Raymond's Run

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TONI CADE BAMBARA

Toni Cade Bambara, born Miltona Mirkin Cade, spent her childhood in Harlem, Brooklyn, Queens, and New Jersey. She changed her name to Toni at age six, and again in 1970 to add Bambara (a West African ethnic group) after coming across the word in her great-grandmother's sketchbook. Bambara earned a BA in theater arts and English literature from Queens College in 1959, where she was one of the few non-white students. Bambara had a passion for jazz and was a member of the Dance Club of Queens College. She went on to earn her master's degree from the City College of New York in 1964. From 1965 through the 1980s, Bambara worked in university outreach programs and taught English, Afro-American Studies, and film-script writing at a variety of universities and institutions, including her own alma mater City College. She was also an artist-in-residence at multiple universities and held lectures at the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution. During the 1960s, Bambara was active in the Black Arts Movement and Black feminism, compiling several anthologies of Black writers and publishing the short story collection *Gorilla My Love* (in which "Raymond's Run" appears) in 1972. After publishing several more short stories collections in the 1970s and her novel *The Salt Eaters* in 1980, Bambara shifted to focus on film and television production. As whole, her body of work is highly political and openly challenges the oppression and injustice that African Americans face. Bambara died of colon cancer in 1995. Her novel *These Bones Are Not My Children* was published posthumously in 1999.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Toni Cade Bambara was heavily involved in various 1960s activist movements, including the civil rights, Black nationalism, and feminism. The goal of these movements was to achieve equal rights and a promote heightened sense of identity and solidarity among marginalized groups, particularly racial minorities and women. "Raymond's Run" is set in Harlem, presumably in the early 1970s. Though the outside historical context of this period isn't directly addressed in "Raymond's Run," civil rights and feminism are important to the story given that the protagonist, Squeaky, is a feisty, independent young Black girl who is proud of her identity and challenges traditional gender roles. In this way, the story is clearly influenced by the activist culture in the U.S. that reached its peak just prior to the to the 1970s.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Gorilla My Love, the short story collection in which "Raymond's Run" appears, was written during the Black Arts Movement, a 1960s and 1970s movement in which Black artists and activists sought to create new ways of capturing the Black experience. In addition to Bambara, other prominent creators from this movement include poet Nikki Giovanni (*My House*; *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day*) and feminist writer Audrey Lorde (*Black Unicorn*; *Sister Outsider*). The Black Arts Movement also hearkens to the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, a sociocultural and artistic movement in which African American literature, discourse, art, and music (particularly jazz) flourished. Bambara drew inspiration from this era in her own activism, including works of Harlem Renaissance visionaries like Langston Hughes ("I, Too"; "Let America Be America Again") in her anthologies of Black writers. The stories in *Gorilla My Love*, including "Raymond's Run," embody the ethos of Black feminism in that they feature young Black girls who are tough and brave rather than stereotypically weak or victimized. Other books that feature strong, Black, female protagonists include Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Toni Morrison's *Sula*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Raymond's Run
- **When Published:** 1971 in *Tales and Short Stories for Black Folks* and *Redbook Magazine*; 1972 in *Gorilla My Love*
- **Literary Period:** Black Arts Movement
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Harlem, New York
- **Climax:** Squeaky and Gretchen smile at each other.
- **Antagonist:** Gretchen; Mary Louise; Rosie
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Gap Year. After graduating from Queens College, Bambara studied mime at the Ecole de Mime Etienne Decroux in Paris.

PLOT SUMMARY

Squeaky isn't expected to do much around the house, but she is responsible for looking after her brother Raymond, who is intellectually disabled. People in their Harlem neighborhood often mock Raymond, but Squeaky doesn't hesitate to stand up for him. She's not afraid to retaliate physically, and she's an incredibly fast **runner**, so she can just run away if things get too heated. In fact, Squeaky wins every race she competes in.. A girl

named Gretchen has been bragging that she's going to beat Squeaky in the May Day race this year, but Squeaky finds this is laughable.

Squeaky often takes walks around the neighborhood, training for races and performing breathing exercises, and Raymond usually tags along. Raymond often causes scenes in public, drawing the ire of neighbors to whom Squeaky must apologize. But Squeaky doesn't mind him as long as he doesn't interfere with her training. Squeaky is unabashedly committed to practicing running, unlike her classmate Cynthia, who pretends that she's naturally gifted at academics, spelling, and piano rather than admitting that she practices.

Presently, Squeaky does breathing exercises as she walks up Broadway with Raymond. Suddenly, she spots Gretchen and her sidekicks Mary Louise and Rosie approaching. Mary Louise used to be Squeaky's friend, but she became mean once she started hanging out with Gretchen. Rosie is especially cruel to Raymond, which Squeaky thinks is ridiculous since Rosie is fat and unintelligent. Mary Louise and Rosie begin to taunt Squeaky and Raymond as Gretchen smiles disingenuously, but the girls back off and walk away when Squeaky stands up to them.

At the neighborhood's annual May Day celebration at the park, Squeaky and Raymond arrive late because the races are the last event of the day. The main attraction is the May Pole dance, which Squeaky's mother always wants her to participate in despite Squeaky's lack of interest in dressing up in fancy clothes and acting like a fairy. Squeaky remembers feeling foolish when she had to dress up as a strawberry and dance for a school play. Although this made her parents proud, Squeaky only wants to be herself—a "poor Black girl" with a passion for running.

Once Squeaky gets Raymond settled in a swing, she goes to get her lucky race number, seven. A teacher named Mr. Pearson is the one who pins the runners' numbers on. He deeply offends Squeaky when he suggests that she should intentionally lose the race so that other girls (especially Gretchen) can have a chance. Stomping away from Mr. Pearson, Squeaky goes to lie in the grass by the track and wishes that she were back in the countryside where her family once lived. Once it's time for the 50-yard dash, Squeaky and Gretchen take their places at the starting line. Squeaky notices Raymond crouching on the other side of the fence, mimicking the runners, but she feels that yelling at him would be too exhausting. Instead, Squeaky begins to daydream like she does before every race, imagining that she's weightlessly flying above a beach and smelling the apples from the orchard near her old house.

When the gun goes off, Squeaky snaps out of the dream and begins to run, blocking out her surroundings and encouraging herself to win. But Squeaky is surprised to see Gretchen keeping pace with her and even more surprised to see Raymond running with them on the other side of the fence. She almost stops to watch him on his first run. Squeaky ends up winning the race, but when she sees that Gretchen also overshot the finish line and hears the race announcer's loudspeaker cut out after "In first place," Squeaky wonders which of them actually won. Noticing Gretchen's controlled breathing technique as she cools down, Squeaky thinks that she actually likes her a little.

While Mr. Pearson and the race judges argue over times on the stopwatches, Raymond rattles the fence to get Squeaky's attention before gracefully scaling it and running over to her. Squeaky realizes that Raymond is a great runner—after all, he always keeps up with her when she practices, and he even emulates her breathing exercises. Squeaky no longer cares about the race results; she thinks that she might quit running altogether and coach Raymond instead. She figures that she could win the spelling bee against Cynthia or become a great piano player if she put her mind to it. Squeaky realizes that she's earned a room full of medals and awards, while Raymond has nothing to call his own.

