

EDEN CAN WAIT

EPISODE 1:

Down the Rabbit Hole



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Eden Can Wait

A Serialized Novel by

Ray N. Kuili



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Table of Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Episode One: *Down the Rabbit Hole*](#)

[Getting Other Episodes for Free](#)

[A Free Sample from *Overdose*](#)

[About the Author](#)

To be, or not to be, that is the question.

William Shakespeare

I'm not afraid of death; I just don't want to be there when it happens.

Woody Allen

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it. For in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die."

Genesis 2:16-17

To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.

Oscar Wilde

Prologue

“Who are you?”

“I’m Five.”

“Where did you come from?”

“From my mother.”

“Elaborate.”

“My mother gave birth to me.”

“Who is your mother?”

“A woman.”

“Can any woman give birth?”

“No.”

“Who can’t?”

“An old woman can’t.”

Silence. A very heavy silence.

“Five, you have failed the test.”

I keep quiet. He is right. What can I say?

“You have failed the test,” repeats the Professor. “Again.”

I nod. Indeed, again. I don’t even know how many times I have failed already—it’s been at least a month since I lost count. Maybe fourteen. Maybe more.

“Do I need to explain to you why you have failed it?”

“I said that an old woman can’t give birth.”

“Don’t try to be funny. You know perfectly well what you’ve done. There’s only one rule—one rule to adhere to—and you just can’t help but keep breaking it. Unless you start taking the test more seriously, you have no chance of passing it.”

“I know. I’ve been trying.”

“It’s about time to try harder. I’ll see you in a week. Or whenever you’re ready, if that day ever comes. But keep in mind that you have only two months left. Then you’re out.”

I nod again, get up and walk to the door.

Once it closes behind me I take a deep breath. Then another one. This isn't exactly what I want to do though. Right now I'd much rather give the poor door a good heavy kick accompanied by a few loudly pronounced words that would accurately describe my feelings toward the test and the man behind that door. But that would only show that I'm not ready. And I've already given enough proof of that. *An old woman* . . . What a brilliant stroke. Pure genius.

As I walk back to my room I can't stop thinking about the test. I didn't last long—in fact I failed faster than the last time. How did he make me do it? Where did that “old woman” come from? He must have sneaked in some reference without me even noticing. Our dear Professor is really good at that. He would've made a killer interrogator outside. Or a great investigative journalist.

But he is not outside. He is here, and so am I. And I really want to stick around. I want to get to that next level. Yes, it means more studies, more tests like this one, more days full of cringing frustration. But it also means money. Lots, and lots, and lots of money. The money I intend to have when I go back outside. With that money we'll see who can't handle the truth. Plus, if I end up kicked out, all of this would be for nothing. And nine months is a long time to waste, despite everything I've learned here so far. So I better go and study.

But when I enter my room my resolve fades away. At the first sight the room isn't bad at all. It's fairly spacious, neat and welcoming. Compared to some hotel rooms I've stayed in it could be even considered slightly luxurious. After all, it comes equipped with a decent computer, an armchair and a large screen TV. Unfortunately, it also comes with no windows.

Of all the crazy things I have to accept in this place, the lack of windows has been surprisingly the hardest one to get used to. Except the Ban, of course. But nothing comes even close to the Ban. You'd think that the lack of windows would be a minor inconvenience when you have no phone, no books—okay, no normal books—no news, and never get to go outside. And yet, it's windows that I miss the most. Sometimes I think that I could give a good chunk of my yet-to-be-earned ton of money just to be able to see a tiny piece of a blue sky whenever I can.

Well, technically I can see some blue sky. Only, like many other things here, it's not quite real. I pick up the TV remote. Channel 14. This one is the best. Lots of action compared to other channels. Here we go. How long will I be able to stand it this time?

I give up less than a minute later. The river lazily streaming on the screen used to have a pacifying effect on me. Not anymore. When you have sixteen channels that show nothing but nature—always lush, green, calm nature with no animal life in sight—you risk developing a strong allergic reaction to TV. Worse, these innocent landscapes make you miss even stupid commercials and obnoxious shows.

