

The fifth annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize for Food & Drink Writing 2017

‘Bait’

by Nicky Winder

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‘Bait’

The most ardent wish of Madame de Roubigné, citizen of the province of Auvergne, was to murder her twelve-year-old daughter. Her most fervent (but prudently unexpressed) intention was not to get caught.

It is, perhaps, worth mentioning that Madame de Roubigné did not regard herself as an evil person. Rather, she saw her intentions as being merely practical. When confronted with a troublesome problem or a dilemma, as in the present instance, she believed that the best – and, indeed, only – response was decisive action. Decisive action, however, did not imply haste. Revenge, as Madame de Roubigné frequently reminded herself, is a dish that is best served cold.

And so, having decided that the death of her only daughter was both necessary and desirable, Madame de Roubigné had made certain plans, painstakingly, over a number of years, and now she stationed herself in her shady kitchen – trees from the

nearby forest habitually cast their gloom over this particular room – to carry them out. Some people wishing to dispose of a relative might employ obvious devices such as weapons, but Madame de Roubigné was a woman of refinement, who disliked crudeness in any form, and she scorned to rely on methods so unsubtle (and so easily detectable). Even poison, with its wealth of palatable possibilities, was not sufficiently nuanced to appeal to her; it was not the lure of dispensing toxins to her hated female offspring, then, that drew her, on this occasion, to her kitchen table.

It was five o' clock on a morning in June. The sun, with a tendency towards predictability, had risen. Birds outside tweeted obligingly, a note of caution evident in their voices. The sky, rendered slightly hasty by its anxiety, was already story-book blue. Trees rustled their leaves obediently. They knew only too well what was expected of a forest backdrop, and nervous glances at the log store offered unpleasant reminders of the perils of non-compliance. Madame de Roubigné washed her hands and made a start on the first of her morning's endeavours: baking a batch of home-made biscuits. These would take a few minutes to cook and would then need to cool; meanwhile she could employ her time in concocting a number of other necessary delicacies. She emptied some ingredients into a bowl and started mixing.

Madame de Roubigné's decision to kill her daughter had not been taken lightly or without misgivings. After all, she was an

intelligent woman, well aware that if the crime were ever to be discovered she would run the risk of serious punishment. However, she had always believed in taking calculated risks, where the benefits were significant enough to justify them, and she also had considerable faith in her powers of concealment, having spent much of her life thus far hiding unsavoury truths from unsuspecting souls around her.

In relation to the latter achievement, it would be accurate to state that few things in Madame de Roubigné's life had been straightforward. She had found romantic relationships, for instance, particularly challenging. Sometimes they had even caused her to feel irritated – she pressed harder with the spoon – an irritation discernible in the form of her first husband's corpse, which still lay (and lay still) at the bottom of a well at the end of the garden; no one had any suspicions about this fortuitous state of affairs, nor was there any sign that future suspicions would arise. Her relationship with her second husband had been dissolved – along with his body (her meticulous research had taken a distinctly chemical turn on that occasion) – after he had omitted to remember her birthday, and her third husband, father to the daughter whose demise she was now plotting, had fallen to his death in a nearby ravine. She had allowed local well-wishers to attend the funeral of the much-lamented deceased, but she was not a woman to boast about her accomplishments, and had kept the sight of the not-inconsequential push that had propelled him onto an

assortment of conveniently-placed rocks discreetly veiled from human attentiveness.

This husband, like his luckless predecessors, had had the misfortune to annoy her. He had showed signs of increasing indifference towards her; had looked at her oddly, sometimes, as if he suspected something was amiss. Worst of all, he had started preferring their daughter's company to her own. Even when the girl was just a tiny infant, he seemed to seek her out, and would insist on carrying her around the garden, hoisting her high upon his shoulders so that she could reach the flowers she craved. As she grew, she shared a love of Nature with her father, and Madame de Roubigné observed their mutual affection with an envy tempered only by resentment. On the day her husband bought the girl a kitten, his fate was decided. The kitten she drowned in a milk pail, but her husband was larger and heavier, and his disposal was less easily arranged. Over their meal each evening she started to study his face attentively, listening to his conversation as she poured him glasses of dark red claret. She was vigilant, and later she would replay his guarded sentences repeatedly in her head, not from any sense of connubial affection, but in the hope that she would gain inspiration for hastening his demise. Eventually, however, she recognised that the solution to her problem lay not in her husband's words, but in his actions.

It was, she realised, truly fortunate that his favourite walk was beside the local ravine. When not at work, or playing with

his daughter, he spent many hours there, staring down over the precipice as if it spoke to him, somehow, of his own situation. Madame de Roubigné had been glad to see this evidence of his despair, and did her best to nurture it. Usually he went there at dusk, but she was lucky, once, and he was delayed. Night was falling as he approached his favourite haunt, his lantern bobbing among the trees. She followed him, silent and stealthy as a cat, and waited until he stood at his preferred spot, fireflies dancing around the feeble light as he stared bleakly into the abyss. Let him commune with it more closely, thought Madame de Roubigné, as she propelled him swiftly over the edge and returned to the cottage, her husband's screams still ringing satisfactorily in her ears.

Their daughter's reaction to this event confirmed, for Madame de Roubigné, that she too needed to be disposed of. The little girl did not cling to her mother for comfort, as one might expect; rather, the death of her father seemed to increase the distance between them. It was almost as if, at some intuitive level, she had sensed the truth about her father's misadventure, and she regarded her mother with growing fear and hostility. Inevitably this led Madame de Roubigné to decide on a particular course of action, and to put certain plans in place. The flurry of baking on which she had now embarked was one of the results. She sighed at the memory of the long and complex exertions which had been necessary in order to bring her to the brink of the success she was about to enjoy.

