

# 7

## THE PATIENT

**D**uring the night Ramona was half awakened when her mother wiped her face with a cool washcloth and lifted her head from the pillow to help her sip something cold. Later, as the shadows of the room were fading, Ramona had to hold a thermometer under her tongue for what seemed like a long time. She felt safe, knowing her mother was watching over her. Safe

but sick. No sooner did she find a cool place on her pillow than it became too hot for comfort, and Ramona turned again.

As her room grew light, Ramona dozed off, faintly aware that her family was moving quietly so they would not disturb her. One tiny corner of her mind was pleased by this consideration. She heard breakfast sounds, and then she must have fallen completely asleep, because the next thing she knew she was awake and the house was silent. Had they all gone off and left her? No, someone was moving quietly in the kitchen. Howie's grandmother must have come to stay with her.

Ramona's eyes blurred. Her family had all gone off and left her when she was sick. She blinked away the tears and discovered on her bedside table a cartoon her father had drawn for her. It showed Ramona leaning against one tree and the family car leaning

against another. He had drawn her with crossed eyes and a turned-down mouth. The car's headlights were crossed and its front bumper turned down like Ramona's mouth. They both looked sick. Ramona discovered she remembered how to smile. She also discovered she felt hot and sweaty instead of hot and dry. For a moment she struggled to sit up and then fell back on her pillow. Sitting up was too much work. She longed



for her mother, and suddenly, as if her wish were granted, her mother was entering the bedroom with a basin of water and a towel.

"Mother!" croaked Ramona. "Why aren't you at work?"

"Because I stayed home to take care of you," Mrs. Quimby answered, as she gently washed Ramona's face and hands.

"Feeling better?"

"Sort of." In some ways Ramona felt better, but she also felt sweaty, weak, and worried. "Are you going to lose your job?" she asked, remembering the time her father had been out of work.

"No. The receptionist who retired was glad to come in for a few days to take my place." Mrs. Quimby gave Ramona a sponge bath and helped her into cool, dry pajamas. "There," she said. "How about some tea and toast?"

"Grown-up tea?" asked Ramona, relieved

that her mother's job was safe so that her father wouldn't have to drop out of school.

"Grown-up tea," answered her mother, as she propped Ramona up with an extra pillow. In a few minutes she brought a tray that held a slice of dry toast and a cup of weak tea.

Nibbling and sipping left Ramona tired and gloomy.

"Cheer up," said Mrs. Quimby, when she came to remove the tray. "Your temperature is down, and you're going to be all right."

Ramona did feel a little better. Her mother was right. She had not thrown up on purpose. Other children had done the same thing. There was that boy in kindergarten and the girl in first grade. . . .

Ramona dozed off, and when she awoke, she was bored and cranky. She wanted butter on the toast her mother brought her and scowled when her mother said people

with stomach flu should not eat butter.

Mrs. Quimby smiled and said, "I can tell you're beginning to get well when you act like a wounded tiger."

Ramona scowled. "I am *not* acting like a wounded tiger," she informed her mother. When Mrs. Quimby made her a bed on the living-room couch so she could watch television, she was cross with the television set because she found daytime programs dumb, stupid, and boring. Commercials were much more interesting than the programs. She lay back and hoped for a cat-food commercial because she liked to look at nice cats. As she waited, she brooded about her teacher.

"Of course I didn't throw up on purpose," Ramona told herself. Mrs. Whaley should know that. And deep down inside I am really a nice person, she comforted herself. Mrs. Whaley should know that, too.

"Who pays teachers?" Ramona suddenly

asked, when her mother came into the room.

"Why, we all do." Mrs. Quimby seemed surprised by the question. "We pay taxes, and teachers' salaries come out of tax money."

Ramona knew that taxes were something unpleasant that worried parents. "I think you should stop paying taxes," Ramona informed her mother.

Mrs. Quimby looked amused. "I wish we could—at least until we finish paying for the room we added to the house. Whatever put such an idea into your head?"

"Mrs. Whaley doesn't like me," Ramona answered. "She is supposed to like me. It's her job to like me."

All Mrs. Quimby had to say was, "If you're this grouchy at school, liking you could be hard work."

Ramona was indignant. Her mother was supposed to feel sorry for her poor, weak little girl.

Picky-picky strolled into the living room and stared at Ramona as if he felt she did not belong on the couch. With an arthritic leap, he jumped up beside her on the blanket, washed himself from his ears to the tip of his tail, kneaded the blanket, and, purring, curled up beside Ramona, who lay very still so he would not go away. When he was asleep, she petted him gently. Picky-picky usually avoided her because she was noisy, or so her mother said.

A funny man appeared on the television screen. He had eaten a pizza, which had given him indigestion. He groaned. "I can't believe I ate the *whole* thing." Ramona smiled.

The next commercial showed a cat stepping back and forth in a little dance. "Do you think we could train Picky-picky to do that?" Ramona asked her mother.

