CHAPTER FOUR

Going Under

*Handle every situation like a dog.*

*If you can’t eat it or play with it,*

*just pee on it and walk away.*

-Author unknown

We share an electric gate and a long, steep driveway with our neighbors who live above us. It’s roughly a ¾ mile walk to the gate from our house, and I walk my two Golden Retrievers down, then back up the driveway every morning, picking up my LA Times at the gate. I figure if nothing else happens that day, at least I got in my workout.

Off to the side, just inside the gate, there’s a tiny segment of land that actually belongs to yet another family who has an old right-of-way to use it for grazing cattle. The cattle have miles to graze and we almost never see them in this little patch of land right at the end of their grazing area, but maybe once every two or three years we see some stragglers who made it that far.

This little corner of the grazing land also happens to be the location of a real life tar pit. Yes, like La Brea.

(This description is paraphrased from Wikipedia: ***La Brea Tar Pits*** *is an active paleontological research site in urban* [*Los Angeles*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Los_Angeles) *where natural* [*asphalt*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bitumen) *has seeped up from the ground for tens of thousands of years. It changes to tar near the surface with long term exposure to the air and is like quicksand to any animal that ventures onto it. Over many centuries, the bones of trapped animals have been preserved by the tar, making this area an important research site*.)

The only reason I knew there is a tar pit is that one day, coming up to the gate, I was greeted to the spectacle of five cowboys dragging a large cow out of the trees toward our driveway with ropes. The cow was absolutely covered in tar up to his chest. Tar, of all things. He was being dragged on his flank from somewhere off to my right. I just sat there stunned. Who would ever have expected to see a sight like this?

“What in the world happened?” I asked.

“She got stuck in that tar pit,” one of the cowboys replied. “We heard her mooing and went looking for her. Pretty surprised to see her trapped in there.”

“There’s a tar pit? Back in there? You’re kidding. A tar pit?!”

“Yeah, right back there,” he said with a wave of his hand before returning to the emergency at hand.

I watched as they laboriously pulled the cow onto the driveway and managed, with two men pulling on the rope and three lifting, to get her up to her feet. She staggered down the street, black, wet and confused, just glistening with her thick coat of tar, the cowboys walking and jogging after her.

I hiked back where he pointed and saw a black pool.

“Damn!” I blurted out.

I couldn’t wait to get up to my house and tell Tunes.

It’s a very pretty walk to the gate every morning with Petey and Tinker, our Golden Retrievers. There are huge old oaks all around, vistas of lovely foothills rising up to become mountains in the background, our creek down below and many birds overhead. I used to ride my motor scooter down this hill and down the street with the dogs a few years earlier, but my scooter died, so now we walk it. It’s a good workout, especially coming back up.

Petey likes to lead the way, pushed forward by his alpha instincts. In fact, anywhere we go, he leads the way. He doesn’t necessarily know where we’re going, he just wants to be in front. If Terryle or I happen to veer off in another direction, he’s not embarrassed or chastened. He just double-times it back to assume his rightful place in the lead once again.

When I open the electric gate, which is in the center of an impressive, long rock wall, he usually bolts out and races up the street – which luckily is a quiet dead end. I just grab my newspaper and head back up hill with Tinker. Within a few moments Petey comes racing up to, of course, take the lead.

This day, the dogs were goofing around at the wall outside the gate, going wide, away from the street, in a new direction different from where they usually ventured. They were browsing and sniffing in the bushes way over to the side of the wall as I walked inside the gate and called for them. Tinker came running. Petey lingered behind.

I was trudging up the driveway and got maybe half-way to my house when I realized that Petey hadn’t materialized yet. This was really odd. I got to thinking: there’s no way he could have gone around the gate and stumbled into that tar pit, is there? It’s back there somewhere. Could he work his way around the wall and get to it that way? Would he be crazy enough to get trapped? After a few more steps, these unlikely thoughts nagging at me, I decided to turn around.

I hate walking back downhill when I’m already walking up, but something told me I’d better take a look.

I made my way through clusters of thick brush to where I could get a look at the tar pit…and what I saw was terrifying. There was Petey, up to his neck and sinking, a desperate and forlorn look on his face. Only his head remained above the tar. He could not move a muscle. And then a visibly serene look slowly transformed his face, like he accepted that he was going to die.