No doubt, their intention was to help us adjust and to give us at least some way to relax after our intensive studies. But it's been established a long time ago what kind of roads are paved with good intentions. As of this moment, the picture of unhurriedly moving water makes me want to hurl something heavy at the screen. I take another deep breath. Okay, watching TV was a bad idea. But grabbing something heavy isn't. Blue sky will wait. What I need now is a good workout. It's time for dumbbells. At least they are not prohibited in this nuthouse.

Exercises, snack, shower . . . I've still got time before dinner. Now, that's something I would not miss for the world. Unlike TV channels that are *supposed* to make me happy, the daily dinner with my friends actually does. And I will get to see . . . Her. I know I have to call her by that ridiculous name even in my thoughts. It's a part of the deal. But that's one violation that I keep allowing myself intentionally. I refuse to think of her that way. Maybe in a week. Maybe even tomorrow. But tonight I will see just Her.

In the meanwhile I still have an hour. And I know how to spend it.

I sigh and turn on the monitor.

“Choose a subject . . .”

What do have here? Arts, Entertainment, History, Literature, Science, Sociology, Technology . . . How about history? I'm still a little vague about everyone's occupation.

A mind-boggling mix of the Bible and elementary math.

“. . . And the Lord God made Adam and Eve. And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived and bore Cain . . . Seth begot One and Two . . . Enoch begot Three. And Three took unto him Two as his wife and begot Four and Five.”

Nonsense. But I have to know it by heart. Because, according to my contract, I am that *Five*.

Episode One: Down the Rabbit Hole

I don't know how long I've been living here.

In fact, I don't even know where "here" is. If I were to write down every piece of information I know about this place, they would all fit on a single page. The list of questions I have about my new home though would easily fill a thick notebook. But writing them down would be a complete waste of time, because no one would bother to answer. Moreover, I've been strongly cautioned against asking questions. The only exceptions are questions we are allowed to ask in class, but these are not the kind of questions I have in mind. So I don't ask questions anymore. I've even almost stopped pondering about possible answers. Everything has an expiration date. Even curiosity.

Memories, on the other hand, remain fresh and vivid. More vivid than they have ever been. And this is no wonder, since they are my only link between "here" and the real world. Between this strange existence and real life. Memories, clothes and dumbbells. Everything else was left behind. Things, places, sounds, concepts . . . And people.

Even in jail you are allowed to have visitors. Even in a prison cell you are permitted to write to your family. But not here. Forget visits—here we are not allowed to *speak* about those who matter to us. We are very strongly recommended not to utter a word about our friends and families. And this is just one of many, many things we are prohibited to do or strongly cautioned against. For instance, we are recommended not to *think* about our past. They know they can't prevent us from venturing in our memories wherever we like. And yet, they strongly advise us against doing so. Why? Who knows. They must have their reasons.

We're strongly advised against discussing literature, politics, sociology, arts, medicine, movies and—for some flabbergasting reason—agriculture.

But you have to give it to them—they are rather lenient about minor violations. It's tough to say what they would do in case of a major one, since we haven't had one to date yet. And truth be told, despite all the similarities, this is not a prison. Prison, no matter how luxurious, is not a place where one goes as a prisoner on his own. But I came here voluntarily. And I can leave anytime I want. Except I will never find my way back. I won't even know where to look. These guys make secret government agencies seem like amateurs. But even if by some miracle I find my way back I would never enter this building again. They won't let me. This bridge can be burned only once.

And so I stay put and study. Study . . .

I am Five, I am Five, I am Five . . .



They say that every reporter wants to write a book. Baloney. Maybe this is true for veterans with thousands of stories under their belt. But when you are a fresh journalism grad all you want is a job. A job that would allow you to write good stories, make some real impact and pay your bills.

That was my plan—to get a job and to make the best out of it. But we all know what happens occasionally to the best-laid plans of mice and men. In my case, no one interfered with my desire to get employed. I successfully did it myself with some help from a couple of soon-to-be-graduated friends.