Mrs. Quimby was amused at the idea of old Picky-picky dancing. "I doubt it," she



said. "That cat isn't really dancing. They just turn the film back and forth so it looks as if he's dancing."

How disappointing. Ramona dozed while another cat-food commercial appeared. She awoke enough to watch a big yellow cat ignore several brands of cat food before he settled down to eat a bowl of dry food silently. That's funny, thought Ramona. When Picky-picky ate dry cat food, he ground and crunched so noisily she could hear him from any room in the house, but television cats never made any sound at all when they ate. The commercials lied. That's what they did. Ramona was cross with cat-food commercials. Cheaters! She was angry with the whole world.

Late that afternoon Ramona was aroused once more by the doorbell. Was it someone interesting? She hoped so, for she was bored. The visitor turned out to be Sara.

Ramona lay back on her pillow and tried to look pale and weak as her mother said, "Why, hello, Sara. I'm glad to see you, but I don't think you should come in until Ramona is feeling better."

"That's all right," said Sara. "I just brought some letters the class wrote to Ramona, and Mrs. Whaley sent a book for her to read."

"Hi, Sara," said Ramona with the weakest smile she could manage.

"Mrs. Whaley said to tell you this book is not for DEAR. This one is for a book report," Sara explained from the doorway.

Ramona groaned.

"She said to tell you," Sara continued, "that she wants us to stand up in front of the class and pretend we are selling the book. She doesn't want us to tell the whole story. She says she has already heard all the stories quite a few times."

Ramona felt worse. Not only would she

have to give a book report, she would have to listen to twenty-five book reports given by other people, another reason for wanting to stay home.

When Sara left, Ramona examined the big envelope she had brought. Mrs. Whaley had written Ramona's name on the front with a floppy cursive capital Q and beneath it in her big handwriting, "Miss you!" followed by a picture of a whale and y.

I bet she doesn't mean it, thought Ramona. She opened the envelope of the first letters anyone had ever written to her. "Mother, they wrote in cursive!" she cried, delighted. Although all the letters said much the same thing—we are sorry you are sick and hope you get well soon—they made Ramona feel good. She knew they were written to teach letter writing and handwriting at the same time, but she didn't care.

One letter was different. Yard Ape had



written, "Dear Superfoot, Get well or I will eat your eraser." Ramona smiled because his letter showed he liked her. She looked forward to the return of her father and sister so she could show off her mail.

Bored with television and cramped from lying still so she would not disturb Picky-picky, Ramona waited. How sorry they

would be to see her so pale and thin. Surely her father would bring her a little present, something to entertain her while she had to stay in bed. A paperback book because she could now read books with chapters? New crayons? Her father understood the importance of sharp-pointed crayons to someone who liked to draw.

Beezus arrived first with an armload of books that she dropped on a chair. "Homework!" she said and groaned. Now that she was in junior high school, she was always talking about all the work she had to do, as if Ramona did nothing in school. "How do you feel?" she finally got around to asking.

"Sick," said Ramona in a faint voice, "but my whole class wrote to me."

Beezus glanced at the sheaf of letters. "They copied them off the blackboard," she said.

"Writing a whole letter in cursive is hard work for lots of people when they are in the

third grade." Ramona was hurt at having her letters belittled. She pushed Picky-picky off the couch so she could stretch her legs. The television droned on and on.

"I wonder what's keeping your father," remarked Mrs. Quimby, looking out the front window.

Ramona knew why her father was late, but she did not say so. He was buying her a little present because she was sick. She could hardly wait. "My class is giving book reports," she informed Beezus, so her sister would know she had schoolwork to do too. "We have to pretend to sell a book to someone."

"We did that a couple of times," said Beezus. "Teachers always tell you not to tell the whole story, and half the kids finish by saying, 'If you want to know what happens next, read the book,' and somebody always says, 'Read this book, or I'll punch you in the nose.'"

Ramona knew who would say that in

her class. Yard Ape, that was who.

"Here he comes now," said Mrs. Quimby, and she hurried to open the door for Ramona's father, who kissed her as he entered.

"Where's the car?" she asked.

"Bad news." Mr. Quimby sounded tired. "It has to have a new transmission."

"Oh, no!" Mrs. Quimby was shocked. "How much is that going to cost?"

Mr. Quimby looked grim. "Plenty. More than we can afford."

"We'll have to afford it somehow," said Mrs. Quimby. "We can't manage without a car."

"The transmission people are letting us pay it off in installments," he explained, "and I'll manage to get in some more hours as Santa's Little Helper at the warehouse."

"I wish there were some other way. . . ." Mrs. Quimby looked sad as she went into

the kitchen to attend to supper.

Only then did Mr. Quimby turn his attention to Ramona. "How's my little punkin?" he asked.

"Sick." Ramona forgot to look pitiful, she was so disappointed that her father had not brought her a present.

