The D.E.S.

Dissociative Experiences Scale

WEIRDMONGER

(The Distilled Nemonicon)

By D.F. Lewis

THE JACK-IN-THE-BOX

The complete story selected by the author

Dr David Mathew (Academic writer and author of fiction)

Forthcoming from GhostTruth / Montag Press

Promotional reading sample · October 2026

THE JACK-IN-THE-BOX

Tim wrote horror stories.

He was sick to the back teeth with jokey situation comedies on TV ridiculing his craft. Just because he had chosen to be a perpetrator of nastinesses with words, didn't mean he enjoyed being pointed at and jeered for aspiring to such an unbecoming career. He thought he deserved more respect . . . after all, there were a few individuals who had made a mint in trying to think up the ultimate freight of frights . . .

He believed the general public needed to be scared stiff, their bodies jolted out of their skins and brains eased from their skulls like shellfish, so that, eventually, they might be able to forget the real evil within themselves already.

*

Tim scribbled through what he had written. Too pretentious by half. He needed a story to grab them. A toyshop, back of the last alley, had a curved window full of gaudily painted face-masks, costumes fit for the fanciest dress parties, speechless dummies whose eyes follow those few passers-by trying to ignore them, puppets with tangled strings and contorted limbs . . . and, just visible at the back of the shop, perhaps the largest jack-in-the-box in the world.

He went in, desperately trying to prevent the clapper above the door from jangling out to whomsoever purveyed such wares. He could have sworn that this shop had never existed here before but, tonight of all nights, it was attempting to prove reality had got it wrong.

*

Tim couldn't get it right. He turned to his wife who was reading in the other corner of the front room. He had once written her into a story, knitting her own brain as it coiled in endless wriggling grey worms from the spindle of her revolving ear.

No help there. She was deep into her book.

*

Back in the shop, a dwarfen shopkeeper shambled from the rear parlour, sporting bottle green overalls and a full set. Tim could discern the mouthpiece of a pipe poking out of the top pocket.

"Yes, can I help you?"

The voice was like Tim would imagine that of a ventriloquist's dummy to be, if it could possibly have had one.

"I'm interested in the jack-in-the-box."

Tim pointed to the container, as large as a tea chest, a colourfully striped awning stretched around it. Sticking out of it was a grinning clown's head. Tim particularly liked the red bulbous nose, complete with nostril hairs.

"It's not for sale."

Tim's immediate reaction was to ask why the devil it was on show if it were not open to offer. However, he decided to be more subtle.

*

His wife had now left the front room. Her leaving had seemed to darken the place. He moved his chair nearer to the fire and continued to write by its flickering light.

*

"Can I test how strong the spring is?"

As Tim spoke, the shopkeeper shuffled closer. Tim could smell his meaty breath.

"No point, sir, it's not for sale. What good would it do you to know the strength of its spring?"

"Curiosity."

That answer, Tim felt, was a stroke of genius, this shop being little more than a refugee from Dickensian London.

Without waiting for further dialogue to ensue, Tim approached the box, pushed the head of the clown down (finding it very difficult to do so) and just managed to fasten the lid with a loud click before it had the chance to jump up again into his face.

"What do I do to set it off?"

The shopkeeper pointed to a button hidden at the bottom of the box.

*

"Want some hot milk, Tim?"

His wife had returned, interrupting the flow of the storyline. He cursed inside. He would never be able to get back into it.

"OK, thanks, leave it outside the door when it's ready."

She nodded silently.

*

Tim got down to his knees to push the button.

"Wait! He's not ready. He'll be changing. You see, it's an extra special jack-in-the-box, and he always springs back out as something different."

Tim accepted what the shopkeeper said as a matter of course. After all, in many ways, Tim knew that was what the dwarf was going to say before he said it.

"How long?"

"As long as it takes."

"How will I know?"

"He will knock on the inside of the box when he's ready."

Ten minutes passed, in which nothing much happened. So why waste words on them?

*

Rapping came on the door to indicate that his drink was waiting. This intrusive knocking of his wife made a mockery of her leaving the hot milk outside the door in the first place.

*

Tim pushed the button. His limbs were aching from crouching on the toyshop floor for so long.

