BOOKS

THE DISCONNECT

Why are so many Americans living by themselves?

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Today, half of U.S. residents are single, and a third of all households have one occupant.

As reliably as autumn brings Orion to the night sky, spring each year sends a curious constellation to the multiplex: a minor cluster of romantic comedies and the couples who traipse through them, searching for love. These tend not to be people who have normal problems. She is poised, wildly successful in an ulcer-making job, lonely. He is sensitive, creative, equipped with a mysteriously vast apartment, unattached. For all these resources, nothing can allay their solitude. He tries to cook. She collects old LPs. He seeks love in the arms of chatty narcissists. She pulls all-nighters in her office. Eventually, her best friend, who may also be her divorced mother, tells her that something needs to change: she's squandering her golden years; she'll end up forlorn and alone. Across town, his stout buddy, who is married to someone named Debbee, rhapsodizes about the pleasures of cohabitation. None of this is helpful. As the movie's first act nears its end point, we spy our heroine in the primal scene of rom-com solitude: curled up on her couch, wearing lounge pants, quaffing her third glass of wine, and excavating an enormous box of Dreyer's. She is watching the same TV show that he is (whiskey half drained on his coffee table, Chinese takeout in his lap), and although this fact assures us of a destined romance, it is not so useful for the people on the screen. They are alone; their lives are grim. The show they're watching seems, from the explosive flickering, to be about the invasion of Poland.

Few things are less welcome today than protracted solitude—a life style that, for many people, has the taint of loserdom and brings to mind such characters as Ted Kaczynski and Shrek. Does aloneness deserve a less untoward image? Aside from monastic seclusion, which is just another way of being together, it is hard to come up with a solitary life that doesn't invite pity, or an enviable loner who's not cheating the rules. (Even Henry David Thoreau, for all his bluster about solitude, ambled regularly into Concord for his mother's cooking and the local bars.) Meanwhile, the culture's data pool is filled with evidence of virtuous togetherness. "The Brady Bunch." The March on Washington. The Yankees, in 2009. Alone, we're told, is where you end up when these enterprises go south.

And yet the reputation of modern solitude is puzzling, because the traits enabling a solitary life—financial stability, spiritual autonomy, the wherewithal to buy more dishwashing detergent when the box runs out—are those our culture prizes. Plus, recent demographic shifts suggest that aloneness, far from fading out in our connected age, is on its way in. In 1950, four million people in this country lived alone. These days, there are almost eight times as many, thirty-one million. Americans are getting married later than ever (the average age of first marriage for men is twenty-eight), and bailing on domestic life with alacrity (half of modern unions are expected to end in divorce). Today, more than fifty per cent of U.S. residents are single, nearly a third of all households have just one resident, and five million adults younger than thirty-five live alone. This may or may not prove a useful thing to know on certain Saturday nights.

"I don't know how to tell you this, but it looks like you have a brain the size of a walnut."

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Eric Klinenberg, a sociologist at New York University, has spent the past several years studying aloneness, and in his new book, "Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone" (Penguin), he approaches his subject as someone baffled by these recent trends. Klinenberg's initial encounter with the growing ranks of singletons, he explains, came while researching his first book, about the Chicago heat wave of 1995. During that crisis, hundreds of people living alone died, not just because of the heat but because their solitary lives left them without a support network. "Silently, and invisibly, they had developed what one city investigator who worked with them regularly called 'a secret society of people who live and die alone,' " Klinenberg writes.

"Going Solo" is his attempt to see how this secret society fares outside the crucible of natural disaster. For seven years, Klinenberg and his research team interviewed more than three hundred people living alone, plus many of the caretakers, planners, and designers who help make that solitary life possible. Their sample included single people in everything from halfway hotels to elder-care facilities, and drew on fieldwork conducted primarily in seven cities: Austin, Texas; Chicago; Los Angeles; New York; San Francisco; Washington, D.C.; and Stockholm.

The results were surprising. Klinenberg's data suggested that single living was not a social aberration but an inevitable outgrowth of mainstream liberal values. Women's liberation, widespread urbanization, communications technology, and increased longevity—these four trends lend our era its cultural contours, and each gives rise to solo living. Women facing less pressure to stick to child care and housework can pursue careers, marry and conceive when they please, and divorce if they're unhappy. The "communications revolution" that began with the telephone and continues with Facebook helps dissolve the boundary between social life and isolation. Urban culture caters heavily to autonomous singles, both in its social diversity and in its amenities: gyms, coffee shops, food deliveries, laundromats, and the like ease solo subsistence. Age, thanks to the uneven advances of modern medicine, makes loners of people who have not previously lived by themselves. By 2000, sixty-two per cent of the widowed elderly were living by themselves, a figure that's unlikely to fall anytime soon.

What turns this shift from demographic accounting to a social question is the pursuit-of-happiness factor: as a rule, do people live alone because they want to or because they have to? At one point, Klinenberg suggests that living alone provides "restorative solitude"; it may be "exactly what we need to reconnect." But most of the people he introduces seem neither especially restored nor vigorously connected. They are insecure, proud of their freedoms but hungry for contact, anxious, frisky, smug, occasionally scared—in short, they experience a mixture of emotions that many people, even those who do not live alone, are apt to recognize.

ILLUSTRATION: JEAN-FRANÇOIS MARTIN