"Cheer up," Mr. Quimby half smiled. "At least you don't need a new transmission, and you'll feel better tomorrow."

"What's a transmission?" asked Ramona.

"That's what makes the car go," explained her father.

"Oh," said Ramona. Then to show her father that her life was not so easy, she added, "I have to give a book report at school."

"Well, make it interesting," said Mr. Quimby, as he went off to wash for supper.

Ramona knew her father was worried, but she could not help thinking he might have felt sorrier for his sick little girl. Anyone



would think he loved the car more. She lay back genuinely weak, exhausted by television, and sorry her father would have to work more hours in the frozen-food warehouse where, no matter how many pairs of woolen socks he wore, his feet were always cold and he sometimes had to go outside until feeling came back into his cheeks.

When her mother, after serving the rest of the family, said the time had come for Ramona to get into her own bed and have a little supper on a tray, she was ready to go. The thought that her mother did not think she was a nuisance comforted her.

## 8

### RAMONA'S BOOK REPORT

**T**he Quimby family was full of worries. The parents were worried about managing without a car while a new transmission was installed and even more worried about paying for it. Beezus was worried about a party she had been invited to, because boys had also been invited. She was afraid it would turn out to be a dancing party, and she felt silly trying to dance. Besides, eighth-grade

boys acted like a bunch of little kids at parties. Ramona, still feeling weak, moped around the house for another day worrying about her book report. If she made it interesting, Mrs. Whaley would think she was showing off. If she did not make it interesting, her teacher would not like it.

On top of everything, Beezus happened to look at her father's head as he bent over his books at the dining-room table that evening. "Daddy, you're getting thin on top!" she cried out, shocked.

Ramona rushed to look. "Just a little thin," she said, because she did not want her father's feelings hurt. "You aren't bald yet."

Mrs. Quimby also examined the top of her husband's head. "It is a little thin," she agreed, and kissed the spot. "Never mind. I found a gray hair last week."

"What is this? A conference about my hair?" asked Mr. Quimby, and he grabbed his wife around the waist. "Don't worry,"



he told her. "I'll still love you when you're old and gray."

"Thanks a lot," said Mrs. Quimby, not wanting to think of herself as old and gray. They both laughed, Mr. Quimby released his wife and gave her a playful slap on the bottom, an act that amused and shocked his daughters.

Ramona had two feelings about this conversation. She did not want her father's hair to grow thin or her mother's hair to grow gray. She wanted her parents to stay exactly as they were for ever and ever. But oh, how good it was to see them be so affectionate with one another. She knew her mother and father loved one another, but sometimes, when they were tired and hurried, or when they had long, serious conversations after the girls had gone to bed, she wondered and worried, because she knew children whose parents had stopped loving one another. Now she knew everything was all right.

Suddenly Ramona felt so happy that a book report did not seem so difficult after all—if she could think of a way to make it interesting.

The book, *The Left-Behind Cat*, which Mrs. Whaley had sent home for Ramona to read for her report, was divided into chapters

but used babyish words. The story was about a cat that was left behind when a family moved away and about its adventures with a dog, another cat, and some children before it finally found a home with a nice old couple who gave it a saucer of cream and named it Lefty because its left paw was white and because it had been left behind. Medium-boring, thought Ramona, good enough to pass the time on the bus, but not good enough to read during Sustained Silent Reading. Besides, cream cost too much to give to a cat. The most the old people would give a cat was half-and-half, she thought. Ramona required accuracy from books as well as from people.

“Daddy, how do you sell something?” Ramona interrupted her father, who was studying, even though she knew she should not. However, her need for an answer was urgent.

Mr. Quimby did not look up from his book. "You ought to know. You see enough commercials on television."

Ramona considered his answer. She had always looked upon commercials as entertainment, but now she thought about some of her favorites—the cats that danced back and forth, the dog that pushed away brand-X dog food with his paw, the man who ate a pizza, got indigestion, and groaned that he couldn't believe he ate the *whole* thing, the six horses that pulled the Wells Fargo bank's stagecoach across deserts and over mountains.

"Do you mean I should do a book report like a TV commercial?" Ramona asked.

"Why not?" Mr. Quimby answered in an absentminded way.

"I don't want my teacher to say I'm a nuisance," said Ramona, needing assurance from a grown-up.

This time Mr. Quimby lifted his eyes

from his book. "Look," he said, "she told you to pretend you're selling the book, so sell it. What better way than a TV commercial? You aren't being a nuisance if you do what your teacher asks." He looked at Ramona a moment and said, "Why do you worry she'd think you're a nuisance?"

Ramona stared at the carpet, wiggled her toes inside her shoes, and finally said, "I squeaked my shoes the first day of school."

"That's not being much of a nuisance," said Mr. Quimby.

"And when I got egg in my hair, Mrs. Whaley said I was a nuisance," confessed Ramona, "and then I threw up in school."

