

ONE BY ONE

RUTH WARE



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From the 'about us' page of the Snoop company website

Hey. We're snoop. Come meet us, message us, snoop on us – whatever. We're pretty cool. Are you?

Topher St Clair-Bridges

Who's the daddy? Well, if anyone's got a claim, it's Toph. snoop co-founder (along with ex-girlfriend, model/artist/professional badass @evaluation) it all started here. If he's not at his desk, he's probably riding the moguls in Chamonix, losing his mind in Berlin's Berghain, or just hangin'. Come find him on snoop at @xtopher or hit him up via his PA Inigo Ryder – the only dude who gets to tell Topher what to do.

Listening to: Oscar Mulero / Like a Wolf

Eva van den Berg

From Amsterdam to Sydney, New York to London, Eva's career has taken her all over the world – but right now home is Shoreditch, London, where she lives with her husband, financier Arnaud Jankovitch, and their daughter Radisson. In 2014 she co-founded snoop with her then life-partner @xtopher – their idea born of a single desire: to maintain their connection across 5,000 km of ocean. Topher and Eva have since uncoupled, but their

connection remains: snoop. Make your own connection with Eva on @evaluation, or via her personal assistant Ani Cresswell.

Listening to: Nico / Janitor of Lunacy

Rik Adeyemi **head of beans**

Rik's the money man, the bean counter, the keeper of the keys – you get the picture. He's been keepin' snoop real since the very first days, and he's known Toph for even longer. What can we say? snoop's a family affair. Rik lives with his wife, Veronique, in Highgate, London. You can snoop him at @rikshaw.

Listening to: Willie Bobo / La Descarga del Bobo

Elliot Cross **chief nerd**

Music may be snoop's beating heart, but code is its DNA and Elliot is the maestro of code. Before snoop was a hot-pink logo on your phone, it was just lines of java on someone's screen – and that someone was Elliot. Best friends with Toph since before they could shave, he's cooler than any tech-head has a right to be. snoop him on @ex.

Listening to: Kraftwerk / Autobahn

Miranda Khan **friends tsar**

Miranda is into killer heels, sharp fashion, and really *great* coffee. Between savouring Guatemalan carbonic maceration and surfing Net-a-Porter, she's snoop's smile to the world. Wanna write us up, hit us up, haul us over the coals, or just say hi? Miranda's the place to start. snoop knows you can never have enough followers – or enough friends. Make Miranda one of yours at @mirandelicious.

Listening to: Madonna / 4 Minutes

Tiger-Blue Esposito **head of cool**

The epitome of chill, Tiger keeps her trademark zen state with the help of daily yoga, mindfulness and – of course – a steady stream of snoop through her oversize headphones. When she's not pulling a Bhujapidasana or relaxing into an Anantasana (that's a side-reclining leg lift to the uninitiated), she's polishing snoop's cogs to make sure we look our very best, and getting the word out. Chill with her on @blueskythinking.

Listening to: Jai-Jagdeesh / Aad Guray Nameh

Carl Foster **law man**

There's no two ways about it – Carl keeps us on the straight and narrow, making sure that wherever we snoop, we're doing it on the right side of the law. A graduate of UCL, Carl did his pupillage at Temple Square Chambers. Since then he's worked in a variety of international firms, mostly in the entertainment industry. He lives in Croydon. Snoop him on @carlfoster1972.

Listening to: The Rolling Stones / Sympathy for the Devil

Taken from the BBC News website

Thursday 16 January

4 BRITONS DEAD IN SKI RESORT TRAGEDY

The exclusive French ski resort of St Antoine was rocked by news of a second tragedy this week, only days after an avalanche that killed six, and left much of the region without power for days.

Now, reports are emerging that in one remote ski chalet, cut off by the avalanche, a 'house of horror' situation was unfolding, leaving four Britons dead, and two hospitalised.

The alarm was only raised when survivors trekked more than three miles through the snow to radio for help, raising questions of why the French authorities did not work to re-establish power and mobile phone coverage more quickly following Sunday's avalanche.

Local police chief Etienne Dupont refused to comment, except to say that 'an investigation is in progress', but a spokesperson at the British Embassy in Paris said, 'We can confirm that we have been informed of the deaths of four British citizens in the Savoie department of the French Alps, and that the local police are treating these incidents as a linked murder inquiry at this stage. Our sympathies are with the friends and families of the victims.'

The families of the deceased have been informed.

