

In the Center of Things

by Markie Scholz



Illustrated by Debbie Hummel

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“Hedgy Hedgehog, you come back here this minute,” Mama Hedgehog hollered out the door after her youngest son, Hedgy. “You too, Sally.”

Hedgy Hedgehog and Sally A. Wolf were on their way to school.

“But Mama, we’ll be late!” Hedgy called back.

“Well, you just be careful. Go straight to school and do not go near the Big Woods. Do not set one toe in the Big Woods. Don’t even talk to anyone who has been in the Big Woods.”

“Yes, Mama,” sighed Hedgy.

“Yes, Mrs. Hedgehog,” Sally said.

Hedgy’s mom said that to them every morning. If they hadn’t been in such a hurry she would have also told them again to watch out for trolls. Everyone who lived in the Meadow feared and disliked the trolls in the Big Woods. Trolls were awful creatures who told bad jokes and then made everyone laugh at them. They picked on everyone littler than they were and they lived in dark smelly caves--in the Big Woods.

Hedgy and Sally were best friends. They had been since they met. No one could understand why. Hedgy, being a hedgehog, was slow to talk. He thought things through very carefully. Sally was a wolf. She hardly stopped to think about anything. She liked to run and jump and have fun. But Hedgy and Sally were best friends, always had been, always would be.

“Come on,” yelled Sally as she ran around the bend. “We’re late for school. We better hurry.”

“Wait, Sally, that’s not the way. That path goes right by the Big Woods! We can’t go that way.”

“We have to,” Sally shouted over her shoulder. “This way is much shorter, and we’re late. Besides, it doesn’t go INTO the



Big Woods, just along side it.”

“But Sally....” Hedgy tried to reason with her.

“Last one to school is a rotten egg!” Sally shouted as she ran as fast as she could.

“But Sally,” Hedgy said softly because he knew Sally was long gone, “You know I can’t keep up with you when you run.” He looked around nervously. He was on a path by the Big Woods. He didn’t like that one bit.

The Big Woods were dark and scary. There were thousands of trees growing too close together. They were covered with moss and slime. Hedgy gulped and decided to run as fast as his short, stout legs would carry him.

He thought he was going to make it to school. He knew that school was just around the next corner. But as he rounded the bend, he was suddenly surrounded by the pesky, annoying Niggle Naggles.

“We’re the Niggle Naggles, we like to play, we’ll make you feel bad, that’s our way.”

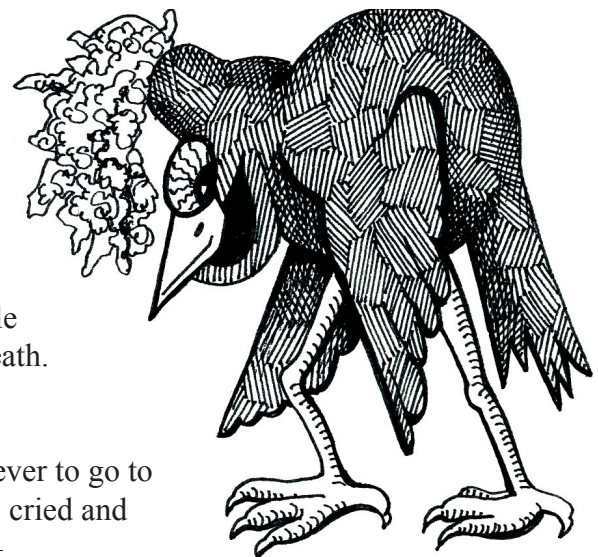


They cackled and chirped and started to dance around Hedgy picking, pecking and poking at his head and neck.

Hedgy did what his mother told him to do, he rolled into a tight ball. He had very sharp prickles on his back that usually made anybody think twice about hurting him. But the Niggle Naggles were not just anybody, they were mean and nasty. They just kept niggling and nagging at Hedgy until he couldn’t stand it anymore.

He unrolled himself and started to run as fast as his little legs could carry him. He thought he was running to the school where he would be safe, but he wasn’t. He had gotten turned around. So instead of running toward the school he ran right into the Big Woods. He ran and ran and ran until he was sure the Niggle Naggles were far behind him. Then he stopped to catch his breath. He looked slowly around.

