

Irreversible
By Jack Karp

Dialogue Sample

GROVES

Have you shown this to anyone else?

ROBERT

Just you.

GROVES

Let's keep it that way.

ROBERT

I'll have to explain it to my men.

GROVES

Don't. I want this compartmentalized.

ROBERT

We have to get people in the lab testing designs. The team leaders need to know how we're going to –

GROVES

Each of them is working on a different part of the gadget. They only need to know enough to finish their part.

ROBERT

Science doesn't work that way. You can't ask people to make decisions about something if they can only see one small part of it.

GROVES

There are already too many people who know too much about this as it is. If everyone sticks to their knitting, then no one knows enough to be a security risk.

ROBERT

None of my men are security risks.

GROVES

So you say. God knows enough of the people you talked me into bringing out here have suspicious backgrounds.

ROBERT

Just because someone isn't American, doesn't make them suspicious.

GROVES

I'm not talking about the ones who aren't American.

(Brief pause.)

ROBERT

I thought we'd settled this. I told you, you don't have to worry about him. He's perfectly loyal.

GROVES

You can't know that.

ROBERT

I think I know my own brother.

GROVES

Still, if you want to keep certain people on the project, I need certain assurances. Understood?

ROBERT

Understood.

GROVES

This is it then? This is the design you want to go with?

ROBERT

Yes.

GROVES

You're not going to change your mind? Once we commit to this, we can't turn back.

(While they are talking, BOHR enters unseen.)

ROBERT

I'm not going to change my mind.

GROVES

Alright, we'll try out your new toy, see if it works.

BOHR

For all of our sakes, it better.

(ROBERT and GROVES both turn toward BOHR.)

ROBERT

Niels!

(ROBERT goes to BOHR and the two hug.)

When did you get here?

BOHR

About thirty minutes ago. But I have spent the last twenty-five trying to convince the guards to let me in.

GROVES

Do you have a badge?

BOHR

A badge? No, I do not have a –

GROVES

You're not supposed to be on the base without a badge.

BOHR

Bah, badges and guards and barbed wire. It is almost as if I had not escaped the Nazis.

GROVES

Escaped the... wait, are you... ?

ROBERT

General, Niels Bohr. Niels, this is General Leslie Groves. He's running the project.

GROVES

Oh, Dr. Bohr, forgive me, I didn't realize you'd arrived.

(GROVES shakes BOHR'S hand.)

I'm sorry about all the security.

BOHR

No apologies necessary, General. I only wish you had warned me before I got off the train. There I was, standing with my suitcases, and all the while these soldiers kept wandering up and down the platform asking for Nicholas Baker, is anyone here Nicholas Baker? It was an hour before I realized they were looking for me.

GROVES

You of all people understand how important it is to keep anyone from knowing you're here.

BOHR

Yes, yes, of course.

(To ROBERT.)

So, Opje, how is the work coming?

ROBERT

Slowly but surely.

BOHR

How have you managed to solve the problem of... oh, how do you say... Ungestört reden?

ROBERT

Ah, yes, Ungestört reden. Wenn wir weiter Deutsch reden, geht er vielleicht weg. Er kann es nicht haben wenn er nichts versteht.

BOHR

Tja, dann hat er gerade die falschen Spielkollegen ausgesucht.

(They both laugh. Awkward pause.)

GROVES

Well, doctor, it was good meeting you.

BOHR

Oh, I am sorry, General, how rude I am being. It is just that my English is not so good. When it comes to these technical discussions, I still think in German, I am afraid.

GROVES

Think nothing of it, Doctor. I have some work I need to get back to anyway. I'll let the two of you catch up.

(GROVES takes a badge from his pocket and gives it to BOHR.)

Here, put this on and no one will stop you next time.

(BOHR takes the badge.)

BOHR

Ah, you were out of yellow stars, I suppose.

(ROBERT and BOHR laugh. GROVES does not.)

GROVES

Well... I should be going. Dr. Bohr, we're all very excited to have you here.

BOHR

Thank you, General.

GROVES

(To ROBERT.)

See you later, *Opje*.

(GROVES exits.)

BOHR

Funny how the sound of German drives people out of a room these days. He does not have much of a sense of humor, that one.

ROBERT

None whatsoever.

(BOHR goes to the blackboard and looks at what ROBERT has drawn.)

BOHR

So tell me, *Opje*, is it really big enough?

ROBERT

To end the war?

BOHR

Yes.

ROBERT

Maybe to end all wars.

BOHR

Ah, I envy you Americans your optimism. I should have known it would take one of you to do this. You do not really know war. To you, it is just an abstraction, a glamorous adventure you see in movies, someplace brave men in starched uniforms go to become heroes. Most of you never see it, not really, not up close. But us in Europe, we live in the midst of it every day. Tanks in the streets, soldiers in the cafes, men with missing limbs, innocent people being rounded up and forced onto trains never to be heard of again. War is not an abstraction to us, it is a daily fact of life. Two wars now with barely even a generation between them. No, for a European, this would... how do you say... hit too close to home. But an American, only an American could believe you can end war by building the world's biggest bomb.

ROBERT

Actually, the General prefers it if we don't use that word.

BOHR

What word? Bo – ?

(ROBERT raises his hand to stop BOHR.)

Opje, that is ridiculous. How can you work if you cannot even say what it is you are working on?

ROBERT

He can be a little obsessed with security, but I see his point.

BOHR

Do you trust him?

