

DEATH OF AN ORTOLAN

On my first date with Penny, I was very nervous because I was only nineteen and Penny was fifty-two. Over coffee, she told me that she was divorced and had two kids, both older than me. Actually, Penny was already a grandmother. She said her grandson's name was Carapace, which I know for certain because I had to ask twice. Penny and I talked a lot about the war, and I said some pretty stupid things that I quickly regretted. But Penny didn't see it that way. "You have a beautiful mind, like a curly Q," she told me. I had never been on a date with a woman before, and so I hid my hands beneath the table and tore my paper napkin into tiny pieces. I couldn't believe it when Penny said she wanted to see me again. I went home that day and wrote all about it in my diary.

On our second date, Penny and I went to an aquarium. She paid for both of our tickets because I was only working part-time at a pizza shop and making minimum wage. Penny, on the other hand, was a gynecologist. More specifically, she was my gynecologist. When we were watching the piranhas

rip apart a human cadaver I said, “Penny, I’ve been thinking, and I’ll feel terrible if this turns into something real. I don’t have anything to offer you. I’m not even in college.” I couldn’t believe it, but as soon as I said that, Penny grabbed me by the shoulders and kissed me on the lips. Her tongue was like the inside of a tomato. When she pulled away she said, “It’s too late, because this is already something real. I love you more than I love my own children.”

On our third date, Penny and I had a picnic and she showed me how to eat an ortolan. I thought we were just going to have some cheese and maybe some grapes, but she pulled these little balls of foil out of her picnic basket, and when she unwrapped them I saw that they were tiny birds. She explained that they were caught in nets, stabbed in the eyes, fed excessive amounts of grain, drowned in jars of brandy and roasted. I was horrified, which led to a deep, philosophical conversation about good and evil, but before I could get re-oriented Penny said, “Hurry up, your ortolan is getting cold.” And I suddenly realized that I didn’t want my ortolan to get cold, even though that morning I’d never even heard of an ortolan. Penny handed me a cloth napkin to put over my head while I ate the bird bones and all—a tradition. I was so nervous, because this was only the third date with a woman I’d ever been on, let alone a gynecologist, *my gynecologist*, and it was a good thing those napkins were cloth, or else I would’ve ripped them to shreds all over again.