



<http://www.esquire.com/features/The-Last-Meal-0598>

The Last Meal

A two-ounce songbird. A lemon-sized tumor. An imperial appetite for death, flesh, and the immortal gesture. It was time for dinner.

By Michael Paterniti

The night before the last meal, I visit a stone church where mass is being said. In the back row, a retarded boy sits with his mother, his head tilting heavenward, watching, in an unfocused way, the trapped birds that flutter and spin in the height of the church vault. About a hundred yards away, in the immense holy hangar, tulips bloom on the altar. It's the end of December — gray has fallen over Paris — and the tulips are lurid-red, gathered in four vases, two to a side. A priest stands among them and raises his arms as if to fly.

Last I remember, I was on a plane, in a cab, in a hotel room—fluish, jet-lagged, snoozing. Then, by some Ouija force, some coincidence of foot on cobblestone, I came to a huge wrought-iron door. What brought me to France in the first place was a story I'd heard about François Mitterrand, the former French president, who two years ago had gorged himself on one last orgiastic feast before he'd died. For his last meal, he'd eaten oysters and foie gras and capon—all in copious quantities—the succulent, tender, sweet tastes flooding his parched mouth. And then there was the meal's ultimate course: a small, yellow-throated songbird that was illegal to eat. Rare and seductive, the bird—ortolan—supposedly represented the French soul. And this old man, this ravenous president, had taken it whole—wings, feet, liver, heart. Swallowed it, bones and all. Consumed it beneath a white cloth so that God Himself couldn't witness the barbaric act.

I wondered then what a soul might taste like.

Now I find myself standing among clusters of sinners, all of them lined in pews, their repentant heads bent like serious hens. When the priest's quavery monotone comes from a staticky speaker, cutting the damp cold, it is full of tulips and birds.

Somewhere, a long time ago, religion let me down. And somehow, on this night before the last meal, before I don a white hood, I've ended up here, reliving the Last Meal, passing my hand unconsciously from my forehead to my heart and to either shoulder—no—yes, astonishingly pantomiming the pantomime of blessing myself.

Why?

When it comes time for communion, why do I find myself floating up the aisle? Why, after more than a decade, do I offer my tongue with the joy of a boggled dog and accept His supposed body, the tasteless paper wafer, from the priest's notched, furry fingers? Why do I sip His supposed blood, the same blood that leaves a psychedelic stain on the white cloth that the priest uses to wipe my lip? Why am I suddenly this giddy Christ cannibal?

At the end of mass, the priest raises his arms again—and the retarded boy suddenly raises his, too, and we are released.

Then I find the hotel again. I lie awake until dawn. Fighting down my hunger.

That's what I do the night before the last meal.

On his good days, the president imagined there was a lemon in his gut; on bad days, an overripe grapefruit, spilling its juices. He had reduced his affliction—cancer—to a problem of citrus. Big citrus and little citrus. The metaphor was comforting, for at least his body was a place where things still grew.

And yet each passing day subtracted more substance, brought up the points of his skeleton against the pale, bluish skin. He spent much of his waking hours remembering his life—the white river that ran through his hometown of Jarnac, the purple shadows of the womblike childhood attic where he had delivered speeches to a roomful of cornhusks. He sat, robed and blanketed now, studying how great men of ancient civilizations had left the earth, their final gestures in the space between life and death. Seneca and Hannibal went out as beautiful, swan-dive suicides; even the comical, licentious Nero fell gloriously on his own sword.

Yes, the gesture was everything. Important to go with dignity, to control your fate, not like the sad poet Aeschylus, who died when an eagle, looking to crack the shell of a tortoise in his beak, mistook his bald head for a rock. Or the Chinese poet Li Po, who drowned trying to embrace the full moon on the water's surface. Yes, the gesture was immortal. It would be insufferable to go out like a clown.

So what gesture would suit him? The president was a strange, contradictory man. Even at the height of his powers, he often seemed laconic and dreamy, more like a librarian than a world leader, with a strong, papal nose, glittering, beady eyes, and ears like the halved cap of a portobello mushroom. He valued loyalty, then wrathfully sacked his most devoted lieutenants. He railed against the corruptions of money, though his fourteen-year reign was shot through with financial scandals. A close friend, caught in the double-dealing, killed himself out of apparent disgust for the president's style of government. "Money and death," the friend angrily said shortly before the end. "That's all that interests him anymore."

And yet as others fell, the president survived—by tricks of agility and acumen, patrician charm and warthog ferocity. Now this last intruder hulked toward him. He shuffled with a cane, stooped and frosted silver like a gnarled tree in a wintry place. It took him an eternity to accomplish the most minor things: buttoning a shirt, bathing, walking the neighborhood, a simple crap.

