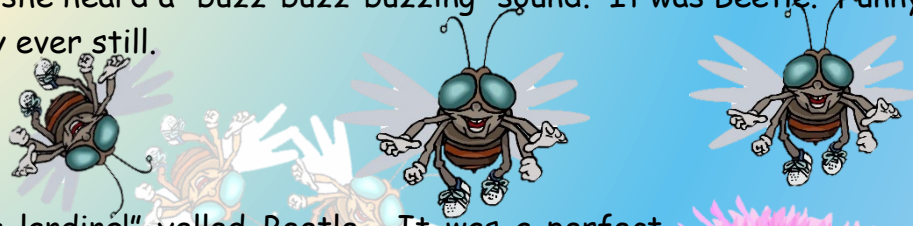


"Well, have fun, My Dear, be safe and wear a smile," advised Grandfather just before nodding off for a quick nap.

"I will, Grandfather. I love you!" shouted Thelma still twirling.

Above her head, she heard a "buzz-buzz-buzzing" sound. It was Beetle. Funny, happy Beetle. He was hardly ever still.



"Coming in for a landing!" yelled Beetle. It was a perfect landing, too, right on one of Thelma's prickly leaves. Then he ran all the way to the top of her head.

"Oh, Beetle, that tickles! Can you run on this leaf?" she asked pointing to her other side. "I have an itch there."

"My pleasure, Thelma!" giggled her little friend. "I will get those 'itchies' for you."



In return for scratching Thelma's "itchies," Beetle feasted on the insects that camped out under Thelma's leaves. It was good for Thelma and it was good for Beetle, too.

"By the way, Beetle, have you seen Bunny?"

"No, I have not seen her. But when I flew by her burrow I heard noises coming from inside. So I know she is awake," Beetle reported.

"Hey! Hey! Good morning, Miss Thistle. Good morning Beetle."

It was Cory Crow just returning from his breakfast "walk-about."



"Hi! Cory!" called Beetle. "Where have you been?"

"I have been traveling about and enjoying the lovely morning. I was also searching for treasures," Cory replied with a long stretch and loud yawn.

"What kind of treasure?" asked an excited Beetle.

"I saw a Field Full of EYES," reported Cory.

"A field full of EYES? I want to see! I want to see!" and Thelma twirled again.

"We will have to wait until dark," instructed Cory.

"You promise?" begged Thelma.

"Yes, I promise, Miss Thistle," Cory replied. "Since you missed the last adventure, the Field Full of EYES will be an adventure just for you."

"Oh! Thank you, Cory!" Thelma exclaimed still twirling. But then she stopped and with a soft voice said, "And, Cory, please call me, 'Thelma' like all my other friends. I was unkind to you when you first arrived on our ditch. I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?"



"You were so brave caring for Bunny in the corn field and gathering corn for everyone's breakfast. I would like to be your friend, too," Thelma offered.

It was not easy for Thelma to apologize, but she felt better after she did.



"I would be delighted, Miss Thi... I mean, Thelma. I am happy to be your friend. So now, we are five! Five best friends: You, Beetle, Bunny, Adam, and me," replied Cory.

## 5 Friends



At that moment, everyone heard a grumbling coming from Bunny's house.

It was Bunny! Bunny was usually so sweet and happy. But not today! Bunny was very upset!

Cory was concerned about Bunny. He hopped over to her and asked, "What's wrong, My Little Dove?"

Thelma watched from where she grew.

Bunny huffed, and puffed and made a snorting, growling sound; although everyone knows bunnies do not snort and growl.

"Someone threw trash all over my burrow!" Bunny exclaimed. "There are empty metal food cans and food cartons and trash all over the ditch bank where I live!" Bunny clenched her teeth in anger and asked, "Who would do such a thing?"

"Not me."

"Not me."

"Not me."



Just then, Adam Mouse, the newest member of the five friends, scampered out from under the grass. He stood on his hind feet and sniffed the air for danger.



"I think I know who did it," Adam said in a shy whisper. "I saw him do it last night."



Now Bunny's eyes were bigger and pinker and she demanded, "Who? Who did this to my house?"

"I don't like to tattle," hesitated Adam.

Cory, trying to ease the tension, asked calmly, "Adam, will you tell us so we can ask him not to do it again?"

Adam started to answer but hesitated. He really did not like to tattle on a friend.

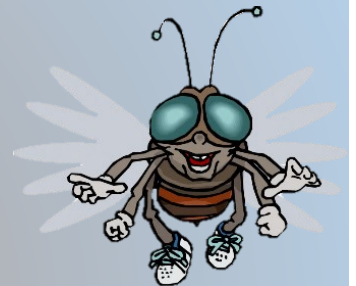
With his voice cracking with sadness, Adam said, "It was Rudy."

