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Ramona the Pest

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## 6 THE BADDEST WITCH IN THE WORLD

When the morning kindergarten cut jack-o'-lanterns from orange paper and pasted them on the windows so that the light shone through the eye and mouth holes, Ramona knew that at last Halloween was not far away. Next to Christmas and her birthday, Ramona liked Halloween best. She liked dressing up and going trick-or-treating after dark with Beezus. She liked those nights when the bare branches of trees

waved against the streetlights, and the world was a ghostly place. Ramona liked scaring people, and she liked the shivery feeling of being scared herself.

Ramona had always enjoyed going to school with her mother to watch the boys and girls of Glenwood School parade on the playground in their Halloween costumes. Afterward she used to eat a doughnut and drink a paper cup of apple juice if there happened to be some left over. This year, after years of sitting on the benches with mothers and little brothers and sisters, Ramona was finally going to get to wear a costume and march around and around the playground. This year she had a doughnut and apple juice coming to her.

"Mama, did you buy my mask?" Ramona asked every day, when she came home from school.

"Not today, dear," Mrs. Quimby

answered. "Don't pester. I'll get it the next time I go down to the shopping center."

Ramona, who did not mean to pester her mother, could not see why grown-ups had to be so slow. "Make it a bad mask, Mama," she said. "I want to be the baddest witch in the whole world."

"You mean the worst witch," Beezus said, whenever she happened to overhear this conversation.

"I do not," contradicted Ramona. "I mean the baddest witch." "Baddest witch" sounded much scarier than "worst witch," and Ramona did enjoy stories about bad witches, the badder the better. She had no patience with books about good witches, because witches were supposed to be bad. Ramona had chosen to be a witch for that very reason.

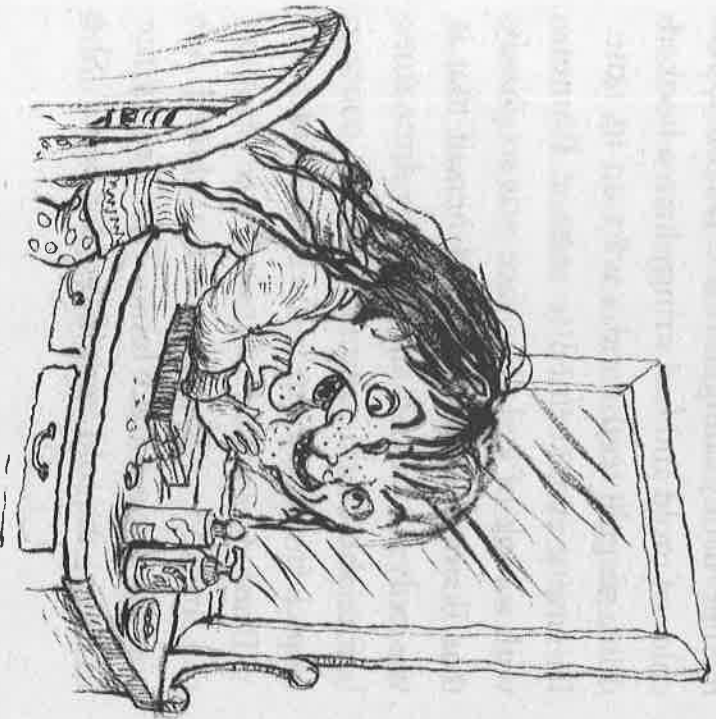
Then one day when Ramona came home from school she found two paper bags on

the foot of her bed. One contained black material and a pattern for a witch costume. The picture on the pattern showed the witch's hat pointed like the letter A. Ramona reached into the second bag and pulled out a rubber witch mask so scary that she quickly dropped it on the bed because she was not sure she even wanted to touch it. The flabby thing was the grayish-green color of mold and had stringy hair, a hooked nose, snaggle teeth, and a wart on its nose. Its empty eyes seemed to stare at Ramona with a look of evil. The face was so ghastly that Ramona had to remind herself that it was only a rubber mask from the dime store before she could summon enough courage to pick it up and slip it over her head.

Ramona peeked cautiously in the mirror, backed away, and then gathered her courage for a longer look. That's really me in there, she told herself and felt better. She

ran off to show her mother and discovered that she felt very brave when she was inside the mask and did not have to look at it. "I'm the baddest witch in the world!" she shouted, her voice muffled by the mask, and was delighted when her mother was so frightened she dropped her sewing.

