

THE

FUTURE



A NOVEL

NAOMI ALDERMAN

AUTHOR OF THE NATIONAL BESTSELLER THE POWER

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**THE
FUTURE**

a novel

**NAOMI
ALDERMAN**

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For OAD, DLA, and SSA: the future

To order, to govern, is to begin naming; when names proliferate it's time
to stop.

If you know when to stop you're in no danger.

—Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Ursula K. Le Guin





PART 1

the essential problem

NORTH CALIFORNIA, NOVEMBER

Action Now! Ecological Convention

lenk

On the day the world ended, Lenk Sketlish—CEO and founder of the Fantail social network—sat at dawn beneath the redwoods in a designated location of natural beauty and attempted to inhale from his navel.

The tops of the mountains in the distance were capped with snow, their curves and crevasses kindling the imagination. The trees near at hand were russet on fawn, gray-green on sage. The redwood trunks were solid, corded, patterned like twisted vines, their surfaces soft with mosses and growing grass; tiny insects whirred through the dense mass. The sky was the pale water-washed blue of the late fall, mottled cloud visible through the spiral-set branches. And yet.

The meditation teacher had a nose whistle.

Each time she took yet another “deep belly breath,” the whine cut through the gentle whisper of the redwoods like a chain saw. She must hear it. She surely heard it. She did not seem to hear it. The redwoods shivered, the November leaves were about to drop, and all things must pass, as she could not cease reminding him.

All things were not going to pass from Lenk Sketlish if he had anything to do with it.

“Let your belly be soft as you inhale,” the teacher said. Her tongue lingered on the double *l* in “belly,” as if she were Italian. She wasn’t Italian. Lenk had asked Martha Einkorn, his executive assistant, to check after the first day. The meditation instructor came from Wisconsin, the home of squeaky cheese. She kept saying “belly.” He should hold light in his belly, feel the warmth in his

belly, crawl inside his own belly, and dwell forever in her adenoidal whine and her infinitely elongated *l*. What was growing inside Lenk Sketlish's belly was an acidic roiling, churning wrath.

The redwoods. Back to the redwoods. The majesty of nature, simple beauty. The worn path up the hillside, the tumbling brook. Breathing in, breathing out. The world as it comes moment by moment and he, too, a part of it. Not scattered, not wrathful, not thinking of the Fantail expansion deals in Uruguay and in Myanmar even though someone was definitely going to fuck something up in his absence.

Be present. Here. Feeling his breath in his navel, the center of his body, yes, good, the navel rising and falling and... the nose whistle added a new note. Slightly lower than the first. Baritone? Alto? Couldn't she hear it? Why didn't she blow her nose before she came to the sessions? Hadn't Martha or anyone on his board or a single one of Martha's minions found out whether this gold-star, top-of-the-line meditation teacher had a nose whistle? Did they just take everything on trust?

"Breathe within the body"—her voice low and lilting—"nothing is needed from you in this moment."

This was obviously not true, given that he had to be there, given that his board had told him quite some time ago that if he couldn't get his anger under control, there were real questions over whether he had a future at Fantail, which was in itself as nonsensical as this woman with a full orchestral wind section in her nose passing herself off as a source of calm. He'd gone along with it; he'd played the game. If they thought they were going to do to him what Ellen Bywater had done to Albert Dabrowski at Medlar, shuffle him out of his own company, well, they had another think coming. But they would do it—they'd tell him his leadership style wasn't working, he wasn't on a learning journey; they'd edge him out slowly at first and then very fast. He'd seen it. Albert Dabrowski was a cautionary tale. Ellen Bywater ran Medlar now. Where the fuck was Albert Dabrowski? Who the fuck even cared?

"Be truly present in this moment," the mucosal trumpets murmured. "Allow yourself to meet the moment with trust."

He was there to show his willingness. He wasn't an immature baby; he'd run Fantail successfully for nearly two decades, built it from nothing but an idea and the sense of a wave building far out in the ocean. In 127 countries across the world now, if you wanted to talk to a mass audience, you started with FantailStream; if you wanted to sell something, you set up FantailStore; if you wanted to trade across borders, you used FantailSeamless to pay in FantailCoin. When nation spoke unto nation, they did it via Fantail.

