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the tank man's son

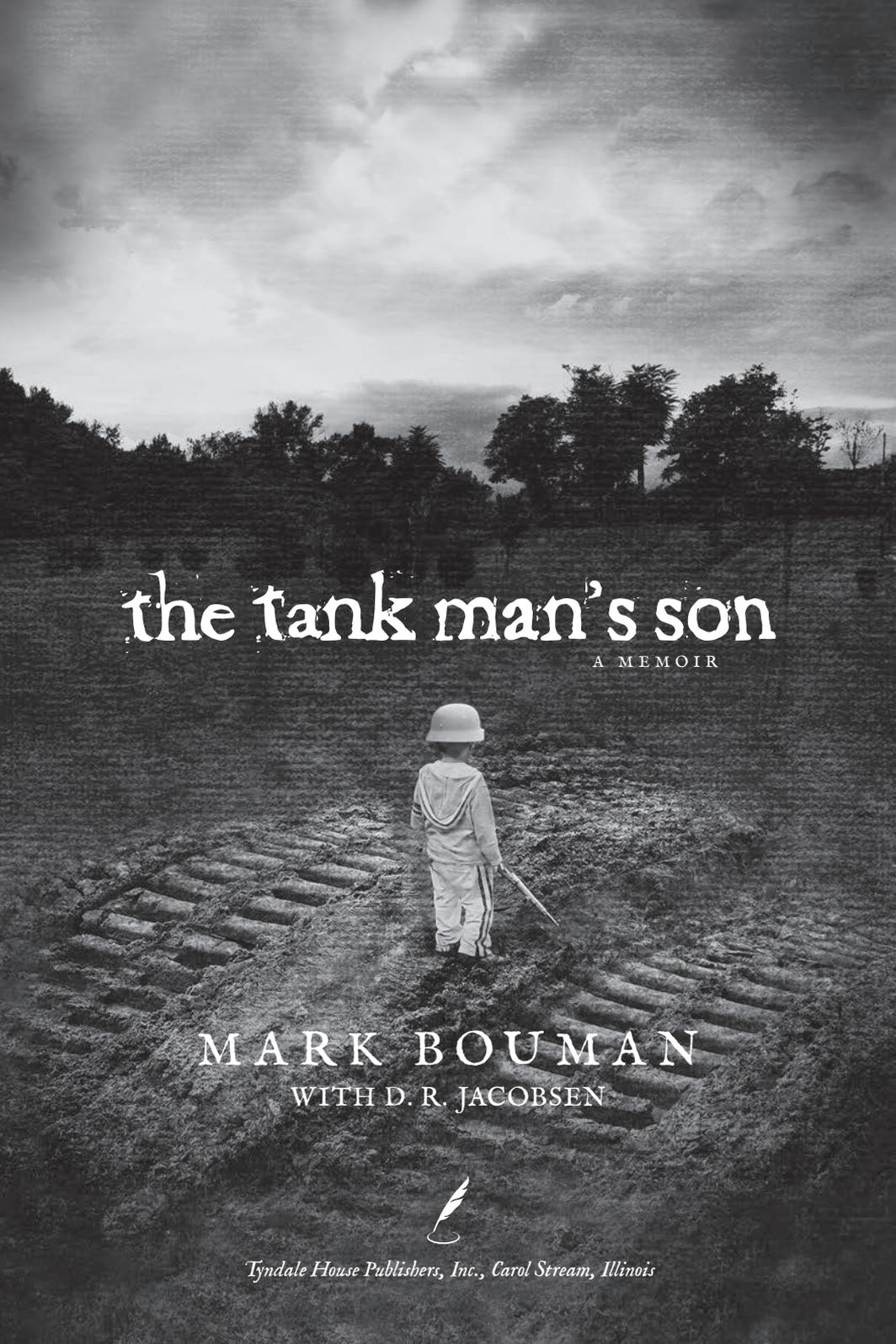
A MEMOIR



MARK BOUMAN

WITH D. R. JACOBSEN

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The Tank Man's Son: A Memoir

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

DEAR READER:

The story you are about to read is true. The events depicted include vulgar language of a kind that typically doesn't appear in books we publish. But after careful consideration, we decided to include some dialogue that, though potentially offensive, is accurate, helps to capture the intensity of the events in an authentic way, and gives a truthful illustration of the human condition.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS MEMOIR IS based on events that happened across nearly five decades, including events that occurred before I was born. I have tried to tell my story truthfully. For the sake of clarity, in some places I have chosen to use composite events, dialogue, and chronology, and I have changed some names and details to protect the privacy of individuals. As with any memoir, this version of my story is uniquely mine.

