



HUNTER GATHERERS

BY PETER SINN NACHTRIEB



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HUNTER GATHERERS — NACHTRIEB



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HUNTER GATHERERS was first produced on the San Francisco stage in June 2006
by Killing My Lobster, supported by the New Works Fund,
a grants program of Theatre Bay Area.

HUNTER GATHERERS was developed at the 2005 Bay Area Playwrights Festival,
Amy L. Mueller, Artistic Director.

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*For my parents and my brother,
who are fully responsible for my sense of humor.*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

So Pam, Richard, Tom and Wendy were in a play I was writing in grad school that I completely lost control of. About halfway through this early piece (which included about fifty other characters) Pam had been exiled into “The Woods” after Wendy and Richard had taken over “The City.” I believe it was after I’d written a scene with a Greek messenger and talking bushes that I began to wonder if I should perhaps set some dramaturgical limits for myself and start again.

Around the same time, I was reading Harvard sociobiologist E.O. Wilson’s book *On Human Nature*, which explores the evolutionary origins for human behavior. The subject is right up my alley as someone whose perspective on life and humanity comes through a biological lens. The book is a study of human character traits that are observed across cultures both “primitive” and “modern” and theorizes why such behaviors may have been naturally selected over time. “I should write a play about primal urges!” I thought, “Maybe with some of the characters from that other play!”

And so emerged the challenge: to write a play that had the scope of the original version, that explored the theme of “humans as animals,” but contained it in a single set “dinner party play” with four characters so someone could actually produce it and I could actually write it. And once I wrote that first lamb scene, things really began to cook. (Sorry.)

From these initial triggers, I feel like the play has absorbed a number of other themes (you can decide on your own what they are). Each character has brought his or her own set of issues into the mix. Even at thirty-five, Pam, Richard, Wendy and Tom all seem to be struggling with their roles in the world, with finding a sense of purpose, and with feeling like adults (so Gen-X of them). “What should I be doing with my life” is a question that consumes everyone in this play with a ferocity. Eventually, they look to their guts for an answer and it’s their primal instincts that ultimately save or destroy them.

HUNTER GATHERERS was developed at the 2005 Bay Area Playwrights Festival (Amy L. Mueller, Artistic Director).

HUNTER GATHERERS received its world premiere by Killing My Lobster in San Francisco, California, on June 15, 2006. It was directed by Tracy Ward; the set design was by Erik Flatmo; the costume design was by Sally Thomas; the lighting design was by Christopher Studley; the sound design was by David Sophia Siegel; the property design was by Karen Zwicker; and the production stage manager was Sarah Aguirre. The cast was as follows:

PAM Melanie Case
RICHARD Jon Wolanske
WENDY Alexis Lezin
TOM John Kovacevich

CHARACTERS

PAM — 35, our hero.

WENDY — 35, Pam's best friend.

RICHARD — 35, Pam's husband.

TOM — 35, Wendy's husband. Smaller than Richard.

SETTING

Pam and Richard's urban apartment in a city much like San Francisco. Perhaps it's a factory that's been converted into a condo loft, or perhaps a condo loft made to look like it was a converted factory. Clean. Modern. High ceilings. Chrome? Appeals to the eye but there's not a lot of warmth. Furniture looks nice, but is uncomfortable. Cataloguey.

There is a "great room" where most of the action takes place. The walls are decorated with tribal artifacts: masks, spears, skulls on a string. The artifacts look clean, well-mounted, disassociated from any sort of use. Metal sculptures (made by Richard) are dotted about. Photos of a wedding, Pam and Richard stand coupled next to Wendy and Tom.

Action also takes place in a bathroom and a bedroom. There is an entrance to the apartment, an entrance to a kitchen, and some way to get to the rest of the house.

TIME

2005. May. Evening.

MUSIC

Of the late '80s.

HUNTER GATHERERS

ACT ONE

Scene 1

Pam and Richard's apartment. The great room. Afternoon.

A large cardboard box sits on the floor. Newspaper is laid out around it. The Joy of Cooking is sitting next to the box, open to a page.

