

White as Snow

(A Rock & Roll Fairytale Murder
Mystery)

SAMPLE

Pete Simons

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Book One

From the Beginning

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Chapter One

Ice Ice Baby

n a frigid winter's night in Providence, Rhode Island, chubby flakes of snow are dancing around an attractive college sophomore as she trudges across campus. Suddenly, she stops, removes a compact mirror from her pocket, and gazes at her reflection. With her ebony hair and fiery red lipstick, her skin appears to glow a frosty white. She smiles with satisfaction.

As the young woman puts her mirror away, she notices three beads of crimson blood falling onto the field of silvery powder. She looks down at her scratched wrist and curses to herself, "That goddamn bitch!" Digging into her pockets, she finds a couple tissues and wraps them around the wound. After peering again at the perfect triangle formed by the blood droplets, she continues on her way.

With each step, Bianca Snowden converges with her unfortunate fate. Although there have been plenty of

opportunities for providence to intervene in her favor that evening, none have materialized. Tonight, Providence is anything but divine. If only they had never met. If only she hadn't agreed. If only she hadn't drunk so much. If only she hadn't walked home by herself. If only it hadn't snowed. If only, just once upon a time, any of these things had been different. Yet not all fairy tales have happy endings. Or, in this case, beginnings.

Bianca's gait is unsteady as she passes through one of the two smaller side entrances of the Van Wickle Gates and enters the area known as the Quiet Green. The large center gates are unlocked only twice a year. They swing inward when the new freshmen arrive at Brown University in the fall, and they open outward as the graduates and faculty march through them on commencement day. Superstition has it that a student who walks through the main gates more than twice will not graduate.

As she negotiates the snow-covered walkway, to her left is the elegant belfry called Carrie Tower, a rectangular clock column constructed of red brick and white stone, standing ninety-five feet tall. A businessman gifted it to the college in 1904 to memorialize his wife, who happened to be the granddaughter of the college's namesake, Nicholas Brown. Bianca notes the inscription on the base, which reads, "Love is as strong as death." She smirks and thinks, *That may be, but death always wins in the end.* Indeed, sometimes its victory comes much sooner than expected.

Even in her inebriated condition, Bianca appreciates the eclectic architecture of Brown University's main campus. The English Georgian facade of University Hall looms over and heartens her. The building was the first one constructed for the college and was used as a barracks for American soldiers during the Revolutionary War. Now it houses the college administration offices. Someone had placed electric candles in the windows for the holiday season, and the four-story redbrick building glows comfortingly in the falling snow. Bianca wishes she had her camera with her so she could capture the scene.

Perhaps it would have been better if Miss Snowden were less enamored with the edifice and more focused on her

foot placement, as she trips for the third time since starting her climb up College Hill and tumbles into the snow. She is back on her feet in a moment, laughing instead of cursing this time, due to some internal logic known only to her.

Bianca's thoughts, usually well-ordered and insightful, skip all over the place. *Life's just a story and we all play a part*, she thinks. *Frigging McDuck. What a poor excuse for a leading man. That surly son of a bitch doesn't even know what he's screwed up. Oh, someone made a snow angel over there. Almost home now. God, the wind. It will serve him right when I'm not around anymore. Snowflakes. How they dance! They'll all be sorry. All the supporting characters. Surly, Sleazy, Breezy, Lazy, Drowsy, Queasy, and Dud. Screw them. Whoa. Black ice beneath the snow. I need to watch my step. Where's my Walkman? Time for some tunes.*

She stops again for a moment, removes her bright-red backpack, and rifles through it, finally pulling out her prized Sony Walkman. She purchased this wonder of modern technology just after its release to the market in March 1979. That was almost a year ago, and now she can't remember how she had managed to cope before the thing had been invented. She takes it pretty much everywhere she goes.

Bianca puts on the headphones, flips over the cassette tape, and punches the play button. The sounds of Foreigner flood her head. *That's more like it. That's what I'm talking about. I love this album. I'm glad I made this tape.* "Long, Long Way from Home" begins to play, and she thinks, *No, it's not really that long. My dorm's only a few minutes away. Oh, my God. This headache is killing me.* She looks in her bag and finds an aspirin bottle. *Only one left. Shit.* She swallows it and drops the empty bottle into the snow.

