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KINDERGARTEN DROPOUT

“**W**hy, Ramona, whatever is the matter?” Mrs. Quimby wanted to know, when Ramona opened the back door.

“Oh . . . nothing.” Ramona had no trouble hiding the gap in her teeth. She did not feel like smiling, and not having a tooth to leave for the tooth fairy was only a small part of her trouble.

Mrs. Quimby laid her hand on Ramona’s

forehead. “Are you feeling all right?” she asked.

“Yes, I feel all right,” answered Ramona, meaning that she did not have a broken leg, a skinned knee, or a sore throat.

“Then something must be wrong,” insisted Mrs. Quimby. “I can tell by your face.”

Ramona sighed. “Miss Binney doesn’t like me anymore,” she confessed.

“Of course, Miss Binney likes you,” said Mrs. Quimby. “She may not like some of the things you do, but she likes you.”

“No, she doesn’t,” contradicted Ramona.

“She doesn’t want me there anymore.” Ramona felt sad thinking about the recesses and the new seat work she was going to miss.

“Why, what do you mean?” Mrs. Quimby was puzzled. “Of course, Miss Binney wants you there.”

"No, she doesn't," insisted Ramona.
"She told me not to come back."

"But why?"

"She doesn't like me," was Ramona's answer.

Mrs. Quimby was exasperated. "Then something must have happened. There is only one thing to do, and that is to go to school and find out. Eat your lunch, and we'll go to school before afternoon kindergarten starts and see what this is all about."

After Ramona had picked at her sandwich awhile, Mrs. Quimby said briskly, "Put on your sweater, Ramona, and come along."

"No," said Ramona. "I'm not going."

"Oh yes, you are, young lady," said her mother, and took her daughter by the hand.

Ramona knew she had no choice when her mother started calling her young lady. She dragged her feet as much as she could

on the way to school, where the afternoon kindergarten was behaving like the morning kindergarten. Half the class was lined up by the door waiting for Miss Binney while the other half raced around the playground. Ramona stared at the ground, because she did not want anyone to see her, and when Miss Binney arrived, Mrs. Quimby asked to talk to her for a moment.

Ramona did not look up. Her mother led her to the bench beside the kindergarten door. "You sit there and don't budge while I have a little talk with Miss Binney," she told Ramona.

Ramona sat on the bench swinging her feet, thinking about her tooth in Miss Binney's drawer and wondering what her teacher and her mother were saying about her. Finally she could stand the suspense no longer. She had to budge so she slipped over to the door, as close as she could without

being seen, and listened. The afternoon kindergarten and the workmen across the street were making so much noise she could catch only a few phrases such as "bright and imaginative," "ability to get along with her peer group," and "negative desire for attention." Ramona felt awed and frightened to be discussed in such strange big words, which must mean Miss Binney thought she was very bad indeed. She scuttled back to the bench when at last she heard her mother walk to the door.

"What did she say?" Ramona's curiosity was almost more than she could endure.

Mrs. Quimby looked stern. "She said she will be glad to have you back when you are ready to come back."

"Then I'm not going back," announced Ramona. She would never go to kindergarten at all if her teacher did not like her. Never.

"Oh yes, you are," said Mrs. Quimby wearily.

Ramona knew better.

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Thus began a difficult time in the Quimby household. "But Ramona, you have to go to kindergarten," protested Beezus, when she came home from school that afternoon. "Everybody goes to kindergarten."

"I don't," said Ramona. "I used to, but I don't now."

When Mr. Quimby came home from work, Mrs. Quimby took him aside and talked quietly to him. Ramona was not fooled for a minute. She knew exactly what those whispers were about.

"Well, Ramona, suppose you tell me all about what went on at school today," said Mr. Quimby with that false cheerfulness grown-ups use when they are trying

to persuade children to tell something they don't want to tell.

Ramona, who longed to run to her father and show him where her tooth used to be, thought awhile before she said, "We guessed what Miss Binney had in a paper bag that began with a T, and Davy guessed 'taterpillars.'"

"And what else happened?" asked Mr. Quimby, all set to be patient.

Ramona could not tell her father about her tooth, and she was not going to tell about pulling Susan's curls. Nothing much was left to talk about. "We learned T," she said at last.

Mr. Quimby gave his daughter a long look, but said nothing.

