

# FutureFeedForward

d a v i d   r i c e

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hamlet monkeys media

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futurefeedforward



# 1.

## O. County

I wore a gray suit to my first deposition, a shapeless, off-the-rack number festooned with cargo pockets and illogical darts. 100% worsted wooline. Summer weight. Hand stitched. 38 Regular. \$49.95 at the GAP I passed on my way in. I left my old pants in the dressing room. They recycle them. Rebuild and re-certify. That sort of thing. Pre-owned pants. I think they have that.

It took me longer than I expected to find the place. All of the exits seemed to be for an enchanted wood. 318b: Deerlick; 318c: Blue Mountain; 318d: Beaver Meadows. I was looking for Brosnan Parkway. It dead-ends into Fishglass just short of the exit. No sign. Nothing.

The place was in a strip mall: Denny's, Donut Star, Ringo's Modified Produce, Fantastic Wok. It was a DEPOTsition. I've heard that On The Record has better food (fried finger waffles, little ginger pies), but the DEPOT generally has plusher seats and the private rooms are quite a bit more reasonable. Besides, the nearest Record is out in the Valley.

I found a spot near the front between a blue maxivan and a late model Spidero with faux crumple and retractable cinder-block risers. Somebody had left their dogs in the van, two black mini-labs. They were sitting in the front, one on the driver's side, one on the passenger's, and were listening to the radio. News radio, or CSPAN. The voices were reassuring, but vaguely histrionic, like an animatronic Lincoln. The blue windows were rolled all the way up so I couldn't quite hear what they were saying. The dogs were sitting perfectly still, ears pricked, ready to rumble.

Generally, DEPOTs are a cross between a cubicle farm and a coffee shop, a honeycomb of little partitioned spaces encrusted with found objects and flea-market furniture. Keeps costs low and puts

everybody at ease. This DEPOT, though, had a sports theme. The waiting area featured bleachers instead of couches. Staff wandered around in vertical stripes and black hats, whistles around their necks. Each of the cubicles was made to look like a miniature playing field from one sport or another: a little ice rink, a parquet floor with hoops on either wall, an AstroTurf grid with goal nets draped on the walls. The field motif was repeated on the tables, and each of the chairs had sport-appropriate jersey slipcovers.

The receptionist was alarmingly tall.

"Hi," I said. "Aren't you Kobe Bryant?"

"Yeah," he said coolly, pointing to his KOBE nametag.

"What are you doing here?"

"Meetin' and greetin'."

"You work here?"

"I own the place. This is my third shop. I've got one in Brentwood, and one up North. I've got a co-branding franchise agreement. Sort of a special-label thing."

"Right."

"I like to put in appearances now and then. Pep up the troops. Keep my finger in the pie."

"Really."

He let loose a sly grin. I cleared my throat and unzipped a cargo pocket.

"Well," he said, examining his shoes. "Who are you here for?"

"SEC. Securities and Exchange Commission."

"Do you have a name?"

"My name?"

"The name of the guy you're here to see."

"I don't think so."

"Did they give you a subpoena?"

"Yeah."

"Let me take a look."

"You know," I started checking my pockets. "I think I left it in my old pants. But I called for a private room."

"A reservation?"

"Yes. A private room. It had a name. The something room."

"The Staples room?"

"That's it."

"They're all set up. They've been waiting for a while."

"They?"

"Three of them. Serious types. A private room was a good move."

He pointed me to a concrete opening towards the back of the main room.

"Through there?"

"Right there. Through the tunnel. They're waiting."

"Thanks."

I started walking back, nervous for the first time since I'd arrived.

The décor in the main room was still pretty new. It smelled of paint and nothing was scuffed or looked particularly worn. Maybe ten or twelve of the cubicles were in use, most of them civil cases. Personal injury. Somebody with crutches and a neck brace being deposed by an insurance company type. As I passed one of the cubicles I heard a woman say "yes, with multiple partners, but I don't see what that has to do with anything."

Little glowing screens in the tabletops, steadily filling with simultaneous transcription, gave everybody's face a ghoulish cast. The whole place was surprisingly quiet, almost hushed. Voices didn't carry. Everything was muted by the thick, green AstroTurf carpeting the pathways and by the enlarged championship banners and pennants on the walls.

