

Dust Jackets

He started collecting children's books after the first conversation he and his girlfriend had about raising kids. At the time, they weren't engaged and they shared an apartment they didn't own, but they were in love and the prospect of educating one or two hypothetical offspring was so exciting that he couldn't wait. Without taking into consideration that objects from childhood are ephemeral or that he had scribbled and chewed on books as a baby, effectively destroying them, he scoured stores for the nicest copies he could find—hardcovers usually, since he liked the way dust jackets protected their contents. He purchased essential works by Dr. Seuss, Lewis Carroll, Roald Dahl and Shel Silverstein, and he made sure when buying certain titles to only purchase those without movie tie-in covers. Their children, he figured, would be exposed to TV and the movies soon enough without having the temptation forced on them by photographs of actors portraying beloved characters.

They hadn't discussed names, but he had his favorites picked out: Miles for a boy and Olivia for a girl. He liked the sound of both with his surname, and when he revealed this, his girlfriend, rather than getting nervous at his overzealous, preemptive christening, found herself caught up in his enthusiasm. He read to her from his books, and she often fell asleep nestled against him like a little girl. The possibility that one of them might have been infertile never crossed his mind. She had previously been on birth control, so the news, delivered soon after they wed, was devastating.

In his early twenties, before meeting his girlfriend, he had mulled over the idea of not having children. The world, he would pontificate in righteous young anger, was a dangerous place to bring anyone into, and he feared the perils prospective progeny would face fifty years in the future—poverty? hunger? The threat of nuclear war? Global warming? But now that the option had been snatched from them, he felt worn out, like he'd skipped some essential stage of his life. He refused to leave home, stayed in bed for days, considered walking with a cane when he noticed a sharp pain in his back, and eventually, lost his job. Adoption was one alternative they considered looking into, but first, he had to mourn the death of children who had never lived, and he did so among books they would never read.

He built a library in the room intended for their nursery and continued his collection. He ordered more books, some like Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince* in the original French, and imagined teaching them foreign languages he didn't know, inventing a history where he had learned them as a boy, and reciting *Le Corbeau et le Renard* without the slightest accent. Briefly, he considered donating the books to local schools, and moving on with his life. He and his wife hadn't discussed divorce, but the possibility created an uncomfortable rift between them. Neither wished to have children with anyone else, but the silence they lived in was agonizing. He understood she secretly wished he'd abandon his attachment to the books and let them find solace in each other, but the books were becoming increasingly important. His collection spilled out of the designated room to fill the rest of their house—living room, dining room, and kitchen. He was ready to give up on everything, to bury himself in piles of paper and cardboard, but she had another idea.

She had always been craft oriented—painting, doing pottery or photography—and one day, after work, she visited the fabric store. They had spent so many years together, she wasn't walking away now. He was a good man, and despite his flaws, she planned to keep their wedding vows. She was sure he wouldn't notice her working late at night in the sole room devoted to her hobbies. He was too preoccupied with arranging and rearranging the shelves to barge in on the swipe of silkscreen or her delicate embroidering or to hear the tap-tapping of her sewing machine. Alternating panels, she stitched here a story of their relationship—the day they met, their first date, the wedding, and trips they took to Europe and various cities in the States—and there, by way of photo emulsion, pictures from better times, smiling reproductions of happier moments, piecing together what she hoped would be the finest quilt she had ever made. She worked quickly, with a steady eye for detail, and her passion rivaled his, with one major difference: She was working to save them.

It took six months, and on the night she finished, she undressed, got into their bed, and wrapped herself in the quilt, waiting for him. Sometimes he fell asleep in the living room recliner, but if not, he usually slipped into their room around midnight, and when he arrived, she saw the first surprised expression in what felt like forever cross his face, though she couldn't tell if this was because she was still awake or nude beneath the quilt, the inside edges of both breasts exposed at the opening.

"Come here," she commanded, and he went, curious but tentative, pulling at his own clothing, perhaps wondering if it was a ploy to rekindle their dwindling sex life.

"What's this?" he asked, as she welcomed him into the quilt.

"It's a dust jacket," she answered, "to protect us inside."

Jason M. Jones

Slowly, he examined each square—reading abbreviated episodes from their lives, lingering on photos he had forgotten—and reaching out to trace the needlework, he cried quietly, not the kind of crying that was long and deep, nor the melodramatic kind people called weeping, but a cathartic cry, a cry to purge the children who never existed, to rid himself of ghosts whose spirits never crossed the nascent threshold, and to encompass and release all the sadness compounded in the pages of those books gracing their tables and shelves, their desks and their countertops. She held him tightly, in a way she longed for during the painful process of grief and healing, in a way she maybe should have when it began but didn't have strength for, kissing his forehead, earlobes, and neck, until exhausted, they slept, and together dreamed of the possibility that in the morning, they might wake, revived in this storied shelter, entirely new, themselves the children they couldn't conceive, born again from a dust jacket womb.