



BLANCHE HOWARD

THE MAN WHO LOVED NUMBERS

Eliot Grayson was only five years old when the number “1” provided him with the first sheer intellectual joy of his little life. That this joy should be so intense at such a young age was remarkable; it sidelined all the other joys to date, those of babyhood (mother, nursing, being the focus of concentrated admiration), and made bearable an anxiety whose source had disappeared before he was old enough to remember.

To say that the number “1” changed his life would be an exaggeration, since there isn’t a great deal of life to change at five years of age. In any case, the greater epiphany didn’t come until the following year when he learned to print the word which to each of us constitutes the single most important word in the English language: I.

That “1” and “I” should be so similar as to be all but indistinguishable struck him, even at that tender age, with such force that the teacher could not calm him, and she had to send him home with a note that he was disrupting the class. After fifteen minutes of fevered exposition, his mother—who had reason to complain from an early age that he “blabbed everything he knew”—pushed him out the door, and Eliot remembered that mothers weren’t a straight line like he was, or his father, or God, who he envisioned as standing like a gigantic tree trunk unmarred by branches, joining earth and sky.

When Eliot’s father returned from work his mother shepherded Eliot rather roughly into the den and told his father to deal with him—which surprised Eliot since Eliot’s mother seldom acknowledged his father’s presence, nor did the two of them stay long in the same room together. Eliot proudly displayed sheets of paper covered with both “1” and “I”, and babbled so rapturously about their twin-like structures that his father retreated to his favorite worry: that the boy might be showing artistic tendencies. (Eliot’s mother had been an artist’s model and she still sat occasionally, for head and shoulder portraits only she said.)

As he grew older Eliot often marveled at his own precocity, that at such a tender age he should have recognized that nothing much exists outside of the “1” who is “I”, or the “I” who is “1”. To have sensed that each lone, upright stroke is all there is; that it stands straight and true and impenetrable, blocking the seduction of the unruly curves of infinity (a knocked-back defeated-looking “8”) and refusing to curl up and become merely a zero! He was understandably proud of his discernment.

The number “2” almost destroyed his childhood infatuation. No sooner had he copied it labouriously onto the page than he was besieged by an anxiety so fierce that he fell out of his desk and was reprimanded by the teacher, until she noticed his extreme pallor and rushed him to the bathroom where he threw up. “2” exuded a power that he was at a loss to understand; it contained some threat to

his orderly existence, some undiscovered fire that could burn through all his other beloved numbers and turn them to cinders. He detoured around it, failing various arithmetic tests that required "2" for the answer, particularly on days when he was feeling frail.

He went back to "1", which could turn itself into every other number yet remain intact. "3" was a "1" with a pinch here and there and because it had a girlish feel to it he skipped over it, but "4" he could identify with. "4" was a little boy, giggling along with other like-minded dirty little boys at the small appendage that sticks out in front. By the time he had worked through the adolescent turmoil of "5" and the slouching uncertainties of "6" and became a "7" he had turned into an erect, slim youth.

It was then that "8", looming next in line, almost caused a youthful crisis of confidence. The groundwork of his belief in the singularity of "1" as the base for all the other numbers was under attack. He couldn't shake the feeling that "8" had set out deliberately to wreck the whole elegant structure, and instead of seeking an identity that would bring "1" and "8" together, he would catch himself ignoring "1" and tracing pagefuls of "8s" with large tops and tidy bottoms.

He began to look forward to quitting his father's house, as though that might solve the enigma. By then the separate rooms of his father and mother had expanded into separate houses, and conversations with his father frequently centred around the advantages of becoming a member of his father's most sensible of professions, a Chartered Accountant, although his father held out little hope that Eliot was listening. In the end, though, Eliot surprised him. Not only did he have no artistic pretensions but he chose to follow in his father's no-nonsense footsteps, and in time, after he was able to put C.A. after his name, he neutralized the bothersome "8s" by marrying one of the species.

Eliot was not a very good accountant; he had a tendency to become distracted by the veiled animosity of "2". His neurotic dislike increased with his exposure to it so that he would often sacrifice accuracy in his attempt to eliminate all "2s" from the bottom line. The senior partner was not amused. He shot a glance at Eliot, the same sort of glance the Grade One teacher had sent, the glance that indicates that the other's "I" is contemplating the sanity of one's own "1".