Eight survivors, also thought to be British, are said to be helping the police investigation.

This year has been marked by unusually heavy snowfalls. Sunday's avalanche is the sixth since the beginning of the ski season, and brings the total of fatalities in the region to twelve.

FIVE DAYS EARLIER

LIZ

Snoop ID: ANON101

Listening to: James Blunt / You're Beautiful

Snoopers: 0

Snoopscribers: 0

I keep my earbuds shoved into my ears on the minibus from Geneva airport. I ignore Topher's hopeful looks and Eva, glancing over her shoulder at me. It helps, somehow. It helps to shut out the voices in my head, *their* voices, pulling me this way and that, pummelling me with their loyalties and their arguments to and fro.

Instead I let James Blunt drown them out, telling me I'm beautiful, over and over again. The irony of the statement makes me want to laugh, but I don't. There's something comforting in the lie.

It is 1.52 p.m. Outside the window the sky is iron grey, and the snowflakes swirl hypnotically past. It's strange. Snow is so white on the ground, but when it's falling, it looks grey against the sky. It might as well be ash.

We are starting to climb now. The snow gets thicker as we gain height, no longer melting into rain when it hits the window, but sticking, sliding along the glass, the windscreen wipers swooshing it aside into rivulets of slush that run horizontally across the passenger window. I hope the bus has snow tyres.

The driver changes gear; we are approaching yet another hairpin bend. As the bus swings around the narrow curve, the ground falls away, and I have a momentary feeling that we're going to fall – a lurch of vertigo that makes my stomach heave and my head spin. I shut my eyes, blocking them all out, losing myself in the music.

And then the song stops.

And I am alone, with only one voice left in my head, and I can't shut it out. It's my own. And it's whispering a question that I've been asking myself since the plane lifted off the runway at Gatwick.

Why did I come? *Why?*

But I know the answer.

I came because I couldn't afford not to.

ERIN

Snoop ID: N/A

Listening to: N/A

Snoopscribers: N/A

The snow is *still* falling – fat white flakes drifting lazily down to lie softly over the peaks and pistes and valleys of St Antoine.

Three metres have fallen in the last couple of weeks, and there's more forecast. A snowpocalypse, Danny called it. Snowmageddon. Lifts have been closed, and then reopened, and then closed again. Currently almost every lift in the entire resort is closed, but the faithful little funicular that leads up to our tiny hamlet is still chugging away. It's glassed in, so even the heaviest dump doesn't affect it, the snow just lies like a blanket over the tunnel rather than clogging the rails. Which is good – because on the rare occasions it does shut, we're totally cut off. There's no road up to St Antoine 2000, not in winter, anyway. Everything, from the guests in the chalet, right through to every scrap of food for breakfast, lunch and dinner, has to come up in the funicular. Unless you've got the money for a helicopter transfer (which, believe me, is not unheard of in this place). But the helicopters won't fly in poor conditions. If a blizzard comes in, they stay safely down in the valley.

It gives me a strange feeling if I think about it too much – a kind of claustrophobia that’s at odds with the wide-open vistas from the chalet. It’s not just the snow, it’s a hundredweight of unwelcome memories bearing down on me. If I stop for more than a minute or two, the images start to come unbidden, crowding into my mind – numb fingers scrabbling through hard-packed snow, the sheen of sunset on blue skin, the glint of frosted lashes. But fortunately I’ve got no time to stop today. It’s gone one o’clock and I’m still cleaning the second-to-last bedroom when I hear the shuddering sound of the gong from downstairs. It’s Danny. He shouts my name, and then something I can’t make out.

‘What?’ I call down, and he shouts again, his voice clearer this time. He must have come out into the stairwell.

‘I *said*, grub’s up. Truffled parsnip soup. So get your lazy arse down here.’

‘Yes, chef,’ I shout back, mockingly. I quickly dump the contents of the bathroom bin into my black sack, change the bin liner, and then jog down the spiral stairs to the lobby, where the delicious smell of Danny’s soup greets me, along with the sound of ‘Venus in Furs’ emanating from the kitchen.

Saturday is both the best day of the week, and the worst. Best, because it’s changeover day – there are no guests, and Danny and I have the chalet to ourselves, free to laze in the pool, steam in the outdoor hot tub, and play the music we like at the volume we want.

