GOING SOLO

THE EXTRAORDINARY RISE AND SURPRISING APPEAL OF LIVING ALONE

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INTRODUCTION:
THE SINGLETON SOCIETY

In the beginning of the Old Testament, God creates the world one day at a time: The heavens and the earth. Water. Light. Day and night. Living species of every kind. After each creation, God declares: "It is good." But the tone changes when God makes Adam. Suddenly, God pronounces the first thing that is not good, lo tov: "It is not good that the man should be alone." So God makes Eve, and Adam is no longer on his own.

In time, injunctions against being alone moved from theology to philosophy and literature. In Politics, Aristotle wrote, "The man who is isolated, who is unable to share in the benefits of political association, or has no need to share because he is already self-sufficient, is no part of the polis, and must therefore be either a beast or a god." The Greek poet Theocritus insisted that "man will ever stand in need of man," and the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius proclaimed that "human beings are social animals."2

So, too, are other animals. (Aristotle, alas, was only half right.) Beasts will indeed live on their own when conditions favor it, particularly when there is a shortage of food. Otherwise most species fare better in
groups. Collective living carries some costs, including competition for status and occasional outbursts of violence. But the benefits—protection from predators, cooperative hunting, efficient reproduction, among others—can easily outweigh them. Our closest animal relatives, the apes, are typically social and live in stable units. Even orangutans, which are notoriously solitary, live with their mothers during their first seven or eight years, and as the Dutch primatologist Carel van Schaik has discovered, orangutans living in a calorically rich swamp forest in Sumatra are “every bit as sociable” as their cousins, the chimpanzees.3

Orangutans are not the only misrepresented creatures. Hermit crabs, it turns out, are actually quite social, living in communities of up to one hundred because they cannot thrive alone. One manual for prospective pet owners advises that “it’s best to always have at least two hermit crabs in a tank—if possible at least two of each species.” Not because they need protection or help with food gathering, but for a simpler reason: When alone, hermit crabs get stressed and unhealthy. Their bodies fail them. They may even lose a leg or a claw.

Isolation can also be unbearably stressful for people, as policy makers in different historical eras have recognized. In the ancient world, exile ranked among the most severe forms of punishment, exceeded only by execution. (Though some called exile a fate worse than death.) During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, modern prison systems popularized the use of solitary confinement because, as the English jurist William Paley put it, isolation “would augment the terror of the punishment” and thereby deter crime.4 Today, the United States alone detains roughly 25,000 people in “supermax” prisons where, one prominent psychologist writes, inmates “experience levels of isolation . . . that are more total and complete and literally dehumanized than has been possible in the past.”5 A common phrase used to describe this condition conveys one widespread belief about being cut off from others: It is, say both critics and advocates of solitary confinement, a “living death.”

Nothing better expresses the human interest in collective living than the formation of families. Throughout history and in all cultures, families, not individuals, have been the fundamental building blocks of social and economic life. And for good reason. As evolutionary biologists argue, living with others offered a competitive advantage to members of the first human societies because it provided security, access to food, and a means of reproduction. Through natural selection, argue the social scientists Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler, our species developed a genetic disposition to establish close social ties.6

In 1949, the Yale anthropologist George Peter Murdock published a survey of some 250 “representative cultures” from different eras and diverse parts of the world. He reported, “The nuclear family is a universal human social grouping. Either as the sole prevailing form of the family or as the basic unit from which more complex familial forms are compounded, it exists as a distinct and strongly functional group in every known society. No exception, at least, has come to light.”7

Since then, scholars have challenged Murdock’s argument, identifying domestic arrangements, such as the kibbutz, that don’t fit into his nuclear model. Yet their counterexamples are always alternative collectives, typically including more people than the conventional family. Though this debate remains unsettled, there’s one thing both sides would agree on: Human societies, at all times and places, have organized themselves around the will to live with others, not alone.

But not anymore.

During the past half century, our species has embarked on a remarkable social experiment. For the first time in human history, great
numbers of people—at all ages, in all places, of every political persuasion—have begun settling down as singletons.* Until recently, most of us married young and parted only at death. If death came early, we remarried quickly; if late, we moved in with family, or they with us. Now we marry later. (The Pew Research Center reports that the average age of first marriage for men and women is “the highest ever recorded, having risen by roughly five years in the past half century.”)8 We divorce, and stay single for years or decades. We survive our spouses, and do whatever we can to avoid moving in with others—even, perhaps especially, our children. We cycle in and out of different living arrangements: alone, together, together, alone.

Not long ago, it might have made sense to treat living on our own as a transitional stage between more durable arrangements, whether coupling up with a partner or moving into an institutional home. This is no longer appropriate, because today, for the first time in centuries, the majority of all American adults are single. The typical American will spend more of his or her adult life unmarried than married, and for much of this time he or she will live alone. Naturally, we are adapting. We are learning to go solo, and crafting new ways of living in the process.

Numbers never tell the whole story, but in this case the statistics are startling. In 1950, 22 percent of American adults were single. Four million lived alone, and they accounted for 9 percent of all households. In those days, living alone was by far most common in the open, sprawling Western states—Alaska, Montana, and Nevada—that attracted migrant workingmen, and it was usually a short-lived stage on the road to a more conventional domestic life.

* In this book, I use the term “singleton” for people who live alone. “Singles” may or may not live alone (some live with a romantic partner, or roommates, or children), and so not all singles are singletons.

Today, more than 50 percent of American adults are single, and 31 million—roughly one out of every seven adults—live alone. (This figure excludes the 8 million Americans who live in voluntary and non-voluntary group quarters, such as assisted living facilities, nursing homes, and prisons.)9 People who live alone make up 28 percent of all U.S. households, which means that they are now tied with childless couples as the most prominent residential type—more common than the nuclear family, the multigenerational family, and the roommate or group home. Surprisingly, living alone is also one of the most stable household arrangements. Over a five-year period, people who live alone are more likely to stay that way than everyone except married couples with children.10

Contemporary solo dwellers are primarily women: about 17 million, compared to 14 million men. The majority, more than 15 million, are middle-age adults between the ages of thirty-five and sixty-four. The elderly account for about 10 million of the total.* Young adults between eighteen and thirty-four number more than 5 million, compared to 500,000 in 1950, making them the fastest-growing segment of the solo-dwelling population.11

Unlike their predecessors, people who live alone today cluster together in metropolitan areas and inhabit all regions of the country. The cities with the highest proportion of people living alone include Washington, D.C., Seattle, Denver, San Francisco, Minneapolis, Chicago, Dallas, New York City, and Miami. One million people live alone in New York City, and in Manhattan, more than half of all residences are one-person dwellings.

* In this book, I use the terms “old people” and “the elderly” to refer to those age sixty-five and above. The reasons for this have more to do with the statistics on aging, which typically classify people as elderly once they reach age sixty-five, than on an argument about the age when one becomes old.
DESPITE ITS PREVALENCE, living alone is one of the least discussed and, consequently, most poorly understood issues of our time. We aspire to get our own places as young adults, but fret about whether it’s all right to stay that way, even if we enjoy it. We worry about friends and family members who haven’t found the right match, even if they insist that they’re happy on their own and will find someone in due course. We struggle to support elderly parents and grandparents who find themselves living alone after losing a spouse, and we are puzzled about what to do if they tell us they prefer to remain home alone.

In all of these situations, living alone is something that each person or family experiences as the most private of matters, when in fact it is an increasingly common condition and deserves to be treated as a subject of great public significance. Unfortunately, on those rare occasions when there is a public debate about the rise of living alone, commentators tend to present it as an unmitigated social problem, a sign of narcissism, fragmentation, and a diminished public life. Our morally charged conversations tend to frame the question of why so many people now live on their own around the false and misleading choice between the romanticized ideal of Father Knows Best and the glamorous enticements of Sex and the City. In fact, as we’ll see, the reality of this great social experiment in living alone is far more interesting—and far less isolating—than these conversations would have us believe.

The rise of living alone has been a transformative social experience. It changes the way we understand ourselves and our most intimate relationships. It shapes the way we build our cities and develop our economies. It alters the way we become adults, as well as how we age and the way we die. It touches every social group and nearly every family, no matter who we are or whether we live with others today.

THIS “WE” IS MORE EXPANSIVE than you might imagine. It’s tempting to treat the soaring rates of living alone as a peculiar American condition, an expression of what the literary critic Harold Bloom called the nation’s “religion of self-reliance.” After all, Americans have long taken pride in self-sufficiency. Thomas Jefferson called individualism “the great watchword of American life,” and the historian David Potter wrote that Americans view it as a “sacred term.” In Habits of the Heart, sociologist Robert Bellah and his coauthors distinguish between two traditions of American individualism. “Utilitarian individualism,” best exemplified by Benjamin Franklin, is based on the belief that society flourishes when each person pursues his or her interests first; this notion has inspired America’s libertarian streak. “Expressive individualism,” as exemplified by Walt Whitman, advocates cultivating and “celebrating” the self (as the poet put it in the first line of the first edition of Leaves of Grass). This view has inspired America’s ongoing search for identity and meaning. Though these two strains of individualism promote different values and agendas, together they offer Americans a well of cultural resources for putting the self before society. We draw from them often.

Consider Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of America’s first public intellectuals. In his powerful essay “Self-Reliance,” Emerson warned that “society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members,” and he offered advice for those seeking relief: “Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world.” Emerson’s neighbor Henry David Thoreau made the case for self-reliance in more dramatic fashion, moving into a cabin he built near Walden Pond. “It is as solitary where I live as on the prairies,” he wrote. “I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world
all to myself.” Thoreau insisted that there was no loneliness in such a setting: “There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still . . . I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once . . . when, for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life. To be alone was something unpleasant . . .” Until, in an instant: “I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature . . . as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since.”