The "8s" of Eliot's youth, including the tall slim elegant "8" he had married and who once had the large top and small bottom of his favourite "8s", began to metamorphose into squat "8s" with large bottoms and small tops. Their deviance troubled him enough that one day he decided to clear the air and confront the unease straight on. "Do "8s" exist," he asked himself, "as separate entities? Or are they merely an extension of "I", and therefore of "1"?"

That was when he realized that he had never queried the space enclosed within the loops of his own "8". His wife had noticed this deficiency long before and drawn it to his attention more than once, but Eliot had not heard. For the first time he listened to what came out of his wife's mouth. Everyday sorts of things, concerns about their boy, his school, the meals, her job. His wife's existence, Eliot realized, had little in common with his own; it was, had been all along, nothing but an extension

of his own "1". He was so relieved that the integrity of "1" hadn't been compromised that if he hadn't been a Chartered Accountant he would have danced in the streets.

The firm Eliot worked for had finally, under societal pressure, decided to admit an occasional young woman to its ranks. He couldn't help but notice the return to the elegant adolescent shapes of his written "8s", which heightened his awareness of his wife's "8" with its small top and increasingly large bottom.

Eliot would have survived this dangerous period in his life if it hadn't been for an artiled student with red hair and green eyes, her shape the living embodiment of a perfect "8". He wondered if she noticed *his* shape. His "7" had filled out into a "9" whose rounded stalk was beginning to curve. Eliot stopped slouching over his desk until he believed his head was almost upright and in any case nicely balanced. It still sported plenty of greying but distinguished curly hair.

The *coup de foudre* came when he happened upon her spread-sheet one evening when they were working late and she left to go to the washroom. Drawings of elaborately-decorated numbers spilled over the margins; "1s" sprouted branches with marvelous pale green buds unfurling in the spring air; a "5s" tail turned into a saucy clown's head and its horizontal line became an ostrich-feathered woman's hat with a cornucopia of fruit spilling from its crown; an "8" was topped by Marie Antoinette ringlets and, peeking out below, were tiny feet shod in fairy-tale slippers.

Eliot felt as though the slim buds she had drawn on "1" were unfurling like a fast-forwarding springtime. He had the sensation of a thousand fireflies just beneath the surface of his skin, little pinpricks of warmth and light, and if the young woman (whose name was Eve) were to touch any one of these tiny but exquisitely-attuned points he knew that from it would burst a Roman candle of white stars, and that they would fall from the sky and shower them both with their dazzling incandescence. In other words Eliot was in love.

He took to murmuring Eve's name in his sleep and when his wife asked, rather querulously, "Who the hell is Eve?" he spoke her name with such delicacy, as though he were holding a butterfly wing of infinite variety and fragile beauty, that she knew at once. "And I suppose you're Adam?" she asked, with heavy sarcasm. Eliot assured her that he had not been unfaithful but by then his wife's disillusion with Eliot's "9" was such that she merely grunted, "Big deal," and went back to sleep.

The sad truth is that Eliot never was unfaithful. He realized that "1" could become a part of infinity when "8" laid back and "1" stretched out along the curves, two bodies entwined and lying together in eternal bliss. He and Eve went out of town on an audit but at the precise moment when Eve was gathered in his arms, her naked vibrant young "8" pressed against the fiery protuberance of his "4" (swollen so as to make that number unrecognizable), Eve whispered, "Now we *two* are one," and Eliot's essential member collapsed.

Eve got up and doodled on the hotel stationary, embellishing a "2". Along the horizontal bottom stroke she started with the knees and drew a pair of

shapely calves and ankles, ending in two dainty bare feet. Moving upward along the curvature of "2" she penciled in thighs that flowed into a slim torso and ended in a bowed head and, using a red audit pencil, long red hair that almost but not quite touched the base point.

As soon as Eliot saw this "2" he had an anxiety attack. His breathing became shallow and laboured and he rattled like an asthmatic. Eve was so alarmed that she ran for water and held it to his lips and began to stroke his fevered brow. "It's *two* that does it," he gasped, and she held him to her breast and murmured that she could live without "2s" but not without him.

