

The Colossal Walden

By

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As Suzanne's plane glided into O'Hare, she stared out at the Tree. Its wide arrowhead shadow darkened Grant Park and cooled the glare from Lake Michigan. At the bottom of the highest pine cone, 1,300 feet above the asphalt, Suzanne had an appointment in a few hours to meet Walden. Even better, the summons had arrived just before the revelation and commencement of his latest AIN project in Chicago. She closed her eyes, inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly.

After a moment, she risked a glance across the center aisle. The man continued to stare at her. Turning back to the incoming landscape, she realized she should have smiled at him or at least looked nonchalant. He must be one of the protesters, she thought. She had just completed her architecture degree with an emphasis in Architecture Imitating Nature. At graduation that morning, protestors had disrupted some of the ceremonies by shouting and waving ridiculous placards, one of which stated, "AIN: Architecture *Perverting* Nature." They hadn't even matched up the letters properly.

Suzanne considered the Tree the epitome of architectural achievement. With its startling evocation of nature, its immense organic form, it dwarfed the city's skyscrapers ideologically, if not physically. The Tree made a statement like no other building in the world, and she wanted to work for the company that had built it, for the man who had envisioned it, for Walden.

While waiting in the taxi line, she saw the protester again. He was talking excitedly in a small group of "similar uniques," her name for people who thought themselves distinct individuals and demonstrated it through outward appearance, but ended up all looking the same.

Entering the taxi, she said, "The Tree," and the system knew where to take her.

She relaxed into the seat and pulled out her letter. Yes, she had the right day. Yes, she actually would talk to Mr. Walden. She had told everyone that she'd come to Chicago to interview with the premiere AIN company, Colossal Engineering, but the true prize was speaking with Walden himself. He wasn't much of a designer, but he was a marketing genius. He could make people see the future, make them imagine. Walden was an idea man.

And the public loved him, as did local politicians and even some national celebrities. For his current AIN project, the one he would reveal tomorrow, he had

secured permission to build without any of the usual public hearings or building commission meetings. He hadn't even specified what he would build. Genius.

She relaxed into the taxi seat, folded her arms across her chest, and imagined becoming a partner in Colossal Engineering before she reached 30. She pictured herself walking into her estate in Oak Brook, brick with columns, and greeting her housekeeper, petite with olive skin.

She had read about Walden's 14-bedroom house that simulated an enormous boulder sitting alone on the prairie. He used a trolley to get around.

While she rode the elevator up and over to Walden's office, Suzanne saw herself reflected in the polished walls. She tugged at her bra strap and breathed deeply several times. Finally, the doors opened.

She didn't move. Instead she stared at Walden's office. Thirteen-hundred feet up hanging on a massive branch, and he'd installed a transparent floor. The furniture seemed to float above the city.

Walden's desk, a carved wood eagle, soared in place. The guest chair resembled a goose defending its territory, head high, wings also spread. Behind the desk, a black stalactite suspended from the ceiling, presumably a private toilet space. The light brown ceiling almost disappeared behind the lights. All very AIN.

Suzanne felt herself shaking, her muscles tensing.

It wasn't until Walden looked up that Suzanne realized he was sitting at the desk. His body blended with the black form behind him, but his white face seemed to hang unsupported and unreal. She thought his suit was beaver, but it might have been shaved mink. His hair, thick and black as his suit, swooped from his forehead like the brim of a hat, then flowed back over the top of his head.

When he noticed her standing in the elevator, he unplugged himself from his computer and walked around his desk. He reached up to push a strand of hair back where it belonged.

She stepped off the elevator, careful not to look down, and stuck out her hand. "Good evening, sir, I'm Suzanne Finch." Did her voice waver? Was her hand a little moist? She looked at Walden, but thought about the ground far below. She almost laughed when she realized how lucky she was to have worn slacks instead of a skirt.

"Suzanne, welcome to Colossal Engineering." He held rather than shook her hand. "Have a seat." He sat on the wing of his desk and looked down at Suzanne, who perched on the goose's carved tail. "Call me Walden. Everyone does."

"Thank you, Walden." It was awfully kind of Walden to sit higher, so she could avoid looking at the city far below.

"So, Suzanne, I've read your portfolio, and some of the architects have read your school papers. I'll tell you right out, we're interested. I invited you here today, Suzanne, because we need people like you, people with your background, people with your perseverance, and I think if you spend a few days with us, you'll choose to join Colossal."

The only thing that kept her from immediately standing up and shouting, "I'll take the job!" was the thought that if she looked down, she would tumble right out of the goose chair onto her head. After this momentary delay, she remembered to appear

indifferent, at least for the moment.

Walden gave her a rundown of the company, information she had already discovered. The chatter allowed her to appear interested while she inwardly dissected his previous statement. Had he really offered her a job? No, he'd said that after a few days with them, she would choose to join Colossal. That wasn't a job offer. After all, joining the company wasn't her choice, it was his.