Bianca re-shoulders her backpack and starts to walk again, passing between University Hall and Manning Chapel (somewhat ironically modeled after the Greek Temple of Diana) to emerge onto the College Green.

And don't get me started about some of the professors here. What role do they think they play in this fairy tale? Almighty wizards? Doesn't Gandalf the Gray realize how goddamn awesome and talented I am? No appreciation. He takes me for granted, just like McDuck. And Saruman the White dared to place his hand on my knee. They think they can take whatever they want. Thieving bastards.

The next Foreigner song on the tape, “Feels Like the First Time,” starts to play.

First time. Oh, yeah, And then there's The Little Prince. Every fairy tale needs a prince. I wonder what the Evil Queen would do if she found out? It wouldn't be pretty, that's for sure. She's got the King wrapped around her little finger. Conniving bitch.

As Bianca crosses the College Green (now, temporarily, the College White), she examines several of the ice sculptures that students had created. Some are amateurish, but others are sublime. There is a four-foot-tall ice dragon with a tail that stretches for seven feet. Beyond it lies a sleeping tiger and the Taj Mahal. Unfortunately, all the sculptures are now covered in a layer of new snow, and it won't be long before the work is lost. Then the artists will return to fix them or, more likely, create something entirely new. Bianca thinks that maybe she should try it. Then she recalls that she has other priorities.

“The Damage Is Done” is next on the playlist. The music begins, and Bianca sings along for a while. Then her thoughts start racing again.

Yeah, the damage is done. You got that right. They stole my Honor. My Pride. My Achievement. It's my Loss. Loss of Virginity. How dare they take that, and why did I allow it? But the story's not over. It's just beginning, in fact. I made a decision. I'll show them. They'll be sorry. All of them will. They'll regret what they did to me. Each in his or her own way.

Having crossed the College Green, Bianca continues down the path leading to the Lower Green, which runs between Sayles Hall and Wilson Hall, both of which were constructed in the Romanesque style during the late 1800s. Bianca likes Sayles Hall much more, with its impressive granite central tower flanked by two smaller turrets on either side. The interior of the structure is quite beautiful, she thinks, and its central hall is large enough to hold dances. Last year, she attended an open lecture given there by a professor of history, whose name she can't recall. His talk was entitled “Captain Kirk and the Moonies,” and it dealt with the dichotomy between offering assistance to other cultures and interfering with their principles and ability to self-govern. Fascinating stuff, and good jokes. The room

also contains a marvelous old pipe organ, which is still played on occasion.

Behind Sayles Hall stands the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius, a Roman emperor and author of a philosophical treatise on Stoicism called *The Meditations*, written around 150 AD. Bianca had heard a rumor that a few years ago some frat boys had drilled a hole in the top of the hollow bronze statue and filled it with water during the following several nights. Then they drilled a small hole in the bottom of the horse. The horse reportedly pissed for a week, although she assumes that was an exaggeration.

As Bianca passes the statue and emerges into the Lower Green, she spots an ice sculpture that she hadn't seen before and staggers across the snowy lawn toward the object. As she gets closer, she recognizes the form as a sleeping woman. *Sleeping Beauty, perhaps? Or Snow White?* It had been wonderfully rendered. *It's a shame that the falling snow is covering her*, Bianca thinks. *She'll soon be unrecognizable.*

As Bianca turns to leave, her foot gets caught on a piece of the sculpture that was already buried, and she falls heavily to the ground. She laughs and starts to get up, but the quad seems to be spinning around her. *I'll just rest here for a bit*, she thinks. Lying back in the snow, she looks up at the drifting flakes lit by the streetlamp on the path. *It's beautiful.* Foreigner's still playing in her ears, and she grows calm as her thoughts dampen.

Betrayal ...

Loss of ...

Virginity ...

I want ...

... it back.

The final song on Bianca's cassette, "Cold as Ice," begins to play.

So tired.

"Cold ..."

I'll just

"... as ..."

have a little

"... ice."

nap.

...

The snow continues to fall.

A snowflake lands on Bianca's bloodred upper lip. It does not melt.

The music is loud enough to be faintly heard by a person standing close by. But no one is there.

"Cold ... as ... ice."

The last notes trail away. After a few more seconds, the tape clicks off.