Pam stands in front of the door, weighed down by too many grocery bags filled with shrink-wrapped vegetables, grains, nuts, berries, and other packaged items, plus a large assortment of fresh flowers arranged in a tasteful urban design (i.e., lots of dead twigs mixed in).

Richard is leaning over the box. In one hand, he holds a very sharp large knife.

Richard reaches into the box, attempting to take hold of a creature inside. There is a loud "baaaaaah," more vigorous shuffling. Richard tries to take a firm grasp. He does not succeed, pulls his arms out, and sits back, frustrated.

A beat.

PAM. Was the butcher closed?

RICHARD. No. *(Beat.)*

PAM. So you tried the butcher first?

RICHARD. Uh-huh. *(Beat.)*

PAM. They were out of lamb?

RICHARD. It didn't look fresh.

PAM. Oh. *(Beat.)* How fresh does it need to be?

RICHARD. Super.

PAM. That's a good butcher. I'm sure that they only carry —

RICHARD. *(Quoting. [Note: All cookbook quotes are fictional.])* "As though the blood has just stopped. Caught in the muscles. Swishing. Unsure. 'Where do I go now,' it wonders?"

PAM. That's very elaborate.

RICHARD. That's the *Joy of Cooking*.

PAM. A new edition?

RICHARD. This chapter is written with a greater passion than the others. *(Beat.)*

PAM. I'm going to unpack these. *(Pam heads for the kitchen. Richard makes another attempt to hold the lamb still. Pam has almost exited when —)*

RICHARD. You're going to have to help me.

PAM. I should really get these peppers in the Sub-Zero.

RICHARD. Young Carl here has got some feist in him.

PAM. Who?

RICHARD. Lots of spunk and vigor.

PAM. You named it?

RICHARD. You name what you love.

PAM. Carl?

RICHARD. This is a very intimate thing I'm about to do, Skipper.

PAM. I don't understand what you want me to —

RICHARD. *(Picking up the Joy of Cooking.)* "The 'holder' calms the lamb, much like a mother calms her babe. A soft caress, a scratch on the nose, stories of magic and happiness softly cooed into the ear steady the throat and relax the soul to help assure a clean cut." *(The box jolts violently.)*

PAM. I don't think I can do that.

RICHARD. You just need two hands.

PAM. It's more of an emotional thing, Richard.

RICHARD. I'm feeling it too. There are great big emotions. Swirling all around us.

PAM. I'm sorry, Richard. I can't. I'll get started on the brownies. *(Pam heads for the kitchen.)*

RICHARD. You love lamb. *(Pam stops.)*

PAM. Yes.

RICHARD. You love the taste of lamb?

PAM. It's my favorite savory flavor, yes, but —

RICHARD. Pamela Christian Gable, this will be the best lamb you have ever tasted.

PAM. I don't doubt that.

RICHARD. You're doubting, Pam.

PAM. I never doubt.

RICHARD. You're doubting this meal. Yourself. Us?

PAM. Of course not.

RICHARD. I'm reaching out to you here.

PAM. Couldn't you hire someone?

RICHARD. I was hoping this was something we could do together.

PAM. Oh.

RICHARD. A Pam and Richard collaboration.

PAM. Mmmm.

RICHARD. For tonight. The "Fab Four" gathers again.

PAM. It's the most special night of the year.

RICHARD. Things must be done to keep love and good fortune shining upon us.

PAM. Sacrifice?

RICHARD. It's not going to be easy. The best things never are. But here we are together, you, me, Carl, and we have an opportunity to create something.

PAM. Something important.

RICHARD. Something really delicious.

PAM. A tribute.

RICHARD. A gift. (*Beat.*)

PAM. I do love to give.

RICHARD. One smell of it, Pam, roasting in the oven ...

PAM. This is a symbol. Of friendship.

RICHARD. One chunk, steaming on your fork —

PAM. Of faith and togetherness —

RICHARD. — juicy, moist, hello there, chunk.

PAM. An act of love.

RICHARD. And when that meat hits your tongue —

PAM. Here it is.

RICHARD. Shooting across your buds —

PAM. Here's your symbol right in front of you.

RICHARD. Filling you up with juice.

