

A Head in Cambodia

The head lay on the table before me, partially covered by a cloth that did nothing to disguise the fact that it had been severed from its body. The eye like a lotus petal torn from the seedpod. The curve of the earlobe like a whorl of sand in the midst of a tornado. A hole where an earring had fitted snugly in place. Hair pulled back in a chignon, each strand clearly articulated. So thick and lush that you knew the hair would spill to her waist if loosened.

I leaned forward, better to see the lips, full and puckered, slightly extended as if reaching, arching, longing for a kiss. Longing, yet partially opened as if taking in breath.

That was what I was missing, that taking in of breath. That link to the living and all that living entails. Breath, consciousness, attachment—not just of head to body, but of the ephemeral to the concrete, soul to body, mind to body. That connection of mind and body that our California gurus encourage us to embrace, to bring to fruition, to cultivate. We are incomplete until we do.

I shook myself, doubting I would be thinking all this if confronted by an arm, a leg, some other body part. Seeing the head gave me a sense of the whole. It had personality. It had wishes

and desires that would not exist for me if I had some other piece of her before me.

P.P. handed me gloves.

I put the first on backwards, thumb where the little finger belonged, because I couldn't tear my eyes from this face, the taut smoothness of the skin, the contrasting fine detail of her coif. I pressed my body against the table as I yanked the glove off and put it on correctly.

As I reached to touch that perfect skin, I felt P.P. move closer and heard his sharp intake of breath. "I know her," I said. I hefted the stone, dense and fine-grained, the head dark against the white towel, and held it in my hands, her weighty cheek pressed against my breast.

"Jenna," he exclaimed. "No!" His rotund body slumped against the table and stilled, this man who was always in motion.

"Afraid so. Oh, yes. Radha."

"Radha," he repeated numbly, rubbing his hands together as if the friction would bring him back to life, would animate her. He knew who Radha was: consort to the Hindu god Krishna, a *gopi*, the gorgeous cowgirl who had captured Krishna's heart.

I nodded.

"Female. But how?" he asked.

"How do I know who she is? She's famous, well, famous for those of us who know Khmer sculpture. It's the head from the eleventh-century Krishna and Radha sculpture in the museum in Siem Reap, Cambodia. Detached from the body and stolen five or so years ago." I paused and frowned. "Unless this is a copy."

"No," P.P. said emphatically. P. P. Bhattacharya—a trustee and patron of the Searles Museum, in Marin County—had brought her in to show her to me, Jenna Murphy, curator of Asian art and a friend. "She's going home," I said.

"So beautiful," moaned P.P.

"That's why she's famous," I said. I turned the head around in my hands, pushing aside my niggling doubts about authenticity.

I appreciated each little detail—the braids in her hair; the flowers of her narrow tiara tucked so carefully behind her ears and tied in a bow at the back of her head; the thin, carved outline around her lips that yearned for that kiss; the eyes that stared straight into mine, asking me, begging me, to take her home, back to Cambodia. I knew how P.P. felt. She expanded my heart as she did his, as only a great work of art can.

I said, “The Baphuon—a monstrous temple. You’ve been.” P.P. had spent two weeks in Siem Reap at the ancient capital of the Khmer empire, Angkor, just a few years before. “The French have been restoring it for years. Decades. They began in the early twentieth century, then renewed their efforts after the Pol Pot era, once the genocide had come to an end. That was when they excavated this sculpture.”

“Don’t want to.” A pout spread across his face, and he began to pace.

I watched him, this short round man. “I know. It will be hard to let her go. But when you see her reattached to her body, you’ll feel rewarded. You’ll love her even more. And you’ll be a hero.”

“Expensive, Jenna.”

I gave him a look. Not because I didn’t understand him. I did. I was one of the few people who had decoded his abrupt, abbreviated manner of speaking. I gave him a look because P.P. was one of the wealthiest men in Silicon Valley, and “expensive” wasn’t usually in his vocabulary. I knew why it was cropping up now. He’d already become attached to this piece and would use any excuse—even pretending expense was an issue for him—to keep it. His *raison d’être* was the act of collecting—the search, the discovery, the purchase—the best of all retail therapy. Now that the piece was part of his collection he would do or say anything to protect it.

I turned my attention back to the head. Flawless, I thought as I studied it more closely. Too flawless? No tiny chips around the edge of the ear or the eyelid, no wear to the braids or breakage

to the tip of the nose, those hints that denote age. In a sculpture that had tumbled to the ground in a deteriorated temple one expected the wear of rain and wind, or breakage and rough edges caused by falling. I set the head on the table. I'm a small woman, and it was a heavy head.

