

THE CLOCK STRUCK NINE O'CLOCK

With that characteristic accuracy of technology, all the cars turned off their engines at the same time. The clocks struck nine, neon signs lit up the night. First there was confusion, then commotion, shouting, protests and finally panic on the tarmac. Although traffic jams were frequent on weekends and long weekends, nobody had ever been in such a situation before. They could not move.

The decision did not depend on them but on a being with whom they had always shared time and tasks, that had made it easier for them the work inside and outside, that, after previously being programmed, controlled the electrical appliances, the heating, the air conditioning, the weekly shopping, the preparation of the menus, the cleaning of the house and everything related to comfort.

That machine was growing by their side without no one realising what could happen one day. Nobody took into account that there was any possibility of being permanently chained to its will: so cold, so mechanic, so distant... That they would lose not only their idolised freedom, to do whatever they wanted because, given their standard of living, they could afford it, but also their autonomy, not for nothing did their degree of dependence show an almost geometric progression. Without it, existence was meaningless.

They were in love with that superior being, they knew it. This was the truth, although they did not acknowledge it in public because dogmas remained vigorous in the process of socialisation of individuals and there were questions that could not even be asked: it was frowned upon for the most intelligent and creative being on the planet to admit such nonsense.

The Great Computer detected that the red line of pollution had been surpassed. This was the objective fact that had caused the stoppage. The drivers, after the initial bewilderment and scuffle, looked at each other suspiciously and locked the doors from the inside. Night was the best ally for those to whose envy prevented them from living, for those who strongly desired to have other people's possessions, for those who were looking for chaos and destruction, for those who, sitting on an old mattress, at the best, or on a simple piece of cardboard, looked at them with a half-smile and a mocking look.

It was all a vain illusion. For hundreds of years cities had been inhabited only by people who had successfully overcome the continuous crisis (economic, health, environmental, scientific, cybernetic), those who had shown the best ability to adapt to new

circumstances. The first to disappear were the poor neighbourhoods, then it was the turn of the dormitory towns and finally the populations of the logistical and industrial belt.

There were no jobs, the robots fulfilled their function perfectly and with them social peace was assured. Social benefits supposed an exorbitant expense and, in addition, they were a bad investment. The shareholders were not prepared to give in, their goal being to always earn more than the previous year. Artificial reproduction had taken hold in the post-truth society and the upper echelons had it under control. There were no longer outsiders in the city. "Diversity enriches" had said activists and populists in their fake-news before the extinction started.

The motor industry tycoons urgently complained to the Prime Minister. Although it took him some time, he decided to shut down computer of the Ministry of the Environment, but not before arresting the representatives of an exotic association, the self-styled Radical Ecologist Association. Once again the slogan: "if you are not with me, you are against me" was reinstated

Over time, fear and suffocation decimated the population. There are now monstrous beings adapted to blackmail and pollution moving on the asphalt.

"Stories without Mufflers" (2006 -)