I panicked. Petey was somehow near the center of the 15’ by 10’ tar pit, as if he’d leaped after something. Maybe a bird or a squirrel. I walked around to the side closest to him and took one careful step into the pit. But I couldn’t quite reach him. I took another step, leaned over, stretched out my right hand, got it under his chin and tried to pull him out. He didn’t budge in the thick tar. The best I could do was keep leaning forward at this awkward angle, keep my hand under his chin and try as best I could to keep his head from sinking under.

And then I noticed that I couldn’t move my own feet. And then I realized that I was sinking.

Where we were was the least likely place for someone to see or hear us. We were inside the rock wall of the gate, hidden from the street, which was not heavily trafficked at all. We were set back far enough from the driveway so as to be impossible to see. But I prayed that a car would either drive by on the street, or better yet, come down the driveway from the neighbor’s house. I could yell loudly enough to maybe have a chance.

My wife had a lingering illness and had not been driving. It was not going to be her.

My knees were now under the tar, and I was sinking still. It was just about to my waist. I was definitely concerned, but I pushed that out of my mind because I was far more worried about Petey. I had a way to go, but his chin was just above the tar level. Any further and he would suffocate.

I didn’t know how deep the tar pit was. Are they deep? Tar pits? I knew that countless layers of mammoths, saber tooth tigers and local dinosaurs had been fished out at La Brea. Do tar pits go ten or a hundred or a thousand feet down?

Was there any chance this one was only as deep as where we were at that moment and we wouldn’t sink any further?

If I couldn’t hold him and Petey went under, I would have the unforgettable vision of watching him drown in tar for the rest of my life. That’s if I even got out. At any rate, I was bent over to the point that he was right in my limited line of sight, so there was no looking away.

And then, of course, there was the matter of my own fate, which figured to be determined later. It was all surreal.

Due to some miracle, I had my cell phone in my pocket. I usually did carry it, however it was only 7:30 in the morning and I didn’t necessarily grab it that early. The problem was that it was in my right front pocket and my right hand was holding up Petey. To make matters worse, I was leaning so heavily forward and to the right, that my pocket was not very accessible. Somehow, though, I managed to slowly work it out of my pocket with my left hand. There was some tar residue that had seeped through my pants onto my phone, so it seems I was just in time.

I’m right-handed, and I usually use both hands to make a call, but with my left hand, I gripped my phone as tightly as possible and painstakingly hit 911 and then brought the phone to my ear. Heaven forbid that I would drop the phone. I tried not to think about that.

“This is 911. What’s your emergency?” the operator asked.

“I’m trapped in a tar pit!” I screamed into the phone. “I’m going under.”

“What was that sir? I don’t think I heard correctly.” I knew that she had never heard of an emergency like this one before and she figured she hadn’t heard it right.

“It’s a tar pit,” I repeated, trying to calm my words down a little. “My dog and I are stuck and can’t get out. We’re sinking! In a very few minutes we’re going to sink under the tar! Please, we need help fast!”

There was a tiny pause. “I’m not exactly sure what you’re saying, sir, but I’ll connect you to the fire department.”

Luckily the line connected right away.

“Ventura Fire,” a man said. “What’s your emergency?

“I need help right away, please! My dog and I are stuck in a tar pit and we’re going under fast. Please can you come rescue us?”

“What’s that sir? A tar pit?”

“Yes!” I screamed.

“Like the La Brea Tar Pits?” His tone was incredulous.

“Yes! We’re not going to last much longer!”

“What’s your location, sir. We’ll be there right away.”

Within five minutes, the fire truck roared up to the gate…then continued right on by. I was screaming, but they couldn’t hear me. It was not long before they hit the dead end at the edge of my block and circled back. Although I didn’t know how soon they would return and, believe me, it seemed like an eternity.

Finally I heard them stop outside the gate. I yelled again as loudly as I could, “Here! Here!”

A voice shouted back “We hear you!”

I have been glad to see firemen before, but this was by far the gladdest ever. (Ventura Fire Department, Oak View Station. This is a resounding plug. These guys are absolute heroes.) They came into view, six men strong, and soon were with me. Posed on the edge of the pit, they looked at each other in astonishment.

“Wow, sir,” someone said.

“This is amazing,” another remarked.

“Please, help my dog,” I half screamed, “he’s about to go under.”

“Don’t worry sir, we’re going to get your dog out and you too. You’re going to be fine.”

“Well please get the dog first. I, at least, have a little more time.”

“Sir, we’re going to get you out first. But we’ll get your dog, too. You’re both going to be OK.”

