

IRREVOCABLE WILL

A Play in Three Acts

by

Roger David Hardesty

"For Roberto"

©Roger David Hardesty, 2017

rdh@hardspace.info

hardspace

www.hardspace.info

Cast of Characters

Poet: A mature man with vaguely upper-crust, New England diction.

Walter: (Voice only.) Slightly younger; has not completely overcome the rough, Queens, NY accent of his childhood.

Comms: (High quality, but computer-generated voice only.) Pleasantly feminine.

Ushers: Actual theater ushers.

Scene

Despite an almost complete absence of decoration, we are to assume depiction of a writer's lair is onstage.

Time

An election cycle following that of Donald Trump's 2016 election as US President. The workday has begun.

Act IScene 1

SETTING: The curtain has not risen. Prelude techno-music continues throughout the house. It now conveys distinct elements of hammer on anvil; chains shaking. As the music fades slightly, chime tones indicate it is time to be seated. They repeat after an interval.

AT REPEATED CHIMES: USHERS, somewhat stilted, step forward from proscenium into heads of aisles.

USHER 1

(in clarion voice, over music)

Ladies and gentlemen, nobles among you. Before production begins, we ask you to silence your hand-held devices.

USHER 2

(also clarion)

Ladies and gentlemen, nobles among you. Please be informed that any devices found active during the production process will have all memory scrubbed. Your sacred property will be returned to you.

USHER 1

Central Records *will* be notified.

(Houselights dim. USHERS exit stiffly while swiveling heads to survey audience.)

(END OF ACT)

Act IIScene 1

SETTING: The stage is bare, except for a four-legged chair and large steamer trunk, showing some wear for its hundred-year vintage. The trunk is angled away from the adjoining, non-descript and front-facing chair. A wisp of antique pink fabric is held fast by the trunk's closed lid.

Downlights illuminate a distant, dark-colored backdrop and matching tab curtains. The stage is gently lit, with bright emphasis on the seating area.

Above and slightly upstage of the chair hangs a projection screen, 16:9 ratio, not so large as to demand attention.

AT RISE: Prelude techno-music that has been playing in front of house fades even lower. On screen for the audience are projected newspaper pages, two up, and indicating woodcut images. POET, sitting forward in the chair, stares downstage. He nods to the beat, audibly imitating the hiss of synthesized cymbals. He idly waves left-to-right the air in front of him; the front-facing image swipes in the same direction to reveal a second page set. POET is interrupted by cell phone chirping, seeming to emanate from the audience. The image disappears. A text crawl begins along bottom of the screen; the field displays "Incoming - Voice Only, Number blocked. Direct Channel Comm Incognito. Active Level 0004. Party Admin priority. Outgoing - video, voice, biometrics." POET, suddenly attentive, smooths his hair and clothing, takes a breath, and assuredly pokes air in front of him. Music and chirps abruptly halt.

POET

Hello?

WALTER

(Off, as if transmitted via cell phone from an electric vehicle in motion)

Have you finished the work?

POET

Sir Walter!

(The text crawl has disappeared. A cursor blinks, expectantly.)

Sir Walter?

(Cell phone chirps as before. A new crawl reads "Incoming - Voice Only. [Delete] Outgoing - video, voice, biometrics." POET makes a more tentative, beckoning gesture before him. Chirping stops. WALTER's voice, electronically distorted, booms deeply from front of house.)

WALTER

Don't say my name.

(Crawl finished, cursor blinks idly on screen. WALTER's voice level diminishes.)

I direct your concerns at this moment from a non-intercept scrambler. Like the ones we give our partisans across the wall. I thought you and I might speak ... freely.

POET

(hesitantly)

I thought I had concluded my research for you, Sir ...

(Static briefly inflicts screen. Cursor returns.)

WALTER

And?

POET

(looking at trunk)

Something extraordinary has happened.

WALTER

Is this going to be a long story?

POET

I am at a roadblock.

WALTER

(Cursor rate increases.)

Don't use that term. We call them 'resource qualifiers.'

(WALTER pauses as a wide bar passes twice through text field like a square, ranging eye and disappears. Cursor returns to initial rate.)

Besides, I scan your device as presently at its registered location. Sensors report you are not in motion. Have not left the location for eight days, in fact.

