



Superluminal



R. W. FROST





Busted



It began, as so many unpredictable results often do, with a poorly timed complaint.

Picture, if you will, just a few years back, the ragged streets of Pepsiconagra Township, Michigan, just after the Army Corps of Engineers had overseen its conversion into the seven-mile square pad of concrete we know today as the shiny

new production floor for the third hub of MitsukoTek Corporation's Midwest Manufacturing Nexus.

The combination of rapid global warming and international industrial assault on most of the earth's ecosystems had finally been slowed to a crawl, yes, but the damage was done. The dystopic future anticipated by years of YA lit had not failed to prepare the armies of well educated - and well dressed - and well, mostly unemployed - drones and dronettes to the catastrophe their world had become. But technology had advanced apace with the ecological disasters surrounding it, and like a cocoon protecting the chrysalis within, had managed with some exceptions - and with some really bitchen tech - to keep those horrors just enough at bay so that they could be routinely ignored.

The complete failure of the United States political system had long been such a joke among the populace (beginning with the election of the Red King, as he is "lovingly" recalled) that few took notice of its actual death as a global power, other than the few historians (or "hysterians" as FoxNN dubbed them) who accurately ascribed it as the date of the "election" in '28, of President General Wilton Placido, he of the "one man, every man" and "good is a gift from God" and other assorted empty, yet eminently shoutable epithets, so it was really no surprise to anyone. As a direct result, the orderly transition of our society from a sovereign nation and cultural model to a Chinese manufacturing center was fairly painless, and explained along the way by the punditocracy as a great success, both for the corporo-political power nexus, as well as "La Gente!" Honestly, it was one of the few perks of growing up here in the Heartland of the good old U-S-of-A, which has taken on great purpose in the new world order, as the main production center for the aforementioned MitsukoTek.

This was just after their first *gonzoy rhombus*TM products had hit world markets. When entangled electron technology had instantaneously made it possible to have lossless, real-time connection with anyone - and as many of them as you wished - anywhere on the globe. When the concept of disk space, and connection speed, and throughput, and random access memory technologies like zincore, cobalt, solid state, flash, and all of their predecessors were permanently left behind like bleached bones in a ghost-town graveyard. When former global tech megaliths

Tengrade, Zeeb, the old perpetually dying and reborn dinosaurs Apple, Microsoft et al, the whole lot of them, found themselves replaced, en masse, like a high school boyfriend. When all you heard, all day, was “Are you going *gonzoy*? I’m going *gonzoy*. Are you *gonzoy* yet? You gotta go *gonzoy*.”

At that moment, month of February, year of 2035, with the highways and byways rumbling continually with the heavy machinery involved in the manufacturing and delivery of that remarkable new technology, you could still quickly get lost alongside those caravans, in the dilapidated neighborhoods of what, only two decades prior, had been known as The Motor City, Detroit. And I routinely did, in search of any powder, crystal, or pseudo that could even for a moment change my outlook on what lay ahead, which, truth be told, at the time didn’t seem to be much. As a trained prowler of those really quite frightening alleys and avenues, I was no stranger to the racial profiling to which lighter skinned citizens such as yours truly were most intensely subject. This was, you’ll recall, right after the worst of the atrocities which led to the (wonderfully named) “2nd Amendment Amnesty Act,” so I understood the reasoning why people like me might not be trusted at that moment in our history, but nonetheless found the practice an unnecessary pain in my pale ass. Especially as it always seemed to occur right at those moments when I just wanted to score. So, dares I was, juss mindin my own beeswax, when outta nowheres...

“Minor! Hey yo Minor! Yeah know das’ you, don’ front.”

One tiny thing I have yet to mention is my own name. Which is David Minor. (Not sure where that was supposed to go. This seems like the obvious spot.) Hence, when I heard my last name shouted, in inimitable ninth grade schoolyard fashion by one of my actual former ninth grade classmates, Ronny Moe, my ears perked, while my valtex hoodie closed further on my freezing neck, trying to avoid detection. I had hoped to score a little further up the drug food chain, but it was too late. Ronny had me in his sights, and that was that. I was lazy.

