

# Facing Up to Finals

— or how to end a carefree life

The weekend before the weekend before — that's when finals begin to exert their influence on Joe Tech's previously carefree life. Many a two-date-per-weekend man settles happily for one. Some one-date men just buy their own copy of *Playboy*. Even if the weather is warm and the mountains visible, very few undergrads are likely to be found at the beaches (traditionally, the weather here is most tempting just when time is least abundant). Repentance is in the air — for the lectures slept through, the classes missed, the homework undone, the books unread. Knowledge becomes much more desirable merchandise, a valuable asset to be gathered quickly against the mortgage payment soon due. One word is on everyone's lips: "Help."

Working against this feeling of impending doom, however, is a phenomenon known technically as the "retroactive martyr effect." Sample mental conversation of sample simple student: "Gads, think how hard I'm going to be working next weekend. Think how little fun I'll be having. I deserve a rest right now. Really care about Physics 2." ("Really care" is delivered properly with absolutely no emphasis on any

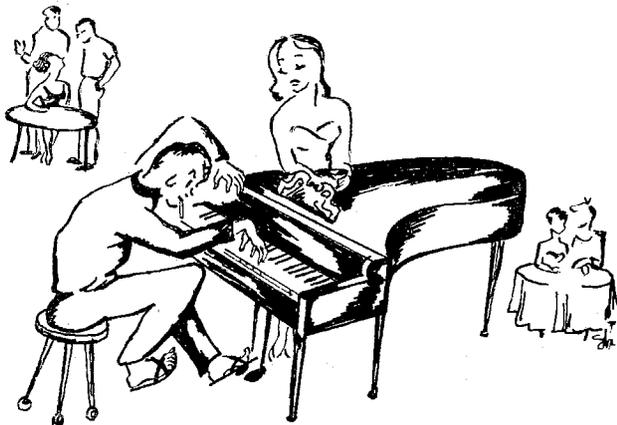
syllable. It means "really don't care.") Hence, time is found to destroy pianos on Hollywood Boulevard, and to attend bad science-fiction double features. Also hence, there is negligible increase in studying the weekend before the weekend before. However, there is a significant increase in worry.

Enter the Monday before the Monday of. Exit the retroactive martyr effect, leaving only ignorance behind. Sample Monday mental conversation: "Let's see — if I go out every day this week I can pass PE, but what about my other 49 units? Perhaps I'd best study a little." So pencils are sharpened, desk lamps adjusted, and little signs posted outside of rooms:

**PLEASE CLOSE DOOR  
BEFORE ENTERING  
SNAKING**

There are two main species of studying: basic research and equation-copying. Basic research involves actually learning the subject matter of a course, and seeing how it fits in with what has been learned before. It's heady stuff in that it gives a (well-deserved) feeling of accomplishment when done properly. Equation-copying is just that, accompanied by little prayers that the final won't use Greek symbols instead of Roman. Unfortunately, as the week before finals passes and the panic grows, equation-copying more and more wins the day.

The strain begins to tell. Shaving becomes a less frequent native custom. Freshmen wander about muttering, " $F = dP/dT$  . . . integral of tangent is logarithm of cosine . . ." Sophomores mutter, "Right hand screw rule . . . granidiorite, schist, grabbo . . . divergence of curl is zero . . ." Juniors and seniors just mutter. Suddenly the despised little technical joke gains sharpness in popularity. Ordinary English: "Get the hell out of here. You bother me." Pre-finals English: Proceed



*Retroactive martyr effect*



*Conscience overcomes myopia*

by induction to a closed neighborhood not including the identity element.”

One would think that the week before finals would be a quiet one in the student houses. Experimental evidence does not bear this out. One year it's pluto-platters, another it's court basketball (played with a volleyball). Most recently the prime time-usurpers have been hula hoops, spun and jumped through, not twirled, and those most uncooperative of all toys, the Eskimo yo-yos. Whatever it is, it gets noisier as finals get closer. People are desperate for any brief diversion from the steady grind. Conscience soon overcomes myopia, and the wayward student returns to his books. Nevertheless the games continue, surviving the high turnover of personnel. To state a general theorem: In any one term, mental entropy is always increasing.

