



The Third Act

FOMO YOLO SOLO

By [Ellen Waterston](#)

COVID leveled the playing field when it came to Fear of Missing Out. After all, no one was having soirees or headed out on a camping trip or meeting at a brewery without you. No one was going to the symphony or theater or floating the river without you. During COVID there was nothing to feel left out about. Now that restrictions are lifting many see the folly and insecurity of their pre-COVID [FOMO ways](#): the unnecessary anxiety and social frenzy it caused, and are resolved not to succumb now that fun is back. We'll see. Feeling invited, seen, wanted, appreciated, up to date and up to snuff is human nature. We need validation through companionship.

[As to YOLO](#), regardless of age, all are charging out of lockdown waving the You Only Live Once banner, determined to make up for lost time. Forget the cost, work is overrated. After a year of having our wings clipped, "Go!" is the clarion call. Ride horses across Mongolia. Don that squirrel suit and leap off the Alps. Get that camper van, cost be damned. Thanks to COVID, we have to accomplish two years-worth of our bucket lists in one.

And then there's SOLO. Unlike FOMO and YOLO, it's not a hip acronym. It's a condition. We now all have first-hand experience of SOLO. COVID gave everyone a taste of the one-hand-clapping concept, isolated from our friends, quarantined in our houses or apartments. The poignant image of the young African American boy staring down from the window of a New York City tenement building at a world he wasn't allowed to access, to experience—he was all of us. The adult child blowing kisses to her elderly parent from outside the assisted living facility—she was all of us. Now, taking the first, unmasked steps toward a longed-for hug after months of distancing, we are startled to discover how emotional these reunions are. COVID created a monotone and monochrome world, a life stripped of color, sound, motion, energy and each other. Through it, we did our best. But still, isolated and alone was, well, lonely.

The older among us didn't require a worldwide pandemic to learn about solitary confinement. In 2020 the death of a partner or a divorce left 28% of Boomers stranded on solo island. I say stranded because, with few exceptions, that's how people describe living alone. Remember, we're social animals. We live in a relative sense, know better who we are when we are part of a social context. Older and alone is not anyone's number-one choice. Maybe you're living in the same too-big house you and your now-deceased partner shared. (Think about Airbnb-ing one of those extra rooms.) Maybe you retired just before losing a spouse and now have no travel partner, no one to share the news of the day with. (Check out trips for older travelers such as Roads Scholar, read Kent Haruf's "Our Souls at Night," or form a caravan of camper vans and head out!)

Maybe you're fearful after a divorce but living alone isn't cutting it. (Close to 15% of the population over 65 use dating sites. The opera's not over...) Maybe dancing was your favorite activity. Maybe your grandchildren are far away. Maybe you realize that most of the world population is far worse off than you and want to do something about it.

According to a May 2021 "Sixty Minutes" episode anchored by Leslie Stahl, babies born today will [live until 104](#). The number over 65 in 2020? 56 million. That number will be 80 million in 2040 and 95 million in 2060 as Boomers hit the ageing threshold, a thinly veiled way of saying a candidate for dying. Forty-two percent of those over 65 currently live alone. That climbs to 58% for those 80 and over. Boomers are of interest, socially, politically and economically, but to whom and why? Let's make certain we drive the discussion about policies that affect us, rather than those who see us as in the way. There's power in older numbers. Boomers are a force for change, not merely an obstacle to younger generations' progress, as many would have you believe. Just when you thought all you had to think about was putting your feet up, it might be time to put your foot down, to shape the conversation about this demographic you are part of, and while you're at it, to shape the conversation about all kinds of pressing problems that your life experience can inform.

The Central Oregon region has many different nonprofit organizations supporting arts, science, environment, families, education...and they all need you. It's well documented that isolation is, quite literally, bad for your health—so whatever you do, don't do nothing and remember, you're not alone. Us old folks, we're in this together.

—Poet and author [Ellen Waterston](#) is a woman of a certain age who resides in Bend. "The Third Act" is a series of columns on ageing and ageism.