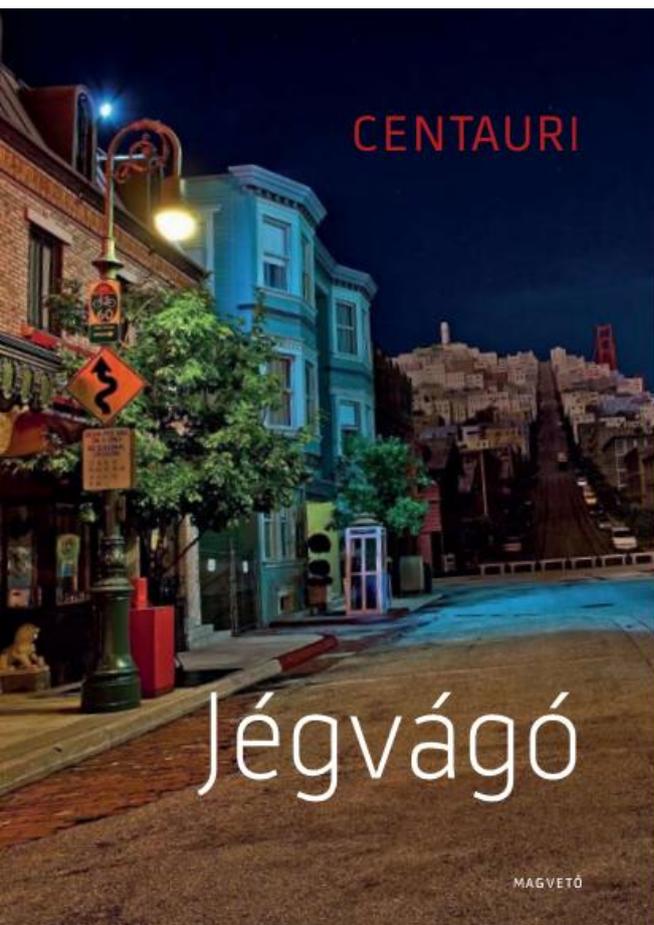


*'Dan Coolbirth?' he asks.  
'Fuck no, it's Jack London'—and I shoot.*



## **Centauri: Icepick**

A (grand American) novel. 416 pages. Published by **Magvető Publishing, Hungary**

Centauri, the 'mysterious writer', doesn't live in the States, and yet his first novel is a genuine modern grand American novel. Spine-tingling accidents, attacks, brain surgery, boozing sessions, crises, and amorous disappointments mark the life of young Dan Coolbirth, whose romance with the much older Angelica is interrupted by a double homicide. That is when the road movie starts, and Dan flees from California northwards to Montana, where he comes across Teya, an Indian girl of ravishing beauty and special powers.

Almost filmically, the story of an extravagant, mad and yet in many respects painfully average family is pieced together, with appearances from countless colourful and unforgettable figures, with writers like Salinger and Melville appearing as indirectly important characters, and light is even shed on what links the family to Jack London. Dan, like a true teenager, is critical of the world around him, particularly his parents, (and even his beloved grandmother, who with the help of her screwball friends tries to make a 'ballsy lad' out of him). Though he does have a brilliant sense of humour. But it's difficult to say whether Dan's story takes him into the past, or into a world where no living person has yet been.

### **Centauri**

Centauri, the author with a pseudonym, was born in 1972 and lives in the Transdanubian region.

His fiction has been tentatively categorized as magical realism, and compared to the work of *Márquez*, *Rushdie*, *Grass*, *Kafka* and *Szentkuthy*. He is not disclosing his real identity, referring mostly to the freedom of writing. He does not disclose photos of himself and does not appear in public.

*'I'll stand in the door with the rifle aimed straight ahead, and if they come in, I shoot, it makes no difference now.' Teya runs to me and tries to disarm me, but I don't let her. 'I won't let them take you. If I've shot once, I'll shoot again. The door is closed. They knock, wait a couple of moments, then one of the cops comes in, a pistol in his hand. 'Dan Coolbirth?' he asks. 'Fuck no, it's Jack London'—and I shoot.*

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### **Inquiries and translation rights:**

István Láng Foreign Rights Manager [lang.istvan@lira.hu](mailto:lang.istvan@lira.hu) Tel: +36-1-235-5030 Fax: +36-1-318-4107  
Magveto Publishing House Ltd. Danko u. 4-8. H-1086 Budapest Hungary [www.magveto.hu](http://www.magveto.hu)