PROLOGUE

WHAT DID IT MEAN to be the Tank Man's son? It was as if Mark Bouman didn't exist—as if I were simply another object for my father to crush.

When I was a boy, I dreamed about freedom. I imagined fleeing my home in Michigan and escaping to the wide-open spaces of Montana, hunting and fishing to my heart's content. Montana was wild and unspoiled. In my dreams I always lived alone.

Yet I could not run away. My entire life was controlled and dominated by my father. I scarcely knew what to do when I had a few hours to myself. Being outdoors was my only joy—sometimes with my brother, more often alone with my dog—and a thin joy it was. It was less like joy and more like the temporary absence of fear and pain. There were fleeting moments in which fear didn't cling to my back, whispering to me in my father's voice. There were minutes and occasional hours when I forgot to remain alert for an openhanded slap. But always, real life returned full force.

The indelible image of my childhood is the brutal silhouette of my father's tank. His tank was a machine made for a single purpose: power. So it was with Dad. Whatever the end on which he happened to fix his attention, his family became nothing more than a means.

The story of my father's brutality is, perhaps, unusual enough to

warrant a book. He was not entirely sane, and his particular brand of insanity was both conspicuous and cruel.

And the story of my suffering—and the suffering of my brother, my sister, and my mother—may be universal enough to warrant a book. We suffered greatly. We emerged on the other side of Dad's wrath as changed people, some more broken than others. But as I've written these stories, marveling anew at their nearly unbelievable strangeness and their casual viciousness, I've sensed something bigger hiding in the margins.

There lurks within these stories hints of something even stronger than my father—something not just stronger than a tank, but stronger than the human heart. Stronger even than the past.

How did I not simply *die* on those eleven acres of Michigan sand and scrub? How did the cowering, belt-whipped boy I was become the man I am today? How did I, the child of an abusive father, become a father myself—one who would gladly die for his boys and who loves them more than life itself?

Looking back, the plot of my life seems too incredible *not* to be true. But if I could tell my childhood self that one day he'd thank God for his father—well, that boy would laugh in my face. Or curse me.

Back in Michigan, my life resembled one of the trees on our land. I could grow in fits and starts, but no matter how high I reached, one day I would be crushed beneath my father's tank. Resistance was impossible. A broken trunk couldn't be resilient. And no matter what happened to me, I was, and always would be, the Tank Man's son.

PART ONE
A HOME

I

THE OAK TREE STOOD a dozen feet taller than the top of my father's tank. From where I was watching, I could feel the vibration rumbling up through the ground. Our eleven acres were peppered with trees, big and small, but ever since Dad had fired up his army tank for the first time, the number was steadily decreasing. Dad motored toward the oak at a walking pace. I could see the outline of his head sticking up through the driver's hatch. He was making subtle course corrections to keep his right-hand tread lined up with the tree. The tank halted several feet from the trunk, and the noise of the engine lowered for a moment.

Then a roar as the tank lurched forward. The tread hit the tree trunk dead center, and the tank climbed slowly upward. Foot by foot, with the engine snarling in time, the machine rose into the air. The tree strained against the increasing weight. It leaned backward, bending and shaking, and even above the noise of the tank I could hear groans and staccato pops from inside the oak. The tank pointed toward the clouds

as if launching from a ramp, and then, with a sudden crack, the oak died, its trunk shattering even as its roots were torn from the earth. The tank slammed down and rolled forward, pulverizing the branches into splinters and grinding the now-useless roots into the ground.

I imagined taking my father's place at the controls, lifting the tank up and over a mighty tree and forcing it to the ground just like he did. It would feel exhilarating. It would terrify me. But I would win. I would be the one in charge, the one with the power. Nothing could stand up to that kind of power.

The tank turned toward me, continuing to roll. Ten feet before it reached me, its treads jerked to a halt. My father looked down at me from the hatch. I watched his lips move, scarcely able to hear him over the engine's growl. It took me a moment to realize what he'd shouted to me.

"Hey! Mark! Want to drive?"