And what would become of the universe he'd created? What would become of his citizens? And then his children and grandchildren, his wife and mistress? Was this the fate of all aged leaders when they were stripped of their magic: to sit like vegetables, shrivel-dicked, surrounded by photographs and tokens of appreciation, by knickknacks and artifacts?

When he slept, he dreamed of living. When he ate, he ate the foods he would miss. But even then, somewhere in his mind, he began to prepare his ceremony des adieux.

I'm going to tell you what happened next—the day of the last meal—for everything during this time in December shaped itself around the specter of eating the meal.

That morning, I pick up my girlfriend, Sara, at Orly airport. I've prevailed on her to come, as any meal shared around a table—the life lived inside each course—is only as good as the intimacies among people there. Through customs, she's alive with the first adrenaline rush of landing in a new country. But then, as we begin driving southwest toward the coast and Bordeaux, she falls fast asleep. It's gray and raining, and ocean wind sweeps inland and lashes the car. The trees have been scoured lifeless. Little men in little caps drive by our windows, undoubtedly hoarding bags of cheese in their little cars. And then a huge nuclear power plant looms on the horizon, its cooling towers billowing thick, moiling clouds over a lone cow grazing in a fallow pasture.

There is something in the French countryside, with its flat, anytime light, that demands melancholy. And I wonder what it means to knowingly eat a last meal. It means knowing you're going to die, right? It means that you've been living under a long-held delusion that the world is infinite and you are immortal. So it means saying sayonara to everything, including the delusions that sustain you, at the same time that you've gained a deeper feeling about those delusions and how you might have

lived with more passion and love and generosity.

And then the most difficult part: You must imagine yourself as a memory, laid out and naked and no longer yourself, no longer you, the remarkable Someone who chose a last meal. Rather, you're just a body full of that meal. So you have to imagine yourself gone—first as a pale figure in the basement of a funeral home, then as the lead in a eulogy about how remarkable you were, and then as a bunch of photographs and stories.

And that's when you must imagine one more time what you most need to eat, what last taste must rise to meet your hunger and thirst and linger awhile on your tongue even as, before dessert, you're lowered into the grave.

It was just before Christmas 1995, the shortest days of the year. The president's doctor slept on the cold floor of the house in Latche while the president slept nearby in his bed, snoring lightly, looked down upon by a photograph of his deceased parents. He was seventy-nine, and the doctor could still feel the fight in him, even as he slept—the vain, beautiful little man punching back. In conversation with the president's friends, the doctor had given him about a 30 percent chance of making it to December. And he had. "The only interesting thing is to live," said the president bluntly.

So there were lemon days and grapefruit days and this constant banter with the tumor: *How are you today? What can I get you today? Another dose of free radicals? Enough radiation to kill the rats of Paris? Please go away now.* There was also a holy trinity of drugs—like blessed Dilaudid, merciful Demerol, and beatific Elavil—that kept the pain at a blurry remove, convinced him in his soaring mind that perhaps this was happening to someone else and he was only bearing witness. Yes, could it be that his powers of empathy—for all his countrymen—were so strong that he'd taken on the burden of someone else's disease and then, at the last moment, would be gloriously released back into his own life again?

With the reprieve, he would walk the countryside near Latche, naming the birds and trees again, read his beloved Voltaire, compose, as he had thousands of times before, love letters to his wife.

He planned his annual pilgrimage to Egypt—with his mistress and their daughter—to see the Pyramids, the monumental tombs of the pharaohs, and the eroded Sphinx. That's what his countrymen called him, the Sphinx, for no one really knew for sure who he was—aesthete or whoremonger, Catholic or atheist, fascist or socialist, anti-Semite or humanist, likable or despicable. And then there was his aloof imperial power. Later, his supporters simply called him Dieu—God.

He had come here for this final dialogue with the pharaohs—to mingle with their ghosts and look one last time upon their tombs. The cancer was moving to his head now, and each day that passed brought him closer to his own vanishing, a crystal point of pain that would subsume all the other pains. It would be so much easier ... but then no. He made a phone call back to France. He asked that the rest of his family and friends be summoned to Latche and that a meal be prepared for New Year's Eve. He gave a precise account of what would be eaten at the table, a feast for thirty people, for he had decided that afterward, he would not eat again.

"I am fed up with myself," he told a friend.