“Ronny, shiiiiiiiit. You kiddin me?”

“Oh ho I don’ kid, son. You for real?”

“Depends what you got, kid.”

“I got if you got, son.”

This bullshit banter went on, frankly, way too long. But such is the long tradition of tiny drug deals. There’s a lot of kids and sons and I got and you got and then it generally ends with some wrinkled-up scratch or its modern digital analog being handed over for a furtively delivered small cello of far too little narcotic, after which said parties retreat to their respective corners of the world. This one was no different. Unfortunately, the same can’t be said for after.

As I stuffed my little bag of freedom into my hoodie pocket and ducked off Grand down Cass toward the trains, I became vaguely aware of the presence of a very particular shade of blue light. Before I had a chance to realize what it was, it was too late. The Regwan Floater touched down directly in front of me and its master, Officer Delgado, stepped out.

“Hands.”

I pulled my hands out, opened them, and raised them over my head. Officer Delgado stepped forward and reached into my pocket as if he had put the drugs in there himself, pulled my precious little packet out, stepped back again, and held it up. He gazed at it in the now alternating blue and red light from his Floater as if he’d never seen Protocol before. Its beautiful crystalline shimmer was visible even through the cruddy clear nanotextile Ronny had put it in.

“Anything you want to say about this, Minor?”

He already had my graph up on his brand-new rhombus. If I had been honest, I would’ve probably given him my soliloquy on why the United States, like every other civilized nation in Europe and most of South America, should long since have re-de-criminalized blood-brain narcotics such as Protocol, Hazrex, Jimbo and the like, but I decided to not get smart and say something I would regret. Officer Delgado couldn’t resist. He glanced sidelong at me.

“What is it, spring break already?”

“Ha ha ha, Zach.”

Officer Zacharia Delgado also happened to have been a student at Pepsiconagra Charter, although he remained, in fact, and in his own mind, three years ahead of myself and Ronnie Moe, who had miraculously vaporized the instant our deal concluded.

“What the fuck happened to you, man? You were like super brain.”

“Who says anything happened. That Protocol was about to be put to good use.”

“I’m talking college. Harvard, right...?”

There was sting in the way he said “Harvard” like it hurt coming out of his mouth. He had already taken my right hand, and I could feel the stretch of the softcuff against my wrist. This was not going to be a five-minute frisk n’ fly.

“You’re not draggin me in on a window bag. Come on, Zach.”

“Sorry.”

“ I got no priors.”

“Orders. Turn and spread ‘em.”

“ Fuuuuuuuck.”

Although I had grown up in end-of-days Detroit, and had spent many lost weekends in these streets, I had never actually been arrested before. It was a bit of a miracle, actually. That it was going to be Z-Doo, scourge of the lunch machines, wannabe B boy from down the street who would bring me in, was the ironic insult. I didn’t resist. That’s not my style. I did, however, emit the following:

“Hey Zach, these things are a smidge tight.”

It was recorded, as was the entire event, without any effort on his part, on his rhombus.



Choices

One notable thing about the continued infusion of Chinese yuan into the local economy was the dramatic improvement in the technology of its penal system. The commitment to an elegant, state of the art, top to bottom mag-lev based local law enforcement regime clearly had its perks. Not that any of the other seven or eight guys here in the holding tank with me at that moment really gave a shit. But I did. Maybe since I saw my incarceration here as an anomaly, soon to be rectified, I more readily appreciated the barely audible exhale made by the general lockup door as it slid open. A quick call to my sister's firm, a healthy chunk of savings - hell, what's it for, anyway but a tight spot like this - and bing bang boom, I'm out! I shielded my eyes from hallway glare.

“Minor.”

A malevolent looking guy - I guessed attorney based on the shark-neutral suit he had on - looked right at me, already knowing I was who he was there to collect.

“That's me.” I got up quickly and stepped to the door.

“I didn't tell you to move. Hold the fuck.”

He didn't finish the sentence, turning back to speak in some cop dialect I didn't understand with some functionary I didn't see.