Squeaky jumps up and down with excitement about her new plans as Raymond approaches, but the crowd assumes that she's reacting to the race results: she's been declared the winner, with Gretchen in close second. Squeaky looks over at Gretchen and smiles, thinking that Gretchen is a good runner—she could even help coach Raymond. Gretchen gives Squeaky a congratulatory nod and smiles back. Squeaky thinks that this is as genuine a smile as two girls could share, given that girls are usually preoccupied with pretending that they're fairies, strawberries, or other things besides people who are worthy of respect.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Squeaky – Squeaky, whose real name is Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker, is the narrator and protagonist of "Raymond's Run." She's a skinny little girl with a squeaky voice (hence her nickname) whose greatest passion is **running**. Squeaky lives with her mother, father, and brothers Raymond and George in Harlem. It's Squeaky's responsibility to look after Raymond each day, a role that she doesn't mind but that wears on her given that Raymond is intellectually disabled and often causes a scene in public. A self-described "poor Black girl" who misses the countryside where her family used to live before moving to the city, Squeaky feels misunderstood and alienated. People (including her own parents) look down on Squeaky because she isn't particularly feminine and does unusual things, like performing breathing exercises in public. At her core, Squeaky just wants to be herself: to work hard and pursue her passions unabashedly without being judged by others. To protect herself and Raymond from being bullied for their differences, Squeaky

adopts a tough, combative persona and intimidates people into respecting her. Her foremost rival is Gretchen, who, along with her sidekicks Mary Louise and Rosie, bullies Squeaky and Raymond. But Squeaky experiences a shift in perspective at the annual neighborhood May Day race after she sees Raymond running skillfully alongside her: she becomes inspired to coach him rather than dominating all of the neighborhood races herself. Squeaky does win the 50-yard dash, but the story ends with her exchanging genuine smiles with Gretchen (the second-place winner) rather than boasting about her own victory. Squeaky's change of heart embodies how being one's genuine self, and lifting others up in the process, is more meaningful than garnering respect through intimidation.

Raymond – Raymond is one of Squeaky's brothers. Though the exact nature of Raymond's disability is never specified, the story implies that it's primarily intellectual: he has an unusually large head and is described as "not quite right" mentally and "subject to fits of fantasy." It's Squeaky's job to take care of Raymond every day while their mother and father are busy, a responsibility that she doesn't mind but that sometimes overwhelms her given her young age and the way in which Raymond acts out in public. He often accompanies Squeaky as she trains for track races, keeping pace with her and even emulating her breathing exercises. Kids in the neighborhood tend to harass Raymond when they see him around, but Squeaky does her best to defend him from cruel bullies like Gretchen, Mary Louise, and Rosie. As much as people mock Raymond for his differences, they also underestimate him: toward the end of the story, Raymond surprises Squeaky at the May Day celebration when he effortlessly **runs** alongside her on the other side of the fence during the 50-yard dash. Though no one thinks of Raymond as particularly talented, Squeaky recognizes that he's an excellent runner and is in awe of his grace despite his physical limitations. He even inspires a sudden desire within Squeaky to quit running and coach Raymond instead. Raymond's free spirit serves as an inspiration for Squeaky to be her genuine self rather than put on a false persona that people will respect, and his untapped potential is a cautionary tale against underestimating those who are differently abled.

Gretchen – Gretchen is a new girl in Squeaky's neighborhood who, along with her friends Mary Louise and Rosie, bullies Squeaky and her brother Raymond. Squeaky describes her as having short legs and freckles. Despite Squeaky's anxieties about Gretchen and her sidekicks, Gretchen doesn't seem to be as tough as she lets on: readers never see her directly harassing Squeaky or Raymond (though she stands by complicity while Mary Louise and Rosie do so), and she walks away without responding when Squeaky stands up to her. Like Squeaky, Gretchen is a **runner**, and she's adamant that she's going to beat Squeaky in the 50-yard dash at their neighborhood's annual May Day celebration. Squeaky laughs her off, since no one ever beats Squeaky, but Gretchen holds her own in the race, keeping pace with Squeaky and coming in a close second place. After Squeaky is announced as the winner, she realizes that she actually admires Gretchen and gives her a genuine smile—and Gretchen smiles back. Squeaky even thinks that Gretchen could help her coach Raymond to become a great runner. Thus, Gretchen and Squeaky's tentative resolution at the end of the story shows the good that can come about when people mutually respect and uplift one another rather than constantly trying to best and dominate others.

Squeaky's Mother – Squeaky's mother takes care of most of the family's household chores. Along with Squeaky's father, she delegates the daily care of Raymond to George, and later to Squeaky. Squeaky's mother wishes that Squeaky would be more feminine and participate in the May Pole dance at the neighborhood's annual May Day celebration instead of **running** in the races. She's especially humiliated by Squeaky's tendency to practice breathing exercises for her running in public. Like Squeaky's father, Squeaky's mother is notably absent from the story, implicating them as somewhat neglectful parents. Squeaky's parents' disproval, as well as the undue responsibility they places on their young daughter, contribute to Squeaky's feelings of inadequacy.

Squeaky's Father – Like Squeaky's mother, her father is notably absent from the story. Squeaky alludes to the fact that he provides for the family in whatever ways they need, but he doesn't seem to be very supportive of or interested in his children. Squeaky's parents delegate the daily care of Raymond to George, and later to Squeaky. Like Squeaky, her father is a fast **runner**, effortlessly beating her when they race. But this is a secret—Squeaky thinks that her father finds it embarrassing to race against kids—so everyone thinks that Squeaky is the fastest person in the neighborhood. Squeaky's parents wish that she were more feminine, and their disproval—as well as the big responsibility they places on their young daughter—contribute to Squeaky's feelings of inadequacy.

Mr. Pearson / Beanstalk – Mr. Pearson is a teacher of Squeaky's who pins on **runners**' numbers at the neighborhood's annual May Day races. Squeaky and her classmates nickname him Jack and the Beanstalk because he walks around the park on stilts and tends to clumsily drop the many supplies he carries around. Squeaky refuses to let Mr. Pearson use her nickname since she isn't allowed to call him Beanstalk to his face, insisting that he call her by her full name—Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker—instead. Mr. Pearson further offends Squeaky when he suggests that she should intentionally lose the 50-yard dash so that other girls—particularly Gretchen, who's new to the neighborhood—can have a chance. Near the end of the story, Mr. Pearson is involved in the squabble among the race judges as they try to figure out whether Squeaky or Gretchen won the 50-yard dash.

Cynthia Procter – Cynthia is a classmate of Squeaky's whom Squeaky resents because she pretends to be naturally gifted at everything she does rather than admitting that she practices honing certain skills. For instance, Cynthia tells people that she's relaxing instead of studying for tests, and she wins the school spelling bee despite claiming to have forgotten about it. But Squeaky sees through this "phony" routine: despite Cynthia's act of pretending to be a piano prodigy, Squeaky hears Cynthia practicing scales whenever she walks by her house. Cynthia irritates Squeaky because Squeaky studies all night for tests and trains relentlessly for track races—she has no patience for people who think that they're above hard work.

Mary Louise – Along with Rosie, Mary Louise is one of Gretchen's sidekicks. Together, the three girls bully Squeaky and her brother Raymond. Mary Louise used to be Squeaky's friend: Squeaky stood up for Mary Louise when she first moved to Harlem from Baltimore, since Squeaky and Mary Louise's mothers used to sing in a choir together. But ever since Mary Louise began hanging out with Gretchen, she talks badly about Squeaky and mocks Raymond for his disability.