PAM. And it's young ...

RICHARD. With life. *La vida!*

PAM. And it's scared ...

RICHARD. *La vida del carne!*

PAM. And it's about to end.

RICHARD. PAM! (*Pam snaps out of it.*)

PAM. Yes.

RICHARD. You just need to hold him. (*Beat.*)

PAM. All right.

RICHARD. I'll do the rest. (*Pam sets the groceries down. She reaches in the box. We hear skittering. Pam uses a little more force to hold the lamb still. Richard takes the knife.*)

PAM. Oh goodness.

RICHARD. You're doing great.

PAM. It's breathing heavy.

RICHARD. Pet him.

PAM. What?

RICHARD. He needs to be relaxed. Scratch the nose. Tell stories of magic. (*Pam pets the lamb. Richard gets in a good knife-wielding position.*)

PAM. (*Quietly, to the lamb.*) Wizards. Enchanted castles. (*A silent, tense moment, where it feels Richard could cut at any moment.*)

RICHARD. I love you.

PAM. I love you too.

RICHARD. You're my Skipper.

PAM. And you're my Boat. (*Beat. Richard almost cuts but holds.*)

RICHARD. Happy anniversary.

PAM. Happy anniversary, Richard. (*Beat. Richard almost cuts but holds.*)

RICHARD. This'll be worth it.

PAM. OK.

RICHARD. I promise.

PAM. Mmm. (*Beat. Richard almost cuts but holds.*)

RICHARD. We'll remember this meal for a long long time.

PAM. Can we just ... get on with it?

RICHARD. (*In a soothing voice.*) All right. OK. That's good. He's calmer. Now hold still, Carl. You are in for a treat. You are about to be transformed from just another sheep in a field into something extraordinary. All it's gonna take is one deep — (*Blackout. Music.*)

Scene 2

The great room, cleaned up, ready for company. The box and newspaper are gone, the table is set. The flowers that Pam bought sit on the dining table in a vase.

There is a stain on the floor where the box once was.

Pam, dressed for dinner, is on her hands and knees with a spray bottle and some steel wool. She is furiously scrubbing the spot.

PAM. (*Muttering.*) Out. (*The doorbell rings.*) Out! (*The doorbell rings again, twice. A mantra.*) One basket. One glorious basket. (*Loud, urgent knocking on the front door. Pam pops out of her trance. In a quick-think move, she puts the vase of flowers to cover the stain. Pam opens the front door. It's Wendy, fashionably dressed in something earthy-sensual. She holds four bottles of red and white wine.*)

WENDY. Oh thank God!

PAM. Hello Wendy!

WENDY. Thank God you're all right!

PAM. I was here the whole time. I didn't — (*Wendy hugs Pam intensely, which remains tight over the next several lines.*) Oh!

WENDY. You wouldn't believe the scenarios I was picturing out there. "They forgot. They're not here. They're out having fun. They were killed. Pam and Richard have been killed and can't answer the door. Because they are dead."

PAM. We would never forget tonight.

WENDY. I am so happy you're not dead.

PAM. Me too. (*Beat, still hugging.*)

WENDY. Oh Pam.

PAM. Wendy.

WENDY. You are the best hugger I have ever known.

PAM. You don't mean that.

WENDY. I mean it more than anything I've ever said. To be in these arms. This warmth. Not in the car.

PAM. I do love a good hug.

WENDY. You are healing me, Pam. (*Beat.*)

PAM. Happy anniversary! (*Wendy pulls out of the hug.*)

WENDY. Another year.

PAM. Still together. The Fab Four. Forever!

WENDY. Look at us ...

PAM. I know! Doesn't it seem like yesterday we were picking out our dresses for the —

WENDY. Look at us getting so old. The fresh sags. Sacs. Droops and clogs. Aches. Decay. Disappointments.

PAM. (*Laughing.*) We're only thirty-five, Wendy! We're still —

WENDY. Halfway to seventy, Pam. Half our cookie, nibbled.

PAM. We'll live a lot longer than seventy. Unless something awful happens.

WENDY. Our hearts will beat inside a flabby mound. I'd rather die. You look fabulous.