And Lenk could do this next part, the public-facing making-nice part. The antitrust hearings, this dumb Action Now! ecological conference with Anvil and Medlar—he could do it. He'd keep his cool, not throw expensive ceramic sculptures through expensive engraved-glass partitions, and no one would have to go to the hospital with a glass shard in her eye ever again. That was a mistake. He regretted it. Meditation is hokey but it works—just breathe from the navel. Focus on the in-breath. The out-breath. He used to be into this stuff at Harvard. One of his roommates had given him a playlist. Long nights coding, then ten minutes of this and you go from strung-out exhaustion to blissful deep sleep. There was something to it. Zimri Nommik of Anvil went to some pod in the desert every year to do ten days of silence and fasting and pouring water up his nose. Or up his ass. One of those. Zimri Nommik, building warehouses and distribution networks, shipping everything old and new under the sun, already on his heels with AnvilChat and AnvilParty, trying to snap up everything in his all-consuming maw and—

“If you find your thoughts have wandered”—the instructor inhaled deeply with an accordion wheeze—“don't be surprised. Simply return gently to the breath. This moment is all you need.” But this had never been the case. This moment was gone as soon as it was noticed. There could be no prize and no possession there. It was the glimmering he needed, the beckoning force of time, the wave gathering in the distant ocean.

“Take a deep belly breath. Remember that we are only ever anxious about things that might happen in the future. But the future is not here. The future is imaginary and all its promises and fears are imagined. We can rest in this moment,” she said. “What is happening is OK.”

But often what was happening was not OK. It was almost never OK. It needed constant nudging and tending, fixing and pushing. Without his intervention the moment would be lost, and the next, and the next, each wave passing and him still bobbing in the cold sea, the warmth leaching from his bones, death rising to swallow him whole. Without keeping his eyes on what might happen, an entire life could be eaten up, and most people's were.

"There's no way to really know what's going to arise next," the instructor said.

Well, then it was all a shit show. There was no way to know. The next moment might hold anything. There could be opportunities, new ideas caught by someone else, a competitor ready to usurp his fortune. There could be Ellen Bywater, the company stealer, turning the all-seeing eye of Medlar in his direction, her gleaming, elegant pieces of hardware the aspirational alternative to workaday Fantail. The Medlar Torc was her new thing, all your communication needs dealt with by this stylish device. She always seemed one step ahead of him now, tempting away his key demographics like she stole Medlar. There could be new products from her, but of course there could be an earthquake, a sudden heart attack, a deadly bomb loosed far away by an unstable dictator, a global pandemic. Anything.

Lenk Sketlish was a powerful man who had built his career on the future, on knowing it, smelling it, feeling it more present around him than the present. The future was his home and his consolation; the urgency of tomorrow, the next decade, the next century pressed in on him and pushed him forward.

"There's no way to really know what's going to happen even one second into the future."

No, thought Lenk Sketlish, that's not going to work for me.

The thinscreen on his wrist gave out a low but urgent beep. The meditation instructor creased her brow, and a satisfying thought flashed through Lenk's mind: Ah, you see, there's no way to really know what's going to happen, is there? He glanced at the thinscreen; it would be an emergency in Albania or in Thailand, a decision to be made and a problem to be solved, some wonderful and financially unarguable excuse to end the session early.

But it wasn't. The skin of his face tightened; his eyes narrowed as he looked at the notification. It was no minor escape. It was the end of days.

zimri

Zimri Nommik, CEO of the logistics and purchasing giant Anvil, missed the notification by a full four hours because—unusually for him—he'd been fucking his wife.

Selah Nommik had been in an oddly labile mood at the Action Now! conference. She loved these bullshit environmental events, it was true. He'd seen her weep actual tears over the tigers and the dolphins and some particular lichen she had the hots for. And it was true that he'd surprised her and doubled the amount of his pledge to the FutureSafe zones. Despite everything, he still enjoyed it when she looked at him like she remembered why she'd married him.

