

*The story of how a man's quest for a utopian architecture became his son's quest for the love of a young woman haunted by an ecological disaster. It is a coming-of-age story, love story, and a treatise on architecture's role in human affairs.*

## **An Architect's Concerto**

By J.D. ALT

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# An Architect's Concerto

A Novel

J.D. ALT

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# PART I

## The Neophyte

1

It is safe now, I think, to tell my father's story—or at least as much of it as I know. It is really my story too. I only knew him for seventeen months, but that was long enough to change the course and trajectory and purpose of my life.

The story, as I will tell it, begins on my eighteenth birthday, a few weeks before I graduated from high school. That morning my grandmother, Gramella, led me with her painful limp out to the detached, two-car garage behind our white, clapboard house and pointed with the rubber tip of her cane up into the rafters.

"There, Charlie," she said. "That's your birthday present."

The cane could not point long because it had to quickly resume its role of supporting Gramella's arthritic hip. But it pointed long enough for me to see what I had never noticed all the years I'd been going in and out of that garage. Pushed back in a corner of the open ceiling joists, partly covered by a dusty folded tarpaulin, was a small black steamer trunk with brass corner guards.

At my inquisitive look, Gramella simply gave an upward nod in the direction of the trunk. "It was your mother's," she said.

Until that moment I had led the sheltered and almost reclusive life of an only child raised by his maternal grandmother in a small, North Carolina house filled with grandmotherly furniture and photos, crocheted doilies and knitted comforters, glass vases filled with perfumed flower petals, artfully arranged porcelain figurines—mementos that, with a single exception, included no physical reference whatsoever to the fact I might have had a mother or a father. Of great aunts and uncles and cousins, there was clear evidence in the small, framed photos on the fireplace mantle and dining room sideboard. But it seemed an entire generation—the one between my grandmother and me—had been skipped over by the facts of historical evidence.

Inquiries about my parents had always been answered by Gramella with light, sunny mantras: "Your mother was as beautiful as they come," she would intone. "She sang like God's favorite angel. Laurie loved you so much, Charlie. It was such a tragedy...."

About my father: “He was as tall as he was handsome, Charlie. Your mother named you after him! He was an architect—had just graduated with all kinds of big awards when he went off to Vietnam. They were college sweethearts. Just like Romeo and Juliet!”

The fact that Gramella had some literary confusion about the educational circumstances of Shakespeare’s characters did not diminish the effect of her sentiment. In the fourth grade, I doted on the imagined images of my mother and father dressed in Elizabethan gowns and stockings, speaking in the high-sounding “thees” and “thous” of the play our school was putting on. I had a minor role and was warmed by the feeling I was somehow connecting with my mysteriously dead and missing parents.

When I was ten this kind of imagining was put to an end when Gramella opened her black, pebbly-textured bible one day and extracted a yellowed newspaper clipping announcing my mother’s fatality. She had drowned in a swimming accident on the French Broad River. It was at a music festival in Asheville. “Performer Feared Lost in the French Broad,” the headline said. Her band and a group of “revelers” had gone swimming after a late-night performance. Authorities were still searching for her body.

“Did they ever find her?” I asked.

“Yes, they found her,”

Gramella pulled a wadded tissue from her apron pocket and wiped her eyes. Then she put the newspaper clipping back in the bible, closed it, and put it on the shelf. Later, I took the clipping out and hid it in my bedside drawer.

For a long time, this revelation about my mother’s death gave me nightmares, dark, watery, river-dreams having to do with the search for her body. Gramella took me to a doctor who taught me deep-breathing exercises to quell the rising panic that awakened my sleep. I began the habit of sleeping with a small night-light in the corner of my room—just enough illumination to outline the hard, dry reality of my closet door frame. But the depths of the darkness inside the closet itself, beyond the frame, were never illuminated.

The pebbly surfaced bible contained no revelations about my father. At my inquiries Gramella was always quick to extol some

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virtue: “He was so talented, Charlie. He could draw a line as straight as an arrow without even using a ruler!”

About his demise, however, all she ever said was that he never came back from Vietnam. “He never really came back, Charlie. There were lots of young boys that never came back.”

When I was thirteen, my seventh-grade civics class went on a field trip to Washington, D.C. Among other places, we visited the Vietnam War Memorial. I told my classmates that my father’s name was on it somewhere, but I did not know the date. Avoiding the easy way of looking in the directory, making it a game, my classmates spread out along the length of the wall looking for the name “Charles Robert” inscribed in the shiny black marble.