"But you didn't do those things on purpose," her father pointed out. "Now run along. I have studying to do."

Ramona thought this answer over and decided that since her parents agreed, they must be right. Well, Mrs. Whaley could just



go jump in a lake, even though her teacher had written, without wasting words, that she missed her. Ramona was going to give her book report any way she wanted. So there, Mrs. Whaley.

Ramona went to her room and looked at her table, which the family called "Ramona's studio," because it was a clutter of crayons, different kinds of paper, Scotch tape, bits of yarn, and odds and ends that Ramona used for amusing herself. Then Ramona thought a moment, and suddenly, filled with inspiration, she went to work. She knew exactly what she wanted to do and set about doing it. She worked with paper, crayons, Scotch tape, and rubber bands. She worked so hard and with such pleasure that her cheeks grew pink. Nothing in the whole world felt as good as being able to make something from a sudden idea.

Finally, with a big sigh of relief, Ramona

leaned back in her chair to admire her work: three cat masks with holes for eyes and mouths, masks that could be worn by hooking rubber bands over ears. But Ramona did not stop there. With pencil and paper, she began to write out what she would say. She was so full of ideas that she printed rather



than waste time in cursive writing. Next she phoned Sara and Janet, keeping her voice low and trying not to giggle so she wouldn't disturb her father any more than necessary, and explained her plan to them. Both her friends giggled and agreed to take part in the book report. Ramona spent the rest of the evening memorizing what she was going to say.

The next morning on the bus and at school, no one even mentioned Ramona's throwing up. She had braced herself for some remark from Yard Ape, but all he said was, "Hi, Superfoot." When school started, Ramona slipped cat masks to Sara and Janet, handed her written excuse for her absence to Mrs. Whaley, and waited, fanning away escaped fruit flies, for book reports to begin.

After arithmetic, Mrs. Whaley called on several people to come to the front of the room to pretend they were selling books to the class. Most of the reports began, "This is

a book about . . .” and many, as Beezus had predicted, ended with “. . . if you want to find out what happens next, read the book.”

Then Mrs. Whaley said, “We have time for one more report before lunch. Who wants to be next?”

Ramona waved her hand, and Mrs. Whaley nodded.

Ramona beckoned to Sara and Janet, who giggled in an embarrassed way but joined Ramona, standing behind her and off to one side. All three girls slipped on their cat masks and giggled again. Ramona took a deep breath as Sara and Janet began to chant, “*Meow*, meow, meow, meow. *Meow*, meow, meow, meow,” and danced back and forth like the cats they had seen in the cat-food commercial on television.

“*Left-Behind Cat* gives kids something to smile about,” said Ramona in a loud clear voice, while her chorus meowed softly

behind her. She wasn't sure that what she said was exactly true, but neither were the commercials that showed cats eating dry cat food without making any noise. "Kids who have tried *Left-Behind Cat* are all smiles, smiles, smiles. *Left-Behind Cat* is the book kids ask for by name. Kids can read it every day and thrive on it. The happiest kids read *Left-Behind Cat*. *Left-Behind Cat* contains cats, dogs, people—" Here Ramona caught sight of Yard Ape leaning back in his seat, grinning in the way that always flustered her. She could not help interrupting herself with a giggle, and after suppressing it she tried not to look at Yard Ape and to take up where she had left off. ". . . cats, dogs, people—" The giggle came back, and Ramona was lost. She could not remember what came next. ". . . cats, dogs, people," she repeated, trying to start and failing.

Mrs. Whaley and the class waited. Yard Ape

grinned. Ramona's loyal chorus meowed and danced. This performance could not go on all morning. Ramona had to say something, anything to end the waiting, the meowing, her book report. She tried desperately to recall a cat-food commercial, any cat-food commercial, and could not. All she could remember was the man on television who ate the pizza, and so she blurted out the only sentence she could think of, "I can't believe I read the *whole* thing!"

Mrs. Whaley's laugh rang out above the laughter of the class. Ramona felt her face turn red behind her mask, and her ears, visible to the class, turned red as well.

"Thank you, Ramona," said Mrs. Whaley. "That was most entertaining. Class, you are excused for lunch."

Ramona felt brave behind her cat mask. "Mrs. Whaley," she said, as the class pushed back chairs and gathered up lunch

boxes, "that wasn't the way my report was supposed to end."

"Did you like the book?" asked Mrs. Whaley.

"Not really," confessed Ramona.

"Then I think it was a good way to end your report," said the teacher. "Asking the class to sell books they really don't like isn't fair, now that I stop to think about it. I was only trying to make book reports a little livelier."

Encouraged by this confession and still safe behind her mask, Ramona had the boldness to speak up. "Mrs. Whaley," she said with her heart pounding, "you told Mrs. Larson that I'm a nuisance, and I don't think I am."

Mrs. Whaley looked astonished. "When did I say that?"