He'd watched Selah walk across the stage—her cream-colored skirt cut above the knee, her calves and thighs tight and glossy, she looked like Serena Williams in her prime. He'd thought: Fuck it, it's all going to go to the lawyers anyway, and said twice the number they'd agreed on. Selah grabbed his hand, held their clasped palms aloft like they'd just won the championship. As the cameras clicked, as the audience roared, as the enormous number appeared on the screen behind them, Selah had bent down and whispered in his ear, "I want you to fuck me. Now." So he was really going to get some action, now. All it had taken was an extra \$5.7 billion.

They fucked the way he liked it, but with an intensity they hadn't found in years. Against the wall of the suite, pulling her skirt off; on the floor, her urging him inside her. On the couch, her under him. Finally in bed, her on top, riding him, her heavy breasts bare, her large, dark nipples so hard, her rhythm so urgent, she erased the memory and the thought of every single part of the whole world and simplified him to a single pinpoint of bright pleasure and entire surrender.

"Bloody hell," she said, and collapsed into the tangled sheets.

Then, remembering, she turned back and said with an unexpected tenderness: “You alright?” It was like they’d just met and she’d only this moment heard about the wheezy, geeky kid he’d been at school, the child of Jewish Estonian immigrants, the boy thrown into a Minnesota high school who was bullied so hard for his weird looks and his strange accent and syntax—and his even more obnoxious constant conviction of his own superiority—that the football kids threw him out of a moving car. She’d seen him again, at the last.

These days, Zimri Nommik had a trainer and a paleo regimen, a six-pack and more money than any other person on Earth. He still looked badly put-together—his broad, hairy shoulders and big arms and hands seeming to belong to a different man than his short, squat frame and pointed features. But it didn’t matter. He knew what he was doing in business so perfectly that it looked like prophecy. His timing was immaculate. His understanding of the market, of the most ruthless impregnable way to run an organization, was unparalleled. Still, Zimri could never hold that janky little boy in completely. He knew how he’d stood next to the healthy, creamy-skinned, flaxen-haired, big-teethed, stocky, farm-bred, sports-playing boys at school. There was never enough sex or enough success to dissolve himself for more than a moment.

Could Selah Nommik know that he’d already spoken to the lawyers? Was that why it was so good? He’d timed his meetings to happen while she was visiting with her family in London. She couldn’t *know*, but perhaps somehow she’d intuited that this was the end, that in a few weeks she would be presented all at once with extraordinary wealth, a nondisclosure agreement, and divorce papers.

“Fuck,” said Selah Nommik. “Shit, I’ve got that thing in Sonoma—you know, the women thing. I’ve got to get going.”

He watched her pull on her panties and smooth the cream skirt over her glorious ass. Fasten the white lace bra. Wanting to hold on to the past is a weakness. Just enjoy it now.

The boys who’d thrown him from the moving car had come to visit him in the hospital. His jaw by then was wired into the new position it would always occupy—slightly thrust forward, giving him the look in profile of an eager

young Communist striving toward victory for the people. Although he knew there were five of those boys, he couldn't now remember any differentiating features; they seemed to pass the few facts he knew—that one had a laugh that sounded like a sneeze, another turned out to be unexpectedly brilliant at physics but kept it quiet—around the group of faces, the characteristics settling on a different one each time. He wished sometimes he had written it all down and sometimes was glad he hadn't. When they visited the hospital, they behaved as if they'd all perpetrated a magnificent joke together, that his face had been smashed in an escapade in which he hadn't been an unwilling participant but an adventurer. *Remember*, said one, laughing, *remember when you were falling out, how you grabbed for the seat belt?*

It was in that moment that Zimri knew that however hard he stuck to his story, those boys would never remember it as anything other than a lark. He'd learned that there was no certainty to be found in others. The only safety was to be independent enough to survive. Any overture of friendship could always turn out to be the subtle maneuvering along a car's bench by a group of interchangeable laughing young men, jostling and pushing until one final puppyish wriggle thrust him into the insubstantial air.

Selah Nommik buttoned her blouse. Goodbye to those breasts, those nipples, those thighs. That was the way it had to be. He lived in San Francisco, for God's sake; there'd always be another one. She kissed him with a fierce tenderness, looked him in the eye, and he thought again—Does she know? But she couldn't know. She just sensed something. She let herself out.

