

Population Of

by Brianne Baxtali

Dominic would show them all. That stupid "Welcome to Bessemer" sign was his. It was the pride of the whole damn town. No other target would do.

It was the dead of night, and Dominic rode his bike to the town line. He briefly considered spray painting something vulgar over the bent placard proudly proclaiming "1967 Pennsylvania State Basketball Champions", but decided against it. This was his statement. He wanted to show everybody how teeth-gratingly boring he found this place.

Drawing in his breath, he raised his arm and poised the nozzle. With two exaggerated swipes of his arms, Dominic crossed out the number beneath "Population of:" and beside it painted a dripping number "1". Himself.

"That was easy," he muttered to himself, glancing over his shoulder. He expected guard dogs and an escape scene from an action movie, complete with explosions. When nothing broke the silence, he hopped on his bike and rode home. He slept easy that night, reassured by the satisfaction of a job well done.

The next morning, Dominic rose with his alarm, excited to hear the gossip that was surely already starting to stir. Pulling on some clothes, he took the steps two at a time down to the kitchen.

"Hey, Mom! I -- "

His voice bounced off the empty chairs and slammed against his chockleas.

"Mom? ...Mom, where are you? Dad? Thea? Where are you guys? Where's breakfast?"

Dominic searched the length of the downstairs, peeked into the basement, and rounded the stairs for an investigation of the upper floor. Nobody was home. He checked his watch to make sure the time was correct. It wasn't normal for his family to not see each other before they started their day, but maybe they each had to get an early start. Shrugging, he gathered up his things and left for school.

As he rode his bike down the sidewalk, something started to gnaw at him. At first, he couldn't place it, but it eventually dawned on him: The silence was overwhelming. But why was it so quiet? There were no cars. Where were they? Speaking of, were his parents cars still at home? He hadn't bothered to check the garage.

When he made it to school, Dominic was dismayed to discover that nobody was hanging around outside before the bell. He checked his watch again to make sure he wasn't late.

"Everybody's probably in mourning over that goddamn sign," he scoffed.

Dominic walked to the doors and pushed, but they were locked. Figuring there was a gas leak, generator failure, or a cow terrorizing the building (it had happened once before, back in 1986), he jumped up in the air, sang a few lines from an oft-quoted Pink Floyd song, and began the ride back home.

But the uneasiness followed him. Unable to shake it off, he decided to drop in at his friend Matt's house. Dominic strode to the door and rang the bell. Matt was not home. He decided to try Butterly next -- good old Butterly. With the goofy grin and the busted treadmill. But like Matt, nobody answered at Butterly's house.

"What the fuck?" Dominic asked. "It's like everybody's dead." It dawned on him that it was like everyone was dead. He tried Butterly's neighbors, but every doorbell had the same effect: Stony, uncomfortable silence.

"This isn't funny," Dominic growled as he punched the fifth door. By the tenth, he was kicking them. Around nine o'clock, he was sobbing uncontrollably.

Dominic didn't know what to do. It was like the whole town had picked up and moved away during the night.

At dusk, he biked out to the town sign to gaze upon his work.

"I bet they have a new damn sign," he frowned.

