

Glass Tiger

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I rubbed the smooth glass against my cheek, feeling the ridges and curves and raised bumps of the perfect carvings slide over my skin. The glass felt cool between my warm fingers.

The tiger's four, sharp-pawed legs stood straight and proud, its head arched backwards like a wolf howling at the moon, chest fur ruffled in the imaginary wind.

The opposite of what I felt.

The exact, complete, *opposite*.

Pride seemed to course through it, filling its amethyst eyes like it could do anything, *anything* in the world.

And even though the glass tiger was the size of my fist, I felt small and insignificant compared to its majestic poise and powerful expression.

And sometimes, that proud expression would become more and more familiar and real, until it felt as if I could almost hear her voice echoing through the glass. And it would wrap around me, a bit like a blanket, until bittersweet memories washed away any other thought and it felt as if she was here, with me, right now.

But, deep down, I knew that her voice wasn't really here. I knew that it couldn't be, that all I had left were those bittersweet memories; captured within the beautiful glass carving.

My memories of Mum.

Playing badminton in the yard against her.

Watching Ratatouille, her all-time favourite movie.

Baking sugar cookies for Grandpa when he'd been sick.

Listening to her read bedtime stories to me, many years ago.

Trying to sneak a peek into her art room where she'd been working on that special surprise for me.

And the hardest memory of all, the one that made me cry myself to sleep every single night, only to wake me up again:

Mum, handed me a shiny box from her hospital bed, her shaking hand placing the delicate cardboard in mine.

"This tiger is made from the rarest of glass," she'd rasped as I opened the box. "I hope that when you hold it tight, you'll remember all those days we spent together, me, you, and your father. The tiger is a creature of fierce pride and loyalty and love. Just like our special family."

Then she'd turned to my dad and wrapped her hand around his, and whispered to us both quietly; "We'll always be a family—" she placed her other hand over my heart. "Because we have each other in our hearts. Always."

But pain and fear was building up inside me. And I couldn't help but choke out my last words. "But how can we be a family if you're not here?"

And I would do anything to get those days back. Anything. Just to see her face once more, to hear her laughter, to see her smile.

I heard a knock at the door.

"Bell!" Someone called from down the stairs. It was Dad. "Pansy's here!" I quickly placed the tiger back in the box and on to the shelf then opened my mouth to call back. "Coming!"

I thought about hiding the tiger, afraid that something might fall on it, or that it might get knocked over and break. But I dismissed the thought. I trusted Pansy. She'd been my friend for over three years now. And this was the first time she was coming over since... it all happened.

I wanted to show her. She's the kind of person who'd understand.

I slipped out the door, shutting it quietly behind me. The wood floor was flawlessly smooth under my thick woollen socks. I hurried down the stairs, taking them four at a time, then slowly entered the kitchen. Dad greeted me, his worn-down face weary with exhaustion and sadness crinkled the edges of his eyes, but a true smile was on his lips. "Hey Honeybee," he said as I entered.

I rolled my eyes. "Enough with the nicknames." I hurried to the doorway and opened it wide.

But I didn't have time to look before something strong tackled me in a hug. "Bell!" Pansy shrieked as she practically lifted me off my feet. "I haven't seen you in almost forever!"

"Uh huh," was all I managed to croak through her thick sweater.

But happily, I carefully wrapped my arms around my friend, grateful for her presence. And when she finally let go, her beaming green eyes stared right into my coffee brown ones. "I've missed you, Bell," was all she said. Not something meaningless about her condolences, like everyone seemed to say.

Pansy really was a good friend. "I've missed you too, Pansy," I told her sincerely, leading her into the kitchen and closing the door behind her. "It's really good to have a friend around right now."

“Absolutely!” Pansy cheered excitedly, then accidentally nudged a chipped flowerpot with her elbow. “Whoops,” she said as I caught the pot with one hand. “I should be more careful around here. Your house is very... decorated.”

I laughed easily, standing the pot upright. “My dad’s work. He says the various flowers and pictures remind him of... of Mum.” My voice cracked unexpectedly.

And I was surprised to hear sniffing beside me. Pansy was tearing up, rubbing her eyes viciously. “Oh, Bell. I’m so, so sorry all this happened to you. I can’t even imagine a life without my mother in it.” She came over to me and gave me another long hug.

I was so overcome with unidentified emotion. “Yeah, your mum is pretty awesome,” I agreed shakily.

“Yeah,” Pansy mumbled into my shoulder, her long reddish hair tickling my chin.

When she finally let go, I tugged her toward the stairs. “Come on, I have something to show you.” We raced upstairs, our socks slipping on the smooth floor. This was the happiest I’d felt in many long days.

We entered my room, and Pansy flopped on the bed. “OMG! This pillow!” She shrieked in a very Pansy-like way when she saw the tiny plush pillow Dad had bought for me the day before. It had a tiny panda face sewed into the front.