After fifteen minutes or so the teacher, Miss Westerbeke, asked me, “Charlie, are you sure?”

I remember the rising shame that clamped hold of my face and chest. Miss Westerbeke put her arm around my shoulder and guided me off to the side.

“There’s a lot of names, Charlie,” she said. “We have to be at the Smithsonian in a few minutes. We can always come back when there’s more time and check the directory.”

But I did not need to go back and check the directory. I had realized in that panicked moment what a strange way Gramella had always phrased it: “He never really came back,” she had said.

For me, the rest of that field trip was the teetering realization of the possibility that my father was not mysteriously dead at all, but somehow, somewhere, even more mysteriously, alive.

I never confronted Gramella with this suspicion. Instinctively I knew she did not want to go there. I always steered away from anything that would kindle her strong emotions for the simple reason they kindled strong emotions in me that I neither enjoyed nor understood. There was something about my mother and father, I could sense, that Gramella had hidden away, and was never going to bring out for me to see.

The lack of proper role models, I suppose, was what instilled in me a profound shyness that first took hold in junior high—in the fall of that same seventh-grade year, to be exact—when the boys and girls of my class, to my surprise and puzzlement, first began pairing up in quiet, darkened-room basement parties.



I might never have discovered my own sexuality had it not been for a big, red-headed boy named Nick who began telling me how he “jaggered-off” every night, and how incredible a thing it was to feel. At first, I did not believe him. I tried a few times on my own, late after I was sure Gramella was asleep, but nothing like he described took place or could be felt. Then one night it happened all by itself, while I was asleep, dreaming I was pulling a thorn from the foot of Mary Evans, a brown-haired girl who lived down the street and never wore shoes during the summer. After that, I took great pains to make sure Gramella had no idea what I knew about, being certain, somehow, that such activities would be strongly disapproved of.

But in terms of boy-girl love, I was already behind the curve. I was not athletic, and as sports and manliness rose in the social protocol, I withdrew to a world of literary pursuit. I could not imagine how to approach a girl in a romantic way, and so I became the editor of the school newspaper and approached them intellectually, on paper. Even though I grew six inches in my senior year—surpassing most of the popular “studs” (as they were called) in the hallways—my interior-self remained the short, spindly kid I had grown accustomed to being in the seventh grade. It takes a long time, I discovered, to grow into your body.

I attended my senior prom with the cheerleader girlfriend of the basketball team’s all-conference point guard. I did not have a girlfriend to take, of course, and she had inconveniently broken off with the team hero a few weeks before the big event. Our date was arranged by a group of her girlfriends who accosted me with bubbly enthusiasm in the office of the school paper. I rented a tuxedo and Gramella tied my bowtie while I looked down at the part in her shiny grey hair. I drove Gramella’s big Buick, and the cheerleader’s parents, with strained enthusiasms and encouragements on their daughter’s behalf, took our photo as I held the passenger door open for her.

The cheerleader, beautiful as any girl I had ever been close to, was politely talkative when we first got in the car, but by the time we arrived at the extravagantly crepe-papered school gym, she’d grown quiet and apprehensive. She was immediately surrounded by her girlfriends when we got inside, and I quickly realized—though

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of course I'd known it from the beginning—that I was merely serving the purpose of legitimately delivering her to the event and, having accomplished this task, my role for the evening was essentially over. I had imagined there might be other possibilities, of course—that we might end up dancing the night away, that we might fall in love, that we might kiss tenderly and then have sex in the back seat of the big Buick.

But the cheerleader and her estranged boyfriend made up half-way through the first slow dance, with the lights dimmed low and the big, mirrored ball scattering shards of colored light over the clinging, mesmerized couples as they drifted back and forth across the free-throw circles.

For me, the rest of the prom consisted of watching a full moon rise over the practice baseball diamond behind the gym, listening to the muffled swell and fall of the music from inside. Eventually, I started thinking about the little black steamer trunk Gramella had pointed at with her cane just a few days earlier: It had been surprisingly lighter than I had expected when I pulled it down from the garage rafters. It hefted easily on my shoulder and plopped lightly on my bedspread, barely making a dent or wrinkle.

When I had popped the brass latch and swung up the lid, the first thing I saw had been a yellowing envelope addressed to me, Charles Robert Cadwell (my Mother's surname) in a bold, slanting, all-capitals handwriting.