After dinner Beezus talked to Mary Jane on the telephone, and Ramona heard her say, "Guess what! Ramona is a kindergarten dropout!" She seemed to think this remark

was very funny, because she giggled into the telephone. Ramona was not amused.

Later Beezus settled down to read a book while Ramona got out her crayons and some paper.

"Beezus, you don't have a very good light for reading," said Mrs. Quimby. And she added as she always did, "You have only one pair of eyes, you know."

Here was an opportunity for Ramona to show off her new kindergarten knowledge. "Why don't you turn on the dawnzer?" she asked, proud of her new word.

Beezus looked up from her book. "What are you talking about?" she asked Ramona. "What's a dawnzer?"

Ramona was scornful. "Silly. Everybody knows what a dawnzer is."

"I don't," said Mr. Quimby, who had been reading the evening paper. "What is a dawnzer?"

"A lamp," said Ramona. "It gives a lee light. We sing about it every morning in kindergarten."

A puzzled silence fell over the room until Beezus suddenly shouted with laughter. "She-she means—" she gasped, "*The Star-Spangled B-banner!*" Her laughter dwindled to giggles. "She means the *dawn's early light!*" She pronounced each word with exaggerated distinctness, and then she began to laugh again.

Ramona looked at her mother and father, who had the straight mouths and laughing eyes of grown-ups who were trying not to laugh out loud. Beezus was right and she was wrong. She was nothing but a girl who used to go to kindergarten and who got everything wrong and made everyone laugh. She was a stupid little sister. A dumb stupid little sister, who never did anything right.



Suddenly everything that had happened that day was too much for Ramona. She glared at her sister, made a big crisscross motion in the air with her hand, and shouted, "Cross out Beezus!" Then she threw her crayons on the floor, stamped her feet, burst into tears, and ran into the room she shared with her sister.

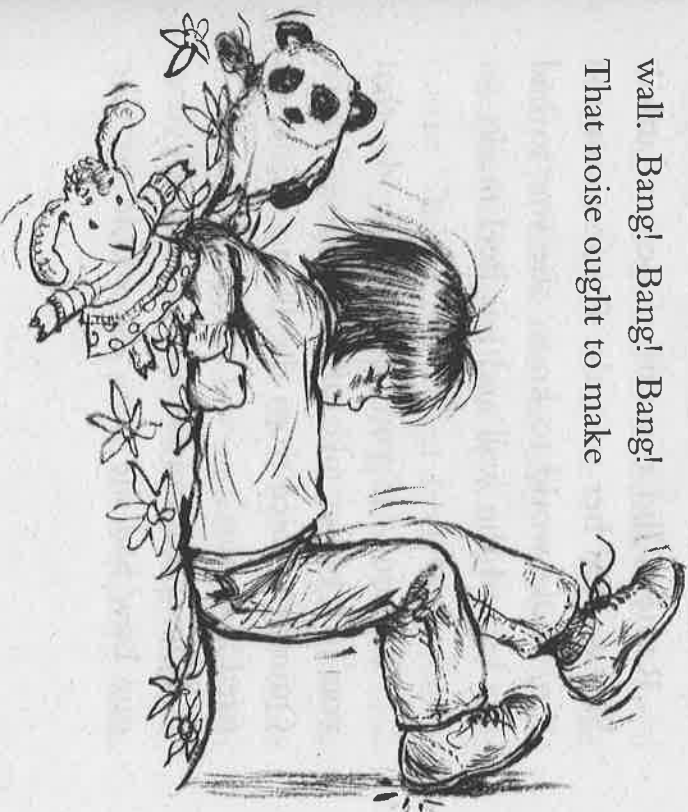
"Ramona Quimby!" her father said sternly, and Ramona knew that she was about to be ordered back to pick up her crayons. Well, her father could order all he wanted to. She was not going to pick up her crayons. Nobody could make her pick up her crayons. Nobody. Not her father nor her mother. Not even the principal. Not even God.

"Now, never mind," Ramona heard her mother say. "Poor little girl. She's upset. She's had a difficult day."

Sympathy made things worse. "I am *not*

upset!" yelled Ramona, and yelling made her feel so much better that she continued. "I am *not* upset, and I'm not a *little* girl, and everybody is *mean* to laugh at me!" She threw herself on her bed and pounded her heels on the bedspread, but pounding on the bedclothes was not bad enough. Far from it.

