

# An Athabasca Story

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One winter day Elder Brother was walking in the forest, walking cold and hungry and alone as usual, looking for a place to warm himself. His stomach was like the shrunken dried crop of a partridge. It rattled around inside him as he walked, and with each step he took the sound made him shiver even more.

Where will I find a place to warm myself? he wondered. Surely some relations will welcome me into their home, let me sit by the fire.

But he walked for a very long time and saw none of his relations. Eventually he traveled so far west that he didn't know the land anymore, and even the animals wouldn't dare to help him because they knew how hungry he was. They kept a safe distance. So he shivered and rattled his way further and further, without anything to guide him except the lengthening shadows and his unerring radar for trouble.

When he was nearly at the point of slumping down in a snowbank and giving up, Elder Brother thought he smelled something. It was smoke, almost certainly, though a kind of smoke he'd never encountered before. And though it was not a pleasant odour at all, not like the aromatic pine-fire he had been imagining, he knew that it meant warmth. So he quickened his frail pace and followed the scent, over one hill and then another and yet another. And eventually he came to the top of one more hill and he looked down across an empty valley and saw the source of the smoke.

A huge plume billowed from a gigantic house far in the distance, and between himself and the house there was a vast expanse of empty land. Empty of trees, of muskeg, of birds and animals. He had never seen anything like it. The only things moving on that vacant landscape were enormous yellow contraptions that clawed and bored and bit the dark earth and then hauled it away toward the big house. And the smell! It was worse than his most sulfurous farts, the ones he got when he ate moose guts and antlers. It was like being trapped in a bag with something dead.

Elder Brother knew he should turn away and get out of that smell as soon as he could. But that would mean spending the night by himself, freezing and chattering and rattling, and he couldn't bring himself to do it. There was warmth up there in the big house, he could see it floating away on the breeze. In places he could even see the heat rising in fine wiggly lines from the newly naked earth itself. So despite the smell he stepped forward and made his way out into that strange expanse.

The house was further away than it had seemed. He walked and walked across the empty space, stepping over dark half-frozen puddles, holding his nose, following the tracks of the great yellow beasts. He attempted to stay far away from the beasts themselves because they didn't look the least bit hospitable. But by the time he got halfway across the open land, he strayed close enough to these creatures that he could see each of them giving off its own smaller stream of smoke. And as he stood there studying them, he realized something else: there were people inside.

Maybe they were houses, he thought. Warm, comfortable houses that by some magic were also capable of digging and hauling the earth. Certainly they were big enough to be houses. He got closer and watched again as one of them rumbled past, shaking the ground at his feet. The man inside was bare-armed, as if it was summer. And he was chewing on something.

Of course Elder Brother was scared by the noise and the smell and the shuddering earth. But his hunger and his shivering were stronger. When the next gigantic thing came rumbling down the track he bounded out in front of it and stood there, waving his right hand desperately while his left hand remained clamped on his nose.

The thing squealed and snorted and eventually came to a stop just before it touched him. A man immediately leaned out from a window near the top of it and shouted, Who in hell are you? Where's your machine?

Oh my brother, my dear relation, Elder Brother said. I'm very cold and hungry and I was hoping... to come and visit you in your house.

The man didn't say anything for quite a while. He scanned the blank horizon, as if looking for something. Finally he leaned further out the window and yelled, You're saying you're not with the company?

Uh, company....

Are you Greenpeace?

I'm cold, Elder Brother said.

The man took off his strange yellow hat and gazed into it for a moment, placing one hand over his forehead as if to keep something from bursting out.

Well you'll be a lot worse than cold, the man said, if you don't get the hell out of my way and off this goddamn property.

Well, *that* was rude, Elder Brother thought, but he tried not to betray his disappointment. This man talked as if he had no relations at all.

Okay, he said to the man. I won't come visit you right now, but could I please ride along on the top of your house? I want to go to the big house over there, where I'm sure they'll let me come in and get warm.

The man laughed a little, and glanced up at the sky for a moment.

I don't know what you're on, buddy, the man said. But you need to snap out of it right this goddamn minute. Cause if you don't step aside I'm gonna call Security, see, and they're gonna come out here and throw your ass in the slammer with all those other yahoos from last month and the month before. I should've called them already. But on the other hand, I could save a little time if we just had a bit of an accident here. Nobody'd ever know it happened.

The man's house made a roaring sound that made Elder Brother step back.

Oh, there's no need for that! Elder Brother said. Don't worry, I'll move aside. But before I go, I just want to know one thing: what are you doing with all that earth?

We're burning it, the man said.

Burning. But earth doesn't—

This stuff does, the man interjected. You really are a moron, aren't you? It's very special dirt, this stuff. We dig it up and take it over to the big house, as you call it, and we mix it around in there and after a while it's ready to burn. Fuel to heat your house, if you have one which I doubt. Gas to power your car. Diesel to move this big rig here. All of it comes right out of the ground. You can tell that by the smell of the air around here. Just like na-palm in the morning!

The man took a deep breath through his nostrils and then laughed, but his face turned sour when he saw that Elder Brother didn't understand.

Yeah, we got real big plans for this place, the man said. There's more of this special dirt here than anywhere else in the world. Everybody wants it, and we're happy to sell it to them of course. And all those people around the world are going to help us burn this very dirt that you see here, from under your feet all the way to the far horizon. We're gonna burn it, and burn it, and burn it, until we make so much heat that the winter never comes back! And then even you and the rest of your sorry kind won't be cold anymore. So how do you like that?

When will that be? Elder Brother asked, rubbing his hands together.

