

Colby



Colby Magazine

Volume 87
Issue 2 *Spring 1998*

Article 2

April 1998

Front Matter

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine>

Recommended Citation

(1998) "Front Matter," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 87 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol87/iss2/2>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the Colby College Archives at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

THE FIFTY PERCENT SOLUTION

Chapter 3: Down the Wabbit Hole

The entrance to the tunnels was in the bowels of the Harold Alfond Athletic Center. They descended, passing the training rooms and storage, then Allyn paused to unlock an unmarked door. Inside, it was cold and dank, the concrete walls clammy with condensation. Allyn felt for the switch, found it, and lighted the place. It was a stairwell, with a steel handrail, painted, for some odd reason, fuschia.

"What's with the pink?" Miranda said.

"Left over from a bathroom in Dana," Allyn said.

They continued down, first one flight, then another and another. Their voices and the scritch of their shoes on the concrete treads echoed in the cavernous space. They descended like miners, and Miranda wished he'd brought a flashlight. In his days with the force, the light had been his security blanket. Flash it in some guy's eyes, it paralyzed him. If it didn't you could always whack the guy instead.

Miranda paused. They were at the bottom, and Allyn had his keys out again. The jingle rang off the walls. This door was steel, pink like the railings. Allyn turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open. It swung inward, and he reached into the darkness, pawing for the switch. But as Allyn pawed, something came over Miranda, and he felt himself tense.

The smell. The cold air that rushed from the tunnel smelled like the pond.

Allyn went inside, still feeling for the switch. Miranda followed. He flinched as something brushed his face, and Allyn said, "What's the matter?" as the light came on.

Hanging from the ceiling was the remnant of a spider web. In the web was the downy feather of a duck.

"You see that?" said Allyn. "Looks like sumpin's been through here. Sumpin' with feathers."

Miranda nodded. Allyn stroked his chin, still thinking.

"Duck feathers?" he said

Miranda nodded again, peeked into the tunnel. "I thought you were going to turn on the lights."

"I did," said Allyn.

"Well," said Miranda, "it's still dark."

Allyn looked into the tunnel, thought some more. "That it is," he said. "Good thing I got this flashlight," said Allyn. The light played down the damp, dark maw of the tunnel.

"In we go," said Miranda, stepping into the tunnel.

Allyn stepped in beside him, clearly less than thrilled about their current enterprise.

"You know what this reminds me of?" Allyn said as they squelched forward.



"No," said Miranda.

Allyn sighed. "Me neither."

The tunnel continued forward in a series of twists and turns. All around them was the fetid smell of pond water, a few more feathers, the greenish flotsam of algae.

"Where does this tunnel go again?" said Miranda.

"It goes everywhere, bud," said Allyn. "Central heating. Physical plant. MacLab. You could consider this the nervous system of the whole college."

They stopped before a culvert that branched away from the main tunnel. The pond water had clearly gone this way.

"Now that's funny," said Allyn.

"You mean funny ha-ha?"

"Nope," said Allyn.

They walked forward into the branch. The walls here were made out of some sort of shiny alloy.

"What kind of funny did you mean, then?"

"Well," Allyn said. "What's funny is that,

technically, this tunnel doesn't exist. It ain't in the blueprints."

"Ah," said Miranda. "I get you."

They kept walking. A strange humming sound grew louder in the distance.

"Listen," said Miranda. "If this tunnel doesn't technically exist, then can I ask you a question?"

"Ayuh."

"Where the hell are we?"

Allyn stroked his beard and looked around him. "Well," he said, "I might have gotten turned around or something, but if I had to guess, I'd say we were underneath the main quad, out in front of the new science building."

Miranda looked over at Allyn. "What new science building?"

Allyn looked at the detective pityingly. "You haven't been up to campus for a while, have ya?"

"No, not for a year or two."

Allyn nodded. "They got 'em a whole new science building where that Arey parking lot used to be."

"What's in it? Offices?"

"Nope," said Allyn. "Well, maybe two or three offices. I think that guy what knows all the birds is in there."

"You mean Herb Spicy?"

Allyn nodded. "Ayuh," he

said. "That's the guy."

The tunnel took a sudden bend, and the two men had to stop short. Before them, the tunnel dropped vertically. Below them was a frothing vat of water. The men sniffed the air and nodded.

"That's pond water all right," said Miranda. "You can tell from the smell."

Allyn looked over at Miranda. "Boy, you are some detective, aren't ya."

There was a sudden squeaking sound as a door into the tunnel creaked open behind them. The dark cavern was suddenly illuminated with blinding light.

"All right," said a voice. "What are you boys doing in my tunnel?"

Miranda and Allyn turned to look into the eyes of an extremely fat man in a lab coat.

"Your tunnel?" said Miranda. "What do you mean, your tunnel?"

"Yah," said Allyn. "This here's college property."

The fat man began to laugh suddenly. "College property," he said. "Whoo!" He dug into his pocket for a wrinkled hanky, wiped away some tears. "Shaddup," he concluded.

"Who are you?" said Miranda.

"I am Professor Beaker," said the man. "Distinguished Hildegard Honker Family Chair of Artificial Intelligence. You boys follow me, or I'll pound yuz."

"I'm Watt Miranda. And this is Lewis Allyn, head of physical plant."

"Shaddap," said Beaker. They followed him through the

heavy door, which he then closed behind them, turning a heavy steel wheel to make sure the seal

was airtight.

"Jeezamarooni," said Allyn, looking around at the room in which he now stood. It was a windowless concrete bunker, filled with blinking computers, steam pipes, electronic hardware. A console at the room's center was covered with hundreds of tiny dials. Each of the dials

was connected to a small V.U. meter.

"What the tarnation is this place?" said



Allyn. "This place isn't supposed to be here."

