

Life

The only one in the loop



Susie Boyt

Column

It is a good move in life never to ask anyone where they are going or where they have been. It is polite, and, possibly, vital for a happy home. There are subtle ways of finding out, of course, if you must know, such as, "Could you be passing the ironmongers later on?", or, "Will you be needing the ping-pong bats?". But direct enquiries about geography and history — no one wants to answer those.

Mothers don't want to be asked to account for their movements and neither do fathers; teenagers really don't want to be asked. The single don't like it, the elderly won't stand for it and toddlers hate it — for it's awfully hard for them to keep their mystery. The busy haven't got time to tell you and, with the quiet-living, it may be a matter of pride.

Whether you are heroic or disgraceful in your pursuits, whether you have lost the afternoon at the William Hill on the corner or have been helping at the local food bank, it is a good feeling being the only one in the loop. The Gospel of Matthew says when it comes to charity the left hand shouldn't know what the right hand

doing but I sometimes think St Matthew could have extended it a bit.

It is exhilarating keeping one or two things hidden, even if it's merely that you've nipped out at an unusual hour to the supermarket for some spray starch, or you almost did. Even if it's only that you're starting to wonder if tinned lychees mightn't be a bad hangover cure. So, you're a bit of a dark horse. It's hardly a crime.

December is a great month for keeping secrets. If anyone expresses curiosity as to your whereabouts, you can raise your brows in a way that implies you are deep in research for the ultimate Christmas present — a gift that conveys thoughts and ideas that words simply cannot express — and if that entails multiple trips to the guitar shops of Denmark Street, then so be it. Even if the truth is you are paying a slightly wistful visit to the dental hygienist, the one who tells you every year about the time the Pyrex dish of roast potatoes exploded, lacing the golden roast turkey with shards of glass, frosting the sprouts and chestnuts, adding lustrous glass chips to the gravy, so that an emergency Chinese takeaway had to be

summoned, it's nice not to have to reveal that you saw her. I don't know why . . .

Perhaps if your deeds were only noble, you'd want to shout them from the rooftop, but no, not even then. For it's agreeable when one's good acts are quietly discovered, especially when the slight attempt to hide them has also been unearthed. January, however, is an impossible time to keep things under your hat. In January people don't just want to know your movements, they want something much more from you — your intentions. It's an awful lot to ask. "In which ways do you plan to improve your character this year?" (Goodness knows it needs it, but what a question!) "What will be the high points in the spring?" (What are you, a psychic all of a sudden?) Is it any wonder you keep listening to Noël Coward singing "Sail Away"? That you keep singing it yourself?

I lived alone for most of the time between 18 and 26 and hardly anyone ever knew where I was. They knew my address, sure, they knew the places of study where I was enrolled, but they didn't know about my four rather Muriel Spark-ish jobs, or the nuts and



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bolts of my routines, such as the fact I got up at 7.45am when the post came to catch it fresh, or where I bought the brown rice I eat every day. They didn't know the soaps I welcomed into my sitting room like a second family, four nights a week, for I had known the characters since I was seven, and that's a lot of shared history. They didn't know what I was reading and writing, or that my neighbour only murmured "hello" to me after seven years as she was quite reserved.

During that time, some of it good, some less so, a friend said that it isn't great in life, not having anyone that you come first with, is it, and I remember saying, "It's not so bad. I mean, what if I had to share my bathroom with someone who had an ugly shampoo bottle? How would I bear it?"

"That, pal, is the thin end of the wedge," she decreed.

I think I knew then, as I know now, that there's a certain luxury in no one knowing what you are up to, even if, especially if, you aren't up to anything at all.

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I have recently returned from Blackbox, a tech accelerator course in Palo Alto, California, where start-ups can learn from venture capitalists, established founders and others about the way Silicon Valley operates. There isn't a better place to take a magical mystery tour of the future of digital. This small city of 65,000 people is the heart of the Valley, where Facebook, Google and Apple all started out.

The two-week residential programme, sponsored by Google for Entrepreneurs, is a hot ticket. I was the only British founder among a group of 19 gathered from all over the world. Depending on our mood, the atmosphere either resembled a Coke advert or a UN conclave from Uganda and Uruguay, Bangalore and Berlin. My first conversation was with a founder from the West Bank who had teamed up with a younger man from Tel Aviv. They almost always sat together chatting, one seeking the perfect line to explain his complex platform, the other receiving help with his business plan. The Palestinian quietly admitted that such closeness would be harder back on home territory.

