

Fiction

HOSSEIN MORTEZAEIAN ABKENAR

Tank

—Translated from Persian by Sara Khalili

I asked him, “Is it true what they say? Did you really swallow a tank?”
At first he said, “Huh?” Then, “Yeah, I’m not lying!”

I said, “A real tank!?”

He said, “Yep!”

He opened his mouth wide when he talked.

I said, “But how?”

He said, “I was shouting ... it just slid down my throat.”

He grimaced and said, “It tasted sour and charred.”

I said, “It’s impossible to swallow a tank.”

He laughed and said, “But I eat everything.”

I said, “Everything?”

He said, “Yeah, Ahmad always gave me half of his rations. He hates canned food, he says it tastes like metal.”

I said, “That’s different from a tank.”

He opened his eyes wide and said, “Different, how?”

He stared into my eyes. I didn’t know what to say.

I said, “How big was the tank?”

He opened his arms wide and said, “It was really big! Blackish-green.

It was one of those with a long antenna on the back ... but Ahmad couldn’t swallow it. He opened his mouth—like this—but he couldn’t.”

I said, “Ahmad was there?”

He said, “Huh? ... Yes.”

He nodded a few times.

I said, “He saw it?”

He said, “Nope!”

I said, “How come?”

He said, “His eyes were closed ... the tank ran over him.”

I said, "The tank ran over Ahmad?"

He said, "Yeah, it ran over him and headed for me."

I said, "What? The tank?"

He said, "Yes!"

He opened his eyes even wider.

I said, "So, what did you do?"

He said, "I shouted, 'Mom!' ... But no one could hear me."

I said, "It was coming toward you?"

He said, "I don't know. I mean, it was coming toward me, but I had closed my eyes. I was shouting and it just kept coming closer ..."

He squeezed his eyes shut and buried his neck in his shoulders.

Then he quietly said, "And suddenly, I didn't feel the sun! ... I knew it was in front of me ... I slowly opened my eyes and saw it. Its gun was pointing at my head."

I quickly said, "Then what happened?"

He said, "Then there was a loud noise. It hit me. Boom! ... I can still hear it in my head."

He put his hands on his head and again closed his eyes.

I said, "So, how did you swallow it?"

He said, "What? ... Through my mouth, genius! Its tracks are still on my tongue, look! Look!"

He stuck out his tongue. It was yellow.

Then he said, "Suddenly, I felt burning in my stomach. It was really fiery. When I opened my eyes, the tank was gone and smoke was coming out of my mouth. I realized it was in my belly. I could smell something burning."

He bent over, his mouth gaping.

He said, "I couldn't move. If I did, I would throw up."

He put his hands on his stomach and suddenly thrust his head down as if he was about to vomit.

I said, "Is it still in your stomach?"

He threw aside the blanket and said, "The doctor took it out."

There was a scar on his stomach, about six inches long. It still had stitches.

The Doctor told me, "He couldn't sleep at night because of the pain. He kept saying his stomach hurt ... that it was making noises." Then, the doctor held the temple of his glasses and turned his head. The

temple got caught in his hair. While trying to free it, he said, "I had to operate on him."

I asked him, "Where is the tank now?"

Surprised, he said, "Didn't you see it?"

I said, "No."

He said, "Outside, in the courtyard. That's *the* tank."

Then he hugged his knees and grew silent. He wasn't facing me, but I could tell he was looking out the window.

I asked, "Does your stomach still hurt?"

He didn't answer.

When I walked out of the building, I wasn't paying much attention to my surroundings. I was thinking about everything he had said. Then suddenly I saw a weeping willow tree. There was something behind it. I looked more carefully. It was a tank! It seemed to be camouflaged behind the branches and leaves. I slowly walked toward it. It was dark green. Some parts looked almost black! The antenna on the back had contorted because of high heat! Its steel barrel was pointing straight at me. I moved closer. It looked menacing. I wanted to touch it, but I was afraid.

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