Suzanne's accommodation for the night was on the east side of the Tree at the bottom of another pine cone – a special guest suite, perhaps an honor. The view was, of course, spectacular, but only the bathroom had an opaque floor. She slept in the tub.

In the morning, Walden's man found her there. She wondered how long he had knocked on the door before entering. He didn't act surprised about her location, but she suspected he would never show surprise. "I'll come back for you in an hour."

An hour later, they proceeded to the bee launch area in the trunk of the Tree. She sank into a low leather seat inside the bee and watched the furious, blurred action of the wings as they buzzed to the construction site of Walden's newest, and still secret, project. Walden's assistant flew the bee around giant concrete pads, one on each side of the Chicago River. They appeared large enough for multi-story buildings, and she wondered whom and how much Walden had paid to avoid bureaucratic entanglements and undue public exposure.

Some, at least, weren't happy about it. She spotted about a hundred protesters walking a large circle near the entrance to the south foundation. She couldn't see any placards, but knew that at least one stated, "AIN: Architecture Perverting Nature."

The bee alighted next to the construction office. Walden talked to a worker in a hard-hat.

While she and her silent guide waited, she noticed him glance at her. She returned his gaze, but he looked away.

Walden saw them and waved them over. "Well, Suzanne," he said, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a comb, "now that you've seen the foundations from the air, what do you think we're building?" He combed his nearly perfect hair.

She considered. "Gate posts to the city of Chicago?"

Walden grinned, shifting from foot to foot, like a dog waiting for a treat. "I'll give you a hint. Each pad gets a shoe!"

Walden's man stared at her as though she was about to say something important, as though this were a test.

"A person?" she asked.

"Yes! A man." Walden grinned and sketched a quick check mark in the air.

She directed her eyes at Walden, but peripherally noticed the other man's shoulders sag. "How tall will he be?" It seemed to be the right thing to say.

Walden put his left arm around Suzanne's shoulder and started walking her toward the river, holding his other hand out to paint a picture. "Look at the spread of the feet, Suzanne. Fifty yards. Imagine a man astride the river, chest out, muscled arms crossed. The message?" He ran an imaginary marquee in front of her. "The city that works, the company that works, Colossal Engineering."

She saw a man in a boat fishing the river.

Walden stepped in front of her, holding both her shoulders. "He'll be 800 feet tall, Suzanne, and," he pivoted to point at the sky, "you could be working right up there when it's done. In the teeth of the AIN revolution."

Her gaze fell from the sky to gauging the distance across the river. She wondered how they could support such a structure, an 800-foot tall sail on two footings. Wouldn't the wind in the Windy City blow it over?

AIN indeed.

The visionary disappeared. Walden's man moved closer. "He went into the office for a moment. He asked me to answer any questions you might have."

"Actually, I wouldn't mind talking to one of the architects or micromech programmers. I can't imagine how he's going to keep this thing standing without sacrificing most of the space inside to structural elements. Super-Light, Double-Buckyball isn't going to solve this problem."

"Mr. Walden has chosen to progress beyond SLDB construction. This structure will be composed of substances more like skin, muscle, and bone. The muscles will be computer-controlled to keep the whole thing standing, just like you stand, with constant flexing and relaxing of many muscles. A-I-N."

Startled as she was, she heard his sarcasm leave each word in ribbons, especially the spelling of AIN. She stared out over the river, then murmured, "He's going to use micromechs to build an AIN colossus, an enormous man."

She turned full circle, looking over the site, then smiled. This is the company for me, she thought. Colossal leads the way. Everyone else only follows. She pictured herself, standing in the eye of the colossus looking out over the city. Forget the teeth. She would keep a private bee and wear air-conditioned, beaver fur suits and do lunch with celebrities and politicians, and she would have an assistant do whatever it was Walden's man did when he wasn't a tour guide for job candidates. "What are the materials for assembly?"

He shrugged. "I'm not familiar with the details, but it's what you would expect, protein strings, water, minerals. The same building blocks humans require. The result is not exactly cells, arteries, and bones, but something close. I'm told the artificial skeleton will be remarkably strong for its weight."

She noticed a crowd gathering at the far edge of the concrete pad and walked over.

He followed her. "They're about to set off the micromechs to build a rock with a plaque to commemorate the site. Why they couldn't use one of the rocks on the riverbank, I don't know."

She looked at him, but he was gazing at piles of sand, gravel, lime, water, and other materials.

A hard-hat stood by. A micromech programmer typed a last command and stepped back. "Everyone behind the lines please."

When the area was clear, micromechs exploded from their tube, racing to predestined tasks like ants on fast-forward, some carrying materials, some carrying other micromechs smaller than she could see.