The wisdom of Emerson and Thoreau has inspired generations of American individualists to chart their own paths out of society. Lone rangers on the Western frontier. Cloaked detectives in the shadowy urban streets. Adventurers going “into the wild” to discover themselves. All are icons of American popular culture, symbols of our romantic fantasy of an unfettered self. So it would be easy to conclude that the contemporary urban singleton is just the latest variation on this theme.

It just wouldn’t be right.

Americans have never fully embraced individualism, and we remain deeply skeptical of its excesses. De Tocqueville found here both a creeping individualism “which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends” and an abiding moral code that binds citizens to each other in civic organizations and associations of all kinds. Transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau espoused the virtues of solitude. But the escape, for them, always preceded a return to society, and the insights borne of solitude were meant to promote the common good.¹³

In fact, reports of the transcendentalists’ individualism have been greatly exaggerated. Most of the leading figures in that movement—Emerson and Thoreau, as well as Bronson Alcott, Elizabeth Peabody, and Margaret Fuller—were deeply engaged in civic and political life. Thoreau was hardly alone, or self-sufficient, during the two years (from 1845 to 1847) he spent on and off at Walden Pond. His cabin, as modern visitors know, sat on land owned by Emerson and was less than two miles from Concord. Thoreau could walk to town in less than thirty minutes, and he returned often to see family and friends, sometimes spending hours downing drinks in the local pub. The human traffic went in two directions. Thoreau was happy to receive visitors, particularly his mother, who came frequently to deliver home-cooked meals.¹⁴

Who could blame her? Anxiety about the fate of people who live alone, particularly family or close friends, has always shadowed America’s interest in self-reliance. In the early colonial towns of New England, local authorities prohibited young men from living independently, lest they use this liberty for licentious pursuits. And as the historian David Potter noted, “In our literature, any story of the complete isolation, either physical or psychological, of a man from his fellowman, such as the story of Robinson Crusoe before he found a human footprint on the beach, is regarded as essentially a horror story.”¹⁵

So, too, are reports that document the decline of American “communities”—another of our sacred terms. The titles of the most popular sociology books in U.S. history—The Lonely Crowd, The Pursuit of Loneliness, The Fall of Public Man, The Culture of Narcissism, and Habits of the Heart—raise the specter of individualism run amok. As does one of the most influential works of recent scholarship: Robert Putnam’s Bowling Alone, which argues that many of our contemporary problems—poor health, failing schools, distrust, even unhappiness—result from the collapse of community life.¹⁶ Americans are attracted to arguments like these precisely because we remain, at heart, a “nation of joiners,” just as we were when De Tocqueville visited nearly two centuries ago.
American culture is not the driving force behind the incredible rise in living alone.

If you're not persuaded, consider another piece of evidence: Today Americans are actually less likely to live alone than are residents of many other nations, including those we generally regard as more communal. The four countries with the highest rates of living alone are Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark, where roughly 40 to 45 percent of all households have just one person. By investing in each other’s social welfare and affirming their bonds of mutual support, the Scandinavians have freed themselves to be on their own.

They have good company. In Japan, where social life has historically been organized around the family, about 30 percent of all households now have a single dweller, and the rate is far higher in urban areas. Germany, France, and the United Kingdom have famously different cultural traditions, but they share a greater proportion of one-person households than the United States. Same for Australia and Canada. And the nations with the fastest growth in one-person households? China, India, and Brazil.17 According to the market research firm Euromonitor International, at the global level the number of people living alone is skyrocketing, having risen from about 153 million in 1996 to 202 million in 2006—a 33 percent increase in a single decade.18

So what’s driving the widespread rise in living alone? Unquestionably, both the wealth generated by economic development and the social security provided by modern welfare states have enabled the spike. Put simply, one reason that more people live alone than ever before is that today more people can afford to do so. Yet there are a great many things that we can afford to do but choose not to, which means the economic explanation is just one piece of the puzzle. We cannot understand why so many people in so many places are now living alone unless we address a difficult question: Of all the ways that the relatively privileged citizens of the most developed nations could use their unprecedented affluence and security, why are they using them to separate from each other?

In addition to economic prosperity and social security, the extraordinary rise in living alone stems from the world-historic cultural change that Émile Durkheim, a founding figure of sociology, called “the cult of the individual.” According to Durkheim, the cult of the individual grew out of the transition from traditional rural communities to modern industrial cities, where the individual was gradually becoming the “object of a sort of religion,” more sacred than the group. A Frenchman who wrote his major works in the late nineteenth century, Durkheim did not envision the radical economic individualism later endorsed by figures such as Milton Friedman, Ayn Rand, or Margaret Thatcher (who famously declared, “There is no such thing as society”), nor did he share their conviction that liberating individuals from the state was the most effective way to generate wealth and advance the common good. But he wasn’t entirely pessimistic, either. Durkheim argued that the modern division of labor would bind citizens organically. After all, individuals could achieve “independence” and “liberty” only if they were supported by the key modern social institutions—the family, the economy, and the state—which meant they had a clear self-interest in joining together to promote the common good.

The Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter didn’t think individuals would see things this way. In his 1942 book *Capitalism, Socialism, and*
Democracy, Schumpeter observed that modern capitalism promoted “the rationalization of everything in life,” and predicted that a cold, calculating culture would ultimately lead to the “decomposition” of the collective. “As soon as men and women learn the utilitarian lesson and refuse to take for granted the traditional arrangements that their social environment makes for them, as soon as they acquire the habit of weighing the individual advantages and disadvantages of any prospective course of action . . . they cannot fail to become aware of the heavy personal sacrifices that family ties and especially parenthood entail . . .” Schumpeter predicted the gradual “disintegration of the bourgeois family” form, because free-thinking men and women would opt for lives “of comfort, of freedom from care, and opportunity to enjoy alternatives of increasing attractiveness and variety.”

The transition would take some time, though, since the cult of individualism still had to contend with deep cultural attachments to commitment. For most of the twentieth century, even the most modern societies expected individuals to marry and judged them harshly if they “failed” to do so. Schumpeter may well have seen singles as rational, but in a survey of Americans conducted in 1957, more than half the respondents said that unmarried people were “sick,” “immoral,” or “neurotic,” while about a third viewed them “neutrally.” These positions did not hold. By 1976, a generation later, only one-third of Americans acknowledged that they had negative views about the unmarried, while half were neutral and one in seven actually approved. Today, with single adults outnumbering married ones, pollsters don’t even bother asking whether Americans approve of being unmarried. Though the stigma of living alone is not entirely gone, there’s no question that our cultural attitudes about singlehood and family life have changed.

According to contemporary wisdom, the search for success and happiness depends less on tying oneself down to another than on opening up the world of possibilities so that one can always pursue the best option. Freedom. Flexibility. Personal choice. These rank among our most cherished modern virtues. Today, writes the demographer Andrew Cherlin, “one’s primary obligation is to oneself rather than to one’s partner and children,” which means the contemporary cult of the individual has intensified far beyond what Durkheim had envisioned.

Not long ago, someone who was dissatisfied with his or her spouse and wanted a divorce had to justify that decision. Today it’s the opposite: If you’re not fulfilled by your marriage, you have to justify staying in it, because of the tremendous cultural pressure to be good to one’s self.

Our commitment to places is even weaker. We move so often that some sociologists call modern neighborhoods “communities of limited liability,” places where people make connections without expecting those links to be deep or lasting. The same is true in the workplace, where employers no longer reward productive employees with career-long positions, and we all know that being self-regarding, self-motivated, and entrepreneurial is the only way to stay afloat. “For the first time in history,” write the German sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, “the individual is becoming the basic unit of social reproduction.” Everything revolves around it.

The cult of the individual spread gradually across the Western world during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But it made its deepest impressions on modern societies in the West and beyond only in the second half of the twentieth century, when four other sweeping social changes—the rising status of women, the communications revolution, mass urbanization, and the longevity revolution—created conditions in which the individual could flourish.
Begin with the rising status of women, whose advances range from gains in education and massive incorporation into the paid labor force to the right to control their domestic, sexual, and reproductive lives. Consider, for instance, that in 1950 there were more than two men for every woman on American college campuses, whereas today women make up the majority of undergraduate students as well as of those who earn a bachelor’s degree. Or the fact that, between 1950 and 2000, the number of working women counted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics rose from 18 million to 66 million while the proportion of women working jumped from 33 percent to 60 percent. Most other advanced nations have experienced similar changes during the past half century, such that today the level of men’s and women’s participation in higher education and the paid workforce is more balanced than ever before.

Women’s assertion of control over their own bodies has also changed the terms of modern relationships, resulting in delayed marriage, a longer transition to adulthood, and increased rates of separation and divorce. In the United States, divorce rates have climbed steadily since the mid-nineteenth century, but in the 1960s they began to rise sharply, and by 2000 marriages were twice as likely to end in divorce as they were in 1950. Today, neither breaking up with a spouse nor staying single means settling for a life of unwanted abstinence. Rather than settling down, great numbers of young adults indulge in the opportunities afforded by easy access to contraception and freedom from family supervision. The Stanford sociologist Michael Rosenfeld argues that middle-class people in their twenties and thirties now look forward to a “second adolescence” in which they seek out new experiences—from serial dating to interracial and same-sex relationships—and refrain from commitment unless they find their “true romantic love.” The new permissiveness around sexual experimentation is an important feature of what Rosenfeld calls our “age of independence.” Living alone gives us time and space to discover the pleasures of being with others.

