Nobody knew where the toy had come from, which great-grandparent or distant aunt had owned it before it was given it to the nursery.

It was a box, carved and painted in gold and red. It was undoubtedly attractive and, or so the grown-ups maintained, quite valuable—perhaps even an antique. The latch, unfortunately, was rusted shut, and the key had been lost, so the Jack could not be released from his box. Still, it was a remarkable box, heavy and carved and girt.

The children did not play with it. It sat at the bottom of the old wooden toy box, which was the same size and age as a pirate's treasure chest, or so the children thought. The Jack-in-the-Box was buried beneath dolls and trains, clowns and paper stars and old conjuring tricks, and crippled marionettes with their strings irrevocably tangled, with dressing-up clothes (here the tatters of a long-ago wedding dress, there a black silk hat, crusted with age and time) and costume jewelry, broken hoops and tops and hobbyhorses. Under them all was Jack's box.

The children did not play with it. They whispered among themselves, alone in the attic nursery. On gray days when the wind howled about the house and rain
rattled the slates and partered down the eaves, they told
each other stories about Jack, although they had never
seen him. One claimed that Jack was an evil wizard,
placed in the box as punishment for crimes too awful to
describe; another (I am certain that it must have been
one of the girls) maintained that Jack’s box was Pan-
dora’s Box and he had been placed in the box as
guardian to prevent the bad things inside it from com-
ing out once more. They would not even touch the box,
if they could help it, although when, as happened from
time to time, an adult would comment on the absence
of that sweet old Jack-in-the-Box, and retrieve it from
the chest, and place it in a position of honor on the
mantelpiece, then the children would pluck up their
courage and, later, hide it away once more in the dark-
ness.

The children did not play with the Jack-in-the-Box.
And when they grew up and left the great house, the
attic nursery was closed up and almost forgotten.

Almost, but not entirely. For each of the children,
separately, remembered walking alone in the moon’s
blue light, on his or her own bare feet, up to the nurs-
ery. It was almost like sleepwalking, feet soundless on
the wood of the stairs, on the threadbare nursery carpet.
Remembered opening the treasure chest, pawing
through the dolls and the clothes and pulling out the
box.

And then the child would touch the catch, and the lid
would open, slow as a sunset, and the music would
begin to play, and Jack came out. Not with a pop and a
bounce; he was no spring-heeled Jack. But deliberately,
intently, he would rise from the box and motion to the
child to come closer, closer, and smile.

And there in the moonlight, he told them each things
they could never quite remember; things they were never
able entirely to forget.

The oldest boy died in the Great War. The youngest,