"The day I got egg in my hair," said Ramona. "You called me a show-off and said I was a nuisance."

Mrs. Whaley frowned, thinking. "Why, Ramona, I can recall saying something about my little show-off, but I meant it affectionately, and I'm sure I never called you a nuisance."

"Yes, you did," insisted Ramona. "You said I was a show-off, and then you said, 'What a nuisance.' " Ramona could never forget those exact words.





Mrs. Whaley, who had looked worried, smiled in relief. "Oh, Ramona, you misunderstood," she said. "I meant that trying to wash egg out of your hair was a nuisance for Mrs. Larson. I didn't mean that you personally were a nuisance."

Ramona felt a little better, enough to come out from under her mask to say, "I wasn't showing off. I was just trying to crack an egg on my head like everyone else."

Mrs. Whaley's smile was mischievous. "Tell me, Ramona," she said, "don't you ever try to show off?"

Ramona was embarrassed. "Well . . . maybe . . . sometimes, a little," she admitted. Then she added positively, "But I wasn't showing off that day. How could I be showing off when I was doing what everyone else was doing?"

"You've convinced me," said Mrs. Whaley with a big smile. "Now run along and eat your lunch."

Ramona snatched up her lunch box and went jumping down the stairs to the cafeteria. She laughed to herself because she knew exactly what all the boys and girls from her class would say when they finished their lunches. She knew because she planned to say it herself. "I can't believe I ate the *whole* thing!"



## 9

### RAINY SUNDAY

**R**ainy Sunday afternoons in November were always dismal, but Ramona felt this Sunday was the most dismal of all. She pressed her nose against the living-room window, watching the ceaseless rain pelting down as bare black branches clawed at the electric wires in front of the house. Even lunch, leftovers Mrs. Quimby had wanted to clear out of the refrigerator, had been

dreary, with her parents, who seemed tired or discouraged or both, having little to say and Beezus mysteriously moody. Ramona longed for sunshine, sidewalks dry enough for roller-skating, a smiling, happy family.

“Ramona, you haven’t cleaned up your room this weekend,” said Mrs. Quimby, who was sitting on the couch, sorting through a stack of bills. “And don’t press your nose against the window. It leaves a smudge.”

Ramona felt as if everything she did was wrong. The whole family seemed cross today, even Picky-picky who meowed at the front door. With a sigh, Mrs. Quimby got up to let him out. Beezus, carrying a towel and shampoo, stalked through the living room into the kitchen, where she began to wash her hair at the sink. Mr. Quimby, studying at the dining-room table as usual, made his pencil scratch angrily across a pad of paper. The television set sat blank and mute, and in

the fireplace a log sullenly refused to burn.

Mrs. Quimby sat down and then got up again as Picky-picky, indignant at the wet world outdoors, yowled to come in. "Ramona, clean up your room," she ordered, as she let the cat and a gust of cold air into the house.

"Beezus hasn't cleaned up her room." Ramona could not resist pointing this omission out to her mother.

"I'm not talking about Beezus," said Mrs. Quimby. "I'm talking about you."

Still Ramona did not move from the window. Cleaning up her room seemed such a boring thing to do, no fun at all on a rainy afternoon. She thought vaguely of all the exciting things she would like to do—learn to twirl a lariat, play a musical saw, flip around and over bars in a gymnastic competition while crowds cheered.

"Ramona, *clean up your room!*" Mrs. Quimby raised her voice.

“Well, you don’t have to yell at me.”  
Ramona’s feelings were hurt by the tone of her mother’s voice. The log in the fireplace settled, sending a puff of smoke into the living room.

“Then do it,” snapped Mrs. Quimby.  
“Your room is a disaster area.”

Mr. Quimby threw down his pencil.  
“Young lady, you do what your mother says, and you do it now. She shouldn’t have to tell you three times.”

“Well, all right, but you don’t have to be so cross,” said Ramona. To herself she thought, Nag, nag, nag.

Sulkily Ramona took her hurt feelings off to her room, where she pulled a week’s collection of dirty socks from under her bed. On her way to the bathroom hamper, she looked down the hall and saw her sister standing in the living room, rubbing her hair with a towel.

“Mother, I think you’re mean,” said

Beezus from under the towel.

Ramona stopped to listen.

"I don't care how mean you think I am," answered Mrs. Quimby. "You are not going to go, and that is that."

"But all the other girls are going," protested Beezus.

"I don't care if they are," said Mrs. Quimby. "You are not."

Ramona heard the sound of a pencil being slammed on the table and her father saying, "Your mother is right. Now would you kindly give me a little peace and quiet so I can get on with my work."

Beezus flounced past Ramona into her room and slammed the door. Sobs were heard, loud, angry sobs.

Where can't she go? Ramona wondered, as she dumped her socks into the hamper. Then, because she had been so good about picking up her room, Ramona returned



to the living room, where Picky-picky, as cross and bored as the rest of the family, was once again meowing at the front door. "Where can't Beezus go?" she asked.