When Eve left him all of Eliot's fireflies and Roman candles sputtered and went out one by one. His wife too, unimpressed with his technical faithfulness, said she had grown tired of playing second fiddle to a bunch of childish "1s" and "3s" and "8s", and personally she couldn't care less if he could or couldn't abide "2s", she wanted out. Their son was off to a university where he could indulge his passion for words (he hated numbers), and by the time they signed the divorce papers Eliot noted that his wife had become a svelte "8" once more.

His hatred of "2s" grew exponentially until their presence, even on the computer screen, was as horrific to him as would have been a viper crawling out of the diskette slot. The senior partner, as tactfully as he could, suggested a leave, little holiday perhaps, get away from the rat race, waving palm trees, sparkling surf, that sort of thing. Oh, and Eliot might just consider seeing someone—the partner couldn't bring himself to use the word psychiatrist, and shrink seemed too flippant—but never hurts to have the old check-up, eh? Eliot, through the cinders left by Eve's fire, understood.

He told the therapist about Eve. He cried. She sent him to a dysfunctional sex clinic. He wasn't dysfunctional. She was puzzled. He said he felt like a man who has been turned inside out, he no longer felt like a "1", he felt as though both ends had joined together into a big Zero.

The psychotherapist treated him with anti-depressants. Prozac made him sleepy, Valium made him cry, Xanax made him nervous, and the whole new arsenal of designer drugs simply wrecked his appetite.

She decided on hypnosis, explaining to him that the brain was like his computer, that lost files left a trace and could be retrieved. As she began a count-down from ten back to one Eliot became increasingly agitated. Just before the number "2" he had to cover his ears and confess to the extreme anxiety the number brought.

"We'll take it gradually," she assured him, and she started with A this time. By G, Eliot was in the state of total concentration that is hypnosis. Then she took him back through the trauma of Eve, past his marriage, through the ambivalence of "8" and into the days of his early manhood—"7", he murmured—and back still through the sexual curiosity of the little-boy games of "4", and—

But here Eliot's agitation wakened him. It took three more sessions before the therapist could keep him under until they reached "2".

A scene of such power presented itself that Eliot stiffened and clenched

his hands and cried out. His mother on a bed, kneeling, her body curved exactly like the curved part of "2", like the naked woman of Eve's drawing. She too has no clothes on; her head hangs at the end of her curved trunk and her hair falls gently down, although not enough to spoil the symmetry. She is not alone. Beneath her, just between his mother's thighs is a man's head so that the base of the "2" is wildly elongated, his mother's legs, the man's body.

The man is not his father.

Eliot is a very little boy, perhaps three years old, and he is rooted to the spot, struck dumb with terror. The bodies form themselves into a single dragon that grunts and rasps, that arches up until Eliot can see daylight under it, then sinks down, bucking and groaning with guttural, menacing animal noises in a bewildering and terrifying rhythm. The room pulsates with the dangerous, encroaching energy that until now was contained in the malevolent nighttime shapes under his bed.

When his mother moans Eliot thinks the beast is eating her. He is able to force a thin, high-pitched squeal from his constricted throat and the memory dissolves into "2s" that dance and pulsate in the darkness behind his eyelids. Crimson and violet streamers arch up and down, keeping time to the beat, and Eliot's heart begins to pound and his body shakes so that the therapist is alarmed and brings him around and fetches water and tries to decide whether to give him a shot of adrenalin then and there.

Eliot has never gone back. He knows that recovered memories are supposed to heal and in a way he *is* healed. He is able to work; he is even satisfyingly competent but his heart isn't in it. He still loves "1" but now he knows it can't be relied on. He still dislikes "2" but now that he knows more than he cares to know about it, "2" has lost its power over him.

Lately Eliot has begun to have a fascination with "0". He is nearing retirement now, and he often toys with the idea of joining his tag ends to form this line that is not a line, and he finds the possibility reassuring. He begins, gradually, to transfer his affections; he hasn't entirely abandoned "1" but he can't quash a sneaky suspicion that "0" will prove to be more reliable. He often scribbles "0" absent-mindedly; he likes the surrounded emptiness; he is half in love with its negation of possibility. A great hole and a great whole, a place of everything and nothing, a zero that cannot be converted into either the self-sufficiency of "1" or the duality of "2".

There is a lot of comfort to be found in "0", Eliot thinks, once you let go of "1".