# CENTAURI

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## ICE PICK

Translated from *Jégvágó*, Budapest: Magveto" Kiadó, 2013

TRANSLATION BY TIM WILKINSON

### CHAPTER 1

Man! If you're curious, I'll tell you: everything is hopelessly crummy, but I have a strong feeling that before long something greasy-new will happen; the kind of thing I can't even imagine. It is no secret, but for longer than I care to remember the air around me is at a standstill, yet I'll take bets that within a close deadline the world will be set dead against me. Don't ask if that will be good or bad for me: I've no idea. One thing is for sure: as of right now, the situation is ultra-shitty. In recent days all I have done is read. Right through the night, non-stop and without meals, I only went into the yard to take a piss: that is what Grandpa Coolbirth — if he were still alive — would also do; sally out onto the street or piss his pants and tug them off at the destination for us rather to throw in a joint or two.

Fuck it! I read so much that by the time I go to bed I have black rings doing the hula hoop before my eyes; I am not reading because I have nothing better to do, but because for the time being I can't do anything else; between us, that before long I'm going to throw the towel in; until that happens I am devouring books that deal with staggeringly big blunders. Of course, some folks will chant "every cloud has a silver lining" — but if you really want to know, a cloud is something which has no lining. It's crummy because there is nothing good in it. Isn't that so? The fact that that's the case is only blabbed about by people who are faking it and think such stuff and nonsense will make them look wiser guys than those who have a positive attitude to life but in reality don't subscribe to it in any way, just parrot what others say; that's how the rot is passed on from father to son, check it out — it shrivels one up horribly. There are some people, like Casimir or Dick, who can regurgitate that sort of stuff every hour on the hour.

I've got a collection of disgusting stock phrases. Have a positive stance to life? What tripe, as if life were a dilemma of Galvani's theory, or as if Faraday and Edison were to clink glasses.

How many times have I heard the old saw: *Money won't buy you love.*

You've heard it already? It's fair bet that whoever says that has never had to get refunds on empty bottles and is just shooting the breeze. D'you know what? If I hear just one more time, I'll crack the person's jaw.

"Then gimme some money! Don't be mean, what's a buck or two to you? I can string a grand out for six months, but you wouldn't even notice if your bookkeeper ripped off two

grand. Your business partner plays cards in Vegas on your account, even your driver pays for tarts from your dough. You may already have a good idea that anyone who can is ripping you off, including you secretary for a grand a month and your Cuban home help for two bars of soap every day. I guess you can afford that and its factored into your business strategy, though it's something else that the pizza delivery man has bonks your wife every now and again. You've never tumbled? The freezer is full, even the tofu there is going off, what do you want — the moment you go off into talks — a pizza for? What column does that fall under in your ledger? Those who live around you are only excited by what trickles down, and now you tell me that begrudge me the odd dollar or two for me to test whether your money can make me happy for at least a few hours? For me to be able at least to eat as many waffles as I can stuff in — you deny me that? You little shit, with your holier-than-thou's, you scumbag. If only you had kept your trap shut!

It would have been cool to see dishing that out to a Wall Street guru. It would be great bellowing until the pupils of your eyes blow out into well cylinders so I might even boldly leap headfirst in like Superman, through your eyes and into your idiotic brain, like Keanu Reeves does into the stomach of Agent Smith in *The Matrix*, just in order to totally screw you up, like shit in a lavatory bowl.

Of course, I know I wouldn't have the bottle to do that. It was for nothing that Grandma was constantly encouraging me, lugging me from bar to bar: the sad truth is I'm lily-livered. Not scared shitless, just lily-livered. If a revolt were ever to break out in Oakland, d'you know what my role would be? I would be dusting the barricades with a white rag. In any case, why would I holler when I know a lummoX like that won't part with a cent.

Fair enough, now I haven't a bean — neither a lot or a little — it's true that money won't bring happiness. Right now it's down to books. T's another matter that those, to, were bought for money, apart from those sent by my mate Goblin. But goldarn it! He himself shelled out for them.

In any case I carry on with the reading even when I'm flush with cash. I like books. There may be several reasons for that. One is genetics. Bit by bit, we are finding that DNA has a hand in everything. Gogol? Long gone are the days when we all came out of his overcoat. More and more it seems that we all burst out of Friar Mendel's peas.

