

DownUnder

The Yuckies



Rollo Foxes-Sox

DownUnder is an adventure story of insect life in a compost pile that is largely based on what is known about their behavior. Five children investigate this unique world with some important life lessons learned along the way.

DownUnder: The Yuckies

By Rollo Foxes-Sox

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Chapters

I - The Pile.....	13
II - The Mickle Muckle	19
III - The Crash.....	37
IV - The Mickle Pickle.....	42
V - Pandamania.....	49
VI - The Meltdown.....	57
VII - The Coup de Main.....	67
VIII - The Wheel of Life.....	100

I The Pile

A warm spring day beckoned the children outside. It had been a long cold winter full of skating and sleigh riding, snowball fights and the building of snowmen and snow forts. It was glorious to be under a deep blue sky and feel the warm sun again. The rain during the night left a soothing petrichor. They were on spring vacation and finally had some time to play together as cousins. Henrik and Richie wanted to build a fort while Andi, Emmy and Alex decided to climb some trees. Baba was busy preparing the vegetable garden while Gigi was cleaning up the breakfast plates. The seedlings, which were now almost four inches tall, had been planted weeks earlier by the children...and largely forgotten by them. Unnoticed, all sorts of plants were now waking up outside, and sleepy-eyed animals were stirring from their long slumber. The beehives bustled with a pleasant hum as foragers began to look for food. Between the fort construction and the tree climbing these things passed largely unseen, unheard, unknown.

The older girls caught sight of their grandfather digging in a large compost heap that they had helped create during the fall. It consisted of a disordered montage of leaves, rotting wood, kitchen parings, eggshells, manure, wood chips and dirt. Their curiosity overcame them to investigate.

“What are you doing, Baba?” asked Andi and Emmy.

“Oh, I am spreading this on the rows for the plants,” he said.

“Why are you doing that. It was such horrid stuff,” cried the girls. “It will make the tomatoes smell and taste terrible. The corn and beans will turn brown.”

Baba gave a hearty laugh. “You need not worry about that. It’ll actually make them smell and taste better, plus make more and bigger fruit. Take a close look at this stuff.”

By now Alex and the boys became curious. Something was not right. They wondered why the pile had shrunk since they had made it last fall. It also gave off a fine warm mist as Baba took out shovel after shovel to spread over the rows. Much of last year’s ingredients were not recognizable. They were very puzzled. They did not see any leaves, wood chips, egg shells or orange, banana or apple peels, and the odor of manure was gone. In fact, it looked like just plain dirt.

“It’s not the pile we made, definitely not,” Henrik blurted out.

“Someone must have taken it,” stated Richie.

The girls looked at each other puzzled. “Are you fooling us, Baba?”

Baba stopped his shoveling, knelt down beside them and said, “It’s Mother Nature’s wonder works. It’s black gold.” Now this comment made the children laugh and look at one another. They did not see any gold and since when was gold black? What was going on here? Was this another one of grandfather’s silly jokes?

Emmy and Andi pow-wowed. How could they solve this mystery? While they thought about the problem, Gigi rang the lunch bell. So, off they ran to peanut butter and jelly with a side dish of primo pasta. Between fort-building banter and bonobo climbing antics the table conversation often

turned to the pile in the garden. Richie wanted to dig into it as he had a favorite red shovel that he liked to exercise. And Henrik said he would help with his equally favorite yellow rake to help sort things out. Together, they were sure they could find the treasure of black gold.

But afternoon time was set aside for some homework assignments. The boys were working on numbers and letters while the girls focused on reading and science. Today the science work involved using a magnifying glass to look at a variety of familiar objects. The boys soon took notice of their experiment, especially because anything other than letters and numbers was a wonderful alternative. All five took turns peering carefully at house dust, the cat's fur and the seedlings that were growing.

"Hmmm, look at that dead bug, skin and booger in the dust ball," Andi observed. "It's so yucky." All agreed, but the boys wondered about the booger. No one noticed the parade of ants marching toward the garden.