Ramona waited for Beezus and her father



to come home, so she could put on her mask and jump out and scare them. But that night, before she went to bed, she rolled up the mask and hid it behind a cushion of the couch in the living room.

"What are you doing that for?" asked Beezus, who had nothing to be afraid of. She was planning to be a princess and wear a narrow pink mask.

"Because I want to," answered Ramona, who did not care to sleep in the same room with that ghastly, leering face.

Afterward when Ramona wanted to frighten herself she would lift the cushion for a quick glimpse of her scary mask before she clapped the pillow over it again. Scaring herself was such fun.

When Ramona's costume was finished and the day of the Halloween parade arrived, the morning kindergarten had trouble sitting still for seat work. They

wiggled so much while resting on their mats that Miss Binney had to wait a long time before she found someone quiet enough to be the wake-up fairy. When kindergarten was finally dismissed, the whole class forgot the rules and went stampeding out the door. At home Ramona ate only the soft part of her tuna-fish sandwich, because her mother insisted she could not go to the Halloween parade on an empty stomach. She wadded the crusts into her paper napkin and hid them beneath the edge of her plate before she ran to her room to put on her long black dress, her cape, her mask, and her pointed witch hat held on by an elastic under her chin. Ramona had doubts about that elastic—none of the witches whom she met in books seemed to have elastic under their chin—but today she was too happy and excited to bother to make a fuss.

"See, Mama!" she cried. "I'm the baddest witch in the world!"

Mrs. Quimby smiled at Ramona, patted her through the long black dress, and said affectionately, "Sometimes I think you are."

"Come on, Mama! Let's go to the Halloween parade." Ramona had waited so long that she did not see how she could wait another five minutes.

"I told Howie's mother we would wait for them," said Mrs. Quimby.

"Mama, did you have to?" protested Ramona, running to the front window to watch for Howie. Fortunately, Mrs. Kemp and Willa Jean were already approaching with Howie dressed in a black cat costume lagging along behind holding the end of his tail in one hand. Willa Jean in her stroller was wearing a buck-toothed rabbit mask.

Ramona could not wait. She burst out the front door yelling through her mask,



"Yah! Yah! I'm the baddest witch in the world! Hurry, Howie! I'm going to get you, Howie!"

Howie walked stolidly along, lugging his tail, so Ramona ran out to meet him. He was not wearing a mask, but instead had pipe cleaners Scotch-taped to his face for whiskers.

"I'm the baddest witch in the world,"

Ramona informed him, "and you can be my cat."

"I don't want to be your cat," said Howie. "I don't want to be a cat at all."

"Why not, Howie?" asked Mrs. Quimby, who had joined Ramona and the Kemps. "I think you make a very nice cat."

"My tail is busted," complained Howie. "I don't want to be a cat with a busted tail."

Mrs. Kemp sighed. "Now Howie, if you'll just hold up the end of your tail nobody will notice." Then she said to Mrs. Quimby, "I promised him a pirate costume,



but his older sister was sick and while I was taking her temperature Willa Jean crawled into a cupboard and managed to dump a whole quart of salad oil all over the kitchen floor. If you've ever had to clean oil off a floor, you know what I went through, and then Howie went into the bathroom and climbed up—yes, dear, I understand you wanted to help—to get a sponge, and he accidentally knelt on a tube of toothpaste that someone had left the top off of—now Howie, I didn't say you left the top off—and toothpaste squirted all over the bathroom, and there was another mess to clean up. Well, I finally had to drag his sister's old cat costume out of a drawer, and when he put it on we discovered the wire in the tail was broken, but there wasn't time to rip it apart and put in a new wire."

"You have a handsome set of whiskers," said Mrs. Quimby, trying to coax Howie

to look on the bright side.

"Scotch tape itches me," said Howie.

Ramona could see that Howie was not going to be any fun at all, even on Halloween. Never mind. She would have fun all by herself. "I'm the baddest witch in the world," she sang in her muffled voice, skipping with both feet. "I'm the baddest witch in the world."