It happened quicker in real time, no doubt. But in Tim's world, all seemed to be clockworking in slower motion. The lid rose like a lazy monster's yawn. And out flew, in all directions, the red, raw, under-ripening innards of a creature which had not fully set.

Its skin was no more than that forming on top of hot milk left too long . . . so it could not possibly have even hoped to withstand the thrust of the spinal spring.

"Too early! Too early! It was not the jack-in-the-box knocking at all!" screeched the dwarf as he hopped round the shop, amid the babble of dummies.

*

Tim sighed. He couldn't write really scarey horror stories for love or money

The fire was out and the house more silent than the tomb.

Publication history

THE JACK-IN-THE-BOX

Exuberance # 3 (1991)

Best of DF Lewis (Tal Publns) (1993)

A promotional preview of the forthcoming GhostTruth / Montag Press edition.

ghosttruth.ca

From the author’s manuscript

Weirdmonger Copyright: Prime Books 2003/2004. (The paperback and hardback have been out of print since around 2010)

Prior dates of publication (mostly 1990s) for each individual story are shown at the end of this book. All the texts of the distilled stories are unchanged except the story where the protagonist’s name has now become the Nemonymous One. ‘The Brainwright’ was published on the dust-jacket of the hardback version in 2004.

WEIRDMONGER (The Distilled Nemonicon)

D.F. Lewis · Gestalt (2026)

Introduction to ‘Jack-in-the-Box’ by D.F. Lewis

Dr David Mathew (Academic writer and author of fiction)

If I state outright that ‘Jack-in-the-Box’ made me think both of a British sitcom from the late 1980s – *Colin’s Sandwich* – and of the “inventor” of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, I hope the author will be intrigued to be a corner on this triangle. *Colin’s Sandwich* was about a man who listened to customer complaints in his day job – and wrote horror stories in his spare time. ‘Jack-in-the-Box’ opens with “Tim wrote horror stories. He was sick to the back teeth with jokey situation comedies on TV ridiculing his craft.”

A coincidence? Probably – although the story *was* published in 1991… and it seems to me that D.F. Lewis, in his fiction, has often given voice and substance to a notion that has crawled around, harmlessly enough, in the reader’s unconscious for some time. Reading ‘Jack-in-the-Box’ this morning made me think of Mel Smith as Colin for the first time in years. No doubt other readers will experience alternative connections. But what has any of this to do with Freud?

The following opinion may well change tomorrow (or even later today), but my favourite kind of D.F. Lewis tale is a miniature piece that involves the uncanny.[1] A Lewis miniature exists where the page count is low and both the level of surprise and the emotional impact are high. Simultaneously, in the words of Sigmund Freud in his influential essay of the same name, “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” – where “something which ought

to have remained hidden but has come to light". I cannot imagine much resistance to the opinion that 'Jack-in-the-Box' could be described thus. And of course, I hope that the reader of these words enjoys the tale as much as *this* reader did.

D.F. Lewis has been Des to me for decades; and while we are never sure 'which' Des we will find when we start a piece of his published fiction, we can rely on 'which' Des we will meet in person, on a walk or in a pub. We will meet a man curious about what you're reading and/or writing; a storyteller, wit and raconteur, with his eyes gently twinkling with impish delight, mischief and wisdom. When I spoke to him once, a long time ago – a time span of roughly half the years I have spent on the planet – Des seemed unaware of the high esteem in which he was (and is) held. He kept his writing life and his day-job life separate, to the extent that he was confident that none of his colleagues knew that he wrote at all. (Whether or not he listened to customer complaints, as Colin did, remains unknown.)

Des was always an encouraging presence; always eager to learn, as well. On a table between where he and I sat in a hotel bar in the late 1990s lay a copy of *Under the Volcano* by Malcolm Lowry. I had intended to read it on the train heading north, on my way to the convention. He asked me what it was about and I told him that I hadn't even read the first page. "Let's make the story up between us then," he suggested; and we spent time on creating an alterative "cover version" to what is widely considered Lowry's masterwork. To this day I have still not read *Under the Volcano*...but I *have* co-authored it...with a D.F. Lewis of bright eyes and a darker beard than he sports today.

Reference

Freud, S. (1919). The Uncanny. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVII, pp. 217-256. London: Vintage (2001).

[1] 'Lewis the Miniaturist' could itself be a Lewis title…if it isn't one already. Return to note reference