It was late. Lenk Sketlish had invited him for morning meditation. That was a no. Not just because he absolutely couldn't stand Lenk, but because an orgasm of that quality couldn't be wasted. Zimri set his AnvilSleepSystem to wake him at 6 a.m. In his experience, an extraordinary, self-erasing orgasm followed by a deep sleep, an ice-cold bath, and a long run would generate ideas worth between \$10 billion and \$20 billion, amortized over a ten-year period. He instructed his AnvilFocus that there would be no interruptions—none at all, none for any reason—until his run was finished. Nothing whatever until midday.

The next day in the November morning, the lake was cold and clear. There was a mist on it, gathering in loose clouds, drifting like a living thing. Five waterbirds dived for pondweed and gossiped among themselves. The redwoods in the distance were scribbled against the sky. Zimri Nommik, breathing heavily, sat on the shore, pulled his smart notebook from his back pocket, and jotted down various thoughts on synergies between production and distribution lines in Southeast Asia. He fell into a reverie, watching the sinuous strands of tide and countertide, wind threading the surface of the lake, all the while seeing not the world itself but the world of metaphor and symbol in which supply chains and factories, industries and countries were colored beads to be moved and moved again until their operation pleased him.

He was in this trance of productivity when AnvilFocus quietly turned itself off at precisely midday. The clip on his shirt collar started to buzz. He flipped his smart notebook to the digital deck at the back of the pages. And there it was. He stared at the notification for a few moments, then out again to the lake. He scratched his ear. Depending on the kind of shit they were facing, this could be it for this particular lake, waterbirds, lakes in general, or all three. Might as well enjoy the scenery while it lasted.

Selah called him as he walked back to the lodge.

“Fuck,” she said. “Zimri, seriously, I’ve been trying to get you all morning. Is this real?”

He thought of how it could be now. No time to find someone new. She was the one who’d be coming to the bunker with him. He could say, “No, it’s a test, stay at home.” The wind stirred the trees and a gust of leaves tumbled onto the sheer surface of the lake.

“It’s real,” he said. “There’ll be a plane coming for you. Get on it.”

“What, we’re not going together?”

“The protocol is not to do anything that draws attention to our leaving. Normal transportation. You know that. I guess I’ll be...” He laughed. “Fuck, Selah, I’m going to be on a plane with Lenk and Ellen.”

“Oh Jesus,” she said. “Better you than me.”

“We can’t talk now,” he said, “not till we’re on the plane, with our own Wi-Fi, OK?”

“Yeah,” she said. Then: “I’m scared.”

“I’ll see you at the bunker,” he said. “Not Haida Gwaii—there’s been a problem. The Scottish one. It’s going to be fine.”

It could be good, he thought. It could actually be better than it had been. Whatever was going to happen to the world, he would be alright. And if it didn’t work out with Selah, there’d still be a way to find someone new.

ellen

In the wood-lined penthouse apartment of her lake-view villa at the Action Now! convention, Ellen Bywater, the CEO of Medlar Technologies, the world's most profitable personal computing company, tried to pack. Her hands were shaking.

Will, her late husband, sat in the wooden easy chair facing the lake view, watching her. He said: Tough decision?

"It's alright for you," she said. "You're dead. You go where I go."

I would have gone where you went even if I were still alive, he said. Even to the ends of the earth.

She smiled at the empty chair. It wasn't that she didn't know he was dead. She wasn't crazy, after all. He was just a hard habit to give up.

The Action Now! event had been Ellen's idea. Well, not quite her idea. Albert Dabrowski, the ousted founder of her company, had made a huge donation to Action Now!, so she had to give a bigger one and go along to the event to make it look good.

Will would have put his arm around her shoulders and kissed the top of her head and said: "A sop to your conscience?" She'd have shrugged and he'd have said: "I prefer your conscience sopping."

She found herself still talking to him, able to fill in his side of the conversation almost precisely. Sometimes in their house she saw him at the foot of the stair, his long body and the folded easel of his angular legs disappearing into the dining room as she walked down the steps. He'd been proud of his legs—at sixty-four, he'd still had good knees for hiking. On the day he died, his knees had been doing just fine.

