsider. He should or could have another circle of friends who are older, more stable and more successful in social endeavors. He is very funny.

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

A park in suburban California near an exclusive neighborhood. There is a small waterfall and a pond, perhaps some ducks, Up Stage Center. Down Stage Left is a small, picturesque wooden footbridge. Remnants of a staged protest lay near the footbridge, which still has a banner on it with the words: 4H - head, heart, hands, and health.

Lights up on Peter who is staging a bombing raid in the park. As we begin, he is holding his pocket watch and clocking the exact time a police patrol car goes by. Peter's eyes track the passing of the patrol car as he starts his stop watch on cue and returns the watch, which is connected to his waist on a long, silver chain, to his pocket. This commando-like adventure must be as precise and as rigidly controlled (with minimum risk of error) as his making of illegal pharmaceuticals in his basement laboratory.

Confident that the police patrol route will give him the time he requires, and that his father is completely tied up with his dental practice, Peter gathers his backpack, which contains his apparatus, and sneaks mysteriously across the stage. He stops Up Stage Center, just in front of the pond, and sets up a small tripod and camera, focusing towards the small, picturesque wooden footbridge, Down Stage Left, and takes a picture. He continues towards the bridge in his mysterious, but charm-full, manner. Because it is dark, we cannot quite see Peter place the bomb, which he produces from his backpack. Once placed, he whistles quickly and he runs away, upstage past the tripod, back to his spot near the edge of the forest and whistles again.

A loud boom and flash from under the bridge surprise and excite Peter who watches. The bridge does not blow sky-high, but rather just lifts a few inches or so, and it comes down in two or three pieces. Sudden disappointment floods his face, his shoulders fall and disgust overtakes him. He takes his tripod, backpack on his back, and exits stage right with his gear. Lights fade to black.

SCENE 2

Earlier that day. The stage is split in two. Stage right is where Scene 2 takes place, stage left is blacked out. Peter and Dave sit across from each other in heated discussion.

PETER: I mean, would they accept it as a wedding present literally?

DAVE: Sure.

PETER: That's interesting, very interesting. I mean, for instance, most people would want a pickle fork or something like that for a wedding present, but this Howard and Norma, God bless 'em, want me to blow up a bridge for them.

DAVE: Well, why not, man?

PETER: I mean, regardless of what my analyst says, well not regardless, but in addition to what my analyst says, when I do something like this, it is, to some degree, a statement in social context; it's a little difficult for me to conceive of placing a social statement on a table for display along with pickle forks and coffee pots and linens and tableware and that kind of stuff.

DAVE: Oh, wow, Peter, that's a very rigid image. They said they would dig to help make a celebratory social statement, okay?

PETER: Regarding Emma Tate's unfortunate demise?

DAVE: Something like that.

PETER: Girl had it coming, always talking about her damned cursed family, and you know they sold that house and ended up in Chicago.

DAVE: Something like that.

PETER: And this whole 4-H bit that was supposed to steer her out of her sheltered, well-to-do, farmer's daughter misery of a life, did what instead? Gave her cojones she never should have thought to have grown and we all lost a good friend.

DAVE: Exactly for that.

PETER: So this Howard, who loved Emma like a sister, and Norma...

DAVE: ...who dug her as a lover...

PETER: ...want to now consummate a matrimony with a bang that will tell the establishment to essentially go fuck themselves while we do our thing underground and no one truly learns a damn thing.

DAVE: 4-H is about belonging, independence, generosity and mastery.

PETER: ...all of which I think we cover in our own place on this earth...

DAVE: And well she has a bum rap because her pops was a drunk and her mom was a mess, and it took her death to straighten them out and they lived happily ever after while her 4-H counterparts decided she never even existed.

PETER: Correction, she couldn't have existed if 4-H had done their share of goodness upon her clearly-already lost soul. That's what they say. That's what we know. That's what Howard believes; well, that's what I hear.

DAVE: I'm not saying I understand it, only that it's what they've asked I come to you with.

PETER: Only they can't ask to my face.

DAVE: They don't know your face, only that you have the same cojones Emma grew...

PETER: ...attached to the sense to not get caught in the blast. (Peter pulls out from under his chair a baggie and looks down at it in his hands) Emma was my first. (Looking back towards Dave, he passes the bag to him, who transacts money he has pulled from his pocket. As the four

hands simultaneously connect, Peter holds on to Dave) You tell Howard and Norma I'm in

. (Stage Right fades to black)

SCENE 3

Stage left, Howard sits near an un-made bed and an end table where he is opening his packet of a powdered substance. Norma listens to her record player downstage stage left. She has headphones on, attached to a record player, and is not paying attention to Howard's actions.

HOWARD: (Affecting a very serious attitude - therefore creating comedy- he places a dollar bill, folded tepee fashion over the powder, puts his hands together as in prayer for a second before reciting aloud) E Pluribus Unum! Voe diddle opp um doe! Into the nostril and to the head... Gotta get high before I... um... Bed! (to Norma, who's head bobs to music in her head) You sure you don't want any? (no response. He rolls the dollar and snorts. He shows no reaction. He sits still for a long time, rubs his nose and sinuses, and says slowly and emphatically) Voe diddle opp um doe.