“Oh no,” he gasped. “I’m in the Big Woods. Mama told me never to go to the Big Woods. What am I going to do?” He began to cry. He cried and



cried and cried until he cried himself to sleep.

As he slept, a wild-looking animal snuck in to take a closer look. He was a TROLL --those awful creatures his mother warned him about. The troll, who's name was Growl, had long stringy hair, huge eyes, floppy ears and three toes on each foot. He looked like all the other trolls but something about this troll was different. No matter how hard he tried to be mean and awful he just had to be nice and friendly. He couldn't help himself, he wanted everyone to like him. However, no one who lived in the Big Woods would give him a chance. They all knew he was a troll and trolls were bad news.

As this troll looked down at Hedgy, he had an idea. "I will make friends with this little fellow. He is not from the Big Woods, so maybe he will want to be my friend." He leaned over the sleeping Hedgy and asked, "Would you like to be my friend?"

But Hedgy just went on sleeping.

"I said," Growl said very loudly, "Would you like to be my friend."

But Hedgy just went on sleeping.

"Humph." said Growl, "I must wake him up so we can get started being friends." He took a giant leap and landed right in the middle of Hedgy.

Hedgy woke right up. "Hey! You sat on me!"

"I am sorry," said the troll. "I didn't mean to. Let me introduce myself. My name is Growl, I was just trying to wake you up so we could be friends."

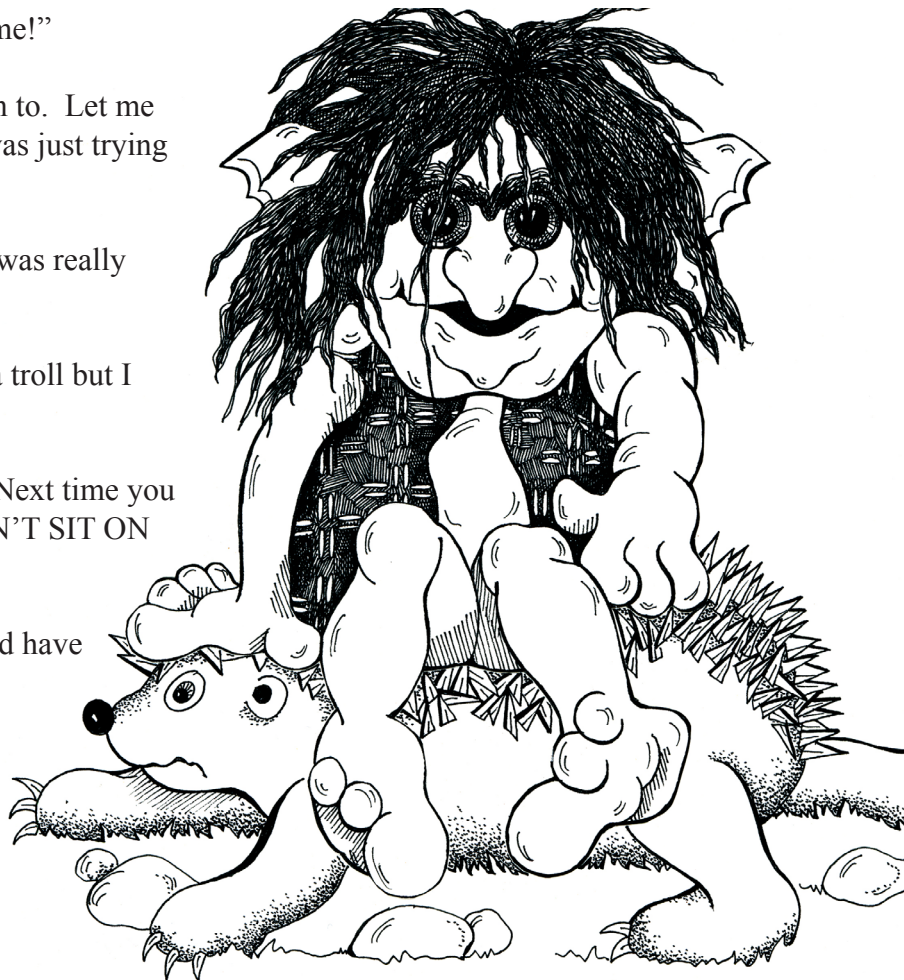
"Growl? Oh no! You are a troll!" Hedgy was really afraid.

