

## **The Angel of the Tar Sands**

Spring had most certainly, finally come. The morning drive to the plant from Fort McMurray was so dazzling with fresh green against the heavy spruce, the air so unearthly bright that it swallowed the smoke from the candy-striped chimneys as if it did not exist. Which is just lovely, the superintendent thought, cut out all the visible crud, shut up the environmentalists, and he went into his neat office (it had a river view with islands) humming, “Alberta blue, Alberta blue, the taste keeps” – but did not get his tan golfing jacket off before he was interrupted. Not by the radio-telephone, but by Tak the day operator on Number Two Bucket in person walking past the secretary without stopping.

“What the hell?” the superintendent said, quickly annoyed.

“I ain’t reporting this on no radio,” Tak’s imperturbable Japanese-Canadian face was tense, “if them reporters hear about this one they’re gunna – ”

“Did you scrape out another buffalo skeleton, for god’s sake?”

“No, it’s maybe a dinosaur this time, one of them real old – ”

But the superintendent, swearing, was already out the door yelling for Bertha who was always on stand-by now with her spade. If one of the

three nine-storey-high bucket-wheels stopped turning for an hour, the plant dropped capacity, but another archaeological leak could stop every bit of production for a month while bifocalled professors stuck their noses . . . the jeep leaped along the track beside the conveyor belt running a third empty, already he could see it, and in three minutes he had Bertha with her long-handled spade busy on the face of the fifty-foot cliff that Number Two had been gnawing out of the ground. A shape emerged, quickly.

“What the . . .” staring, the superintendent could not find his ritual words, “. . . is that?”

“When the bucket hit the corner of it,” Tak said, “I figured hey, that’s the bones of a – ”

“That’s not just bone, it’s . . . skin and . . . .” The superintendent could not say the word.

“Wings,” Bertha said it for him, digging her spade in with steady care. “That’s wings, like you’d expect on a angel.”

For that’s what it was, plain as day now, tucked tight into the oozing black cliff, an angel. Tak had seen only a corner of bones sheared clean but now that Bertha had it more uncovered they saw the manlike head through one folded-over pair of wings and the manlike legs, feet through another pair, very gaunt, the film of feathers and perhaps skin so thin and engrained with tarry sand that at first it was impossible to notice anything except the white bones inside them. The third pair of wings was pressed flat by the sand at a very awkward – it must have been most painful –

“The middle two,” Bertha said, trying to brush the sticky sand aside with her hand, carefully, “is what it flies with.”

“Wouldn’t it . . . he . . . fly with all six . . . six. . . .” The superintendent stopped, overwhelmed by the unscientific shape uncovered there so blatantly.

“You can look it up,” Bertha said with a sideways glance at his ignorance, “The Bible, Isaiah chapter six.”

But then she gagged too for the angel had moved. Not one of them was touching it, that was certain, but it had moved irrefutably. As they watched, stunned, the wings unfolded bottom and top, a head emerged, turned, and they saw the fierce hoary lineaments of an ancient man. His mouth all encrusted with tar pulled open and out came a sound. A long, throat-clearing streak of sound. They staggered back, fell; the superintendent found himself on his knees, staring up at the shape which wasn’t really very tall, it just

seemed immensely broad and overwhelming, the three sets of wings now sweeping back and forth as if loosening up in some seraphic exercise. The voice rumbled like thunder, steadily on.

“Well,” muttered Tak, “whatever it is, it sure ain’t talking Japanese.”

The superintendent suddenly saw himself as an altar boy, the angel suspended above him there and bits of words rose to his lips: “*Pax vobis . . . cem . . . cum*,” he ventured but the connections were lost in the years. “*Magnifi . . . cat . . . ave Mar . . .*”

The obsidian eyes of the angel glared directly at him and it roared something, dreadfully. Bertha laughed aloud.

“Forget the popish stuff,” she said. “It’s talking Hutterite, Hutterite German.”

“Wha. . . .” The superintendent had lost all his words; he was down to syllables only.

Bertha said, “I left the colony, years ago I. . . .” But then she was too busy listening. The angel kept on speaking, non-stop as if words had been plugged up inside it for eons, and its hands (it had only two of them, in the usual place at the ends of two arms) brushed double over its bucket-damaged shoulder and that appeared restored, whole just like the other, while it brushed the soil and tarry sand from its wings, flexing the middle ones again and again because they obviously had suffered much from their cramped position.

“Ber . . .” the superintendent said, “Ber. . . .” Finally he looked at Tak, pleading for a voice.

“What’s it saying,” Tak asked her, “Bertha, please? Bertha? What?”

She was listening with overwhelming intensity; there was nothing in this world but to hear. Tak touched her shoulder, shook her, but she did not notice. Suddenly the angel stopped speaking; it was studying her.

“I . . . I can’t. . . .” Bertha confessed to it at last, “I can understand every word you . . . every word, but I can’t say, I’ve forgotten. . . .”

In its silence the angel looked at her; slowly its expression changed. It might have been showing pity, though of course that is really difficult to tell with angels. Then it folded its wings over its feet, its upper wings over its face, and with an ineffable movement of its giant middle wings it rose, straight upward into the blue sky. They bent back staring after it, and in a moment it had vanished in light.

“O dear God,” Bertha murmured after a long time. “Our Elder always said they spoke Hutterite in heaven.”

They three contemplated each other and they saw in each other’s eyes the dread, the abrupt tearing sensation of doubt. Had they seen . . . and as one they looked at the sad cliff still oozing tar, the spade leaning against it. Beside the hole where Bertha had dug: the shape of the angel, indelible. Bertha was the first to her feet.

“I quit,” she said. “Right this minute.”

“Of course, I understand.” The superintendent was on his feet. “Tak, run your bucket through there, get it going quick.”

“Okay,” Tak said heavily. “You’re the boss.”

“It doesn’t matter how fast you do it,” Bertha said to the superintendent but she was watching Tak trudge into the shadow of the giant wheel. “It was there, we all saw it.”

And at her words the superintendent had a vision. He saw like an opened book the immense curves of the Athabasca River swinging through wilderness down from the glacial pinnacles of the Rocky Mountains and across Alberta and joined by the Berland and the McLeod and the Pembina and the Pelican and the Christina and the Clearwater and the Firebag rivers, and all the surface of the earth was gone, the Tertiary and Lower Cretaceous layers of the strata had been ripped away and the thousands of square kilometers of black bituminous sand were exposed, laid open, slanting down into the molten centre of the earth, *O miserere, miserere*, the words sang in his head and he felt their meaning though he could not have explained them, much less remembered Psalm 51, and after a time he could open his eyes and lift his head. The huge oil plant, he knew every bolt and pipe, still sprawled between him and the river; the brilliant air still swallowed the smoke from all the red-striped chimneys as if it did not exist, and he knew that through a thousand secret openings the oil ran there, gurgling in each precisely numbered pipe and jointure, sweet and clear like golden brown honey.

Tak was beside the steel ladder, he about to start the long climb into the machine. Bertha touched his shoulder and they both looked up.

“Next time you’ll recognize what it is,” she said happily. “And then it’ll talk Japanese.”