It was Jeremy's idea: instead of selling ourselves to corporate buyers we should build a company of our own. A company that would do a different kind of journalism. It didn't take him long to convince me. I had always dreamt of writing stories I want, not just getting assigned to cover some random news. We teamed up with Kim, a tech genius who somehow ended up getting a degree in journalism and the company was born. *Journalism Done Right* was our motto, and the only goal we didn't have in our business plan was taking over the world. Nevertheless, some of our ideas came pretty close to that objective.

Jeremy was in charge of the business, Kim's job was to make the tech part work smoothly on a very limited budget and I was our editor-in-chief. My job was to write mind-blowing original content, and in my spare time edit submissions from yet-to-be-found external contributors. Jeremy promised to get the money and much to our surprise he did. The investor he had found got sold on our bold vision, believed in government and business transparency, was fed up with mass media and was willing to invest enough to keep us going for six to nine months depending on how quickly we would burn through our cash. We thought that was more than enough to get started.

Six months had enough events to fill six years, but felt more like six weeks. All the late nights, the calls, the stories, the first thousand readers, the first references to our stories in serious—okay semi-serious—papers . . . all of that seemed like a movie. And we were the stars.

I was having the time of my life writing stories, digging up facts and connecting with the growing number of contributing volunteers. We came up with a couple of novel things that made occasional reporting for us an attractive proposition for students interested in journalism, and submissions were flowing in. Many of them were not at the right level, but some were pretty good. The strategy was working. None of our stories was a groundbreaking expose, but we had enough of them to start being noticed. As result, we made some friends and—thanks to my focus on covering questionable moves in business and government alike—some enemies.

A few times Jeremy asked me to go easy on a specific company or a politician. Every time I reminded him about our motto and—more importantly—about our roles. The “I don’t tell you what deals to make, you don’t tell me what stories to publish” argument always worked. Kim never took part in these discussions—he was busy enough working his tech magic. “Go get 'em, tiger,” was the most he would say, though I had a feeling that he would be just as supportive if I replaced the story in question with celeb dating gossip. We weren’t making any money worth speaking of, but being a young startup we weren’t supposed to—or so we thought. We even got our share of the spotlight, when a tech magazine mentioned us in an article about “audacious young entrepreneurs rewriting the rules of journalism.” They got Jeremy’s last name wrong, but it still felt like five minutes of unexpected, yet well-deserved fame.

It was nearly perfect while it lasted. Regretfully, it didn’t last long.

When one day Jeremy told us that we had almost ran out of money, we didn't think of it as much of a problem.

“Talk to the guy,” Kim said nonchalantly.

“Already did,” replied Jeremy. “He balked.”

“What? Why? Did he really expect us to do more?”

“It's not about us. A couple of his other startups went belly-up, so he just lost appetite for new investments.”

“Well, talk to another guy then,” said Kim.

“Did that too. I’ve been talking to them for a few weeks now. No one is interested, even those who have heard about us. The climate has changed. Plus, we were lucky to find him in the first place.”

“So what's your plan B?” I asked. “Start looking for a job?”

“That would be my plan C,” said Jeremy. “I think we can do better.”

And better we did. A week later Jeremy informed us that we had a corporate buyer.

We were stunned. A real acquisition offer was something we weren't expecting to get until a few years down the road. The buyer was real too—a well-known paper with a long history and even longer list of industry awards. I was surprised they knew we existed and even more surprised by the fact they were interested in buying us. Although our companies certainly were in different leagues, we just as certainly didn't see eye to eye on some key issues I covered.

But once we heard the terms our excitement evaporated. No one was going to pay us millions for journalism done right. After paying off all the bills and giving our original investor his part, each of us was getting some—rather insignificant—stock and a job. That was it. We were promised a certain degree of journalistic freedom, but that was just a nice way of saying that our company would become a small part of some department in the bowels of the paper's headquarters.

I was hardly happy about that prospect. This was not the outcome I had in mind while pulling all-nighters for months. Kim wasn't thrilled about the deal either, but he quickly agreed to it, leaving me outnumbered two to one. I stated that I didn't care for corporate checks, mentioned a promising story on the shady deals in the state Senate I had been working on and tried convincing two young audacious entrepreneurs to reject the offer. The young entrepreneurs inquired if I had a viable alternative to propose. I didn't.

We sold.