Inside the envelope was a single, deeply creased page with the same bold, print-like script:

Dear Charles,

I have just found out that, miraculously somehow, you exist! There is nothing I want more than to come and see you. But sadly, I can't. Someday I promise to find you and make things right. In the meantime, your Grandmother Ella is a beautiful and wonderful person, and I know she will always give you more love than a person could ever need. I loved your mother very much, and I will think about you every day....

Your father, Charles Robert

I had quickly searched the trunk to see if there were more letters. But there was only the one. I read it a dozen times, trying to decipher its meaning, trying to recognize some connection with the bold, slanted handwriting, trying to listen to someone talking to me who I could not hear. The fact that my father was alive—or at least had been during some of my youth—was no longer surprising. The fact that he had been thinking about me was a revelation.

The trunk contained only a few other items: A dark blue knitted sweater. A pearl-handled hairbrush and comb. A pair of white leather baby-shoes (mine?). A well-worn baseball cap emblazoned: “Meet me at Woodstock”. A red and white cotton bandana. Not much at all.

The next day I had asked Gramella what happened to the rest of my mother’s things.

“I don’t know,” she answered. “That’s all there was. Maybe Kurtz took it.”

“Kurtz?”

Gramella winced, as if she hadn’t meant to say this name.

“He was in your mother’s band. It was a long time ago, Charlie. They traveled all around in a bus. I never saw them much.”

“What about my father? There was a letter from him.”

“I know.”

“What happened to him?”

“No one knows, Charlie. We never heard from him again.”

Spare as it was, the trunk did contain a few treasures. Three items had been carefully folded in the blue knit sweater: a fat leather-bound diary, zipped closed; an old-fashioned plastic reel of brown, metallic-looking tape, labeled: “Charleston Peace Rally”; and a framed 5X7 black and white glossy photo.

Thick as it was, the diary was sparsely populated. Only the first 50 pages or so had been used, and there were long periods between the dates, as if my mother had only written in it when something in life compelled being recorded. The first entry began with her cryptic, backwards date symbol—year first, month, then day:

72-6-2 I’m moving in with Charlie! He has six months special training in Charleston, and we decided we’ve got to be together. My mother is appalled— “crushed” is the word

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she used. We're just not ready to get married, I told her. In truth, she loves him as much as I do. I'm so excited! We're going to find a carriage-house downtown. He's going to make the furniture! And I've found a band there looking for a singer.... If it wasn't for Vietnam, life would be absolutely perfect.

The photo was the most immediately compelling thing. It was of a young man and woman. They were leaning on either side of the grille of an old Mercedes Benz. The grille was vertical rather than horizontal—an old model I had never seen before.

The young man, dressed in a navy officer's uniform with the coat thrown open, is tall and thin. His short-billed Officer's hat is pushed back on a high forehead, and a pair of John Lennon wire framed glasses perches at the midpoint of a straight, eagle thin nose. Most striking was his smile—big and wide with a noticeable gap between his two front teeth. He is laughing at something that has just happened or been said.

The young woman (she has a striking resemblance to the cheerleader I had just delivered to the prom) leans with competitive nonchalance on the opposite side of the Mercedes grille, her mouth shaped into something she is saying, apparently to the cameraman, something that's elicited the big smile on the young lieutenant. She is slender and delicate, every feature painted by the sunlight with great affection. She is wearing—in stark contrast to the officer's uniform—ragged edged cut-off jeans, unlaced high-top tennis shoes, and a T-shirt emblazoned with the faded image of the Vietnam Peace Symbol.

Until that moment, the only image I had ever seen of my mother was the photo Gramella kept on the upright piano in the parlor—a touched up studio portrait that must have been her high school graduation picture. It had always seemed unreal to me, like the photo of a plaster statue someone had applied rouge to. But here in this new photo, captured miniature and alive in my hands, was my real mother. And a man I had never before laid eyes on—who I instantly recognized was my father.

I drove home before the last dance of the prom had been sounded and went up to my room and opened the steamer trunk and took all these things out and looked at them again.

## 2

I went on to major in English at the University of North Carolina where I eventually dated several girls, one who took me to bed and showed me with great patience, detail, and participation, how to make love to her. But the relationships did not take hold. I discovered, to my surprise, that sexual gratification—while it kept my attention—was not, after all, the central thing I was longing for.

