

ON THE RIVERBANK

He was hauling in his fishing gear when a tremendous explosion, followed by a violent jolt to the ground, hurled him forcefully into the river. She was walking along the bank and had to grab hold of the nearest tree to avoid being swept away like a rag doll. The city was ablaze. Inhuman screams and inconsolable cries filled the air in the first moments; then, silence. A profound silence, broken only by the faint crunch of a drone falling in pieces onto the bridge. Then, a black cloud spread its wings in all directions, and a strong smell of burnt gasoline permeated the entire forest with the force of a wild horse.

She, still mulling over the matter that had taken root in her mind since the explosion, staggered along the riverbank. She knew he was an expert swimmer and, therefore, believed that nothing had happened to him. But it wasn't so. There was no trace of him, nor of the fishing rod or the basket. Suddenly, a second explosion once again sowed destruction across those kind, peaceful lands, where people lived in harmony, even though their political views and personal values differed. The town council had been governed by various political parties which, despite their very different platforms, maintained the same basic principles on three or four crucial issues. Despite their best efforts over a long period, social media algorithms failed to immerse their users in provocation, falsehood, disrespect, insults, intolerance, violence, and hatred.

That couldn't be, things couldn't go on like that, the world couldn't function that way. It was just a small town, a single place, but large multinational corporations, especially tech companies, couldn't allow its example to spread to other parts of the world.

For five decades, they had been gradually expanding their sphere of global supremacy. First came the fight against the unions; workers were living very well at the expense of corporations' profits. Moreover, there was no longer any need to look to the East; the once-powerful empire of the proletariat had collapsed. The cost of the welfare state, intended for the entire population, had to be reduced, and therefore, state taxes had to be cut. Social democracy and Christian democracy had to be eliminated. They could aspire to more; public services had to be reduced to a minimum so that corporations could find new sources of wealth. Still, it wasn't enough; goods had to be globalized, national borders eliminated; that would be the final nail in the coffin for the old politics based on wealth distribution, which would be replaced by the accumulation of capital in the hands of a few. Information was becoming a new commodity of value, a value that was constantly

rising. The perspective based on mass culture, individualism, rampant consumerism, the view of people as customers rather than citizens, and the exaltation of Western culture at the expense of others, especially white men, would be disseminated by agencies and networks that served the interests of the magnates who financed them. Advertising and events at the global level and in major metropolitan areas would take precedence over the events and ways of life in less populated regions.

She was stunned. Her partner had disappeared. She didn't give up; surely he was somewhere. She searched for him for a long time. It was unbelievable. They had spent their whole lives together. They had refused to have children because the course of history didn't seem right, and they didn't want to be responsible for their suffering. She sat down in the riverside vegetation and began to cry. She cried very softly, almost imperceptibly, as if she didn't dare to cry out for fear of hurting his feelings.

They had met in 1999 in Seattle, at the protests against globalization. The attraction was so strong that, although they lived in the nation's capital, they decided to move together to a quiet town in the north. They settled in the suburbs, in a house with a few acres of farmland that they acquired with a mortgage they hadn't yet finished paying off.

She cried and thought. She thought and cried. The wealth of the most powerful figures became so disproportionate that each of them exceeded the GDP of more than half the nations of the world combined. A new step had to be taken, perhaps the last, the most decisive. And they took it. Dialogue was forgotten. Freedoms of the press, of opinion, of expression, and of assembly were seriously damaged. Bombs and the ritual of destruction took their place. In Seattle, my love, we fought to prevent this from happening.

Dear reader, choose an ending

FIRST ENDING

Another explosion was heard. This time, enormous, near the bridge. The drone's wreckage fell two meters from her. She opened her eyes for the last time and, with tears in her eyes, smiled because now she was going to meet him.

SECOND ENDING

It had all been a nightmare, a bad trip. He had taken a dose of hallucinogenic mushrooms. He woke up numb and drenched in morning dew. It took him a week to recover from hypothermia and several more to overcome the gastrointestinal and emotional aftereffects of the experience. This happened in his youth, a few years after he had participated in "the battle against globalization."

THIRD ENDING

Her name was Elizabeth. She worked as a freelancer for a television corporation in the United States. She woke up in the middle of the night completely disoriented and distressed. The next day she died by the Karaj River, running for cover inside an air-raid shelter during one of the many bombings with which the military operation "Epic Fury" was punishing the city of Tehran.

"Uncensored Stories" (2006 -)