As I touched those glorious lips, I said, "I know. But the Cambodians will love you when you return this sculpture." Yet, as I spoke, I was tallying up the pros and cons. Real or fake. Old or new. That's always the question with Southeast Asian sculpture, as the number of fakes increases yearly and the quality exponentially. I adjusted my shoulders, as if straightening my five-foot-two frame might help me resolve the question.

"Don't want love," he responded, sounding more like a petulant four-year-old than a man with a string of degrees and an accent that combined his homeland, India, with upper-crust Eton and Oxford. He hated words, superfluous words, though I'd heard him speak eloquently on occasion.

"Well, I'm afraid there's no other option if it is the authentic, original Radha. It would be unethical of me to do anything other than have you—"

"I know." He impatiently picked up the head.

"Gloves, P.P."

"No," he said crossly as his hands caressed the stone surface. As if in a daze, he repeated, "Return her."

I opened my mouth, horrified at the oils that his fingers were imparting to the stone. But I managed to restrain myself before saying more. After all, it was his head. I pulled my gloves off and brushed away the strand of hair that seemed always to be flopping into my eyes. P.P. turned the head over and over, perhaps trying to process, as I had, its lack of apparent wear.

I mentally shook myself. It was so gorgeously carved, the proportions so perfect—everything about it attested it a masterpiece. It was difficult to think that it might be a fake, a modern copy.

"Return what?"

We both jumped.

“Return what?” Arthur Philen, deputy director of the museum, repeated as he stepped through the door of the conservation lab. Arthur was a hoverer. He gave us all turns, popping in when least expected.

“This head that P.P. just purchased. It’s the head that was stolen a few years ago from a famous Cambodian sculpture. I’m sorry—it *looks* like the head of that sculpture. That head was broken right off the work while it was still in the museum.” I cursed myself and my tendency to speak before thinking. One was always better off saying as little as possible to Arthur, since he had the innate ability to turn the simplest thought, act, moment into a drama.

He sidled into the small space between us. He was a narrow man, physically and intellectually.

“That isn’t good. We don’t want stolen art in our museum . . .” He began to dither, circling P.P. and the head. P.P.’s jaw locked. So did mine. Philen was impossible.

“I can’t be sure it’s stolen,” I said. “It could be an extremely good copy. I need to do some research, and Tyler should examine it.”

“Tyler,” P.P. said flatly, as if the excess energy that kept him in motion at all times had been drained from him. He held the head more closely to him.

“Conservator,” Arthur said, picking up not only P.P.’s abbreviated style, but also a bit of his lilting accent.

P.P. rolled his eyes. He knew who Tyler was. P.P. practically lived in the museum.

“Yes, once Tyler goes over it and we’re certain it’s the original, then we can decide what to do.” A cramp began to knot my calf, and I pushed up on my toes. I’d been so busy with my upcoming exhibition of Chinese Qing monochrome porcelains, I hadn’t found much time to ride my bike.

“Where is Tyler? This is his lab, why isn’t he here?” Arthur spun around, looking for the missing Tyler. He would have been

a great dancer if he wasn't so uptight. I could see that he was beginning to get his underwear in a knot.

"P.P., you can't bring stolen art into our museum," Arthur said primly, circling around the head and P.P. Though he waved his hands around, he didn't seem interested in touching the head, or admiring its great beauty. Not for the first time, I wondered if Arthur really liked art. He wouldn't be the first art historian who didn't. I couldn't think of anyone else in the museum who thought less about art. Even the guards were always up on current exhibitions and grilled me on what museums I'd visited when I traveled. Our staff parties were permeated with art, with art history charades, more obscure with each passing year, as details of paintings—not just complete paintings—made their way into our charade lexicon.

P.P. glared at him and shifted his body, causing Arthur, in his ever-tightening progress around the room, to run into the worktable. "Didn't know."

"Of course he didn't know," I said. "We don't know. Arthur, please, we need to do some research. If it does turn out to be the original head, P.P. will happily return it to the Cambodian government." I looked meaningfully at P.P. His mouth was set in a harsh line, but he nodded agreement.

"Return it? Without being asked?" Arthur began marching again, gesticulating as he did. "Return it like that famous lintel that was returned to Thailand, or those sculptures to Cambodia a few years ago?"

Arthur's parts made one view him as a two-dimensional fabrication—a mechanical toy with jerky movements and exaggerated physiognomy. Aquiline nose, a slab of a face, limbs extended like Laurel in that old Laurel and Hardy movie when he was stretched on a rack. Right now the gears in the head of that mechanical toy were moving so fast I feared it would suddenly begin to do a full three-sixty spin.