The entrance to the Staples room was fashioned after the concrete tunnels that lead into stadiums. Simple cinderblock walls in a washable, industrial-grade off-white. It may just have been an acoustical artifact of the narrow, concrete space, but I could hear what sounded like the distant roar of a crowd coming from just beyond the door at the end of the tunnel.

I stopped in front of the door and took a couple of quick, deep breaths. The crowd sound seemed to come in waves, as if in response to a tennis ball being knocked back and forth during a surprisingly long volley. I shook my hands to loosen up and reached for the knob. Just as I touched it, the door swung suddenly open.

There was no vista. No field. No green court. The room was pretty small and saturated with fluorescent light. Ventilated, metal lockers lined a couple of the walls. One wall was covered with a floor-to-ceiling tromp l'oeil painting of a green-tiled shower room. Some low benches had assumed a conversational arrangement in the middle of the room near a free-standing

blackboard marked with Xs and Os and concealing a smoky transcription screen.

"Mr. Vigor?" said a voice from behind the open door.

"Yes."

"Come on in."

The air was a little stale and humid. I stepped in. The door slammed closed on its automatic hinges, revealing three figures clustered around a table covered in finger foods and bottled drinks. One of them was looking at me.

"I hope you'll excuse us," she said. "We got hungry and couldn't wait." She looked like her name might have been Gidget, except that her head was piled high with an enormous knot of blonde dreadlocks.

"Is that a crudité?" One of the others was asking, pointing at some balls of raw dough pierced with carrot sticks.

"No problem." I said, straightening my tie. She was wearing khakis and a blue, button-down shirt. Loafers, no socks. They were all wearing khakis and blue, button-down shirts. No suits. Not a tie among them.

"Is a crudité predigested?" asked the third. He also had a mass of dreadlocks, gray as my suit, some of them reaching the backs of his knees and as thick as saplings.

"I think sometimes they're just raw." The other one had dreads too, but shorter and younger.

"You're all here to question me?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, wiping her right hand on her pant leg. "But it's nothing to worry about. We often work together. I'm Mischka." She stuck out her hand. I shook it. "This is Tony, and Malcolm."

The younger one glanced over and waved a pepper-crusted cocktail sausage in my general direction. The older one was fixated on a small bowl of cheese compote and didn't look up.

"Would you like to have a seat?" She pointed over towards the benches. "We could get started right away. Maybe you'd like a juice box? I saw green berry, blue berry, and something called Motion."

"No thanks. Not just yet." I started wandering over towards the benches.

"I don't think you're allowed to do that to cheese." The younger one was saying.

It was somehow muggy, so I decided to take off my jacket before sitting down. I couldn't see a coat rack, so I tried one of the lockers.

"Those don't work," the older one said, still without looking away from the compote. "They're just decorative."

"Oh." I rattled the handle a little and then hung my jacket on the corner of the blackboard. Mischka sat down, balancing a plateful of hors d'oeuvres on her knee.

"You understand that this is just an information gathering session?" she asked. "And that the Commission is not currently contemplating claims against you or your employer?"

"I understand."

"But whatever you tell us will be on the record, and, should action be deemed appropriate somewhere down the line, we may use the testimony that you give us now."

"Fair enough." I took a seat across from her. The benches were low and my knees stuck up awkwardly above my lap. "I'm here to cooperate."

"Good."

The older guy sat by Mischka, the younger one on my right. With one hand, Mischka took a small plastic card out of her shirt pocket. "This is a formality, but just so we've clearly identified ourselves to you." She handed me the card.

Mischka Roolingworth. Special Investigations Office. Her eyes were closed in the picture. I handed the card back to her. The other two offered their cards.

The older one was Malcolm. In the picture he looked to be wearing the same shirt, and to be about the same age, but his hair was sheared short, marine style. The younger one was Tony.

"Okay," said Mischka. "Are you represented by counsel?"

"Yes."

"Because you are entitled to have a lawyer present during the questioning," put in Tony.

"Yes."

"Yes?" asked Mischka.

"Yes I am represented by counsel."

"But your counsel is not here."

"I guess he's not here yet, but he should be on the way."

"Has he ever appeared before the agency in a representational capacity?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"And is he your personal attorney, or was he retained by your employer?"