Ramona wanted to be wicked, really wicked, so she swung around and beat her heels on the wall. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! That noise ought to make



everybody good and mad. "Mean, mean, mean!" she yelled, in time to her drumming heels. She wanted to make her whole family feel as angry as she felt. "Mean, mean, mean!" She was glad her heels left marks on the wallpaper. Gladi! Gladi! Gladi!

"Mother, Ramona's kicking the wall," cried tattletale Beezus, as if her mother did not know what Ramona was doing. "It's my wall, too!"

Ramona did not care if Beezus tattled. She wanted her to tattle. Ramona wanted the whole world to know she was so bad she kicked the wall and left heel marks on the wallpaper.

"Ramona, if you're going to do that you had better take off your shoes." Mrs. Quimby's voice from the living room was tired but calm.

Ramona drummed harder to show everyone how bad she was. She would *not* take

off her shoes. She was a terrible, wicked girl! Being such a bad, terrible, horrid, wicked girl made her feel *good!* She brought both heels against the wall at the same time. Thump! Thump! Thump! She was not the least bit sorry for what she was doing. She would *never* be sorry. Never! Never! Never!

"Ramona!" Mr. Quimby's voice held a warning note. "Do you want me to come in there?"

Ramona paused and considered. Did she want her father to come in? No, she did not. Her father, her mother, nobody could understand how hard it was to be a little sister. She drummed her heels a few more times to prove that her spirit was not broken. Then she lay on her bed and thought wild fierce thoughts until her mother came and silently helped her undress and get into bed. When the light had been turned out, Ramona felt so limp and tired that she soon

fell asleep. After all she had no reason to try to stay awake, because the tooth fairy was not going to come to her house that night.

The next morning Mrs. Quimby walked into the girls' room, and said briskly to Ramona, "Which dress do you want to wear to school today?"

The empty space in her mouth and the heel marks on the wall above her bed reminded Ramona of all that had happened the day before. "I'm not going to school," she said, and reached for her playclothes while Beezus put on a fresh school dress.

A terrible day had begun. No one said much at breakfast. Howie, who had recovered from his cold, stopped for Ramona on his way to school, and then went on without her. Ramona watched all the children in the neighborhood go to school, and when the street was quiet, she turned on the television set.

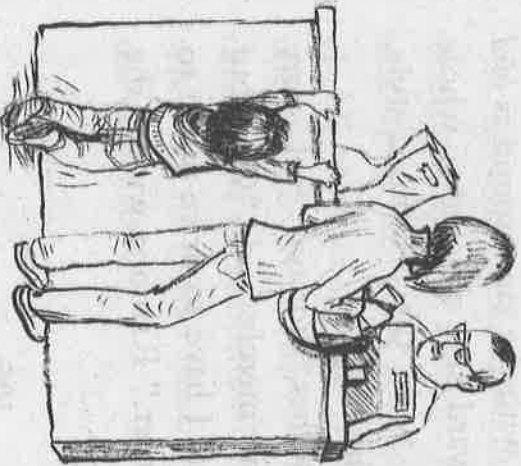
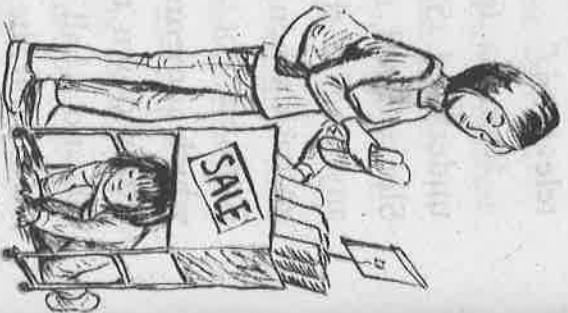
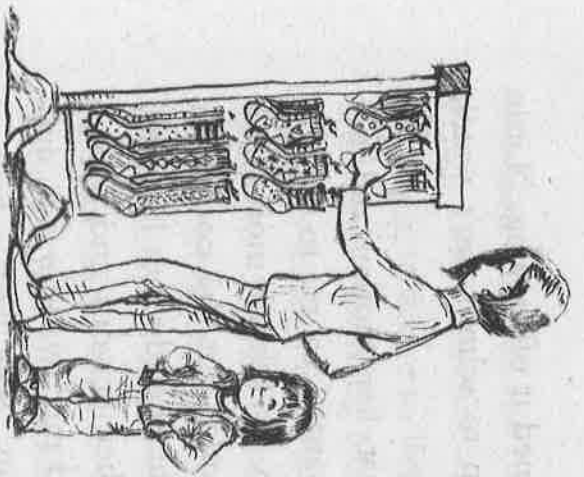
Her mother turned it off, saying, "Little girls who don't go to school can't watch television."

