

Only Matter

RYAN HABERMEYER

Lenin is only matter, nothing more than a combination of a cranial hemisphere, intestines, an abdominal cavity, a heart, kidneys, a spleen...
—Nikolai Valentinov

After Christine Spillson

The bath is prepared every eighteen months, a delicate

neon cocktail of alcohol, acetic acid, hydrogen peroxide, potassium acetate, and formaldehyde. The exact chemical proportions, however, remain the KGB and Soviet Politburo's

last carefully preserved secret.

The unlikely Snow White,

Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, the world's most infamous revolutionary known simply as Lenin, is removed from his glass sarcophagus and placed on a gurney, then rolled out of the mausoleum in Red Square and into a basement, somewhere or nowhere (nobody knows), where they will spend days, weeks, maybe months (again, nobody knows) cleaning the

corpse. Ninety-seven years and counting.

I've kissed a dead girl too. Slow

and fumbling and awkward on a stranger's couch. The two of us giggling. I'd never felt so alive. And then in an instant there she was in a funeral parlor, her cheeks and forehead bruised despite the makeup. When I saw her stiff and listless, with lips oddly twisted, I felt dead people would be happier with harmonicas. As if

death is a song and we struggle to find the right tune.

Emaciated, mute, crippled,

Lenin had been deteriorating both physically and mentally for years by the time he finally gave up the ghost in the winter of 1924. Ravaged by strokes and an assassination attempt and suffering from what may or may not have been syphilis, the humorless Lenin was already decomposing by the time Bolsheviks arrived at his estate mere miles from Moscow on a frigid January evening. His nose had darkened, the eyes sunk into their sockets, and the skin around the skull dimpled and wrinkled and was starting to brown. Small patches of decay began to form all over his skin as his body teemed with microscopic bacteria organizing a symphony on par with Tchaikovsky

to celebrate his demise.

The clock was ticking. Some argued he should be buried

with his mother. Others suggested he could be refrigerated indefinitely. His widow was ignored entirely. Eventually, a Committee for Immortalization was summoned and at length determined Lenin must transcend history. Through the miracle of science, the bureaucracy declared with banal providence, he would endure. Nobody knows if they cracked open bottles of champagne to celebrate this defiance of nature, but a mere three days later a makeshift mausoleum was under construction outside the Kremlin, a hole in the ground blasted by dynamite due to an intense January freeze into which

the glass sarcophagus was lowered.

She climbed over a fence

along the southern California cliffs, and in the wine-dark night crawled to the edge of a concrete water drainage platform locals called the diving board. She smoked cigarettes, arranged them into a little arrow pointing toward the sea. I can almost see her under the stars, trying to sync herself with the rhythm of waves as she stands, trembling, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear

and then—

The few photos that exist

of Lenin's spa treatment leave much to the imagination. Despite a bloodless existence for nearly a century, his corpse is more yellowish than pale, surprisingly lifelike, the limbs supple and elastic. He wears what appears to be a kaupinam to conceal his modest communist member as two workers robed in white aprons like druidical acolytes drain the embalming fluid before lowering him into the tank of slightly fluorescent olive water. One photo gazes from the foot toward the head, revealing the empty chest cavity that looks like an unzipped coat, a few ribs still visible under the taught skin like bizarre piano keys. As he floats, thin strands of reddish hair sprawl out

in the chemical waters like seaweed.

My mother told me

they were unable to save the dead girl's hands and had to artificially re-create them. Like a mannequin? I wondered. I don't know, my mother said. She didn't want to talk about death, just the afterlife, and probably reassure herself that I had no intention of being a Romeo to this Juliet, but all I could think about was that night on the couch: how the dead girl told me she wanted to be an actress, or maybe it was a singer (I don't remember), and I wanted to be a filmmaker, the two of us starry eyed for the Hollywood we frequented, and how her lips were

so warm and her fingers combing through my hair and for a moment I thought
I'd stepped outside my body

into a kind of la la land.