"My mind is going in circles," she said. "I'm frightened."

Will understood. Of course she was frightened. No one *wanted* the world to end.

The notification had information about the protocol. She'd written the protocol herself, a while back. In the event of disaster.

"Ellen," said the protocol on her SmartPin, "do not pack all your belongings. Only take small items of sentimental value. Your needs will be provided for."

What about me? said Will. Am I a small item of sentimental value?

Ellen told him to fuck off.

"Have the kids' protocols been activated?" asked Ellen.

The SmartPin responded: "Your children have been notified. They are on their way to the transport."

"Even Badger?" said Ellen.

Will gave Ellen a sharp look. Badger was their youngest, their nonbinary child with a radical political stance. Badger had mentioned several times that they did not approve of this whole system, of warnings and private jets and hidden safe bunkers in New Zealand.

The protocol was to make no phone calls in this situation. It was no use having a safe and comfortable place to ride out a global catastrophe if everyone knew you were leaving and could follow you. Get the doors sealed before anyone knew you'd left—that was the plan. Still.

"Call Badger," said Ellen.

An agony of thudding heartbeats before Badger answered the call. Their face, projected onto the wall of the suite, was very close to their screen—they never wanted their mother to see where they were. How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is.

Still, Badger looked afraid. This gave Ellen a certain grim satisfaction. See? Your mother still does know something worth knowing.

"Are you coming?" said Ellen. "Did you get the alert?"

Badger's brow creased. Oh, that little crease they'd had since they were a day-old baby suckling noisily at the nipple. That frown of intense engagement.

"Mom? There's a car outside. I don't know what to do."

Oh, how Ellen had missed this. Being a mom to Badger had always been tricky, prickly. But her baby needed her.

“Get in the car. OK?”

“OK.”

A pause. Then, at last, the depths of the frown.

“Can I bring...”

“You can bring two people. Tell them to leave their phones behind, OK? Anvil Clips, Torcs, anything. Tell them it’s a vacation. Tell them I’m making you do it and you hate me. OK?”

Badger breathed out a long sigh. Their sweet freckles were scattered under their eyes like stars.

“OK. I’ll see you, right?”

“Less than a day, darling. I promise.”

Ellen Bywater had regained herself. Before the car arrived, she sat in front of the mirror, applied her lipstick, and blotted it. She believed in doing these things herself.

Will said: You did your own makeup for our wedding. Nineteen eighty-nine and you painted the whorls of gold, red, and yellow around your own young eyes. I watched you. Like an artist with the fine camel-hair brushes and the little golden pots. Like a priestess.

“I looked like I’d been punched hard in the nose,” she said. But after all, it’s life that punches you till your face is unrecognizable.

“You’re going to miss seeing me go all to wrinkles,” she said to Will.

Will said, You already had wrinkles when I died, remember? I kissed your wrinkles.

“Sometimes you made fun of them.”

Sometimes we made fun of each other. That’s how we were. I always believed in you.

Ellen looked at Will, who was not there. What was it they’d believed in, after all?

Sometimes, she knew what he would have said as if he’d been right there. And sometimes she had to figure it out—she hated these moments, when she knew he was really gone.

At last Will said: You’ve always done your best for your shareholders and your employees.

There wasn't much packing to do. She took her watch. She took her topaz sweater and the gold necklace that always looked so good against it. She took her laptop, her phone, and her Medlar Torc. The idea of packing was itself a small item of sentimental value.

Although it was strictly against the protocol, Ellen checked the big survivalist site, Name The Day. If anything was out there, if anyone knew the big one was coming, it'd be somewhere on the site. But there was nothing out of the ordinary. Troops in the South China Sea. A pipeline explosion in eastern Europe. The same old prepper rants. Those people didn't know that anything had boiled over. Still, somewhere out there, something was happening. Alarms don't go off for no reason. Somewhere in the world, a situation that used to be just about under control was slipping into "not under control at all." A chain reaction. Somewhere in the jungle, there was a tiger.