

Hired-in-the-Box

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A Ye Olde Toys Story

Many people had wonderful things to say about Ye Olde Toys, but Jackie wasn't one of them. For one thing, she just didn't care for dolls. But for another thing, the store had also installed a giant new display; a Jack-in-the-Box with a human sized Jack: a crazed, grinning maniac of a toy that bounced, jangled, and scared every right thinking person stiff. Jackie swore he popped from his box whenever she walked by, without any song or dance, and it nearly gave her a heart attack every time. It had gotten to the point where she would stay away from this side of the mall altogether to avoid the mechanical monstrosity, or stand nearby and wait for Jack to appear just to make sure he wouldn't pop out and surprise her while walking by.

Such was the case today, and she waited a safe distance for Jack to come out. She waited almost seven minutes before noticing a sign on the box. Taking wary steps, she went to read the sign, hoping it would say "Out of Commision -- For Good!" Instead, what it said confused her:

Now Hiring:

Jack-in-the-Box Jester

Jackie looked between the sign, the colorful box, and then the store. Were they serious? Did they really

expect someone to be the crazed maniac that jumped out of a box every ten minutes? But knowing the box was currently empty allowed Jackie to calm down and let her heart slow. With her tormentor now a terrible memory, she could live a free life again.

Still, she had no desire to stick around, and left. But she made it only two two steps before the terrible melody of 'Pop Goes the Weasel' began to play. Jackie turned slightly with a confused and worried face, just in time to see the box lid explode open. She flinched, fully expecting her clownish nemesis to surprise her.

Instead, her stomach lurched and the tile she stood on launched Jackie into the air like it was a trampoline. Her body made a perfect arc into the box where she landed on a soft pad. Her scream was involuntary, but also futile. No one seemed to care. But now inside the cursed box, Jackie's heart beat with terror. She tried to get back out, but not before the box lid sealed up tight and her world went black.

Inside, in that dark, soft place, something began to happen. She stopped shouting as her mouth was forced together, and every second that passed, it became harder for Jackie to move. Some joints were frozen in place, and others burst with tension. She felt new clothing slide and stretch across her body, replacing her old jeans and t-shirt. Her fingers were smooshed together in a mitten glove, and something coiled around her legs. Her joints began to spring, like they never wanted to stay in place, but there was nowhere for them to stretch but the plush interior of the box.

Jackie needed to jump, to leap, to pop, to get out of this dark, enclosed space, not feeling like herself anymore. She had too much energy and not enough room. But in the dark, a familiar jingle played on a music box, tightening the springs in her heart. The same playful melody that she had been scared of minutes before now made Jackie happy, and she couldn't figure out why. The lid of the box sprang open just as the song crescendoed. Jackie sprang also, her body releasing its stored energy and leaped into the world. Her arms flung wide and bounced from the brand new springs inside them.

She was forced to look out at the mall, at people walking to and fro, laughing, chatting, shopping. They

all looked dull. Drab. Nothing like her, bright and springy. Down before her, a man in a red apron stood and appraised her. He had well groomed black hair and was a little short, holding a crumpled piece of paper. He smiled a toothy grin at Jackie.

Curious, and frightened, Jackie looked at herself as best as her strange new body let her. What skin she saw was plastic instead of flesh, with a slight shine to it. Her hands were held straight with mittens. She was forced to wear a clownish red dress with bouncy tassels. Jackie could see little else about her new body, but could feel a coil wrapped around her nylon legs and her short hair brushing her face with each sway.

Jackie looked at the employee in front of her box. She tried to ask him something, but her mouth wouldn't move. She tried to move her arms, but they sprang at the slight bob of her central spring. From his perspective, it looked like she waved at him.

"You're going to make a great ornament for this store. Gonna bring in at least double the customers, since you're not nearly as creepy as the last one."

Jackie was bewildered by the man. She couldn't curse, hit, or even make funny faces at him. All she could do was bounce and vaguely wave. And then her box pulled her back down. Back into the box. Back into the dark. She could have imagined it, but she felt her eyes widen. She tried to move again, trying to get her fingers to grab the lip of the box. But they and every other part of her went back inside, and the lid closed on her. All she could do was wait for the music to begin to play.

She couldn't believe what she was now. Couldn't believe it was possible. But she came to accept that she was an oversized toy made from plastic and springs. Many people admired her, and no one suspected that she was alive. Jackie lived her life with a look of surprise molded on her face, with mouth held tightly closed and eyes widely open. She was surprised at what she had become, surprised how she had been stolen. She was surprised to be on display, surprised to be in the dark.

She had no choice but to be surprised, just as she had no choice but to be a toy.

Years passed and Jackie-in-the-Box never tired of her job. She always wanted to find some way out, but if she was stuck to a coil and made from plastic, the decoration could only make the best of it. And while she was as eager as ever to greet customers, the customers grew weary of Jackie.

The day came when Jackie came out of her box and she saw the very same employee who first greeted her readying a new pedestal for a new decoration on the door opposite her. Jackie the Jester knew her time in front of Ye Olde Toys was ending. She smiled, or would have, if not for her molded face. The spell that held her to the box would soon be lifted, and she could talk and move just like any other human. The thought of being human after so long being a toy bewildered the toy.

The employee finished with the new pedestal, doll-less, Jackie saw, and knew why that was. She wished whoever was taken for that spot the best of luck. The employee walked to her and spoke some magic words. He spoke at her, but not to her. Tingling energy wafted over her and worked on her. Jackie waited for her coiled spring to shrink to nothing, and her plastic skin to melt away. Except neither of those things happened.

Instead, the man in front of her, and the mall around her, grew to dizzying heights as she was shrunk down to a toy just inches tall. She wasn't going to be human, wasn't even going to be a decoration for the toy store, but was going to be a toy. Being a jack-in-the-box was her life.

Different emotions ran through Jackie's mind as she realized this. She was disappointed, not just because she was not going to be turned back, but also because she wasn't going to welcome customers to her shop. She was afraid of being put on the shelves and waiting for someone to own her. But she was also excited and joyful, realizing that she would finally, after so many years, be properly played with.

She hung onto that last thought the most as the employee picked up her palm sized box and took her into the store. Jackie had been the best advertisement for Ye Olde Toys for years, had done her best, and was now getting a promotion.