"Please don't be scared of me. I may be a troll but I truly want to be friends." Growl pleaded.

"Well Growl, may I make a suggestion? Next time you want to make friends with someone--DON'T SIT ON THEM!"

"I will remember that. I am just a troll and have much to learn," said Growl.

"But I thought trolls were mean. Why do you want to be my friend?"



“I am different from the other trolls. I want friends. Please, can we be friends?”

“Yes, I think we can. I need a friend.” said Hedgy. “Now, friend, could you tell me the way out of the Big Woods.”

Growl hung his head. “I wish I could,” he sighed. “But I have never been out of the Big Woods. I’m as afraid of being out of the Big Woods as you are of being in them. I am very sorry.”

“Not to worry,” said Hedgy, “I know I will find the way. But I better get started.” He looked left and right and straight ahead. “I think I will go north. Maybe that is the way home. Good bye, Growl. It was nice to meet you, Friend.” And off he went, sure he was on his way home.

Growl watched his new friend go. “I should have gone with him. He called me “Friend!” When will I ever get another friend?”

“Hedgy? Hedgy?” It was a girl’s voice, coming nearer and nearer.

“Wait a minute! I think I am about to get another chance at a friend,” said Growl.

“Hedgy?” said Sally. She was running toward Growl. “Oh hi there, my name is Sally, have you seen a lost hedgehog? He is my good friend. I ran off and left him and I just bet he got lost in here!” Sally was frantically pacing left and right, not paying much attention to anything or anyone around her.

“Excuse me. I have seen a hedgehog,” said Growl.

“Really? Where? I have to find him. We are really late for school!” Sally said as she turned and glanced at Growl for the first time. “Hey, you should be careful. You do know there are trolls in here, don’t you?”

“Yes, I know all about trolls.”

“Did you know they have great big eyes?” Sally asked while she looked down the path.

“Yes, I did know that,” Growl said nervously.

“And huge floppy ears?”

Growl nodded.

“And big feet with three toes on each foot?”

“Yes I did know that,” Growl said.

Finally Sally turned and took a close look at Growl.

“Hey, did you know you have big eyes?” Grawl nodded.

“And huge ears?” Grawl nodded.

“And, uh oh, big feet, with um, three toes on each foot?”

“Yes, I did.” Said Grawl, “But I am not your run-of-the-mill troll.”

Sally gulped loudly. “You are not?”

“No I am a good troll. I just want to be friends. Can’t we please be friends? Hedgy said he would be my friend. Please, friends?”

Sally looked Grawl up and down. “Well, OK, I guess. Any friend of Hedgy’s is a friend of mine. Now do you know where Hedgy is? Uh, Friend?”

“He headed north on that path.”

“Oh no! That will take him deeper into the Big Woods. It will take him to the center of things! Hey Troll, thanks for the information. I have to go find Hedgy. Bye! Bye! Bye!” Sally said as she ran after Hedgy.

Grawl sighed. “This making friends business is hard work. I think I will go take a short nap.”

Meanwhile, Hedgy was no longer sure he was on the right path.

“Oh dear, now I am really lost and alone,” he said to himself. “And my spines itch.”

His spines always itched when he became nervous. He looked around for something to scratch against.

“That lumpy tree over there will do fine,” he said as he ambled over to rub his back against one of the lumps.

“ACK!” shouted the lump as it stood up. “How dare you stick me with those prickly, pokey, painful spines? I am the Great and Glorious Giant Caterpillar, Natilly. No one sticks me like a pin cushion!”

“I am so sorry, I didn’t know. My name is Hedgy and I...” Hedgy started to explain, but Natilly interrupted.