PAM. No I don't.

WENDY. Yes you do!

PAM. I was in a rush.

WENDY. You're as pretty as you were in high school.

PAM. I never thought I was all that —

WENDY. Prettier. You're glowing. Flushed. You're pregnant!

PAM. No! I just didn't have time to wash.

WENDY. Age has been much kinder to you these years, Pam. You still look as fresh from the pasture as a spring —

PAM. Lines. On my face. I'm seeing lines.

WENDY. You're imagining them.

PAM. *You* look fantastic as always.

WENDY. Blah.

PAM. You do!

WENDY. Blah blah. You say nice things, Pam. You always say nice things.

PAM. I mean them. You've always taken such good care of yourself.

WENDY. Pilates only goes so far. That's what the mirror tells me. The scale. The ambivalence of construction workers when I walk by.

God, I miss you.

PAM. I'm so glad we still do this.

WENDY. Who would think a bridge and a tunnel would make it so difficult to be with the ones you truly love?

PAM. Where's Tom?

WENDY. Hmm?

PAM. Your husband?

WENDY. Let's not spoil the moment just yet.

PAM. Is he not coming?

WENDY. He's parking. Tom is parking the car.

Tom will be parking the car for quite some time.

PAM. Driving is the worst part about living in the city. Well, that and all the sadness.

WENDY. Well, Tom just loves to park. He insists on discovering the "perfect" spot. Apparently, there's some ephemeral parking spot quality that goes beyond enough space to fit the vehicle.

Asshole.

PAM. Is everything OK?

WENDY. No. Yes. Just some residual road rage from the car. Some of our worst moments as a couple are in transit.

PAM. Well, good for you to get out of the car before things got really bad.

WENDY. Yes. Yes it was. *(Beat.)*

PAM. Wendy?

WENDY. Maybe we should take trains. Maybe I should drive. Maybe I should divorce Tom.

PAM. You can do one without the other.

WENDY. Can I? Can I when they're really the same thing?

How are you, Pam?

PAM. I'm fine.

WENDY. You look stiff.

PAM. Maybe a little sore from the gym.

WENDY. How are you *really*?

PAM. Well, it's silly, not a big, just, well, this afternoon, right here —

WENDY. I mean how are we all, really? How are we doing with our lives? Sometimes, I miss those third-grade report cards we used to get. When they evaluated your progress as a human. Teacher, God, Buddha, Mao, someone, tell me: Am I a check plus? Or just a check?

PAM. One teacher said I was like a puppy dog. That bothered me.

WENDY. It's good to know what you are like, Pam. Even if it hurts. *(She sniffs.)* Richard is concocting something supernatural in there.

PAM. He'll come out when he hears a cork pop.

WENDY. Every year, he raises the bar. Last year, my God. Who knew a chicken would fit in a duck and then fit inside a turkey? I certainly didn't.

PAM. These are really great wines.

WENDY. That is a really great smell.

PAM. Can I just open any one?

WENDY. Which will go best with dinner?

PAM. The red.

WENDY. Oo. That suggests something bloody. Or pasta?

PAM. Bloody.

WENDY. I've been craving flesh all day.

What kind?

PAM. I'd rather not say.

WENDY. Fine. I'll have to guess. *(Wendy sniffs loudly.)*

PAM. Wendy's famous nose.

WENDY. State champion. Never forget that.

PAM. I've never been very good at sensing. *(Wendy continues to smell, perhaps raising her arms so that the chemicals can seep through her tender underarm skin.)*

WENDY. Oh yes. A fresh, tender smell. Young. Innocent. Cute? Oh. And that marvelous aroma of liquid fat that makes you feel like you're home. Safe. And cumin. He's using cumin, isn't he?

PAM. I haven't been in there since he started cooking.

WENDY. Mmm. Nutty fabulous. Fresh. Bloody. Bloody and fresh.

That brings back memories. *(The cork pops. Richard enters, wearing an apron that says "Richard!" He holds a knife and an onion. He walks towards the vase of flowers on the floor without seeing it.)*

RICHARD. Oh my goodness, I just heard a pop! I smell perfume and tannins in the air and, lo, mine eyes doth be-seeith the finest of beauties of the entire kingdom. I must have died 'cause I'm in heaven! Hahahahaha — *(Richard trips over the flowers.)* Whoa!