George – George is Squeaky and Raymond's brother. Supervising Raymond used to be his responsibly before Squeaky took on the role. In Squeaky's estimation, George wasn't as good of a caregiver as she is, since Raymond got picked on more often when George was responsible for him. Now, George spends his time doing errands and selling Christmas cards to earn pocket money.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Rosie – Along with Mary Louise, Rosie is one of Gretchen's sidekicks. Together, the three girls bully Squeaky and her brother Raymond. Squeaky describes Rosie as fat and unintelligent, which she's quick to point out when Rosie insults Raymond.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CARETAKING

In "Raymond's Run," Squeaky is responsible for looking after her disabled older brother, Raymond, despite being a child herself. While her family's expectation that she will care for Raymond gives Squeaky a sense of pride and identity, it's also overwhelming: she is constantly fighting with and insulting Raymond's bullies (which puts her at odds with her peers), and whenever Raymond gets into trouble, Squeaky's family blames her. Meanwhile, nobody seems to be caring for Squeaky. Her parents and teachers are largely absent, and when they do appear, they often undermine her sense of security and self-worth. Neither Squeaky's intense care for Raymond nor her parents' failure to care for her is an ideal model for caretaking, but the story suggests definitively that it's better to relate to others with care than with hostility or neglect. In the end, Squeaky's relationship with Raymond becomes a model for her relationships with others, helping her to adopt a more positive and caring attitude.

Despite being a child, Squeaky has a tremendous amount of responsibility, as she is her disabled brother's primary caretaker. Squeaky clearly loves Raymond, whom she is seemingly expected to look after each day while her parents are busy. She defends Raymond against neighborhood kids with "smart mouths" who often ridicule Raymond for his "big head" and his erratic behavior (he's "subject to fits of fantasy"). Squeaky adopts a tough persona in order to defend him, and she is proud of this toughness. Taking care of her brother in this way gives Squeaky a sense of purpose, even at a young age—she's quick to point out that Raymond is safer with her than he had been in the past, when their brother George was in charge of caring for him. But caring for Raymond, who is older and bigger than her, is undeniably hard on Squeaky: when Raymond has "fits" and aggravates their neighbors, Squeaky is the one who must subdue him and apologize on his behalf. And if Raymond acts out of line—sloshing around in the gutter and getting his clothes wet, for instance—Squeaky is the one who "get[s] hit when [she] gets home." It's clear that Squeaky is forced to take on far more responsibility as Raymond's caregiver than is fair for a girl her age.

But while Squeaky displays responsibility and maturity beyond her years in caring for Raymond, none of the adults in Squeaky's life take good care of her. Squeaky's parents are notably absent from the story. They appear primarily in her recollections, typically in instances when they have failed to understand her or declined to show her support. Her mother, for example, "thinks it's a shame" that Squeaky doesn't participate in the May Pole dancing (ignoring Squeaky's vehemence about not wanting to dance), yet she does not show up at the track race—the activity at the center of Squeaky's identity—to cheer Squeaky on. Furthermore, while Squeaky's father occasionally **runs** with her (thereby affirming and participating in her passion), even this support is limited. They conduct this father-daughter ritual in secret, which Squeaky interprets as a sign that he's not proud of her skill but is instead embarrassed to be "a thirty-five-year-old man stuffing himself in PAL shorts to race little kids."

Beyond her parents, other adults in her life fail Squeaky. For instance, her teacher Mr. Pearson—who organizes the May Day track meet—actively tries to undermine the pride Squeaky takes in running. Squeaky has won this event for the past

several years, and she expects this year to be no different. But rather than celebrating her talent and hard work, Mr. Pearson cruelly insinuates that it would unfair for Squeaky to win again, and he seems also to blame the race's poor turnout on the fact that Squeaky is participating. Mr. Pearson, a runner himself, is presumably someone who might nurture Squeaky's passion. Instead, his comments leave her so "burnt" that she can only stomp away and prepare for the race on her own. The way in which adults in Squeaky's life treat her shows that she is continuously neglected, unsupported, and misunderstood—a stark contrast to the level of care that Squeaky provides for Raymond.

Despite the repeated failure of parents, teachers, and other adults to nurture and care for Squeaky, the story ends with a moment of profound optimism, as Squeaky begins to understand caretaking as a model for good relationships. As Squeaky runs the race, she sees Raymond running on the sidelines, which makes her realize that Raymond could be "a great runner in the family tradition" if she were to coach him. This idea is so powerful that Squeaky loses interest in the competition itself, which was previously her central concern. She no longer cares if she won or lost the race, because she realizes that it might be more fulfilling to "retire as a runner and begin a whole new career as a coach with Raymond as my champion." This signals a major shift for Squeaky; she now understands that she would rather help someone else succeed than continue to worry about her own achievements.

This realization of the value of caretaking carries over to Squeaky's relationship with a classmate named Gretchen, which has been hostile and competitive throughout the story. As Squeaky thinks about helping Raymond run, she finds herself smiling at Gretchen, and she realizes that their shared passion for running could be a point of common interest rather than fuel for competition. In a moment of epiphany, Squeaky fantasizes that she and Gretchen could actually unite and coach Raymond together, showing her shift to a more cooperative and compassionate attitude toward others. In this way, Squeaky's relationship with Raymond—a relationship of care, compassion, and cooperation—becomes a model for Squeaky's other relationships, even with her most bitter rival. By realizing how fulfilling it is to care for Raymond, Squeaky is able to stop emulating the competition and neglect that surround her and instead choose to be supportive and helpful moving forward.

REPUTATION, RESPECT, AND IDENTITY

Squeaky is an independent, headstrong girl who's at odds with a society that values strict adherence to social norms. While her parents and teachers expect her to be docile and feminine, Squeaky insists on being herself: she won't wear dresses, she has rituals that seem odd to others (like constantly practicing **running** and performing breathing exercises in public), and she spends all her time with her disabled brother, Raymond, whose appearance and behavior expose both him and Squeaky to ridicule. To defend Raymond and to garner the respect of others, Squeaky adopts a mean and tough reputation, someone willing to trade insults or brawl when challenged. She presents herself as formidable and willing to fight, but for all her tough talk, readers never actually see her engage in violence in the story. From Squeaky's narration and actions toward others, it's clear that she's actually a thoughtful, sensitive young girl—far from the abrasive persona she projects to the world. Through Squeaky's inner thoughts and her change of heart at the end of the story, Bambara makes the case that often, seemingly tough individuals are putting on a false persona to protect themselves and win others' admiration—and that such people are better off being honest about their true selves if they want to earn people's sincere respect.

Squeaky postures as tough in order to protect herself and Raymond. From the start, readers get the sense that Squeaky is compensating for the fact that she's a self-described "little girl with skinny arms and a squeaky voice." Others seem to view her the same way, given that these qualities are what led to her nickname. Because of Squeaky's size and voice and Raymond's disability (he's "not quite right" mentally), the siblings are at risk of being ridiculed, and so Squeaky is quick to boast that she's "the quickest thing on two feet" and that she's not afraid to "knock you down right from the jump" if anyone tries to harass her or Raymond. Squeaky's eagerness to fight is, at least partially, a reaction to the neighborhood bullies who torment Raymond and the trio of girls—Gretchen, Mary Louise, and Rosie—who are rude to Squeaky. In this way, her tough persona seems to be a defense mechanism, a way of protecting herself and Raymond and of earning respect from others.

But as the story progresses, it becomes evident that the reputation Squeaky tries to project stems out of a general feeling of being unaccepted. It's gradually revealed that people misunderstand and mistreat Squeaky because they disapprove of her behavior: her mother is embarrassed when Squeaky does her exercises in public, both her parents seemingly ignore her because they're disappointed that she's not feminine enough, and her classmates taunt her because they're jealous of her talent as a runner. Squeaky's teacher Mr. Pearson even suggests that Squeaky should purposely lose the annual May Day race in order to give the other girls a chance. The story also alludes to the fact that Squeaky used to live in "the country" surrounded by nature, and that she hates "the concrete jungle" of Harlem where she now lives. Readers can infer, then, that Squeaky's toughness is really a front for her fears and feelings of dissatisfaction and alienation. Her persona is defensive rather than offensive—she projects bravado and aggression because she feels the need to shield herself against other people's disapproval. Squeaky is adamant that she only wants

to be herself: "a poor Black girl" who is wholeheartedly dedicated to running rather than more traditionally feminine activities like dancing. Thus, the expectations and pressure to conform that others place on Squeaky drive her to close herself off and adopt a façade of toughness to protect the identity and passions that she holds dear.