The next thing I knew, I was stumbling forward along an extremely shiny tile floor toward a steel door at the end of a hallway of cubicles flanking the booking desk and inner bullpen of the station. Cops and workers at screens paid no attention as Detective Fadiman (Farris Fadiman, I later found out was his name) slapped fresh softcuffs on, then drove me like a roped calf toward said steel door,

his small, muscly legs pistoning while he rammed my arms up toward the back of my head. I had a really bad feeling about that door we were approaching, but there wasn't shit I could do about it. I suddenly missed Zach, and our familiarity, which was an even worse sign.

Fadiman hustled me into the room, which was one of those plain, classically efficient interrogation rooms from time immemorial. A chair, a metal table, and another chair on the other side of it, with a long mirror along one wall. I did note however that the lighting was a design success - low voltage lamps neatly recessed and nearly invisible in thin gussets set into the ceiling. This, in the second and a half that I was tumbling headfirst into the far wall, shoved by Fadiman. The clonking sound that my head made as it smacked crown first into concrete was a sound I pray I never hear again. Blood erupted and flooded my eyes. Stunned by the unnecessary savagery, shaken and disoriented, I flopped over, unable to see.

“A smidge tight? Is that so? A smidge!”

I had never so regretted a choice of words in my life. As Fadiman's fist smashed into my jaw, I heard a tiny whining sound, high and rising. Then, blackness.

#

When I came to, I couldn't see anything. But it was quiet. Then the pain hit, and I felt like someone had tried to twist my head off at the neck. I heard a strange sound, and realized it was me, moaning. I instantly clammed up and wondered why I couldn't see. Then I realized that there was something loosely hanging over my eyes. I instinctively flipped my head to try to move it, but an intense stab of pain hit just below my ear and I struggled not to pass out again. Voices. Things I didn't understand.

“Just torch the whole thing.”

“Fadiman's not my concern.”

“The whole sector. Wiped.”

I'm not sure exactly how much time passed after that, but the next thing I knew, the weird fabric flipped up, and a very pale Chinese man was looking down at me quizzically. My right eye was practically swollen shut, except for a thin slit, but my left seemed perfectly fine. I could see that the man had round glasses made of some sort of metal that appeared to change color ever so slightly as he moved.

“David, how do you feel?”

His English was flawless. I suppose my surprise must have shown, because he smiled.

“I grew up in Palo Alto.”

“Hey, so did I. Well, till I was like 5.”

“I know. So. How are you feeling?”

I took stock. I moved my hands and realized first, that they were free, and second, that I was in a hospital bed. I pushed myself up slightly, and nothing felt too bad. But just as I was about to respond, I stopped myself. I sensed instinctively that whatever I said right now, at this moment, would take on greater and greater significance, depending on how things shook out. So I said:

“That depends.”

“On what?”

He waited, as if he had all the time in the world.

“Are you a doctor?”

“I am.”

“Do you work for the police?”

“On occasion.”

“Who was that guy? The guy who tried to crush my skull.”

“That was Detective Farris Fadiman. “

“Does this mean--”

He cut me off before I could even finish.

“He mistook you for someone else. Our most sincere apologies.”

“So you’re saying that guy can just grab me and ram me head first into a wall, while in restraints, and all I get is an apology?”

“What else would you like?”

“I’d like an attorney.”

“I think we’re getting a little ahead of ourselves here.”

He gazed at me, kindly. Then placed a feathery hand on my wrist.

“You’ve already been bonded out.”

“Bonded...bonded out? What...?”

“It means your bail has been posted.”

“Duh. But who? Who posted my bail?”

“I did. “

The Chinese doctor handed me a card. I didn’t recognize his name, Dr. James Kanaka, but the logo was unmistakable: MitsukoTek. I slumped back in the bed and closed my eyes. This was going to be very bad for business. By which, I mean mine.

