

The Letter

by Dennis Plöger

The envelope was blue. A bright, bland, hulking blue. It lay crumpled and wet because of yesterday's rain on the wooden kitchen table and was ripped open with a knife on one side.

The letter was a few yards away in a likewise bland white, formally folded next to the fridge, which inner coldness was no match to it.

"Dear citizen" it said. "You are ordered to visit agency 4 on the 13th of February 2913 at 11 am. Best regards, Council Heims"

Stamped and signed hastily. The usual footer was blazed on the lower part of the letter: "*We are everything. Earth is us.*" Decorated with an angelic figure over the word "earth" and an ornament around it.

The letter neither made me happy nor fearful nor did it spark any interest in me. I was ordered to visit the agency on the third of this month at 11 am. *I am everything. Earth is me.*

Until then it was five days. It was the eighth and the ice, that the rough January left over for February proliferated and scraped on windows and doors and left behind white, shimmery ice flowers.

I sat down by the fireplace with its usual flicker.

I read the letter again: "Dear citizen, you are ordered...".

"Ordered. You are ordered" I repeated in my mind. I added "13th of February 2913, 11 am" and took my smoking pipe, lit it and drew on it a few times.

But somehow the letter stuck in my thoughts. I started to ask myself, why I should visit the agency 4 on the 13th.

There were a dozen reasons for this: An unpaid ticket, an overdue official document, my wife because of the divorce, or...

Yes. Or it could be the "Demise".

To be precise: The "federal countermeasure to the observance of the limit". This limit was eighty billion.

Eighty billion people lived on the planet, that was formerly called "the blue planet". At least I had heard of that. Well, the only blue thing on it were the bland envelopes from the agency. Before the planet would start to burst, the agency ordered, that a number of old people were to be randomly picked and... well, slaughtered.

There's no other way to say it. Depending on where the ball of the live's roulette landed, somebody would have to tell his family goodbye, visit and agency and... say goodbye.

But no. No. That only starts from seventy on. I just turned eighty-six. It just couldn't be.

But what if it is?

What - if it is?

My kids are all grown up, my wife lives with her new boyfriend in a way to expensive flat, of which I pay the biggest part, my house has seen better days and my friends are...

Are important.

Well, Judith, Phil, Andy, I don't know... I would... No, they would... no. *We* would miss each other a lot. No long evenings of laughter, dance and plays anymore. No fun, no joy, no... love.

Particularly no love. Particularly no Judith. Her gray hair in the flicker of the fireplace. Her tender hands. Her laugh. The time I spent with her reminded me of the first time with my ex-wife. Of a good time.

Yes. It were good times.

It were.

I really think, I would miss that all very much.

But no, it rally couldn't be. There were, based on the last figures I heard, 79.932.241.313 people on earth. I'm number 313. Or 312. Or... Well, I could be anybody.

"Nobody is the first, nobody the last. We are everything. Earth is us"

But perhaps there's an error in the calculation. I heard of such things before.

But no. No, no. But... but yet?

I left the house to get lost of my bad thoughts on a winter walk through the park near my house.

I was snuggled in a cozy winter jacket with black gloves and a cap, that might've been a bit too short around the snow, that was a few feet high.

Snow. Snow. White innocence, white snow. Soft, fresh. But cold, icy. You can spot drops of blood in snow. They get bigger, gathered all water molecule and paint it in bright red. They get bigger and bigger until the whole winter wonderland is red.

I shook my head, to send away those thoughts and looked at the frozen pond. Two kids were skating on it. Two little ballerinas without ground, that hovered over the hard ice like birds in the sky. Their clumsiness made me smile. One of the kids dropped down on the ice, the other one laughed and immediately it stood up and laughed as well. After a few minutes, spectacle repeated itself.

I came back home to the telephone ringing. I answered and heard a familiar voice on the other end of the line.

"Hey, Ben! It's Phil. What are you doing, you old camel? I already called you three times!"

I checked out my watch. 7:32 pm. I was in the park more than an hour, but still my thoughts didn't come to rest.

"I've got a letter from the agency" I said frankly.

Phil stopped short. "Yes?"

"Yes." I said.

"What's it about?" Phil continued.

"I don't know. You now their letters."

"Yeah. I was ordered to go there, because I didn't pay my phone bills and I was worried sick! Crazy, right?" Phil let out a strained laugh, because of some problems with his lungs.

I nervously joined the laughter. "Yes, yes. Very crazy! What's up, Phil?"

"Oh, I just wanted to ask you, if you want to come around tonight. Judith, Andy and myself wanted to go to Trisha's."

"That is a great idea!"

The evening flew by quickly. The cozy atmosphere of the small pub "Trisha's" was familiar to me for some time. There were ten tables on the sides and one next to the bar that was built into the northern wall and radiated dignity and honor.

We sat down at our regular table in one corner of the pub and as Phil and Andy went to fetch some drinks from the bar, Jude put her hand on my arm.

"Are you okay, Ben?" she asked and concern was in her wrinkles, that overtook her whole face when she smiled and made her quiet desirable. "You're so quiet tonight."

"Oh, it's nothing. Nothing. I'm just in thought."

"Thinking about what?"

"I got a letter from the agency today."

She startled and knocked over the card holder.

"You're thinking about the Demise?"

"Who knows..."

"That can't be". She put up the card holder again adjusted it. "You're only eighty-six! That only starts from seventy-two."

"Seventy" I said

"Fair enough."

"Yeah, I know. It's just... I can't get it out of my head."

"Sure."

We watched the people in the pub for some time.

Then she said: "We would miss you."

I looked her into her green eyes. "I would miss *you*!"

And I smiled and she smiled and we both smiled and I loved that.

Then Phil and Andy came back and the moment was gone.

The evening actually made me forget my thoughts about the letter for some time. We laughed and danced and I cherished this gathering. As I came home, I waved Andy and Judith and their card disappeared into the foggy night heading downtown.

I fell asleep quickly.

On the morning of the 13th I woke up to mixed feelings. The clock showed 8 am. I rose, put on my robe and went out the door to fetch the paper, remembered, that the paper boy only came around 9, went in again with a shake of the head and made me a toast with jam.

But as I lost my appetite, I stood up after some bites, got dressed and drove away.

Now, fear was the prevailing feeling. The cold streets went through morning mist and the lights of the cars, that stuck in early traffic, painted the damp air red.

The agency building came into sight and lay grey and flat in the streetscape at a dirty curb.

As I went through the sliding door and past a grim guard, the fear became almost unbearable and I started to shake.

I took the council's hand insecurely and after a short shake he gave me a grey form with an undefinable look. Then he said an affected "Have a nice day", sent me through the door and I was out.

Confused, I went back to the car, sat down and read the form.

"Dear citizen" it went, "You are ordered to pay the following due amount for your country." An amount, a signature, *We are everything. Earth is us.* That's it.

It was an invoice. A due invoice. Nothing else. My heart calmed down and I started laughing so frantically, that guards gave me a stare.

And I came home and sat down.

The phone rang.

It was Phil.

His voice shook,

"Ben. Something happened"

And the seventy-first birthday came to my mind.

Judith's.

We are everything. Earth is us.