• • •

Long before he became the Tank Man, Dad had been a kid, just like me. He had two parents and a little home in Grand Rapids, Michigan, with a finished basement and lace curtains and a set of Sunday china. He learned to ride a bike and write book reports and sweep the sidewalk. He grew taller and stronger and learned to swear and throw a punch. He taught himself to drive when he was still in middle school, pushing his dad's '39 Ford van out of the driveway and then starting it once he was a block down the road.

By the time he was thirteen, he was shuttling his mom to town so she could pick up groceries or supplies for the beauty parlor she ran in a small shop attached to the house. By the time he was fourteen and his parents sat him down to tell him that a divorce didn't mean they loved him any less, he had already turned his gaze out to the world—past Grand Rapids, past Michigan, out toward the horizon where there might be something better, just waiting for him to discover it and make it his own.

When he was fifteen, he joined his father on a trip to “see the world”—or at least the world between Michigan and the Grand Canyon. It took them three days, sharing the driving along the way. On the second day, when his father was snoring in the passenger seat, Dad slammed into the back of another car. By the time the highway patrol officer left with his report, Grandpa Bouman had everyone convinced that he’d been the one driving while Dad rode shotgun. Whether they hiked down into the canyon or took pictures or just sat quietly at the edge, Dad never chose to relate. The only parts of the story he cared to tell were the long drive and the sudden crash.

By the time he was sixteen, Dad talked his mother into signing a waiver that let him join the United States Navy. He said good-bye to her, didn’t bother saying good-bye to his dad or his dad’s new wife, Ginn, and hitched a ride to the Greyhound station. With his duffel bag slung over the chip on his shoulder, he stepped off the bus at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center outside Chicago, determined to make a name for himself. Next came Jacksonville, Florida, where he spent eighteen months discovering his knack for repairing engines on carrier planes like the T-34 and the F3D. That was the year the pilot of a twin-engine Beechcraft, a lieutenant, stuck his head in the maintenance hangar and asked for a volunteer to join him on a short flight to an air base up the coast. On the return trip to Jacksonville, the pilot asked if Dad knew how to fly.

“Yep, you bet!” came the instant answer. Dad flew most of the way back before the pilot realized Dad was improvising. That was how Dad lived: ready to try anything, supremely confident—often with no reason to be so—and always able to let consequences slide off his shoulders like water off a duck.

While waiting to turn eighteen, Dad struck up a friendship with Stew. Stew was Dad’s kind of guy: independent, bold, and unafraid to tell everyone, including his superiors, what he really thought. They talked about guns and fast motorcycles and made lists of the know-nothing

officers they'd like to teach lessons to. They spent their base leave in Jacksonville together, cutting up and causing trouble in the bars and pool halls. And it was sometime during their time together that Stew clued Dad in to the *real* cause of all the world's troubles.

The three of us Bouman kids—me, my older brother, Jerry, and my younger sister, Sheri—grew up knowing who Stew was. Dad would flip right to the picture of him in the photo album and tap his finger, and we would pretend to study the snapshot we'd already seen dozens of times. Stew sat ramrod straight in a wooden chair, wearing a crisply pressed Nazi uniform with swastika bands on each sleeve. His daughter stood behind him, one hand on her father's shoulder. She wore a Hitler Youth uniform, and behind the two of them was draped a Nazi flag.

"You kids know not to ask questions," Dad would say and then close the album.

Shortly after meeting Stew, Dad persuaded a squad of cadets to goose-step around the base, a stunt that earned him a trip to the psych ward for evaluation. In the early 1950s, so close to the end of the Second World War, the naval brass figured no one would be crazy enough to ape the Nazis unless he was *actually* crazy. My mother later told me that Dad was given a Section 8—that was how they discharged people judged unfit for military service, like homosexuals and the mentally ill. Dad's version of the story was different: his naval career ended when he punched some know-nothing officer who had it coming. Still, an honorable discharge arrived in Grandma Jean's mailbox, owing to the intervention of a family friend who happened to be a congressman from the great state of Michigan.

Maybe Dad would have left the Navy on his own, even if he'd never met Stew. It wouldn't have taken Nazi ideology to persuade my father to punch an officer—he would have done that on a dare. Either way, by age eighteen, Dad found himself out of the Navy, officially a man, and with no idea what to do next. If he'd been more driven and hard-working, perhaps he would have struck out on his own and moved to

Detroit or Chicago. He could have done what other young men did: find a job, make friends, date a local girl, and begin a new life. Maybe save up for a new sedan or a starter home. Join a bowling league or the local chapter of the Elks. Instead, he moved into his mother's basement, avoided work, smoked two packs a day, and filled out his six-foot-two frame with another forty pounds of muscle.