“I’m glad you like it,” I said distractedly while reaching up on the shelf for the shiny box. My fingers brushed the corner, and I lifted it down with the utmost care.

“Here,” I breathed as I gently opened the box in front of Pansy. “This is a very special gift my mum gave to me. She carved it herself.” I lifted the lid and revealed the gorgeously crafted glass sculpture.

Pansy reached out carefully to touch the tiger's head. Then she stopped herself. "May I?" She asked softly, drawing her hand back.

I nodded, slowly folding away the tissue paper. She reached out and grasped its lithe body, pulling it from the box. Stupidly, my heart jumped in fright. I couldn't bear to see the tiger in someone else's hands. What if Pansy dropped it? What if it shattered into pieces? What if I lost it forever? What if—

After another moment, I couldn't take it anymore. "Give it back," I said a little too sharply. I held out a hand. This was a mistake. I shouldn't have shown it to anyone else. Paranoia started to build up inside me.

Pansy blinked. "Don't worry. I'll be careful." She continued to gaze at its intricate carvings.

"Give it back," I repeated forcefully, now reaching for the tiger. But Pansy held it away from me. "Just a second," she said quickly, but then added, "this really is beautiful."

I felt panicked. And with a lunge, I attempted to snag the tiger from her grip.

I missed.

Confused, Pansy fell backwards, her hands flinging up, the tiger flying out of her grip.

I watched as if everything was going in slow motion. The tiger flew and flew, across the room, finally falling down, toward the hard floor.

I watched as it hit the ground.

Shattering.

Shattering.

Shattering.

Into tiny, endless pieces.

The beautifully proud, loyal, fierce tiger, shattered into dust.

And my heart seemed to break along with it.

I felt like screaming out loud, but I didn't. I felt like collapsing into a heap, but I didn't.

I just stood there, frozen in anguish. "M...my... tiger," I gulped softly, staring and staring at the broken glass.

I turned to Pansy, who was staring at the broken glass with a mildly confused expression.

"You—you broke it," I whispered, shocked. "You—you broke it!" My voice raised higher. My head was spinning. I couldn't think.

Pansy stared at me in shock, as if she'd suddenly realized what had happened.

"N—no, you knocked it away..." her voice trailed off. She stared at me. "It—it wasn't *my* fault."

I stared her down, tears welling in my eyes. My hands balled into fists. "Yes," I seethed, digging my fingernails into my skin. "*You* dropped it! It's *ALL your fault!*"

Pansy gave me a wide-eyed stare.

I stared back at her angrily. "Get. Out." I could have whispered those words, or I could have shouted. Instead, I let all my grief and anger pour out. Pansy looked up at me, tears welling in her eyes. "I... I'm so sorry," she whispered, like that would make it okay.

Nothing was okay. Nothing at all.

"Get out," I whispered again, pointing to the door. "Now."

Pansy fled. And I collapsed onto my bed.

Huge, choking sobs overtook me. Tears rained down my face. "It's not fair," I rasped through the tears. "Not fair."

I reached down and shakily gathered the glass in my arms and piled it beside me on the bed. I stared and stared at the broken pieces, my stomach twisting. All those memories of Mum were shattered along with the glass. As was my heart. This wasn't fair.

"And now I've lost you forever," I couldn't help but mumble dully. "Oh Mum, you'd be so disappointed in me."

I buried my head in my hands.

And suddenly, it felt as if my mind were flashing back to all the things my parents had ever told me. About love and trust and kindness and how you should always keep your loved ones close. And my mum's last words to me. "*We'll always be a family because we have each other in our hearts. Always.*"

Mum would be so disappointed to see me clinging to the tiger like it was all I had left. She would have wanted me to remember her in my heart, not in a glass sculpture.

Suddenly, I felt ashamed. Ashamed of myself for thinking all I had was the tiger. Ashamed of myself for not remembering her from my heart. I'd been holding on to the tiger like it would bring her back. She would never have wanted that.

I gathered all the glass and placed it gently on my desk. The pale evening sun was shining dully on the oak wood, illuminating the glass with hundreds of bright colours. I carefully arranged the glass in the form of a lumpy heart on the desk.

"Maybe... maybe this was meant to be," I whispered softly. "It's made me truly realize where the greatest memories are kept." I lifted the largest fragment of glass. "Not in a sculpture," I pressed it to my heart. "Right *here.*"

I glanced out the window, listening as the birdsong echoed from the trees, watching the neighbour's dog bound across the grass, breathing in the scent of fresh summer flowers.

And I made a promise.

“Even if the world shattered to pieces all around me; even if my life turned upside down;

I will *never* forget you. I love you, Mum.”

That left one last thing to do.

I needed to apologize to Pansy.

All she had ever been was a great friend.

I was so lucky to have her.