If you have a romantic partner, maybe you’ve noticed that you two spend an awful lot of time together—and that you haven’t seen other people quite as much as you’d like. Or if you’re single (and many of your friends aren’t), you might have gotten the eerie feeling that I sometimes do: that you’re in a deserted town, as if you woke one morning to find the houses all empty, the stores boarded up. Where’d everyone go?

Either way, that feeling might not just be in your head. Kaisa Kuurne, a sociologist at the University of Helsinki, told me she was “a little bit shocked” when she started mapping Finnish adults’ relationships for a 2012 study, investigating whom subjects felt close to and how they interacted day to day. Subjects who lived with a romantic partner seemed to have receded into their coupledom. When Kuurne asked them to rate, on a scale of one to seven, how close various relationships felt, they’d frequently give the highest mark to only their partner and their children, if they had them; when subjects illustrated their social networks, they’d commonly put those other connections—friends, co-workers, siblings—on the outskirts of their map. People outside the household, for the most part, weren’t “woven into that everyday life,” Kuurne told me.

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