“I do not speak to porcupines!” she said as she started to walk away.

“Porcupine! I am not a porcupine! I am a hedgehog--Hedgy Hedgehog.” Hedgy sputtered.

“You’re a hedgehog?” Natilly took a closer look. “So you are--the funniest looking hedgehog I have ever seen!” She began to laugh.

“Don’t laugh at me!” cried Hedgy.

But Natilly laughed and laughed. She laughed so hard, she fell over. Hedgy ran over to her and looked her right in the eye.

“I said don’t laugh at me! I don’t like it. How would you like it if everybody treated you like you are treating me?” Hedgy shouted.

“They do treat me like that. So I treat them the same way.” She said a little angrily.

“But do you like it?” Hedgy asked.

“No, I don’t. But what can I do about it?”

“You could try treating them the way you wish they would treat you. It really works,” Hedgy explained.

“Really? You mean, if I were nicer, the other creatures would treat me better?” Natilly couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “That’s too easy.”

“I know it works. If you are nice, it rubs off and others are nice to you. Come on, Natilly, let’s give it a try.” He cleared his throat and in his nicest voice he asked, “I am looking for my way out of the Big Woods. Can you please help me?”

“Why should I? You, you... Oh wait. I get it. That is not the way to make friends, is it? Let me try that again.” She said and cleared her throat. “Yes, I can help. I can give you a ride on my back. That way you will surely find the way out of the Big Woods.” Natilly helped Hedgy up onto her back. “You know, I could get used to this being nice stuff.”

Hedgy rode on Natilly’s back for quite a while. Finally he said, “Natilly, are we going in circles?”

“What on earth would make you think that?” Natilly asked.



“Well, I think we have passed that same tree about 12 times.”

“Why yes, we are,” she said sweetly. “I never get very far away from that tree; it is where I plan to build my cocoon.”

“Well, why did you tell me you could get me out of the Big Woods?” Hedgy asked in a confused voice.

“I was just hoping you would see a path you liked and hop off and be on your way,” Natilly said.

“Oh dear, then I better get off and get going then. I will never find my way home like this. Thank you for your help, Natilly,” Hedgy said as he slid off of Natilly’s back.

“Goodbye and good luck. I will practice being nice.” Natilly called after Hedgy as he headed north. “Oh, have a nice day!”

As Hedgy continued on his way, he realized that he was getting more and more lost. He didn’t know what to do. Then he saw a small cabin right beside the path.

“Hey, Hey, Hey, look at you. You look sad and alone. Could I possibly be of some help to you?” asked a sneaky Fox. It seemed to Hedgy that he appeared out of thin air.