At the same time that Dad was lounging on his mother's couch and reading anti-Semitic books and military manuals about how to assemble land mines, Mom was making a name for herself at Unity Christian High School. She played first-chair French horn in the school orchestra and edited the school newspaper. She represented Unity at the state debate championship and placed second. Her unfailingly honest and responsible parents were no-nonsense workers—her father a carpenter, her mother a nurse's aid—who expected their children, Mom and her older sister, Janie, to take care of themselves and keep their heads down. They had moved the family from Arkansas to Michigan years before so the girls could attend a good Christian school. They never gave the girls birthday presents or celebrated holidays. Surviving the Great Depression had taught them that having fun was simply too expensive.

One summer afternoon, Mom drove Janie to Holland Beach on the shore of Lake Michigan. They planned on spending the afternoon swimming and lying in the sun. It was a popular place to see and be seen, and it also happened to be free. That same summer afternoon, Dad took his mother's car and drove to Holland Beach as well. Cruising the parking lot, he spotted two ponytailed teenagers sitting inside a Buick sedan. He eased his own car to a stop beside theirs. The girl in the passenger seat was cuter, but the girl in the driver's seat was closer, and her wide smile revealed her perfect teeth, so my father decided to simply go with what was right in front of him.

"Would you like to go see a movie?" he asked Mom.

That was that. From then on they were a couple. At least that was the way Dad remembered it: simple and to the point.

Mom's version was a bit different. They met at the beach, but it was Janie who first met Dad while they were swimming. She invited him back to shore to share their picnic, and Dad took the opportunity to suggest that the three of them see a movie together. Once they had eaten, Janie drove, with Mom in the middle and Dad on the outside. It thrilled Mom to sit next to Dad since it was Janie who always attracted the attention from boys.

On the drive home, the warm summer air whipped through the open windows, swirling Dad's thick black hair.

"What did you think of the movie?" Mom ventured.

"It was okay," he quickly answered, "but I really prefer war movies. And Westerns. I try to catch a movie at least once a week."

"Really?" Mom was incredulous. "You must have a great job!"

Dad hedged. "Actually I'm between jobs right now. I just got out of the Navy, so . . ."

Mom found herself looking sideways, not for the first time, her eyes tracing his strong arm draped along the edge of the rolled-down window. "What did you do in the Navy?"

"Aircraft mechanic," he replied smartly. "I haven't decided yet what to do for a job. I'm taking my time. Since I just got home, I'm not in any big hurry."

He grinned. Mom couldn't believe it. No big hurry to work? Movies once a week? Free to do whatever he wanted—maybe even to put one of those arms around her shoulders while they drove through the back roads together?

Dad looked at the sisters. He wanted to ask Janie out, since she was prettier, but that would have been awkward with Mom sitting between them. And here is where their memories come together, with Dad asking Mom if she'd like to go out to a movie again. Mom knew it was wrong to date, wrong to have fun, wrong for a high school student to cut loose with an ex-Navy man. And Mom knew just as surely that she wouldn't—couldn't—say no to the excitement Dad offered.

“Sure,” she said, hoping he couldn’t see the color rising to her cheeks.

However it happened, the results were the same. As the summer ended and the school year began, Dad and Mom began dating in secret. To a girl who never went off script, Dad’s fearlessness and disregard for convention seemed like a godsend. Maybe life didn’t have to be as safe and boring as it had always been. Maybe her parents had been wrong about duty being the most important thing in life. Dad wanted to have all the fun he could at every moment he could, and that answered nearly every longing Mom had ever felt. She was newspaper, and Dad was a lit match.

Mom’s decision to date Dad was the first crack in the facade of her exemplary life, and soon nearly everything crumbled. Dad stole money from his mother’s beauty parlor so he could show Mom the kind of good time they both deserved. They drove too fast and snuck into dance halls. They saw the latest movies and kissed by the lake. She was a sixteen-year-old kid who lived miles from town—a kid with parents whose idea of a fun Saturday was to go fishing and then return home to clean and salt the fish. It’s no wonder she felt free the moment she hopped into Dad’s front seat and roared down the country roads toward anywhere but home.