"Rudy? Rudy who? Rudy-Tudy? 'Rude Rudy'?" joked Beetle with giggles.

"Sh-h, Beetle," scolded Cory.

"No," continued shy little Adam. "His name is Rudy Raccoon. At night, he searches through garbage for something to eat. (Sigh) He is really a nice guy."

"Oh, that rude, rude, Rudy!" Bunny bristled. "Where does he live? I want to go mess up his yard!"

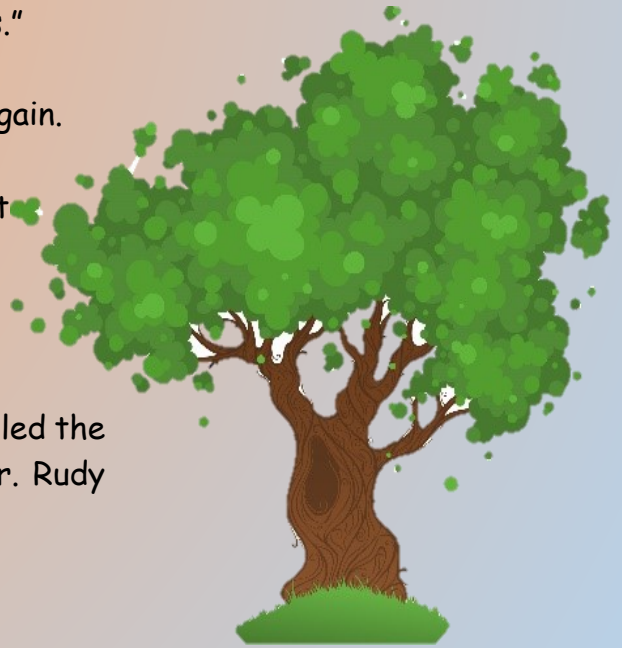
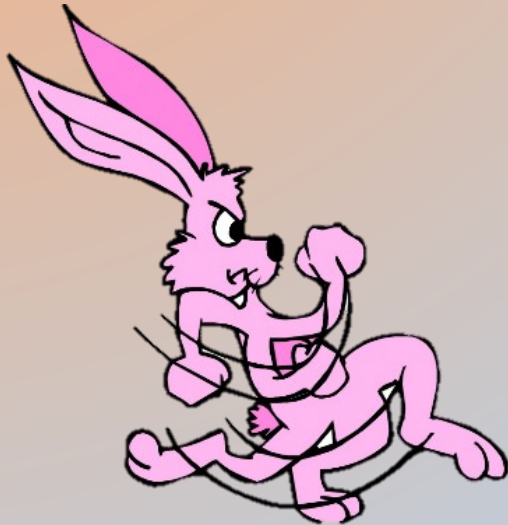


"I think I know where he lives," said Adam reluctantly. "It's in that big oak tree," Adam said as he pointed to a very large oak tree across the fence. "See the hole where the three big branches divide? That's where he lives."

"Oh! That rude, rude Rudy," Bunny fumed again.

With a calming voice, Cory said, "Why don't we go talk with Mr. Rudy now?"

With stern determination and a frown, Bunny led the way as the five friends set off to visit with Mr. Rudy Raccoon.

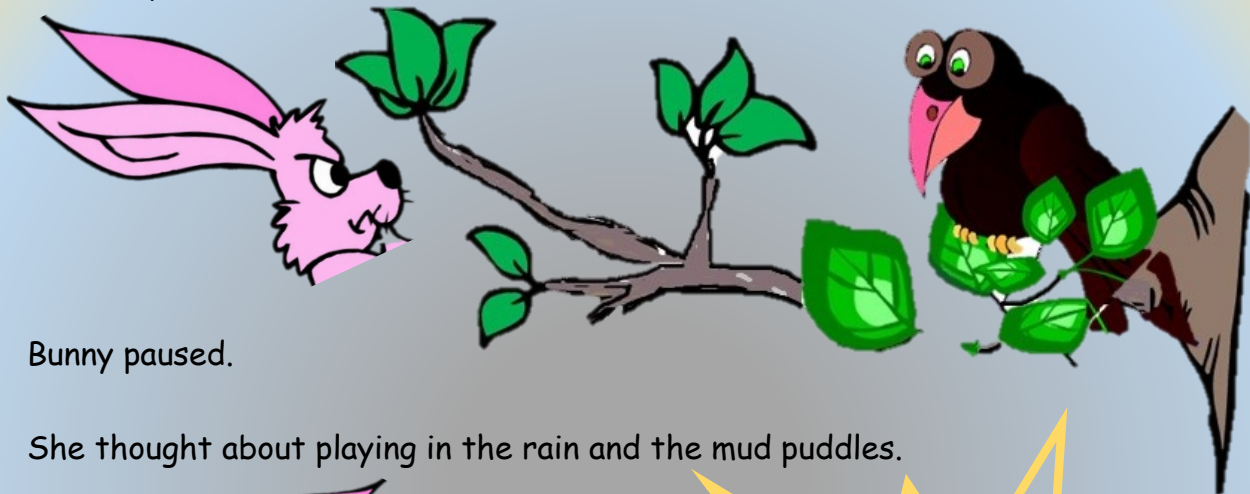


Before the friends arrived at Rudy's nest, wise Cory Crow cautioned Bunny and said, "My Sweet Little Hummingbird, can you stop a moment and think of something that makes you happy? Something that makes you smile?" Cory coached.