That stands out particularly with my family. I might say that Granny hewed a book worm out of me, but it wasn't as simple as that. Grandma Coolbirth was, in fact, Pa's half-sibling, only as it happened twenty-five years older than him. Since my ancestors just scampered around like poisoned mice and they had no time left for me, when it came down to it for the most part it was her who brought me up, so she may well have had a part in my getting hooked on books, despite which it was her person that was decisive, as my paternal father, John Coolbirth by name — in the family he was only ever called Pop — likewise dealt with books: he started out as a bookbinder before going into printing. Supposedly he had printed *The Catcher in the Rye* in 1951, though Goblin reckons it was published in New York City. What is even closer to the bone, his mother, the first Ina Coolbirth, my great-grandmother, was a librarian. On my reckoning, that works out at four generations. Just like a dynasty of physicians — not one who wasn't a bibliophile. Upbringing alone won't keep a love of books going for more than a hundred years, it has to do with the genes, man! Who knows, perhaps the whole family is descended from Gutenberg.

Don't go thinking it was easy for me to work all this out, but since 2009 I have been absolutely in the picture, in that year both Granny and my father kicked the bucket. Here I'm talking about a 79-year-old and a 53-year-old adult male. Mother simply left left me in the lurch two years before that.

"I can't stick breathing the same air as your Gran. You're a grown-up now, Dan. Your Dad, God forgive for saying it, is nothing more than a zombie. Some day you'll understand what I'm driving at. You have all got Angelica; I'm no use to anyone here."

So saying — no kisses, no hugs, no promises — she hung the key to the apartment on

the coat peg by the door, alongside the picture of Roosevelt and strolled out of our lives. The old man didn't leave even a scribbled note. As a result there were three of us left in the house from 2007.

My father slaved away constantly whereas Gran tramped around town the whole day long. By the evening the pad could come to life, with Gran staggering back, her lipstick usually smudged, often a bit tipsy, every now and again being brought back in a taxi by her young friend, Angelica Warren. Sometimes Angelica would have supper at our house, so one way or another we ran into each other for a couple of hours almost every evening; all the same. It was just as quiet as in the mornings. As if we weren't even there.

In the old days evenings were a time for the usual program of incredible putting down to start up.

"God, Ina! You've been hitting the bottle again," my mother would say.

"Yes. At least eight Bloody Marys. So what?"

"Doesn't it strike you that it would be better if Dan didn't see you like this?"

"My darling girl, in case you hadn't noticed, Dan has passed his twentieth birthday and he might be a fully fledged man if you paid a bit more attention to him. You'd be better acquainted with him if at least you spent the weekends at home instead of in self-knowledge groups. And, of course, John wouldn't have to look on the house as a motel."

"D'you think that I could for once have my supper in peace?" muttered my old man, but only to himself. My stomach heaved. In the end I would slink off to my crib and only come out when everyone was asleep.

Incredible as it may sound, once my mother had bitten the dust the quiet of the evenings was more disturbing than the rowing had been. It would have been better if my old man had blown fuse, once at least, and between two slices of toast, out of the blue, would yell out, "Screw your mother!" and then carry on munching his toast and calmly didding his spoon into his 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>- minute boiled egg.

Gran could also have pronounced, with wise nonchalance, "Don't pay any attention to him, my boy! It's better not to."

But they said nothing at all, and that was the last straw. They pretended nothing at all had happened. Perhaps they were relieved once my mother had gone, but then can't have supposed it was a bundle of fun for me as well. After all, she had given birth to me, so it was not as simple as my having sight of her as she sauntered out of the entrance door. I'm serious. Who gives a shit about how moths and fathers step in or out of doors at our place the way Mother did. I was the first in the family over four generations to know both my parents. That's a trifle embarrassing, I reckon.

Alongside the fact that Mother went off to lead a happy life, that was less painful than the deaths of my old man and Gran two years later. For that very reason I found the keeping stumm about it all the more unbearable. You wanna know why? I can almost hear Mother rabbiting on: "You reckon you'd be better off without me? You reckon that you can stand on your own feet? Well don't let me stop you! Eat what you cooked."

