

Daddy Walked the Pits

by Steven Gowin

Seems like the tar just got hold of Daddy somehow. What is it about asphalt and a man?

A regular man but a big man, six foot four and bald, he'd been leadin' his regular life with his regular job and his family. But then came the tar.

You know that smell. Got that sulfurine bouquet so rich, and you breathe it deep, and you get the acid and the sting and the bitter of it. Coats your throat, damn near gags you, but don't, and instead you only hanker it more... that rich bitter sulfur, again and again. The tar got to Daddy that first time we visited Carpenteria and its pit... the odor, the methane gurgling up through it, its still calm surface.

That's how it started, a family outing gone awry.

So Daddy read up on the tar... studied on the ancient physicians of Babylon and the Aztecs and medieval friars and all their oils and ointments for swellings and lesions, dyspepsia, grip, and mental disease. "The bitumen owns a healthative power," Daddy announced. "It cures mind and body... body and soul. Asphalt means rebirth." And then he'd go quiet, his eyes as black and smooth as pure carbon, and he'd travel to a place I know too... that dark faraway pit down deep in his being. And nevermore did he utter the word, "home" for his home now was with the tar.

He never stopped talkin' about it. There was the time he gathered us all in the living room to rhapsodize on the La Brea vents. "First seen by white man during the Portolà expedition," he read aloud from a old volume, "Friar Juan Crespi reconnoitered the vents for the Spanish. He understood that the tar would caulk many a galleon. And so he and Junipero Serra gave them indigenes a name, 'Gabrielino,' and enslaved them to mine the asphalt and die of the cholera."

Not long after that lesson, of a Tuesday afternoon, Daddy just walked off his work at the Salinas Iceberg Packing. He sold mama's Buick to finance the trip and fled to the Carpenteria pits again. He

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took our second car, a old Fairlane and left Mama and us kids to fend alone. With no automobile, Mama'd send little Don on his bike to the Chin Brothers three and four times a week for bread or milk or potatoes until the bank account run out.

We were down to bean burritos by the time Daddy come back. And when he finally did come back, the Fairlane's seats and Daddy's shoes and socks and every bit of clothing he'd taken with him were covered with gummy black tar. And he wouldn't hear nothing of how hard it'd been for Mama; he didn't care. He'd collected dozens of Mason jars of soupy asphalt and would disappear for hours to his basement workbench, labeling them samples, scribbling notes, staring into the brown and yellowy goo... a Joseph Smith of tar. I helped him when I could, for the tar called me too.

Them bills was piling up. But Daddy wouldn't countenance returning to the salad packing. "Bitumen can mean a cure for melancholy, excessive sweating, palsy, cancer, and more so much more. My path is clear," he said, and I believed him. Then in the kitchen one night, when Mama asked how the tars would pay rent, buy another Buick, feed us all, get Joannie's braces, Daddy got into color. His entire head went scarlet, and he sweat so hard, you'd wonder he didn't try his own cure. He stretched himself up to his full height fast and spinning on his heels, nearly fell.

Recovering, he raged, "Do not question my wisdom; do not doubt my conviction," and he stumbled down the hall, pounding on walls, knocking down the hat tree and bulling his way out of the house. "Tar paves the road to grace," he bellowed. We followed him to the drive with the little kids crying, "Daddy, what's wrong? Daddy, Daddy, don't go." But the fever was upon him; he would not listen. He piled into the Fairlane, fired it up, and revved it over and over until it belched gray smoke. Then he slammed its door hard and roared away in a greasy blue cloud... this time to Bakersfield.

Kern County lawmen telephoned Mama that next day. They'd detained Daddy for trespassing at the McKittrick pits. He'd been there for hours, probably all night, gathering more jars of bitumen. When the deputies approached him, he'd offered them asphalt for

their "babies," sayin' his own children were safe and healthy and fixed with their own supply back in Salinas. In fact, he'd left jars and jars of the stuff in our cellar.

Having promised to keep away from the Kern oil fields, Daddy was released and drove south hard, up over the Tehachapis. He smoked past Fort Tejon, Lebec, and Castaic en route to Los Angeles, and by mid morning, under a flat gray sky, he'd abandoned the Fairlane in the intersection of Sixth and South Curson. From there, he just marched into George C. Page Park, shinnied up the old quarry fence, and waded slow into the La Brea pits.

In my mind's eye, I see the bystanders screaming and callin' for help, and I see my Daddy sinking into the tar that had claimed so many mammals all them terrible years ago. I see his poor bald head disappear amongst the methane bubbles, and I hear the suck of the asphalt mud pulling him down, down, down.

Now I know... I know... as I picture that black vinyl surface, that like my Daddy, I myself am in love, forever in love with the bitumen and the asphalt and the goo. And I am certain that soon I too will visit Carpentaria and McKittrick and La Brea. I must walk the pits my Daddy walked and know whatever my Daddy knew. Even now I crave the acrid tar.

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