Two firemen stepped into the shallow edge of the tar pit, put their hands under my arms, and pulled. I didn’t budge. Two more stepped in, grabbed hold as best they could and I began to slowly slide out, both vertically and horizontally at the same time, out of the pit and toward the shallower shore.

Meanwhile I did not take my eyes off Petey. I had had to let go of him as they worked on pulling me out.

It took some serious pulling, but I was coming out of the tar. As more and more of me emerged, my lower torso was completely thick with tar. My socks and shoes did not make it out. (We’ll be coming back to that later.) The firemen carried me to a nearby tree and leaned me against it. I just sat there, stunned.

While I sat there, looking out at this unbelievable scene, random thoughts invaded my brain. Imagine if I hadn’t gone back to look for Petey at the time I did. Or if I just hadn’t checked the tar pit? He would have disappeared under the surface of the tar, never to be seen again. We would have looked frantically, driven around for hours and days calling his name, talked to all the neighbors, reported him missing to the animal shelter, called them every hour or so, circulated word on social media…

We would have never found him or had any idea of his fate.

My God! Imagine if I had disappeared too.

Since Petey was in so deep, they couldn’t step in to grab him. They would have all ended up like me. They shouted instructions back and forth and two men went back to the firetruck and pulled off a ladder. They came back and three of them laid the ladder across the tar pit. It went right next to Petey and was long enough to reach the solid banks on both sides. It was pretty much covered with tar in the middle, but it created a solid surface.

A fireman stepped out, reached down and tried to pull Petey by his head, the only part of him not submerged in tar. Of course, Petey didn’t budge an inch. The fact of the matter is, his big Golden Retriever head would have popped clean off before he would have come out of the tar.

Another fireman handed the first man a shovel and he began shoveling tar away from the area right next to Petey. Not real easy, shoveling tar, by the way. The firemen brought out a second ladder and laid it next to Petey on his other side. Then a fireman walked out on the ladder and started shoveling from the other side.

The rescuers were largely covered in tar by now and their ladder and shovels were pretty much saturated in the thick, awful stuff.

After a while, they had shoveled enough tar away so that one fireman could plunge a rope under Petey’s torso far enough for the other man to feel it and pull it the rest of the way. Then they did it again to double it up. With a rope under Peter, six firemen, three on each solid bank, started pulling. It looked amazingly difficult, but slowly Petey started to emerge.

I was bug-eyed looking on.

Finally, they pulled him out, twice as thick as usual due to the solid several inches of tar covering every part of his body. He shook, as dogs do when they are wet, but nothing came off. He walked away from the tar pit gingerly and stood confused near the driveway.

Dogs always act a little dazed and confused, if you know what I mean. Or maybe it’s more accurate to say that they are just totally ensconced in their own dog world mentality and not fully in tune with human logic. They’re always in the now, with little regard for the future. At any rate, Petey did not know what to think.

“Sir, we need to take you to the hospital,” one of the firemen told me.

“No, I think I’m going to be all right,” I said. “Thank you SO MUCH for saving our lives. You guys are incredible! I need to figure out how to get the tar off my dog.”

(I started to have an inkling of what a monumental task THAT would be.)

“Yeah, you need to get him to a vet or an animal hospital,” one said. But I was already figuring that was not going to be possible. My car would be ruined forever if I put him inside, and it would take the vet’s full staff all day to get Petey clean. They had other things to do.

Me walking into their office with a Golden Retriever covered in tar was the last thing they ever, ever wanted to see.

While the fireman began the unenviable process of trying to get their pants, boots, ladders and shovels a bit more presentable by pouring kerosene over everything, I started trudging up the driveway behind my giant tarbaby of a dog. He had, of course, taken the lead.

(The “I lost my shoes and socks” part starts here.) To make matters worse, I am a tender foot and it was rough trudging up the blacktop driveway barefoot. It was “ooh-ow” with every step. There is an amazing amount of pebbles, rocks, acorns and twigs on my driveway. Amazing amount. You can try to avoid stepping on the worst ones, but that just lands you straight onto the second worst ones.

You would think that maybe having tar coating your feet might bring a tiny reprieve from the non-stop pain, but it is vastly inferior to any kind of shoe for protection. Still, being realistic, my troubles before and after this walk were so immense that I am embarrassed to even mention these 10 minutes of torture.

But mention it, I am compelled by good journalism to do.