Just four days into our stay, a young radicalised Muslim couple killed 14 people in another part of California; a few days later, Republican presidential hopeful Donald Trump was calling for the US to ban all Muslims from coming into the country. By my calculations, such a law would have excluded just under a third of our group, including two charming young Pakistanis who, still in their early twenties, had come up with a watch to help people afflicted by tremors to analyse their condition — Trequant is a potentially life-changing device that could help up to 6m sufferers in the US alone. Among our group, neither the attack nor Trump ever came up in conversation.

Just over two years ago, Aileen Lee, a US investor, coined the term "unicorn" to describe tech companies valued at more than \$1bn before their initial public offering. At last count there were 144 of these, topped by Uber at \$51bn.

This is how everyone wants to make it big now. The people at Google might



DIARY

LOUISE CHUNN



talk about getting your product right, building it slowly, but there's more than a whiff of the gold rush about Silicon Valley these days. People speak of a bubble that's about to burst; others simply point out that most of the big, problem-solving ideas have been done.

Keith Teare, co-founder of the website TechCrunch and now heading an investment and consultancy business, told us that unicorn-hunting is a reality, albeit a rather unpalatable one. The chances of such huge success are pitifully low, so investment is increasingly hard to come by. "You're trying to move investors from fear to greed. If you can't ignite their greed then you won't get a cheque. Risk only affects the price they'll pay."

Mike Maples, a venture capitalist who told us he made 500 times his seed investment in Twitter, laid out some harsh statistics for our group: "Ninety-seven per cent of the wealth created in Silicon Valley was made by 10 companies. Do you really want to sacrifice five years of your life for the scraps of three per cent? I love founders and want them to do well, but it's a very tough job."

Maples was charismatic, with a low boredom threshold. I told him he reminded me of an old-style record company A&R man, only searching for talent in the digital new world. It was an assessment he seemed to agree with: "I always said I wanted to be to tech like Berry Gordy was to Motown."

My start-up, [Welldoing.org](#), helps people find the most suitable therapist for their needs. There are more than 1,000 different modes of therapy; people can be overwhelmed by the choice and simply give up. I'm aware that this subject is not at the forefront for the A+ programmers of Silicon Valley — currently preoccupied by AI (artificial intelligence), robotics, the Internet of Things and virtual reality — but mental health is a big issue here.

Founder depression is an acknowledged syndrome and there have been a number of well-publicised suicides. Experts blame the toxic mix

of long hours (many talk of 80-hour weeks) and little sleep but surely the clincher is the huge competition and pressure to be first to market and then to make it large as quickly as you possibly can. Anything less is failure.

With tech, super-quick growth is possible — one of our talks at Blackbox was on the subject of exponentiality from Pascal Finette at Silicon Valley's Singularity University, a think-tank set up in 2008 to solve the world's most critical problems through technology. But, at the same time, start-ups are burning through money, so investors get antsy, or someone else comes along with the same idea and a shorter timescale.

One of the many founders we heard from was an eminently sane chap from Poland, Marcin Treder of the design application UXPin. "When we were raising seed investment there was nothing else in my life. No matter what your friends do, you're not going to Yosemite." But once he got his money, his venture capitalist introduced him to a monthly entrepreneurs' meeting. "We get together and we talk about our problems. It's like group therapy."

In the valley of the unicorns, sharing your troubles may not make you rich. But it's probably the best way to stay sane.

Louise Chunn is the founder of [welldoing.org](#)

Tsar wars

Continued from page 1

breath-taking helicopter photography and dizzy crane shots. His cameramen roller-skated through the dancers in the ball scene, synchronising their movements with the lilt of the waltz. The battle sequences, in their chaotic din and hacking slaughter, are the most historically credible ever filmed and the Borodino sequence, nearly 20 minutes long, ends with one of the most astonishing aerial shots in all of cinema: cavalry charges performing an endlessly looping ballet of carnage, while fire blooms from the cannon and infantry stagger back and forth in blind futility. That Olympian top-shot, both omniscient and despairing, exactly translates into film Prince Andrei's brutal eve-of-battle exclamation to his ingenuous friend Pierre (come to see the battle dressed in a white topper). "War", says Andrei, "is the vilest thing in the world . . . [men] come together to kill each other, they slaughter and maim tens of thousands . . . and then they say prayers of thanksgiving for having slaughtered

so many people . . . how does God look down and listen to them?"