Fifty or sixty years. Maybe forty.

Oh. Not to complain, but I was hoping for something a little—

Elder Brother was interrupted by an explosion of noise from the front of the big yellow house-thing, and it lurched toward him with surprising speed. He was barely able to leap out of the way before it rolled right over his footprints.

Now get off this land! the man yelled as his house roared away. It doesn't belong to you. Go back to the bush or wherever it was you crawled out from. I'm calling Security right now!

Elder Brother stood there for a while and watched the house labouring over the hillocks and through the black puddles in its way. He was more than a little scared of this mysterious Security that would soon be coming after him, but he was also angry. How could this man tell him that the land wasn't his? How could this "company" keep all the magical dirt for itself? If there was so much of it, Elder Brother reasoned, there should be plenty to share with visitors.

Though he knew he should probably be running for his life, Elder Brother found himself unwilling to move. He was held there by an idea: if these people wouldn't give him any of this magical dirt, maybe he should take some for himself. Yes, what a fabulous plan! Since the man and his company were so rude, they deserved to have their precious dirt stolen. And the best part was that if Elder Brother gathered enough of this magic dirt for himself, he could burn it for years and keep warm until the winter was gone for good.

So instead of fleeing the empty land, Elder Brother began walking toward the place in the centre where the largest of the yellow contraptions were tearing away at the earth. The snow had all been cleared away there, and he could see how black this magical dirt really was. He watched the beasts moving this way and that, and he waited for his opportunity. Finally he saw an opening, and he darted between a couple of the great mobile houses toward a spot where the ground had recently been opened. It looked softer there, and warmer too. Yes, this was the place. He lifted his right hand and thrust it as hard as he could, right down into the soil, up to his elbow.

Ayah! a voice said. What are you doing, Elder Brother?

Sssshhhhhhhh, he answered. I'm taking what's mine.

And he reached deeper and deeper into the ground, spreading his fingers as wide as he could in order to hold the largest armload of dirt. A year's supply in one hand, he imagined! He reached so far that his cheek rested against the redolent earth itself. He nearly gagged at the smell but he didn't loosen his grip. He could already feel the warmth coming out of the soil and it made him a little stronger.

Elder Brother, you're hurting me! the voice cried out.

Not nearly so much as they are, he said, and with that he began reaching in with his other arm, tunneling in with his fingers, opening his arms wide in a desperate embrace. His nose was raw with the fumes, and particles of grit were getting in his mouth. He was about to heave the huge armload of dirt out right then and begin his run for the bush, but one thought stopped him. What if it wasn't enough? What if he ran out and then the winter came back?

So without another hesitation he kicked off his moccasin and began tunneling in with the toes of his right foot. He clasped and clawed until he was more than thigh-deep in the earth, and then he tilted his toes upward to hold as much as he could. Then quickly he kicked off his other moccasin and tunneled with that foot, squirming and worming until that leg too was embedded in the earth. Ass-deep and shoulder-deep in the magical soil! Surely this would be enough to last him for decades, until the winter had been vanquished for good.

You are a genius, Elder Brother, he said to himself. You deserve all the warmth you're going to get.

But when Elder Brother tried to lean back and lift the great clump of dirt out of its place, he discovered that he had no leverage. He pulled and pulled at the soil, flexing his arms and his legs all at once, but nothing moved. The only thing that happened was his limbs seemed to sink a little deeper into the ground. He grunted and panted, flexed again, shimmied his buttocks for extra oomph. However it didn't make a bit of difference.

Well, he thought, I guess I should just take a little less of this stuff, maybe make two trips. I'll just wiggle my legs out of these holes and settle for a nice big armload of magic dirt.

I imagine you can guess how that worked out. Right. It didn't. Elder Brother was stuck fast in that Athabasca tar. By this time he couldn't move a finger or a toe.

Instinctively he called out to the voice that had spoken to him earlier. Help me! I'm sorry I didn't listen to you. I'll leave now without taking anything at all.

But the voice didn't answer. And Elder Brother was stuck there in the ground all night, and all the next day and the following night. He howled to the voice, asking it for forgiveness. He yelled to any of his relations who might be in earshot. He even screamed to the men in the huge yellow creatures that, from their sound, seemed to be moving closer and closer to him. (Of course he couldn't see what was going on back there. All he could see was the clump of oily dirt that his nose was resting on.) If those men in the contraptions heard him, or saw him, they gave no sign of it.

Late in the afternoon of his second day of being stuck in the ground, the sound of the contraptions became much louder, and a dark shadow suddenly closed over Elder Brother. Then he was being lifted, along with his armload of dirt and a great deal more, and he felt himself falling with the thunderous sound of everything else falling around him. He cried out but he knew it was hopeless; no one would hear him over a cacophony like this. When he landed, the dirt closed over him. It pressed into his nostrils, his ears, his mouth, even into his clenched bum. The weight of it pushed down and down until he couldn't even move an eyelid. Soon the thing began to move, and it hauled him slowly across the wasteland, encased there in the tar as if he was a fossil. And eventually the truck reached the edge of the huge smoky refinery, where it dumped him and many tons of tar sand into the yawning hopper that was the beginning of the processing line. And inside the refinery he was made very warm indeed.

Of course Elder Brother can't die, luckily for him. Or perhaps not so luckily. He's still alive even now, after everything he's been through. It's true that people don't see him much anymore, but sometimes when you're driving your car and you press hard on the accelerator, you might hear a knocking, rattling sound down deep in the bowels of the machine. That's Elder Brother, trying to get your attention, begging you to let him out.