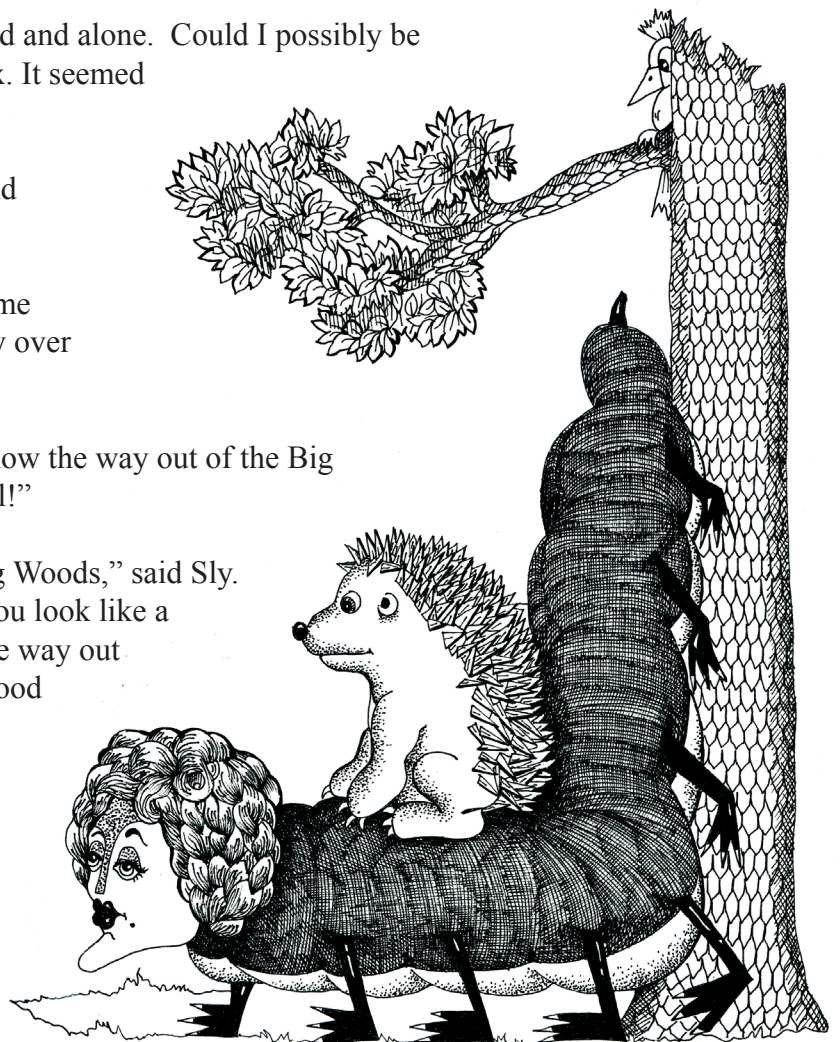
“Whoa!” Hedgy yelped. “Who are you and where did you come from?”

“I? Why I am Sly Fox. Where di you come from?” asked Sly Fox as he looked Hedgy over carefully.

“Um, Hello Sly,” said Hedgy. “Do you know the way out of the Big Woods? I am lost and I am late for school!”

“Indeed, I do know the way out of the Big Woods,” said Sly. “And I will gladly tell you, for a price. You look like a strong young hedgehog. I will tell you the way out of the Big Woods if you will move this wood pile to the other side of my cabin.”

Hedgy thought it was unfair to make him work like that but he wanted to go home. So he moved the wood. It took him a long time and he was very tired when he finally finished.



Then he asked Sly Fox again how to get out of the Big Woods.

“I will not tell you until you do one or two more jobs for me,” Sly said. “Now, sweep off my front step. When you are done, I may tell you the way home.”

“Sly, you are not being nice,” Hedgy said. “You shouldn’t push me around like this.”

“Hey, Hey, Hey,” said Sly as he leaned down and looked Hedgy right in the eye. “I don’t care. If you want the information, you will do the work.” And he went inside to rest while Hedgy worked.

Hedgy sighed and started to sweep the stairs. Then all of a sudden, he thought of something. “This guy is never going to help me. He is just using me to do his work. Well, I am better off if I try to find my own way out of the Big Woods!” He threw the broom down and started off again, still heading north.

When Sly came out to see how Hedgy was doing, he tripped over the broom handle and fell flat on his face. KERPLOP! He had been outfoxed by a very determined hedgehog.

Meanwhile, Hedgy had made it to the center of things. He was sad and alone. But there was a nice breeze. Or so he thought. Suddenly, the breeze turned into a wind, then the wind turned into a gale, then the gale grew greater and greater and even greater yet. Hedgy curled into a tight ball.

“You are a wimp. You are a nothing,” hissed the wind.

Hedgy curled himself into an even tighter ball.

“You are useless. Useless!” The wind howled.

“Stop it! Stop it!” Hedgy cried.

But the wind kept whistling his horrible insults until Hedgy wished he had never been born.

Just then he heard a voice. It was Sally, his friend.

“Hedgy Hedgehog,” she yelled over the noise of the wind. “I have



looked everywhere for you. How did you get here? This is the very center of things. Come on, let's get out of here and go home."

"Oh Sally, you don't know how glad I am to see you. Thank you for coming. I really need a friend," he shouted as the wind even tried to blow his voice away.