The second driving force behind the cult of the individual is the communications revolution, which has allowed people throughout the world to experience the pleasures of social life—not to mention vast amounts of entertainment—even when they’re home alone. The telephone, for instance, is the most common device that we use to stay connected. Home phone service in the United States first became available during the late nineteenth century, yet most Americans were either unwilling or unable to get it. In 1940, only one in three American households had phone service, but demand surged after World War II, with household penetration reaching 62 percent by 1950 and roughly 95 percent today. The television penetrated into American households far more rapidly. In Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam reports that between 1948, when the device came on the market, and 1959, home ownership rates for TV went from 1 percent to 90 percent, a pace unmatched by any other major communications technology, including the radio, the VCR, the personal computer, and the mobile phone. Over the past decade, the Internet has further transformed our communications, combining the more active, interpersonal features of the telephone with the more passive, mass communications features of the television. Individual users can not only communicate instantly, at all hours, with friends and strangers, they can also express themselves to a potentially unlimited audience via a blog, a homemade video posted on YouTube, or a social networking site. For those who want to live alone, the Internet affords rich new ways to stay connected.

In the modern world, most people who live alone have another way to connect with each other: simply leaving their home and participating in their city’s robust social life. Mass urbanization is the third en-
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able condition for the rise of the singleton society, in part because it has led to a booming subculture of singles who share similar values, orientations, and ways of life.

Subcultures thrive in cities, which tend to attract nonconformists who are able to find others like themselves in the dense variety of urban life. (That's why we tend to associate subcultures with particular places, from the bohemians of Greenwich Village to the surfers of Manhattan Beach.) When a subculture gets established and becomes visible, it can grow enough to influence or even transform the culture at large. The historian Howard Chudacoff argues that, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, single men in cities such as Chicago and New York created a new collective lifestyle built around drinking clubs, civic associations, apartment houses, and relatively liberal sexual mores. By the late twentieth century, what was once a distinctive bachelor subculture was such a big part of urban culture in general that the concept lost its salience. Singles, including those who lived alone, didn't have to confine themselves to particular buildings, clubs, neighborhoods, or cities. A growing number of places—gyms, coffee shops, clubs, residential complexes—and services—cleaning, food preparation, home delivery—were being developed with their needs and interests in mind. With some notable exceptions, they could find people who understood their experiences and shared their concerns just about anywhere. Together, as Ethan Watters argues in Urban Tribes, they could help each other live alone.29

The fourth change that has amplified the cult of the individual is also a collective achievement, but it is rarely experienced that way. Because people are living longer than ever before—or, more specifically, because women often outlive their spouses by decades, rather than years—aging alone has become an increasingly common experience. In 1900, about 10 percent of the widowed elderly in the United States lived alone; by 2000, 62 percent did.30 Today it's not unusual for women to spend a quarter or a third of their lives in a place of their own, and men are spending a greater share of their adult years living alone, too.

Aging alone is not easy. The ordinary challenges of growing old—adjusting to retirement, managing illnesses, enduring frailty, watching friends and family die—can become extraordinary hardships for someone who spends most of the time alone. Yet it is not always miserable, either. A survey in England, for instance, found that old people who lived alone had higher life satisfaction, more contact with service providers, and no more cognitive or physical impairments than those who lived with others. And according to a recent review of the literature on aging, studies of the entire elderly population have found that "those living alone are healthier than those living with adults other than a spouse, or even, in some cases, than those living with a spouse."31 Indeed, in recent decades old people have demonstrated a clear preference for living alone rather than moving in with family or friends or to an institutional home.32 This, again, is not merely an American phenomenon. From Japan to Germany, Italy to Australia, aging alone has become common, even among ethnic groups that have long exhibited a clear preference for keeping multigenerational homes.33 Today few people believe that aging alone is an ideal outcome, but most of those who are single as they get older do everything possible to maintain a place of their own.

The question is why. Or more precisely: Why do so many of us find living alone so much more appealing than other available options? Why has it become so common in the world's most affluent societies? What makes it so compelling for the young, the middle-aged, and the old?

We have embarked on this massive social experiment in living alone because we believe it serves a purpose. Living alone helps us pursue sacred modern values—individual freedom, personal control,
and self-realization—whose significance endures from adolescence to our final days. It allows us to do what we want, when we want, on our own terms. It liberates us from the constraints of a domestic partner’s needs and demands, and permits us to focus on ourselves. Today, in our age of digital media and ever expanding social networks, living alone can offer even greater benefits: the time and space for restorative solitude. This means that living alone helps us discover who we are, as well as what gives us meaning and purpose.

Paradoxically, living alone might be exactly what we need to reconnect. After all, for most people living alone is a cyclical condition, not a permanent one. Many, though by no means all, of those who live alone ultimately decide they want the intimacy of a domestic partner, whether a lover, family member, or friend. But they, too, know that today none of our arrangements are binding or permanent. We are unmoored from tradition yet uncertain how to remake our lives, and in contemporary societies it has become increasingly common for people to move through different experiences—single, solo, married, separated, partnered, and back—while anchored only by the self.

This means that each person who lives alone is subjected to extraordinary pressures, and at times it can be hard to stave off self-doubt about whether one is living the way one should. But it doesn’t mean that those who live alone are condemned to feel lonely or be isolated. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that people who live alone compensate by becoming more socially active than those who live with others, and that cities with high numbers of singletons enjoy a thriving public culture.34

It’s important, even urgent, that we find new and better ways to assist those who suffer from social isolation. But sweeping laments that associate living alone with the end of community and social decline divert attention from this project and do nothing for the people and places that most need help.

Living alone and being alone are hardly the same, yet in recent years journalists, professors, and pundits have routinely conflated them, raising fears that the rise of living alone signals the ultimate atomization of the modern world. Exhibit A is The Lonely American, in which Jacqueline Olds and Richard Schwartz, a married couple who teach psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, warn that “increased aloneness” and “the movement in our country toward greater social isolation” is damaging our health and happiness. The book opens with two blockbuster findings that are meant to support this conclusion. The first, drawn from an article published in an academic journal, reports that between 1985 and 2004 the number of Americans who said they had no one with whom they discussed important matters tripled, reaching nearly a quarter of the population.

A quarter of the population! This is an incredible statistic, and the authors of The Lonely American were hardly the first to note it. The finding, which came from research by social scientists at Duke University, ran in headlines and framed talk show conversations for weeks after its initial publication. And it would indeed be disturbing, deeply so, if it were reliable. In fact, the social scientists who authored the original article were skeptical of their own numbers, and they cautioned readers—to no avail, alas—that they had probably overstated the prevalence of social isolation. Berkeley sociologist Claude Fischer is even more dismissive. After scrutinizing the evidence, he reported that the paper’s claims about Americans’ isolation are implausible, anomalous, and inconsistent with all other research, and he attributes the problem to flaws in the social survey on which it is based. “Scholars and general readers alike should draw no inference from the [survey] as to whether
Americans' social networks changed substantially between 1985 and 2004," Fischer concludes. "They probably did not."35

The Lonely American is even less careful with its second big claim: that by 2000 about one-quarter of all American households consisted of only one person, and that this reveals how lonely and disconnected we have become. In fact, there's little evidence that the rise of living alone is responsible for making more Americans lonely. Reams of published research show that it's the quality, not the quantity of social interactions, that best predicts loneliness. What matters is not whether we live alone, but whether we feel alone. There's ample support for this conclusion outside the laboratory. As divorced or separated people often say, there's nothing lonelier than living with the wrong person.36

This point has also failed to register with the experts who regularly appear in the media to promote marriage and denounce the culture of singlehood. Take The Case for Marriage, in which authors Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher report that, compared to married people, those who live alone (including divorced, widowed, and single people) are less likely to be happy, healthy, and wealthy. "Marriage is good for everyone," they declare, whereas being unmarried "choops almost ten years off a man's life," and "will shorten a woman's life span by more years than would being married and having cancer or living in poverty."37

These cautions may well come from good intentions, but they vastly overstate what the research shows. For instance, there is good evidence that people who never marry are just as happy as people who are currently married, but also significantly happier and less lonely than people who are widowed or divorced. We also have good evidence that bad marriages produce undue stress, strain, and sickness for those who suffer through them; one recent study reports that "individuals in low-

quality marriages exhibit an even greater health risk than do divorced individuals."38 Moreover, as several critics of The Case for Marriage have noted, studies comparing the fate of married and unmarried people suffer from a serious problem that makes intuitive (not to mention statistical) sense: namely, that the mental, physical, and financial health of married people may well be the cause of their enduring marriage, not the consequence of it.

Marriage proponents are not the only ones whose activism can hinder their analysis. On the other side of the spectrum, singles advocates—or defenders, as is often the case—must work so hard to debunk the myths and stereotypes about the unmarried that they have little time or incentive to address the challenges of going solo.39 For although, as the psychologist Bella DePaulo writes in Singled Out, singletons endure all kinds of prejudice and discrimination and "still live happily ever after," they do not do so easily, or always. (After all, who does?) It is important to understand why.

Living alone may not be the social problem that it's generally made out to be, but it generates all kinds of challenges for those who do it, and for those who care for them. The fact that no previous human societies have supported large numbers of people who lived alone means that we have no historical examples to learn from, no precedents to mimic or avoid. This makes understanding what it means to live in a society of singletons all the more important, and our first order of business is to analyze how we got here.

This book begins with a brief account of how the collective project of living alone grew out of the culture of modern cities, not the monastic or transcendental traditions, as we often assume. Cities allowed for the expression of individual eccentricities and permitted the experiments with new ways of living that small towns and villages sup-
pressed. The urban environment, from the hotel residence to the apartment house and the social club, created places where young people who wanted to prolong the transition to adulthood could indulge in all kinds of new experiences while living in places of their own. Eventually middle-age and older adults made use of these same urban amenities, and helped develop new ones, too. By the late twentieth century, they had turned downtown areas throughout the developed world into adult playgrounds, where bars, restaurants, entertainment zones, and a booming commercial street culture encouraged singletons to come together rather than hunker down at home.