The snow falls harder. By five o'clock that morning there's an extra eighteen inches of fresh powder on the ground, and her body is completely covered. Due to the strong winds, not even a bulge in the snow remains to indicate her presence. It will be several days before Bianca's face—by then truly as white as snow—will be seen by anyone again.

And in the silence of the dawn, the snowflakes continue their frantic dance, unaware and uncaring that Bianca Snowden's song has ended.



Chapter Two

Supper's Ready

Charles Munck trudges heavily across campus, weighted down by his backpack full of books, the residual ice on the newly shoveled walkway crunching beneath his boots. Slightly pudgy, his somewhat lumbering physique and sleepy-eyed stare conceal a perceptive, analytical mindset. His friends at Brown call him “Chip.” Given his surname, he probably couldn't have avoided that nickname even if he hadn't been painfully shy by nature. He doesn't seem to mind the moniker much, since he's never complained ... or said much of anything, actually, except on rare occasions. Yet what he lacks in loquaciousness, he more than makes up for in charity and consideration.

Chip hopes to be able to speak with Bianca either before or after dinner and find out what's been bothering her these past several days. He's also very much looking forward to tonight's meal since he was too busy to stop for lunch today.

Chip, Bianca, and six other students comprise the “Heigh-ho Supper Club.” It started simply as a way to relieve the monotony of the standard campus meal program—not that the gastronomic selections at the Sharpe Refectory (more commonly known as “the

Ratty”) are particularly bad. Students need something to complain about, though, and institutional food is always a safe target.

The club members, four men and four women, lived along the same hallway during their freshman year and became friends. A few weeks into their sophomore year, they got back together for dinner at the Ratty. At the end of the meal, Bianca suggested that they meet more regularly and that perhaps they could even prepare their own meals a few times a week.

Scotty MacGrunt started complaining about how busy he was. “Ah cannae be wastin’ mah valuable time shoppin’ and cookin’ with you lot. Ah need tae work!”

Sick of his diatribe, one of the others started singing in a loud voice, “Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, it’s off to work we go.” The rest of the table joined in, and soon the entire cafeteria was singing the song, complete with the requisite whistling. Scotty’s objection was squashed, and the Heigh-ho Supper Club was formed.

Each week, two of the students shop for groceries while the rest take either a cooking or a clean-up shift on one of the three supper nights. The chores rotate, except that Chris “Cokey” Snowden is exempt from food-preparation duty by unanimous consent. Although some of the participants speculated that Cokey was deliberately ruining his appointed dinners to avoid cooking assignments, after the second inedible meal it was universally agreed that he could not be allowed to continue, whatever his intentions. Cokey, a somewhat irresponsible philosophy major with a moderate proclivity for mind-enhancing drugs, might have been kicked out of the club altogether had it not been for the pleas of his well-liked sister Bianca. And perhaps because he is the only one of them who has a car on campus.

Scotty MacGrunt’s culinary skills are considered to be only slightly better than Cokey’s, but he’s a Scotsman and an engineer, both of which are considered to be valid excuses for an inability to cook. Scotty’s tolerated as an occasional chef on the sole condition that he never attempt to make haggis again. Happily for the group, the cooking proficiencies of the remaining six students range between adequate and exceptional.

Chip notices one of his friends walking up the side road, and he picks up his pace to converge with her. Mika, a gorgeous Asian girl with long black hair and penetrating eyes, is a focused, highly intelligent pre-med student. No one doubts that she’ll attend medical school after Brown, and she was prophetically bestowed

with the nickname “Doc” halfway through freshman year. She smiles as Chip approaches, and they enter Chip’s dormitory together.

Sonny Day and Bless Ewing are setting the table as Doc and Chip enter the room. Sonny, a muscular, affable psychology major, is whistling a tune while he checks the oven. Standing by the sink, Bless gives her mind a welcome rest from the analysis of differential equations as she prepares the salad. The petite blonde turns away to sneeze into her sleeve.

“Gesundheit,” chirps Sonny with a grin.

“Hey, guys, what’s for dinner?” inquires Doc as she sheds her coat.

“Lasagna,” pronounces Sonny with his trademark, infectious grin. “You’re going to love it.”

“Thank God. I needed a good excuse to take a break from my diet.”