POET

No, no. I mean I was at a roadbl ... I mean ... your family history research ... Call it a dead end or brick wall. The Terminus of Endeavor. No leads seemed pertinent. I had stalled.

WALTER

You lack initiative? Even after I cleared access for your profile to enter Newberry Certified Library and Smithsonian Consolidated Historical Society?

POET

(uncomfortably)

Yes, sir. The, uh, 'resource qualifiers,' though lifted,

(going rote, attempting a gracious tone)

'by your offer in a grand and generous manner,' *did* provide access to online indexes.

(marveling)

As if I possessed your Active Level Four status. The investigation into your ancestral records seemed very promising.

WALTER

And?

POET

Well, apparently, neither organization has staff. There's no one to actually pull or scan source documents. As far as I can tell, bots replaced archivists some years ago ... and they've been re-allocated to other pursuits.

(brightly)

More critical to the war effort, I'm sure.

(POET pauses to regard the trunk.)

But something extraordinary *has* happened, sir. Full of portent, I must say. Perhaps to give re-birth to American prosperity.

WALTER

(sternly)

Poet.

POET

(POET points before him. A fanciful, double-helix begins spiraling onscreen.)

You're aware that we used your DNA profile to establish genetic lineage ...

WALTER

Is this going to be a long story? I have been in up-download with you for an alternative cost to the nation of four thousand dollars.

POET

(POET nods acknowledgment, busies both hands to center an imaginary frame on the trunk.)

The trunk, sir. Apparently, Central Records confused my request (rote)

'acting on your well-considered and munificent behalf,'

(normalized)

as ... well ...

(breathless)

... indicating that I am your agent.

(POET waits for repercussion.)

When it's owner ...

WALTER

Don't use names.

POET

... who shall remain nameless, was removed from all status; just recently, I understand; well, Central Assessors determined a 20th century artifact offered potential value to a Status Four. As we suspected, you hold grant to the highest level status among even your most-distant cousins. Her property diverted to you, of course. And I got it. National Postal delivered it four days ago. Here.

WALTER

Contents?

POET

Apparently empty, sir.

WALTER

That's a null data set. You poets. None in this great administration find it worthy of investment, to report an *absence* of actionable intelligence. Get a disposal permit. Are we concluded? Prepared to upload final report?

POET

Well, I say *apparently* empty, sir.

(Returning imaginary frame to himself.)

I must tell you, emphatically, that I had no intention of intruding on your sacred property rights. As 'custodian' of your affairs in this matter ...

(POET pauses. Another bar passes through the displayed text field.)

WALTER

I know you subscribe to Breitbart. Common-level information access. I found the qualifier when I vetted you for this work. You *do* know we are preparing to auction off the United States Presidency, don't you? The longer I fail to attend to the nation's affairs, the higher the state's alternative cost. You and I have been synched for twelve thousand dollars now.

POET

There was a record ...

(breathless)

... hidden in the lining, sir. An early 19th century relic.

WALTER

Report.

POET

(in reverie)

Sir, you need to see this precious document set. Must hold it.

WALTER

Actionable intelligence, Poet.

POET

(uncomfortably)

You need to see the document. I've no clearance for passage along Camino Real. Time spent in National Uber, on common travel lanes, would; even without the cost of border stamps required to leave Florida Swamplands and enter the capital at Mar-a-Lago ...

I just don't have the resources. It'd cost me twelve dollars, twelve level-twenty-four-hundred dollars, or more, to bring you the ... it's a letter.

WALTER

Rephrasing: scan the document. Post a transcript and conclusive report to our secure electronic drop-box. You'll have your Poetry Recitation Permit from Central Records in thirty cents. And my gratitude.

POET

Very good, sir. Uh, the documents are encrypted.

(Pause. Cursor disappears. Static again briefly illuminates the screen. POET proceeds hesitantly, unsure whether the pair remain connected.)

It was written in hieroglyphics once called a 'cursive' hand. Optical character recognition refused to produce readable text. I thought it might be wise to de-code them. Natural curiosity, you know. Perhaps obtain a clue ...

(Cursor returns.)

WALTER

Time is money.

POET

(POET turns sideways in chair, opens trunk and withdraws four sheets of paper before re-facing audience.)

Indeed, and I devoted some many hours to deciphering the graffiti, referencing known samples Google was willing to provide following (rote, with nod of acknowledgement) 'your wise and generous provision of extended browsing permission.' The four-page parchment *does* seem to reference a known ancestor. Direct maternal line, six generations removed.