PAM and WENDY. Oh! *(Richard has fallen to the ground. He is silent, motionless. A beat.)*

RICHARD. I'm OK. Richard is OK.

WENDY. *(Holding her chest.)* My heart.

RICHARD. That was not the entrance I rehearsed.

PAM. I'm so sorry, I didn't —

RICHARD. There wasn't a vase in the middle of the room before.

PAM. I just put it there.

RICHARD. I have a knife in my hand. And an onion.

PAM. There was a stain on the floor.

RICHARD. So you put flowers over it?

PAM. I didn't want to see the stain.

WENDY. This is why we should all learn CPR.

RICHARD. Just a little fall.

WENDY. It could have been worse.

RICHARD. Hello, Wendy!

WENDY. Hello, Richard. (*Richard and Wendy hug.*) You look perfect as always. Love the apron.

RICHARD. I made it for tonight.

PAM. It's a really dark stain.

RICHARD. You're going to be OK at the helm, tonight, Skipper?

PAM. Yes, Boat.

RICHARD. Steady as she goes? (*Do Richard and Pam exchange captain's salutes? Richard chuckles. Wendy shudders ever so slightly.*)

PAM. I'll get some paper towels. (*Pam exits. A moment of something between Richard and Wendy.*)

RICHARD. Hey now. Where's my buddy?

WENDY. If we're lucky, he's driven into a ... parking spot. Or a garage. He loves those.

RICHARD. No garages around here.

WENDY. Good.

RICHARD. I got scared he wasn't coming.

WENDY. Eek.

RICHARD. Did Pam tell you what we're having?

WENDY. No no! I'm enjoying becoming engulfed in magic vapor. The mysteries of Richard.

RICHARD. I'm using cumin.

WENDY. And a cup of amazing!

RICHARD. Oh, Wendy, I haven't felt like this in a long time. (*A noise of wordless excitement.*) Aah! It feels like my whole life has led up to this day.

WENDY. Mine too. (*Beat.*)

RICHARD. I want to tell you so bad what we're eating.

WENDY. Don't spoil the surprise, Richard. Let my nose and mouth make the discovery on their own.

RICHARD. Just like Columbus.

WENDY. Land ho. (*Pam enters with a lot of paper towels. She begins to clean up the mess.*)

PAM. I feel terrible.

RICHARD. It's all right, Skipper.

PAM. My mind is all jumbly. The whole day. When I was at the store, looking for baguettes, I walked right into a toilet paper display at the end. Right into it!

WENDY. Oh, and it fell.

PAM. No. It sort of squeezed around my body, and then gently pushed me away.

WENDY. That must have been awful for you.

PAM. What if it had been something in cans?

RICHARD. The important thing is we're all OK. Everyone's breathing and uninjured and OK.

PAM. Almost.

RICHARD. We embark tonight on our annual evening cruise of celebration, memories, and love.

Speaking of which, I need to go into the kitchen and cry. *(Pam and Wendy look at Richard, who is taking a comedian's pause. He waves the onion.)* Onion! *(Richard laughs. Wendy and Pam laugh, sort of. Richard exits.)*

WENDY. I tripped once. As a girl. Almost lost my life.

PAM. This could have been a lot worse.

WENDY. Falling is dangerous. Knives are dangerous.

PAM. Richard does aikido.

WENDY. Thank the Lord for the things that Richard does. *(Doorbell rings.)* And that informs us that the party is over. *(Pam answers the door. It's Tom, a little sweaty, exhausted, in a tweed jacket and cords, looking a little pale.)*

TOM. Sorry!

PAM. Hello, Tom! *(They hug.)*

TOM. I am so sorry. Sorry sorry sorry.

PAM. There's nothing to be sorry about.

TOM. Being on time is very important to me.

PAM. You're still on time.

TOM. I forgot about the parking here. Cars circling like vultures. The inappropriate U-turns. The mean looks.

It's scary out there.

PAM. We have a parking spot with the apartment.

