

THE BEAVER



ONE AFTERNOON late in the spring term someone said there were only 456 hours of undergraduate time left for the Seniors. The Senior Beaver forgot when it was said—because at the time he had been shuffling rapidly down the olive walk, late for class, and had only snarled at the whimsical prophet who had offered the information. But later he remembered it as the first time some thought of the looming end of study, and of graduation, had really clicked with him.

Near the end of the last term, of course, all the Seniors began to realize that the Four Years were almost over. It was sort of impressive, the Senior Beaver decided, and savored waiting for the last class in each course. In fact he sat through the last class of all with ill-concealed glee, his arms folded, taking no notes—and went out of it afterwards feeling like a smug boxer who had just won a close match on points.

After all this mental gluttony the prospect of the last exams seemed even more insufferable as the Senior Beaver bent to study on Sunday night. He had faced many exam weeks before, but this suddenly looked like the most insuperable of all; to get over this last one took a certain resolution which was definitely not fostered by the feeling of successful finish which had welled up in him on Friday. Also, in this last term he had deliberately, calculatedly loafed, in the accepted attitude of spring and the auspicious Senior Term. Now he wondered in a chill of some terror if perhaps he had exceeded the invisible limits of flunking-out, where no amount of exam-study could save him. At any rate he gauged his mind grimly to the remaining hours, snaked furiously, and cursed the nights for being so diabolically short.

Momentous Occasion

THE SENIOR BEAVER stretched mightily, looked up at the sky, and felt a great weight slide from his back. The last exam was over; he had finished all his work at Caltech. This *should* be a momentous occasion—but somehow the moment didn't feel very momentous.

Probably, he decided, he had anticipated this moment too strongly for too long; now it couldn't possibly be as good as he had expected. And when he tried to capture the monumental substance the moment should have, all he succeeded in feeling was a great thirst for beer.

That evening, over a succession of pitchers of foaming brew, the Seniors talked about the past four years—

trying to find in each other's talk the realization that it was all over. They got quite drunk in the attempt.

Senior Week had a misleading quality. The Senior Beaver had expected it to produce the elusive feeling he sought: that he was really finished. Once or twice, sitting over his coffee at late breakfast, he had watched the underclassmen rushing to their various exams and felt as though he no longer had a place in the rat race. But most of the time, drinking beer, or lying on the beach, or sleeping in, he simply knew the usual vacation feeling: that you're getting away with a little freedom now but there'll be more work waiting when it's over.

There were a lot of other Seniors to celebrate with too. Already they were reminiscing like Old Grads about past pajamarinos, dances, and basketball games ("Remember the one we won with Oxy where they had to go two overtimes?"). But they were still a class, together, and their talk didn't yet have any of the background poignancy of Old Grads trying to relive their lost pasts.

In Senior Week the Seniors were still a group, homogeneous in the current fabric of their lives, not split up by post-commencement surroundings and friends and memories which would never be melted back into this one close group. And now they could only talk of getting graduated and "getting out of this place—the faster the better."

The Finish

FRIDAY AFTERNOON the Senior Beaver descended to the Board of Directors' room with a crowd of gay, yelling Seniors, picked up his black robe and cap and put them on. He noted, with comments to the others, that the sleeves were too big and got a laugh out of this. When he joined his enrobed class in the arcade of the Houses he saw the neat rows of chairs on the wide green Athenaeum lawn, the flurry of people, the colorful clothes. As the Seniors milled around he heard over and over the ancient graduation greeting, "Hey, what are *you* doing here?" or "How did they let *you* out?"

The sun was especially hot as he stood in line, waiting to march up to the front seats, and he could feel a disconcerting drop of sweat start down his back under the black robe. The program in his right hand was suddenly soaking wet. The organ processional next, and walking down the aisle in pairs past a sea of proud beaming parents' faces, bright spring clothes, purring movie cameras, into the empty rows of seats with name cards on them. Faculty coming up onto the pine-covered platform in brilliant Ph.D. robes. Now the invocational prayer and the commencement address and the consciousness of the sun's heat and how uncomfortable sitting had become. Finally somehow it's time and the Seniors file up for the black folders passed out by Dr. DuBridge.

The Beaver didn't remember focussing on anything until he was back in his seat, looking at the gilt and black letters on the diploma. When it was all over the crowd broke up into talking groups, shaking happy hands, taking pictures of robed graduates.

The Beaver roamed about, shaking hands with his classmates, saying final farewells like "See ya around," and at last got away to take off his robe. When he returned, the crowd had largely disappeared and only the vast field of disarranged chairs remained on the green grass. The House was empty and quiet and his footsteps echoed in the court. Suddenly and for the first time he realized he had finished.

—Jim Hendrickson '50