"Why?" demanded a pouty Bunny.

"Because, My Pet, if you go to speak to Mr. Rudy with an angry attitude and a frowny face, you might make an enemy. Wouldn't you rather have a happy face and win a friend?"

After thinking a moment about Cory's advice, Bunny said, "Oh, I didn't think about it that way. O.K.," said Bunny. "I will think about how much fun we had when we played in the rain and mud puddles last week. That was such fun."



Bunny paused.

She thought about playing in the rain and the mud puddles.



"Oh, Cory, Dear, you are right!" said Bunny with delight. "I am beginning to feel better."

"Then off we go to visit Mr. Rudy Raccoon," directed Cory Crow. "But first, let's tell Thelma what is happening and where we are going."

Cory was so thoughtful.



## Chapter 2

### *Rudy Raccoon*

Bunny, Beetle, Cory and Adam set off across the fence to visit with Rudy Raccoon, the number one suspect.

Thelma stretched really tall and watched her friends from her place on the ditch.

"Let me go first," suggested Adam Mouse. "Rudy knows me."

"Good idea, Adam," Cory agreed. "But don't be too timid."

Adam knocked on the tree and called out to Rudy Raccoon.

"Hello, Rudy. It's me, Adam Mouse."

Rudy's nest, in the big oak tree where the three branches divided, seemed to be a nice, neat little nest.



Bunny just could not understand how Rudy could keep his nest so neat and clean and yet litter her yard.

"Hi, Adam!" greeted Rudy. "Come on up."

"I would, Rudy, but I have friends with me and they don't really climb trees. Could you come down, please?"

"Sure thing. Be right there. Let me wash my hands first," replied Rudy.





This is another puzzlement for Bunny. Not only was Rudy's home neat and tidy, but HE was neat and clean.



The friends listened as Rudy scampered down the oak tree. He was very nimble and athletic. He could go up the tree headfirst and come down headfirst. Not like a cat that must go down tailfirst. Nor like a dog which does not climb trees at all. At least not usually.

Bunny was curious.



"Cory," Bunny asked, "if a raccoon is not like a cat and not like a dog, what kind of animal is a raccoon?"

"Very good question, My Pet," replied Cory. "Raccoons are a smaller cousin to the bear. But one curious thing about a raccoon is that he washes his food before he eats."

"So why did he leave his dirty trash all over my yard?" groaned Bunny.



Adam answered that question for Bunny.

"Raccoons are nocturnal. That means they work at night and sleep during the daytime. Something must have frightened him when he was carrying his dinner home to his nest and he dropped it."

"Hi, Adam!" Rudy rubbed his sleepy eyes as he greeted Adam. "Sorry I took so long, I am not quite awake this morning. What's up, pal?"



"Well, er. Well, um," Adam stammered, searching for the right words.

"Hello Mr. Raccoon," Cory said. "I am Cory Crow and this is Miss Bunny and Mr. Beetle. Of course, you know Adam. We are Adam's friends from across the fence."

"Hello, Mr. Crow. Let's go just over there and sit under these blueberry bushes where it is cool and shady," Rudy invited.

"Look!" whispered Bunny. "He's wearing a mask! He must be a thief!"

All the friends were very surprised to see that Rudy Raccoon had a black mask over his eyes and he LOOKED like a bandit that would steal trash and leave it littering the ground.

"Sitting in the shade would be quite nice," said a gracious Cory. "However, Mr. Raccoon, this is not a social call. I don't know exactly how to say this, but this morning when Miss Bunny came out of her burrow, she found empty metal cans, vegetable peelings and other trash all over her yard. We were wondering, since you work at night, if you saw any suspicious activity last night?"



"Oh, Cory," whispered Bunny. "You said that so well."

"Thank you, My Dove. As the old saying goes," whispered Cory in reply,

*"it is easier to catch flies with honey than with vinegar,"*

"No, I can't say that I noticed anything out of the ordinary," reported Rudy. "Last night on my patrol, I checked out the people's trash cans but everything was ship-shape and above board."