Cities created the conditions that make living alone a more social experience, but they did not provide any answers to the difficult questions that those who pioneered the new lifestyle encountered. The core chapters of this book address these challenges, proceeding in the chronological order through which they typically appear. (This means that the early parts of the book focus on the experiences of younger and more financially secure solo dwellers, while the later parts focus on older and more frail ones.) Drawing on extensive interviews and observations, each chapter explores how people who live alone manage the most common problems that stem from their situation: Learning how to live alone after spending one's early life in a shared household, and struggling to balance one’s investment in professional development with one’s social and personal needs. Remaking one's life as a singleton after spending years in a marriage or domestic partnership, with little knowledge about how life after separation will feel. Organizing with others to promote the welfare and status of people who live alone as a group. Protecting oneself from the demands of the workplace, the reach of social media, the pull of troubled friends or family members, or what is, for some, the unmanageable pressure of collective life. Aging alone after the loss of a long-term companion. Facing up to the fact that since any one of us could live alone someday, it’s in everyone’s interest to make it a healthier, happier, more socially engaging experience. And that’s a challenge we can only overcome together.

I've done enough writing and public speaking about the rise of living alone to know that you might already be wondering why I care about this issue, and what the stakes might be for me. After all, most libraries and bookstores are full of polemical tomes in which married people make the case for marriage, or single people make the case for being single, or cynics argue against love altogether. My interest in living alone stems less from my private life (I'm now married with two young children, but was once quite happy living alone) than from a personal response to something I discovered in my research. During the late 1990s, when I was working on a book about the devastatingly lethal Chicago heat wave of 1995, I learned that hundreds of people in America's “city of neighborhoods” had died alone and at home, out of touch with friends, family, and neighbors, and beyond the reach of the local safety net. They died not only because of the weather, but also because they had grown dangerously isolated while the rest of the city turned away from them. 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.” The heat wave was the morbid birth announcement of this society, and the question, once several hundred dead bodies showed up in the center of Chicago and entered public consciousness, was how we would treat the solitary people who'd survived.

Soon after Heat Wave was published, someone from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation asked if I would be interested in following
up that study with a larger one, on living alone in America. At first I was reluctant, because my introduction to the topic had been so grim and difficult. But I recognized that I had come to it through its bleakest angle, and decided that by learning the story of how and why so many of us have come to live alone, I might also discover something fundamental about who we are and what we value today. I proposed a research project and, after the foundation agreed to support it, hired a team of research assistants to help with the investigation.40

We started in Manhattan, the nation’s most popular place for living alone, and eventually expanded to other major American cities: Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Austin, and the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as to other nations where living alone has grown prevalent, such as Sweden, England, France, Australia, and Japan. By the end of this seven-year study, we had conducted in-depth interviews with more than three hundred singletons of all social classes and life stages—though, it’s important to note, most people who live alone are financially secure enough to do it, which means our interviews, as well as the analysis I offer here, focus mainly on the experiences of the middle class. To supplement what we learned from these interviews, we also observed places where people live alone together, including residential buildings for affluent young professionals, single-room occupancy dwellings, and assisted living facilities for the elderly. We mined the archives for historical research, social surveys, and market studies about the lifestyles of singles and solo dwellers (since some studies lump them together, for some issues we had to do so as well); and we interviewed scores of others—including caregivers, government officials, architects, and artificial intelligence designers—who are concerned about the fate of the growing number of Americans who live on their own.

We all came to the project with preconceived ideas about what we would discover. Some of us lived alone in our twenties or thirties and viewed having our own place as a mark of distinction or a reward for professional success. One of us worried about widowed grandparents in distant cities who spent untold hours on their own. Another was relieved that their mismatched parents had finally separated and embraced their independence. Another was concerned about the fate of female friends who lived alone and wondered whether they would ever have children. And another was fixated on the plight of the sick and the isolated poor.

A fundamental principle of social research is that we acknowledge our preconceptions but strive to move beyond them. We did our best to honor this rule, and I ask that you do the same as you read this book. I know that this is no simple request. For you, too, possess knowledge of issues related to living alone, and you may have some strong views of your own. Many times during the course of my research, friends and colleagues who felt passionate about this issue urged me to address their own pressing questions.

Some of these questions are deeply personal: Does the rise of living alone stem from or contribute to a growing sense of distrust—of others, of intimate relationships, or of commitments in general? Has it become a strategy of self-defense for those who fear rejection and the pain of separation? Or does it represent a more risky and adventurous lifestyle, one best suited for those who are willing to continually put themselves on the line?

Some questions are sociological: Does living alone mean something different now that we’re hyperconnected, through cell phones, social media, and the like? Has the fast growth of living alone among young adults led them to prioritize their personal development and avoid participating in communities and groups? Or has it paved the way for
new "urban tribes" to replace the traditional families that, as so many of us know from experience, often break apart? Do the social networks formed by contemporary solo dwellers survive when participants marry, move, grow old, or become ill? If not, what happens to those who stay on their own?

Some questions are political: Will the growing ranks of people who live alone develop a collective identity and, as some prominent strategists believe, establish themselves as a lobbying group or voting bloc? Or will solo living give rise to political atomization, with each person promoting his or her own interests or looking out for his or her own needs? Will the nations where aging alone has become rampant invest in social programs that help those who become isolated, frail, and sick? What fate awaits us if we don’t?

For many of us, the mere thought of living alone sparks anxieties about isolation, and not without reason. But although it’s clear that for certain people, in certain conditions, living alone can lead to loneliness, unhappiness, sickness, or worse, it’s also clear that it need not have such disastrous effects.

Today more and more people are seeking ways to flourish despite—or is it because of?—the solitude they can achieve at home: young professionals who can afford to have their own places and prefer domestic autonomy to having roommates; singles in their thirties and forties who refuse to compromise in their search for a partner, in no small part because they recognize and enjoy the benefits (personal, social, and sexual) of living alone; divorced men and women whose previous experiences in relationships ended the fantasy that romantic love is a reliable source of happiness and stability; elderly people who, following the death of a spouse, rebuild their lives through new friendships, social groups, and activities, and take pride in their ability to live alone.

Though each of these situations is distinctive, those who confront them share a common challenge: They must not only solve the puzzle of how to live alone; but also of how to live well. In this they are in good company, and all of us—no matter where we are or whether we live with someone at this moment—can learn from their answers.
On September 30, 2007, the Non-Committals won the championship of the Brooklyn Kickball Invitational Tournament, defeating Prison under the lights of Greenpoint’s McCarren Park. The teams were comprised mostly of young middle-class adults in their twenties and thirties who played regularly in a local league, but competitors came from as far as Providence, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, and Toronto. Today there are booming kickball clubs in Maui, Miami, Dallas, Denver, San Diego, and Seattle. The World Adult Kickball Association, which hosted seventy-two teams and 1,500 players at its 2009 Founders Cup in Las Vegas, calls the game “the new American pastime.” That’s clearly a misnomer, however, since the group has also helped organize leagues in England and India and is eagerly seeking additional outposts.

It’s hard not to interpret the surprising popularity of this childhood game as a symbol of the historically new life stage that sociologists call second adolescence. This period of prolonged development on the path
to adulthood is growing increasingly common in affluent nations, where young adults are growing ever more committed to Non-Committal Living, as the Brooklyn chumps would put it. In Chicago, for instance, one organization’s ads for a kickball league claim, “Recess was never this much fun!” and its campaign for a dodgeball league—what else?—promises, “As an adult you can relive the glory days on the playground!” In some places, games reproduce the college fraternity experience as well as elementary school days. During “sloshball” competitions, ESPN reports, players must hold a beer at all times and runners cannot advance until they shotgun a beer. In New York City, games are played in the epicenter of Brooklyn hipster culture, and instead of engaging in frat house behavior, participants act like natives, going straight from the ball field to the barroom, where they’ll listen to indy rock bands till early the next day. At season’s end they gather in Greenpoint for the Kickball Prom.¹

Playing children’s games on weekends is not the only way that today’s young adults revisit adolescence. They stay in school longer than did previous generations, knowing that the job market rewards them for being both well trained and flexible, and guessing that it’s unwise to commit too hastily to a career path or to a corporation that will not commit to them. They delay marriage and having children and spend years engaging in casual sex or serial dating, often remaining skeptical that an intimate relationship can last a lifetime. They chat on instant message and social network sites, play video games, share music online. Those younger than twenty-five even move back in with their families, frequently enough to be labeled the “boomerang generation” by journalists and sociologists.

But viewed historically, the “boomerang” label is undeserved, as is the view that by indulging in a second adolescence young adults are neglecting to grow up. “It is widely believed that young adults are more likely to live with their parents now than ever before,” writes sociologist Michael Rosenfeld.² But in fact, he notes, compared to previous generations they are far more likely to establish themselves in a home of their own. While it’s true that the prevalence of people ages twenty-five to thirty-four living with their parents has gone up since 1960, the increase has been modest: from 11 percent to 14 percent for men, and from 7 percent to 8 percent for women.³ The more significant change in the culture of young adults involves breaking away from their family home. Consider, for instance, that only 1 percent of people ages eighteen to twenty-nine lived alone in 1950, while 7 percent do today, or that 11 percent of people ages twenty to twenty-nine lived apart from their parents back then, whereas today more than 40 percent do. (Not all of them live alone, but leaving home is a necessary condition for doing so.)⁴ “The increase in this type of living arrangement has grown astonishingly since 1970,” observe demographers Elizabeth Fussell and Frank Furstenberg Jr., marking “a new sort of independence from family with significant social meaning.”⁵

This is an understatement. In recent decades a growing number of twenty- and thirtysomethings have come to view living alone as a key part of the transition to adulthood. In the large urban areas where it is most common, many young professionals see having one’s own home as a mark of distinction and view living with roommates or parents as undesirable at best.