"He's actually the GC. Satchel Pincher. I'm not sure why he's not here yet. I'm sure he'll be here any minute."

"Your employer's attorney will be here representing you as well?"

"Sure."

"Maybe we should hold off 'til he gets here, then?" asked Tony, chewing on some mushroom jerky.

"We could," Mischka replied. "Perhaps Mr. Vigor would be willing to waive his counsel's presence temporarily, so we can get started, with the understanding that Mr. Pincher will have the opportunity to object to anything on the transcript."

"I'm comfortable. I don't think there's any need to wait."

"Good. I think we'd like to go on the record, then," she said, looking around at the corners of the room. A tiny, flashing cursor appeared on the blackboard screen. "We're on the record."

Tony nodded enthusiastically. Malcolm allowed a Gouda flake to dissolve in his mouth.

"Let's first confirm that you are Mr. William Vigor," continued Mischka.

"Wim."

"Wim? Could you spell that?"

"W-I-M. Everybody calls me Wim." I glanced over at the screen, but it had already finished transcribing.

"And who is your employer?"

"Futurefeedforward."

"Futurefeedforward. That company formerly did business as Boudaine Temporal Enterprises?"

"Yes. Before I was hired."

"What is your position at the company?"

"I am VP of Marketing and a member of the Board of Directors."

"And to whom do you report?"

"I report to the CEO."

"Mr. Boudaine?"

"Yes. Red Boudaine."

"Alright. And just for background, can you tell us a little about the company, its line of business."

"We operate a proprietary temporal network through which we offer a range of services."

"A temporal network," nodded Tony. "I saw that in some of the materials. What is that, exactly?"

"I'm not the technical guy."

"That's okay," said Mischka. "Just give us the big picture."

"Well, a temporal network is sort of like a regular computer network, but it spans both time and space."

"Time and space?"

"Yeah. Yes. In a regular client-server network, you have a client machine that requests data from a server. The client and server could be in the same room, or thousands of miles apart. Regardless, the requested data is then sent through the network back to the client."

"Simple enough."

"In a temporal network, the client and the server might not only be in different places, but in different times as well."

"I see."

"So, for instance, back at the office, right now, we have a client that can make requests to a server located in the future."

"In the future."

"I don't know exactly when, but sometime significantly in the future. Not just next week. Maybe ten, twenty years out."

"Ten or twenty years in the future."

"Exactly."

"You have this server in your office now."

"No. The server isn't there now. It hasn't been built yet. The technology to build it doesn't yet exist. But it will be built."

"But you have a 'client' machine. In your office. Right now. A real machine."

"Yes. Just a regular pc."

"And it receives data from an imaginary server."

"Not imaginary. It's real. It's just in the future."

"And how does the data get from the future to the client?"

"That's it. It goes through the temporal network."

"Of course."

"Yes. There's a little black box that sits in the office, and the pc networking card is plugged into it. That's the temporal router. At the other end, on the future-side, the server is plugged into a temporal router."

"The same router, but in the future?"

"Not necessarily. It could be a different router. I think. Like I said, I'm not a technical guy. There's a whole network of them, anyway, spread out all over the future."

"And it is your testimony that this device works."

"Yes."

"That it receives information from the future."

"Yes."

"You've used the device yourself."

"I've seen it used. And I've definitely been privy to information from the future that came across the network."

"But you haven't used the network yourself."

"Well, security is a real concern, as you can imagine. They keep access to the network pretty limited. Wrapped up. Things are compartmentalized. Need to know. That sort of thing. But it does work. I have seen it work."

"I see." Mischka paused. Malcolm started poaching off of her plate.

"Like a time machine," blurted Tony.

"Sort of. But only information is traveling in time. Back in time. No matter. Nothing physical. From what I understand, the energy required to send matter back in time, even just a tiny bit, would be astronomical. On top of that, I think they told me that it isn't even possible to send a real object back in time."

"But you can send information back?"

"Exactly. It involves something called a 'retrograde quantum effect'. It's some sort of wave that reaches its destination before it's left."

"I think I read about that," offered Tony, shrugging his shoulders and grinning apologetically.

"And you can encode information in these wave effects," I continued. "1s and 0s. Data."