When they were in sight of the playground, Ramona saw that it was already swarming with both the morning and the afternoon kindergartens in their Halloween costumes. Poor Miss Binney, dressed like Mother Goose, now had the responsibility of sixty-eight boys and girls. "Run along, Ramona," said Mrs. Quimby, when they had crossed the street. "Howie's mother and I will go around to the big playground and try to find a seat on a bench before they are all taken."





Ramona ran screaming onto the playground. "Yah! Yah! I'm the baddest witch in the world!" Nobody paid any attention, because everyone else was screaming, too. The noise was glorious. Ramona yelled and screamed and shrieked and chased anyone who would run. She chased tramps and ghosts and ballerinas. Sometimes other witches in masks exactly like hers chased her, and then she would turn around and chase the witches right back. She tried to

chase Howie, but he would not run. He just stood beside the fence holding his broken tail and missing all the fun.

Ramona discovered dear little Davy in a skimpy pirate costume from the dime store. She could tell he was Davy by his thin legs. At last! She pounced and kissed him through her rubber mask. Davy looked startled, but he had the presence of mind to make a gagging noise while Ramona raced away, satisfied that she finally had



managed to catch and kiss Davy.

Then Ramona saw Susan getting out of her mother's car. As she might have guessed, Susan was dressed as an old-fashioned girl with a long skirt, an apron, and pantalettes. "I'm the baddest witch in the world!" yelled Ramona, and ran after Susan, whose curls bobbed daintily about her shoulders in a way that could not be disguised. Ramona was unable to resist. After weeks of longing she tweaked one of Susan's curls, and yelled, "*Boing!*" through her rubber mask.

"You stop that," said Susan, and smoothed her curls.

"Yah! Yah! I'm the baddest witch in the world!" Ramona was carried away. She tweaked another curl and yelled a muffled, "*Boing!*"

A clown laughed and joined Ramona. He too tweaked a curl and yelled, "*Boing!*" The old-fashioned girl stamped her foot.

"You stop that!" she said angrily.

"*Boing! Boing!*" Others joined the game. Susan tried to run away, but no matter which way she ran there was someone eager to stretch a curl and yell, "*Boing!*" Susan ran to Miss Binney. "Miss Binney! Miss Binney!" she cried. "They're teasing me! They're pulling my hair and boinging me!" "Who's teasing you?" asked Miss Binney. "Everybody," said Susan tearfully. "A witch started it."

"Which witch?" asked Miss Binney. Susan looked around. "I don't know which witch," she said, "but it was a bad witch."

That's me, the baddest witch in the world, thought Ramona. At the same time she was a little surprised. That others really would not know that she was behind her mask had never occurred to her.

"Never mind, Susan," said Miss Binney.

"You stay near me, and no one will tease you."

Which witch, thought Ramona, liking the sound of the words. Which witch, which witch. As the words ran through her thoughts Ramona began to wonder if Miss Binney could guess who she was. She ran up to her teacher and shouted in her muffled voice, "Hello, Miss Binney! I'm going to get you, Miss Binney!"

"Ooh, what a scary witch!" said Miss Binney, rather absentmindedly, Ramona thought. Plainly Miss Binney was not really frightened, and with so many witches running around she had not recognized Ramona.

No, Miss Binney was not the one who was frightened. Ramona was. Miss Binney did not know who this witch was. Nobody knew who Ramona was, and if nobody knew who she was, she wasn't anybody.

"Get out of the way, old witch!" Eric R.

yelled at Ramona. He did not say, Get out of the way, Ramona.

Ramona could not remember a time when there was not someone near who knew who she was. Even last Halloween, when she dressed up as a ghost and went trick-or-treating with Beezus and the older boys and girls, everyone seemed to know who she was. "I can guess who this little ghost is," the neighbors said, as they dropped a miniature candy bar or a handful of peanuts into her paper bag. And now, with so many witches running around and still more witches on the big playground, no one knew who she was.

"Davy, guess who I am!" yelled Ramona. Surely Davy would know.

"You're just another old witch," answered Davy.

The feeling was the scariest one Ramona had ever experienced. She felt lost inside



her costume. She wondered if her mother would know which witch was which, and the thought that her own mother might not know her frightened Ramona even more. What if her mother forgot her? What if everyone in the whole world forgot her? With that terrifying thought Ramona snatched off her mask, and although its

ugliness was no longer the most frightening thing about it, she rolled it up so she would not have to look at it.