Ultimately, though, Squeaky realizes that she doesn't have to be tough and antagonistic to protect Raymond or to have an identity of her own. The reader can infer that she's actually somewhat timid—after all, Squeaky never actually fights anyone in the story. She even considers ducking into a nearby store when she sees Gretchen and her sidekicks approaching rather than facing them directly, a reaction that contradicts Squeaky's fearless persona. And in the end, Squeaky, too, seems to realize that the false reputation she tries to convey isn't helpful to her or to Raymond. During the 50-yard dash at the May Day celebration, Squeaky is awestruck when she sees Raymond running on the other side of the fence, gracefully keeping pace with her. This inspires Squeaky's sudden desire to quit running altogether and to coach Raymond instead—she seems to understand that helping Raymond embrace his talent will be more productive for both of them than trying to intimidate bullies or garner bragging rights through winning races. After the race results are announced, Squeaky even smiles at Gretchen (who narrowly placed second)—and Gretchen briefly smiles back. The girls were bitter enemies up until this point, but both seem to genuinely respect and admire each other in this moment. Through this simple but significant gesture, it's clear that Squeaky has come to realize that living in fear of others' opinions of her and intimidating people into respecting her is a hollow pursuit. Rather, genuine respect and a true sense of identity are found when one shows *others* respect, celebrates other people's triumphs, and pursues one's own passions honestly and unabashedly—just like Raymond does.

GENDER ROLES AND FEMALE SOLIDARITY

The protagonist of "Raymond's Run"—a precocious young girl nicknamed Squeaky—hopes that she'll win the 50-yard dash at the local May Day races. Her main competition is a girl named Gretchen—a feud that reflects Squeaky's broader estrangement from women and femininity. Leading up to the race, she narrates her discomfort with the traditionally feminine role that her community expects her to play: instead of wearing a frilly dress and dancing around the May Pole, Squeaky is a serious **runner** who is unapologetically competitive. She also brawls with anyone who mocks her disabled brother, and she is hostile to other girls her age. As she runs the race, though, Squeaky has an epiphany: while she still insists on being herself (even if that means bucking social norms), she realizes that she actually likes and respects Gretchen. In the story's climactic moment—a shared smile between Squeaky and Gretchen—Squeaky realizes that part of being true to herself means extending kindness to other women. For Bambara, then, division between women is just another social norm that should be defied so that women can thrive.

Squeaky's refusal to "act like a girl" is rooted in her strong sense of self; to her, playing a traditionally feminine role would be a betrayal of who she is. Squeaky learned this in nursery school when she dressed up as a strawberry for a pageant. While this pleased her parents, she says the pageant was "nonsense" and that she was a "perfect fool" for participating. "I am not a strawberry," she insists, "I do not dance on my toes. I run. That is what I am all about." Squeaky's memory of the strawberry costume connects to her refusal to wear a dress to the May Day celebration. Even though this is a norm in her community that her mother begs her to follow, Squeaky insists that wearing the dress and participating in the May Day dance would mean "trying to act like a fairy or a flower or whatever you're supposed to be when you should be trying to be yourself." To Squeaky, then, insisting that girls follow feminine norms is equivalent to training them not to be themselves, and she wants no part in this. Importantly, though, this does not mean rejecting *all* feminine norms; she never rejects the label "girl," for example, and she embraces being her disabled brother's caretaker, a role that is traditionally gendered female. Instead, Squeaky prefers to think critically about the expectations others place on her and decide for herself whether following a norm would be true to who she is.

However, the story emphasizes one norm that Squeaky uncritically follows: that women should relate to one another through competition and animosity rather than learning to be friends or allies. When Squeaky reflects that "girls never really smile at each other because they don't know how to [...] and there's probably no one to teach us how, cause grown-up girls don't know either," she acknowledges that unkindness between women is a social norm passed between generations. Squeaky emulates this norm: she constantly insults other girls, calling them out for their freckles or weight, and the girls around her are aggressive and insulting in return. Squeaky's former friend Mary Louise, for example, now talks about Squeaky "like a dog." Underlying this outright hostility is a pervasive sense of competition among girls. Many of the school activities that Squeaky mentions—such as the spelling bee, music class, or the May Day Races—are inherently competitive, and the there is an obvious struggle among Squeaky's female peers to be the best. Her classmate Cynthia Procter, for instance, is so competitive that she pretends that her skills come without effort, insinuating that she has aced tests without studying, or that she can play the piano without practice. Even though Squeaky's competitive posture is different (she prides herself on her hard work and practices running constantly in public), she shares

Cynthia's competitive spirit, bragging about her "big rep as the baddest thing around" and her "roomful of ribbons and medals and awards." It's clear, then, that Squeaky and the other girls in the neighborhood feel the need to best rather than support one another.

However, Squeaky's non-competitive and caring relationships with men—particularly with her intellectually disabled brother Raymond—become a model for rethinking her attitude toward women. Squeaky's only positive relationships in the story are with men: she enjoys racing her father (even though he always wins), and she shows a tenderness toward her intellectually disabled brother Raymond that she never shows other women, caring for and defending him despite the social difficulty it brings. It's Raymond who finally makes Squeaky begin to question the value of her competitive spirit. As Squeaky waits to find out whether she or Gretchen won the May Day race, she realizes that she would find more meaning in teaching Raymond to run than in winning races herself. This is a shift in her attitude: she no longer wants to prove herself superior to other women but instead wants to help Raymond (who has nothing "to call his own") find success. In this moment of epiphany, Squeaky looks from Raymond to Gretchen and realizes that her kindness toward Raymond could extend to Gretchen. For the first time, Squeaky sees Gretchen as an ally rather than a rival; maybe Gretchen would even help her coach Raymond, she thinks, showing that they could perhaps work together rather than trying to tear each other down. When Gretchen and Squeaky then share a "real" smile (even though girls "don't practice smiling every day" because they're "too busy being flowers or fairies or strawberries instead of something honest"), Bambara implies that Squeaky has learned a new way of relating to women. In practicing kindness as Squeaky once practiced competing, she defies the silly norm that women should be hostile and competitive toward one another.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

RUNNING

Running, Squeaky's passion in life, symbolizes freedom and escape from the judgment of others. For years, Squeaky has used winning races to prove herself to the people in her neighborhood—but the act of running itself is also a way for her to shut out the world and connect with her truest, purest self. Before every race, Squeaky daydreams that she's weightless and floating above scenic landscapes, representing the sense of emotional weightlessness that running gives her. Squeaky, who's largely misunderstood and mistreated by others, is able to block out the world around her (and especially other people's judgment of her) while she's running. And at the end of the story, after running the 50-yard dash, she no longer cares about whether she's won. Squeaky even thinks that she'll give up races altogether and coach her brother Raymond instead—her reputation as a winner no longer matters to her, only the joy of running and the ability to share it with her brother. Running thus comes to represent a break from trying to conform to others' expectations and an embrace of freedom and unabashedly pursuing one's passions.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage Books edition of *Gorilla, My Love* published in 1992.

Raymond's Run Quotes

Sometimes I slip and say my little brother Raymond. But as any fool can see he's much bigger and he's older too. But a lot of people call him my little brother cause he needs looking after cause he's not quite right. And a lot of smart mouths got lots to say about that too, especially when George was minding him. But now, if anybody has anything to say to Raymond, anything to say about his big head, they have to come by me. And I don't play the dozens or believe in standing around with somebody in my face doing a lot of talking. I much rather just knock you down and take my chances even if I am a little girl with skinny arms and a squeaky voice, which is how I got the name Squeaky. And if things get too rough, I run. And as anybody can tell you, I'm the fastest thing on two feet.