"Information traveling in time." Mischka paused. The transcription hesitated. "What sort of information?"

"Anything really. The weather. The names of people who haven't been born yet. What you'll have for lunch tomorrow."

"And this information comes from the server in the future."

"Yeah. So if it's something that people know in the future, we can request it now. In the future, once we can get a hold of the information, we'll put it in a giant database on the server, so that when we request it now, the server just pulls it out of the database and sends it back to the present."

"Any kind of information."

"Anything, as long as it's possible to find it out sometime in the future."

"How far into the future?"

"I really can't say. I don't know specifics, but far. Pretty far."

She hesitated, mouth open, about to speak. A little noise came out of her mouth, not quite a word, something short of a phoneme.

"Okay then," said Tony, rubbing his palms together. Mischka waved him off.

"You explained how information is sent to the present from the future, but you also mentioned the request sent by the client in the present to the server in the future. How does that work, the same way?"

"Good question. I actually understand this part. The request isn't ever sent out over the network. We just store it on the client's hard drive. We don't have to send it into the future, because it'll get there eventually naturally, as long as we maintain and back up copies of the request, and then give the server access to it once we catch up to it, once we reach the moment in the future when the server has the answer to the query."

"The query."

"The information request. In the present, we only have to be able to receive signals from the network; we don't actually have to know how to send them."

"Just receive."

"Yes. Apparently all of the complicated, high-tech equipment that hasn't been invented yet is required only on the sending end, on the server-side."

"I see."

"The receiving equipment, the router back at the office, works off of present day technology. It only requires things that have already been invented."

"Convenient."

"Very."

Tony stood up abruptly and started pacing the room.

Mischka leaned forward, studying my face. A sunburst of worry lines emerged from behind her brow. "So it is your contention that futurefeedforward, the company you work for, possesses a device that enables you to see the future."

"Not really *see* the future. It's not so much about prediction. It's more like getting the answers to the questions before the test."

"Cheating?"

"In a way."

Mischka glanced at the other two, and then at her empty plate. "You understand that you are under legal oath."

"Yes."

"And that there are penalties, both civil and criminal, for lying under oath, and for making misrepresentations or making material omissions to a duly sworn enforcement official."

"Sure."

She mouthed something at Tony, pointing to the door. He shrugged and shook his head.

"Okay," she said. "Tony and I are going to step away for a moment, and Malcolm will continue the deposition. Is that okay with you Mr. Vigor?"

"I suppose."

"Good. We'll return momentarily."

The door whooshed closed behind them. Malcolm sat across from me, still and quiet. He dared a furtive glance in my direction, but quickly looked away.

"We are on the record in this matter," he ventured.

I scratched my head. He started nodding absently.

"I would like to ask you a question."

"Okay."

He furrowed his lips, looked to be gathering himself, but suddenly let out a long breath. It sounded as if his head were deflating.

I unzipped one of my thigh pockets and started feeling around inside. Malcolm looked to be rehearsing a gesture involving both hands. There was a little scrap of paper inside the pocket, about half the size of the note inside a fortune cookie. I took it out.

"This question concerns your company."

"I'm prepared to answer any questions you may have."

He made the gesture, but appeared dissatisfied and began rehearsing it again. I looked at the slip of paper. It said "Stitched by 12" in a font designed to mimic neat handwriting, a draftsman's handwriting.

"There are shareholders in your company," Malcolm began.

"Yes, but we don't currently trade on an exchange."

He began shaking his head slowly and pursing his lips as if agreeing to disagree. I flipped the paper over. Down in the corner, in a smaller version of the same font, was printed the word "HELP."

"But there are shareholders who own shares."

"Yes."

He looked pleased, and pointed at me for emphasis. I put the slip of paper back in the pocket and began feeling around in another pocket. He started to cross his legs by grabbing one knee with both hands and lifting.

"Shareholders other than employees of the company."

"Yes. I believe so. A few."

I found a little packet in the pocket. It felt like a packet of NutraSweet.

"Okay." He said. "They own shares."

"Yes."

"Real shares."

"Yes."

He began cogitating. "But they are somehow different from regular shares."

"Oh. I see what you're after. The interstitial shares. Sure. Yes. We sell this special kind of share that's unique to us. I think we have a patent application in on these shares."

