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I Crushed a Car with a German Tank

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Shortly after my husband, Chris, and I moved to the Frankfurt area in Germany, I read about a place southeast of Berlin where you can learn to drive a tank. My reaction, naturally, was, “Sign me up!”

I tried twice to make a reservation on the phone and failed. On the third try, with my poor German and a few English words from the man on the other end, I was 60 percent confident I’d reserved the right day and time. No name, no credit card information, and no other form of confirmation was provided.

Apparently they would let anyone drive a tank, no questions asked.

Getting There Is Half the Adventure

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As with any good adventure, our GPS led us to a parking lot at the opposite end of the village. Luckily, we’d seen a sign earlier that said “nanzerschule.” I may not know how to say “hello” in

...ing, we saw signs that indicated that the tank was not a toy. It was a real tank, but I know the word for tank: panzer.

Following the signs, we continued our trek down a dirt road, pockmarked with holes from recent rain. When we finally came to a building with various tank parts, including a turret, we thought we'd arrived. But a posted sign nearby read something to the affect of "private property, don't park here" ... *because a tank might run you over* was implied but left unspoken.

We could make out another, smaller structure in the distance. Some discarded cars, half crushed and half still intact, lay to our left. We decided to head toward the building down the road marked by a sign we roughly translated as "travel at your own risk."

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Sure enough, a portable bathroom, a small shed, and an awning over a small trailer selling bratwurst and coffee greeted us. We were the first to arrive for the day, but as more and more people arrived later I realized that allowing people to drive a tank is a surprisingly popular (and profitable) business.

'Who Is Crushing the Car?'

A young man greeted us and, after telling him our German *ist nicht sehr gut* (in not-so-good German), he laughed and spoke to us in English.

He provided some basic information about the tanks, and then he mentioned that the BMP—a vehicle my husband insists is *not* an actual tank—is better "for the ladies." The T55, he said, is a bit harder to drive.

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Before I could think of a witty retort, he asked, "Who is crushing the car?" My husband quickly pointed to me, and as the young man looked at the two grinning older men behind the cash register, sighed and said, "Well, I guess you're driving the T55!"

I felt vindicated, like I was proving their tagline ("[Germany's biggest man's playground!!!](#)") was both a poor choice of words *and* punctuation.



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"What else can I crush?"
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Learning to Drive a Tank

Chris got instruction on driving the BMP. As soon as he hit the gas, I was tossed around as easily as a flag in a breeze. I stood on a bench at the back of the tank, my upper half sticking out the back, my hip bone aligning perfectly with the height of the metal hatch entrance (a lingering bruise proves it). We were outfitted with balaclava-style headgear, though I'm not sure why. It did come in handy when I needed to cover my nose against the extremely strong fumes that came pouring out of the BMP into my face, though.

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We zoomed around their mud track, given the lighter construction of the BMP (14 tons versus the T55's 34). After a few laps, including one minor stall, it was my turn to drive the T55—the same tank [driven by James Bond](#) in *GoldenEye*. (I'd soon learn that Pierce Bronson not only didn't drive the tank in the movie, but was also on the opposite side of where the driver is supposed to sit. Not to mention it'd be near impossible to reach the pedals and stick your head out of the hatch.)

I donned the old helmet, took my place in the driver's seat on the left side of the tank, and plugged into the communications equipment. Given the Soviet-era origin of the tank, I was surrounded by machinery labeled in Russian. Chris took his seat on top of the tank in an area usually occupied by the turret but retrofitted with a small seat. The instructor turned on the tank and began going over the instructions. Already I was struggling to hear anything over the roar of the engine.

Knowing how to drive a stick shift gave me a leg up. The T55 has the standard gas and brake, plus a clutch and a gearbox, though the location of the gears is different than in a manual car. To steer, there are two levers, one on either side of your legs. The left lever, when pulled towards you, helps the car turn left as it stops the left tank track and allows the right to continue moving forward (the opposite being true for the right lever). To your right is a gauge showing RPM. The hatch above me was left open—at least for the moment.

Over the Hill and Into a Ditch

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Given that my ability to see was limited by two small side-by-side windows measuring about one inch high by three inches long, I relied on the communications from the instructor who stood on the seat to my right with the upper half of his body sticking out of the tank for better visibility.

I've never concentrated on anything so hard in my life, squinting as if it'd help me see through the windows better and sitting on the edge of my seat as if that'd help me hear anything better. Shortly after, I heard the instruction to hit the clutch and shift from first to second gear. It took significantly extra force to move the gears than a normal shifter, but I was still left puzzled as to why this vehicle, in the minds of the instructors, was better suited to a male driver.

We increased RPM from 500 to 1000, which is where we stayed for most of the drive. The commands "left" and "right" were (most of the time) easy to distinguish and I could usually see the track, though sometimes it seemed like we were about to go into the surrounding farm fields and woods. Given we were in a tank, I was unsure how much the path actually mattered.

After a few standard laps, I noticed the instructor was giving commands that lined me up for a sizeable hill made of mud—something my husband hadn't maneuvered in the BMP. Confident that this is what the instructor was saying, we went up the hill and as we crested the narrow peak, for the first time I thought, "What would it take to flip this tank, and what would happen if we did?"

Going up the hill, all I saw through the windows was sky. As we crested the hill, I started to feel the weight of the tank, as if the back end were going to topple head over heels over the front and turn us into a somersaulting ball of steel. The ground, the only thing I could see, rushed toward me.

After we made it off the mound, I was confident I could conquer anything. So as we approached what looked like a ditch, I thought, "Well, it's not on the track, but we did just go over that large mound." I committed to it. Between commands that sounded like "straight" and "forward" I was a confused as to whether I should push the levers back to their normal position. I yelled into my helmet, "What?!" The tank stalled. The instructor popped his head into my hatch. "The path is that way!" he yelled, more so I could hear him than out of anger. "I need you to yell more!" I replied. "I can't hear anything!"

At this point, the instructor asked Chris to get off the tank and came over to me to talk about crushing the car.

Crushing a Car, a.k.a. Pure Joy

It had been sitting in an area of the track the entire time—a weathered maroon hatchback that reminded me of my first car. The instructor reiterated that it would be important to keep going until he told me to turn right or left in order to line us up for hitting the car head on. At that point he closed the hatch door and I realized the driver's area is quite small. I was too elated by the fact that I could hear slightly better that claustrophobia didn't cross my mind. We went for a lap around the course again, perhaps to confirm my foray into the ditch was a fluke.

Turning a corner we started to approach the car. Surprisingly, the instructor had me dial back on the speed. We squared off with the car and right before we made any contact, he told me to get the tank up to 1500 on the dial. I'm pretty sure I closed my eyes for a second just before impact, which registered as a slightly bigger bump than the already lumpy, muddy course. Driving over the top of the crushed car, it registered that if this vehicle was a non-obstacle, what else was this thing capable of? I looked toward the surrounding woods and thought better of commandeering the vehicle.

I pulled up to the start of the course, the hatch opened, and the instructor, laughing, helped me out. Clearly, the thrill of crushing a car never gets old. I thanked him for putting up with my hard hearing—I was still shaking from trying to concentrate so hard. As we made our way back to our unarmored Honda Civic, I promised the men I was much better at driving this car with a normal-sized windshield.

The scent of tank exhaust stayed with me well after I drove off. I put the windows down, and despite the lingering odor I couldn't help but smile the entire way home.