How cool the air felt outside that dreadful mask! Ramona no longer wanted to be the baddest witch in the world. She wanted to be Ramona Geraldine Quimby and be sure that Miss Binney and everyone on the playground knew her. Around her the ghosts and tramps and pirates raced and shouted, but Ramona stood near the door of the kindergarten quietly watching.

Davy raced up to her and yelled. "Yah! You can't catch me!"

"I don't want to catch you," Ramona informed him.

Davy looked surprised and a little disappointed, but he ran off on his thin little legs, shouting, "Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum!" Joey yelled after him, "You're not really a pirate. You're just Mush Pot Davy!"

Miss Binney was trying to herd her sixty-eight charges into a double line. Two mothers who felt sorry for the teacher were helping round up the kindergarten to start the Halloween parade, but as always there were some children who would rather run around than do what they were supposed to do. For once Ramona was not one of them. On the big playground someone started to play a marching record through a loudspeaker. The Halloween parade that Ramona had looked forward to since she was in nursery school was about to begin.

"Come along, children," said Miss Binney. Seeing Ramona standing alone, she said, "Come on, Ramona."

It was a great relief to Ramona to hear Miss Binney speak her name, to hear her teacher say "Ramona" when she was looking at her. But as much as Ramona longed to prance along to the marching music with

the rest of her class, she did not move to join them.

"Put on your mask, Ramona, and get in line," said Miss Binney, guiding a ghost and a gypsy into place.

Ramona wanted to obey her teacher, but at the same time she was afraid of losing herself behind that scary mask. The line of kindergarteners, all of them wearing masks except Howie with his pipe-cleaner whiskers, was less straggly now, and everyone was eager to start the parade. If Ramona did not do something quickly she would be left behind, and she could not let such a thing happen, not when she had waited so many years to be in a Halloween parade.

Ramona took only a moment to decide what to do. She ran to her cupboard inside the kindergarten building and snatched a crayon from her box. Then she grabbed a piece of paper from the supply cupboard.

Outside she could hear the many feet of the morning and afternoon kindergartens marching off to the big playground. There was no time for Ramona's best printing, but that was all right. This job was not seat work to be supervised by Miss Binney. As fast as she could Ramona printed her name, and then she could not resist adding with a flourish her last initial complete with ears and whiskers.

## RAMONA ✧

Now the whole world would know who she was! She was Ramona Quimby, the only girl in the world with ears and whiskers on her last initial. Ramona pulled on her rubber mask, clapped her pointed hat on top of it, snapped the elastic under her chin, and ran after her class as it marched onto the big playground. She did not care if she was last in line and had to march beside gloomy old

Howie still lugging his broken tail.

Around the playground marched the kindergarten followed by the first grade and all the other grades while mothers and little brothers and sisters watched. Ramona felt very grown up remembering how last year she had been a little sister sitting on a bench watching for her big sister Beezus to march by and hoping for a leftover doughnut.

"Yah! Yah! I'm the baddest witch in the world!" Ramona chanted, as she held up her sign for all to see. Around the playground she marched toward her mother, who was waiting on the bench. Her mother saw her, pointed her out to Mrs. Kemp, and waved. Ramona beamed inside her stuffy mask. Her mother recognized her!

Poor little Willa Jean in her stroller could not read, so Ramona called out to her, "It's me, Willa Jean. I'm Ramona, the baddest witch in the world!"



Willa Jean in her rabbit mask understood. She laughed and slapped her hands on the tray of her stroller.

Ramona saw Henry's dog Ribsy trotting along, supervising the parade. "Yah! Ribsy! I'm going to get you, Ribsy!" she threatened, as she marched past.

Ribsy gave a short bark, and Ramona was sure that even Ribsy knew who she was as she marched off to collect her doughnut and apple juice.

## 7 THE DAY THINGS WENT WRONG

Ramona's day was off to a promising start for two reasons, both of which proved she was growing up. First of all, she had a loose tooth, a very loose tooth, a tooth that wagged back and forth with only a little help from her tongue. It was probably the loosest tooth in the morning kindergarten, which meant that the tooth fairy would finally pay a visit to Ramona before long.