Mrs. Quimby opened the front door, and when Picky-picky hesitated, vexed by the cold wind that swept into the room, assisted him out with her toe. "She can't sleep over at Mary Jane's house with a bunch of girls from her class."

A year ago Ramona would have agreed with her mother so that her mother would love her more than Beezus, but this year she knew that she too might want to spend the night at someone's house someday. "Why can't Beezus sleep at Mary Jane's?" she asked.

"Because she comes home exhausted and grouchy." Mrs. Quimby stood by the door, waiting. Picky-picky's yowl was twisted by the wind, and when she opened the door, another cold gust swept through the house.

"With the price of fuel oil being what it is, we can't afford to let the cat out," remarked Mr. Quimby.

"Would you like to take the responsibility

if I don't let him out?" asked Mrs. Quimby, before she continued with her answer to Ramona. "There are four people in the family, and she has no right to make the whole day disagreeable for the rest of us because she has been up half the night giggling with a bunch of silly girls. Besides, a growing girl needs her rest."

Ramona silently agreed with her mother about Beezus's coming home cross after such a party. At the same time, she wanted to make things easier for herself when she was in junior high school. "Maybe this time they would go to sleep earlier," she suggested.

"Fat chance," said Mrs. Quimby, who rarely spoke so rudely. "And furthermore, Ramona, Mrs. Kemp did not come right out and say so, but she did drop a hint that you are not playing as nicely with Willa Jean as you might."

Ramona heaved a sigh that seemed to

come from the soles of her feet. In the bedroom, Beezus, who had run out of real sobs, was working hard to force out fake sobs to show her parents how mean they were to her.

Mrs. Quimby ignored the sighs and the sobs and continued. "Ramona, you know that getting along at the Kemps' is your job in this family. I've told you that before."

How could Ramona explain to her mother that Willa Jean had finally caught on that Sustained Silent Reading was just plain reading a book? For a while, Willa Jean wanted Ramona to read aloud a few boring books the Kemps owned, the sort of books people who did not know anything about children so often gave them. Willa Jean listened to them several times, grew bored, and now insisted on playing beauty shop. Ramona did not want her fingernails painted by Willa Jean and knew she would be blamed if Willa Jean spilled nail polish. Instead of Mrs. Kemp's

taking care of Ramona, Ramona was taking care of Willa Jean.

Ramona looked at the carpet, sighed again, and said, "I try." She felt sorry for herself, misunderstood and unappreciated. Nobody in the whole world understood how hard it was to go to the Kemps' house after school when she did not have a bicycle.

Mrs. Quimby relented. "I know it isn't easy," she said with a half smile, "but don't give up." She gathered up the bills and checkbook and went into the kitchen, where she began to write checks at the kitchen table.

Ramona wandered into the dining room to seek comfort from her father. She laid her cheek against the sleeve of his plaid shirt and asked, "Daddy, what are you studying?"

Once again Mr. Quimby threw down his pencil. "I am studying the cognitive processes of children," he answered.

Ramona raised her head to look at him.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"How kids think," her father told her.

Ramona did not like the sound of this subject at all. "Why are you studying *that*?" she demanded. Some things should be private, and how children thought was one of them. She did not like the idea of grown-ups snooping around in thick books trying to find out.

"That is exactly what I have been asking myself." Mr. Quimby was serious. "Why am I studying this stuff when we have bills to pay?"

"Well, I don't think you should," said Ramona. "It's none of your business how kids think." Then she quickly added, because she did not want her father to drop out of school and be a checker again, "There are lots of other things you could study. Things like fruit flies."

Mr. Quimby smiled at Ramona and rumbled her hair. "I doubt if anyone could



figure out how you think,” he said, which made Ramona feel better, as if her secret thoughts were still safe.

Mr. Quimby sat gnawing his pencil and staring out the window at the rain. Beezus, who had run out of fake sobs, emerged from her room, red-eyed and damp-haired, to stalk about the house not speaking to anyone.

Ramona flopped down on the couch. She

hated rainy Sundays, especially this one, and longed for Monday when she could escape to school. The Quimbys' house seemed to have grown smaller during the day until it was no longer big enough to hold her family and all its problems. She tried not to think of the half-overheard conversations of her parents after the girls had gone to bed, grown-up talk that Ramona understood just enough to know her parents were concerned about their future.

Ramona had deep, secret worries of her own. She worried that her father might accidentally be locked in the frozen-food warehouse, where it was so cold it sometimes snowed indoors. What if he was filling a big order, and the men who were lucky enough to get small orders to fill left work ahead of him and forgot and locked the warehouse, and he couldn't get out and froze to death? Of course that wouldn't happen. "But

it might," insisted a tiny voice in the back of her mind. Don't be silly, she told the little voice. "Yes, but—" began the little voice. And despite the worry that would not go away Ramona wanted her father to go on working so he could stay in school and someday get a job he liked.