I spent one semester, as part of a course on investigative journalism, researching and trying to track down my father. He had majored in architecture at Clemson, where he met my mother, and—just as Gramella had said—he'd won several regional competitions—not for designing buildings, but for designing cities. I even found a micro-filch in the school archives that included one of his drawings—a complex network of lines and shaded boxes titled “Urban Study II”. His fitness reports from the navy's Officer Candidate School in Newport were unremarkable. His tour of duty in Vietnam was classified. And after he was discharged at the San Diego Naval Base in the spring of 1972, he vanished, apparently, from the face of the earth.

Gramella died two months before I graduated, unable to hang on to see me in cap and gown. What I got from the sale of her house and furniture was not considerable, but I was determined to live on it long enough to write my first novel. I rented an old, partially furnished, paint-peeling farmhouse off a gravel road outside of Chapel Hill and moved in with my portable typewriter and five reams of paper.

The novel I tried to write was an imagined version of my parent's courtship, woven around the sparse and cryptic entries in my mother's diary. In truth, I had no idea what I was doing, or even why I was doing it. I got up every morning and sat at my typewriter and wrote about these characters that, really, I didn't understand

## About the Author

J.D. ALT is an architect who spent much of his career imagining and designing things that could never be built for the simple reason that the building of them would not generate financial profits. This included affordable, community-building strategies based on the theory of Matrix Architecture, and a free-to-ride downtown people-mover design called SMRTram—for which he obtained two U.S. patents. Ultimately, he realized the problem—and the solution—lay not in architecture, but in macroeconomics. His goal then shifted from understanding and explaining Matrix Architecture to understanding and explaining the macroeconomics of modern fiat money—and what it makes possible. This effort led to the writing of dozens of essays for the economics blog New Economic Perspectives ([neweconomic-perspectives.org](http://neweconomic-perspectives.org)) and, more recently, for Real Progressives ([real-progressives.org](http://real-progressives.org))—as well as four books on the topic:

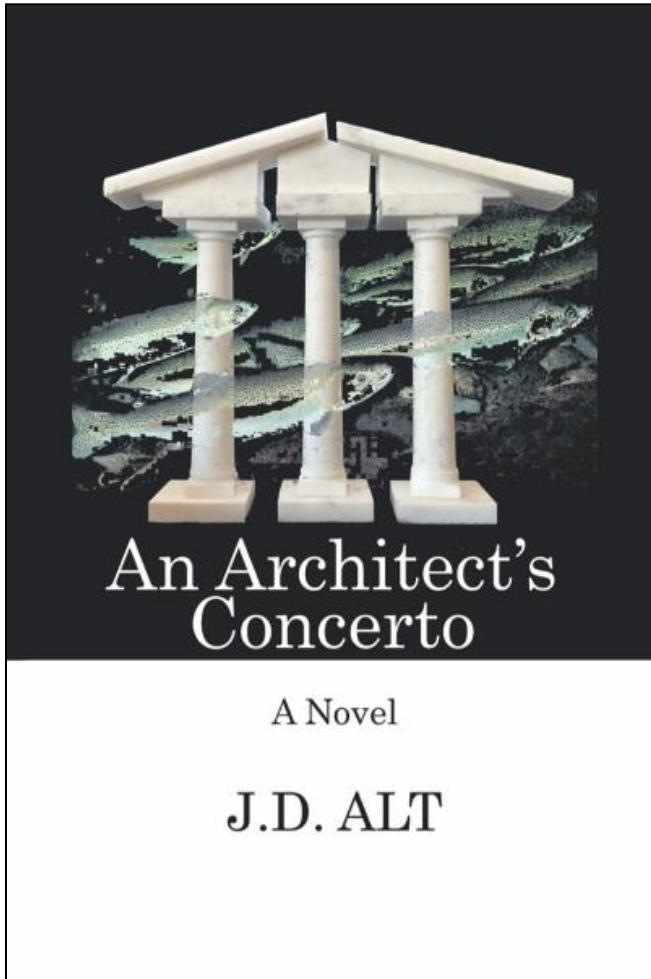
*Diagrams and Dollars (ebook)*

*Low Earth Orbit—A novella about the near future (ebook)*

*The Millennials Money*

*Paying Ourselves to Save the Planet*

Mr. Alt currently lives with his wife, architect Scarlett Breeding, south of Santa Fe, New Mexico. He can be contacted through his website: [www.jdalt.com](http://www.jdalt.com).



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