And when all we did for weeks was mess around, it seemed absolutely that we were going to stew in our own juice and Mother had been right: without her things were a whole lot worse, and her leaving was a punishment. Maybe for Gran, too. The way it looked we came unstuck. You know what? That's exactly what we did. By keeping stumm. Came off badly. You wanna know why? Because that's the way Mother wanted. If only we could have thrown fits for at least a few days. Of course, I was also of shit-all use: I stood in the door, it rained into the hall, and I was dead calm as I watched her hanging the key on the coat peg, and I even trundled the wheeled trunk to the taxi instead of bawling at her:

"Get the fuck outa here!"

The taxi wasn't prepared to hang around for even a couple of minutes in front of the house, it being in a no-parking zone, but parked two blocks further, the road was slippery with mud bubbling out of the drains, Mother trotted in front of me under her umbrella whilst I, like

a poodle, followed her step for step, clattering along with the wretched trunk. I didn't utter a word. Trunk at the back, Mother in front, in the car door —whoosh! — car vanishes. Not so much as a glance at me.

It's hard to imagine the hush which descends on a house from which before long first Gran catapulted out, and a month later Father. It's hard to imagine the bleeding hush which descends on one. If I told you, then you would also flip.

What could I turn my hands to? I didn't even feel like reading; all I did was leaf through the humungous amount of books I inherited. The one day I caught myself packing up all the family documents. I soon came to see that nothing was of any value, nothing was where it should be — and by the time spring came round I had sketched out the family tree on the back of some Xmas packaging paper with poinsettias for decoration.

Since 2009 I have been aware that not counting a Phineas Gage from New England, it all started with another Ina Coolbirth, my great-grandmother, probably around 1895. That woman, the founding matron of the whole family must have been an extremely promising woman, and uncannily she was also a librarian, and what's more, precisely in the same Webster Street library as Gran. Great-grandma's son was John Coolbirth I; in other words, Gramps not only spent his schoolboy years in the library, but he was actually born there. One day after closing, the birth pains so suddenly took hold of great-grandma that she collapsed on the spot and she only struggled to her feet again after giving birth to Gramps next to the travel books shelves.

It is not necessarily of no matter where one is born. For most of us it is in hospital. For Jesus it was on a farm. For Gramps — a special case — in a library. It was useless nagging grandma about the "Joseph", she kept that strictly to herself. It could've been anyone from the postman, the Holy Spirit, or one of the Rockefellers, even John L. Davie of the House of Representatives, who like a Croesus, financed the Webster Library from his own pocket and, by no chance at all, the Salvation Army, let's say. Since my great-grandmother was a spinster and Gramps a bastard child, that was where they continued to live for quite a long time. My grandfather, therefore, learnt how to crawl on all fours, on the very same parquet floor of the library off which not much before Great-grandma Coolbirth had mopped up the forewaters. The signs are that Gramps did not land on his head, but one thing is certain that as a youth more than a few times he brushed against by a big novel. It's no surprise that he became a bibliophile. Thanks to that my father inherited from him — and me from my father — roughly two hundred volumes written in who knows what language.

Goblin reckons that Gran's inheritance includes one of the missing manuscripts of Aristotle. If that's true it would save all worries for a lifetime. It would be like finding a Titian or a Rembrandt in the garden shed. It's hard to work out whether Goblin was pulling my leg. I don't think so. For a start he is not given to joking, not that a grazer of classical philology can't have a sense of humour. For another thing, he was acquainted with my Gran earlier than I was, so who knows what he picked up from her ages ago. He reckons a lot of stuff did a disappearing act during World War II about which not a soul knew until then. Paintings, stamps, maps, and codices came to light from the most unexpected places, from attics and cellars. One part had been stolen by the Nazis, another part by the Russkies. Then the Nazis robbed the Russkies, and still later the Russkies robbed the Nazis, at which time we Americans also stepped in and stole everything back from everybody in order to give everything back to everybody, except a few bits and pieces remained in our hands all the same. In the final analysis it is conceivable that in that chaos something like that about which previously nobody knew ended up in the States; it is quite another matter how anything would have landed up at Gran's of all places. In other words, one ought to get an expert to look through the inheritance, because I have found nothing of special note, or more exactly only a pistol about which I could not decide whether it had been my father's or Gran's.

Granpa Coolbirth sailed in my great-grandmother's side wake in more than one respect. For a start, he made his living from bookbinding, later founded a printing firm, but

even more interesting than that, at the age of 34, in 1930, the worst possible time, the nadir of the world economic slump he knocked up a girl, who for her part simply vanished like camphor. The abandoned kid was Gran, whom my grandfather named Ina after my great-grandmother. At 72 years of age, great-granny could only help by looking after her grandchild, young Ina while Gramps scraped together a bite to eat.

