

“Sol, up and at em’. You’ve got to do your chores before the bus comes,” I hear mama holler from the kitchen. I pull the bed covers tighter around me. I need just a few more moments to gather my courage before starting my big day. Today I’m starting the 5th grade. This is momentous. Ginormous. I’m a little scared. Today, I’m beaming aboard the school bus to zip to my new school on planet Unis. I’ve never even ever left Guernsey and today I’m rocketing to Unis!

You should know, us kids on Guernsey are known as the hicks of the galaxy. We’re way out beyond the asteroid fields. I bet most folks couldn’t find us on a map of the galaxy if their life depended on it. We don’t see many outsiders and daddy says there’s no reason to go anywhere ‘cause we have everything we need right here on Guernsey. Except schools, I guess.

Our family, including daddy’s relations from way back, have raised cattle on our 93,000 acre patch on Guernsey for a quarter of a millennium. Daddy likes to say, “Sol, if it weren’t for Guernsey, none of the yahoos in the galaxy’d have any burgers.” I know that’s true. Everybody likes a good burger. Everyone knows that cattle from Guernsey produce the best milk, cream and beef.

“Sol! Your chores aren’t going to do themselves,” mama shouts. I hop out of bed. My job is to tend to the calf embryos.

The path to the calf embryo barn isn’t within the gravity shield, so after I pull on my new blue and white Unis school jersey and leggings, I slip my feet into mama’s hand-me-down boots which keep me grounded. I’ve got the bruises to show what happens when I forget to wear mama’s boots. Last time, I whacked my elbow on the incubator, but good. Luckily I’m getting bigger. Once I’m a hundred pounds, I won’t need the boots no more. When I was seven, mama had to zap my head when I hit it on the auger in the barn ceiling. It was a bloody mess!

I love taking care of the calf embryos. My job is to measure the manna (it’s chock full good stuff for babies) into the nutrient mixer. I watch it carefully as the milky green sludgy stuff is pumped into the fetuses through the connecting umbilical tubes. Mama is a stickler. The amount of manna for each calf embryo better be right, or I’ll hear about it. I check each fetus’s density monitor. Then, I’m especially careful when I feed the density numbers into the nutrient mixer. I watch to make sure the manna mixes and flows through the umbilical tubes.

Mama put me in charge of the babies that are in their last 45 days of gestation. (By the way, I know a lot of big words like *gestation*, *insemination* and *incubation*, so if you have a question, just ask me.) In a way, I’m the mama to 23 baby calves. I always name them. But, I don’t get attached even though they have the biggest brown eyes you’ll ever see. It’s funny, once they’re done incubating and daddy moves them from the pens to the pastures, I can’t hardly tell one from another. Bessie’s the oldest of the bunch. I always talk to her and tell her she’s a pretty girl. She blinks her big brown eyes at me through that waxy slime and I think she’s saying, “GET ME OUT OF HERE!”

“Daddy, Bessie’s ready to pop tonight, I think,” I tell him as I kick off my gravity boots and sit down to breakfast. Mama gives me a blue and white pancake in the shape of an “U”, for Unis I guess. I don’t

think it looks too appetizing, but say “Thanks, Mama,” anyway. “Daddy, can I help move Bessie out?” I ask.

Daddy says, “Mmmm.” There’s no interrupting him when he’s watching the screen on his cap visor. “Looks like the market for methane is up again today,” he says. “I look like a friggin’ genius for hooking up with Nature’s Gas.”

“We look like friggin’ geniuses,” mama says, as she refills daddy’s coffee cup.

I remembered when I was just a little kid – about the time when I hit my head on the auger – and mama and daddy sitting at the breakfast table, talking about buying methane vacuums. The first generation had come out in 3447, but the methane storage unit needed more height for Nature’s Gas collector drones. The Methane Vacuum Tall2 came into the Guernsey implement shop in 3451. Daddy was the first on Guernsey to buy in. Heck! I bet I’d be the only kid at Unis Public School whose family had purchased enough Tall2s to cover 5,200 acres.

Of course some old-timers on Guernsey didn’t much like the Tall2s peppered across a landscape that hadn’t changed for a millennium. They were used to seeing vistas of cows lowing in meadows of green grass. Some business folks said the Tall2s would keep tourists from coming to Guernsey. That’s a laugh. I’ve never heard of a tourist in our territory. Mama and Daddy say that by the time I graduate high school they’ll have enough money from the sale of methane gas that I can go to any university in the galaxy. I already know a lot of big words and I’m a hard worker.

In 4th grade we studied cow farts and methane. Of course, my teacher didn’t talk about “farts”, she said we were studying ozone layers and methane gas produced by cows. It’s ancient history, but that’s why Guernsey was established in the first place. Guernsey has the thickest ozone layer of any inhabitable planet – more than 300 miles of ozone -- so it became the planet for beef production: And cow farts! Now, Guernsey is going to be known throughout the galaxy for the sale of methane gas to help warm houses of yahoos. Ha! If they only knew that cow farts are keeping them from freezing.

Daddy beamed me up into the Tall2 three half days ago. I thought the methane pipes might blind me, even though I was wearing goggles. The pipes were friggin’ bright! I hope Nature’s Gas knows what it’s doing, because the Tall2 is a work of complexity and confusion. It makes a person feel downright small standing under the pipes with whooshings, blinkings and pingings coming from all directions.

Daddy beamed me to the roof of Tall2. It was quiet and peaceful. I could see clear to the Otium Mountains and even spotted the campground where we pitched our tent last solstice. It was fun hovering just above the tent floor in my sleeping bag, but the way I tossed and turned, I kept bumping into everyone so Mama put rocks in the bottom of my bag. But that’s another story.

Speaking of stories... we had an adventure about 9 full-days ago. We’d released Clarice from the pens to the pasture and danged if she didn’t amble straight to one of the Tall2s. I think she thought the legs would make good back scratchers. She was rubbing up against one of the legs and next thing our sweet Clarice knew she was beamed up into the workings of the Tall2! You’ve heard the saying about a “bull in a china cabinet?” Well, Clarice ain’t no bull, but she went plumb crazy. It took some doing to get her beamed back down to the ground. Daddy’s negotiating with Nature’s Gas about the damages. Clearly, they’ve got a glitch in their giddy-up.

Mama looked at the distance screen and said, "Finish up, Sol. The bus is here."

"I'll be back at half-day," I say. I tap daddy's cap and he looks up and says, "You'll do great, Sol. Have a good day."

I hop on the beamer and think, "Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to school I go."