"A patent application."

"Yes. You'd need to talk to our CFO about that."

"The CFO?"

"Emily. Emily Efou."

"Is she here?"

"No."

"Is she under subpoena?"

"I don't think so. As far as I know, I'm the only one who got a subpoena."

"I see." He started slowly smacking his lips. His mouth sounded dry. "Hmm." He kept working his mouth as if priming a pump.

I took the packet out and glanced at it. It was white and stuffed with what felt like sand. On one side it said DO NOT EAT in big black letters.

"I think," he said, pointing to himself. "I think I should consult with my colleagues."

"Okay."

As he opened the door I could hear a din funneled down the tunnel from the main room. It sounded like quite a commotion, including the intermittent squawk of sirens. Once the door shut it was perfectly quiet.

"This is going fine," I told myself. "I can handle these guys." I stretched out my legs and let out a deep breath. I turned the packet over in my fingers. The other side was covered with miniscule, decorative print.

"This all natural humectant is provided to ensure the quality of your garment," it said. "It includes ingredients not fit for human consumption.

"This garment is made of 100% wooline. Wooline is a naturally occurring wool-like substance secreted by certain crustaceans and tree frogs. It is highly durable and water resistant under normal conditions.

"Certain mites and bacteria may infest and consume wooline garments. To reduce the risk of damage, dry your garment thoroughly whenever it becomes moist or wet. Do not wear the garment for extended periods in tropical or humid climates." I noticed a strange smell in the room, something sickly sweet. I kept reading.

"This humectant packet contains extracts from beet larvae and certain deciduous trees of the Pacific Northwest. These extracts have been shown to be a natural repellent to the bacteria and mites that feed on wooline. It is recommended that you retain and continue to use this packet." The smell was getting stronger. I was starting to smell eucalyptus and burning sugar.

"If you experience a rash that persists for more than two weeks after you have worn the garment, or if your doctor has informed you that you have a seafood allergy or a compromised immune system, discontinue wearing and wash thoroughly with soap and water."

The smell was overpowering. I held the packet to my nose and sniffed.

"Shit!" I gasped, convulsively flinging the packet across the room. It bounced off the painting of the shower room and landed near the corner of the buffet table. I doubled over, gagging reflexively.

"My god," I breathed, "tree shit!"

I waited for a couple of minutes, catching my breath. Then I resolved to get rid of the packet, throw it away, before anyone came

back. As I was getting up, something on the blackboard caught my eye. I looked closely at the screen.

"Vigor:" it said. "This is going fine. I can handle these guys. Shit. My god. Tree shit."

"Fuck!" I shouted under my breath.

"Fuck," it repeated.

"No. Stop. Go back."

"No. Stop. Go back."

"Delete."

"Delete."

"No. Delete the last words."

"No. Delete the last words."

I started looking around at the empty room, waving. "No, rewind. Go back."

"No. Rewind. Go back."

"Um. Escape."

"Escape."

"Help."

"Help."

"F-one."

"F-one."

"Quit."

"Quit."

"Control, Alt, Delete."

"Control, Alt, Delete."

Nothing. I started looking around for buttons or switches. Nothing on the blackboard. No ports or sockets. I tentatively tapped the screen with my finger. Nothing.

"Fuck!" I started hyperventilating. "Fuckin' fuck fuck fuckedy fuck."

I looked down at the screen. "Fucking fuck fuck fuckedy fuck," it said.

I closed my eyes and made little okay signs with each hand, picturing an open highway running through a field of rolling, golden wheat. Not a car for miles. The click and whir of grasshoppers fanning out across the field. A crow in the distance.

The door opened. I opened my eyes.

"Mr. Vigor," Mischka said. "We apologize for the delay."

"No problem," I said smoothly, squeezing a deflective glint out of my eye. "You mentioned earlier that Satchel would have an opportunity to object to portions of the transcript."

"Your attorney."

"Yes. That he could have parts of the record stricken."

"He might, if there were a sound reason."

"Good."

"Is there a portion of your testimony that you would like to recant, or modify?"

"Not just now, but maybe later." The three of them came into the room, closing the door behind them.

"Actually, we were just discussing Mr. Pincher."

