

Robert, The Architect

by Andrew Bowen

Robert Townsend had planned his suicide for ten years, and on July 10th, 2010 he took a long, hot shower to set the mood. He wondered if his twin sons were enjoying themselves in Italy...thought about the last time he made love to his wife two weeks prior—the first time they had done so in a year. He then closed his eyes, inhaled the thick, warm mist, and remembered the first step he took toward this day.

For Robert's tenth birthday, his parents had taken him to his father's native Athens to see the Parthenon. He developed a passion for two things after the trip: architecture and theology. By the time his classmates had discovered graffiti penis art, Robert was sketching prints of ancient temples and the statues of the gods. Upon high school graduation Robert's destiny was as clear to him as if it had been whispered upon the breath of the divine. He would build a world temple—the greatest and most beautiful structure in human history, to join the faiths of mankind and end sectarian conflict.

Robert decided to major in architecture and religious studies in college. He dreamt in sandstone and marble, measurements and geometric molds of his vision. He traced his spiritual bloodline to Pythagoras, Imhotep, Daedelus, Leonardo de Vinci and the brotherhood of the Free Masons. While his friends partied or visited home, Robert locked himself away to plan his divine calling. He envisioned himself as a prophet of God, with his blueprints as holy writ and the world temple as his Academy. But despite his brilliance and the title of prodigy conferred upon him by his instructors, Robert had one weakness: funding.

The world temple would require massive investment and involvement from multi-national sources. Robert understood his lack

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of people skills and soon befriended Mia Stanton, a business and accounting major. Mia had her doubts but as she watched Robert, drunk on the ambrosia of inspiration, she couldn't help but to become his disciple.

"The key," she told him over a cheese pizza in his apartment. "Is cooperation with tangible returns. In other words, our investors will want to get something out of this."

"Peace," Robert said quietly as he sketched on the blank side of the pizza box.

Mia smirked, said, "Yeah, that too," and watched Robert draw. She had developed a crush on him by the start of the spring semester of their senior year. Robert's passion and intensity was a singularity of will, the stuff of her fascination. At times she wondered how that energy would translate in other forms. Robert always felt Mia's gaze. Over time, it required more and more effort to focus on his temple of stone and not on hers of flesh.

For Robert, graduation was a minor affair. His parents helped him celebrate with a party at home that included mostly extended family. Robert spent most of the event daydreaming in the corner of whatever room his mother had guided him to about his temple and blueprints.

Robert drove three hours back to his campus apartment that evening to the thunder and light of a city of freshly minted graduates partying the night away. The vibration of bass and riotous neighbors buzzed through the concrete steps of Robert's apartment complex and into his feet. He wedged his way through a stairwell full of drunken former students and looked up at his door as he dug for his keys.

Mia stood with her back against his door and smiled as he approached. "Welcome home."

Robert closed the door against the noise. "How am I supposed to concentrate with all that racket?"

Mia cracked open a bottle of beer and thrust it into Robert's hand. "You aren't focusing tonight anyway," she said and took a gulp from her own bottle. "We're celebrating."

"I don't drink," he said, set the bottle on the counter and walked toward his bedroom. "Besides, I have work to do."

"On what? Come on Robert, you've worked on this thing since you were like twelve years old."

"Ten. I was ten when I had my vision of the temple."

Mia rolled her eyes. "Sorry. Ten. Point is you're done with the plans! Now you just need to relax or you'll have a heart attack before you lay the first stone."

He dug through a mound of books and paper in his bedroom. "Where is it?"

"Where's what?"

Blood rushed to Robert's face as he ripped apart his room. "The blueprint book. It's gone!"

"You mean this?"

Robert turned and looked up at Mia. She leaned against the door jamb with the book in her hand as she finished her beer.

"Give it to me."

"Come and get it."