Related Characters: Squeaky (speaker), Squeaky's Father, Squeaky's Mother, George , Raymond

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Squeaky, the narrator and protagonist of "Raymond's Run," is describing her role as caretaker of her brother Raymond, who is intellectually disabled. Given that this quote appears very near the beginning of the story, the reader can infer that the responsibility of caring for Raymond is central to Squeaky's identity, as it's seemingly the first thing she wants people to know about her. Although it's arguably unfair that Squeaky's mother and father delegate the task of looking after Raymond onto Squeaky (given that Squeaky is a very

young girl and Raymond is "much bigger" and older than she is), Squeaky seems to take pride in caring for and protecting him. Already, the story portrays caretaking as a highly rewarding role, even if it's a difficult one.

This passage also introduces Squeaky's tough reputation: she's not afraid to "knock you down," and she's "the fastest thing on too feet." In bragging like this, Squeaky is attempting to present herself as a force to be reckoned with—even though she also admits to being "a little girl with skinny arms and a squeaky voice." Given the way in which people mistreat Raymond for his differences, it makes sense that Squeaky wants to come off as threatening to ward off any potential harassment that comes their way. The story thus sets up Squeaky's character as one who is wholeheartedly dedicated to her brother—even to the point that she's willing to shape her entire identity and public persona around taking care of and protecting him.

> The big kids call me Mercury cause I'm the swiftest thing in the neighborhood. Everybody knows that—except two people who know better, my father and me. He can beat me to Amsterdam Avenue with me having a two fire-hydrant headstart and him running with his hands in his pockets and whistling. But that's private information. Cause can you imagine some thirty-five-year-old man stuffing himself into PAL shorts to race little kids? So as far as everyone's concerned, I'm the fastest and that goes for Gretchen, too, who has put out the tale that she is going to win the first-place medal this year. Ridiculous. In the second place, she's got short legs. In the third place, she's got freckles. In the first place, no one can beat me and that's all there is to it.

Related Characters: Squeaky (speaker), Raymond, Gretchen, Squeaky's Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Squeaky has just introduced readers to her love of running, a pursuit to which she is wholeheartedly and unabashedly dedicated. Squeaky is clearly a talented runner—just before this quote, she boasts that she wins first place in every race she enters—yet Squeaky's father doesn't seem to take her passion seriously. Though Squeaky's father is a great runner himself, the fact that the races between him and Squeaky are kept secret suggests that he's embarrassed to be seen "stuffing himself into PAL shorts to race little kids." In this way, he seems to trivialize Squeaky's running, which likely leaves her feeling unappreciated. Whereas Squeaky gives a great deal of care to Raymond, it seems that Squeaky's father doesn't care for her in return. It makes sense, then, that Squeaky is a bit of a braggart—she's adamant that she's "the swiftest thing in the neighborhood," pushing this point to garner people's respect in lieu of her father taking interest in her and being proud of her.

This lack of support also contributes to feelings of competitiveness and bitterness toward other girls. Even though Gretchen could be a potential friend for Squeaky, since they share an interest in running, instead Squeaky is quick to point out Gretchen's freckles and "short legs," laughing at her ambition of winning a first-place medal. Without someone to model what support looks like, it seems that Squeaky is unable to extend support to other girls, whom she only sees as threats to her reputation as a winner.

> [...] I've got Raymond walking on the inside close to the buildings, cause he's subject to fits of fantasy and starts thinking he's a circus performer and that the curb is a tightrope strung high in the air. And sometimes after a rain he likes to step down off his tightrope right into the gutter and slosh around getting his shoes and cuffs wet. Then I get hit when I get home. Or sometimes if you don't watch him he'll dash across traffic to the island in the middle of Broadway and give the pigeons a fit. Then I have to go behind him apologizing to all the old people sitting around trying to get some sun and getting all upset with the pigeons fluttering around them[.]

Related Characters: Squeaky (speaker), Squeaky's Father, Squeaky's Mother, Raymond

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Squeaky breaks down her duties as Raymond's caretaker: she must supervise him each day, bringing him along with her while she walks and does breathing exercises around the neighborhood. Raymond's tendency to get lost in "fits of fantasy" and to disturb the neighbors makes it clear that taking care of him and keeping him out of trouble is no easy task—especially given that he's older and bigger than Squeaky.

The fact that Squeaky must apologize on Raymond's behalf, and that she's the one who gets hit as punishment if Raymond misbehaves, shows that she's under an immense amount of pressure from their parents. This arrangement is certainly hard on Squeaky and is arguably unfair to her—after all, she has a huge amount of responsibility at a very young age. And given their mother and father's absence from the story, it seems that they do not give Squeaky the same level of care that Squeaky gives Raymond. This neglect seems to play a significant role in Squeaky's sense of self: without anyone to support and protect her, she centers her identity around being Raymond caretaker and pretends to be tough in order to protect herself and Raymond.

> […] I'm serious about my running, and I don't care who knows it.

Now some people like to act like things come easy to them, won't let on that they practice. Not me. I'll highprance down 34th Street like a rodeo pony to keep my knees strong even if it does get my mother uptight so that she walks ahead like she's not with me, don't know me, is all by herself on a shopping trip, and I am somebody else's crazy child.

Related Characters: Squeaky (speaker), Raymond, Squeaky's Father, Squeaky's Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Squeaky declares her passion for running and her lack of shame in practicing in public. Squeaky's mother, however, is "uptight" about Squeaky doing her exercises on the street—when Squeaky does this, her mother separates from her and pretends that she doesn't know her. This shame hearkens back to Squeaky's father's embarrassment about being seen racing with Squeaky—it seems that both her parents trivialize her greatest passion in life, an attitude that almost certainly contributes to Squeaky need to compensate through bragging and depicting herself as brave and formidable. Squeaky believes that her mother thinks of her as a "crazy child," which is ironic given that this is how many people in the neighborhood view Squeaky's intellectually disabled brother Raymond. Squeaky and Raymond, then, are both established as outcasts in the neighborhood and within their own family, which explains why Squeaky is so quick to protect Raymond: she knows how it feels to be rejected for simply being one's authentic self.

> Now you take Cynthia Procter for instance. She's just the opposite. If there's a test tomorrow, she'll say something like, "Oh, I guess I'll play handball this afternoon and watch television tonight," just to let you know she ain't thinking about the test. […] I could kill people like that. I stay up all night studying the words for the spelling bee. And you can see me any time of day practicing running.

Related Characters: Cynthia Procter, Squeaky (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Having just described her unabashed love of running and her commitment to practicing, Squeaky shares her frustration about Cynthia Procter, a classmate who pretends to be naturally gifted at things rather than admitting that she studies and practices. A significant issue that Bambara tackles in "Raymond's Run" is that of girls tearing one another down rather than extending kindness and support, and this quote is a prime example of that problem. A number of girls in Squeaky's neighborhood (Squeaky included) are incredibly competitive and feel the need to brag and best others; Cynthia takes this to the extent that she refuses to admit any weakness and creates a false persona as a prodigy who doesn't need to work hard. Squeaky knows this is all an act—just after this, she says that she hears Cynthia playing scales on the piano whenever she passes by her house, despite Cynthia acting as though she never practices.

It's clear, then, that Squeaky, Cynthia, and others feel the need to act disingenuously in order to intimidate people into respecting them. But this constant competition only creates conflict and stress among the girls in Squeaky's neighborhood. Squeaky has a deep desire to be accepted for who she is and what she loves, yet this can never be realized as long as she and the other girls are more concerned with bolstering their reputations than expressing their true selves. Squeaky comes to this realization herself by the end of the story, and Bambara

thus imparts the feminist message that girls should support one another and stand in solidarity rather than viewing one another as enemies.

