

## **Haunting the Dead**

by Allene Nichols

P.O. Box 622  
Arlington, TX  
76004

(817) 543-2348

[allenen@pobox.com](mailto:allenen@pobox.com)

**CAST:** Clara, a woman in her mid-thirties  
Joe, a man in his mid-thirties  
Hope, a sixteen-year-old girl

**SETTING:** A junkyard. A large Christmas tree dominates center stage. A record player sits next to it, with a record on it. Two car batteries sit between the tree and the record player. Wires run from the Christmas tree to one battery and from the record player to the other battery. One wire on each is disconnected, so the record player isn't functioning, and the Christmas tree lights aren't lit. An old toilet sits stage left.

## Haunting the Dead

Hope sits on stage left, repeatedly opening and slamming the lid on the toilet. The sound is somewhat rhythmic. She wears jeans, a t-shirt, and tennis shoes. Clara enters carrying a beautifully detailed nutcracker doll. Clara is barefoot and wears a white nightgown that reaches to mid-calf. Her hair is held back by a bandana that serves as a headband. She attaches the second wire from the record player to the battery. She puts the arm on the record. The opening of "The Nutcracker" plays. Clara dances with the doll downstage center. Joe enters, angry.

JOE

Clara! Have you lost your mind? Put your shoes back on before you step on something.

Clara continues to dance. Joe walks to the record player and drags the arm over the record, making a screeching sound, then disconnects the record player from the battery. Clara continues to dance, as if she still hears the music.

JOE (CONT)

What if they heard?

CLARA

(To Hope, who ignores Clara.)  
When I was thirteen, I played Clara in “The Nutcracker.”

JOE

When did you get back?

CLARA

I was beautiful that night.

JOE

Did you see the Grinders?

CLARA

I loved the part where the tree grew and grew until it overshadowed the whole stage.

She sets down the nutcracker doll and steps  
back. She stands, facing the doll.

JOE

You were gone for two days. I was worried.

CLARA

And the nutcracker grew and grew until he turned into a handsome prince.

JOE

Two days, Clara. I thought They’d got you for sure.

CLARA

And the prince fought the evil rat king.

Hope stands and moves to the nutcracker.

JOE

If they heard the music, They’ll be here soon. We should leave.

CLARA

Then the other soldiers killed the rat king’s minions. All the rats died.

Hope picks up the doll.

HOPE

No. Not the rats. They’re my friends. Remember Miniver? And Elvis? How I trained him  
to do tricks? To sit on my shoulder and tickle my ear with his whiskers?

Clara walks over to Hope and reaches for the doll. Hope holds the doll out of her mother's reach.

HOPE (CONT)

No, Mother. He wouldn't kill the rats until you were so hungry you couldn't stand it. That's what a real prince would do.

CLARA

Give it to me.

Hope continues to hold the doll out of her mother's reach.

HOPE

It's just a doll, Mother.

JOE

Give it to her.

Hope hands Clara the doll. Clara cradles it tenderly.

CLARA

(to the doll)

You were my prize. A present from Madame Petrovka for dancing so well. She gave you to me right on the stage, in front of everyone. Mommy and Daddy were so proud.

Joe goes to Clara and tries to put his arms around her. Clara pulls away.

CLARA (CONT)

No!

HOPE

(to Joe)

We saw them.

JOE

Where?

HOPE

Back in the old town. There were people there, too. People like us.

JOE

People?

HOPE

There was a boy. He was beautiful.

JOE

Where are they now? Why didn't you bring them here?

HOPE

I wanted to. I tried to get to them. (points to Clara) She wouldn't let me.

CLARA

It was too dangerous.

HOPE

The—the Grinders—had rounded them up. They were in a pen. Where the street used to be. They screamed for us to help. I tried to run to them. I could have opened the pen.

CLARA

No. It was hopeless. I couldn't lose you, too.

HOPE

I could have saved them. We were in the Chase Manhattan Bank building.

Hope indicates Clara.

HOPE (CONT)

She shoved me into a room and barricaded the door until it was too late.

CLARA

It was already too late. They were already dead. I heard the clicks.

JOE

That close? They're that close. We have to leave. Now!

HOPE

I could have saved them.

CLARA

No. You can never save them. I remember that much.