After putting the biscuits into the oven to cook, she decided that the cake needed to be her next priority. But not just any cake. This was the delicious confection that was to be served at her daughter's wake; it would be the publicly-scrutinised evidence of her maternal distress, and would need to be seen to contain the finest ingredients available. She tipped flour, which looked like soft white ashes, into her bowl. She sweetened the flour with sugar. She thought of her daughter, still drowsing upstairs, and viciously cracked an egg, then started beating it.

The cake would be smothered with snow-white icing, and her dim-witted neighbours would see this as a fitting tribute to the young girl's innocence and purity. Madame de Roubigné smiled grimly; only she would know that the expanses of whiteness represented the cold marble slabs under which she would joyfully watch the remains of her daughter being buried. And the lily for the centre, painstakingly fashioned from fondant – why, that was another distraction. A labour of love, those fools would say, not realising that the delicate carving of each petal had simply been a means to an end. The more elaborate the cake, the more eloquently it spoke of the mother's grief. And Madame de Roubigné smiled again. Perhaps her favourite part of the cake-making process on this occasion, though, was preparing the sponge itself. She would enliven it with Summit cherries, she decided, freshly plucked and as red as hearts. Of course, she must cut them into smaller

pieces, or they would sink, and she enjoyed the sensuality of slicing through them with her knife, its silver point piercing one fleshy shape after another.

After the addition of the remaining ingredients and a few more minutes of labour, the cake was safely in the oven, the biscuits were ready and cooling on a rack, and Madame de Roubigné washed her hands again, turning her attention to her main objective. She needed a range of delicacies fit for a very specific palate, but was also aware of the importance of appearances; the presentation of certain vital provisions had to look plausible. She spent some time in reminding herself of the plan that she had made, allowing her thoughts to stray briefly to its gratifying outcome, and at last, once she was satisfied that everything was as it should be, she began her final preparations.

Thus she assembled on her well-scrubbed table: a jar of chutney, home-made, the freshly-baked biscuits (packed in a small, decorated tin), a shining red apple, and a pot of raspberry jam. To these items she added a soft round cheese, and, the crowning glory, a large and tender steak – the finest a distant butcher had been able to procure. Madame de Roubigné did not believe in taking unnecessary chances. She wrapped this magnificent cut of meat carefully, positioning it next to the cheese, as her plans would probably benefit from this proximity.

Finally, in pride of place on her kitchen table, Madame de

Roubigné deposited a substantial basket. Made of wicker, it was capacious as well as sturdy, and exuded a homely, rural air. One by one she packed the various delicacies she had prepared into this ample receptacle. Then she covered them with a gauzy fabric, through which their tantalising aromas still permeated, so that the kitchen was transformed into a veritable banquet of competing smells, each, it seemed, more delectable than the others. It may have seemed, to the casual observer, that the basket and the glorious feast it contained were now complete, but this was not, in fact, the case. Since making the decision to dispose of her daughter, Madame de Roubigné had spent many hours in one of the libraries in Clermont Ferrand, the capital city of Auvergne. She had lingered chiefly in the Zoology Section, poring over numerous books pertaining to the olfactory responses (and, specifically, preferences) of the lupine species as a group, and of the sub-species inhabiting her own region in particular. Notes had been taken, substances acquired from a range of sources: pharmacies, abattoirs, and boucheries. These had been supplemented more recently with various fresh ingredients – one of her daughter’s chickens had been encouraged to make a generous gesture of self-sacrifice earlier that morning, for example – and a heavily distilled version of the resultant mixture was now stored safely in a small vial, the contents of which Madame de Roubigné drew up carefully into a syringe she had acquired in readiness.

Madame de Roubigné did not believe in leaving anything to chance. The basketful of goodies had been prepared with such attentiveness that it was bound to achieve its purpose. However, just in case the scents issuing so powerfully from it did not encounter, in their journey through the forest air, a certain large, pointed, furry muzzle (notwithstanding rows of shiny teeth), then the liquid inside the syringe, drizzled with unhesitating hand over the contents of the basket, would undoubtedly do the job instead. And if that aroma did not result in the sudden pricking of two hairy ears, a change of direction, and a determined, carnivorous bounding towards her twelve-year-old daughter, then Madame de Roubigné would acknowledge herself very surprised indeed.

What followed would be decisive, may or may not later involve the brisk – and timely, not to say welcome – annihilation of her elderly mother in a nearby cottage (depending on which version of the narrative events adhered to), and would be greeted universally as a tragic accident, resulting in sympathy – not to mention financial compensation – of the most gratifying proportions.

Only one eventuality could thwart this ingenious plan, but Madame de Roubigné was a woman of great resourcefulness, and she had had the foresight to despatch a number of invitations, several weeks earlier, on behalf of the Guild of Woodcutters, summoning them all (on pain of losing their licence, which would render them ineligible to raise an axe

against any ‘tree, sapling, coppicing or any other substantial form of natural growth’ – Guild of Woodcutters Regulations) to a meeting in Paris, many kilometres away. No gestures of last-minute rescue or redemption would be allowed to interfere with what she had in mind; the trap was set, and it was foolproof.

Madame de Roubigné finished packing the basket, checking its contents several times to be certain that nothing had been omitted. Exulting in the thoroughness and precision of her culinary preparations, she summoned her daughter down to breakfast. She watched the child eat her simple meal, then helped her to put on her red-hooded cape, fastening it tightly at the throat with fingers remarkably eager to perform this maternal service.

Then Madame de Roubigné, murderer and mother, despatched her daughter into the forest’s depths.