No trip to the spa, however grotesque,

is complete without a manicure. Picture a middle-aged Russian woman toiling
over poor Vladimir's hands. Along with his face, these are the most visible
and thus heavily scrutinized parts of his body. Matter is memory and memory
matters. And so, Lenin's hands are beloved. Boyish hands that loved playing
chess. Revolutionary hands that waved about as he rode the horse peddling
violent wish-fulfillment fantasies but too scared to touch a comrade's shoulder.
Hands that penned love letters from prison in invisible ink. Hands that signed
the order creating the Cheka. Hands that seized land. Hands that grasped at
the stars. Hands that broke bread and ignited fires real and imagined. Hands
that redistributed land. Hands that every morning carefully oiled a moustache
and beard until it glistened with bourgeois charm. The trembling hands of a deaf
and blind and delirious man on his deathbed that reached to pet the dog as he
whispered, "Good, dog. Good dog." Hands that

rewrote history.

She's still buried, alive

in the rubble of my mind, housed in memories like a tower of broken shards of
glass. Some lives start with tragedy and end in farce, and some the other way
around, but all lives are fables of one kind or another. The trick is you never know
until it's too late, right,

which fairy tale you're living in?

It is oddly compassionate, this ritual devotion

to a century-old tyrant. But aren't we all like the Red Queen lecturing Alice, wanting to believe in impossible things before breakfast? Lenin's eyes are long since removed, but I stare at the photographs over and over. Pity turns to horror, turns to indignation, turns to disbelief, turns back to pity. Is it true the moustache was preserved to conceal the stitches fastening the lips shut? Surely, more than a few have wondered if a smile is struggling to break through those lips regularly moisturized to give the illusion he might still speak. For even the atheist father of the now defunct communist paradise must smirk at how he has outlived his monstrous creation and been

translated into a saintly relic.

His brain was extracted during the first embalming,

portions of it sliced like provolone. The few notes that have survived the censors indicate that upon initial examination the cerebral blood vessels had thickened with a hard plaque. According to legend, when doctors tapped these calcified vessels with a pair of tweezers it made a tinkling noise, like hammers chipping away at a fine gem. In a vat somewhere in the Moscow Brain Research Institute, Lenin's brain is likely still floating and some exhausted neurologist, or perhaps a janitor, is still desperately mapping the cells for

some semblance of genius.

The last time I saw the dead girl we rode horses,

like a deleted scene from Chekhov. The aloof rich girl and the lovesick peasant. By then I knew the kiss was out of pity, that I was like a dog with its tail between its legs, but I got on the horse anyway and halfway through the labyrinth of trails the horse reared. I remember falling. "I was going to tell you something," she said just before riding away, "but I forgot." Call me later, I said, nursing my

bruises. I had no idea this would be our last moment together, our last words.
“No,” I hear her say,

“it doesn’t matter.” How the saints of memory are tyrants.

After Lenin is pickled,

the body is removed and wiped down with rags soaked in formaldehyde, then immersed again in what his original embalmers referred to vaguely as “balsam.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, after the original baptism, Lenin’s body was stubborn and refused to absorb the poison meant to delay decomposition. Small cuts were made along the stomach, back, shoulders, thighs, even in the webbing between fingers and toes, hoping poor Vladimir would soak up the mixture like a good sponge and

perform the desired laboratory trick.

Biology does not answer to politics,

however, and science can only create so many illusions. Paraffin and keratin and other substitute tissues have been injected into and molded onto what was once the revolutionary. When random spots of skin bloom with rot, quinine or carbolic acid is applied. Today, poor Vladimir is

less a corpse than a (somewhat) living sculpture.

Twenty-five years later, every time I see a horse I think

she’s still falling. I wonder if she left her mouth open, or if she closed it,

too shy to kiss the air.

I've never dreamed of kissing Lenin because I don't live

in a fairy tale where matter is a tyrant. Fickle, indifferent, mutant. Sometimes solid, sometimes liquid, sometimes gas. When bodies cease to matter, they move on to memory, carving out pockets in the mind like nomads in search of a hotel. Lenin's corpse is just a body, according to his rival Nikolai Valentinov, a body that is also a vehicle of history, of occultism and cultism, of absurd Kafkaesque bureaucracy and the raw power of political propaganda. But it is also the story of chemistry. How matter denatures into other matter. And so the world grinds us down to atoms. Some remain particles, others become waves, and those of us who cannot splice ourselves into history

endure a more tedious chemistry.