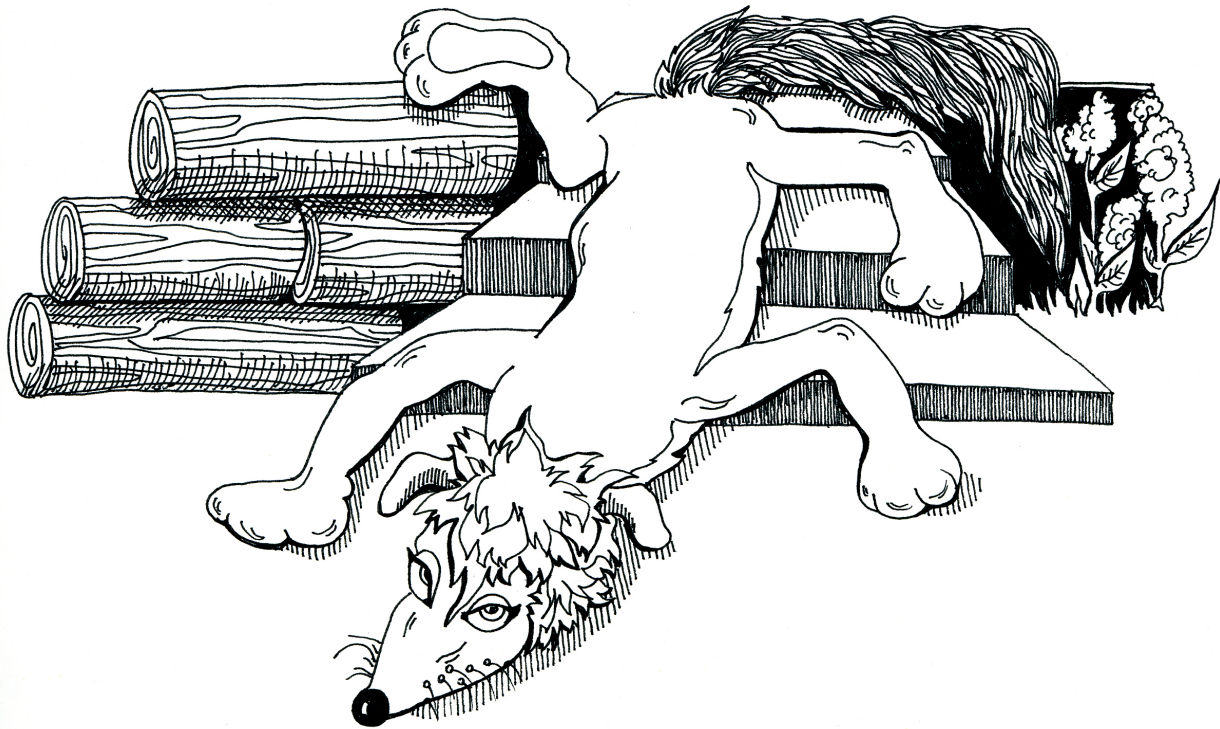
"You are friends with this nasty little nincompoop? I don't think so," teased the wind.

Sally swallowed. She was afraid of this bully wind. She didn't want it to pick on her too.

"Are you friends with this whimpering little weakling?" the wind shouted again.

Sally tried to be brave. She tried to say she was Hedgy's friend. But the wind was too fierce.

"Uh, no," said Sally. "I am not his friend. I am his, uh let me think. I am his...babysitter. Yeah,



that's it, I am just his babysitter. Come on little Hedgy, time to go home."

"Babysitter?" Hedgy roared. "Sally, what are you saying?"

"Be quiet, Hedgy. I don't want that wind to start picking on me too."

"But Sally, what about me?" Hedgy cried and rolled into a ball.

“For goodness sakes, Hedgy, let’s go home. Then we’ll be friends again.”

“No,” said Hedgy. “If we are not friends now, we are never going to be friends again. Go away.”

“Leave him,” the wind told her. “He is just a babbling cry baby.”