Emmy checked out Soxie's hair. A well-mannered tuxedo cat, she patiently put up with such a detailed inspection. Actually, she loved the attention and purred softly. "I see some dirt and dust here. I thought cats were very clean since they are always licking themselves. And, oh my gosh, a tick! That's disgusting! Let's remove it."

"Who's going to do that?" asked Alex.

A chorus of "not me" echoed from the five. They turned to Baba for help. And one, two, three he picked out the tick and dispatched it down a drain. A general sigh of relief was heard. Soxie was very pleased and returned to her purring and preening.

Now Alex commandeered the magnifier and checked one of the young plants.

“It has hair on its stem and little veins in its leaves,” she said. The others gathered around to see the interesting findings. They asked grandfather if that was normal, and he reassured them that it was very healthy indeed. The children felt that a new world had been opened to them through the looking glass. However, no one saw the tiny mite busily digging in the soil around the plant.

Later that afternoon the children played soccer, hide-and-seek and took a hike in the woods. It was all good fun and niggled their appetites for a scrumptious meal.

“What’s for supper?” asked Henrik, his nose following Gigi who pointed to the feast. “Oh yummy” he cried. “Spasgetti and meataballs, my favorite.” It was topped off with delicious tomato sauce made by their nonna from last year’s garden.

Afterwards story time followed with a nice evening walk under a starlit sky and to a peeper and cricket opera in full swing. Bedtime was welcome after such a busy fun-filled day. Chatter among the five cousins was short but centered on the next day’s adventures. Emmy’s mind wandered to the pile. She wondered whether a closer examination would be useful to better find out what was going on in it. Would the magnifying glass possibly help? Her eyelids closed before she could make a plan.

Now the next day began with the usual chorus of songbirds at sunrise. All got up, dressed in play clothes and proceeded to wake up their grandparents.

“Come on Baba and Gigi. It’s time to wakey wakey, uppey uppey”.

Emmy consulted Andi about her idea. They asked for the magnifying glass.

Henrik and Richie found their tools, and all five were off to the pile. The boys attacked the hill with vigor.

“Slow down so we can see what’s going on,” said the girls. Henrik raked out a small section that Richie had excavated. It had that earthy smell of undisturbed material topped with the morning dew. No peels, parings, rinds or other articles that had been thrown into the pile months ago could be seen. All very odd, indeed, they thought.

“Well, very strange, maybe someone or thing came and took out those things,” they wondered.

Undaunted, Emmy began combing the material using the looking glass. She asked the boys to carefully remove the top layer of the pile. With a gasp, the following view soon jumped out:



The magnifying glass viewing compost life

“Wow, check this out,” yelled Emmy. Everyone tried to squish into the field of the looking glass.

With one loud shriek they blurted “It’s the yuckies!”

“It’s an alien invasion,” exclaimed Andi and Alex.

“Let’s blow the critters up before they attack us,” screamed Richie raising his shovel.

“I’ll finish them off,” replied Henrik, carefully shouldering his rake.

Nearby, grandfather chuckled, listening to the chatter, but nobody paid attention. Instead, they argued about the findings and what to do next.

“Maybe we should see why these bugs are here,” suggested Alex.

“Well, suppose they get onto us?” replied Andi.

“Hmmm, yes ... I’m afraid and don’t want to do anymore,” cried Alex.

As they discussed what to do, Emmy noticed that the bugs began to disappear into the pile. “Uh-oh, looks like they are trying to escape,” she shouted.

“They may crawl up your leg or get in your hair,” teased Andi.

Then, as one, all eyes turned to their grandfather who was now busy preparing the rows for planting.

“We have a very big problem here so can you help us Baba?” pleaded the children.

Grandfather came over, smiled with a comforting warmth, and making himself comfortable on the warm earth, asked what was the matter. Everyone began speaking at once until they all agreed on one issue.

“What’s going on in the pile with all these disgusting creeping things?” they chorused.

“Well, he said, that’s abit of a story so sit down and let me tell you about it.” And so, under a warm spring sun he recounted the tale of DownUnder.

III The Crash

“Clear the runway,” yelled Alfred. “Sounds like we have a pilot in trouble.”