Three minutes later the plaque appeared as if it had been there all along. She'd seen such demonstrations before, but they always amazed her. So instant. So clean. The results so AIN.

Her companion shook his head slowly, then turned. “Mr. Walden is over by the bee, Ms. Finch.”

They landed at a nearby restaurant. Suzanne ordered trout, but it tasted bland. Walden talked more about the project. When he finished presenting a particular image, he would close his eyes and savor a bite of his steak.

Walden’s man waited in the bee.

As they buzzed back to the site, she saw a convoy of refrigerated trucks exiting the expressway with police stopping traffic.

Walden rubbed his palms together. “Tomorrow is it, Suzanne. The big day. Six hours and the whole thing will be done, right down to the air conditioning, water in the toilets, and beer in the fridge.” His eyes glinted, but he didn’t look at her.

After they landed, Walden disappeared again. Suzanne walked to the riverbank. A dead fish bobbed in the water, white belly shining in the sunlight.

Walden’s man asked, “How does it feel to be interviewing with Walden?”

“Fine.” She nodded. “It feels fine.” But, she didn’t feel fine. Walden’s plan to build a giant man using new technology had stunned her. The Tree was created from composite, SLDB stuff – all proven, durable, trusted. It swayed a fraction in the wind, but withstood shear forces through balanced tension and compression. She didn’t think skin, bone, and muscle would size well even if Colossal’s numbers added up to a practical structure. Beyond the technicalities, building a giant man didn’t seem very AIN. It reminded her more of Frankenstein’s monster than the Tree.

The man next to her coughed into his hand. “‘Glorious’, is what my son calls the Tree, but I can’t imagine what makes people think it’s anything other than impertinent.”

Suzanne blinked.

He stared at the top of the Tree, the only portion visible from their location. “There is a modesty in nature that can’t be copied, certainly not at 15 times the scale.” He looked at her directly. “Don’t you think there is a conceit in AIN?”

She turned to the river. The dead fish had drifted away. Three sea gulls flapped above, screaming and cackling at each other. “The clients like it, so who are we to argue?”

He kicked a stone into the water. “There’s a Texas oil man who lives in Colorado. All hat and no cattle. He had Colossal build a duplicate of that tree near Boulder. Two hundred acres of Colorado blue spruce were shaved from the earth to make room for the proportional first floor and the ancillary construction roads and parking and photo-taking overlooks.” Heaving a sigh, he rested his elbows on the railing. His head and neck sagged between his shoulders like a burden.

Then, he straightened and looked at her.

She thought he was about to tell her something important, a secret perhaps, but Walden had seen them and was walking over.

Walden looked on the verge of skipping. “Tomorrow morning at 10, you’ll see Colossal Engineering in action, Suzanne.” He patted her arm. “I’ve got to stay and straighten out a few things, so I’ll see you then.” He nodded once to his assistant and strode off.

When she returned to her suite for the evening, she found that someone had

placed carpets on the floor.

The next morning Walden met them at his bee. “I hope you slept well last night, Suzanne. Did you watch the site’s overnight activity at all?”

“No.” She hadn’t looked. “Part of the Tree is in the way of getting a really good view.”

They stopped at the azalea-shaped parking garage so Walden could talk to someone about press parking and a shuttle bee. As they buzzed down to the site, Suzanne understood the reason for that preparation. Blankets, coolers, lawn chairs, portable lavatories, and spectators filled every inch unoccupied by vehicles. People lounged on the grass, sat in the backs of pickups, and perched on top of busses and vans. Off to the east, the press chattered and flitted, talking to, photographing, and filming people in the crowd. Anywhere with a view was packed, and the construction wouldn’t start until 10 AM.

They all had come to see Walden build something; it didn’t even matter what. Even the “similar uniques,” waving their signs and shaking their fists, had arrived to learn about this giant secret.

When Suzanne, Walden, and his man disembarked, Walden ran a comb through his hair. “I won’t see you until tomorrow just before you leave. Enjoy the rest of your stay. I’m sure the interviews tomorrow will go fine.” He shook her hand, then headed for the construction office.

His assistant led her to a transparent, single-story, air-conditioned observation building that had appeared overnight.

She watched the last of the trucks maneuvering into their assigned spots. She noticed demonstrators arguing with police on horseback near the truck entrance, and wondered what they hoped to gain. No cameras pointed in their direction and the police would not allow disruption. The public liked Walden, especially in Chicago. If the press paid no attention, the public wouldn’t either.

She intended to point out the demonstrators, but her companion’s gaze darted around the construction site, distracting her. “Do you think this colossus is as impertinent as the Tree?” She tried to start a conversation.

“Arrogant.” He turned his upper body to face her without moving his feet. “What do you think?”