While Ramona worried, the house was silent except for the sound of rain and the scratch of her father's pencil. The smoking log settled in the fireplace, sending up a few feeble sparks. The day grew darker, Ramona was beginning to feel hungry, but there was no comfortable bustle of cooking in the kitchen.

Suddenly Mr. Quimby slammed shut his book and threw down his pencil so hard it bounced onto the floor. Ramona sat up. Now what was wrong?

"Come on, everybody," said her father. "Get cleaned up. Let's stop this grumping



around. We are going out for dinner, and we are going to smile and be pleasant if it kills us. That's an order!"

The girls stared at their father and then at one another. What was going on? They had not gone out to dinner for months, so how could they afford to go now?

"To the Whopperburger?" asked Ramona.

"Sure," said Mr. Quimby, who appeared cheerful for the first time that day. "Why not? The sky's the limit."

Mrs. Quimby came into the living room with a handful of stamped envelopes. "But Bob—" she began.

"Now don't worry," her husband said. "We'll manage. During Thanksgiving I'll be putting in more hours in the warehouse and getting more overtime. There's no reason why we can't have a treat once in a while. And the Whopperburger isn't exactly your four-star gourmet restaurant."

Ramona was afraid her mother might give a lecture on the evils of junk food, but she did not. Gloom and anger were forgotten. Clothes were changed, hair combed, Picky-picky was shut in the basement, and the family was on its way in the old car with the new transmission that never balked at backing down the driveway. Off the Quimbys sped to the nearest Whopperburger, where they discovered other families must have wanted to get out of the house on a rainy day, for the restaurant was crowded, and they had to wait for a table.

There were enough chairs for the grown-ups and Beezus, but Ramona, who had the youngest legs, had to stand up. She amused herself by punching the buttons on the cigarette machine in time to the Muzak, which was playing "Tie a Yellow Ribbon 'Round the Old Oak Tree." She even danced a little to the music, and, when the tune came to an

end, she turned around and found herself face to face with an old man with neatly trimmed gray hair and a moustache that turned up at the ends. He was dressed as if everything he wore—a flowered shirt, striped tie, tweed coat and plaid slacks—had come from different stores or from a rummage sale, except that the crease in his trousers was sharp and his shoes were shined.

The old man, whose back was very straight, saluted Ramona as if she were a soldier and said, "Well, young lady, have you been good to your mother?"

Ramona was stunned. She felt her face turn red to the tips of her ears. She did not know how to answer such a question. Had she been good to her mother? Well . . . not always, but why was this stranger asking? It was none of his business. He had no right to ask such a question.

Ramona looked to her parents for help

and discovered they were waiting with amusement for her answer. So were the rest of the people who were waiting for tables. Ramona scowled at the man. She did not have to answer him if she did not want to.

The hostess saved Ramona by calling out, "Quimby, party of four," and leading the family to a plastic-upholstered booth.

"Why didn't you answer the man?" Beezus was as amused as everyone else.

"I'm not supposed to talk to strangers," was Ramona's dignified answer.

"But Mother and Daddy are with us," Beezus pointed out, rather meanly, Ramona thought.

"Remember," said Mr. Quimby, as he opened his menu, "we are all going to smile and enjoy ourselves if it kills us."

As Ramona picked up her menu, she was still seething inside. Maybe she hadn't always been good to her mother, but that

man had no right to pry. When she discovered he was seated in a single booth across the aisle, she gave him an indignant look, which he answered with a merry wink. So he had been teasing. Well, Ramona didn't like it.

When Ramona opened her menu, she made an exciting discovery. She no longer had to depend on colored pictures of hamburgers, French fries, chili, and steak to help her make up her mind. She could now read what was offered. She studied carefully, and when she came to the bottom of the menu, she read the dreaded words, "Child's Plate for Children Under Twelve." Then came the list of choices: fish sticks, chicken drumsticks, hot dogs. None of them, to Ramona, food for a treat. They were food for a school cafeteria.

"Daddy," Ramona whispered, "do I have to have a child's plate?"

“Not if you don’t want to.” Her father’s smile was understanding. Ramona ordered the smallest adult item on the menu.

Whopperburger was noted for fast service, and in a few minutes the waitress set down the Quimbys’ dinners: a hamburger and French fries for Ramona, a cheeseburger and French fries for Beezus and her mother, and hamburgers with chili for her father.

Ramona bit into her hamburger. Bliss. Warm, soft, juicy, tart with relish. Juice dribbled down her chin. She noticed her mother start to say something and change her mind. Ramona caught the dribble with her paper napkin before it reached her collar. The French fries—crisp on the outside, mealy on the inside—tasted better than anything Ramona had ever eaten.

The family ate in companionable silence for a few moments until the edge was taken off their hunger. “A little change once in a

while does make a difference,” said Mrs. Quimby. “It does us all good.”

