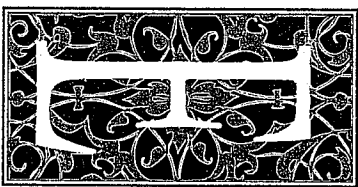


# Spring

BY ITALO CALVINO

ANTICIPATING: Discuss or write about a time when you went into business for yourself: lemonade stand, lawn mowing, leaf raking, baby-sitting, etc. Record what you did, how it went, and what you learned from the experience. If you cannot think of a personal experience, substitute a "get rich quick" episode someone you know became involved in.



very day the postman left some envelopes in the tenants' boxes; only in Marcovaldo's there was never anything, because nobody ever wrote him, and if it hadn't been for an occasional dun from the light or the gas company, his box would have been absolutely useless. "Papal! There's mail!" Michelino shouted. "Come off it!" he answered. "The same old ads!" From all the letter-boxes a blue-and-yellow folded sheet was protruding. It said that to achieve really good suds, Blancasol was the best of products; anyone who presented this blue-and-yellow paper would be given a free sample.

Since these sheets were narrow and long, some of them jutted from the slot of the boxes; others lay on the ground, crumpled, or only a bit mused, because many tenants, opening the box, would promptly throw away all the advertising matter that crammed it. Filippetto, Pietruccio, and Michelino, collecting some from the floor, slipping some from the slots, and actually fishing others out with a bit of wire, began to make a collection of Blancasol coupons.

"I have the most!"

"No! Count them! I have the most! You want to bet?"

Blancasol had conducted the advertising campaign through the whole neighborhood, house to house. And house to house, the young brothers started covering the area, trying to corner the coupons. Some concierges

drove them away, shouting: "You little crooks! What are you trying to steal? I'm going to call the police." Others were pleased to see the kids clean up some of the waste paper deposited there every day.

In the evening, Marcovaldo's two poor rooms were all blue and yellow with Blancasol ads; the children counted and recounted them and piled them into packs like bank tellers with banknotes.

"Papà, we have so many; couldn't we start a laundry?" Filippetto asked.



In those days, the detergent world was in great upheaval.

Blancasol's advertising campaign had alarmed all the rival companies. To launch their products, they distributed through all the mailboxes of the city similar coupons, which entitled the recipient to larger and larger free samples.

Marcovaldo's children, in the days that followed, were kept very busy. Every morning the letter-boxes blossomed like peach-trees in spring: slips of paper with green drawings or pink, blue, orange, promised snow-white wash for those who used Washrite or Lavolux or Beautisuds or Handlikleen. For the boys, the collecting of coupons and free-sample cards ramified into more and more new classifications. At the same time, their collection territory expanded, extending to the buildings on other streets.

Naturally, these maneuvers could not go unnoticed. The neighborhood kids soon realized what Michelino and his brothers went hunting for all day, and immediately those papers, to which none of them had paid any attention before, became a sought-after booty. There was a period of rivalry among the various bands of kids, when the collection in one zone rather than another gave rise to disputes and brawling. Then, after a series of exchanges and negotiations, they reached an agreement: an organized system of hunting was more profitable than helter-skelter grabbing. And the collection of coupons became so methodical that the moment the man from Washrite or Rinsequik went by on his round of doorways, his route was observed and shadowed, step by step, and as fast as the material was distributed, it was confiscated by the kids.

Commanding operations, naturally, were still Filippetto, Pietrucio, and Michelino, because the idea had been theirs in the first place. They

even succeeded in convincing the other boys that the coupons were common property and should be preserved all together. "Like in a bank?" Pietruccio explained.

"Do we own a laundry or a bank?" Michelino asked.

"Whatever it is, we're millionaires!"

The boys were so excited they couldn't sleep any more, and they made plans for the future.

"We only have to redeem all these samples and we'll have a huge amount of detergent."

"Where are we going to keep it?"

"We'll rent a warehouse!"

"Why not a freighter?"

Advertising, like fruits and flowers, has its seasons. After a few weeks, the detergent season ended; in the letter-boxes you found only ads for corn-removers.

"Shall we start collecting these, too?" someone suggested. But the prevailing view was that they should devote themselves at once to the redemption of their accumulated wealth of detergents. It was merely a matter of going to the prescribed shops and making them give a sample for every coupon. But this new phase of their plan, apparently quite simple, proved to be much longer and more complicated than the first.

Operations had to be conducted in skirmishing order: one kid at a time in one shop at a time. They could present three or even four coupons at once, provided they were of different brands; and if the clerks wanted to give only one sample of one brand, they had to say: "My Mamma wants to try them all to see which one's best."

Things became difficult when, in many shops, they would give the free sample only to those who bought something; never had Mammams seen their children so eager to run errands to the grocery.

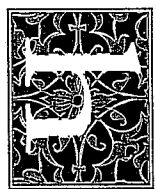
In other words, the transformation of coupons into goods was dragging out and required supplementary expenses because errands with Mamma's money were few and the shops to be covered were many. To procure funds the only course was to initiate phase three of the plan, namely the sale of the detergent already redeemed.

They decided to sell it door to door, ringing bells: "Signoral Are you interested? Perfect wash!" and they would hold out the box of Rinsequik or the packet of Blancasol.

"Yes, yes, thanks. Give it here," some of them said, and the moment they had the sample, they would slam the door in the boy's face.