> Gretchen smiles, but it's not a smile, and I'm thinking that girls never really smile at each other because they don't know how and don't want to know how and there's probably no one to teach us how, cause grown-up girls don't know either.

Related Characters: Squeaky (speaker), Raymond, Rosie, Mary Louise, Gretchen

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 26–27

Explanation and Analysis

As Squeaky walks with Raymond down the street, she runs into Gretchen and her sidekicks Mary Louise and Rosie. Gretchen is a nemesis of sorts for Squeaky: she's also a runner, and she's been claiming that she's going to beat Squeaky in the neighborhood May Day race this year. And here, while Mary Louise and Rosie taunt Squeaky and Raymond, Gretchen smiles disingenuously, silent yet complicit in the bullying that's occurring.

Squeaky's reflections in this moment are quite insightful given how young she is: she recognizes that girls tend to be cruel to one another because they don't know any better. According to Squeaky, "grown-up girls"—young adults or adult women—don't know how to be genuine and kind toward one another either, suggesting that this atmosphere of competitiveness and hostility is the norm among adult women as well as young girls in their neighborhood. Through Squeaky's wise observation, Bambara makes the implicit argument that women need to model proper behavior for younger girls. As an activist in the Black feminist movement, Bambara sees the value in girls and women lifting one another up and showing support rather than viciously competing with one another—a viewpoint that Squeaky, too, adopts by the end of the story.

> You'd think my mother'd be grateful not to have to make me a white organdy dress with a big satin sash and buy me new white baby-doll shoes that can't be taken out of the box till the big day. You'd think she'd be glad her daughter ain't out there prancing around a May Pole getting the new clothes all dirty and sweaty and trying to act like a fairy or a flower or whatever you're supposed to be when you should be trying to be yourself, whatever that is, which is, as far as I am concerned, a poor Black girl who really can't afford to buy shoes and a new dress you only wear once a lifetime cause it won't fit next year.

Related Characters: Squeaky (speaker), Squeaky's Father, Squeaky's Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

When Squeaky arrives at her neighborhood's annual May Day celebration at a local park, she reflects on how her mother wishes that Squeaky would participate in the May Pole dance rather than the races. Squeaky's mother, it seems, is disappointed that Squeaky isn't more traditionally feminine—Squeaky doesn't want to wear fancy clothes or "act like a fairy or a flower" the way other girls do. Instead, Squeaky just wants to be herself: a self-described "poor Black girl" who doesn't want to buy new clothes just to pretend she's something she's not. Squeaky goes on to describe how foolish she felt when she played a dancing strawberry in a school play just to make her mother and father proud. Through these reflections, it becomes even clearer that Squeaky's parents are disappointed in and perhaps even embarrassed of her because she doesn't follow prescribed social norms.

This is underscored by the fact that Squeaky's parents don't attend the May Day race to support her. Squeaky is alienated by the fact that she thinks more critically about gender roles than those around her do—and she doesn't want to just conform to what other girls are doing. This passage thus adds another layer to Squeaky's struggles with identity: while she wants to be unabashedly herself (a runner, first and foremost), she's pressured by her parents to stifle who she is and what she loves to do. Readers can see, then, that Squeaky's tough persona and tendency to brag is perhaps a way of compensating for the disapproval and lack of support she faces at home.

> To the right, a blurred Gretchen, who's got her chin jutting out as if it would win the race all by itself. And on the other side of the fence is Raymond with his arms down to his side and the palms tucked up behind him, running in his very own style, and it's the first time I ever saw that and I almost stop to watch my brother Raymond on his first run.

Related Characters: Squeaky (speaker), Gretchen, Raymond

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

As Squeaky and Gretchen are competing in the 50-yard dash at the May Day celebration, Squeaky is shocked to see Raymond keeping pace with them on the other side of the fence. This moment is significant, as just prior to this, Squeaky was adamant that she *had* to win the race—now, though, she considers quitting just to stop and watch Raymond's first-ever run. Up until this point, running has been a source of inner conflict for Squeaky: the act of running itself is a passion and a healthy emotional escape for her, but she's also motivated to win races as a way to impress others and gain their respect through intimidation. But in witnessing Raymond running freely, independent of the race and seemingly unafraid of what others think about "his very own style" of running with "his arms down to his side and the palms tucked up behind him," Squeaky has a change of heart: she no longer cares about maintaining her reputation as a winner. It seems that caring for and supporting Raymond has imbued Squeaky with a special appreciation for Raymond's fearlessness and uniqueness. Going forward, then, Squeaky will hopefully be inspired to express herself and pursue her passions without worrying about other people's judgment—just like Raymond does.

> […] it occurred to me that Raymond would make a very fine runner. Doesn't he always keep up with me on my trots? And he surely knows how to breathe in counts of seven cause he's always doing it at the dinner table, which drives my brother George up the wall. And I'm smiling to beat the band cause if I've lost this race, or if me and Gretchen tied, or even if I've won, I can always retire as a runner and begin a whole new career as a coach with Raymond as my champion. After all, with a little more study I can beat Cynthia and her phony self at the spelling bee. And if I bugged my mother, I could get piano lessons and become a star. And I have a big rep as the baddest thing around. And I've got a roomful of ribbons and medals and awards. But what has Raymond got to call his own?

Related Characters: Squeaky (speaker), George , Cynthia Procter, Raymond

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 31–32

Explanation and Analysis

After witnessing Raymond running alongside her during the 50-yard dash, Squeaky has an epiphany: she no longer cares about winning the race. Up until this point in the story, Squeaky has been characterized by her deep-seated need to best others and uphold her tough and intimidating reputation. But now, having seen Raymond run for the simple joy of running, Squeaky thinks that she might quit the sport altogether and coach Raymond instead.

As Raymond's caretaker, Squeaky seems to have been suddenly inspired by his courage to run in front of others without regard for how they'll judge him. She now sees the value in pursuing other achievements, like winning the spelling bee or becoming a skilled piano player, to prove to herself that she can do it—not to impress anyone else. Significantly, Squeaky recognizes that she already has "a roomful of ribbons and medals and awards," which is proof enough that she is a great runner. In extending compassion to Raymond, who hasn't been given the same opportunities that she has, Squeaky adopts a more cooperative mindset and wants to lift Raymond up rather than continuing to focus on her own reputation as a winner—and ideally, she'll extend this supportive attitude to herself and to others, as well.

> And I look over at Gretchen wondering what the "P" stands for. And I smile. Cause she's good, no doubt about it. Maybe she'd like to help me coach Raymond; she obviously is serious about running, as any fool can see. And she nods to congratulate me and then she smiles. And I smile. We stand there with this big smile of respect between us. It's about as real a smile as girls can do for each other, considering we don't practice real smiling every day, you know, cause maybe we too busy being flowers or fairies or strawberries instead of something honest and worthy of respect…you know…like being people.

Related Characters: Squeaky (speaker), Raymond, Gretchen

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, in which Squeaky and Gretchen share a brief smile, serves as the climax of the story. It represents a significant shift in Squeaky's mindset from competitive and bitter toward other girls to respectful and supportive of them. Importantly, this change comes after Squeaky witnesses Raymond running alongside her during the 50-yard dash and realizes that she no longer cares about winning races—instead, she's more interested in coaching Raymond and helping him reach the same level of personal fulfillment and success that she's achieved in her running career. Squeaky's role as Raymond caretaker is a central aspect of her identity, and now the cooperative and supportive mindset she applies to caring for Raymond has radiated outward to influence how she treats others. Whereas Gretchen was once her nemesis, Squeaky now respects Gretchen as a fellow runner and even wants to include her in coaching Raymond—and importantly, Gretchen gives Squeaky a congratulatory nod and a "real" smile in return, small but meaningful gestures of respect.

