

BY ITALO CALVINO

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Italo Calvino

NUMBERS IN THE DARK

and Other Stories

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY
Tim Parks

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VINTAGE

finery stocks dwindling, and likewise oil pipeline flows, and the loads in tankers ploughing the seas; drill-bits probe the depths of the earth and bring up nothing but dirty water; my foot on the accelerator grows conscious of the fact that its slightest pressure can burn up the last squirts of energy our planet has stored; my attention focuses on sucking up the last dribbles of fuel; I press the pedal as if the tank were a lemon that must be squeezed without wasting a drop; I slow down; no: I accelerate, my instinctive reaction being that the faster I go, the further I'll get with this squeeze, which could be the last.

I don't want to risk leaving town without having filled up. Surely I'll find one station open. I start patrolling the avenues, searching the pavements and flowerbeds where the coloured signs of different petroleum companies bristle, though less aggressively than they used to, in the days when tigers and other mythical animals blew flames into our engines. Again and again I'm fooled by the 'Open' signs which only mean that the station is open today during regular hours, and hence closed during the lunch break. Sometimes there's a pump attendant sitting on a folding chair eating a sandwich or half asleep: he spreads his arms in apology, the rules are the same for everybody and my questioning gestures are pointless as I knew they would be. The time when everything seemed easy is over, the time when you could believe that human energy like natural energy was unconditionally and endlessly at your service: when filling stations blossomed enticingly in your path all in a line with the attendant in green or blue or striped dungarees, dripping sponge at the ready to cleanse a windscreen contaminated by the massacre of swarms of gnats.

Or rather: between the end of the times when people with certain jobs worked round the clock and the end of the times when you imagined that certain commodities would never be used up, lies a whole era of history whose length varies from country to country, person to person. So let me say that right now I am experiencing simultaneously the rise, apex and decline of the so-called opulent societies, the same way a rotating drill

The Petrol Pump

I should have thought of it before, it's too late now. It's after twelve thirty and I didn't remember to fill up; the service stations will be closed until three. Every year two million tons of crude are brought up from the earth's crust where they have been stored for millions of centuries in the folds of rocks buried between layers of sand and clay. If I set off now there's a danger I'll run out on the way; the gauge has been warning me for quite a while that the tank is in reserve. They have been warning us for quite a while that underground global reserves can't last more than twenty years or so. I had plenty of time to think about it, as usual I've been irresponsible; when the red light begins to wink on the dashboard I don't pay attention, or I put things off, I tell myself there's still the whole reserve to use up, and then I forget about it. No, maybe that's what happened in the past, being careless like that and forgetting about it: in the days when petrol still seemed as plentiful as the air itself. Now when the light comes on it transmits a sense of alarm, of menace, at once vague and impending; that is the message I pick up and record along with the many angst-ridden signs sedimenting down among the folds of my consciousness, dissolving in a state of mind that I can't shake off, but that doesn't prompt me to any precise practical action as a consequence, such as, for example, stopping at the first pump I find and filling up. Or is it an instinct for making savings that has gripped me, a reflex miserliness: as I become aware that my tank is about to run out, so I sense re-

pushes in an instant from one millennium to the next as it cuts through the sedimentary rocks of the Pliocene, the Cretaceous, the Triassic.

I take stock of my situation in space and time, confirming the data supplied by the kilometre clock, just returned to zero, the fuel gauge now steady on zero, and the time clock, whose short hand is still high in the meridian quadrant. In the meridian hours, when the Water Truce brings thirsty tiger and stag to the same muddy pool, my car searches in vain for refreshment as the Oil Truce sends it scurrying from pump to pump. In the meridian hours of the Cretaceous living creatures surged on the surface of the sea, swarms of minute algae and thin shells of plankton, soft sponges and sharp corals, simmering in the heat of a sun that will go on living through them in the long circumnavigation life begins after death, when reduced to a light rain of animal and vegetal detritus they sediment down in shallow waters, sink in the mud, and with the passing cataclysms are chewed up in the jaws of calcareous rocks, digested in the folds of syncline and anticline, liquefied in dense oils that push upward through dark subterranean porosities until they spurt out in the midst of the desert and burst into flames that once again warm the earth's surface in a blaze of primordial noon.

And here in the middle of the noonday urban desert I've spotted an open service station: a swarm of cars surges around it. There are no attendants; it's one of those self-service pumps that take notes in a machine. The drivers are busy pulling chrome pump nozzles out of their sheaths, they stop in mid-gesture to read instructions, uncertain hands push buttons, snakes of rubber arch their retractable coils. My hands fiddle with a pump, hands that grew up in a period of transition, that are used to waiting for other hands to perform those actions indispensable for my survival. That this state of affairs wasn't permanent I was always aware, in theory; in theory my hands would like nothing better than to regain their role of performing all the manual operations of the race, just as in the past when inclement nature beset a man

armed with no more than his two bare hands, so today we are beset by a mechanical world that is doubtless more easily manipulated than brute nature, the world in which our hands will henceforth have to go back to managing on their own, no longer able to pass on to other hands the mechanical labour our daily life depends on.