And so we've come to a table set with a white cloth. An armada of floating wine goblets, the blinding weaponry of knives and forks and spoons. Two windows, shaded purple, stung by bullets of cold rain, lashed by the hurricane winds of an ocean storm.

The chef is a dark-haired man, fiftyish, with a bowling-ball belly. He stands in front of orange flames in his great stone chimney hung with stewpots, finely orchestrating each octave of taste, occasionally sipping his broths and various chordeo concoctions with a miffed expression. In breaking the law to serve us ortolan, he gruffly claims that it is his duty, as a Frenchman, to serve the food of his region. He thinks the law against serving ortolan is stupid. And yet he had to call forty of his friends in search of the bird, for there were none to be found and almost everyone feared getting caught,

risking fines and possible imprisonment.

But then another man, his forty-first friend, arrived an hour ago with three live ortolans in a small pouch—worth up to a hundred dollars each and each no bigger than a thumb. They're brown-backed, with pinkish bellies, part of the yellowhammer family, and when they fly, they tend to keep low to the ground and, when the wind is high, swoop crazily for lack of weight. In all the world, they're really caught only in the pine forests of the southwestern Landes region of France, by about twenty families who lay in wait for the birds each fall as they fly from Europe to Africa. Once caught—they're literally snatched out of the air in traps called *matoles*—they're locked away in a dark room and fattened on millet; to achieve the same effect, French kings and Roman emperors once blinded the bird with a knife so, lost in the darkness, it would eat twenty-four hours a day.

And so, a short time ago, these three ortolans—*our* three ortolans—were dunked and drowned in a glass of Armagnac and then plucked of their feathers. Now they lie delicately on their backs in three cassoulets, wings and legs tucked to their tiny, bloated bodies, skin the color of pale autumn corn, their eyes small, purple bruises and—here's the thing—wide open.

When we're invited back to the kitchen, that's what I notice, the open eyes on these already-peppered, palsied birds and the gold glow of their skin. The kitchen staff crowds around, craning to see, and when we ask one of the dishwashers if he's ever tried ortolan, he looks scandalized, then looks back at the birds. "I'm too young, and now it's against the law," he says longingly. "But someday, when I can afford one . . ." Meanwhile, Sara has gone silent, looks pale looking at the birds.

Back at the chimney, the chef reiterates the menu for Mitterrand's last meal, including the last course, as he puts it, "the birdies." Perhaps he reads our uncertainty, a simultaneous flicker of doubt that passes over our respective faces. "It takes a culture of very good to appreciate the very good," the chef says, nosing the clear juices of the capon rotating in the fire. "And ortolan is beyond even the very good."

The guests had been told to hide their shock. They'd been warned that the president looked bad, but then there were such fine gradations. He already looked bad—could he look worse?

It seemed he could. On his return from Egypt, he'd kept mostly to himself, out of sight of others; his doctor still attended to him, but they had begun to quarrel. The president's stubbornness, his fits, and his silences—all of them seemed more acute now. When he entered the room, dressed in baggy pants and a peasant coat, he was colorless and stiff-legged. He was supported by two bodyguards, and a part of him seemed lost in dialogue with the thing sucking him from earth—with his own history, which was fast becoming the sum of his life. He was only half physical now and half spirit.

When the dying are present among the living, it creates an imbalance, for they randomly go through any number of dress rehearsals for death—nodding off at any time, slackening into a meaningful drool. They ebb and flow with each labored breath. Meanwhile, we hide our own panic by acting as if we were simply sitting in the company of a mannequin. It's a rule: In the vicinity of the dying, the inanity of conversation heightens while what's underneath—the thrumming of red tulips on the table and the lap of purple light on the windowpane, the oysters on crushed ice and the birds on the table, the wisp of errant hair drawn behind an ear and the shape of a lip—takes on a fantastic, last-time quality, slowly pulling everything under, to silence.

The president was carried to a reclining chair and table apart from the huge table where the guests sat. He was covered with blankets, seemed gone already. And yet when they brought the oysters—Marennes oysters, his favorite, harvested from the waters of this region—he summoned his energies, rose up in his chair, and begun sucking them, the full flesh of them, from their half shells. He'd habitually eaten a hundred a week throughout his life and had been betrayed by bad oysters before, but, oh no, not these! Hydrogen, nitrogen, phosphorous—a dozen, two dozen, and then, astonishingly, more. He couldn't help it, his ravenous attack. It was brain food, and he seemed to slurp them up against the cancer, let the saltwater juices flow to the back of his throat, change

champagne-sweet, and then disappear in a flood before he started on the oyster itself. And that was another sublimity. The delicate tearing of a thing so full of ocean. Better than a paper wafer—heaven. When he was done, he lay back in his chair, oblivious to everyone else in the room, and fell fast asleep.