“Especially after the way—” Ramona stopped herself from finishing with, “—after the way Beezus acted this afternoon.” Instead she sat up straight and smiled.

“Well, I wasn’t the only one who—” Beezus also stopped in midsentence and smiled. The parents looked stern, but they managed to smile. Suddenly everyone relaxed and laughed.



The old man, Ramona noticed, was eating a steak. She wished her father could afford a steak.

As much as she enjoyed her hamburger, Ramona was unable to finish. It was too much. She was happy when her





mother did not say, "Someone's eyes are bigger than her stomach." Her father, without commenting on the unfinished hamburger, included her in the orders of apple pie with hot cinnamon sauce and ice cream.

Ramona ate what she could, and after watching the ice cream melt into the cinnamon sauce, she glanced over at the old man, who was having a serious discussion with the waitress. She seemed surprised and upset about something. The Muzak, conversation of other customers, and rattle of dishes made eavesdropping impossible. The waitress left. Ramona saw her speak to the manager, who listened and then nodded. For a moment Ramona thought the man might not have enough money to pay for the steak he had eaten. Apparently he did, however, for after listening to what the waitress had to say,

he left a tip under the edge of his plate and picked up his check. To Ramona's embarrassment, he stood up, winked, and saluted her again. Then he left. Ramona did not know what to make of him.

She turned back to her family, whose smiles were now genuine rather than determined. The sight of them gave her courage to ask the question that had been nibbling at the back of her mind, "Daddy, you aren't going to be a college dropout, are you?"

Mr. Quimby finished a mouthful of pie before he answered, "Nope."

Ramona wanted to make sure. "And you won't ever be a checker and come home cross again?"

"Well," said her father, "I can't promise I won't come home cross, but if I do, it won't be from standing at the cash register trying to remember forty-two price changes in the produce section while a long line of

customers, all in a hurry, wait to pay for their groceries."

Ramona was reassured.

When the waitress descended on the Quimbys to offer the grown-ups a second cup of coffee, Mr. Quimby said, "Check, please."

The waitress looked embarrassed. "Well . . . a . . ." She hesitated. "This has never happened before, but your meals have already been paid for."

The Quimbys looked at her in astonishment. "But who paid for them?" demanded Mr. Quimby.

"A lonely gentleman who left a little while ago," answered the waitress.

"He must have been the man who sat across the aisle," said Mrs. Quimby. "But why would he pay for our dinners? We never saw him before in our lives."

The waitress smiled. "Because he said

you are such a nice family, and because he misses his children and grandchildren." She dashed off with her pot of coffee, leaving the Quimbys in surprised, even shocked, silence. A nice family? After the way they had behaved on a rainy Sunday.

"A mysterious stranger just like in a book," said Beezus. "I never thought I'd meet one."

"Poor lonely man," said Mrs. Quimby at last, as Mr. Quimby shoved a tip under his saucer. Still stunned into silence, the family struggled into their wraps and splashed across the parking lot to their car, which started promptly and backed obediently out of its parking space. As the windshield wipers began their rhythmic exercise, the family rode in silence, each thinking of the events of the day.

"You know," said Mrs. Quimby thoughtfully, as the car left the parking lot and headed down the street, "I think he

was right. We are a nice family.”

“Not all the time,” said Ramona, as usual demanding accuracy.

“Nobody is nice all the time,” answered her father. “Or if they are, they are boring.”

“Not even your parents are nice all the time,” added Mrs. Quimby.

Ramona secretly agreed, but she had not expected her parents to admit it. Deep down inside, she felt she herself was nice all the time, but sometimes on the outside her niceness sort of—well, curdled. Then people did not understand how nice she really was. Maybe other people curdled too.

“We have our ups and downs,” said Mrs. Quimby, “but we manage to get along, and we stick together.”

“We are nicer than some families I know,” said Beezus. “Some families don’t even eat dinner together.” After a moment she made a confession. “I don’t really like sleeping on



someone's floor in a sleeping bag."

"I didn't think you did." Mrs. Quimby reached back and patted Beezus on the knee. "That's one reason I said you couldn't go. You didn't want to go, but didn't want to admit it."

Ramona snuggled inside her car coat, feeling cozy enclosed in the car with the

heater breathing warm air on her nice family. She was a member of a nice sticking-together family, and she was old enough to be depended upon, so she could ignore—or at least try to ignore—a lot of things. Willa Jean—she would try reading her Sustained Silent Reading books aloud because Willa Jean was old enough to understand most of them. That should work for a little while. Mrs. Whaley—some things were nice about her and some were not. Ramona could get along.

“That man paying for our dinner was sort of like a happy ending,” remarked Beezus, as the family, snug in their car, drove through the rain and the dark toward Klickitat Street.

“A happy ending for today,” corrected Ramona. Tomorrow they would begin all over again.