As it turns out my hands are a little disappointed: the pump is so easy to work you wonder why on earth self-service didn't become commonplace ages ago. But the satisfaction of doing it yourself isn't much greater than that of using an automatic chocolate bar dispenser, or any other money munching device. The only operations that require some attention are those involved in paying. You have to place a thousand-lire note in the right position in a little drawer, so that a photoelectric eye can recognize the effigy of Giuseppe Verdi, or perhaps just the thin metal strip that crosses every banknote. It seems the value of the thousand lire is entirely concentrated in that strip; when the note is swallowed up a light goes on, and I have to hurry to push the nozzle of the pump into the mouth of the tank and send the jet gushing in, compact and trembling in its indescent transparency, have to hurry to enjoy this gift that is incapable of gratifying my senses but nevertheless avidly craved by that part of me which is my means of locomotion. I have just enough time to think all this when with a sharp click the flow stops, the lights go off. The complicated mechanism set in motion a few seconds ago is already stilled and inert, the stirring of those telluric powers my rituals called to life lasted no more than an instant. In return for a thousand lire reduced to a meagre metal strip the pump will concede only a meagre quantity of petrol. Crude costs eleven dollars a barrel.

I have to start all over again, feed in another note, then others again, a thousand lire a go. Money and the subterranean world are family and they go back a long way; their relationship unfolds in one cataclysm after another, sometimes desperately slow, sometimes quite sudden; as I fill my tank at the self-service

station a bubble of gas swells up in a black lake buried beneath the Persian Gulf, an emir silently raises hands hidden in wide white sleeves and folds them on his chest, in a skyscraper an Exxon computer is crunching numbers, far out to sea a cargo fleet gets the order to change course, I rummage in my pockets, the puny power of paper money evaporates.

I look around: I'm the only one left by the deserted pumps. The to-ing and fro-ing of cars round the only filling station open at this hour has unexpectedly stopped, as if at this very moment the convergence of creeping cataclysms had suddenly produced the ultimate cataclysm, the simultaneous drying up perhaps of oilwells pipelines tanks pumps carburettors oil sumps. Progress does have its risks, what matters is being able to say you foresaw them. For a while now I've been getting used to imagining the future without flinching, I can already see rows of abandoned cobweb-draped cars, the city reduced to a plastic scrap heap, people running with sacks on their backs chased by rats.

All of a sudden I'm seized by a craving to get out of here; but to go where? I don't know, it doesn't matter, perhaps I just want to burn up what little energy is left us and finish off the cycle. I've dug out a last thousand lire to siphon off one more shot of fuel.

A sports car stops at the filling station. The driver, a girl wrapped in the spirals of her flowing hair, scarf and woollen turtle-neck, lifts a small nose from this tangled mass and says: 'Fill her up.'

I'm standing there with the nozzle in the air; I may as well dedicate the last octanes to her, so they at least leave a memory of pleasant colours when they burn, in a world where everything is so unattractive: the operations I perform, the materials I use, the salvation I can hope for. I unscrew the fuel cap on the sports car, slip in the pump's slanted beak, press the button, and as I feel the jet penetrate, I at last experience something like the memory of a distant pleasure, the sort of vital strength that establishes a relationship, a liquid flow is passing between myself and the stranger at the wheel.

She has turned to look at me, she lifts the big frames of her glasses, she has green eyes of iridescent transparency. 'But you're not a pump attendant... What are you doing... Why...?' I want her to understand that this is an extreme act of love on my part, I want to involve her in the last blast of heat the human race can make its own, an act of love that is an act of violence too, a rape, a mortal embrace of subterranean powers.

I make a sign for her to shush and point down with my hand in the air as though to warn her that the spell could break any second, then I make a circular gesture as if to say it's all the same, and what I mean is that through me a black Pluto is reaching up from the underworld to carry off, through her, a blazing Persephone, because that's how that ruthless devourer of living substances, the Earth, starts her cycle over again.

She laughs, revealing two pointed young incisors. She's uncertain. The search for oil deposits in California has brought to light skeletons of animal species extinct these fifty thousand years, including a sabre-toothed tiger, doubtless attracted by a stretch of water lying on the surface of a black lake of pitch which sucked the animal in and swallowed it up.

But the short time granted me is over: the flow stops, the pump is still, the embrace is broken off. There's a deep silence, as if all engines everywhere had ceased their firing and the wheeling life of the human race had stopped. The day the earth's crust reabsorbs the cities, this plankton sediment that was humankind will be covered by geological layers of asphalt and cement until in millions of years' time it thickens into oily deposits, on whose behalf we do not know.

I look into her eyes: she doesn't understand, perhaps she's only just beginning to get scared. Well, I'll count to a hundred: if the silence goes on, I'll take her hand and we'll start to run.