(Holding up a palm.)

Whom we shall not name.

(pausing)

And the intercourse is delicate, sir.

WALTER

Disconnecting.

(POET, initially puzzled, passes through affection, consternation and timid elation as he leafs through papers. An electronic beep

sequence interrupts his consideration of returning them to the trunk. He is not quick enough to fully swipe.)

COMMS

Direct peer-to-peer channel contact initiated. Enjoy your liberty.

(The single word '[Delete]' moves across the text field.)

WALTER

(his cell phone voice)
How delicate? I can be there in three outlaid dollars or less. You have correspondence from my sixth great grandmother? Frances Tandy Burris (1724-1816)? Written in her own hand?

POET

Yes, sir.

WALTER

Mother to patriots? Grandmother to those who made America great?

POET

(reservedly)
Yes, sir. Your own mother was, nobly, heiress to income stream from Tandy property, some of which remained in Kentucky. Breeding operations, beginning with mules ...

WALTER

Report. Some detail is permissible.

POET

Well, sir, as I say, this *is* delicate.

(POET halfheartedly holds one of the papers to face the audience. He perks up.)

The issue at hand was property. You can be sure these revelations in no way jeopardize your inherited wealth. Your Status Four remains rightful and true.

WALTER

Never in question.

POET

However, Ms. Tandy Burris references 'Uncle' Monk.

(In a clear voice.)

M-O-N-K.

("Monk' Tandy, AA male, Unk-1835" appears on the screen.)

WALTER

Maternal or paternal lineage?

POET

Sir, the appellation seems entirely gratuitous. It is uncertain, but there appears to be no familial link, though early genetic data return is ... inconclusive.

WALTER

Kentucky. Some sort of 'kissing cousin?'

POET

(rushed)

Sir, probate records I was able to retrieve under your authority indicate Monk was a *slave*. There may have been affection, yes. Ms. Tandy Burris, in these 1810 instructions, sent for the man, a Negro, who had been left behind on a Virginia ... plantation, it was called. She was very keen to have ... her property ... brought to her in Kentucky. The language is very personal.

(Monk details disappear from screen and the cursor blinks rapidly. POET gestures are unable to retrieve the data.)

WALTER

Damn you, poet! You've let your romanticism interfere with my valuable commitment of state resources to this work. The nation suffers from the same lack of rationality you now engage in.

POET

Yes, sir.

(POET waves alertly and pokes pointedly. Similar signatures slide onscreen, parking side-by-side.)

Though the letter's signature bears close resemblance to that on Frances Tandy Burris' will, I have no way of verifying the letter's provenance.

(POET shows affection for the sheaf. The feeling flickers from his face.)

Though I've never held a source document before, its genuine appearance can no doubt be disproved ... or proved, I suppose ... by scientific testing of inks and such.

(The screen goes blank. POET's hand twitches.)

DRAFT

WALTER

(to himself)

No need to bring forensics into this work.

POET

No sir. But this is remarkable. Nowhere in Google have I ever discovered the slightest suggestion that American wealth was derived from forced labor. Your ancestress indicates there may be scores held in ... lifelong, indentured servitude. An unnamed 'Mistress of the Needle' seems in close, confidential relationship ...

WALTER

I thought US Marshals had cleared Swamplands. Have you aligned with subversives, man? You know your report is contradictory of all that is documented by Central Records. This is obviously fake reporting. No relevancy.

(in a distinct aside)

Immediate Appeal, Centcom. Online monitors. Terminate client's upload and all outgoing communication permissions beyond this peer channel ... Zulu Alpha Victor, Uniform Zulu. Political leak discovered.

(The text field appears in red outline. No cursor is evident. WALTER proceeds conversationally.)

Breitbart may have conveyed that your noble administration seeks Supreme Court ruling, that aliens never granted entry-level status and found within our borders, can be considered property.

POET

I thought that was officially repudiated in subsequent downloading.

WALTER

It's news again.

POET

Yes, Sir W...

WALTER

We can't let an Active Level Three Thousand something interfere with the administration's great agenda.

POET

No, sir.

(mumbles)

Status Twenty Four Fifty, sir. Doctorate. Tenured before universities' consolidation.

(A red bar traverses the text field.)