NORMA: (yelling through her headphones) "First thought, best thought," just like Ginsberg says.

HOWARD: What the hell are you rattling off about? (no response. He throws the bill at her head, which hits her on the head and finally catches her attention.) Say again?

NORMA: Tortured, solitary artist, John Coltrane, makes me weep with gratitude.

HOWARD: Huh?

NORMA: I love you, and always will.

HOWARD: Ah, what you need is some of me.

NORMA: I can't stop thinking Emma would have loved Coltrane.

HOWARD: What makes you think she didn't already?

NORMA: Because she wouldn't have been so damned angry all the time.

HOWARD: You think music could have carried that girl passed her lowly existence? You must be high. (Howard mood suddenly changes to a more relaxed one.)

NORMA: Don't place me in your barbituric galaxy.

HOWARD: Everything is purple.

NORMA: Oh never mind. Is Dave coming by again?

HOWARD: He dropped this off before heading to his last class to drop his final paper before his break can officially begin. The man has it all under control, and he did mention his buddy Peter is on board. Peter wants to meet us.

NORMA: Why?

HOWARD: He'd like to know for whom he is breaking the law.

NORMA: You're already high, too late for that.

HOWARD: He means the bridge.

NORMA: I mean, seriously.

HOWARD: I think they're coming by later... (the doorbell rings, Howard reacts as though the sound has come from his head) now that idea truly sparked a bell in my head.

NORMA: I'm gonna drop a bell on your head, you crazy fool. (she walks to the door center stage and opens it to find Dave standing alone). Hey buddy, I hear congratulations are in order on another successful semester.

HOWARD: Everything is marvelous.

DAVE: Thanks, Norma. And to you too, the ceremony was lovely. You guys must be beat after all that hosting of friends, family and the like. Howard tells me you are heading to the mountains for a couple weeks as a honeymoon.

NORMA: Yes, the most wonderfully intense experience. Who knew that was even possible off smack? It's like a whole new *tree* of leaves turned over for the better.

(Howard now stares off into space as he reaches for the headset and puts it on, which practically blows his mind.)

He's had a harder time cold-turkey. That's why this new thing from your buddy. (Towards Howard) Say Howard, how you feeling? (No response. Back to Dave) I mean, I told him sure if your guy has an alternative then I'm game but I won't be the dummy that tries it and ends up with permanent brain damage. So I says to myself. "Self, you've got a man now, and that man is strong-headed enough to be that guinea pig." I'm crazy for letting him go there at all but I'm all for staying off that smack. So suppose turns out it's the dumbest thing we ever tried. Best he do it in my presence. Looks okay, harmless enough. Still, probably the dumbest thing we ever did.

DAVE: Oh, I don't know about that. Psychiatrists use it to help with depression and it all depends on whether or not he got off. (to Howard) Did you get anything from it, man?

Norma walks over and removes the headphones from Howard's head. For the first and only time, Howard raises his glasses to his forehead and is as wide-eyed as a deer in headlights.

HOWARD: Instant cellular awareness. (The glasses fall back in place)

DAVE: Well that's something. Besides, for now it's legal, just impossible to get without our friend Peter.

HOWARD: You're a very clever fellow, Dave.

DAVE: Welcome to reality.

NORMA: Which is why we agreed to *meet* your chemist friend. Where is this Peter, anyway?

DAVE: Parking his car, I thought.

HOWARD: Tell me something. What goes on in those advanced meta-physics, admission-at-instructor's discretion-only classes? I mean, what do they teach you?

DAVE: Well, it's like this: "You cannot step into the same river twice. You cannot step into the same river once. You cannot step out of the same river you step into. If you cannot step into the same river once or twice, and if you cannot step out of the same river once or twice, it is necessary for mankind to build bridges." Did I say that too fast for you?

HOWARD: No, no, I follow you, right out the window.

NORMA: So, tell us more about Peter, besides the chemistry entrepreneurship I mean.

DAVE: Well he was ostracized from the Jewish community. They had an excommunication service or ceremony where he had to lie in the door of the synagogue and they all walked on him and spit on him.

HOWARD: Ha!

NORMA: I can hardly believe that. Why? What did he do?

HOWARD: I'll tell you what he did. He think too much.

NORMA: No, come on now, what did he do?

HOWARD: I know what happened. It seems as how one day this fellow from somewhere hit Peter up and he said he had these filters or prisms or something that in the presence of moonlight could change stuff into gold. So the Jewish elders heard about this, of course, and got together to elect Peter to investigate, and Peter was off to take a look and he came back and told them it was true, and they acted out of a sense of economic urgency.

NORMA: (to Howard) You fool. (to Dave) Come on, Dave, what really happened?

Peter appears at the open door, no one notices.

DAVE: What really happened? Well it was like this. It was a cold, damp morning, the fog held close to the harbor, and the frost on the pumpkin.