JOE

Let's go.

Joe and Hope start to leave. Clara makes no move to join them. Joe stops.

CLARA

I remember that much!

HOPE

Come on, Dad.

Joe approaches Clara once again. Clara backs away screaming.

CLARA

No! No! No! No! No! No! No!

HOPE

Make her shut up!

Joe backs away from Clara. Clara calms down.

CLARA

(quietly)

I remember cotton sheets.

Clara continues to talk during the following. Her voice starts soft, but becomes louder and more insistent until she can't be ignored. Hope is increasingly distracted by her mother.

CLARA

Coffee cups with pictures of the Empire State Building and the Chicago Art Institute. Little soaps shaped like roses. I remember time. Watches. Clocks. Stories about Big Ben. Porcelain toilets. Showers. Cats to pet. Dogs that we didn't eat. Hot dogs. Ice cream. Popcorn. I remember riding in cars. Dancing. Dancing. Dancing. Nail clippers. Fingernails without dirt under them. I remember the moon when it didn't frighten us. My mother's lipstick. My father's ties. I remember people. Madame Petrovka. Daddy. Mommy. I remember...

HOPE

We can't stay here now. They have good hearing. They heard her.

JOE

What do you want me to do? Leave her?

HOPE

Yes. Leave her like she made me leave them.

JOE

Could you hear the clicks, like she said?

HOPE

Yes, but—

Haunting the Dead

JOE

How loud?

HOPE

They were loud, but—

JOE

How loud?

HOPE

So loud we couldn't hear the people  
scream.

JOE

Then she's right. You couldn't have  
helped them.

HOPE

You don't know. You weren't there. I  
could have done something. I could have  
distracted them. If I'd saved fifty for my  
one life, I—

(Hope interrupts herself.)

During the following, Hope approaches Clara,  
until the two women are facing each other.

HOPE (CONT)

Yes, Mother. You remember! You remember Fourth of July parades and Christmas and  
your grandmother's doilies. You keep telling me. Over and over. But I don't. I remember  
walking and hiding and always being hungry. I don't remember people because I never  
saw one until two days ago. All I remember is being afraid.

Hope grabs the doll from Clara and throws it to  
the ground. Its lower jaw breaks off. Clara falls  
to her knees, picks up the pieces, and cradles  
them, sobbing.

JOE

That's enough. Both of you.

During the following, Clara pulls herself  
together.

HOPE

It's just a doll, Mother. It doesn't matter. I can't imagine why you carried it all these years.

JOE

Hope. Stop it.

HOPE

We used to find dolls in abandoned houses. Remember? But I never took one. They're just dolls. They don't matter.

JOE

This one matters. To her.

CLARA

(pause)

I saw the legs first. As thick as tree trunks. So tall I hurt my neck looking up. Bristles sticking out of them, like infested limbs on a fir tree. The smell was unbearable. And the horrible clicking noises.

HOPE

So we hid. Like we always do. I wanted to rescue them. You should have let me try.

CLARA

You would have died.

HOPE

At least I would have died for a reason. Not this meaningless wandering through old things. Discarded toys and dolls. Old clothes lying neatly in drawers, waiting all these years for people who will never come. We're ghosts. Haunting the dead.

CLARA

I saw them, Joe. In the pen. My mother and father.

HOPE

Liar.

JOE

Nobody escaped the camps. You know that.

CLARA

I should have gone with them. But I ran. Hid.

JOE

You were thirteen years old. They wanted you to live.

HOPE

We're wasting time. Let's go.

CLARA

It was my fault.

JOE

What?

CLARA

We wouldn't have been in town if I hadn't been in the ballet. We'd have been home. In the country. We could have escaped.

JOE

You don't know that.

CLARA

Seeing those people yesterday, in the pens, it all came back to me.

JOE

Let it go, sweetheart. We've got to move. Where are your shoes?

HOPE

Never mind the shoes. Let's just go.

CLARA

(to Joe)

She doesn't even know what today is.

JOE

None of us do. You could be wrong.

CLARA

It's cold. And I saw a new star.

JOE

You can celebrate Christmas Eve somewhere else.