This quote thus neatly wraps up all of the story's main themes: Squeaky's change of heart, which Raymond inspired, demonstrates how caretaking has the power to make people more cooperative and compassionate. Her realization that people should be "something honest," rather than pretending they're something they're not, emphasizes the importance of embracing one's true identity rather than being overly concerned with how others perceive them. This, the story suggests, is how to foster genuine, mutual respect. And finally, Squeaky's gesture of making peace with Gretchen sends the message that women and girls should support one another and lift each other up rather than trying to tear each other down—they are, after all, fellow people who are "worthy of respect."

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

RAYMOND'S RUN

Unlike most girls, Squeaky doesn't have many household chores—her mother does most of them. Squeaky also doesn't have to earn pocket money by running errands or selling Christmas cards the way George does. Squeaky's father takes care of most everything else the family needs—all Squeaky has to do is look after her brother Raymond.

The story begins with Squeaky describing her caretaking duties, which suggests that looking after Raymond is central to her identity within the family. Each of her family members seems to have a distinct role in the household, and Squeaky's primary responsibility is Raymond.

A lot of people refer to Raymond as Squeaky's little brother because he's "not quite right" and needs supervision, but he's actually older and much bigger than she is. People would often mock Raymond for his "big head" when George was the one who looked after him, but Squeaky isn't afraid to stand up for Raymond; she isn't one to stay quiet when someone is speaking out of turn. Squeaky isn't afraid to take risks and push people down, even if she's a skinny little girl with a squeaky voice (which is how she got her nickname). If a confrontation gets too intense, Squeaky just **runs** away—she's "the fastest thing on two feet."

Squeaky clearly takes her role as Raymond's protector seriously. It doesn't matter to her that he's "not quite right" and has a "big head"—Squeaky loves Raymond regardless of his disability (the exact nature of which is unspecified) and is willing to stand up to whoever bothers him. Squeaky's boasting about being unafraid to fight and being "the fastest thing on two feet" establishes the reputation that Squeaky has made for herself in the neighborhood. Though she's small and physically unintimidating, she projects toughness to the world as a means of defending Raymond and herself.

Squeaky wins first-place medals in every track competition she participates in. In private, though, Squeaky's father races against her and effortlessly beats her, even when Squeaky gets a head start. But this is a secret, since racing against kids is embarrassing for Squeaky's father. As far as everyone else knows, Squeaky is the fastest person in the neighborhood—certainly faster than Gretchen, who's been bragging that she's going to win the first-place medal this year. Squeaky thinks this is ridiculous, since Gretchen has short legs and freckles, and no one ever beats Squeaky.

Squeaky is clearly a talented runner, yet her father's embarrassment at being seen racing her implies that he doesn't take her passion seriously. Whereas Squeaky is willing to stand up to anyone who insults Raymond, their father doesn't extend that same pride and protectiveness to Squeaky. The reader thus begins to see that Squeaky's abrasive attitude is at least partially rooted in a lack of support and care from those around her. Meanwhile, Squeaky's disapproval of Gretchen hints at a general atmosphere of competitiveness and hostility among the girls in the neighborhood.

One day, Squeaky sets out on a walk down Broadway while doing breath training for **running**. Raymond walks with her on the side closer to the buildings, since he's prone to "fits of fantasy." If Raymond pretends he's a circus performer and gets his pants and shoes wet when he steps off the curb (his makeshift tightrope) into the gutter, Squeaky is the one who gets hit as punishment when they return home. Sometimes, Raymond even darts into the street to scare the pigeons, which causes a commotion and upsets the neighbors. When this happens, Squeaky always has to apologize on his behalf. But Squeaky doesn't mind looking after Raymond while he makes believe, as long as he doesn't interrupt her breathing practice.

Raymond's "fits of fantasy" and the ruckus he causes in the neighborhood suggests that his intellectual disability is rather severe and that he's difficult to control. It seems unfair, then, that Squeaky is soley responsible for supervising him at such a young age, especially since Raymond is older and bigger than she is. Plus, given that Squeaky is the one who gets hit when Raymond misbehaves, she's clearly under an immense amount of pressure from her parents to keep Raymond in line. And yet Squeaky doesn't resent this role—she seems to take pride in being Raymond's caretaker and to enjoy his company rather than viewing him as a burden.

Squeaky is unashamed of training in public, even though this embarrasses her mother. Squeaky's classmate Cynthia Procter, on the other hand, likes to let on that she doesn't need to prepare for things like tests or the school spelling bee. But Squeaky knows better: Cynthia also pretends to be naturally gifted at the piano, but whenever Squeaky passes by Cynthia's house, she hears her practicing scales. Squeaky resents this, since she herself studies hard and is unabashedly serious about **running**. Presently, as Squeaky does her exercises, Raymond keeps pace with her because people will harass him if they see him hanging around.

Like Squeaky's father, her mother is embarrassed rather than supportive of Squeaky's passion for running. And again, it's likely that this lack of support contributes to Squeaky's feelings of inadequacy and her subsequent need to push people away and assert herself. In this vein, Squeaky's bitterness toward Cynthia Procter is another indicator that the girls in the neighborhood see one another as competition rather than potential friends or allies.

As Squeaky does her breathing exercises, she spots Gretchen and her sidekicks Mary Louise and Rosie walking up the street. Squeaky used to be friends with Mary Louise when Mary Louise was new in Harlem, defending her from bullies, but now Mary Louise talks bad about Squeaky. Rosie is mean to Raymond, although Squeaky doesn't think Rosie has room to talk since she's fat and unintelligent. Squeaky considers going into the candy store to avoid the girls, but she decides that would be cowardly—she has "a reputation to consider." Squeaky is ready for a fight.

The way in which Mary Louise has backstabbed Squeaky adds context to Squeaky's resentment toward other girls: it seems that the norm among the girls in the neighborhood is to put one another down in order to social climb and make themselves feel superior. Squeaky, too, emulates this norm through her insulting thoughts about Rosie and her prior comments about Gretchen's short legs and freckles. However, this mean streak seems to be a front—Squeaky has "a reputation to consider" that drives her to be tough, even when she'd rather run and hide.

As the girls approach, Mary Louise and Rosie taunt Squeaky about losing the upcoming May Day race, but Squeaky knows that they're just parroting what Gretchen told them to say. As Gretchen smiles disingenuously, Squeaky thinks that "girls never really smile at each other" because adult women don't either, so there's no one to teach them how. Mary Louise and Rosie begin to bully Raymond, but Squeaky is quick to tell them off. Gretchen tries to look tough but has nothing to say back, so she and her sidekicks walk away. Raymond and Squeaky exchange a smile and carry on down the street.

Though Squeaky claims to be unafraid to fight, it's significant that she shies away from actual violence and instead tells the girls off verbally. Her posturing seems to be defensive rather than offensive—she just wants people to let her and Raymond be themselves and walk in peace. Squeaky's insight that "girls never really smile at each other" because that behavior isn't modeled to them suggests that the issue of cattiness and competitiveness is widespread among adult women and young girls alike in their neighborhood. Gretchen and her sidekicks don't know any better—they're merely emulating a social norm in being cruel to Squeaky and Raymond.

On May Day, Squeaky is in no rush to get to the park since the track meet is the last event of the day. The main attraction of the celebration is the May Pole dance, which Squeaky's mother wishes she would participate in. But Squeaky is adamant that she doesn't want to wear fancy clothes and dance around pretending to be a fairy—she's more interested in being herself, a "poor Black girl" who can't really afford new clothes. Squeaky remembers playing a dancing strawberry in a nursery school production of Hansel and Gretel, feeling foolish just so that her mother and father could watch proudly. But Squeaky isn't a dancer—she's a **runner**.

