

LEVEL 4.6

901998 Blue Pencil Test

Ramona Quimby

Cleary, Beverly

Rainy Sunday

Rainy 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, left overs 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 to day, 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. Sulkingly 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' 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 ruffled 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 , 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 Whopper burger?" 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 Whopper burger 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 Whopper burger, 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 Bee1.us, but Ramona, who had the youngest legs, had to stand up. She amused herself by punching the buttons on the vending 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 ~s 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, ~ with relish. Juice dribbled down her chin. She noticed her mother start to say something and change ~ her mind. Ramona caught the dribble r 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 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