You see, I was at the time an employee of MitsukoTek Corp. But due to a strange stroke of good fortune, I was not a full-time employee, having signed with them what was referred to, without a hint of irony, as a UCA, or Unique Contractor Agreement. Good fortune because it allowed me to actually make more money than had I been considered a full time employee. Not to mention the freedom from having some clock-watching mid-level monitoring my comings and goings. The advantage to MitsukoTek, of course, was that such contracts allowed them to avoid paying such trifling things as retirement accounts, medical or dental insurance, and most importantly, were instantly voidable for any reason they deemed sufficient, without notice. Giving them the opportunity to void my con-

tract with actual cause, i.e. being busted for schedule four drug possession, was just gilding the lily.

“So...”

I opened my eyes, gazing up at the ceiling, which, again, impressed. A discreet, fully articulating, modular-flex lighting grid hovered just under tasteful, sea-foam accented tile, controlled via remote, no doubt.

“...what’s the deal? Am I getting shit-canned?”

“That’s not my department, David.”

I looked down and met Dr. Kanaka’s eyes, which were there waiting for me. I tossed his business card on the side table. He picked it up, and tucked it away in his breast pocket.

“Kanaka’s a Japanese name.”

“I took my mother’s name when I became old enough.”

“Must’ve pissed off your dad.”

“Oh, you have no idea.”

“So, not surprising you work for a global Chinese conglomerate with a most common Japanese name.”

“Irony abounds.”

We both smiled, but I got the distinct impression that it was like a little, witless worm smiling at a big, smart bird. Guess which one I was.

“If you feel up to it, I will accompany you to your next appointment.”

“Why’d you post my bail? And how much was it?”

“Let’s go get answers to all your questions. And see if we can do it without attorneys.”

His kind gaze never wavered, but something within it suddenly seemed distant and pitiless. And of course it did. The doctor’s tender bedside manner is built on the knowledge of terrible outcomes.

#

I was back in the room where Fadiman had tried to dent my cranium. There was no evidence of it, the wall was pristine, as was the floor, the table, and the chairs. Dr. Kanaka sat comfortably next to me, legs crossed as he worked on a flexible translucent tablet - it was my first look at the prototype gonzoy gyrus. Made from a proprietary graphene, comfortably foldable down to about a quarter the size of a cocktail napkin, I figured. All I could see were shimmering reflected colors - he was working in 2D to forestall prying eyes. It reminded me of those little transparent neon fish they used to sell at the pet store, back before the world fisheries crashed and then all they got were polliwogs.

The door opened with a whisper, and two men walked in. The first was a fit, sharply dressed white dude, hair cut in a really excellent fade, with a little crest of shaggy bangs that turned over like a wave curling along his forehead. It seemed to actually be in motion. I'd seen the technology before - a nucleophilic polymerized pi-bond construct that was fairly short-lived - that 'do took quite a bit of active upkeep. The second guy moved with the ease of a dancer, he seemed to take his seat before I actually saw him move across the floor to it. He was Korean-American, elegantly dressed, very tan, also with great hair, but without any artifice about it - salt and pepper at the temples, black above, well cut. And strikingly good looking. He spoke first.

“Hello, Mr. Minor. I'm Charsu Kim. This is Tevin Brother.”

His moving-hair partner nodded, perfunctory, and remained silent.

“You have questions.”

I wiggled up in my chair, and cleared my throat.

“I do. First of all, how was I booked while unconscious?”

“Oh, you were unconscious?”

Charsu set his rhombus down and tapped it. I could see reflected light playing off his down-tipped, perfectly freckled cheekbones. He looked up abruptly and casually drew a finger through the air. Three-dimensional shapes floated up in front of me. So bitchen. Great tech.

There I was, at the booking desk, rolling my thumbprint onto the booking screen. My thumbprint itself appeared. Another icon bloomed, an officer I couldn't place was escorting me away. I noticed that I was weaving, and stumbled rounding a corner, his hand roughly gripping my arm.

"That's bullshit," I was surprised at how thin and reedy my indignant voice sounded in this concrete square. I rubbed my arm.

"What'd you give me?"

Charsu glanced up at Dr. Kanaka.