CLARA

I used to believe. But God died the night They came. (pause) Christmas Eve. Everything was perfect. Madame Petrovka gave me the doll, and I walked out of the theater so proud, between my parents. Before we had gone more than a few steps, my world collapsed. Those abominations blocked out the sky.

JOE

They just got between us and God. He's still there. Trying to get past their bodies. You have to believe that.

CLARA

Why do I have to believe that? (points to Hope) She doesn't believe in anything. (pause) I do believe. I believe that one of the creatures laid its eggs in the manger. The nutcracker prince is dead. My parents (pause) my parents died. I lived. For nothing.

HOPE

We have to go.

CLARA

(indicates the Christmas tree.)

It's Christmas Eve. I'm going to light the tree. I'm going to make them all live again. Mommy. And Daddy. And Jesus. I'm going to live again.

Clara moves to connect the tree wire to the battery. Joe physically restrains her. Clara struggles.

HOPE

No!

JOE

Are you insane?

JOE

You'd be lighting a beacon.

CLARA

I have to do this. Listen.

They listen. A soft, repetitive clicking can be heard. Joe releases Clara.

JOE

(to Hope)

Go. I'll catch up with you. Go.

Hope doesn't move.

HOPE

You're wrong, Mother. I do believe in things. I believe we'll wake up safe tomorrow. For a while. I believe we'll find more people. That we'll fight. Like the olden fighters. Like Dad's family. I don't know if we'll win, but I believe the battle's worth fighting.

CLARA

What do you know about fighting?

HOPE

I know I've been running for too long.

CLARA

We've all been running for too long.

HOPE

I learned, Mom. From old books. How to make weapons. Where to find them. They're all still there. In the old National Guard building. In people's homes. The bastards didn't even bother to remove the weapons. They thought they were safe once we were all in the camps. To have children for them. To be raised and slaughtered like cattle.

JOE

Hope. Run toward the old bridge. Hide. I'll meet you there.

HOPE

Are you coming, Mother?

CLARA

(to Hope)

Give your Mother a hug.

Hope and Clara embrace.

CLARA (CONT)

Go on, now.

HOPE

But--

JOE

Go on. It'll be okay.

Hope starts to exit, but turns and waits at the edge of the stage, unseen by her parents. The clicking sound gets louder through the next scene.

CLARA

I turned Hope's head away when They started to eat. The boy. The one she thought was so beautiful. (pause) It gnawed the child in half.

Hope stifles a cry.

JOE

Come with us.

CLARA

It's Christmas Eve.

JOE

You don't know that.

CLARA

I can't run any more.

JOE

A while longer. For Hope.

CLARA

No more.

JOE

I remember them, too. I lost my family.

CLARA

You all fled together. They took their chances with the rebels. Those things ate my parents. If I hadn't run, maybe I could have—

JOE

Died with them. It would have been suicide. (pause) I know how you feel. It's wrong. This going on. Living when they're dead. But we have to—

CLARA

No.

JOE

Please come with us.

CLARA

I can't run anymore

JOE

What will this do to Hope? Have you thought about that? She'll blame herself. Children always do.

CLARA

She won't understand. I don't want her to understand. Keep her safe. Let her dream. (pause) Go on. Hope needs you.

JOE

They're getting close.

A buzz now accompanies the clicking. Joe stares helplessly at Clara, then turns to leave.

CLARA

Go. She needs you.

Joe embraces Clara. They kiss. Joe turns to leave. He sees Hope. He tries to get her to go with him, but she won't budge. Clara sets down the doll, and attaches the wires for the Christmas tree and the record player. The Christmas tree lights up. The record player plays the opening of "The Nutcracker." The sound jumps where Joe scratched the record. Clara dances. Hope suddenly rushes over to the doll, snatches it up, and looks at her mother. Clara removes the bandana from her own head and wraps it around the doll's face and lower jaw, securing the lower jaw. The stage darkens a bit. Hope and Joe exit in a hurry, Hope still holding the doll. Clara continues to dance. A shadow begins to grow behind the Christmas tree. The shadow of the creature's leg resembles the Christmas tree. As the creature approaches, the shadow grows larger and larger until it overshadows the stage. The clicking and buzzing sounds compete with "The Nutcracker." Clara stops dancing and stares up, a look of horror and fascination on her face. The stage goes dark abruptly. At the same time, all of the sounds cease.