Squeaky's reflections about the May Pole dance and the play reveal another layer to her parents' disapproval: her mother and father clearly wish that Squeaky was more traditionally feminine. Squeaky's rejection of prescribed gender roles and commitment to being herself, a "poor Black girl" who loves to run, disappoint her parents. Squeaky's tough posturing, then, seemingly stems from feeling hurt at others' disapproval and wanting to shut people out and avoid judgment about her identity and passions.

When Squeaky arrives late to the May Day program, she puts Raymond in a swing and looks around for her teacher Mr. Pearson, who pins the race numbers on. Truthfully, Squeaky is really looking for Gretchen, though she doesn't see her anywhere in the crowded park. Eventually, Mr. Pearson fumbles over, clumsily dropping things as he towers over the crowd on stilts. Mr. Pearson greets Squeaky by her nickname, which she resents because she's not allowed to call him Beanstalk (his nickname among Squeaky and her classmates) to his face—so she corrects him that her name is Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker.

Even though the May Day race is incredibly important to Squeaky, her parents are seemingly absent. Again, their lack of support despite the responsibility for Raymond that they delegate to Squeaky likely makes Squeaky feel unappreciated and ashamed of who she is. It logically follows, then, that Squeaky has created a formidable persona in order to protect herself from getting hurt emotionally. Her insistence that Mr. Pearson call her by her full name underscores this: she bristles whenever she senses that someone is trying to make her feel inferior. Meanwhile, Squeaky's preoccupation with finding Gretchen in the park shows the extent to which she's motivated by besting other girls rather than simply focusing on her own performance.

Mr. Pearson hints that Squeaky should purposely lose the race this year—it would be a nice gesture to let Gretchen win, since she's new to the neighborhood. Squeaky just gives him a dark look and stomps away after pinning on her lucky number, seven. She thinks that adults can have a lot of nerve. Squeaky goes to lie down in the grass next to the track, imagining that she's back in the country instead of the "concrete jungle" of the city. After the younger age groups **run** the 20-, 30-, and 40-yard dashes, Squeaky and Gretchen take their places at the starting line for the 50-yard dash. Squeaky sees Raymond on the other side of the fence, mimicking the runners' crouched positions, but Squeaky doesn't have the energy to yell at him to cut it out.

Here, Mr. Pearson reinforces the competitive attitude that Squeaky and her female classmates harbor toward one another. Rather than encouraging Squeaky to do her best, he frames her winning as a disservice to other girls like Gretchen. Squeaky's daydream, meanwhile, adds yet another layer to the persona she puts on: it seems that she feels dissatisfied and alienated in the "concrete jungle" where she lives and longs to go back to the countryside. Thus, she acts tough and abrasive to prevent others from seeing her emotional pain or vulnerability. Squeaky's decision not to yell at Raymond also implies that being his caretaker wears on her despite how much she loves him—it's simply too big of a responsibility for a girl her age.

Whenever Squeaky is about to **run** a race, she feels like she's in a fever dream, flying weightlessly over a beach. In the dream, she smells apples like the ones in the orchard near where she used to live in the countryside. She feels herself getting lighter and lighter until she crouches over the starting line and snaps out of the dream. Feeling solid again, she encourages herself that she has to win because there's no one faster than her—she could even beat her father if she really tried.

Here, the symbolism of running is fully established: though Squeaky uses winning races as a means of impressing others, running also represents escapism, a break from the judgment she constantly faces from other people. But again, this inner peace is interrupted, as even Squeaky's private inner monologue reveals a deep-seated need to win in order to maintain her reputation.

The gun goes off, and Squeaky flies past everyone else and tunes out the world around her. She sees Gretchen to her right and Raymond keeping pace with them on the other side of the fence, **running** in his own style with his arms at his sides and his hands behind him. Squeaky, awestruck, has never seen this before; she almost stops and watches Raymond on his very first run. But she stays focused on the finish line and wins the race, garnering congratulatory pats on the back from everyone on the sidelines.

Seeing Raymond running is a turning point for Squeaky: despite desperately wanting to win the 50-yard dash just before this, she actually considers quitting the race just to watch him. Raymond isn't motivated by accolades or other people's opinions—running alongside the racers seems to be a way of expressing himself and doing something he enjoys, regardless of how he looks while doing it. Squeaky's admiration of him, then, suggests that she may come to a similar conclusion about unabashedly pursuing her passions regardless of what people think of her.

Then, just as the race announcer says "In first place," the loudspeaker cuts out. Squeaky sees that Gretchen overshot the finish line, too, and is now walking back while breathing steadily like a professional would. Seeing this, Squeaky thinks that she actually likes Gretchen a little. Beanstalk argues with the announcer and a few other men about the times on the stopwatches while Squeaky and Gretchen look at each other, wondering who actually won.

It's significant that Squeaky's change of heart toward Gretchen happens just after witnessing Raymond's run. It suggests that loving and supporting him as his caretaker is spilling over onto Squeaky's attitude toward others, making her more cooperative and supportive rather than competitive. Instead of viewing Gretchen as an enemy, Squeaky begins to feel solidarity and even admiration toward Gretchen as a fellow female runner.

Just then, Raymond rattles the fence to get Squeaky's attention, eventually climbing over it in a graceful way that makes Squeaky think of how Raymond looked while he was **running**. She thinks that Raymond would actually make a good runner—he always keeps up with Squeaky when she practices and even mimics her breathing exercises. Squeaky thinks that it doesn't matter if she's won or lost against Gretchen, since she could always retire as a runner and coach Raymond instead. She could even beat Cynthia in the spelling bee if she studied hard enough, or she could become a star on the piano if she could convince her mother to get her lessons. Squeaky's room is full of ribbons, medals, and awards—she wonders what Raymond has of his own.

Again, it seems that Squeaky's care for Raymond has given her a sudden shift in perspective. Having realized the things she's been able to achieve while Raymond has been left out, Squeaky's sole motivation is no longer just beating peers like Gretchen or Cynthia—she is more concerned with bettering herself, cooperating, and helping lift others up. Squeaky even thinks that she'll give up racing, forfeiting her need to constantly project an image of success and strength to the world. Instead, Squeaky is inspired to pursue other hobbies and to help Raymond realize his own untapped potential.

Squeaky laughs aloud with joy at all of her plans, jumping up and down with excitement as Raymond scales the fence and **runs** over to her. She thinks that Raymond will be an excellent runner, just like Squeaky and their father. Everyone else thinks that Squeaky is excited because the judges have just announced the final results of the race: Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker in first place, Gretchen P. Lewis in second. Squeaky looks over at Gretchen and smiles, thinking that Gretchen is a good runner and that she could even help Squeaky coach Raymond. Gretchen nods to congratulate Squeaky and smiles back—as real of a smile as a girl can manage, Squeaky thinks, given that girls don't usually practice "real smiling." She thinks that maybe girls are preoccupied with being fairies or strawberries instead of being "something honest and worthy of respect [...] like being people."

It's a big deal that Squeaky is more excited about her new plans than about winning the race—watching Raymond run for the simple joy of running seems to have rid Squeaky of her constant need to best and impress others. The "real" smile that Squeaky shares with Gretchen further implies that Squeaky is ready to drop her tough persona and be vulnerable, supporting others even when she's not sure if her kindness will be reciprocated. By extending respect to others in this way, the story suggests, one will garner sincere respect (rather than fear or intimidation) in return and even forge new friendships. In caring for Raymond, Squeaky is ready to cooperate with other girls as fellow human beings who are "worthy of respect," treating people in the way that she hopes others will treat Raymond.

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