Living alone offers several advantages: It grants sexual freedom and facilitates experimentation. It gives time to mature, develop, and search for true romantic love. It liberates young adults from difficult roommates, including good friends who turn out to be better friends when they are not always in the next room. It enables them to socialize when and how they want to, and to focus on themselves as much as they need.
Why did the practice of living alone grow so popular among young adults, and how did it turn from a sign of social failure to a rite of passage and a reward for success? To answer these questions we need to look more closely at how the public life of cities and, more specifically, the subculture of singles encouraged new forms of individualism. For the urban bohemians who first experimented with solo living in neighborhoods like Greenwich Village did something that they hadn’t intended: They pioneered a lifestyle whose broad appeal would ultimately bring it into the mainstream. We also need to examine the private lives of families, because changes in the way we relate to one another inside the home have led more of us to grow comfortable in a place of our own. First, though, we should step back to see what we might call the “old” cult of the individual, if only to establish how different it is from the individualism we find in cities today.

THE CONTEMPORARY VIEW of living alone as a productive experience grew out of a rich historical legacy. The monastic tradition, which has roots in ancient China, Egypt, and Syria, valorized asceticism as a path to knowledge and a meaningful life. According to monastic teachings, separating from society is the most powerful way to get closer to the divine. This is why the fourth-century hermit Abba Moses issued his famous instruction: “Go, sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.”

In practice, however, few hermits were true solitaries. Whether in the desert or on the outskirts of a town, they typically lived in settlements shared by other men and congregated with them for a variety of purposes. The historian Peter Brown writes that in Egypt, where “the theory and practice of ascetic life reached its highest pitch of articulate-

ness and sophistication . . . [g]roups had to reproduce exactly, on the fringe of the desert, the closed-in, embattled aspect of the fortified villages”; he notes further that “the monastery of Pachomius was called quite simply The Village.” In ancient China, writes the Asia scholar Aat Vervoorn, the earliest versions of eremitism were secular and philosophical rather than religious, and the lifestyle involved not renouncing society so much as “a lack of regard for those things of the world that are common objects of human action, such as wealth, power, and fame.”

Over the centuries, these traditions have evolved and mutated as much as they have traveled. Today we find traces of the old cult of the individual in romantic ideals that emphasize solitude as a return to nature, in the spirit of Thoreau or John Muir; as a path to the sacred, as for Thomas Merton or Hesse’s Siddhartha; or, as the psychologist Anthony Storr put it, as a return to the creative self. These are all influential perspectives, and they no doubt fed the stream of ideas that gave rise to the belief that living alone is important for becoming an autonomous adult. But they also share a decidedly antiurban and antisocial bias, and are in many ways antithetical to the practice of living alone in the city. To find the sources of our contemporary ways of settling down, we must look beyond the traditions of the monastery and toward those of the modern metropolis.

“The metropolis,” wrote the German sociologist Georg Simmel, “assures the individual of a type and degree of personal freedom to which there is no analogy in other circumstances.” Simmel was born in Berlin in 1858, when the population was about 460,000, and during his lifetime he witnessed it grow to more than 2 million people. Many of his contemporaries, particularly those who participated in the romanticist movement against modernity, lamented the moral and cultural changes wrought by urbanization. But Simmel doubted that the
less urban life was more virtuous or meaningful. He rebuked those, like Nietzsche and Ruskin, who believed that cities crushed the individual spirit. "Small-town life," he argued, "imposed such limits upon the movements of the individual in his relationships with the outside world and on his inner independence and differentiation that the modern person could not even breathe under such conditions." The city, by contrast, offered possibilities for "social evolution," because in it "the individual's horizon is enlarged" and he "gains a freedom of movement beyond the first jealous delimitation" of the family or the religious community. In the city, the individual could participate in any of the emerging social groups, or subcultures, that matched his preferences and interests.8

What evolved from this new social landscape, Simmel claimed, was a new, "metropolitan type" of individual, with a rational and intellectual orientation to the world, a deep psychological life, and a cool, blásé attitude that he designated as "reserve." City dwellers were hardly inhibited. On the contrary, Simmel insisted that modern urban culture liberated residents and allowed them to cultivate the very parts of themselves that the village had repressed. "Individual freedom," he wrote, "is not only to be understood in the negative sense as mere freedom of movement and emancipation from prejudices and philistinism. Its essential characteristic is rather to be found in the fact that the particularity and incomparability which ultimately every person possesses is actually expressed, giving form to life... We follow the laws of our inner nature—and this is what freedom is."9

For city dwellers at the turn of the twentieth century, being liberated from the tight grip of the family, the constraints of religious traditions, and the surveilling eyes of a small-town community was exhilarating. It's often argued that modern urban culture helped usher in an era of great creativity and aesthetic experimentation, giving rise to avant-garde movements such as surrealism, Dadaism, and the Bauhaus. But modern cities induced extraordinary innovations in what Simmel called the everyday techniques of living, too, because they rewarded residents who gave up old habits and acculturated to the new social scene. While the aesthete declared that they were treating "art as life," even the less eccentric urbanites began to experience life as art, remaking themselves, their communities, and their homes to suit their "inner natures," pushing back against "the concrete institutions" that the city and the state were already rebuilding.

From today's perspective, the act of taking a place of one's own does not appear especially "peculiar" or "extreme" (to use Simmel's terms), but at the turn of the century it was a bold and provocative way to use one's social liberties. Not that young single adults were uncommon in the late nineteenth century, when young workers were abandoning their native towns to seek jobs in metropolitan areas. In 1890, the proportion of young single men (ages fifteen to thirty-four) living in large American cities was higher than it would be until about 1990, and at the time the average age of first marriage was also higher than it would be for another century, roughly twenty-six for American men and twenty-two for American women. The fact that these are averages means that many delayed marriage until they were even older. In 1900, fully one-third of all native-born American white men between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four were single, as were half of all native white women that age in New York City. Hardly any of these bachelors lived alone, however. About half of all unmarried men, and a greater proportion of unmarried women, lived with their family (just as they do in parts of Southern Europe and in many developing nations today). Nearly all of those who left their family home to work in a distant neighborhood or city rented a room from another family or, to the growing dismay of social workers and sociologists, moved into a rooming house.10
ROOMING HOUSES, which were known as “plain hotels for plain people,” were precursors to the small, private apartments that would ultimately house single urban residents. They were popular among people in skilled trades who made a steady but modest income and wanted to escape surveillance, but their abundance and accessibility made them attractive for many migrants to the city. “Hotel life,” writes the architectural historian Paul Groth, could be “virtually untouched by the social contract and tacit supervision of life found in a family house or apartment unit shared with a group.” This fact aroused great anxiety among moral reformers of all stripes, who feared that living outside a family home would lead to isolation and a host of social problems.

Solo living was said to be dangerous for men because it made them selfish and vulnerable to wanton impulses, and for women because it made them lonely, hysterical, and depressed. As early as 1856, the poet Walt Whitman authored “Wicked Architecture,” an essay in which he listed the personal consequences of boardinghouse life as: “listlessness; emptiness; sloth; nerves; dyspepsia; flirtations; prodigality; vain show; perhaps—often, might we not say?—immorality, nay, infamy.” Fifty years later, a well-known Protestant minister warned that the boarding house system was “stretching out its arms like an octopus to catch the unwary soul.” And in his classic 1929 field study The Gold Coast and the Slum, University of Chicago sociologist Harvey Zorbaugh lamented that the typical boarding house has “no dining room, no parlor, no common meeting place. Few acquaintanceships spring up in a boarding-house... The keeper of the boarding-house has no personal contact with, or interest in, his roomers.”

Along with many of his contemporaries in the social sciences, Zorbaugh argued that living without a domestic partner was one of the key urban conditions that generated “personal disorganization” and “social anomy.” To illustrate the point, he offered statistics that showed a concentration of suicides in the neighborhoods where boardinghouses were common as well as a series of horrific stories from the “world of furnished rooms.” In the story of a “charity girl,” a young woman from Emporia, Kansas, moves into a boarding house when she arrives in Chicago at age twenty-two to attend music school. She reports that it is impossible to make friends there, and within a few months of her arrival “my loneliness amounted almost to desperation.” The “charity girl” endures a series of horrors. Her mother dies. Her father won’t talk to her because she has moved to the city. Her music teacher bluntly tells her she’s not good enough to really make it. And she has no one to comfort her, not even the other souls who share her home. “I began to look at my life in Chicago. What was there in it, after all? My music was gone. I had neither family nor friends.” For Zorbaugh, this was a parable about the dangers of urbanization. “The city is like that,” he quoted her as saying, and added his own conclusion: “Such complete anonymity could be found nowhere but in the city of today, and nowhere in the city save in the boarding-house.”

Some city dwellers relished this anonymity, however, because it liberated them to live by their own “inner laws.” In another classic study from the University of Chicago, The Ghetto, sociologist Louis Wirth explained that in the early twentieth century a number of Jewish hotels popped up in Chicago to house Jews who wanted to escape the confines of their local community. During the same era in New York City, writes one historian, “the first full-blown generation of American moderns” moved to Greenwich Village so they could enjoy “life without a father” (to use Gertrude Stein’s phrase) and forge “a community of dis-
sidents who prided themselves on living a life apart.” Villagers took up a great variety of personal, political, and aesthetic causes. But, as Ross Wetzsteon argues in his neighborhood history Republic of Dreams, they were motivated by one common aspiration: “the liberated self.”