“You hear that, Hedgy? You’re a cry baby. Cry baby. Cry baby. Cry baby...” she teased. Then suddenly she stopped. “Hey, wait a minute, what have I done? Hedgy is not a cry baby. Hedgy is my friend. Oh no! Hedgy, can you ever forgive me? I was so afraid of that wind that I started to pick on you. Well, not any more. Hey, you big bellowing bag of wind, you go away. Get out of here! You are the who is nothing! You, you, you are just full of hateful, hot air”

The wind howled, “You are like him. You are a loser too! Both of you are losers. Both of you are nothings.”

“No, we aren’t.” said Sally, who couldn’t understand why the wind was being so mean. “Hedgy is my friend. You are the loser. Get out of here.”

“That’s right.” Hedgy hollered as he quickly uncurled from his ball. “Quit picking on us.”

“Don’t be babies!” Said the wind as it turned back into a breeze and blew away. “I was just joking...”

Sally and Hedgy stared at each other, Hedgy said, “Wow! Did you see that? You know, I couldn’t handle that bully by myself. But once you stood up with me, together we really show it, didn’t we?”

“Yes, I think it helps if we stick together” said Sally. “O.K. Hedgy, its time to go home. I know the way, so let’s get going.”

“But what about the Niggle Naggles, Sally, they’ll be waiting for me.”

“Don’t be silly Hedgy. The Niggle Naggles won’t bother you anymore--not after what you have been through today. Think about it.” Sally said as they started home.



“OK, well some people can look awful and maybe have different ideas than I do, but we can still be my friends, like Growl. But that won’t help with the Niggle Naggles. And some people just need to be told to stop acting mean and they will--like Natilly. But that won’t help with the Niggle Naggles. Oh, and then there is Sly Fox who is and always will someone who uses others. Sometimes it is just best to get away from them. But none of that will help me with the Niggle Naggles. They won’t listen to me. They won’t leave me alone.

“What about the wind?” asked Sally.

Well, with the wind, when you and I stuck together, he quit picking on us. “He did, didn’t he,” said Sally. “But that won’t help us with the Niggle Naggles. Oh, I get it--it’s like the wind--if we stick together, the Niggles Naggles won’t pick on us, right?”

“Bingo!” said Sally.

“But Sally, what if that doesn’t work? What if they pick on both of us? Then what?”

“Then,” said Sally, “We will find a grown-up to help. And if that grown-up can’t help us, we will keep looking until we find someone who can. Now come on, I want to go home. I am so hungry I could eat snail tails or frog brains. But I would rather have a cheeseburger with mushrooms. Come on!”

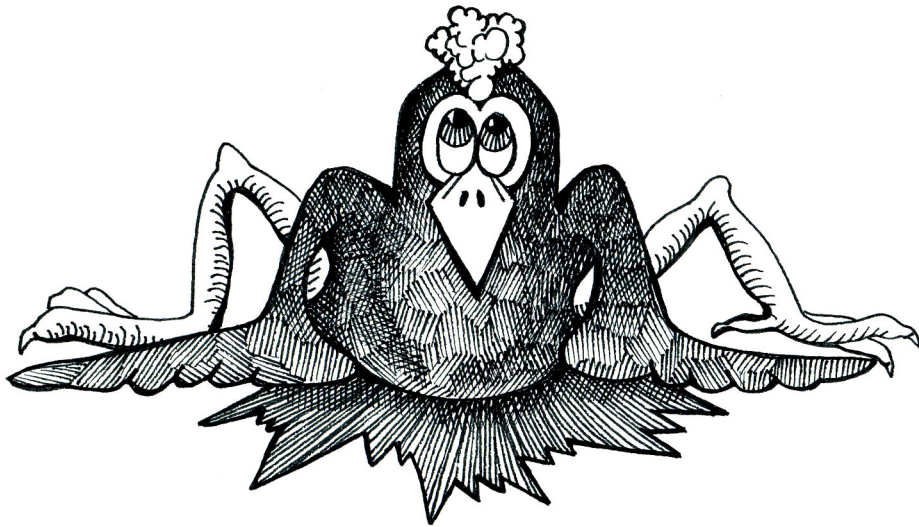
And the two friends left the Big Woods.

Sally really did know the way home.

In very short order, they were
back in the Meadow

Where they lived happily ever after.





THE END