For Gran & Co. Roosevelt was a god, with his picture even hanging in the hall as it was thanks to him that Pa was left standing in the Depression. At the time of the New Deal the Public Works Administration put in hand a program of large-scale construction. That was when we became not far short of New Yorkers since manual workers were recruited first of all for constructing La Guardia airport. Gramps, however, hesitated. Leave the West Coast? That's going a tad too far! We then almost became Angeleros as in round two jobs were being advertised for the Griffith Observatory. Gramps was pleased as Punch as Los Angeles was almost the next-door city, and he even got as far as packing his suitcase. He planned that if he landed the job even grandma might move out there later on. He walked out to the station at dawn, an infant in his arms, and as he was standing around on the platform a fellow came by who, likewise on the authority of the PWA, was recruiting workers for San Francisco as they had also dusted down a plan for the Golden Gate Bridge that had been cherished for 50 years. My grandfather chased after the fellow and within minutes had been added to the list, hurried home with the trunk, handed Gran over to my great-grandma, and started work that very day. By the afternoon he was shoveling in the foundations of one of the towers and working hard at pushing a wheelbarrow, but the next day his wrist joints had repetitive strain injury. As a result we remained San Franners.

Let it be said in his favor, though a printer by trade he carried out the roughest jobs and was devoted in bringing Gran up. However, he did not give up attempts to procure a woman. There's no way of knowing what went wrong, but it was perilously late in the day that he found a fitting mate, then Gran was already 24 and was working. It wasn't that he was seeking a woman to take care of the little girl. Still, in 1954 up popped Jessica Vernieu, who in 1955 gave birth to my father. He was dogged by bad luck. It was just the time he could have let go of his daughter's hand and lived in a happy marriage, as the printing works that he had bought back was flourishing mightily, at which point Jessica went and died on him. That was too much. Gramps was crushed.

See for yourself: you pull yourself together seven times, and in the end you still get screwed. Even if you do a handstand and shit yourself. And then a New Deal or Woodstock only comes along once. In truth, Gramps was not in as crummy a position as it looked. True, he was 50 years old by then, and a brat had been left on his hands, but by then his daughter had reached 25 years old.

One day he plonked himself in front of his daughter: "I brought you up. Now it's your turn. Raise your younger brother in my place," and so saying he pressed the infant into her arms.

Subsequently he disposed of the printing shop that he had managed so nicely in the boom years, put his subsistence into stocks and shares, and resettled in Montana, near the Canadian border. It was no use fleeing, however, because fate overtook him there as well. Maybe his conscience would also not leave him in peace, for ultimately the big truth is that it ditched my father, then he squandered it, maybe so that Gran should by no chance be able to serve him back. According to Gran, after that he did no work worth mentioning, only swigged at liquor and read; as long as his eyesight allowed, he would go hunting; in the end, at the age of 74, he vanished at Flathead Lake, a vast freshwater lake in western Montana which is bordered by spookily dark forests. Most old buzzards go soft in the head of their own and wander off without any reason into the wide world, but Dad's case was not shabby like that. So far from it that it is worth jumping back in time.

## CHAPTER 2

Grandpa's fate was sealed much earlier, probably already back in 1848, in New England. During an explosion a devilishly big iron rod zinged into the noggin of a decent chap named Phineas Gage. It entered through his face and exited through the top of his skull. In those days steam machines no longer counted as novelties, but for boilers to blow up was still a common occurrence. I have no idea exactly what the hell detonated next to Phineas's conk, maybe a locomotive, but in any event it must have been a huge bang, because the pipe shot through his head like a rifle bullet. One minute Phineas was still negotiating how many tons of coal should be brought from Lethbridge, Alberta, and the next minute, like a salt mine, he was standing motionless in the smoke with a sooty face, as inanely as if Chaplin had just pelted a custard pie in his face, in his head a foot-and-a-half or 60-cm length of boiler tube. It had gone through him with surgical precision and jointlessly, there was not even any seepage of blood. For a couple of days he just sat without making any move, just blinking his big, serious cow's eyes and from time to time asking, "What happened?"

The others had no clue what to say.

The day approached when Phineas, bit by bit, would recover from the shock and fingered his chin.