"Where's the money?" And they would hammer their fists on the door.

"Money? Isn't it free? Go home, you naughty kids!"



In that same period, in fact, men hired by the various brands were going from home to home, leaving free samples: this was a new advertising offensive undertaken by the whole detergent industry, since the coupon campaign had not proved fruitful.

Marcovaldo's house looked like the basement of a grocery store, full as it was of products by Beautisuds, Handikleen, Lavolux; but from all this quantity of merchandise not a cent could be squeezed; it was stuff that's given away, like the water of drinking-fountains.

Naturally, among the company representatives the rumor soon spread that some kids were making the same rounds, door to door, selling the very product their representatives were begging housewives to accept free. In the world of trade waves of pessimism are frequent; they began to report that they, who were giving the stuff away, were told by housewives that they didn't have any use for detergents, while the same women actually bought the products from those who demanded money. The planning offices of the various firms got together, market research specialists were consulted: the conclusion they reached was that such unfair competition could be carried out only by receivers of stolen goods. The police, after bringing formal charges against criminals unknown, began to patrol the neighborhood, hunting for thieves and the hiding-place of their loot.

In a moment the detergents became as dangerous as dynamite. Marcovaldo was afraid. "I won't have even an ounce of this powder in my house!" But they didn't know where to put it; nobody wanted it at home. It was decided that the children would go and throw all of it into the river.

It was before dawn; on the bridge a little cart arrived, drawn by Pietruccio and pushed by his brothers, laden with boxes of Washrite and Lavolux, then another similar cart drawn by Ugucione, the son of the concierge

across the street, and then others, many others. In the center of the bridge they stopped, they allowed a cyclist to pass. After he had cast a curious glance behind him, they cried: "Go!" Michelino began hurling boxes into the river.

"Stupid! Can't you see they float?" Filippetto cried. "You have to empty the powder into the river, not dump the box!"

And from the boxes, opened one by one, a soft white cloud drifted down, rested on the current that seemed to absorb it, reappeared in a swarm of tiny bubbles, then seemed to sink. "That's the way!" And the kids began emptying pounds and pounds.

"Look! Over there!" Michelino shouted, and pointed farther downstream.

After the bridge there were the falls. Where the stream began its descent, the bubbles were no longer visible; they reappeared farther down, but now they had become huge bubbles that swelled and pushed one another upwards from below, a wave of suds that rose and became gigantic, already it was as high as the falls, a whitish foam like a barber's mug lathered by his shaving-brush. It was as if all of those powders of rival brands had made a point of demonstrating their frothiness: and the river was brimming with suds at the piers, and the fishermen, who at the first light were already in the water wearing their hip-boots, pulled in their lines and ran off.

A little breeze stirred the morning air. A clump of bubbles broke from the water's surface, and flew off, lightly. It was dawn and the bubbles took on a pink hue. The children saw them go off, high over their heads, and cried: "Ooooo . . ."

The bubbles flew on, following the invisible tracks of the city's currents of air; they turned into the streets at roof-level, always avoiding bumps with cornices and drainpipes. Now the compactness of the bunch had dissolved: the bubbles, first one then another, had flown off on their own, and each following a route different because of altitude and speed and path; they wandered in mid-air. They had multiplied, it seemed; indeed, they really had, because the river continued spilling over with foam like a pan of milk on the stove. And the wind, the wind raised up froths and frills and clumps that stretched out into rainbow garlands (the rays of the oblique sun, having climbed over the roofs, had now taken possession of the city and the river), and invaded the sky above the wires and antennae.

Dark shadows of workers rushed to the factories on their chattering motorbikes and the blue-green swarm hovering over them followed as if each man were pulling behind him a bunch of balloons tied by a long string to his handle-bars.

It was some people on a tram who first took notice. "Look! Look! What's that up there?" The tram-driver stopped and got out: all the passengers got out and started looking into the sky, the bikes and motorbikes stopped and the cars and the news-vendors and the bakers and all the morning passers-by and among them Marcovaldo on his way to work, and all stuck their noses in the air, following the flight of the soap-bubbles.



Surely it's not some atomic thing?" an old woman asked, and fear ran through the crowd, and one man, seeing a bubble about to light on him, ran off, yelling: "It's radioactive!"

But the bubbles continued to glisten, multi-hued and fragile and so light that one puff, whoosh, and they were gone; and soon, in the crowd, the alarm died as it had flared up. "Radioactive my foot! It's soap! Soap-bubbles like kids blow!" And a frantic gaiety seized them. "Look at this one! And that! And that!" because they saw some enormous ones, of incredible dimensions, flying over, and as these bubbles grazed each other, they merged, they became double and triple, and the sky, the roofs, the tall buildings, through these transparent cupolas, appeared in shapes and colors never seen before.

From their smoke-stacks the factories had begun belching forth black smoke, as they did every morning. And the swarms of bubbles encountered the smoke-clouds and the sky was divided between currents of black smoke and currents of rainbow foam, and in the eddying wind they seemed to fight, and for a moment, only one moment, it looked as if the tops of the smoke-stacks were conquered by the bubbles, but soon there was such a mixture—between the smoke that imprisoned the rainbow foam and the globes of soap that imprisoned a veil of grains of soot—that you couldn't understand anything. Until, at a certain point, after seeking and seeking in the sky, Marcovaldo couldn't see the bubbles any longer, but only smoke, smoke, smoke.