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## Living alone: a testament to freedom or an erosion of society?

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A few months ago, Nicki Roswell had a knock on her door. A neighbour needed the back of her dress laced up and didn't have anyone to do it for her. Ms. Roswell sympathized, since she lives alone herself, and fastened the woman's clothing. The two are residents of Liberty Village, a fast-growing downtown Toronto neighbourhood where nearly 55 per cent of the population – 2,200 people, from ambitious twentysomethings to midlife professionals – resides solo.

While they may live by themselves, demographically they are in good company: There are now, for the first time, more one-person households in Canada than those populated by couples who have children. (Only two-person households are more common.)

Census figures released last fall revealed that 27.6 per cent of Canadian homes have just one occupant, a vast shift from decades past.

Single dwellers accounted for only 7.4 per cent of homes in 1951 and 13.4 per cent in 1971.

Today, there are 3,673,305 single-occupancy households in the country, an increase that is mirrored in the United States and a few steps behind similar trends in Europe.

For her part, Ms. Roswell has enjoyed being "sequestered" in her bachelor townhouse since 2009, after her divorce. And the 39-year-old art director is not in any hurry to change it.

"You're not anxious," she says, "about 'completing your life' or 'moving to the next phase,' because this phase is not a place of discomfort."

At least, not until it's made that way by others, such as the family friend who asked her pointedly why women today believe their lives must be "perfect" before they have children, or the business associate who urged her to "go out and get some sperm, right away!"

"Seriously, I'm really getting tired of the sense that I'm running out of time for something and that my life has to be on the nation's schedule," Ms. Roswell says. "I tried following a formula, and my happily ever after didn't work out so well, so I'm just going to do [what] I want to do."

She pauses. "Am I selfishly single? I don't know."

Despite the judgment it still can attract, independent living has come a long way from the stereotypes of spinsters hoarding cats and feckless eternal bachelors.

The number of years that all kinds of people spend unmarried and childless is rising: In 1971, 42 per cent of Canadians aged 18 to 34 were married with children; by 2001, it was only 18 per cent. Living alone is no longer seen as a transitional purgatory endured only after divorce or the death of a spouse, but as a symbol of modern economic independence.

Many of these solo fliers are young professionals who gravitate toward new condominium developments in areas such as Yaletown and Gastown in Vancouver or Calgary's Eau Claire, Beltline and Mission, where 45 per cent of the population lived alone as of 2006.

One of the most conspicuous single-living enclaves in Toronto is Ms. Roswell's Liberty Village, in the city's west end, where glass condo towers are shooting up at a staggering pace on former industrial lands.

The pattern will only intensify as the neighbourhood develops: Single dwellers promise to make up approximately 70 per cent of those buying property from CanAlfa, a developer building nearly 1,600 units in the area.

The area's meatier history – a munitions factory, a sizable prison – has been largely eradicated. The community hub is now the Metro grocery store, where gym bunnies from the adjacent Good Life have been known to flirt among the bulk bins. Nightly after work, a parade of girls walk French bulldogs and Chinese-crested powder puffs; men do the same with their Yorkies and shih tzus.

This is the briefcase-gym-bag-backpack set, productivity on overdrive: They use the treadmill at all hours, with young women showing off the results on Thursday nights as they teeter into cabs on porno heels.

Aside from a handful of strollers and Baby Bjorns, children aren't a common sight in the neighbourhood, certainly not the way they are in adjacent Parkdale, where Tibetan and Roma immigrant families fill the streets before the school bell goes every morning.

In Liberty, one playground stood quiet over the course of two weeks: Little dogs kicked up the sand until one Saturday when three squealing children took the turf back.

Living communally in families was once almost obligatory, socially and economically, especially for women. However, the gender revolution of the 1960s and 1970s saw both sexes begin to delay forming families to pursue their careers.