Suddenly, it's the Friday before Waterloo. "Where goes the rose of yesterday?" Schedule for day: buy bluebooks, pick up take-home tests, study, study, study. That's a grim weekend if there ever was one. Mealtime at the student houses looks like the class reunion of a TB ward. True, there are always those indomitable gamblers who have one or even two dates just for propaganda purposes. Often they don't laugh last.

A typical Saturday conversation revolves about the completed take-home tests. Question: "Did you catch the trick in problem 7?" (Actual meaning: I *did* catch it. Bet you didn't.") Answer (panicky): "What trick? It looked perfectly straightforward to me . . . OOOooooohhhh . . ." (moan of horrible realization.)

That Sunday is the worst of all. There's an unlimited amount of material to study, no possible excuse not to study it, and yet nothing can be finished completely. Any sense of accomplishment must wait for examination time. Until then the only companion is an overwhelming feeling of being turned down on a lathe.

One hundred watts of *Die Walküre* in your ear! It's seven o'clock Monday morning and the moment of truth is one hour away. Breakfast is well attended but not overly enjoyed. Most of the people are scared,

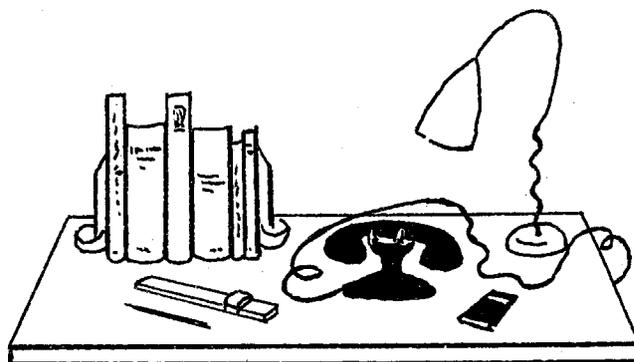
some so much that they're physically sick. The next three hours and the next three days can be among the most important of a lifetime. To the 2.0 (C) student it can mean the difference between graduating and flunking out, between Electrodata and selling cars for the next 40 years. The 3.4 (B+) student may be making his choice between a good grad school and North Dakota Normal. First term freshmen, as yet unclassified by grade point average, will soon acquire such GPA tags as almost part of their names. And four years of mediocrity is no fun, even at a topflight school. Perhaps that's why some of the 4.0 (A) boys sweat it most of all. Quickly, breakfasts are finished and the Olive Walk stampede begins. (Wild Russian music in background.) Sit down, rip open the mimeographed sheets: Sure enough — finals!

They're over. Some people have cooled some finals, some finals have cooled some people, but anyway they're over. Luckily for Athenaeum members and other local residents, everyone doesn't finish at once. Nevertheless, the spontaneous Thank-God-I'm-Done parties achieve impressive proportions. Usually the loudest celebrators are those who've done most poorly in the previous few days. At the other end of the scale are those who commemorate the occasion with a good night's sleep.

Soon the student houses are quiet and nearly empty. Home — that comfortable haven which demands no performance, only attendance — has called. There are friends, family, girls, and good food to be met all over again. The freshmen go most eagerly, as yet unaware of the difficulties absence can cause. Most of the upperclassmen go, too, but traveling lighter of many illusions. Then there are those who lack money or reason to leave. They spend their days working and pestering instructors for graded exams. And often they have people to welcome *back* from school. It's more fun that way.

The first date after finals can be a wonderful one. A soft voice to hear, a soft hand to hold — soothing medicine for writer's cramp and slide-rule burn. Soon Tech life will resume in full hectic glory, but right then there's time just to relax, and perhaps even be in love.

— Brad Efron '60



*The first date can be wonderful*