The Village of the early twentieth century was famous for its intellectuals, artists, activists, and eccentrics, including celebrated figures such as Georgia O’Keeffe, Emma Goldman, Eugene O’Neill, Alfred Stieglitz, Walter Lippmann, Claude McKay, and Eleanor Roosevelt. But even the more ordinary Villagers enjoyed the freedoms available in what the historian Christine Stansell calls “the cradle of liberated personae,” a place where “closeted identities can come out of their hiding places” and all variety of individuals could “foster more fully realized selves.” Women’s ability to find work in the paid labor market was a key part of this self-actualization, because it gave them a degree of financial autonomy, as well as a way to break out of the domestic sphere. The community, Stansell continues, nurtured “a population of single women supporting themselves outside traditional family situations... Ladies went to work by themselves every day. They rode streetcars alone,” and their discussions focused “on how women might live outside traditional domestic roles.” Whether in New York, Chicago, London, or Paris, experiments like these spawned a new story line in the day’s novels.

“The pleasures and dangers of being alone in the city excited the imagination of female contemporaries,” writes Judith Walkowitz. “Heroines,” adds Stansell, “lit by the high ambitions of their generation, set out to prove themselves in the world, rejecting romantic love, determined to find new stories for themselves beyond marriage.”

The bohemian culture of the Village was not entirely due to the spirit of its residents. The neighborhood’s spatial arrangements—its narrow, windy streets; its intimate cafés, salons, and saloons; its great central gathering place, Washington Square Park—provided both pri-
vacy for personal experimentation and a zone for self-expression and public display. At the beginning of the twentieth century the area had a great number of tenement buildings that warehoused large families. But over the next few decades builders developed an ample supply of small, relatively inexpensive residential units in rooming houses and apartment buildings, which enabled the modern men and women of “the place where everything happens first” to live alone. In 1917, the year that Marcel Duchamp and friends ascended the Washington Square Arch and declared the area “a free and independent republic,” the writer Anna Alice Chapin identified a building nearby as “the first all-bachelor apartment house erected in town. It is appropriately called ‘the Benedick’ [from Shakespeare’s Much Ado About Nothing], after a certain young man who scoffed at matrimony.” By the 1920s developers were converting single-family houses and tenements into one- or two-room apartments, and women as well as men rushed to fill them.

The sources of this demand are not hard to identify. Between 1920 and 1930, the population of children under age fourteen in the Village dropped by around 50 percent. By 1930, about half of the adult men in the Village were unmarried, as were 40 percent of all women. These changes were consistent with the general population trends for New York City, but they happened faster in the Village, and in more exaggerated fashion. In a decade, the community of families had turned into an urban enclave for adults, particularly for singles. A growing vanguard lived alone, and the rest of the city would soon follow its lead.

Like the bohemians, gay men at the turn of the twentieth century also moved to cities and sought housing that would free them from supervision and social control. The historian George Chauncey has documented how gay friends in New York City helped each other identify places where landlords and neighbors were tolerant, recruiting other gay men for adjoining units, lest someone more judgmental and
GOING SOLO

intrusive move in. Rooming houses were especially attractive, not only because they maintained a culture of privacy, but also because they allowed residents to pay by the day or week, which made them easy to abandon if something went wrong. Chauncey reports that certain hotel residences in Manhattan attracted large numbers of gay men, as did the apartment houses where, as one analyst put it, “your neighbor is just a number on the door.” Entire neighborhoods—in Greenwich Village, Chelsea, Hell’s Kitchen, the East Fifties and Sixties—became gay enclaves, organized around bars, cafeterias, cheap restaurants, literary societies, and community centers that helped men support each other in the quest to define themselves. By the 1920s, these areas had established reputations as places where people of all sexual persuasions could come together to enjoy their autonomy, without worrying too much about whether anyone else was watching.18

In fact, before long, people went to New York City’s bohemian, bachelor, and gay neighborhoods precisely so that they could watch, if not participate in, their distinctive subcultural scenes. It is well known that during the Harlem Renaissance middle-class whites traveled uptown for a taste of the neighborhood’s exotic jazz clubs and intoxicating nightlife; so too did they go downtown to sample the Village’s bohemian offerings. The Village attracted visitors at all hours, but at night its busy streets and buzzing cultural institutions transformed the area into a theater of the new, modern lifestyle, and an adventurous audience from the city and beyond flocked to the site. This is precisely what happens when a city’s public life is robust: Strangers meet in a densely packed, diverse social environment. The stage and street merge. A new public geography develops. And then, as Richard Sennett argues in *The Fall of Public Man*, “the imaginative limits of a person’s consciousness [are] expanded . . . because the imagination of what is real, and therefore believable, is not tied down to a verification of what is routinely felt by the self.”19 The idea that one could live quite socially while keeping a place of one’s own shifts from being strange and unimaginable to being tantalizing and concrete.

Just as white middle-class exposure to African American music, dance, art, and literature during the Harlem Renaissance began to nudge blacks from the margins to the mainstream of U.S. popular culture, so too did the middle-class engagement with the world of bachelors and bohemians plant the seeds for the slow growth of new ideals about how to live. This is not to say that great numbers of Americans, or even New Yorkers, suddenly abandoned their aspirations to settle down in a traditional relationship. In fact, between the 1920s and the 1950s the dominant practice among young adults involved making a quick and early start to domestic life, and the average age of first marriage dropped by about two years for men (from 24.6 to 22.8) and one year for women (from 21.2 to 20.3). But during those same decades an alternative lifestyle—modern, independent, and single—was sprouting up in cities like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle. “New Women,” as the most liberated called themselves, were at the forefront of the change.

“The single woman, far from being a creature to be pitied and patronized, is emerging as the newest glamour girl of our times . . . She is engaging because she lives by her wits. She supports herself. She has had to sharpen her personality and mental resources to a glitter in order to survive in a competitive world and the sharpening looks good. Economically, she is a dream. She is not a parasite, a dependent, a scrounger, a sponge or a bum. She is a giver, not a taker, a winner and not a loser.”20

In 1962, a forty-year-old named Helen Gurley Brown published these words in her slim, sensational bestseller *Sex and the Single Girl.*
Brown, who went on to edit *Cosmopolitan* for more than three decades, had humble origins. She spent her early childhood in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas, but moved to Los Angeles at age ten after her father died. She was raised by her mother; her family was poor, and her sister had polio. Brown, who supported them, developed a firsthand appreciation for the struggles and aspirations of working women in her generation. She attended a small business college, found clerical work in a talent agency, and shifted into advertising when she was hired as a secretary. She gradually moved up the ranks, becoming one of the industry's most accomplished copywriters before branching out into journalism.

*Sex and the Single Girl*, which came out a year before Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, was the kind of feminist tract that scandalized and alienated a great many feminists. For it was written not against what Friedan famously called "the problem with no name"—inequality of the sexes, generated through discrimination at home, in the courts, in politics, and in the workforce—but for women who felt oppressed by the overwhelming social pressure to settle down early, forgoing years of experimentation, growth, and pleasure to get a marriage license for a domestic life that they might not need or want. Brown insisted that young women should enjoy their best years without a husband. "A single woman's biggest problem is coping with the people who are trying to marry her off," she argued, while marriage should be "insurance for the worst years of your life."

Brown's book was "not a study on how to get married but how to stay single—in superlative style." She offered her own life as Exhibit A. *Sex and the Single Girl* opens with Brown's account of how, by delaying marriage until age thirty-seven, she wound up with a smart and sexy husband who worked in the movie business, two Mercedes in the driveway, and a big house overlooking the Pacific Ocean. It was not easy to maintain her autonomy, Brown admitted. During her twenties and early thirties she watched her contemporaries rush into wedlock, often settling for men whose flaws were readily apparent. "Although many's the time I was sure I would die alone in my spinster's bed, I could never bring myself to marry just to get married." Instead, she worked doggedly to advance in her career. She developed a fierce aggression and a unique style that she was willing to "get out in the open." None of this, according to Brown, required great beauty, wealth, or a high-voltage personality. It simply demanded guts, conviction, and the fortitude to live alone.

Brown did mean alone. "Roommates," she insisted, "are for sorority girls. You need an apartment alone even if it's over a garage." The benefits of going solo were innumerable. With a home of one's own, a single woman could have time and space to cultivate her self without the social pressure of family or friends. She could work late without worrying anyone, "furnish her mind" through reading, change her appearance as she saw fit. Most of all, she gained privacy, and with that the freedom to experience a more adventurous, libidinous life. The single girl "has a better sex life than most of her married friends," Brown claimed (albeit without providing any evidence). "She need never be bored with one man per lifetime. Her choice of partners is endless and they seek her."[22]

The private apartment, writes the literature scholar Sharon Marcus, became a powerful symbol of the new urban culture during the 1960s because it "offered the single girl an eroticized arena in which to exercise her creativity and promote her own creative comforts." But few single women expected to maintain this arena for long. Brown, after all, proposed living alone not as a means to subverting marriage but rather as a means to improving it. "Serving time as a single woman," she counseled, "can give you the foundation for a better marriage if you
finally go that route.” It could also prepare a modern woman for the possibility that, even if she married, she would one day find herself on her own again, since “a man can leave a woman at fifty (though it may cost him some dough) as surely as you can leave dishes in the sink.”

Indeed, when Brown wrote *Sex and the Single Girl*, a nascent cultural movement was pushing men to do precisely this, promoting a new bachelor lifestyle that repudiated marriage and family altogether. The movement had an outlet in *Playboy* magazine, an iconic leader in Hugh Hefner, its publisher and editor, and a totem in the bunny ears that signaled men’s endorsement of a new way of living. “I don’t want my editors marrying anyone and getting a lot of foolish notions in their heads about ‘togetherness,’ home, family, and all that jazz,” said Hefner. His magazine did everything possible to discourage readers from getting those notions, too.