TOM. Lucky people. What I wouldn't give for a parking garage. *(Wendy coughs gently but purposefully.)* I'm sorry, honey. I didn't catch that.

WENDY. I coughed. That's all I did.

TOM. Wendy hates parking garages.

WENDY. I just coughed.

TOM. She only coughs when she hates something.

WENDY. I don't "hate" parking garages. More what they represent.

PAM. Ugliness. Excess. The worst of human civilization.

WENDY. I meant about him.

TOM. Surprise surprise.

PAM. Well, I'm glad you found a spot.

TOM. And what do they "represent," about "me," in your "mind?"

WENDY. Why are you asking me to criticize you?

TOM. Oh it's a criticism.

WENDY. I'm *trying* to hold my tongue here, Tom, as per your note on the fridge. (*Beat.*)

PAM. I yelled once at a car.

TOM. I'm just really curious how a —

WENDY. There are some tigers who like the woods, and others who prefer cages, magic shows and having their meat served in a bowl. That's all I'm going to say.

PAM. He was turning. With no blinker!

TOM. Tigers don't have to drive, Wendy.

WENDY. They do in metaphors, Tom.

TOM. Those spots were too narrow.

WENDY. You're terrified of parallel parking.

TOM. We have a long car.

WENDY. IT'S A PRIUS!

PAM. And we're here! Here we all are! Happy anniversary. Yay! Yay! Yay!

TOM. Yes. We're here. That's what matters. The car is parked, Tom. Sorry, Wendy.

WENDY. I hate it when you apologize.

PAM. How's everything at the hospital?

TOM. It's hard. Emotionally. Tough.

PAM. That sounds scary.

TOM. It is. But, we're helping people. I really feel like we're helping people.

PAM. I can't even imagine the stress.

WENDY. You should try doing reiki.

TOM. I was promoted today. (*Wendy coughs.*)

PAM. That's so great!

WENDY. Without a raise.

TOM. It's an honor.

WENDY. Sans the moolah.

PAM. Congratulations! What are —

TOM. Chair of the medical ethics board.

WENDY. Volunteer chair.

PAM. That sounds really interesting. (*Wendy drinks her glass of wine, pours another.*)

TOM. It's going to be challenging and sad. Doctors often find themselves in heart-wrenching, terrible predicaments. To treat or not to treat, save the liver or the kidney, baby versus mom ... you can be forced to decide between two godawful — (*Richard enters, jumps into a crouch pose.*)

RICHARD. (*To Tom.*) Ah-HA!

TOM. Hey there, Richard!

RICHARD. That's my buddy! That's my buddy in the room! (*Tom is never as convincingly macho as Richard is in the following exchanges.*)

TOM. And there's my man!

RICHARD. The M.D.!

TOM. The B.A.

RICHARD. The big guy!

TOM. Not as big as you.

RICHARD. (*Macho yell with physical gesture.*) Haaa!

TOM. (*Macho yell with physical gesture.*) Haaa!

RICHARD. (*Macho yell with physical gesture.*) Haaa!

TOM. (*Macho yell with gesture, shorter.*) Ha! (*A beat where they wait for the other to make a move. Richard laughs. Tom laughs. Tom breaks the pose.*) So anyway Pam, just to finish, the ethics board deals with complex — (*Richard pounces on Tom, grabbing him around the waist and tries to wrestle him to the ground.*) Oh boy! Ha ha.

RICHARD. Let's see how strong you are tonight, buddy.

TOM. Ha ha, not very, Richard!

RICHARD. You got the muscle to beat me?

TOM. I've been jogging.

RICHARD. Who's gonna get pinned this year?

TOM. I wonder. (*Richard eases up, giving Tom an opportunity to make a move.*)

RICHARD. Your move, buddy. Hit me with your best move.

TOM. You know, this year I've started having spasms — (*Richard slaps Tom.*)

RICHARD. Get fierce on me, buddy. Fierce me up!

TOM. OK. Here I go! (*Tom attempts to wrestle Richard. Richard immediately retaliates with a deft maneuver that throws Tom on his back.*)

RICHARD. AHHHHH!

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