Ramona felt that her mother did not understand. She wanted to go to school. She wanted to go to school more than anything in the world, but she could not go back when her teacher did not like her. Ramona got out her crayons and paper, which someone had put away for her, and settled down to draw. She drew a bird, a cat, and a ball in a row, and then with her red crayon she crossed out the cat, because it did not begin with the same sound as *bird* and *ball*. Afterward she covered a whole sheet of paper with *Q*'s, Ramona-style, with ears and whiskers.

Ramona's mother did not feel sorry for Ramona. She merely said, "Get your sweater, Ramona. I have to drive down to the shopping center." Ramona wished she

had a dime from the tooth fairy to spend.

There followed the most boring morning of Ramona's entire life. She trailed along after her mother in the shopping center while Mrs. Quimby bought socks for Beezus, some buttons and thread, pillowcases that were on sale, a new electric cord for the waffle iron, a package of paper for Ramona to draw on, and a pattern. Looking at patterns was the worst part. Ramona's mother seemed to sit



for hours looking at pictures of boring dresses.

At the beginning of the shopping trip, Mrs. Quimby said, "Ramona, you mustn't put your hands on things in stores." Later she said, "Ramona, please don't touch things." By the time they reached the pattern counter, she said, "Ramona, how many times do I have to tell you to keep your hands to yourself?"

When Mrs. Quimby had finally selected a pattern and they were leaving the store, who should they run into but Mrs. Wisser, a neighbor. "Why, hello!" exclaimed Mrs. Wisser. "And there's Ramona! I thought a big girl like you would be going to kindergarten."

Ramona had nothing to say.

"How old are you, dear?" asked Mrs. Wisser.

Ramona still had nothing to say to Mrs. Wisser, but she did hold up five fingers for the neighbor to count.

"Five!" exclaimed Mrs. Wisser. "What's the matter, dear? Has the cat got your tongue?"

Ramona stuck out her tongue just enough to show Mrs. Wisser that the cat had not got it.

Mrs. Wisser gasped. "Ramona!" Mrs. Quimby was thoroughly exasperated. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Wisser. Ramona seems to have forgotten her manners." After this apology she said angrily, "Ramona Ger-aldine Quimby, don't you ever let me catch you doing such a thing again!"

"But Mama," protested Ramona, as she was dragged toward the parking lot, "she asked me, and I was just showing—" There was no use in finishing the sentence, because Mrs. Quimby was not listening and she probably would not have understood if she had listened.

Mrs. Quimby and Ramona returned

home in time to pass the morning kindergarten straggling along the sidewalk with their seat-work papers to show their mothers. Ramona got down on the floor of the car so she would not be seen.

Later that afternoon Beezus brought Mary Jane home from school to play. "How did you like kindergarten today, Ramona?" asked Mary Jane in a bright, false tone. It told Ramona all too clearly that she already knew Ramona had not gone to kindergarten.

"Why don't you shut up?" asked Ramona. "I'll bet Henry Huggins isn't going to want to marry a girl who hasn't even finished kindergarten," said Mary Jane.

"Oh, don't tease her," said Beezus, who might laugh at her sister herself, but was quick to protect her from others. Ramona went outside and rode her two-wheeled, lopsided tricycle up and down the sidewalk for a while before she sadly removed Miss

Binney's red ribbon, which she had woven through the spokes of her front wheel.

On the second morning Mrs. Quimby took a dress out of Ramona's closet without a word.

Ramona spoke. "I'm not going to school," she said.

"Ramona, aren't you ever going back to kindergarten?" Mrs. Quimby asked wearily.

"Yes," said Ramona.

Mrs. Quimby smiled. "Good. Let's make it today."

Ramona reached for her playclothes. "No. I'm going to stay away until Miss Binney forgets all about me, and then when I go back she'll think I'm somebody else."

Mrs. Quimby sighed and shook her head. "Ramona, Miss Binney is not going to forget you."