The migration of the past couple of decades back into revitalized downtowns has made solo living particularly attractive: Cities offer a robust social calendar, and lately the rise of social media and its extended friend circles have made the prospect of a lonely, Thoreau-like existence seem even more outdated.

"The collective project of living alone grew out of the culture of modern cities," says Eric Klinenberg, a New York University sociology professor and the author of a 2011 book about the phenomenon called *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone*.

He interviewed 300 singletons – people who live alone but aren't necessarily romantically single – and found that downtown dwellers easily extended their home beyond their own walls and into the "sanctuary in the city," the urban playgrounds of gyms, restaurants, bars and coffee houses that allow people to get their social fix even as they maintain an exclusive domestic space.

This abundance of choice may lead to a collision of values: Those who live alone, especially if they're healthy and financially secure in an urban setting, tout its freedoms and opportunities for self-realization.

Others predict solos will regret it later, when they begin craving marriage and children or are left infirm and uncared-for in old age.

Some critics of the new wave of singles look askance at the formation of solo ghettos dominated by careerist "transient twentysomethings" who raise dogs, not children. An article last year in Toronto weekly *The Grid* asked, "Is Liberty Village family-unfriendly?"

One commenter fired back, "Aren't we allowed to have neighbourhoods too? You don't hear us complaining about feeling unwelcome in your 'family-friendly' residential neighbourhoods with schools and big houses. A lot of us can't afford houses in Toronto anyway."

Others warn about the perils of the female biological clock, from Lori Gottlieb's polarizing 2010 book *Marry Him: The Case for Settling for Mr. Good Enough*, to the collective scream that rose up around "All The Single Ladies," Kate Bolick's 2011 Atlantic article about being unbetrothed at the age of 39.

It closed in Amsterdam at a housing complex where applicants must be female and "commit to living alone." Enchanted, Ms. Bolick concluded, "A room of one's own, for each of us."

Detractors warned that she would rue her choices, symbolized by a photo of Ms. Bolick sipping Champagne as a wedding bouquet sailed over her head.

Prof. Klinenberg argues that with today's extended lifespans, people inevitably pass in and out of relationships, a fluid cycle in which it sometimes makes more sense to go it alone.

Andy Rosso, a 37-year-old cameraman, has lived on his own for a decade in Toronto. "It's not 1975, where if you were 27 and you didn't have four kids, you were washed up," he says. "You're trying to get yourself right before you move onto the next stage of your life."

While Mr. Rosso isn't opposed to living with somebody, the second bedroom in his Liberty Village townhouse is occupied by golf clubs for the time being.

"I look at it from the perspective of not wearing pants a lot, which is good," he jokes about his bachelor pad. "You can do what you want. You're on your own clock."

"It seems like a selfish thing to say, but it's indicative of our generation. Is it selfish, or on the road to self-actualization? What's the difference between the two?"

While plenty of guys like Mr. Rosso have moved to Liberty Village to live close to work, "the single female aged 25 to 35 has been a major driver," says Scott McLellan, senior vice-president of Plazacorp, a developer with four towers going up in Liberty.

"They don't look at this as a transitional move, the 'I'll end up marrying somebody and moving to the suburbs.' I don't think that's part of the agenda any more. They see this as long-term. Monday to Friday is completely dedicated to career growth and a lifestyle that supports it."

That's an apt description of Katie Tobin, a 26-year-old wardrobe stylist for broadcast, entering her third year of living alone in Liberty Village.

Unfettered by familial surveillance or the squeeze of roommates (she had five of them in university), day to day she's tethered only to her dog, a toy poodle named Ranch.

"I come home and I love it," Ms. Tobin says of her very pink one-bedroom townhouse apartment. "Some nights, my house is a disaster, but I don't even care and I put on a movie. I don't have to satisfy anyone."

Being on her own only bothers her the occasional Sunday, a day she still links with childhood family dinners. "You've had fun all weekend, you've been busy-busy all week and now you're stopping for a second, sitting there. You're not distracted and so you notice it: 'I am alone.'"