I got up to the house, screaming at Petey NOT to go in the doggie door. Not only did that not work, but he went in, came back out, then went in again…and came back out again, confused by my yelling. I was tenderfooting it up to the back door as fast as I could, but not moving all that fast. The result was one unbelievably tarred-up doggie door…but at least he hadn’t trekked very deeply into the interior of our house.

“Tunes!” I hollered, sticking my head inside the door.

“Where have you been, I was starting to worry…what in the world!” she gasped. Terryle was way surprised to see the two of us standing outside the door forlornly covered in…tar? Surprised doesn’t really do justice to the look on her face. But what word would?

Tar Pit Terror (part II)

So, unfortunately, this story is far from over.

Trying to contemplate, as I trudged up the hill, what it would be like to get Pete clean, failed to even come close to the misery of the next many hours.

We knew from visits to the beaches in Ventura and Santa Barbara how to get little smears of tar off our feet. You simply rub the tar off with baby oil and paper towels. And we had a bottle of baby oil and a few rolls of paper towels. But those fell way, way, way short of what would be needed.

I peeled off my tar pants and underwear and threw them in the trash bin. I put on some clean pants, socks and shoes that Terryle brought me and set up a square yard or so of collapsed boxes near our back door for Pete to stand on while we worked on the tar. No sense getting clumps of tar all over the porch and driveway.

Terryle started to work on Petey while I raced to the nearest sizeable drug store to buy baby oil and paper towels. I bought out all their stock – 11 bottles of baby oil and nine eight-packs of paper towels – and raced home.

I was hoping that Terryle would have gotten Pete somewhat clean by the time I made it back, but that aspiration missed by a mile. I didn’t notice any progress whatsoever. Pete was completely covered in tar, before and after my trip. But our one bottle of baby oil was empty and the few rolls of paper towels we’d had at the house were covering the ground, a hundred sheets saturated in tar.

“This is not going to be easy,” Terryle remarked.

We realized that we needed to clear Petey’s going-to-the-bathroom organs, or he would not be able to relieve himself. We couldn’t even see them at the moment; we had to kind of guess where they even were. It took an hour just to clear those at all adequately.

The best technique for removing the tar was to saturate one spot on his body with baby oil, then use a few paper towels to scrape off whatever tar would come. (It simply would not come off unless thoroughly doused first.) And it wasn’t much, even though the paper towel was now totally covered in tar. After a few hours, all the baby oil and paper towels were gone and he was far from clean. Really, depressingly far.

So I headed to another drug store and bought out their stock of baby oil and paper towels. I also had an inspiration: Dawn dish soap. That’s what the wildlife rescue people used on birds and sea mammals that got covered in oil from ocean oil leaks. I bought every bottle they had, which was five or six.

By seven o’clock, Pete was a lot cleaner, but far from tar free. We knew that he would try to lick it off, just out of instinct. But that would poison him and had to be avoided.

I took him over to the hose, loaded him up with many squirts of Dawn, and lathered him up really well. When I rinsed it off, it had made a difference. I repeated the process eight or nine more times, then brought him back for more baby oil treatment.

It was no fun doing this. Terryle and I were on our knees for many hours, and our legs and backs were killing us. By some miracle, Petey was pretty good about the ordeal. He only ran away a couple of times, but we managed to get him back. Maybe he knew he was (we were) in crisis, but he stood there passively for all those hours and let us do our thing trying to get the tar off.

Tinker watched us with a miniscule degree of interest, then went back in the house.

By 9:00 at night, we couldn’t do it any more. Pete still had plenty of tar on him, but we’d gotten 80 percent of it off. We had to let him come into the house and we scrubbed our hands and arms and collapsed into bed. We put a funky white sheet over Petey’s dog bed to try to preserve it. It worked, but afterward the now-black sheet went right into the trash.

By 7 a.m. we were back at it. I started with half a dozen Dawn shampoos. We spent a few more hours on baby oil treatment. I gave Pete four or five more Dawn shampoos…and he was pretty damn clean. He looked like a dog again.

He was prancing around, acting normally, like nothing had happened the past two days. His memory is terrible, so I’m sure he completely forgot. But still, it was pretty damn offensive that we went through all that for him and he was not absolutely humbled with appreciation.

But he did seem to remember not to go anywhere near that tar pit again. Meanwhile, to be certain, we fenced it off.

Moral of this story: if you have a tar pit anywhere near your property, DO NOT let your dog get anywhere near it.