

From *Calvino, Italo. Numbers in the Dark and
Other stories.* Trans. Tim Parks. New York: Vintage,
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Conscience

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Came a war and a guy called Luigi asked if he could go, as a volunteer.

Everyone was full of praise. Luigi went to the place where they were handing out the rifles, took one and said: 'Now I'm going to go and kill a guy called Alberto.'

They asked him who Alberto was.

'An enemy,' he answered, 'an enemy of mine.'

They explained to him that he was supposed to be killing enemies of a certain type, not whoever he felt like.

'So?' said Luigi. 'You think I'm dumb? This Alberto is precisely that type, one of them. When I heard you were going to war against that lot, I thought: I'll go too, that way I can kill Alberto. That's why I came. I know that Alberto: he's a crook. He betrayed me, for next to nothing he made me make a fool of myself with a woman. It's an old story. If you don't believe me, I'll tell you the whole thing.'

They said fine, it was okay.

'Right then,' said Luigi, 'tell me where Alberto is and I'll go there and I'll fight.'

They said they didn't know.

'Doesn't matter,' Luigi said. 'I'll find someone to tell me. Sooner or later I'll catch up with him.'

They said he couldn't do that, he had to go and fight where they sent him, and kill whoever happened to be there. They didn't know anything about this Alberto.

'You see,' Luigi insisted, 'I really will have to tell you the story. Because that guy is a real crook and you're doing the right thing going to fight against him.'

But the others didn't want to know.

Luigi couldn't see reason: 'Sorry, it may be all the same to you if I kill one enemy or another, but I'd be upset if I killed someone who had nothing to do with Alberto.'

The others lost their patience. One of them gave him a good talking to and explained what war was all about and how you couldn't go and kill the particular enemy you wanted to.

Luigi shrugged. 'If that's how it is,' he said, 'you can count me out.'

'You're in and you're staying in,' they shouted.

'Forward march, one-two, one-two!' And they sent him off to war.

Luigi wasn't happy. He'd kill people, offhand, just to see if he might get Alberto, or one of his family. They gave him a medal for every enemy he killed, but he wasn't happy. 'If I don't kill Alberto,' he thought, 'I'll have killed a load of people for nothing.' And he felt bad.

Meantime they were giving him one medal after another, silver, gold, everything.

Luigi thought: 'Kill some today, kill some tomorrow, there'll be less of them, that crook's turn is bound to come.'

But the enemy surrendered before Luigi could find Alberto. He felt bad he'd killed so many people for nothing, and since they were at peace now he put all his medals in a bag and went around enemy country giving them away to the wives and children of the dead.

Going around like this, he ran into Alberto.

'Good,' he said, 'better late than never,' and he killed him.

That was when they arrested him, tried him for murder and hanged him. At the trial he said over and over that he had done it to settle his conscience, but nobody listened to him.