Now I have come to France, to the region of François Mitterrand's birth and his final resting place, and on this night, perhaps looking a bit wan myself, I begin by eating the Marennes oysters—round, fat, luscious oysters split open and peeled back to show their delicate green lungs. Shimmering pendulums of translucent meat, they weigh more than the heavy, carbundled shells in which they lie. When you lift the shell to your mouth and suck, it's like the first time your tongue ever touched another tongue. The oysters are cool inside, then warm. Everything becomes heightened and alive. Nibbling turns to hormone-humming mastication. Your mouth swims with sensation: sugary, then salty, then again with Atlantic Ocean sweetness. And you try, as best you can, to prolong it. When they're gone, you taste the ghost of them.

These are the oysters.

And then the foie gras, smooth and surprisingly buttery, a light-brown pâté swirled with faint greens, pinks, and yellows and glittering slightly, tasting not so much of animal but of earth. Accompanied by fresh, rough-crust, homemade bread and the sweet sauternes we drink (which itself is made from shriveled grapes of noble rot), the foie gras dissolves with the faint, rich sparkle of fresh-picked corn. It doesn't matter that it's fattened goose liver. It doesn't matter what it is. Time slows for it.

This is the foie gras.

The capon is superb—not too gamey or stringy—furiously basted to a high state of tenderness in which the meat falls cleanly from the bone with only the help of gravity. In its mildness, in its hint of olive oil and rosemary, it readies the tongue and its several thousand taste buds for the experience of what's coming next.

This is the capon.

And then the wines. Besides the sauternes (a 1995 Les Remparts de Bastor, a 1995 Doisy Daëne), which we drink with the oysters and the foie gras, there are simple, full-bodied reds, for that's how Mitterrand liked them, simple and full-bodied: a 1900 Château Lestage Simon, a 1994 Château Poujeaux. They are long, old and dark. Complicated potions of flower and fruit. Faint cherry on a tongue tip, the tingle of tannin along the gums. While one bottle is being imbibed, another is being decanted, and all the while there are certain chemical changes taking place between the wine and its new atmosphere and then finally between the changed wine and the atmosphere of your mouth.

This is the wine.

And so, on this evening in Bordeaux, in the region where Mitterrand was born and buried, the eating and drinking of these courses takes us four hours, but then time has spread out and dissipated, woodsmoke up the chimney. Mitterrand, who was famous for outwaiting his opponents, for always playing the long, patient game, once said, "You have to give time time."

And so we have, and time's time is nearing midnight, and there are three as-yet unclaimed ortolans, back in the kitchen, that have just been placed in the oven. They will be cooked for seven minutes in their own fat—cooked, as it's gently put, until they sing.

With each course, the president had rallied from sleep, from his oyster dreams, from fever or arctic chill, not daring to miss the next to come: the foie gras slathered over homemade bread or the capon and then, of course, the wines. But what brought him to full attention was a commotion: Some of the guests were confused when a man brought in a large platter of tiny, cooked ortolans laid out in rows. The president closely regarded his guests' dismayed expressions, for it gave him quiet satisfaction—between jabs of pain—to realize that he still had the power to surprise.

The ortolans were offered to the table, but not everyone accepted. Those who did draped large, white cloth napkins over their heads, took the ortolans in their fingertips, and disappeared. The room shortly filled with wet noises and chewing. The bones and intestines turned to paste, swallowed eventually in one gulp. Some reveled in it; others spat it out. When they were through, one by one they reappeared from beneath their hoods, slightly dazed. The president himself took a long sip of wine, let it play in his mouth. After nearly three dozen oysters and several courses, he seemed insatiable, and there was one bird left. He took the ortolan in his fingers, then dove again beneath the hood, the bony impress of his skull against the white cloth—the guests in silence and the self-pleasing, pornographic slurps of the president filling the room like a dirge.

At the table now, three ortolans, singing in their own fat. We'll eat the birds because the ocean storm is at the purple windows; because this man, our chef, has gone to great lengths to honor us at his table; because we're finishers; because it's too late and too far—the clock is literally striking midnight— to turn back.

We offer the third bird to the chef.

And so he's the first to go. An athiest, he doesn't take his beneath the napkin. He just pops the bird in his mouth, bites off the head with his incisors, and holds a thickly bundled napkin over his lips, occasionally slipping it from side to side to sop up the overflowing juices. Slowly, deliberately, he begins to chew. As he does, he locks eyes with Sara. For long, painful minutes during which we can hear the crunch and pop of bone and tendon, he stares deeply across the table at her, with the napkin to his mouth.