“Where are the rest of them?” queries Bless. “It’s almost six o’clock.” She sneezes.

“I just saw Scotty and Tyre walking into the mailroom on the way over,” Chip responds. “They seemed to be having an intense discussion about something. They should be here shortly. I don’t know about Bianca.”

“I’m a little worried about Bianca,” Doc adds. “She didn’t sleep in our room last night.”

“Well, she wasn’t here,” Chip states. “Maybe she found a new boyfriend.”

“Don’t let Scotty hear you say that, Chip,” Bless chides. “I think your nose looks fine the way it is.”

Chip’s face turns beet-red, and he clams up, appearing horrified. Then he notices the concerned look on Bless’s face, and he fast recovers, saying, “No, no, it’s okay, Bless. I know you were only joking. Is there anything I can do to help with the meal?”

Bless smiles at him and replies, “Sure, Chip. If you could finish tossing the salad and place it on the table, that’d be great. You’re so kind.”

Cokey Snowden peeks around the corner of the kitchen and asks, “Is it almost ready?” His torn Genesis T-shirt hangs loosely on his slender frame.

Bless looks up. “Almost, Cokey,” she responds, and Cokey gives her a thumbs-up and disappears. She turns to Sonny and mutters, “That boy needs a haircut and a shave.”

Sonny laughs. "Oh, Bless, you're such a mom. Let the man be."

Tyre and Scotty make their entrance, shouting "Hello," and "How's it goin'?" respectively. Tyre Dashell is an attractive blonde with dark circles under her eyes. A pre-law student, she shares a room with Bless in Pembroke, on the other side of campus. Roommates Doc and Bianca live in another dormitory off the Lower Green, while Chip, Sonny, Cokey, and Scotty share this spacious two-bedroom suite in which the Heigh-ho Supper Club is now fully gathered ... with the exception of Bianca.

Tyre drops into a chair. "What a day. I'm exhausted."

Scott MacGrunt raises a bushy eyebrow as he stares appraisingly at Tyre. His acerbic sense of humor has a tendency to put some people off, but the other members of the Heigh-ho Supper Club allow him considerable leeway most of the time, thinking that he means well. They figure it's a cultural thing stemming from his upbringing in Aberdeen, Scotland—that or an excess of testosterone. In either case, Scotty exclaims, "Ye'r always exhausted, Tyre. Bless, cannae ye let yon poor lass sleep at night, fer God's sake?"

"What are you talking about, Scotty?" Bless pipes up. "The girl sleeps like a log. I can hardly get her out of bed for class in the morning. *Ab-choo!* Besides, if you want to pity someone, pity me. I haven't been feeling well lately."

"Ye'r a hypochondriac, lassie," Scotty responds. "Ye ne'er feel well. How many times a month do ye go tae the health clinic? An' they ne'er find anythin' wrong."

"Down, Scotty," Sonny intervenes. "That's enough. Let it go, and don't be so grumpy. Try to be pleasant for once."

Chip changes the subject. "Bianca's still not here. Doc says she didn't sleep in her room last night. Has anyone seen her? Cokey? Scott?"

"Chip!" warns Bless.

"Well, he is her boyfriend, isn't he? Well? Anyone?"

Scotty glances at Tyre and then looks down. "Ah've nae seen Bianca fer the last few days. We had a wee disagreement."

Chip turns to Cokey. "Do you think she went home? Your family lives in Cranston, right? That's not too far away."

"No, it's not far," Cokey replies, "but it's not walkable. My car keys are in my pocket, so she would've had to get a cab or call our parents for a ride. I can't imagine why she'd do that when she can

call me. And *I* haven't fought with her. Lately, that is.” He looks questioningly at Scotty.

“Maybe we should call your house, Cokey,” Tyre suggests, “just to check.”

“And make my dad and his trophy wife go ballistic if Bianca's not there?” Cokey snorts. “They'll be all over her. Mercedes already hates Bianca, and this would be a golden opportunity for stepmommy to put the screws to her. Not to mention that my dad will give me infinite crap for not watching my sister 24-7. Bianca won't thank you for that, and neither will I. Forget it. It's only been one night. Let's wait a bit. This isn't the first time she's been AWOL. She'll turn up, and everything will be fine. Let's eat already. I'm starving. Can somebody please start the ritual?”