"Well, that's good to hear, Mr. Raccoon. When you go on patrol, do you ever take advantage of goodies in the people's trash?"



"Yes, siree! The people have wonderful goodies in their trash. I especially love vegetable peelings, but my very favorite is eggshells! Sometimes there is a little egg left in the shell and it is delicious! Yum, Yum. However, eggs are not easy to wash," admitted Rudy. "But I make do."

"And did you happen to drop any egg shells in my yard last night?" Bunny asked kindly.



"Very well said, My Sweet Pidgeon," praised Cory.

Bunny looked at Cory and smiled with sparkling eyes.



"Oh, no, Miss Bunny," answered Rudy. "I try to be a good neighbor. However, I do have a younger brother who has not yet learned good manners. My mother has tried to teach him to be polite, but he just has not caught on yet. I do apologize."



"How old is your brother?" asked Bunny.

"He is only one month old," replied Rudy.

"Oh, I see," said Bunny sweetly. "Little brothers and sisters can be very messy, can't they? I have several brothers and sisters myself so I know how they can be."

"Well, since my baby brother made the mess, let me help you clean it up," offered Rudy.

"Thank you, Mr. Raccoon," said Cory. "You are most helpful and gracious."

"Let's go, everybody!" shouted a happy Bunny. Bunny's sweet little heart-shaped lips could not contain her giant smile.

As the friends got closer to Bunny's house, they saw Thelma still stretching to see what was going on.

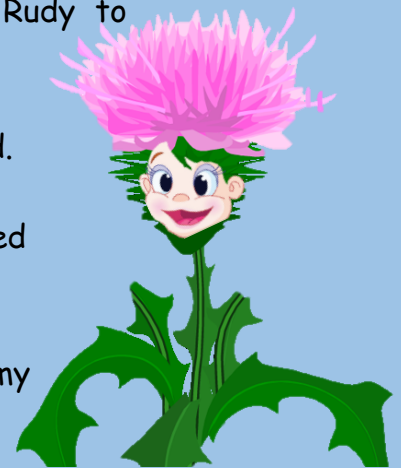
"Thelma, this is Mr. Rudy Raccoon," Cory introduced Rudy to Thelma. "He is going to help us clean up Bunny's yard."

"Hello, Mr. Rudy Raccoon," Thelma greeted the new friend.

"Hi, there, Miss Thelma," Rudy returned the greeting.

"Oh, please. Do call me Thelma like all my friends do," Thelma offered.

"Then you have to call me Rudy," replied Rudy.



"Hey! Can we call you Rudy-Tudy?" giggled Beetle.

"Sure you can. If I can call you, Beetle Bug!" joked Rudy.

"You'll have to catch me first!" shouted Beetle hiding behind Cory.

"I can outrun you any ole day," Rudy giggled. "You're it!"



"Uhm." Thelma cleared her throat to interrupt the joking and laughing. "So Rudy, you are going to help clean up Bunny's yard?" asked Thelma.

Rudy stopped short and Beetle bumped into him from behind.

"Yep." Rudy finally got out between his giggles. "It's the least I can do, since it was my baby brother who made the mess."

"That is very sweet of you, Rudy," smiled Thelma.



"O.K., gang, let's get started," called Cory. "We can recycle the paper, the cardboard cartons, the vegetable peelings and the egg shells. They are 'bio-degradable.' When we bury them, they decay, returning nutrients back into the soil. That actually becomes food for the wildflowers."

"The metal cans? That's another matter. We will have to put them back into the people's trash can," directed Cory.



"I can do that," offered Rudy. And he scampers off carrying an empty vegetable can between his teeth.

"See! I can stand on my hind legs to put the metal items in the trash can," announced a proud Rudy.

"Let's go, gang! We can't let Rudy outwork us!" encouraged Cory.

Thelma, again watching and wishing she could help, could only offer words of encouragement and cheer on the friends. She did not know that the value of encouraging words is no small gift.



"Good Work, Beetle"

"Go! Rudy, go!"

"Good job, Bunny!"

"You go, Adam!"

"Almost Done, Cory"

"Wow! Look! We are finished!" Bunny announced. "Thanks for helping Rudy."

"No problem," replied Rudy. "I'm glad I could help. I hope we can play together again soon. That is if I don't have to work every night."

"Thank you, Rudy," said Adam as the friends turned to leave. "I hope we can be friends, too. Bye."

"Bye, Adam," shouted Rudy. "Bye, Cory. Bye, Bunny. Bye, Beetle. Goodbye, Thelma."

"Bye Rudy," all the friends said together.



"I understand now," said Bunny. "Just because someone LOOKS bad does not mean he IS bad. Rudy was very nice."

"Yes," agreed Cory. "We must not be quick to judge someone by appearance."

"Good lesson," added Beetle.



"Good Lesson"