Dad became Mom’s only friend. More than that, he became her world. Her homework sat untouched for days at a time, and she dropped out of the school play. Her French horn gathered dust beneath her bed. When she heard about a job answering phones and filing documents for an insurance company, she dropped out of school, because what was the point in pretending? All she wanted was to be with Dad, and he’d take care of her as long as they stayed together. He picked her up from work every evening, and every morning she counted the hours until she could see him again. Her father was angry, but her mother was more than happy to save the school tuition every month. Mom overheard her mother telling her father, “If she wants to ruin her life, at least it won’t cost us anything.”

Mom smiled to herself. The only thing her mother seemed to care about was saving money, but Mom had found a way to make money and have fun at the same time. There was so much more to life than what her parents had allowed her to experience, and if she had to leave them behind, she would. She'd found her future in my father.

Several months later, Mom walked out of the bathroom she shared with her sister and blurted out, "Janie, I'm *sick*."

"What do you mean? Sick how?"

"*Pregnant* sick," Mom groaned, feeling the urge to vomit again.

Her parents knew Mom had a secret life, but they didn't know the half of it. Mom's questions spilled out as tears streamed down her cheeks. "Now what am I going to do? What will Mom and Dad say? What's going to happen?"

"You'll need to tell them soon," Janie said. "It won't help any if you wait."

A few hours later, her father arrived home from his construction job. He sat down at the kitchen table, reading the paper while he waited for his wife to finish making dinner. Janie and Mom entered the kitchen.

"She needs to talk to both of you," Janie announced, then stepped out of the way.

Her father lowered his paper and peered at his younger daughter over his thick, black reading glasses. Her mother stopped midturn on the linoleum, holding a plate of pickled beets.

"What's wrong?" she asked in a low tone.

Mom couldn't speak, so her sister spoke for her. "She thinks she might be pregnant."

Mom burst into tears, her head bobbing up and down from the great heaving sobs that swelled inside and threatened to overwhelm her.

"Well," pronounced her father, "that's a fine mess you've got yourself into."

"I'm *so* sorry," Mom managed, finding her father's eyes.

"Sorry doesn't solve the problem, now does it?" he said.

Janie moved to put her arms around Mom, hoping to console her.

“You’ll have to marry that boy,” her mother said as she resumed her dinner preparations. “If you’re pregnant, then you’re on your own. You know that. You’ve brought this on yourself. Don’t expect us to help.”

A child choosing to ruin her life was nothing an upstanding parent should stand in the way of. Mom stared at the floor, hearing the newspaper crinkle as her father went back to reading, hearing her mother at the chopping board, feeling her sister’s arms. That’s when Mom realized two things: that she’d have to marry Dad, and that it was the last thing she wanted to do.

Not that she had a choice. Ending her pregnancy wasn’t an option for her, and her parents were kicking her out, so keeping the baby at home wasn’t an option either. In 1958, in rural Michigan, independent single mothers simply didn’t exist, especially ones without a high school diploma. Over the years, her parents had made sure Mom knew that good and honest people never became pregnant out of wedlock—and if they did, God forbid, they got married immediately.

That advice would have been easier to follow if her parents hadn’t made such a point of convincing her that Dad would never make a good husband.

Mom was trapped between truths, and the only way forward was a wedding. Except a wedding was impossible. None of the parents would attend or help pay for it. Mom didn’t have the emotional strength to organize even a civil marriage ceremony, so Janie took it upon herself to arrange things. She was the only one present when Dad and Mom stood in front of a justice of the peace at the courthouse in Grand Rapids and promised to love each other for better or worse, in sickness and in health, until death parted them.

Dad’s mother couldn’t bear the thought of the couple starting their married life living in a car, which is exactly what Mom and Dad would have been forced to do, so she bought them a trailer—a steal at \$250 because it had been damaged in a flood and the previous owners had

moved out. After the ceremony at the courthouse, Dad's stepmom, Grandma Ginn, hosted a reception at her place: a simple cake, some photos, and an hour of awkward small talk. Then the happy couple drove back to their water-stained trailer to begin life together as man and wife.

That was late winter 1958. Dad was nineteen, and Mom was seventeen. Jerry was born just over six months later. I was born two years after that, and Sheri two years after me. We were the Boumans, a clan of five crammed into a trailer in Cannon, Michigan, trying to make our way in the world.