"It isn't," said Beaker.

"Artificial intelligence?" said Miranda. "I didn't know Colby had a department of artificial intelligence."

"It doesn't," said Beaker.

"Well then," said Allyn. "At least we're finally getting to the bottom of this."

A small alarm began to chime from the central console. "Hang on a minute," said Beaker. He moved quickly toward the machine. "Damn. He's not supposed to work here!" He turned a dial. "There we go."

Beaker turned back to the men. "Some clown in English almost got tenure, some schmoo who writes funny jokes. Can you imagine that, a comedian on the faculty?" He shook his head in contempt. "Good thing I was here to put the kabosh on that, eh?"

"What do you mean, you stopped him?"

Allyn said. "What do you have to do with it?"

"What do I have to do with it?" Beaker said.

"What do you think? I run the whole college from down here. It's all part of the program."

Miranda and Allyn looked at each other, confused. "I think you're mistaken," Allyn said. "They got 'em a whole committee on tenure and promotion that makes all those decisions. It's pretty serious business."

"The committee!" Beaker said, laughing again. "Oh, yeah, man, I almost forgot about them!" He got out the hanky to wipe the tears away. "Listen, those eejits on the committee just do what I've decided." He patted the machine. "Like I said, it's all part of the program."

"You're demented," said Allyn.

Beaker turned a knob on the machine. "Demented, am I? Examine your paycheck next month, okay? I just cut your salary in half."

"You say you control the whole college from down here?" said Miranda. "Through this computer, or whatever it is?"

"I'm sorry I said you're demented," Allyn said, thinking about his salary.

"Hang on a second," Beaker said, checking his watch. "Ah. Here we go." He fed a large scroll of paper into a scanner.

"What's that?" said Allyn.

"These?" said Beaker. "These here are the grades." He shook his head. "Lotsa surprises this term, I'm afraid."

Another alarm went off, over on the far side of the computer. Beaker flicked a switch, and a V.U. meter jumped into the red zone. "Hey, look at that. I just unsettled the dean of faculty's latest lawsuit! And canceled his turnpike Transpass."

"I'm lost," said Allyn.

"Exactly," said Beaker. "You're all lost! A bunch a weasels. You think this college would work if everything was really left up to your pathetic little committees? Your little discussion groups? The student assembly? The administration?" He started to laugh again. "You want to know how long this joint would last if I weren't secretly running everything from down in this bunker?" He held his thumb and his finger close together. "This long," he said.

"But we don't have a department of artificial intelligence," said Allyn, becoming annoyed with this entire situation.

"It's a secret!" said Beaker. "You think people would like it if they knew the truth?"

Allyn shook his head. "Most people don't like the truth."

Beaker checked his watch. "Uh-oh, gotta slow the clock down." He adjusted a knob, then looked at the men. "Gotta make sure the clock on Miller Library is slow, just in case students accidentally get to classes on time. Well, what they think is on time, anyway." He cackled.

"You're a madman," said Miranda.

"Yes," said Beaker. "But I have tenure! No matter what the courts and the dean and the president and the Board of Trustees say! They can't take that away from me! Certifiable, huh? I'll show them certifiable!"

"Listen, bud . . . er, I mean Professor Beaker," said Allyn. "We're looking for the dean. Ernie Smythe? You seen him?"

"Smythe? Smythe?" He checked a print-out. "He's supposed to be in his office. You

mean he's not?"

"He's disappeared," said Miranda.

"Impossible," said Beaker. "I have him right here on the scanner." He checked an oscillator.

"Hey, that's weird. Where'd he go?"

"I told you he's missing."

"That's not good," said Beaker. "This could throw off everything!"

"Where's all the pond water?" said Allyn.

"Pond water? It's in the vat," said Beaker, pointing to one wall. "I need pond water for the algae solution. It's the secret source of power for Winkletron 9000. Fifty percent water, fifty percent pond scum."

"Winkletron 9000?" said Miranda. "What the hell is Winkletron 9000?"

At that moment, a loud clanking came from the tunnels.

"Ah," said Beaker, moving toward the door.

"Here it is now."

He turned the heavy metal wheel and unsealed the door, which swung open on its hinges. A moment later a large mechanical moose lumbered into the laboratory. It clanked forward on its steel legs, chewing on something.

"Behold," Beaker said. "The future of higher education!"

The electronic moose chewed for a moment longer, swallowed, then belched.

"I went up to UMaine," cried Beaker, "offered them the technology. You know what they did? They laughed in my face! I went to Bates, said I'd give them the project for free! Guess what—they threw me out on my kiester! I went to Bowdoin, said I'd give them all the rights to the software! Incredible: they told me to get lost! Told me I was insane! All those other colleges, they *laughed* at my experiments! Well, no one's laughing now! No one will ever laugh again!"

"Bowdoin suh . . . suh" The moose stuttered to a halt. Beaker smacked him smartly on the nose. The moose hiccupped, then made a giant sucking sound.

"Shaddup," said Beaker. "Just shaddup." to be continued . . .

The Fifty Percent Solution is the latest chapter in Colby's Alumni Fund participation challenge (announced in a special mailing to alumni and parents in the fall). Achieving 50 percent participation in the Alumni Fund is a crucial Colby goal. If you didn't give last year, your gift will generate a \$100 contribution for Colby's endowment from the challenge fund. If you did give last year, give again to help us reach this year's 49 percent benchmark—generating an additional \$75,000 endowment contribution. Donors will automatically receive the missing chapter of *The Fifty Percent Solution*. Participate and help solve the mystery! For more information about *The Fifty Percent Solution*, visit us on the web at <http://www.colby.edu/alumni/50percent.html> or contact us via e-mail at development@colby.edu.