In the distance could be heard the erratic sputter of buzzing wings. The landing strip had not been used for some time and heaps of discarded material had been carelessly thrown here and there. Worse still, twilight had begun and visual flight rules were difficult. And what was a bee doing out so late thought Alfred? Further, the buzzing beat sometimes fast, sometimes slow, sometimes not at all, indicating that there was serious problem.

“Call in the Wahwahtaysee stat,” he ordered.

Roland summoned Dudley who rallied his friends to quickly roll all the garbage off the runway which sat on the top of the pile. It took little time being such experts.



Dudley, creating a dung ball

At the same time a firefly squadron of Wahwahtaysee under Wauwatosa's command arrived. She ordered them to carefully line up along the airstrip and turn on their lanterns.



Wauwatosa directing her team to light the airstrip

In the distant twilight, a wobbly furry ball could be vaguely seen rapidly approaching, flying a zigzag pattern. Everyone was filled with foreboding

and thought a crash was going to happen. Several drones were sent out to guide the stricken bee to safety. The situation was grave as the bee's descent was too fast, and it looked like a graveyard spin was inevitable. The usually Herculean helicoptering of wings was failing fast. With a heroic last effort of BUZZ SPUZZ BUZZ SPUZZ SPUZZ SPUUTT and flaps down the distressed bee stalled, plopped onto the runway, bounced and rolled over several times stopping just short of a very large pile of dung balls. A loud gasp went up from the onlookers followed by a horrid stillness. Then suddenly, the fuzz ball jiggled and squiggled.

"Well, that was a fine how do you do," sighed Buster dusting himself off. "What a mess, I nearly didn't make it. It was my fault. I overdid it with my nectar cargo and too much mac and cheese for lunch, which gave me the collywobbles. Thanks everyone. Those fireflies saved my fuzzy-wuzzy."

Jezebel was the first to give him a very big hug with a bussy thrown in from which he blushed. "Ah my sweet, everything is tickety-boo," he smickered and with a bow he waddled off to deliver his cargo of sweets to everyone's delight.

The humble unflappable bumblebee was well loved by all since he brought dessert every day, treated everyone with kindness, and helped the security force when needed. He was many times the size of his friends. So big in fact, that he never needed to use his stinger; his size alone was enough to calm the most feisty of individuals. His only nightmare was the infamous murder hornet, which thankfully had not been seen for a very long time. On the other hand, he helped keep harmful members of the bee family away from marauding the pile. He was a natural entertainer being a jolly storyteller and jokester.

“Who is the smartest bee?” was a favorite of his. When no one got the answer, he would snicker and say, “why the spelling bee!”



Buster, the beloved bumblebee

He met his beefriend one day while patrolling the top of the pile. She caught his eye because she was so different than other bees. She enjoyed listening to his adventure stories and found time to accompany him on his forays. They often had lunch over some kitchen morsel thrown on the pile the evening before. Their favorite was pineapple and corn husks-so sweet and juicy. Jezebel was a cuckoo bee, because she had other bees care for her babies. In Buster’s eyes she was so beautiful, being a neon domino color. He would stand motionless many minutes gazing into her iridescent eyes. He imagined her to be worth 7 Helens. Aiming to be a high society bee, she wore the latest fashions, attended the evening opera and went

to a variety of balls around the area. She could out waggle and zaggle all the other bees. And despite many suitors she found Buster irresistible because he was reliable, cuddly and most of all, very patient with her quirky dalliances. For instance, one day when Buster had invited her out for dinner and dancing she never arrived because she had her antennae done at the salon, went shopping for a suitable gown, then realized her shoes did not match, and to top it off became locked in the changing room. But she affectionately provided a taradiddle for her twiddle.

“Oh, you are so gracious, Buster. It took me longer than I thought to find the right outfit,” she sighed while she fluttered her long eyelashes and twirled her beautiful antennae.

Buster knowingly understood these matters and forgave her many times over. Together they shared many a hygge and special bond. He made sure she was safe and secure, and she assured his comfort and care.



Jezebel, Buster's beau

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