"I need a shave," he said, and at last gott o his feet and staggered off to thd bathroom. The others chewed their nails with worrying about what would happen if the tube caught on the door jamb, but no, it didn't. Phineas stepped through the door without a hitch, took out his shaving brush and set it down on one edge of the sink, turned on the tap, looked up and that, friend, was when it began to dawn on him that he had been sitting around for three days with a bloody great pole in his bonce. That was why he had felt no urge to get up, sleep or eat, though he had been made to drink from a beaker of water; that was why everything was so strange, with the whole world looking like he had never seen it before like that, in a live, direct broadcast. Or precisely the reverse: as if the world were composed of magazines that had been fairly skillfully cut and pasted.

A rare, but not unique case. I myself have seen the like, and moreover here in San Francisco. When I was a child, every summer a sea pelican whom we called Pablo used to turn up on the beach under Cliff House. A good few pelicans sit about in the bay area from spring on, but Pablo was a truly unusual creature. He was a spectacle in the same way that the multitude of sea lions on view at Pier 39 in Fisherman's Wharf. One spring he returned to California with an arrow in his body. The arrow had entered under his crop, almost disappearing into the stomach, then, having travelled the length of the neck, popped out under his beak. On that account anyone could recognize Pablo from a long distance way, not due to the arrow but to his unusual, sashaying way of flying. The bright sparks ferreted out that they spent the winters in Paraguay, or more specifically the region between the Paraguay and the Pilcomayo Rivers as it was exclusively the Guaicurú Indian people who forayed in that part of the world and hunted with arrows of the kind he carried in his body.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* always reported on Pablo's journeys. The old pelican got the most out of life, a big vagrant, vanishing and then turning up again a dozen times in just a single year. News of him was received at various times from Mexico and Florida, and on almost a weekly basis between Los Angeles and San Francisco. However much he roved, though, he was basically one of ours, a San Franciscan pelican.

Nature conservationists watched his every step. Many people regretted that he did not find a mate and lived a solitary life. After a while had elapsed a number of overzealous Greens got it into their heads to help Pablo in his disadvantaged situation by surgically removing the arrow so that he could regain his position a fully fledged member of the West coast pelican colony. A basin was set up for him under the rock-face at Cliff House, in the

place where the surf of the Pacific Ocean runs its course for a good long way over the sands, where anyone could watch events in comfort from the windows of the pristine-white restaurant. At all hours of the day the basin waited the ever-hungry Pablo with fish. Two days later, to the greatest delight of the guests and patiently coffee-drinking scribes, he was captured and, with onlookers being held back by a police line, the arrow was removed—an operation from which Pablo died the next day. After that he was stuffed, the arrow was reinserted, and he was exhibited in the museum of the California Academy of Sciences in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco.

The boiler tube was also extracted from Phineas's head, but, unlike Pablo, he got away with that, too. I have to say, it would have been kinder for him to kick the bucket. Both for him and for many thousands more.

He had a jet-black crew cut and short-cropped moustache, slightly sallow complexion, and coal-black eyes. His look radiated vitality, humour, and — believe it or not — love. Yet after the rod, to everyone's amazement, was dug out of his skull, all of Phineas's charm was lost, darkened to pitch, and he radiated fuck-all. He flipped out. He cursed like a docker; he became aggressive, quarrelsome, coarse, and ranting, a veritable scourge. He looked at everything with hatred. Phineas Gage was changed into a morose scoundrel by the boiler tube.

In itself, from my grandfather's point of view, that would not have been disastrous, only Gage had a frail, Catholic little wife by the name of Deonna. She was, even at the best of times, jittery, chlorotic, blonde-haired woman, and now she was stymied by two things at once. For one thing, her husband had trudged off to work as a meek, standup fellow but returned as a turbocharged Nero. He turned into a shithead such as the whole neighbourhood had never seen the like for 25 years. For a second thing, Deonna was blocked not only by a changed husband but by the sheer figure. Earlier she had not come across anything evil. Her most jarring recollection was when, a wafer had leaped out of the hands of Father Félibien on the second Sunday of Lent: it sprang onto the altar, struck the bench, bounced twice on the stone floor before the padre, by then scrambling on all fours after them, managed to clutch it. So, what about Deonna? Since she was sitting in the first row and she broke into a sweat, it passed through her mind that the wafer might roll down the altar steps and in the end it would be up to her to catch it! But was she in any way permitted to do that? Hey presto, just like that, to grasp Christ's body? Faced with the music hall of Lent, Deonna now realized that some moments are a lot more dreadul than that. A tube from a dirty boiler can bring about a change that not even hundred psalms will efface. Deonna found hersel in the entrace to Hell, and above its lintel the following was inscribed:

*Abandon all hope ye who enter here.*

Maybe even that would not have been enough to do the dirt on Pa, but Félibien advised the skinny little woman: skedaddle before even worse trouble comes along. That in itself shows how a Félibien, for all that he was a devout priest, was an enlightened soul. Deonna had entered an eternal alliance in accordance with the rite of the Roman Catholic Church. That need not have stopped her taking to her heels; probably not even Phineas Gage would be all that cut up, only in her time of trouble Deonna clung more than ever to God and the Church as for her they represented her only solace. Thus, without the Church giving the nod it would not have occurred to her to leave him. Félibien reassured her:

“My dear girl, trust in the Lord and write a letter to His Holiness for the marriage to be considered as non-binding as the Devil has taken possession of your husband, and it will surely not leave him. Your lawful husband's soul has now gone to damnation and is not serving the Mother Church but the empire of Beelzebub, the Underworld.

Enthused by the idea that perhaps, with Rome's permission, she might be rid of Phineas with a clean conscience, Deonna did indeed write, or rather got the parish priest to write. Félibien suspected there was little chance of their receiving a favorable reply from Rome, since Pope Pius IX was by no means an enlightened man. For that reason, so that the letter should be a dead cert, the priest first had Father Iñigo, the trendiest exorcist of the day,

come by.

That step gave another nudge to grandfather's fate. News of the impending exorcism carried the names of Phineas and Deonna further afield than had the frightening accident and miraculous escape combined.

Iñigo's itsy-bitsy assistance was of no use, of course. Phineas would remain a malicious brute even if shot through the heart with a silver bullet. Getting wind of what was going on around him, he soaked up still more of it. He walloped Deonna so soundly that even if she had been literate she would have been unable to write any letter as both her hands were broken. Deonna convalesced in the parish, and although it seemed unlikely that Phineas would seek her out, the parish and the church were guarded night and day by four strapping miners. She had not yet recuperated when said letter, in Reverend Félibien's elegant handwriting, was sent off to Pius IX. The letter even appeared in issue No. 78 of the *Review of the History of British Medicine*. Goblin forwarded that to me, and if it is of interest it ran as follows:

*In earnest prayer to God, ask Your Holiness the Pope, blessed father, the vicar of Our Lord Jesus Christ on earth, to grant dissolution from the vow I made to Phineas Gage and ask God to dissolve the holy bonds which you presented to us and man cannot interrupt. God sees that from the bottom of my heart and soul I love the man who received in Christ the name of Phineas Gage, but I stand with a pure heart before the Lord God and all his saints even when I assert that the man with whom I am obliged to share my bed is no longer Phineas Gage. I do not know, it being known only to God Almighty, what has become of Phineas Gage, but it is certain by now that this man is not the same as him.*

*Your Holiness may have heard the frightening case that Phineas Gage suffered in February of last year in which his body survived but in all certainty not his soul. As a result of an explosion, a piece of iron bored through his head. I know that God's ways and ends are inscrutable, nor do I seek to get to the bottom of why things happened the way they did, or particularly how, but I am certain that his soul departed through the hole that the piece of iron punched in Phineas Gage's head, and Lucifer and his dark host moved into its place. It may also be no chance that this was done to him by a steam engine, a machine which according to many derives from the devil. It was in vain that I turned to the Lord in prayer to return to me my husband's soul; in vain that Father Iñigo, holiest priest of the Church of Christ, tried to reason with Lucifer; everything was in vain, Phineas Gage is yet the minion of evil and continues daily to exercise his frightening authority over me.*

*He strikes and beats me wherever he can reach me, whatever I do, and, like a wild stallion, he assails me whenever he fancies. Several times a day he keeps me bound up, even on the Lord's day, he does not go to church, he holds the priest in contempt, he urinates on the crucifix and often masturbates on it. His willy is many times bigger than the old one and always at the ready, purple-black like a ripe aubergine, with a surface like sandpaper. Against my will Phineas Gage thrusts it into my mouth with such force that I choke and his untold sperm on every single occasion when I plead for nourishment or a sip of water.*