"Is he here?"

"He's here, but he seems to have been involved in a bit of a scuffle."

"A fight?"

"A scuffle. With the owner."

"With Kobe Bryant? Satchel was in a fight with Kobe Bryant?"

"We don't know all of the details, but it looks like there was some sort of disagreement that led to shoving."

"There was shouting," added Tony. "People heard loud voices."

"Some furniture was overturned," continued Mischka. "Some of the staff were involved. Several chairs were thrown. But the police are here and things appear under control."

"The police? Is Satchel hurt? Is he under arrest?"

"Mr. Bryant left in an ambulance after his physician arrived. I don't think Mr. Pincher was hurt much. The police are questioning him, but we were told that he'd be permitted to join us soon."

"So we'll continue the deposition."

"I think as long as we're all here," said Mischka, nodding. "We may as well see where things take us, but we should, at any rate, wait until Mr. Pincher is available."

"Wait."

"Yes. Tony and I were discussing it, and, based upon your testimony so far, it is our belief that you may be subject to action for violations of Federal securities laws. Because of that fact, we're hesitant to go any further until your attorney is present."

"I see."

"As you may be aware, you were brought to our attention by an individual who attended an investors' conference in Gilmore."

"I didn't know that."

"This individual reported that you, personally, made a presentation at the conference offering to sell 'interstitial' shares in futurefeedforward, the company for which you worked, and that these shares represented an entirely novel form of financial instrument, a sort of combination of a derivative and traditional equity ownership."

"I did make that presentation."

"You don't need to confirm or deny what I'm telling you now. You should in fact probably wait to make any statement until your attorney is present. I'm simply trying to give you some background information to explain our interest in you."

"Okay." The four of us resumed our habitual seats.

"We called you in for questioning concerning these 'interstitial' shares. No one at the agency that we are aware of has heard of or has any knowledge of this sort of instrument. We called you in just to gather basic information about the shares, what they were, and how they worked."

"Mmmhuh," I mumbled, mouth closed.

"However, your responses to my initial questions have led us to believe that you have likely made material misstatements of fact to investors and potential investors in connection with an offer to sell securities."

"Misstatements such as?"

"Well, potentially fraudulent statements concerning the technology developed and allegedly used by the company."

"The temporal network."

"Mr. Vigor, you do not have a device capable of receiving information from the future."

"I don't."

"No. Such a device simply does not exist and cannot exist. Any contrary claim is incredible on its face."

"I see. Anything else?"

"Any monies you, your associates, or the company has received in connection with claims, by you or others, about the existence of such technology are likely to be forfeit as proceeds of a securities offering in violation of federal law."

"Okay."

"In addition, you may be personally liable for civil penalties depending upon the willfulness or recklessness with which you have perpetrated this fraud; and you may face criminal penalties, should a U.S. Attorney decide to bring charges in connection with this case."

"That's it?"

"You understand that my intention is to describe to you what may happen, and that I am not accusing you now of violation of any law. It is important, however, for you to be informed of the shift in our interest in you and the company for which you work."

"Alright. That's clear enough."

Mischka continued to look at me intently. I refrained from blinking. She started to look away, eyes rolling to her left, preparing to glance over at the blackboard.

"Crystal clear," I said suddenly, a bit too loudly. She looked back at me.

"Okay," she said hesitantly.

Out of the corner of my eye I caught Malcolm leaning towards the blackboard, looking over the transcript. He was scratching his head with a peculiar gyration of his wrist reminiscent of a biplane propeller, activated by manual start, but whose engine would not quite catch.

Just as he opened his mouth, an ominous, thunderous stomping of feet erupted outside in the tunnel. We all turned to look at the door. The thundering approached in fits and starts, as if drunk and stumbling down an alley. I glanced at Mischka. She glanced back, her eyes widening. The stomping stopped just outside the door, hanging fire. I thought, in the dozen or so heartbeats of silence that passed before anybody ventured to budge, that I might fall off the bench, or enjoy an unexpected and incapacitating blow to the head.

When the door opened, nobody blinked. It opened explosively, but perfectly soundlessly, without crash or clamor. Satchel Pincher stood in the doorway, lit from behind, holding a Ziploc bag full of ice to the side of his head.