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My Life in the Stockyards

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Enter K with hamburger.

All my life I've been near the beef. Ushering the cows in. Shipping them out, nicely trimmed in sanitary, consumer ready packages. It's what I do. And what I am. A beef man.

But I'm well past my prime. We've all got expiration dates and mine is now. I don't mind. I'm ready. But still I'm afraid. And full of wonder. What's waiting for me out there? Nothing? Or will I meet the many cows I've killed? Will I have to answer for their deaths? Or will I be greeted by legions of grateful souls, fed happily on beef for many lifetimes?

I guess I have to die by the same code I've lived by: Beef is bounty.

That's why I brought this hamburger to my deathbed. I want it with me on my journey.

So, goodbye earth. Goodbye flowers and coffee and baseball. Sweet life is draining away. It's getting dark, too dark to see. I sink into that darkness willing to accept whatever. No, wait. Not whatever. Well, OK. Whatever.

But what's this? A tunnel of pure light is opening up to me from the darkness. Even my burger is glowing. I float up toward the top of the tunnel. Someone is waiting for me there. He seems kind. Loving. Like a dad is supposed to be. But who is he? So far he's just a silhouette. Finally I reach the top. Now I see.

"Is it you, Is it really, really you?"

"Yes, it's me, Kestutis. It's Upton Sinclair. I wrote *The Jungle*." "I know who you are. I'm just surprised. I mean you're a socialist. But we're in heaven. I don't understand."

"That's alright. There may be a lot of things you don't understand. Yet."

"I never really read your book, *The Jungle*. I started it a couple of times..."

"That's all right, son. You know my book very well, without having to read. And you know what and who it's about. It's about your home and your people.

"You mean the Lithuanians?"

"I mean the cows. The ones you butchered."

"But how are they my people? How are they people at all?"

"How not? They fed you. They fed your kin and all your kind. They once fed all of Bridgeport. And beyond. They gave you life. You took their life into you and so became one with them. And its to them you must return."

"Return?"

"Return."

And so I do, descending down through the light years and back to earth. Back to the herd. And deep in the herd, I see my cousins, Algimantas and Aras. I see my sister Indre and my brother Arunas. My mother Laima is here too. I see my father Gytis. Even as a bull he looks a little tipsy. His father is here, too. And his father's father's father. We are all cattle but we don't see it that way. To us, we're just us. Cattle, yes, but human too. One big herd. Willing to die in order to sustain life.

We march over the range and into cattle cars. The cattle cars rumble through the prairie. Our long low moos echo through the night. At dawn the car doors open and the stink of manure wafts in. We hear voices. Familiar voices are shouting at us in a language we understand. Luga. That's what the Irish boss men call Lithuanians. It's supposed to be a slur. But the Lithuanians know who they are. Lietuviai. From Lietuva. The Lugans poke and prod our cattle clan into pens. New gates open and we walk up ramps and into the slaughterhouse. Off come our heads and our blood rains onto the south side mud and runs into Bubbly Creek. Big beef men hang us onto hooks. We are skinned. Expert Lithuanian butchers carve us into consumable portions. Prime cuts, sub-prime cuts and scraps. We are wrapped and packaged.

It's grisly. Maybe a little contamination seeps in here and there. But what's a few poisonings compared to the nourishment of the multitudes that live in Back of the Yards and Bridgeport and Canaryville. Many of them are the same Lugans that led us through the stockyards to our slaughter. They take all they can and they eat all they take. They have wives and babies to feed. And they're all hungry. They need my meat. To be strong. To work. So they can save. Big beefy butchers and big beefy foremen. Shit shovelers. Carcass carriers.

Bank that cash. Save those pennies. Get it done. Bring up those kids and take them far away from here. To Brighton Park. To Marquette Park. Where sons and daughters of butchers and beef haulers become insurance salesmen, merchants, even teachers. Soon come engineers and doctors and then it's out from Marquette Park and on into greener pastures. Lemont. Palos. Our herd is fat and happy. Our kids can do and be what they want. Artists, actors, entrepreneurs. Ski bums and surfers. Druggies and beatniks. Vegetarians, even. Rich enough, wise enough to they can lay off the beef. It doesn't matter. Beef blood is flowing through their veins. And they will never leave the herd.

Our dead rejoin the herd and our babies come out from it. We walk into the future on the hooves of cattle. To new lands. Lands where we might be left alone. To raise our cattle and 60 kids. Each carrying the other's life through eternity. Horns on our heads and in our hearts.

Now I know where dead Lugans go. It's good being a cow. No bull. Sure there's a few rough moments. But that's no different from life on two legs, is it?

It's all one.

I'll follow the sun.