Worst, because it’s changeover day, which means nine double beds to change, nine bathrooms to clean (eleven, if you count the loo downstairs and the shower room by the pool), eighteen ski lockers to sweep and Hoover, not to mention the living room, the dining room, the den, the snug and the outdoor smoking area, where I have to pick up all the disgusting butts the smokers always strew around in spite of the prominent bins and buckets. At least Danny takes care of the kitchen, though he has his own

to-do list. Saturday night is always a big dinner. Got to put on a show for the new guests, don't you know.

Now, we sit down together at the big dining-room table, and I read through the information Kate emailed this morning as I spoon Danny's soup into my mouth. It's sweet and earthy and there are tiny little crunchy bits scattered over the top – shaved parsnip roasted in truffle oil, I think.

'This soup is really good,' I say. I know my role here. Danny rolls his eyes, in a *well, duh*, gesture. If there is one thing about Danny, he's not modest. But he is a great cook.

'Think they'll like it tonight?' He's fishing for more compliments of course, but I can't blame him. Danny's an unashamed diva about his food and, like any artiste, he enjoys appreciation.

'I'm sure they will. It's gorgeous, really warming and ... um ... complex.' I am striving to pin down the particular savoury quality that makes the soup so good. Danny likes compliments to be *specific*. 'Like autumn in a bowl. What else are you doing?'

'I've got amuses-bouches.' Danny ticks the courses off on his fingers. 'Then the truffled soup for starter. Then venison haunch for the carnies and mushroom ravioli for the veggies. Then crème brûlée for dessert. And then the cheese.'

Danny's crème brûlée is his showstopper, and it's to die for. I've literally seen guests come to blows over a spare portion.

'Sounds perfect,' I say encouragingly.

'As long as there aren't any fucking stealth vegans this time,' he says morosely. He's still reeling from last week, when one of the guests turned out to be not just vegan, but gluten intolerant as well. I don't think he's forgiven Kate yet.

'Kate was *really* clear,' I say, cajoling. 'One lactose intolerant, one gluten-free, three veggies. No vegans. That's it.'

'It won't be,' Danny says, still enjoying his martyrdom. 'One of them will be low-carbing or something. Or a fruitarian. Or a breatharian.'

‘Well, if they’re a breatharian, they won’t be bothering you, will they?’ I say reasonably. ‘They’ve got all the air they could want up here.’

I wave an arm at the huge window that dominates the south side of the room. It overlooks the peaks and ridges of the Alps, a panorama so breathtaking, that even though I live here now, I still find myself stopping mid-stride on certain days, almost winded by its beauty. Today the visibility is poor, the clouds are low, and there’s too much snow in the air. But on a good day you can see almost to Lake Geneva. Behind us, to the north-east of the chalet, rises the Dame Blanche, the mountain that forms the highest peak of the St Antoine valley, overshadowing everything.

‘Read out the names,’ Danny says, around a mouthful of soup, only he says it more like *read aht the names*. His accent is pure sarf London, though I know in reality he grew up in Portsmouth. I’m never quite sure how much is all part of the act. Danny’s a performer, and the more I get to know him, the more I’m fascinated by the complicated mix of identities beneath the surface. The cheeky cockney geezer he puts on for the guests is just one of them. On nights out in St Antoine I’ve seen him pivot from note-perfect Guy Ritchie, to a gloriously flaming RuPaul, all in the space of five minutes.

Not that I can talk. I’m putting on my own act. We all are on some level, I suppose. That’s one of the joys of coming here, to a place like this, where everyone is passing through. You get to have a fresh start.

‘I need to get it right this time,’ he says, breaking into my thoughts. He puts a minuscule grind of fresh black pepper onto his soup and tastes it, then looks approving. ‘Can’t afford another fucking Madeleine. Kate’ll have my guts for garters.’

Kate is the area rep, and is in charge of coordinating all the bookings and logistics for all six of the company’s chalets. She likes us to greet the clients by their names right from day one.

It's what marks us out from the big chain operators, she says. The personal touch. Only it's harder than it sounds, week in, week out. Last week Danny made friends with a woman called Madeleine, only when the feedback forms came in, it turned out there was no one called Madeleine in the group. Or any woman with a name beginning with M. He's still got no idea who he was talking to all week.

I run my finger down the list Kate sent through last night.