"Nothing quite as powerful as that Protocol you recently - allegedly, mind you - purchased."

They all let that hang in the air, three pairs of eyes resting on me. So this was how it was going to be.

"Okay, listen, Detective Kim, I want an attorney. I don't know or care if my bond's been posted, but I have nothing else to say until--"

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Minor, I'm not a detective. I'm-- none of us here work for the police. Officially. We have...let's just say, a respectful corporate relationship with them. For cases such as this."

"Wait, so...who the fuck are you two?"

"We...we are MitsukoTek."

Charsu said something to Dr. Kanaka in Chinese. The doctor's eyebrows rose as he cocked his head, but he didn't respond. Charsu looked back to me. He smiled.

"We are all MitsukoTek. Correct?"

"Yeah, okay, fine, I mean I'm a U.C. so technically no, but yes."

“Okay good. Good!”

He waved, almost apologetic, and the floating images suddenly swirled into the air and seemed to chase each other, incongruously giggling, all the way back into the rhombus. Charsu, for a brief moment, lost his calm.

“My little girl. Loves to change my settings.”

“Yeah, don’t wanna lose the street cred when you minimize.”

I actually got a sharp laugh out of Dr. Kanaka. Tevin watched me with clinical detachment, his hair continuing to peel that perfect wave. Not sure what it was that penetrated, but I suddenly realized that he was the dude. He was the guy. The guy who, whatever was to be decided here, whatever this show was, and whoever it was for, this was the guy who was going to make the decision. Whatever that decision was.

I angled myself toward him, just as he spoke for the first time.

“What do you know about Satellite 9?”

He had a hint, a wisp, just the tiniest soupçon of a German accent in there. It made me instantly flip from thinking he was a douche, to liking him. He had worked really hard to get that accent that deeply buried, so I felt a kindred spirit, as I had worked really hard to overcome a stutter which suddenly appeared at age 6, the year we moved to Michigan. This also helped explain the hair. Lot of reimagining, this guy.

In truth, I knew a little bit about Satellite 9. That everybody with my level of clearance was calling it NBT for next big thing. That it was totally top secret, evidenced by the most boring name imaginable, as it was to be the ninth satellite in MitsukoTek’s DaVinci array, which governed the worldwide manufacturing floors. But in this game I didn’t yet understand, I wanted information, and it’s a lot easier to get while listening than speaking.

“Umm. Not much. What is it?”

Charsu and Dr. K imperceptibly focused up, and I realized that they were equally eager to hear. Which told me they were also below Tevin's clearance level, and further reinforced my previous opinion about the pecking order here.

“First of all, this is protected. Doesn't leave this room. Agreed?”

He continued looking at me, waiting.

“Fine with me.”

“Satellite 9 implements the next generation entanglement tech. Our specs show that alone it has the capability of the eight other satellites combined. It launched in November, completed its diagnostics and began operational control of the array, as of last Monday. Its capacity for heuristics is theoretically unlimited.”

I blinked a few times, waiting. Charsu and Dr. K hid their disappointment, as they already must have known these generics and were hoping for something a little more juicy.

“But. There have been...mmm...”

Tevin searched for the most casual, connotation-neutral word he could find in his brain's German-English dictionary, finally settling on:

“...anomalies. We don't think they are anything more than growing pains, but given what's at stake, we can't afford anything short of perfect.”

“What kind of anomalies?”

“Certain...concerns regarding...orbital integrity. We have taken precautionary measures, and tethered it to DaVinci Station for the time being, which is being overcautious, but...”

I don't think Charsu was breathing at this point.

“So...” I screwed up my face, trying not to seem too disrespectful, but couldn't help myself.

“What the fuck does this have to do with me? I'm a Level 5 programmer.”

Charsu lit up. His department. His eyes sparkled, as he leaned forward.

“We know you are being underutilized, David. You did post-doc work on the quantum gravity and M-theory trials at CERN--”

“Because I got turned down for the super collider in Beijing. Some jackass named Gonzoy sucked up all the oxygen.”

He continued as if I hadn't spoken.