The grinding of gears in Arthur's head always aligned with his desire to get attention, to get noticed. Arthur sought affirmation

as a way to negotiate himself into Caleb New's position as the museum's director. Everything he did, every word he spoke, was an attempt to move him in that direction.

"We're getting ahead of ourselves, Arthur." I may be small and young, but I can be forceful. I can also be impulsive, as evidenced by my initial certainty that this was the genuine head. But Arthur was gone, popping out as quickly as he'd popped in, leaving P.P. and me looking at each other, holding the proverbial bag, or in this case, the head. "Uh-oh," I said.

P.P. scowled and said, accurately and succinctly, "Idiot." Then he resumed caressing the head. I had to keep reminding myself that the head belonged to him and it wasn't my place to chastise him for not wearing gloves. Somehow, having the head here in the conservation lab, in the midst of microscope, beakers and brushes, lacquers and paints, all the paraphernalia of the science of restoration and conservation, made his stroking seem all the more incorrect.

"Fake would be good," P.P. said.

For a second I didn't understand. "Because you could keep it?"

He nodded, running his finger around and around the whorl of that perfect ear.

"I thought you said it was expensive."

He shrugged.

There was something he wasn't telling me. I pulled the gloves back on and took the head from him. It took some strength, not just because the head was heavy, but because P.P. was firmly attached. I turned it upside down as I wrestled it away and looked at the break, but there wasn't anything unusual about it. It was irregular, rough, one side of the neck extending further than the other. Not cut with a modern saw, or so it seemed. Which was weird, as hadn't the head been cut from the sculpture?

I looked up and out the high windows that lighted the conservation lab, trying to recall what I knew about the theft. The alarm system malfunctioning, the only guard asleep in his office,

the head detached at an old break. Ah, yes, that would explain the uneven surface. I looked back at the neck, where one would expect to find some of the adhesive that had attached the head to the body at the old break. I couldn't see any, but I would have Tyler check for it, as it was an important clue to whether the piece really was the original.

Then I looked closely at the stone. It appeared to be the good, fine-grained sandstone typical of Cambodian sculptures. It wasn't concrete or resin mixed with crushed stone and poured into a mold, the way some fakes are created today.

"I'll put it on Tyler's priority list if you don't mind leaving it here for a while," I said. "He really needs to check it under the microscope. Secondly, do you mind if he chips a tiny piece away from the lower section of the neck? So that he can see how deep the skin of patination is and if it's irregular, as one would expect from an old piece. You know, since the discoloration wouldn't be uniform over the surface."

P.P. didn't speak, and I realized that he'd mentally answered my first question and wasn't going to bother to answer my second, impatient, as he always was, with the obvious.

"Sorry, P.P. Let's go to the registrar's office and get you a receipt for the piece."

"Oh, well," he said as we headed for the door.

"What do you know about the people who sold the head? The person who bought it originally?"

He didn't answer.

"P.P., don't get secretive on me now."

"Never should have shown you," he sulked, holding the door open for me.

"Well, that may be. If you want to own a stolen head." He was beginning to irritate me. The greed, the acquisitiveness that I saw as his least attractive characteristic was showing itself in his foul expression. In the corridor, I asked again, "Do you know anything about the former owner?"

“Suspicious death.”

“Who? The owner?” I stopped at the registrar’s door, but P.P. kept on going, heading for the elevator that would take him out of our basement offices, leaving without a receipt and with my questions unanswered.

I cursed him. But only for a moment. I understood.

If you live your life for beautiful objects, they become like lovers. To have one taken from you is not pleasant.

I wondered where I might find Tyler, but decided I couldn’t spend my time searching for him. Tyler would be back in the conservation lab soon enough, and I had a hundred things to do.

I stuck my head into the registrar’s office. “Breeze, we need to get a receipt to P.P. for an eleventh-century Khmer head.” Breeze was responsible for keeping track of all objects in the museum. Any piece brought in, whether it belonged to the museum or not, needed to be noted in the records, and if someone left an artwork for examination or for sale, they needed a receipt.

“Okay. Come in and I’ll write it up. I’ll let you get it to him.”

“I’ll be back to pick it up.”

“You’re really pushing out the boat today,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“I wouldn’t bend over in that skirt if I were you.”

“You didn’t say that two weeks ago when I wore it.”

“You must have washed it since then. And dried it.”

“You’re right. Too short?”

“Way. The last thing you need is to exaggerate those curves. At work, anyway.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s cute—don’t get me wrong—and it does match the purple streak in your hair.”

I laughed as I pushed the strand behind my ear. “Thanks.”