ROBERT

He's an overbearing son of a bitch, but he's a good man.

BOHR

I will have to take your word for it. After the last few years, I do not trust anyone in a uniform. So I was not sure if I should mention this in front of him or not. There is something I wanted to talk to you about and I thought it best to discuss it privately.

ROBERT

Margarethe and your son are okay? They both made it out?

BOHR

Yes, yes, everyone is fine, thank God. No, this is, well, this is something else.

(BOHR pulls out a folded piece of paper. He unfolds it and lays it on the table.)

You will have to excuse its condition. I have not let this out of my sight since Denmark.

(ROBERT looks over the paper. Pause.)

ROBERT

Where did you get this?

BOHR

Where would have been the worst place in the world for me to have gotten it?

ROBERT

How?

BOHR

Werner came to visit me in Copenhagen. He wanted my advice on a problem. This problem.

ROBERT

What did you tell him?

BOHR

I had to be smuggled out of the country in the middle of the night. What do you think I told him?

ROBERT

That was very brave, Niels.

BOHR

No, it was very stupid. If I had offered to help, I could have steered the Germans down the wrong path. But I am afraid I let my temper get the best of me.

ROBERT

Well, I for one am glad you got out of there.

BOHR

(Referring to the paper.)
Do you know what this is?

ROBERT

Yes.

BOHR

Can it be used as a weapon?

ROBERT

Anything can be used as a weapon, Niels. A bottle of beer can be used as a weapon.

BOHR

You know what I am asking, Opje. I do not have to tell you what would happen if the Nazis managed to make this work.

ROBERT

Don't worry about the Nazis. Half their scientists have escaped and the other half are locked up. The ones they have left, you've forgotten more physics than they know.

BOHR

And what of Werner?

ROBERT

Heisenberg is a spineless ass.

BOHR

He is simply doing what he feels he has to, just as you are.

ROBERT

Why do you always defend him? I don't know how you can even look that man in the eye after –

BOHR

Werner is a good man, a little confused right now perhaps, but still a good man.

ROBERT

A good man wouldn't do what he's doing.

BOHR

You are doing what he is doing. And if it wasn't for the accident of your being born here instead of there, you would be in Berlin right now doing it for the Nazis.

ROBERT

No, I wouldn't.

BOHR

And if I were your age instead of mine, I would be helping you.

ROBERT

You're too smart for that.

BOHR

There are plenty of smart people in Germany.

ROBERT

And they left when they saw what was happening.

BOHR

A lot of them did not. I did not. It is not about intelligence, Opje. It is about momentum. You do not know, you were not there. I watched intelligent people, people who have been called geniuses, simply stand by and watch as the Nazis began burning books in giant bonfires in the streets, thinking this is crazy, certainly people will see that it is crazy and stop it. Even me, I said to myself a hundred times, people will not let this continue. They will stop it. But they did not. And then the Nazis began burning synagogues in the dead of night and we thought, this is crazy, now people will see that it is crazy and stop it, and they did not. And then the Nazis began burning Jewish shops and even homes and we thought, this is crazy, surely now people will see how crazy it is and stop it, and they did not. And then... well, we both know what the Nazis began burning then. Some things, once they get started, they become impossible to stop.

ROBERT

You got out.

BOHR

Only because they were going to arrest me.

ROBERT

I don't believe that. People make choices. Heisenberg made a choice.

BOHR

I do not need to tell you, Opje, a man is made of atoms, just like all matter. And an atom is sometimes a wave and sometimes it is a particle. Sometimes it is both. A man is never just one thing, any more than the atoms that make him up.

ROBERT

Still lecturing, I see.

BOHR

Still steering me onto tangents so you do not have to answer my questions, I see.

ROBERT

Relax, Niels, we're getting close.

BOHR

And how close are they?

ROBERT

Let me worry about that. You've had a long trip. Go get some rest, and tonight, Kitty and I will treat you to the best meal you can get outside Santa Fe.

BOHR

That sounds very nice, thank you, but I am afraid I will not be staying.

ROBERT

Where are you going?

BOHR

To Washington to meet with your president, and then back to London to meet with Churchill. I am hoping to convince them not to keep all this secret. The only way to make sure no country ever uses this weapon is to make sure every country has it.

ROBERT

Aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself? We haven't even built the thing yet.

BOHR

We must get ahead of ourselves. Once this thing is finished, it will have a momentum of its own, you will see. Every nation will rush to build one. There will be an arms race the likes of which we have never seen, and once it starts it will end only when we have all blown ourselves up. If we hope to stop it, we must start now.

ROBERT

I wish you'd stay. You'd be great for morale, and I could really use the help.

BOHR

Thank you, Opje, I am flattered. But I have to be honest, I do not like this place. The guards, the secrecy, the wire fence, it all reminds me a little too much of the Nazis. I do not know how you can think in a place like this.

ROBERT

It's necessary for security.

BOHR

I would be very careful of that if I were you. When the Nazis first built their camps surrounded by wire it was in the name of "security." Secrecy is the enemy of science, Opje. Nothing good ever needs to be kept secret.

ROBERT

You know they're not going to listen to you.

BOHR

I know. Still, a man has to try.

ROBERT

It was good to see you, Niels. It's been way too long.

BOHR

Yes, it has.

(They shake hands.)

ROBERT

I hope you come back.

BOHR

I hope I do not have to.

(BOHR exits. ROBERT looks over BOHR'S piece of paper for a moment.)

ROBERT

Fuck.