I believe the chef is trying to seduce my girlfriend, a scene mirrored by ortolan-eating lovers in Proust, Colette, and Fielding. But then I realize that he's not so much trying to take something from her as trying to find a still point from which he can focus on the chaos in his mouth. He's chewing, sucking, slobbering, savoring. And he's trying to manage all of the various, wild announcements of taste.

After he swallows and dabs his napkin daintily at the corners of his mouth, it's our turn. We raise our birds and place them in our mouths. I can't tell you what happens next in the outside world because, like Mitterrand, I go beneath the hood, which is meant to heighten the sensual experience by enveloping you in the aroma of ortolan. And the hood itself, with its intimation of Klan-like activity, might trouble me more if not for the sizzling bird on its back in my mouth, burning my tongue. The trick is to cool it by creating convections around it, by simply breathing. But, even then, my mouth has gone on full alert. Some taste buds are scorched and half-functioning, while others bloom for the first time and still others signal the sprinkler system of salivary glands.

And now, the hardest part: the first bite.

Like the chef, I sever the head and put it on the plate, where it lies in its own oil slick, then tentatively I try the body with bicuspid. The bird is surprisingly soft, gives completely, and then explodes with juices—liver, kidneys, lungs. Chestnut, corn, salt—all mix in an extraordinary current, the same warm, comforting flood as finely evolved consommé.

And so I begin chewing.

Here's what I taste: Yes, quidbits of meat and organs, the succulent, tiny strands of flesh between the ribs and tail. I put inside myself the last flowered bit of air and Armagnac in its lungs, the body of rainwater and berries. In there, too, is the ocean and Africa and the dip and plunge in a high wind. And the heart that bursts between my teeth.

It takes time. I'm forced to chew and chew again and again, for what seems like three days. And what happens after chewing for this long—as the mouth full of taste buds and glands does its work—is that I fall into a trance. I don't taste anything anymore, cease to exist as anything but taste itself.

And that's where I want to stay—but then can't because the sweetness of the bird is turning slightly bitter and the bones have announced themselves. When I think about forcing them down my throat, a wave of nausea passes through me. And that's when, with great difficulty, I swallow everything.

Afterward, I hold still for a moment, head bowed and hooded. I can feel my heart racing. Slowly, the sounds of the room filter back—the ting of wineglasses against plates, a shout back in the kitchen, laughter from another place. And then, underneath it, something soft and moving. Lungs filling and emptying. I can hear people breathing.

After the president's second ortolan—he had appeared from beneath the hood, wide-eyed, ecstatic, staring into a dark corner of the room—the guests approached him in groups of two and three and made brief small talk about the affairs of the country or Zola or the weather. They knew this was adieu, and yet they hid their sadness; they acted as if in a month's time he would still be among them.

And what about him ? There was nothing left to subtract now. What of the white river that flowed through his childhood, the purple attic full of cornhusks? And then his beautiful books—Dostoyevsky, Voltaire, Camus? How would the world continue without him in it?

He tried to flail one last time against the proof of his death. But then he had no energy left. Just an unhappy body weighted with grapefruits, curving earthward. Everything moving toward the center and one final point of pain. Soon after, he refused food and medicine; death took eight days.

I'm eaten up inside," he said before he was carried from the room.

We wake late and senseless, hungover from food and wine, alone with our thoughts, feeling guilty and elated, sated and empty.

The day after Mitterrand's last meal seemed to have no end. Huddled together, we wander the streets of Bordeaux, everyone on the sidewalks turning silver in the half-light. And then we drive out toward Jarnac, the village where Mitterrand is buried—through the winding miles of gnarled grape trees in the gray gloom. We visit Mitterrand's tomb, a simple family sarcophagus in a thickly populated graveyard, and stand on the banks of his childhood river.

If I could, I would stay right here and describe the exact details of that next day. I would describe how we watched children riding a carousel until twilight, all of their heads tilting upward, hands fluttering and reaching for a brass ring that the ride master manipulated on a wire, how the stone village looked barbaric in the rain, with its demented buildings blackened by soot from the cognac distilleries.

We just seemed to be sleepwalking. Or vanishing. Until later. Until we were lost and the streets had emptied. Until night came and the wind carried with it the taste of saltwater and the warm light in the *boulangerie* window shone on loaves of bread just drawn from the oven. And we were hungry again.

<http://www.esquire.com/features/The-Last-Meal-0598>