She looked back at the site. “I think as a representation of Colossal Engineering, this man will make Walden a lot of money.” She adopted the company line, but wished they were building something else, something more within her grasp of architecture, more like a building.

She retrieved a bottle of grapefruit juice from a beverage cart. An ambulance weaved through the crowd toward a man prone on the grass. Probably the heat, she thought. Her grapefruit juice tasted sour. It wasn’t the pink kind.

Walden held a brief press conference, broadcast for the employees and the world, during which he revealed and explained his secret, capping it by drawing an analogy to Chicago.

Then, he raised his hands and made a chopping motion.

She watched micromechs swarm out of hundreds of tubes on both sides of the

Chicago River. Many flowed into the materials trucks and back out. A few stowed the empty tubes. Others gathered at the base of or climbed the concrete pads, carrying millions of micro-assembly mechs tiny enough to move proteins around.

By 10:30 the micromechs had finished the shoes. Fifteen minutes later the legs began to appear. The scene looked as if an invisible artist slowly had sketched form and color in a line drawing with the city as a background.

"This is going to be big," she said.

"Yes." Her companion nodded. "Big indeed."

Suzanne sat in a front row of seats, transfixed by the progress. By noon, tight khaki shorts covered the hips and waist and accentuated tanned legs. Occasionally, the leg muscles flexed during a windy gust. A chain of trucks revolved through the main supply area, filling and emptying in countless revolutions. An orange liquid oozed from the top of the structure and down the sides, but some of the micromechs acted as janitors, cleaning the mess as it occurred.

She realized that the build team likely had practiced on smaller projects to arrive at this degree of precision.

"You look surprised." Walden's man must've been watching her.

She stood, thinking he was testing her. "Why did you tell me the imitation of nature is arrogant? Were you told to test my loyalty? To undermine me? Did you think I was a protester here to sabotage the construction?"

He looked at her, perhaps calculating an answer.

"Don't feed me a line," she said. "This is just between you and me."

He was silent for a moment longer, watching the construction. "I used to be an architect. I retired three years ago when my company was bought out by Colossal. They bought it at a tax sale. They bought the client list, but with the new AIN architecture and micromech construction and Double-Buckyball, well, the profession has changed completely. Walden left my company's architects on the stoop. I needed a job, so I stayed on as Mr. Walden's personal assistant."

"You're trying to avoid my question."

He sighed, held up his hands, dropped them. "Mr. Walden is not behind any of my questions, nor is he behind anything related to AIN we've discussed. He is unaware of what we've said and will remain so unless you choose to tell him."

She had studied AIN because nature fascinated her. Nature was so impressive, creating such unlikely and improbable constructions. She wanted to learn so much from it. "Why do you call it arrogant to imitate?"

He smiled, a first. "If I were to take one of your projects and reproduce it using my own methods of building and making it twice as big, would I have designed something new?"

She shook her head. "No, I suppose not."

"Yet, wouldn't my building be more impressive because it was larger? Your small structure would most likely pale in comparison. What if Walden built pyramids ten times larger next to the ancient ones? How would people view the originals? Would they still evoke awe? Would people still wonder how the Egyptians could possibly have built them so precisely so long ago?"

"AIN architects value nature." She valued nature. "We're paying homage to nature, to the natural forms that appeal to humans. Few people find a douglas fir ugly, and

there are very few buildings that get such unanimous praise as the Tree.”

They looked out at the construction again. The micromechs were at the neck. The wider parts of the construction had appeared to be sculpted from air, but formation of the neck seemed like a picture sliding out of a printer. A sea gull swept by and picked off one of the spider-like mechs.

“It’s not arrogant,” she said. It’s a way to build buildings that people naturally like. Any company that can’t build what the customer wants will go out of business, just like yours went out of business. AIN is where the money is. It’s here to stay. It’s the future.”

Only the giant man’s hair was still under construction. The face had a quirky, aggressive stare with unblinking eyes. He moved and flexed in the breeze. Hair appeared around the ears.

She gaped in sudden recognition. With a perfect body, perfect smile, and perfect attitude, there was no mistaking it. Walden had made *himself* the Colossus of Chicago.

At school, Suzanne had never considered such an arrogant, even belligerent exaggeration of the AIN concept. She had studied the Tree, of course, but she always thought of it as an icon of AIN, not the start of a larger-than-life theme park. The colossus had become an absurd bastardization of a high principle.

She looked back at Walden’s man. He turned to look at her. Did he appear satisfied? Perhaps a little smug? He nodded to the colossus.

Complete, it was bald except for the hair on the sides of its head. The top of its head actually shined.

She laughed out loud and looked at Walden’s man. “What’s your name?”

He returned her gaze, smiling. “Anthony,” he said. “Anthony Walden. That’s my son.” He pointed again at the form outside. “The way nature intended.”

AIN indeed, Suzanne thought.