Bless nods and announces, “Okay, supper's ready. I'll take Bianca's part.”

They all stand around the table, reciting lines from the Grimm Brothers' tale of “Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs.”

Bless begins, “There's something wrong with this table.”

Sonny says, “Who's been sitting on my chair?”

Doc says, “Who's been eating off my plate?”

Scotty says, “Who's been takin' some of mah bread?”

Bless says, “Who's been eating my vegetables?”

Cokey says, “Who's been using my fork?”

Tyre says, “Who's been cutting with my knife?”

Chip says, “Who's been drinking out of my mug?”

Bless concludes, “This meeting of the Heigh-ho Supper Club is called to order. Please be seated.”

The seven friends sit down at the table, which consists of two folding card tables pushed together. Bless had covered them with a tablecloth and placed a few candles on top. The dinnerware is comprised of old cutlery from Chip's house and somewhat garish plastic plates adorned with little red-white-and-blue flags and liberty bells, which Mika's mom had bought on sale. It's about as homey a setting as you can get in a dorm room.

“Why do ah always get stuck in the middle?” complains Scotty. “The table legs are in the way an' mah liberty bell plate is wobblin'.”

“Ach, pooor Mach Grunt,” pans Sonny in a pathetic interpretation of a Scottish brogue. “The wee bells wobble, but they dunna fall down.”

“Please pass the salad,” says Tyre.

Chip hands the salad bowl to her and comments, “You know, Bianca has seemed pretty down in the dumps lately. Something’s really bothering her.”

“She’s been stressing over last week’s final exams,” Cokey mutters. “She says she didn’t do well, but she always says that. Then the grades are posted and she gets all A’s. It’s so predictable that it makes me sick. I get C’s all the time, and you don’t see me getting hyper about it. She’s also been complaining about her art project. She’s put in more hours on that art class than Doc’s spent in the Rockefeller Library.”

“Hey!” exclaims Doc.

“He’s right, Doc,” confirms Scotty. “Cubicle 126 is yer second home. Ah ken that the library hae decided tae gift ye the chair when ye graduate.”

“They’re calling it the Ching Chair,” Sonny adds.

Chip is still thinking about Bianca. He doesn’t believe that her classwork has anything to do with her recent moodiness, but he remains silent about it.

“What’s Bianca’s art project about?” Tyre asks.

Cokey raises his hands. “I dunno, exactly. It’s got to do with a painting at the Rhode Island School of Design.”

“The what?” mocks Doc. “Nobody calls that school by its full name. It goes by its initials. Pronounce it with me, Cokey: Rizz-dee. I love their museum. They have a very nice Impressionist collection.”

“Impressionism,” Scotty scoffs. “That’s when art started tae go downhill. People began paintin’ things tha’ didnae look like real life. Before ye knew it, they were jus’ puttin’ random shapes on canvas an’ callin’ it art. Eventually, they didnae e’en bother paintin’ shapes. Hell, anyone could do it. Who was tha’ tosser who jus’ danced around a canvas on the floor, drippin’ paint?”

“Jackson Pollock,” Tyre responds, “the abstract expressionist. One of his paintings hangs at RISD. It’s brilliant. You should go see it.”

Studiously ignoring her, Scotty intones, “Pass the lasagna, please. The food looks guid, Bless and Sonny. An’ ah’ll tell ye wha’. It took way more effort tae cook this pasta than tae throw some paint on the ground. You lot hae more talent in yer little fingers than Jackson Pillock had in his whole body.”

Tyre’s face grows red. “It’s Pollock. You’re the pillock. You engineers are all alike. You have no appreciation for the arts at all.

You just tinker with cogs and wires. I don't know what Bianca sees in you.”

Scotty stands up. “Hey, listen, Flat. If all o’the world's modern artists dropped dead right now, the earth would jus’ keep turnin’ as usual. It might e’en be a slightly better place. But do ye ken wha’ happens if the engineers disappear?”

“How about we all calm down, friends?” appeals Sonny, smiling with worried eyes.

“This is wha’ happens!” shouts Scotty, and he turns off the lights.

With the room lit only by the candles on the table, Scotty returns and sits down. Tyre folds her arms and leans back in her chair.

“The food’s delicious,” declares Chip. “Thank you, Bless and Sonny.”