“--where your recommendations were off the charts. You're the only candidate in this region with both the background and credentials for-”

“Candidate for what? What do you want from me?”

It came out wrong, dripping with defensiveness, but I managed to keep from giving away anything else. Tevin shifted and rolled his eyes. He leaned forward, setting his elbows on his perfectly creased slacks, and folded his hands together like a patient father. I was liking him more and more.

“We've come to the decision to send our highest qualified technician to DaVinci Station to perform on-site diagnostics, and to oversee implementation of the Satellite 9 technical team's recommendations.”

I couldn't hide my astonishment. I must have blinked nine or ten times in the silence that followed. The superiority of GIST - gonzoy infinite space technology® - was already a fact in the marketplace, as it had, in one fell swoop, rendered the concept of disk space limitations and memory access speeds irrelevant. You experienced this directly when you downloaded, let's say, something the size of the entire Library of Congress archives onto a rhombus in twelve seconds - as we had, routinely, down in 5, during prototype testing. But the superiority of gonzoy instant link™ - its revolutionary communications technology - lay in the fact that it had ostensibly cracked the code of transmission delay; electron entanglement technology promises that what you do at one end occurs at the same instant on the other end, whether down the street or across the planet, no lag time, no decay, the information is technically in two places at the same time, classical mechanics be damned.

In the face of this capacity, the fact that MitsukoTek wanted to shoot some poor stooge into space to babysit some computers, or sit around and stare at

screens or something, was absurd. It was so baffling that before I could formulate a response, the shape of an impression started to make itself clear: the vague outlines of an understanding. I looked at the three faces inclined toward me, and realized what was common to each of them: that as smart as they all clearly were, they had no fucking clue as to the underlying science, and particularly, the mathematics of what this technology was. A chill ran up my spine. I couldn't help but think: then who does understand it? And that was it. I was hooked. I was surprised to hear the calm in my own voice:

“So, what's the deal you're offering?”

Tevin's hair-wave nodded, expectantly. He had known exactly what I was going to do. Charsu smiled, surprised and delighted, and looked at Dr. Kanaka, who was already slipping his gyrus into a coat pocket.

“As soon as you've healed up a bit, you will join the Satellite 9 project team. That's a level 7 security clearance. Once up to speed and after completing a performance review, you'd be relocated to the station.”

“What's the pay?”

“Your upgrade to 7 will put you at just less than double what you currently make. But you'd go on a PSC up on the station, and that's a significant bump in pay, not to mention full health, dental, and retirement benefits, compounded retroactively for your previous employment contract.”

“How long up there?”

“That is likely up to you, Dave.”

“And the last question...”

I looked at Tevin, who was motionless, eyes locked into mine. I was going to have to see if he was a gamer in the near future, because if he was, I think he'd be a tough opponent to take on in Offenbach Immersion. As if already confirming it, Tevin spoke before I could continue:

“This arrest never happened. We're owed a few favors here, let's just leave it at that.”

Obviously, I was right about the absurdity. This gig would clearly repel any normal human being with anything resembling a normal life, and must surely stand to be a shit-show of epic proportions. Why else would they be putting such a theatrical squeeze on a sketchy - if brilliant - independent contractor who now may or may not have a felony drug bust on his résumé? No self-respecting Chinese physicist with a burgeoning (or even fading) career on the mainland would touch it. Even career climbers and pure science guys would run at the thought. All of which, sad to say, put it right in my wheelhouse.

“So...no attorneys. No bail bondsmen fucking up my credit or knocking on doors late at night.”

Charsu had to jump in, a little jealous of Tevin’s obvious seniority.

“Taken care of. MitsukoTek looks after its own.”

Spoken like a true corporate toady.

The only thing on my mind at that moment was the fly in the ointment. My girlfriend, Cullaine. We had just hit the six month “curtain of monogamy” as she jokingly referred to it. I had no idea how she would react to this development, and wasn’t sure I was ready to find out. Because the only thing worse than a huge, clothes-hurling dust-up on the subject of my willingness to commit, would be her not giving a shit.

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