*Playboy* condemned conventional domestic life but embraced a new kind of masculine domesticity. “Throughout the 1950s and 1960s,” writes Bill Ooserby in the *Journal of Design History*, “*Playboy* spotlighted a series of luxurious ‘Playboy Pads’—both actual buildings and fantasy blueprints—tailored to the outlook and tastes of the hip ‘man about town.’” In *The Hearts of Men*, Barbara Ehrenreich argues that the magazine’s ideological project involved “reclaiming the indoors as a realm for masculine pleasure.” Its not so subtle message to readers: Abandon, all ye who open these pages, your suburban home, your station wagon, your controlling wife. Return to the great city. Get a place of your own and fill it with modern luxuries: fine liquor, modern art, hip clothing, a stereo, leather furniture, a king-size bed, and the greatest pleasure of all—beautiful, available women.

“*Playboy* loved women,” Ehrenreich writes. “Large-breasted, long-legged young women, anyway—and it hated wives.” Marilyn Monroe graced the cover of its first issue, which also included an attack on alimony and a story about “Miss Gold Digger of 1953.” Hundreds, eventually thousands of women posed nude for its centerfold spreads and photo features. Producers of high-end men’s products bought ad space so that their brands would be associated with the lifestyle Hefner advocated.

Real women were welcome in a playboy’s private home, particularly if they were the “fun-loving,” nubile, liberated kind that the magazine celebrated. Hefner surrounded himself with “bunnies,” first in a Chicago apartment and eventually in the famous Los Angeles mansion, and he took on several lovers at a time. His policy was always straightforward: Women could visit, spend a night or many more. But they shouldn’t get too comfortable, seek emotional commitment, or expect him to settle down. His bed may have been open, but in the end it was his alone.

**NOT THAT HE HAD TO MAKE IT.** By the 1970s both sexes benefited from the dramatic expansion of the service economy, including home cleaning, child care, elder care, food delivery, even laundry. Drawing on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the sociologist Susan Thistle has shown that, since the 1970s, “the conversion of women’s domestic tasks into work done for pay has . . . been the area of greatest job growth.” There’s a simple reason for this: Record numbers of women have been moving into the paid labor market. In 1950, about one in three of all adult women participated in the civilian labor market; by 1980, more than one half did.26

Women with more education entered the workplace at an even faster rate. Employment for those who had completed some college went from 51 percent to 67 percent during the 1970s, and from 61 percent to 74 percent among those who had earned a college degree.
As these women left their invisible jobs as uncompensated domestic workers they generated new demand for other people, mainly women, who could replace them. The personal services industry has grown ever since.

Although women’s wages lagged behind men’s (and still do), their rapid entry into the paid labor market made it far easier for them to achieve independence than ever before. The average age of first marriage, which rose slowly during the 1960s, jumped considerably in the 1970s, from twenty-one to twenty-two for women and from twenty-three to twenty-five for men. Adults didn’t only delay marriage during the tumultuous decade, they also terminated it at unprecedented rates. In 1970, about 700,000 American couples divorced, a high figure compared to the 393,000 divorces in 1960 and the 385,000 in 1950. But 1980 was unprecedented, with roughly 1.2 million divorces. Demographers calculated that the divorce rate had jumped 50 percent during the 1970s, and they marveled at the startling fact that 25 percent of all marriages that took place in 1970 had been terminated by 1977.

The nation had experienced a divorce revolution, and the transformation wasn’t due solely to women’s increased participation in the labor market. It was also fueled by an emerging moral code that placed one’s obligation to care for the self on par with, if not above, one’s commitment to family. "Beginning in the 1950s," argues Barbara Dafoe Whitehead in The Divorce Culture, Americans “became more acutely conscious of their responsibility to attend to their own individual needs and interests... People began to judge the strength and ‘health’ of family bonds according to their capacity to promote individual fulfillment and personal growth,” rather than on more traditional measures, such as income, security, or class mobility. Scholars in Europe identified a similar shift. The British sociologist Anthony Giddens argues that once women achieved economic independence, couples began to seek “pure relationships,” which are “free floating” and not anchored in traditional financial or social constraints. The modern marriage, he writes, “becomes more and more a relationship initiated for, and kept going for as long as, it delivers emotional satisfaction to be derived from close contact with another.” When it fails to do so, as marriage often does during hard times, individuals feel an obligation to justify sustaining it, because divorce is a readily available option. By the 1970s, more people began to act as if their quest for personal happiness—whether as a playboy, a liberated woman, or simply a “single”—trumped all other obligations. During that decade, writes David Sarasohn, “the freedom to hop from one relationship to the next was as essential as anything in the Bill of Rights.” Finding a place of one’s own was the best way to achieve it.

During the 1960s and ’70s the housing market aided the search for autonomy, with inventory expanding much faster than the population, particularly in central cities, where middle-class families were fleeing. The urban crisis, as it came to be known, proved itself an opportunity for unmarried adults seeking their own apartments in metropolitan settings. In most big cities, middle-class individuals could easily find affordable rental units, and as they clustered together in places of their own they forged neighborhood cultures organized around single life: Lincoln Park in Chicago. The Marina District in San Francisco. West Hollywood in Los Angeles. Belltown in Seattle. These weren’t bohemies or gay enclaves, but places for urban professionals, the young and never married as well as divorcees. They were full of apartment buildings, both new and newly renovated, to meet the needs of an increasingly individuated marketplace. Solo living was suddenly in vogue.

Consider how many people were doing it. In 1960, about 7 million Americans lived alone, but by the end of the decade more than 4 million others had joined them, making for some 11 million one-person households in the United States. During the 1970s the ranks rose faster
and higher than ever before, topping 18 million in 1980. The increase was particularly sharp in cities. In Manhattan, for instance, the proportion of residential units with just one resident went from 35 percent in 1960 to 46 percent in 1980, and the proportional rise was even greater in Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas, Seattle, and San Francisco. The numbers of people living alone has continued to increase since the 1970s. It rose slowly during the 1980s and 1990s, then soared in the 2000s. Today more than 5 million Americans under thirty-five have places of their own.

Many of the young adults who live alone were brought up to do so. Not explicitly, since all children share their home with a family or adults of some sort, and schools do not promote living alone as a goal. But today an unprecedented number of children around the world develop the capacity and desire to live independently through another, historically novel experience: growing up in a room of one's own.

Traditionally, most children in the same family shared a room with each other, if not with their parents. This was true, of course, for the children of immigrant families who lived in urban tenements, and of African American children whose families packed into apartments after migrating to the northern states. But, until recently, it was also true of native-born white middle-class families, and even of some affluent ones. According to the U.S. Census, in 1960 the average family household had 2.4 children and 0.7 bedrooms per child. Since then, American families have become smaller and homes have grown larger. By 1980 the average household had 2 children and 1 bedroom per child, and in 2000 it had 1.9 children and 1.1 bedrooms per child—meaning it is common for American kids to have not only their own room, but perhaps even some claim on another one. Indeed, the size of a typical American home more than doubled between 1950 and 2000, rising from 983 square feet to more than 2,200. Today in many middle-class communities parents feel negligent if they don't provide a private bedroom for each of their children. Adults who love living in city centers will leave for the suburbs so they can give their children private space. Once a luxury, in recent years it has become an entitlement of middle-class life.

Whether in cities or suburbs, today's children also spend an unprecedented amount of time home alone, preparing their own snacks or meals and planning their own leisure time, because it's increasingly common for both of their parents to spend their weekdays at work. According to "Latchkey Kids," a report by the William Gladden Foundation, by 2005 somewhere between 10 million and 15 million American children under age sixteen were regularly taking care of themselves after school or during summer vacations. "More children today have less adult supervision than ever before in American history," the report claims, and many "begin their self-care at about age eight." The rise of latchkey kids and private rooms within the home is an international phenomenon. In Europe, the dramatic decline in fertility rates over the past fifty years has transformed the experience of domestic space. Between 1960 and 2000, the average number of people per household fell from 3.1 to 2.3 in England, from 3.1 to 2.4 in France, from 3.8 to 2.6 in Germany, from 3.6 to 2.6 in Italy, and from 2.8 to 2.1 in Denmark. The trends are similar in Canada, where between 1960 and 2005 the average household size dropped from 4 to 2.5; in Japan, where from 1975 to 2005 it went from 3.3 in to 2.5; and in the United States, where it plummeted from nearly 5 in 1900 to 3 in 1950 and 2.6 in 2000. In nearly all of these nations, the shrinking family has coincided with the extraordinary physical growth of the house and the apartment. By the late twentieth century, people throughout
the developed world could be together at home with their family, but also alone.

Today, of course, we no longer need private rooms to separate into individual environments. Entire families can sit together, and even share a meal, while each member is immersed in an iPhone or a laptop rather than in conversation with those nearby. But the availability of a domestic private sphere for each person in a middle-class residence changed the norms of family interaction long before the advent of social media. In her comparative study of child-rearing practices among different class groups in the United States, sociologist Annette Lareau noticed that in the typical middle-class family, each child has his or her own room, and “except for times when they share meals (this happens only once every few days), parents and children are rarely all together in the same room.” Instead, family life is organized around the needs and interests of each individual, parents and children included. The children do not belong to the same sports teams, play the same instruments, or hang out with the same friends, so the family develops a schedule that allows each one to be dropped off and picked up on his or her own. The parents do everything to promote “the individual development of each child,” and in the process the children “learn to think of themselves as special and as entitled.” But they also grow hostile toward and competitive with their siblings. For although the middle-class children rarely engage in face-to-face interaction with each other, Lareau observes, “references to ‘hating’ a family member are common and elicit no special reaction.” 56 Things are calmer when everyone keeps to himself.