When I showed up at my new work, I didn't quite know what to expect. Not only it was my first real job, not counting a couple of college internships, but I also wasn't sure how people would react to a hotshot who waltzed in without a job interview. By the end of the day I discovered that even if people had any reservations about me they kept their concerns to themselves. I got an assignment, a desk and an invitation for lunch. The craziness of my startup days was quickly fading away, replaced by the solid, respectable daily routine of an employed journalist.

There was one piece of unfinished business though. That story about the state Senate. I had worked on it for a long time, it had some juicy details that no one else had written about, and the ongoing election season was making the timing simply perfect. Plus, people just had to know about the kind of deals taking place. It was just too good to let go.

My new boss sounded very open to the idea and told me to send him the materials. I did.

A week passed.

When I reminded him about the story he apologized and promised to go over the summary I had sent.

Another week passed.

This time I didn't take "let me look into this" for an answer, and kept pressing until he told me that the story was good, but it was not in line with the paper's official position and thus had no chance of being published. I pressed some more and was told that Stevens would never approve it. Now we were talking. Stevens was the paper's editorial page editor and based on what I had heard about him was the man behind every important editorial decision. He also happened to be the man with whom Jeremy had negotiated the acquisition. Now it was time to show him that he had made a good investment.

I stopped trying to convince my boss, left him in a state of confusion and went to see Stevens. I knew that the right thing to do was to ask for an appointment, but two weeks of pointless waiting took a toll on my patience.

Stevens was in and even agreed to see me. Gray-haired, young-looking and soft-spoken, he sat in his chair with what would've been a perfect poker face had it not been for an almost invisible smile. When I explained the reason for my visit, the smile gave way to a puzzled expression.

"Haven't you already received an answer from Chelsky?" he asked.

I confirmed.

"Then you already know that there isn't much for us to discuss," he said in the same soft-spoken manner. "It's a no go. Thanks for stopping by."

And he turned back to his desk.

I tried to stay calm, thought of a proper response, realized that what I was about to say would end my employment on the spot, took an unnoticeable deep breath and cleared my throat.

Stevens turned back, and asked with a note of surprise in his soft voice, "Yes?"

I presented my case the best I could. He listened without interrupting.

"Is that all?" he asked when I finished.

I nodded.

"It's a no go," he repeated as if he hadn't heard a word I said.

"It's an important matter," I said. "And people need to know the truth about it."

“Truth about important matters is the last thing most people want to know,” he replied, for the first time showing signs of irritation. “That’s why we write about celebrity divorces.”

“I thought our job was to inform the public and let people decide what matters to them.”

“Our job is to *educate* the public, not to inform it. We help people form opinions. Some stories help with this mission, some don’t.”

“I see. Is this why—”

“Mr. West,” he raised his palm and the tone of his voice became slightly sharper. “Has it ever occurred to you why we purchased your company?”

I shrugged.

“To get our reader base? To get us? Our ideas?”

“Ideas,” he sounded amused. “You don’t have ideas. You have *ideals*.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Ideals are *impractical* ideas. And that’s exactly what your former editorial board had.”

“I was our editorial board—” I began and stopped.

He smiled.

“Nice talking to you, Mr. West.”

He started turning to his desk again, then stopped halfway and turned back.

“Oh, and a word of advice. You see, you’re so fond of truth sharing because you haven’t come across a real truth yet. But if you stick around in this business, which is likely, and if you become successful in it, which is not, one day you will come across a truth that will make your bones chill. And trust me, sharing it with others would be the last thing you’d want to do about it. Actually, the only thing you’d want would be to forget about it. But it won’t go away. It’ll stick in your mind and you’ll live with it for the rest of your days. That’s how some of us live. So don’t rush to broadcast facts just because they happen to be true. Truth is a highly overrated commodity. Have a nice day, Mr. West.”

He looked at a fly that was buzzing around the room and added thoughtfully, “I wish I could just pay it to go away.”

By the time I got back to my desk I already knew what I was going to do. There was more than one way to share a story.

When Jeremy heard about my plan he told me I was out of my mind.

“They’ll fire you,” he said. “And it will be your own fault.”