"Yes, she will," insisted Ramona. "She will if I stay away long enough."

Some older children on the way to school shouted, "Dropout!" as they passed the Quimbys' house. The day was a long, long one for Ramona. She drew some more seat work for herself, and afterward there was nothing to do but wander around the house poking her tongue in the hole where her tooth was while she kept her lips shut tight.

That evening her father said, "I miss my little girl's smiles." Ramona managed a tight-lipped smile that did not show the gap in her teeth. Later she heard her father say something to her mother about "this nonsense has gone on long enough," and her mother answered with something about "Ramona has to make up her own mind she wants to behave herself."

Ramona despaired. Nobody understood. She wanted to behave herself. Except when banging her heels on the bedroom wall, she had always wanted to behave herself. Why

couldn't people understand how she felt? She had only touched Susan's hair in the first place because it was so beautiful, and the last time—well, Susan had been so bossy she deserved to have her hair pulled.

Ramona soon discovered the other children in the neighborhood were fascinated by her predicament. "How come you get to stay out of school?" they asked.

"Miss Binney doesn't want me," Ramona answered.

"Did you have fun in kindergarten today?" Mary Jane asked each day, pretending she did not know Ramona had stayed home. Ramona, who was not fooled for an instant, disdained to answer.

Henry Huggins was the one, quite unintentionally, who really frightened Ramona. One afternoon when she was pedaling her lopsided, two-wheeled tricycle up and down in front of her house, Henry came riding

down the street delivering the *Journal*. He paused with one foot on the curb in front of the Quimbys' house while he rolled a paper.

"Hi," said Henry. "That's quite a trike you're riding."

"This isn't a trike," said Ramona with dignity. "This is my two-wheeler."

Henry grinned and threw the paper onto the Quimbys' front steps. "How come the truant officer doesn't make you go to school?" he asked.

"What's a truant officer?" asked Ramona.

"A man who gets after kids who don't go to school," was Henry's careless answer, as he pedaled on down the street.

A truant officer, Ramona decided, must be something like the dog catcher who sometimes came to Glenwood School when there were too many dogs on the playground. He tried to lasso the dogs, and once when he did manage to catch an elderly

overweight Basset hound, he shut the dog in the back of his truck and drove away with it. Ramona did not want any truant officer to catch her and drive away with her, so she put her lopsided, two-wheeled tricycle into the garage and went into the house and stayed there, looking out from behind the curtains at the other children and poking her tongue into the space where her tooth used to be.

"Ramona, why do you keep making such faces?" asked Mrs. Quimby in that tired voice she had been using the last day or so.

Ramona took her tongue out of the space. "I'm not making faces," she said. Pretty soon her grown-up tooth would come in without the tooth fairy paying a visit, and no one would ever know she had lost a tooth. She wondered what Miss Binney had done with her tooth. Thrown it away, most likely.

The next morning Ramona continued to draw rows of three pictures, circle two and

cross out one, but the morning was long and lonely. Ramona was so lonely she even considered going back to kindergarten, but then she thought about Miss Binney, who did not like her anymore and who might not be glad to see her. She decided she would have to wait much, much longer for Miss Binney to forget her.

“When do you think Miss Binney will forget me?” Ramona asked her mother.