'So it's a corporate party this time. Tech company called Snoop. Nine people, all in separate rooms. Eva van den Berg, co-founder. Topher St Clair-Bridges, co-founder. Rik Adeyemi, Head of Beans. Elliot Cross, Chief Nerd.' Danny snorts out his soup through his nose, but I carry on. 'Miranda Khan, Friends Tsar. Inigo Ryder, Topher's Boss. Ani Cresswell, Chief Eva-tamer. Tiger-Blue Esposito, Head of Cool. Carl Foster, Lawman.'

By the time I'm finished, Danny is actually crying with laughter and his soup has gone down the wrong way.

'Is that really what it says?' he manages, between coughs. 'Head of Beans? Tiger – what the fuck else? I didn't think Kate had a sense of humour. Where's the real list?'

'That is the real list,' I say, trying not to laugh at the sight of Danny's screwed-up face, shining with tears. 'Have a napkin.'

'What? Are you shitting me?' he gasps, and then sits back, fanning himself. 'Actually, I take that back. Snoop's that sort of place.'

'You've heard of them?' I'm surprised. Danny isn't normally the sort of person with his finger on the button that way. We get all sorts here, lots of private parties, the odd wedding or anniversary, but a surprising number of corporate retreats too – I guess the price tag is easier to swallow if your company is paying. There's a lot of law firms, hedge funds and Fortune 500 companies. This is the first time Danny's heard of one of the companies and I haven't. 'What do they do?'

‘Snoop?’ Now it’s Danny’s turn to look surprised. ‘Have you been living in a fucking cave, Erin?’

‘No, I’m just – I’ve never heard of them. Are they a media company?’ I don’t know why I chose that. Media seems like the kind of industry that would have a Tiger-Blue Esposito.

‘No, they’re an app.’ Danny looks at me suspiciously. ‘Have you *really* not heard of them? You know – Snoop – the music app. It lets you – well, snoop on people. That’s kind of it.’

‘I have literally no idea what you’re on about.’

‘Snoop, Erin,’ Danny says, more acidly this time, like if he keeps saying it, I’ll smack my forehead and go *oh yeah, that Snoop!* He pulls out his phone and scrolls down the apps to one that looks like two eyes on a hot-pink background. Or maybe two cogs, it’s hard to see on the logo. He presses it, and the screen goes bright pink, then black, blazoned with *snoop. Real people, real time, real loud* in fuchsia letters.

This time the two Os of the name are the wheels of a cassette tape.

‘You like hook it up to your Spotify account or whatever,’ Danny explains, scrolling through menus as he does, as if lists of random celebrities will make everything clear. ‘And it makes your listening public.’

‘Why would anyone want to do that?’ I say blankly.

‘It’s a quid pro quo, innit?’ Danny says, sounding impatient. ‘The whole point is no one wants to listen to you, but if you join, you get to listen to other people. *Voyeurism for your ears* is what Snoop calls it.’

‘So ... I can see what ... I don’t know ... Beyoncé is listening to? If she were on there.’

‘Yup. And Madonna. And Jay-Z. And Justin Bieber. And whoever else. Slebs love it – it’s the new Instagram. It’s like, you can connect, yeah? But without actually giving away too much information.’

I nod, slowly. I can actually kind of see the attraction of that.

‘So it’s basically famous people’s playlists?’

‘Not playlists,’ Danny says. ‘Because the whole point is that it’s real time. You get what they’re listening to *right now*.’

‘What if they’re asleep?’

‘Then you don’t get anything. They don’t appear in the search bar if they’re not online and listening, and if you’re snooping on someone and they stop listening, their feed goes dead and you get the option to shunt along to someone else.’

‘So if you’re snooping on someone and they pause a song to answer the phone –’

Danny nods.

‘Yeah, it just cuts off.’

‘That’s a really terrible idea.’

He laughs and shakes his head.

‘Nah, you’re not getting it. The whole point is ...’ He stops, trying to formulate something unquantifiable into words. ‘The whole point is the connection. You’re actually listening to the same thing at the same moment as they are – beat for beat. You know that wherever she is in the world, Lady Gaga is listening to the exact same thing you are. It’s like ...’ Inspiration strikes, and his face lights up. ‘It’s like, you know when you’re first going out with someone, and you’re sharing a set of headphones, one earpiece in their ear, one earpiece in yours?’

I nod.

‘Well, it’s like that. You and Lady Gaga, sharing her ear-phones. It’s really powerful. When you’re lying there in bed, and they switch off, and you know that somewhere they’re probably doing the exact same thing as you, rolling over, falling asleep ... it’s pretty intimate, you know? But it’s not just celebrities. If you’re in a long-distance relationship, say, you can snoop your bloke and listen to the same song at the same time. Assuming you know his Snoop ID of course. I keep mine locked down.’