But the intermittent loneliness, for her, is a small price to pay for her independence.

Amanda Kirkland feels the same way. She has lived alone in Liberty Village for eight years, currently in a two-bedroom-plus-den condo. "The downtime I have at the end of the day, that's when I need to go to the gym, decompress, walk the dogs," the 45-year-old says. "There's no way of it sounding besides me-me, but it's what I gotta do."

Ms. Kirkland is vice-president at developer CanAlfa; construction on its fifth condo tower in the area begins this year.

"Work's always been important to me," she says. "From the day I got out of university, I wanted to get a job and earn money. I didn't want to go backpacking. I'm picky. I know what I want and I know what I don't want."

She adds, "I'd be fine with somebody here three or four nights – and then you can go home."

For solos who get me time, not diapers, after work, Liberty Village is custom-tailored: The area teems with amenities catering to the cult of the individual, from gyms and pools in nearly every condo, tanning salons and manicurists around every corner, as well as two juice bars and a new laser clinic.

"This is not just a neighbourhood suited for the single young person – it coddles them," Ms. Roswell says.

Yet while some might malign singles as shallow or narcissistic, many of them actually do more for their families and communities than married folk, according to a 2011 University of Massachusetts report.

"The unmarried are typically portrayed as unencumbered by family obligations, or even as self-centered individuals who do not help out in the community the way married couples do," wrote lead author and sociology professor Naomi Gerstel.

She found the opposite: Unmarried adults pitched in more with parents, siblings and neighbours than did their married counterparts, who had fewer contacts and community involvement thanks to the demands of their marital unions.

Rather than "selfish singles," sociologists are increasingly using the term "greedy marriage" to describe the way domestic responsibilities can pull couples away from the wider world. People in that position easily can resent those who have chosen to remain untied by family bonds.

The time benefits afforded to solos "are threatening to people who think that the way to live a good and happy life is to get married, have kids and live in your own house," says Bella DePaulo, a visiting professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is the author of *Singled Out: How Singles are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After*.

"When [couples married with children] see more people living an entirely different way, especially as they see that so many of those people are living happy, productive, meaningful lives, it threatens their sense that their way should be the preferred way," Prof. DePaulo says. "If all of these single people were home crying into their beer, that would not be threatening."

However, there still are downsides. Some Liberty Village solos complain about the toll of tending to an entire house by themselves, including the Liberty- requisite dog. They can be unsettled by things that go bump in the night.

"There are moments at night where I think, 'I really wish I had someone to tell that about to.' Yes, I can pick up the phone, but to have somebody regularly there – yeah," admits 42-year-old Michelle Di Rasio, who has lived on her own in a two-bedroom townhouse for eight years.

Still, Ms. Di Rasio is divorced, and understands that a person can also feel infinitely more lonely while living with someone. An extrovert with a good social network, she will often go out and share meals with her neighbours.

"I know what it's like to be very unhappy in a relationship so I'm really hesitant to have that kind of commitment again," Ms. Di Rasio says. "There are people who are together because they're afraid of being alone. What are they doing? They're so unhappy, it just blows my mind."

As she knows, however, anxieties still can swirl when a family member chooses to go it alone. Ms. Di Rasio is the youngest of five siblings in an Italian family, and all the others are married with children. "My family's never ever given me hard a time, but I think deep down they're thinking, 'Why aren't you living with someone?'"

From well-meaning acquaintances, she has also heard, *ad nauseam*: "Don't wait too long, you're going to get too picky."

Why does this "curiously old-fashioned outsider status" still persist around those who choose to reside alone, as Slate.com's Katie Roiphe put it last year? Some people argue there is good reason not to see the option through such rosy glasses.