In an influential 1958 essay, the psychologist and pediatrician Donald Winnicott argued, paradoxically, that “the capacity to be alone is based on the experience of being alone in the presence of someone, and that without a sufficiency of this experience the capacity to be alone cannot develop.” Specifically, Winnicott was referring to the infant and mother relationship, and to the developmental process through which a young child learns to feel secure on his or her own and self-contained when with others, because the reliable presence of the mother conveys the sense that the environment is benign and allows for healthy attachments. This process may well still be important, but children who grew up in the decades after Winnicott published his essay have had more opportunities to cultivate an ability to be alone—and not only because so many had private bedrooms.

One striking cultural change related to the rise of private bedrooms concerns the way child psychologists advise parents to help their infants sleep. For most of human history, mothers and infants slept together; today, the great majority of the world’s mothers and children still do. The biological anthropologist James McKenna, who directs the Mother-Baby Behavioral Sleep Lab at Notre Dame University, argues that in the process of evolution mothers developed an innate capacity to attend to the needs of their sleeping children, even when they themselves are in deep sleep. While many cultures have used cradles to support sleeping babies, the crib was not widely marketed to or used by middle-class families until the twentieth century. Initially, babies who slept in cribs were placed near their mothers, close to or right next to the family bed. But in late 1946 a pediatrician named Benjamin Spock published The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care, in which (among other things) he advised parents to place newborns in rooms of their own so that they could learn to sleep independently, while also giving Mom and Dad some privacy and peace. 57

It’s hard to measure the impact of a few lines in an advice book, but this, of course, was no ordinary publication. The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care went on to sell more than 50 million copies in thirty-nine languages, placing it among the bestselling books of all
time. By the 1950s, "Dr. Spock" had become the modern world's clear authority on child care and development, and his views on a great variety of issues—including sleep training for infants—commanded the attention of countless doctors and parents. In 2000, the chairwoman of the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission was using her office to advise all parents to avoid sleeping with children under the age of two. And she did so with the full support of Dr. Spock's successors: "sleep scientists" and child psychologists whose views on the value of individuating sleeping infants could be extreme.

In the 1986 bestseller *Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems*, for instance, Richard Ferber reports, "We know for a fact that people sleep better alone in bed." Parents, he acknowledges, may be tempted to give in to their infants' desires to be near them when they slumber, and some may even "feel this is in their children's best interests." But he believes they are mistaken: "Sleeping alone is an important part of his learning to be able to separate from you without anxiety and to see himself as an independent individual." Ferber has tough words for parents who resist his advice: "If you find that you prefer to have your child in your bed, you should examine your own feelings very carefully," since it's possible that "instead of helping your child you are using him to avoid facing and solving your own problems... If these problems cannot be simply settled, then professional counseling may be required."³⁸ Some parents were indeed put off by the harshness of the "Ferber method," but millions of others bought his books and steeled themselves for the experience of "Ferberizing" their children. In the process, they helped acculturate the next generation to the experience of being alone.

After growing up in a private bedroom with plenty of personal time, an increasing number of young adults want to maintain the condition when they leave home for the first time—even, or perhaps especially, if they are going to college. Housing officers at universities throughout the country report that a great majority of their entering students have never shared a bedroom and that many have trouble adjusting to life with a roommate during their first year. Once that year is finished, they're willing to pay extra to restore their privacy. On today's university campuses, the newest dormitories have an ample supply of single rooms, as well as suite-style units where students share a common area but have a private room with a bed and desk. Most colleges developed their housing stock before students began requesting singles, however, and today demand for private sleeping quarters far exceeds the supply.

For example, in 2006, Miami University housing director Lucinda Covenev acknowledged that the school had been consistently unable to accommodate most requests for single residences and announced plans to build hundreds of new single-room units. "We need to meet the needs of the modern student," she told the school paper. "A lot of students want that environment and privacy... We understand these residence halls were built a long time ago and we're working to try to make on-campus living more attractive." In 2008, George Washington University reported that it had received 286 applications for five single-room units in one of its dorms, and promised that it would add three hundred single units to its supply when it completed construction and renovation of new facilities. In 2009, Boston University opened a high-rise with luxurious "apartment-style" dorms for undergraduates, featuring a large number of one-person units (called singles) and suites in which each resident has a private room. In previous eras, graduating seniors packed into communal houses to share their final year of college near close friends. Today, a new spirit is emerging. "I applied by myself because my friends were all too cheap to live here," a resident of the BU dorm told the *Boston Globe.*³⁹ Now she could live without them, too.
AT LEAST ONE MOTHER with a child in BU’s luxury dorm recognized that her son would have a hard time maintaining his lifestyle after he left the university. “You graduate facing a terrible job market and having to live with rats in Brooklyn,” she told him in the fall of 2009. She could have added one more thing: Regardless of their preferences, all but the most affluent young adults who move to big cities to make it on their own soon discover that they’ll also have to live with roommates. And this is significant, because the distinction between living with roommates and having a home of one’s own has acquired great cultural significance. For the current generation of young people, it’s the crucial turning point between second adolescence and becoming adult.

Take Justin,* who was an aspiring journalist with a fresh degree from a Big Ten school when he got recruited to work in New York City at a job that came with transitional corporate housing. On first glance, Justin appears shy and guarded. He’s physically slight, with curly brown hair, deep-set eyes, and a soft, gentle voice that’s often hard to hear. He’s personable, and funny, once he gets comfortable, but since this can take a while he found that meeting people in New York was more difficult than he’d anticipated. Living alone didn’t help. Fortunately, several of his college friends had also moved there, and through them he found a shared apartment where the roommates enjoyed going out together just as they had when they were in school. Justin hadn’t soured on going solo, but he knew he wasn’t ready and that he could try again when the time was right.

It can be fun to have roommates when you’re young and single, as anyone who’s watched *Friends* or *Three’s Company* surely knows. Roommates provide companionship, so you don’t have to feel alone when you wake up in the morning or come home after a rough day. When you move to a new city, they can help you meet people, invite you to parties, and add to your social network. They may share in the cooking, cleaning, and shopping, which means you don’t have to do everything. And they help pay the rent, which means you can live in a better neighborhood or save money for going out. For years, Justin enjoyed all these benefits, so much that he endured a seemingly endless series of transitions—people moving in and out, being forced to search for new apartments, relocating to different neighborhoods—so that he could keep sharing a place with people his age. But after five years Justin found himself focusing on the costs of this situation. For, as anyone who’s watched *Friends* or *Three’s Company* also knows, often—too often—having roommates is no fun at all.

Is there anyone who has lived with roommates and not escaped with tales of woe? Review, among the many stories cataloged in the “trouble with roommates” findings from my research: The roommate, once a friend, who stops paying his rent or his share of the bills. The roommate who steals. The roommate with bad taste. The roommate who never leaves home. The roommate who goes silent. The roommate who blogs about you. The roommate with the TV addiction. The roommate with a drinking problem. The roommate who eats your food. The roommate who won’t do the dishes. The roommate who smells. The roommate who hates your girlfriend. The roommate who hits on your girlfriend. The roommate who becomes your girlfriend, and then breaks up with you . . . and refuses to move out.

Justin’s experiences were hardly catastrophic, but he had his share of difficulties. In one apartment, he and a roommate got on each other’s nerves and the atmosphere quickly became stressful. Justin dreaded

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* Justin is a pseudonym, as are the names of all the singletons who appear in this book, except those who are public figures. Granting anonymity to the subjects of social science research is the standard way of protecting them, and universities typically require scholars to do so.
seeing him in the living room or at the table. He started avoiding home, or rushed straight to his room when he got there. It was awful, he remembers: "When you don't feel close to your roommates, in some ways that's lonelier than living alone because your isolation is strikingly in front of you. It totally sucks." So he moved, again to a place with roommates. The new place was better, but Justin felt himself still longing for more privacy. With roommates, he explains, "When you bring a girl home, not only will the girl notice your roommates, but your roommates will notice her." The social life at home becomes a burden, sometimes an unbearable one. The conversation the next morning can be even worse. As Justin hit his late twenties, he had plenty of friends and enough money to afford a one-bedroom apartment downtown if he cut out some other expenses and gave up any hope of accumulating savings. The choice was easy. He decided to live alone.

The experience was transformative. "Now I can't imagine living with a roommate," Justin explains. "I would not be happy." He's older, and in his social circle, he says, once you're past your mid-twenties there's an expectation that you'll either live with a partner or have a place of your own. There's a stigma around having roommates as a grown-up, he reports. "I might be embarrassed to admit it. I mean, I feel like an adult now and it's hard to imagine. Having roommates feels sort of unadult."

THE CAPACITY TO LIVE ALONE

I HAVE ALWAYS LIVED SINGLE, and never yearned to live any other way," writes Bella DePaulo, the psychologist, author, and singles advocate. DePaulo grew up in Dunmore, Pennsylvania, a small town where children learned that getting married was all but obligatory. Before she went to college, it never occurred to her that she could opt out, but as an adult she recognized that this was exactly what she wanted. "I don't think there was a specific moment when I realized I LIKE living single. This is who I am. It's not going to change," she explains. "To get to that point, I think I had to understand a bigger point—it is fine (good, even) to live the life that is most meaningful to you, even if your way is not the most conventional one." 1

One need not grow up in a small town like Dunmore to have trouble imagining the possibility of living alone someday. The ideal of achieving security in a marriage or with an intimate partner remains fundamental to our culture, and it is instilled in the minds of our young. Children in modern societies may well have more private space