WALTER

I have left your e-commerce permissions in place. You *really* don't want Homeland Security to initiate a treason case against you, do you?

POET

Thank you, sir. No.

WALTER

Very well. Permit no leaks. I will dispatch a custody team. We must keep America secure.

POET

Uh, sir, there is one more thing. Well, two ... leading to a culminating point.

WALTER

(exasperated)

Report, man.

POET

Well, it is apparent that the Burris family, following on with success in livestock breeding, sought to engage this Monk in ... impregnation practices. Apparently, there were two such programs. Widow Burris used the terms - with a not insignificant hint of admiration for Uncle Monk's prowess, actually - she wrote of "brute strength," "docility" and "dumb as an ox" as preferred traits in agricultural production.

(Rushing.)

The other program involves domestic 'servants,' sir; Burris men were themselves breeding with Negroes. Familial terms like 'Sister Nonah' seem to indicate your 19th century family was aware of consanguineous status. The term employed was "blood-related ..."

WALTER

Enough!

(The display goes blank. With the clunk of an offstage circuit-breaker, all stage lights but that on the POET and trunk extinguish.)

POET

Just one more thing, sir. From the unsealed probate records. It seems as if 'Sister Nonah' had absconded when Ms. Tandy Burris drafted her 1814 will. Irrevocable will.

(POET stabs forward with a straight arm. Nothing is displayed. He continues undaunted.)

This perfectly legal testament lays claim to "contraband Nonah and her heirs forever."

(POET looks about, not receiving response.)

Breitbart is reporting on all of the administration's great improvements to property rights. I myself know nothing of the intricacies of law. I simply thought ... as America gets better and better, and the wars become completely manageable ... that you might personally lay claim to Negro descendants in this genetic strain.

(POET, stands and throws out a gesture evocative of Nazi salute. It has no effect on the darkened overhead display. He freezes. His gaze pierces the forth wall, to regard audience members.)

That could amount to a substantial amount of property, Sir Walter. Tens of thousands of people.

(POET's arm drops.)

Of course, as a man of letters, I realize there are emotional implications. You would be coming into possession of various and sundry cousins, five, six and seven times removed.

Not that I would ever write dramatically about such. My Breitbart downloads so insistently explain that creating new markets is a 'patriotic and noble activity' ... likely to elevate status in one single and incredible leap.

(POET touches pockets and looks about wistfully.)

I suppose it would be a task for Central Wage and Price control?

(POET slumps and regards the trunk.)

I know nothing about supreme economics. It simply seems logical to me as a layman that, were the administration simply to zero out the status of so many Euro-Africans ... well, think of the boost to the nation's great and wondrous commodities market.

(POET turns and drops sheaf into trunk.)

"It is our moral and political duty to create wealth," says Breitbart. Doesn't it seem, Sir Walter, that restoring rightful and legal title to the progeny of absconded property, that it would produce immense prosperity? What of their homes and possessions?

(POET waves backhandedly and steps into trunk. He pulls the lid closed as he lies down inside. A few seconds later the pink fabric disappears within.

Remaining stage light slowly dims and techno-music postlude, centered on excited Celtic-sounding shouts, rises. The overhead screen displays "In the 1960s, Bell Labs, research arm of a government-issued monopoly on telephonic communications, conducted studies to determine consumer acceptance for phone implants within the human skull."

The text is replaced with "A signal, negative response emerged in results. Consumers reported dissatisfaction with the idea that it would be socially unacceptable to ignore incoming calls; there was no provision for users to be considered 'not at home,' or 'unavailable.'"

Screen displays real-time, graphic representation of pulsating audio levels. Curtain falls.)

(END OF ACT)

Act IIIScene 1

SETTING: As Act I, Scene 1.

AT RISE OF HOUSE LIGHTS:

USHERS proceed from proscenium, passing in stilted, zig-zag patterns down the aisles.

USHERS

(with slight projection, to audience members, in staggered presentation as if USHER 2 follows the others' lead)

Nothing to see here. Transmission concluded. Nothing to hear, here.

USHER 1

Following correction, search access will be shortly restored to your handheld devices. Thank you for coming.

(USHERS, approaching theater exit, almost overlap in near-clarion voices)

Make America great. Make America great; ladies, gentlemen and nobles among you.

(They exit somewhat mechanically. Postlude music rises, includes periodic static.)

(END OF PRODUCTION)