Bless blushes. “You're quite welcome, Chip. You know, it's kind of fun to dine by candlelight. We should do this more often.”

Doc turns to Sonny and inquires, “I meant to ask you before, Sonny. Has your brother left the campus?”

“Yes, Doc, thanks for asking. Yeah, Colin went home, although I suggested he come back tomorrow and attend one of Professor Dimpleman’s classes with Chip. His high school’s winter break is almost over. It was fun to have him stay with me for a while. Of course, we live in East Providence, so I get to see him frequently. Bianca and I have been helping him with his college-application essay. He's pretty much done with everything now.”

“What does he intend to study?” inquires Doc.

“He's not sure, but he thinks maybe law enforcement.”

“Oh, he should talk with Chip about that,” says Bless.

“He did,” offers Chip, “although I'm studying sociology, which isn't the same thing. I did tell him a lot about the course I took in deviant behavior.”

“Aye, well, ah’m sure tha’ was interestin’ fer him,” jaws Scotty. “Deviant behavior bein’ a subject of which ye hae excellent firsthand knowledge.”

Doc fixes Scotty with a steely gaze. “You're incorrigible, Scotty. Leave our little chipmunk be.”

Bless stands and starts clearing empty plates from the table. Sonny stretches, then joins her.

“For dessert tonight, we have assorted fresh fruit,” Bless declares before carrying the dishes into the tiny kitchen.

“Yum,” responds Tyre.

“I just want an apple,” indicates Cokey.

“Oh, I'm sorry,” replies Sonny. “We don't have any apples. The store was all out. How about a banana?”

“Me don't want no stinking banana! Do I look like a frigging monkey to you?” responds Cokey.

Bless appears at the kitchen doorway and chides, “Oh, stop teasing him, Sonny. Everyone knows how much he loves apples.” She throws an apple to Cokey, who catches it and takes a bite.

“Guid monkey,” says Scotty, and Cokey scowls at him.

Bless and Sonny bring out two bowls of assorted fruit and some Cool Whip. The group dig in.

After a few moments, Tyre declares, “That was great. I'm stuffed. Ready for a nap now.”

“Don't do it,” warns Chip. “If you close your eyes, you'll sleep till morning.”

“If she'd keep her eyes an' her gob closed more often, we'd all be better aff,” Scotty mumbles.

“What was that, Scotty?” asks Cokey.

Scotty looks down and mutters, “Nothin’.” He turns to his left. “How about ye, Doc? Headin' back tae the library? Yer chair has probably cooled tae room temperature by now.”

“Yes. I need to study advanced organic chemistry. I hardly know the stuff.”

Scotty smirks. “Mibbie that's because the spring term does nae even start until tomorrow. Ah take yer point, tho'. Yer such a slacker. Ah've always thought tha' the 4.0 ye've got so far is jus' a fluke. Suit yerself. Jus' ye ken tha' there's more tae life than grades, lassie.”

Sonny grabs Scotty from behind and holds him in a headlock. “There you go again, Scotty. Stop calling the good doctor a dog. Now say the line! SAY IT!”

“NAY!” cries Scotty. “It's demeanin’!” Cokey and Chip start laughing.

“SAY IT NOW!” shouts Sonny, gripping his prey tighter.

“A'right! A'right!” Scotty takes a breath, then recites, “Ye cannae mix matta an' anti-matta. Ah cannae change the laws of physics, Cap'n!”

Sonny releases him, and they all laugh.

Bless sneezes and then declares, “As your chairperson tonight, I'd like to announce that our next official gathering will be

Wednesday evening at the usual time. At that meeting, we'll collect dues and discuss assignments and menus for the following week. Per the agreed schedule, Doc will be your chef and chairperson, and Bianca will be on clean-up duty."

"We hope," murmurs Tyre.

Bless frowns and asks, "Is there any new business to discuss?"

"I move that we thank our chef and clean-up volunteers for an excellent meal," Doc proposes.

"Second!" Chip yells.

"Thank you, Doc and Chip," Bless replies. "All in favor?"

Everyone shouts, "Heigh-ho!"

"The motion carries," Bless announces. "Any other business?"

No one responds.

Bless blows her nose and declares, "Hearing none, I hereby declare tonight's meeting of the Heigh-ho Supper Club to be adjourned."



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