Robert rushed toward her with his hand out. "That wasn't funny. You had me—"

Mia dropped her bottle, grabbed the back of Robert's head, and pressed her lips against his. For a second he resisted and took hold of the book. Mia held tight to both Robert's lips and the book. The kiss, the taste, the smell of Mia gently melted Robert's resolve. His eyes closed and one by one, his fingers slipped off the book.

The condom broke.

Mia refused to take the morning after pill and took a pregnancy test once her period became late. Robert sat in a corner of his bedroom while Mia took the test in his bathroom and rubbed his hand over the blueprint's pages. For the past three weeks he slipped into a murky depression. The pages of his creation cooled against his fingers. Before they'd slept together, the lines and measurements of the temple burned in his mind like ribbons of fire. The embers of inspiration began to cool and he could no longer see the temple clearly.

But he allowed hope into his heart. The test could come back negative. Perhaps the cooling was God's way of showing Robert what could happen should he stray again.

Whimpers seeped from the bathroom. Mia didn't come out for half an hour and Robert had his answer.

Robert's knees became callous from prayer as he begged for forgiveness over the next weeks. He whipped himself to the point of

exhaustion and fainted with pain. He remembered the punishment of Moses and the Israelites, set to wander the desert and an entire generation barred from the Promised Land for their idolatry. The flame of divine purpose Robert had carried and protected since he was ten had been snuffed out by a gentle, unexpected breeze.

The twins, Janis and John, were born 37 weeks later. Robert and Mia married two months after that. The last vestiges of warmth had long abandoned Robert's temple project and after the honeymoon he locked his blueprint book in a chest to collect dust. Having lost his ability to build or design, Robert used his Religious Studies degree to teach at the local high school. Mia went on to complete her Master's degree in accounting and founded her own financial services firm. Since the day Mia announced she was pregnant and Robert had lost his mandate, he had no desire to live. Social pressure kept him from taking his life. Over the years, Robert became sterile in family life and did only enough to maintain the unity of the home.

But on the twins' 13th birthday, Robert had a vision. New warmth flowed over and into him. He saw his own peaceful, fully atoned death...and God would allow him to be the architect of his own end.

The cornerstone of his death was laid on the day after the twins' birthday with a calculation. Robert would die during the first lunar eclipse after their twenty-third birthday. By then, he reasoned, the boys would be fully independent and not as affected by his death as opposed to their formative years. He also assumed that his marriage with Mia would be so cold by then that divorce or indifference would render the impact to a minimum.

Robert spent the years leading up to his suicide planning. Mia was incredibly mindful with finances and so he saved for the event pennies at a time. He often mulled in his classroom over photographs of ancient temples—all of which became candidates for

his resting place. Then, two years before his lunar eclipse, he found his destination: Easter Island.

According to his research, Easter Island would be only one of a few places where the umbra of the moon would pass over the earth. He envisioned himself sitting next to a moai statue on the slopes of Rano Raraku and biting a hydrogen cyanide pill while staring with them toward heaven as the moon's shadow passed over him like death's gentle shroud.

The hot water of Robert's shower was beginning to cool. His daydream over, he stepped out and dried off. He looked down at the one-way airline ticket to Easter Island on the sink as he brushed his teeth. A foamy smile spread over his mouth. In a little over fifteen hours, he thought, he will have finally built his masterpiece—his personal mausoleum, and all would be at peace.

Robert unfurled the towel from his waist and settled on the seat of the toilet to take the last dump of his life on earth. He grinned with a long sigh as the excess weight slipped from his body and thus made him lighter. Another burden lifted, he thought.

Footsteps boomed across the hardwood floor of his bedroom.
“Robert! Robert where are you?”

Mia had come home early from work. Robert clenched and reached for the ticket on the sink. The paper lay an inch beyond his reach when Mia pushed open the door. Robert froze beneath the chapped, tear-streaked face of his wife.

“Hi...”

Mia pulled a white plastic stick from her purse and choked on her words. “You aren't going to believe this.”

Robert leaned back, exhaled a long, shaky breath, and stared up at the ceiling in frozen contemplation.