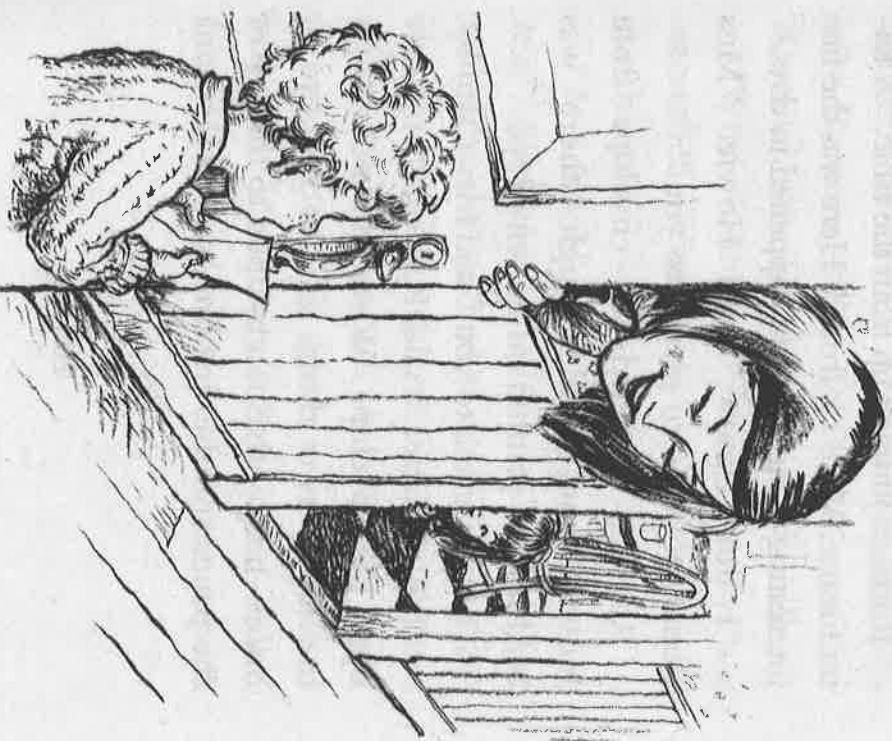
Mrs. Quimby kissed the top of Ramona’s head. “I doubt if she will ever forget you,” she said. “Not ever, as long as she lives.”

The situation was hopeless. That noon Ramona was not at all hungry when she sat down to soup, a sandwich, and some carrot sticks. She bit into a carrot stick, but somehow chewing it took a long time. She stopped chewing altogether when she heard the doorbell chime. Her heart began to thump. Maybe the truant officer had finally

come to get her and carry her off in the back of his truck. Maybe she should run and hide.

“Why, Howie!” Ramona heard her mother say. Feeling that she had had a close call, she went on chewing away at the carrot stick. She was safe. It was only Howie.

“Come on in, Howie,” said Mrs. Quimby.



"Ramona is having her lunch. Would you like to stay for some soup and a sandwich? I can phone your mother and ask her if it's all right."

Ramona hoped Howie would stay. She was that lonely.

"I just brought Ramona a letter."

Ramona jumped up from the table. "A letter for me? Who's it from?" Here was the first interesting thing that had happened in days.

"I don't know," said Howie. "Miss Binney told me to give it to you."

Ramona snatched the envelope from Howie, and, sure enough, there was RAMONA printed on the envelope.

"Let me read it to you," said Mrs. Quimby.

"It's *my* letter," said Ramona, and tore open the envelope. When she pulled out the letter, two things caught her eye at once—her tooth Scotch-taped to the top of the paper and the first line, which Ramona

could read because she knew how all letters began. "DEAR RAMONA ~~Q~~" was followed by two lines of printing, which Ramona was not able to read.

"Mama!" cried Ramona, filled with joy. Miss Binney had not thrown away her tooth, and Miss Binney had drawn ears and whiskers on her Q. The teacher liked the way Ramona made Q, so she must like Ramona, too. There was hope after all.

"Why, Ramona!" Mrs. Quimby was astonished. "You've lost a tooth! When did that happen?"

"At school," said Ramona, "and here it is!" She waved the letter at her mother, and then she studied it carefully, because she wanted so much to be able to read Miss Binney's words herself. "It says, 'Dear Ramona Q. Here is your tooth. I hope the tooth fairy brings you a dollar. I miss you and want you to come back

to kindergarten. Love and kisses, Miss Binney.”

Mrs. Quimby smiled and held out her hand. “Why don’t you let me read the letter?”

Ramona handed over the letter. Maybe the words did not say exactly what she had pretended to read, but she was sure they must mean the same.

“Dear Ramona Q,” began Mrs. Quimby. And she remarked, “Why, she makes her Q the same way you do.”

“Go on, Mama,” urged Ramona, eager to hear what the letter really said.

Mrs. Quimby read, “I am sorry I forgot to give you your tooth, but I am sure the tooth fairy will understand. When are you coming back to kindergarten?”

Ramona did not care if the tooth fairy understood or not. Miss Binney understood and nothing else mattered. “Tomorrow, Mama!” she cried. “I’m going to kindergarten tomorrow!”

“Good girl!” said Mrs. Quimby and hugged Ramona.

“She can’t,” said matter-of-fact Howie. “Tomorrow is Saturday.”

Ramona gave Howie a look of pity, but she said, “Please stay for lunch, Howie. It isn’t tuna fish. It’s peanut butter and jelly.”