Bondarchuk was also brilliant at the intimate moments and understood how important soundscape was to Tolstoy. We are first introduced to Andrei's father, the martinet Prince Nikolai Bolkonsky, as he walks through the autumnal woods of his estate. A Haydn minuet plays over the action; all very pretty. But then the camera tracks back to reveal an actual quartet playing for the prince beneath the trees, which is precisely what a serf orchestra used to do every time Tolstoy's maternal grandfather chose to go for a stroll. When the walk was over, as Rosamund Bartlett's fine biography of Tolstoy tells us, the serf violinists went back to feeding the pigs.

The uncanny physical immediacy of *War and Peace* is the result of Tolstoy bringing together personal memory, family history and dense archival research into the making of his narrative. His hero, he said, was truth. Before writing the Borodino chapters he walked the battlefield in the company of

a 12-year-old boy for several days. But other kinds of memory-archive came into play, too. His presence at the siege of Sevastopol in the Crimean war, both as soldier and war reporter, gave Tolstoy first-hand knowledge of what it felt and sounded like when shells landed and bullets came flying like "flocks of birds". The figure of his rustic "Uncle" 's Tatar mistress is drawn from Tolstoy's earlier service in the Caucasus, plus his own affair with the wife of one of his serfs, who bore him a child. Earthiness was everything. Where sensation was most intense in his memory, as in the book's wolf hunt or the Christmas Eve sleigh ride, fake moustaches applied with burnt cork, his prose takes wing.

With typical preference for honesty over kindness, Tolstoy insisted that he and his wife Sophia, not long after their marriage, read each other's diaries; his, of course, full of his sex escapades recorded in hurtful detail. And yet the early years of that marriage — he began *War and Peace* in 1863, just a year after their wedding — he believed to be his happiest. Tucked away in Yasnaya Polyana, the estate he inherited from his mother's family, he was, with Sophia's crucial help as amanuensis (for his handwriting was so illegible he could hardly read it himself), at liberty to cre-

ate a masterwork. Six years on, the 5,000 pages of manuscript, 600 characters, three changes of title and a complete alteration of plot (1805 was originally the back-story to a tale of the doomed Decembrist uprising of 1825) were delivered to the world. By this time Tolstoy was already a successful writer and had committed himself to changing Russia, freeing and educating the serfs, rather than indulging himself in further fiction. So the moral zeal bled into the pages of the book. In fact, he indignantly refused to call it a novel at all, "still less a



Paramount's 1956 version, starring Audrey Hepburn — Eyevine

poem and even less a historical chronicle", but what the author wanted and was able to express in the form in which it was expressed. Stylistically, it was also unlike anything anyone else had written before: raw, richly inelegant, sometimes directionless, bursting through the confines of good literary form yet stained on every page with the juice of life.

Strenuous physical immediacy is but half of the book; its deep core is concerned with the rest of us, the inner life, especially of the passions and what happens to them when abraded by the force of ambition, cupidity, vanity and violence. Accordingly, the most radically exhilarating passages document the workings of that inner life in broken diction, interior monologues (you even get inside the wolf's head) and the repetitions and linguistic contortions that form and unform in our minds. One such passage has the young hussar Nikolai Rostov, on the eve of the impending disaster of Austerlitz, fighting off sleep while still mounted on his horse, peering dimly at some sort of white spot in the darkness — a *tache*.

"Tache or no tache . . . 'Natasha, my sister, dark eyes. Na . . . tashka . . . (she'll be so surprised when I tell her how I saw the sovereign!) Natashka . . . take the

tashka . . . Na-tashka, at-tack a . . . yes, yes, yes. That's good.' And again his head dropped to his horse's neck. Suddenly it seemed to him that he was being shot at. 'What? What? . . . Cut them down! What? . . . ' said Rostov, coming to his senses. The moment he opened his eyes, Rostov heard ahead of him, where the enemy was, the drawn-out cries of thousands of voices . . . "

All he can make out, however, is "aaaa! And rrrr!"

"What is it? What do you think? Rostov turned to the hussar standing beside him. 'Is it from the enemy?'"

Eventually, Nikolai realises he is listening to the full-throated acclaim of the enemy soldiers — "Vive l'empereur!" — as Napoleon rides through the French camp. But Tolstoy has us hear the overture to calamity through Rostov's drowsy senses, as an obscure, distant hum and roar, the shapeless *aaaa* and *rrrr* of life into which we are inexorably pulled and through which we struggle, as best we can, to find a place of safety.

*Quotes are from the Pevear-Volkhonsky translation of *War and Peace* (Knopf/Vintage 2007)

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