NORMA: Come on, really.

DAVE: Well, Howard's story was much more interesting.

NORMA: Honestly, tell. You never know when it might be on The Big Surprise with Mike Wallace someday.

PETER: It had more to do with me suggesting that God and the universe were the same thing instead of the orthodox duality.

Norma and Howard are stunned, caught speaking of someone behind their back. Peter is smiling and Dave goes to greet him to the door.

DAVE: Everyone meet Peter. Peter, Howard and Norma.

PETER: A pleasure and don't worry. I'm quite resolved over my beliefs.

HOWARD: Compadre, this stuff is fantastico, what's it called?

PETER: Ketamine, and all I will say is that it's not at all addictive and welcome aboard.

NORMA: Please come in.

DAVE: Where ya been? Thought you were just parking the car.

PETER: Taking photos for some... friends. (Police sirens can be heard in the distance). Your 4-H park, what a sight.

HOWARD: Part of the land of the bourgeoisie.

PETER: That land is near where I was raised, parents live just through the forest on the other side of the hill, easy to find.

HOWARD: So, friend, you theenk we weel blow op thee breedge tonight maybe?

PETER: Ay, si, if you want to do it tonight.

NORMA: The 4-H are at it in the park now doing their best to share their wealth of freedom-fighting righteousness, making the best better.

HOWARD: Searching for their next do-gooder pawn to exploit for the sake of a past generation's lost endeavors.

PETER: By the soured milk in my mother's breasts, you'll find your task complete this evening. We should actually head out now. As I was passing, they were finishing. I'll take you to the overlook on the other side of the forest where you can watch what happens and meet me there on

the other side of this crazy idea. We are agreed, though? \$200 cash. I'll place it and you two wait for my signal to detonate from the meeting point.

HOWARD: Agreed.

NORMA: To Emma. For Emma.

DAVE: For Justice, regardless of any curse.

Fade to black

ACT TWO

EPILOGUE

As lights fade up, Howard, Norma and Dave are watching from an overpass in the far distance. On both sides of the stage are trees signaling forests on either end. They are standing on an overpass over the highway watching the drama which is in the direction of the audience. They are passing a joint around waiting for Peter to return.

HOWARD: A woman *always* carries the contraband. It's the law—a male cop cannot look into a woman's pocketbook. It's an illegal procedure. The only thing he can do is, if he thinks he has reasonable cause, he can take her in to get a lady cop to look into her bag, but that could give her time to throw it away. I think if you can get it eight feet away, it's an automatic non-possession.

DAVE: Why is that?

HOWARD: I don't know for sure, but I think it has to do with, what if the cop finds a Tampax?

NORMA: Ah, that makes a lot of good sense. After all, a cop could get turned to stone or something like that.

DAVE: Thank goodness for the laws that love and protect us.

NORMA: Thank goodness for the glasses that Malcolm and Slater used to drink their sorrows away after what happened to Emma.

DAVE: I'm impressed with your tenacity to find a way to get this *all* pinned on *them*.

HOWARD: Scoundrels who think they can out smart a pack of foxes are nothing more than slithering snakes who deserve all they get.

They hear a familiar whistle in the distance.

DAVE: That's your cue.

Howard and Norma hold the fuse and a cigarette lighter together in the fashion of a bride and groom cutting a wedding cake. They kiss and wait.

HOWARD: To Emma.

NORMA: And to us, I love you babes. (Norma lights the flame.)

The second whistle is heard. They light the fuse. In the distance, a muffled sound can be heard, and the group knows it is done. Peter emerges from the edge of the forest, backpack on his back.

HOWARD: Peter, we thank you. Emma thanks you. The starving class thanks you.

Peter, holding the camera, takes a photograph of Howard and Norma. As they pose, Dave speaks to the audience.

DAVE: Though I was unsure if these friends would ever satisfy their innate hunger, they did in fact manage to right a few wrongs. Malcolm and Slater were arrested for blowing up the bridge. They were then charged with a federal crime for not only destruction of public property but of what was still officially a 4-H-rented area. For the global network of youth organizations whose mission is "engaging youth to reach their fullest potential while advancing the field of youth development", this was a sadistic sign of proactive revolt against evil. Whatever, it worked. That night we drank and ate like kings. Howard and Norma disappeared on their honeymoon and I never saw them again. I graduated and am now a psychotherapist in Palo Alto. Yes, it's now the fucked up 1980s. I suppose I overcame the starving class and I bridged the gap between meritocracy and my own self-righteousness. I tell you something, though, friends, I never encountered such a celebratory, social statement again. Perhaps the end of the 1960s brought all that down with it. Whatever happened, it's because of *us* that *you all* can do what you do. So, you're welcome. Now stay in school and go make something of yourselves. If we're all cursed with anything, it's the fate of walking over waters that flow mighty. Remember, bridges do fall and it's our duty to always try and rebuild them stronger.

Dave holds up a peace symbol and walks off stage as we fade to black.