‘OK ... ’ I say slowly. ‘So ... like ... your feed is public, but no one knows it’s you?’

‘Yeah, so I have like two followers, because I’ve not bothered to hook up any of my contact list. Mind you, some of the most popular Snoopees are totally incognito. There’s this one guy in Iran, HacT, he’s called. He’s in the top ten Snoopees pretty much every month. Well, I say in Iran, there’s no actual way of knowing. That’s just what it says on his Snoop biog. He could be from Florida.’

An alert pings on his phone, and he brings it up.

‘Ah, yeah, there, see? This is someone I’m subscribed to, Msaggronistic. She’s this French-Canadian chick in Montreal, she listens to some really cool punk stuff. That alert was telling me she’s come online and she’s playing ... ’ he scrolls down the notification, ‘the Slits, apparently. Not sure that’s my cup of tea, but that’s the thing, it might be. I just don’t know.’

‘Right.’ I’m not sure I’m any the wiser really, but it’s sort of making sense.

‘Anyway,’ Danny says. He gets up and starts clearing our soup plates. ‘That’s what I meant, these tech start-ups, you could actually imagine them calling their head of finance Chief Bean Counter or whatever the fuck he was called. They’d think it was edgy or something. Coffee?’

I look at my watch. 2.17.

‘I can’t. I’ve got a couple of rooms still to do, then the pool.’

‘I’ll bring you one up.’

I stand and stretch, working the kinks out of my neck and shoulders. It’s physical work, cleaning. I never realised how much before I started this job. Heaving Hoovers up and down stairs, scrubbing toilets and tiles. Doing nine rooms on the trot is a workout.

I’m finishing the pool when Danny comes in with a cup of coffee. He’s wearing his usual trunks – the smallest, tightest ones

I've ever seen in real life. They are banana yellow, and when he turns round to put my coffee down on the lounge, you can see that he has BAD BOI written across his butt in scarlet letters.

'Don't make *any* splashes,' I warn him, as he stands poised at the edge of the pool, his arms outstretched. 'I'm not mopping again.'

He says nothing, just sticks out his tongue, and then does a perfect, splash-free dive into the shallow end of the pool. It's not really deep enough for diving, but he skims the bottom and comes up safely at the far end.

'Come on, the bloody place is clean enough. Get in.'

I waver. I haven't hoovered the dining room, but I don't know if anyone would be able to tell.

I look at my watch. 3.15. The guests are supposed to arrive at 4 p.m. I'm cutting it fine.

'Oh all right then.'

It's our weekly ritual. A ten-minute dip after all the chores are done, like a way of reclaiming our territory, reminding ourselves who's actually in charge in this place.

My bikini is on under my clothes and I pull off my sweaty T-shirt and stained cleaning jeans, and ready myself to dive. I'm just about to push off, when I feel a hand grab my ankle and yank me forwards, and with a shriek, I pitch into the pool.

I surface, spluttering, raking hair out of my eyes. There is water *everywhere*.

'You fucking imbecile! I said no splashes!'

'Chill.' Danny is laughing uproariously, the water like jewels on his dark skin. 'I'll mop it, I swear.'

'I'll bloody kill you if you don't.'

'I'll do it! I said so, didn't I? I'll do it while you dry your hair.' He points to his buzz-cut scalp, reminding me that he's got a head start on me in that department.

I punch him on the shoulder, but I can't stay mad at him, and for the next few minutes we swim and wrestle, and fight like

puppies, until at last we're both drenched and gasping for air and have to stop to catch our breath.

Danny pulls himself out of the water, grinning and panting, and pads off to the changing room to get dressed and greet the guests.

I should follow him, I know it. There is plenty still left to do, jobs to complete, tasks to finish. But for a moment, just a moment, I let myself float, spreadeagled on the clear blue water. I touch my fingers to the scar that runs across my cheek, tracing the dented line where the skin is thin and still tender, and I gaze up at the grey sky through the glass roof above, watching as the snowflakes come spiralling down.

The sky is the *exact* colour of Will's eyes.

The clock is ticking down to the arrival of our guests, and I can hear Danny beginning to mop the changing rooms. I should get out, but I can't. I can't look away. I just lie there, my dark hair fanning out around me, floating, gazing up. Remembering.