**"Where people are wholly fulfilled in an independent lifestyle, then that's obviously just fine. But there are a great many people out there who would like to be married," says Andrea Mrozek, manager of research and communications at the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, a non-profit research organization.**

In 2008, 91 per cent of teen girls and 89 per cent of teen boys said they expected to get married and even more presumed they would have children: 94 per cent of the young women and 95 per cent of the young men, according to sociologist Reginald W. Bibby's 2009 book, *The Emerging Millennials*, which surveyed 5,000 teens.

**Ms. Mrozek and other pro-family advocates also suggest that living with a spouse helps people evolve: "Where people are extending their single lives from the sense of, 'I don't want to give up anything, I don't want to change anything, I can't compromise on certain things,' I think anybody would be hard pressed to see that as a hallmark of maturity," she says.**

And she believes many solos aren't as satisfied as they let on. **"People slide into a lonely lifestyle by accident: They think they would have gotten married by a certain age and it hasn't happened. ...**

**"Alternatively, they fall into that through tragic circumstances in their life like a difficult breakup or a marriage demise. ... Is that a trend line we want to celebrate?"**

Indeed, research has found that lack of social connection can pose significant health risks, especially among older populations. Loneliness has been linked to higher stress levels and blood pressure, poorer sleep and an increased chance of depression and Alzheimer's disease.

Already, for some of the younger denizens of Liberty Village, getting sick alone is seen as a liability: "If you have the chills and it's really hard to get out from under a blanket off the couch to get tea or NeoCitran you don't have anybody to bring it to you," Mr. Rosso says, laughing, but clearly from experience.

But observers are mistaken if they think that most who live alone are really looking for such total autonomy.

"People who live alone are not completely self-reliant. It's the interdependence of the places that they live that make their independence possible," Prof. Klinenberg says.

Marriage advocates often "talk as if marriage solves these deep human problems – securing happiness and avoiding loneliness, finding meaning. We know at this point that a great many marriages don't deliver those benefits. I'm not saying getting a place of their own solves all their problems or makes life perfect, but I don't think anything does."

Many solos do acknowledge a worry, however, that the longer you live alone – even in swishy, social Liberty Village – the rougher your edges might become.

"I've never put up with a lot," says Jordan Epstein, a 33-year-old real-estate agent who moved here from Thornhill in 2010. "It's my place. As soon as I walk in the door, it's all mine. I don't have to worry about other people."

In November, Mr. Epstein hosted a friend in from out of town. After mere hours, he admits, he was "going crazy": "I just don't enjoy having someone around. The freedom to wake up and walk around the kitchen naked, if I want to, isn't there."

Are those who live alone diminishing their capacity to be among others, or simply modifying what they want out of life?

Currently single, Mr. Epstein jokes that he bought two 55-inch flat-screen televisions, one for his bedroom and one for his living room, before investing in a bed.

If a woman were going to move in, he says, he would have her sign a cohabitational agreement. But, he adds, "I don't see the need to rush to move in because I like knowing they have their own place they can go back to if they need their space."

Ms. Roswell sees the same philosophy play itself out through the window of her ground-floor townhouse, when she witnesses the weekend parade of boyfriends and girlfriends calling on her neighbours. "It feels like people are visiting their relationships rather than thrusting themselves headlong into commitments."

She has her own caveats for any future cohabitation: "It cannot represent a situation that makes me less than I am over here by myself. ... It should contribute to it. That's a lot to ask for from any relationship, because what I'm enjoying now is pretty good."

Over at Ms. Tobin's very pink townhouse, a plush chair moulded like a high-heeled shoe greets guests at the door. The stylist accepts that a boyfriend literally could not fit into her one-bedroom woman cave.

Sometimes she frets about her "girly" apartment, but female friends have reassured her: "They say, 'Katie, you're never going to live like this again – you might as well girlify this shit.' When am I ever going to have a bedroom with a pink wall?"

Ms. Tobin understands the transitory nature of her living arrangements, just as Prof. Klinenberg describes, and for today she is far from eager to trade them in. "It's comfortable. It's almost a community," she says. "I have everything I want. At this point in time, I don't even know where else I would live right now."