"On what grounds? It's my story. I had worked on it long before I got here. And it's not like I'm selling it to a competitor—I'm simply posting on my personal blog."

"It doesn't matter. You are an employee of this company now."

"Well, screw this company then," I said, finally fully expressing my freshly formed attitude toward my new employer.

Jeremy shook his head.

"They'll screw you first."

My article—or rather my blog post—went live the same evening, accompanied by a few emails to people I knew would be interested in the story.

Next day it was picked by a couple of news sites and even got mentioned by a local TV station. But on that day I didn't pay much attention to the noise surrounding it. I was busy being fired.

I was informed about the termination of my employment by my boss five minutes after I had shown up for work. The state of confusion I had left him in on the previous day was gone. He seemed focused and determined and while it wasn't clear whether he was in support of the decision, the message he delivered was crisp and clear. The only vague part was the reason for the termination, but I didn't bother to ask. I just wanted it to be over with.

When I got out of his office and went to collect my belongings I almost ran into Stevens. He was walking down the hall talking to a deputy editor. At the sight of me he smiled and continued walking.

"Sounds like some people are interested in the truth about important matters after all," I said loudly.

Stevens stopped, half turned to me and replied with a polite smile, "I'm glad you have discovered that, Mr. West. You may be up for more discoveries. For example, you may find out that people in this industry take one's loyalty to his paper hilariously seriously."

The stare of the deputy editor told me that Stevens's grim prediction was not completely groundless.

The days and weeks that followed confirmed that it was dead accurate.

While I had found some limited fame, I could not find a job. I received polite non-committal replies or no replies at all. Several people I knew promised to check with their managers about open position, but never got back to me.

The only two offers I received were completely unsolicited. One was to join a startup that had no funding and no plan, but had a lot of great ideas. Another was from a decent paper in Denver. The editor sent me a letter expressing his support for my actions and inviting me to join his team, should I consider relocation to Colorado. I had nothing against Denver, but leaving Boston just because I couldn't find a local job didn't feel right.

On top of the job situation, I didn't even have the satisfaction of watching my story make some real difference. The scandal that rocked the state Senate a week after my post had been published, pushed all the older news into oblivion. So while I felt right about my decision, at times I wondered whether it was really worth it.

I spoke once with Kim, who was genuinely supportive, but hardly helpful. He told me that at first my rapid departure was surrounded by all kinds of wild rumors, but that a couple of weeks later no one was talking about it anymore. We joked about my plan C being to retire into a Buddhist monastery at the age of twenty-five, then Kim asked if I needed money. I vehemently denied that possibility and we said goodbye.

I lied. My bank account was in dire need of a funds injection and I had already entertained ideas of moving to Denver or applying for a job in a local pizzeria.

And then that email arrived. The email that turned my world upside down and made retirement to a monastery look like a sane plan C.

Dear Mr. West,

We would like to offer you an opportunity to participate in a sociological research project. Should you accept this offer your participation will be well rewarded. Due to the sensitive nature of our research we ask you to keep the details of our communications as well as the fact of this offer strictly confidential. Should you disclose this information to others, this offer will be permanently rescinded.

You will receive further information upon confirmation of your interest in this opportunity.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Experimental Science Institute

I reread the message for the third time. It didn't sound like spam. It could've been a scam but they were not asking for anything. The only information they would get out of my reply would be a confirmation of my email address. And, given the fact that my address had been posted on my site for everyone's enjoyment, I wouldn't be disclosing anything they didn't already know.

Besides, the letter was too vague for a scam. If you want someone's immediate attention you have to offer him a huge and juicy carrot, not some vague promise of an unspecified vegetable. The letter reeked of "whatever" attitude and was hardly designed to lure innocent victims.

In fact, it was the letter's vagueness that was making me question its true intentions. It was simply too light on details for a legitimate job interview invitation. Unless, of course, it was exactly what it claimed to be—an invitation from an organization that wanted to disclose information about itself only on a need-to-know basis.

As I sat wondering about all this, it occurred to me that I had been overlooking an important piece of information. I checked the sender's address. EXPSCI.ORG hardly looked like a domain name for a spammer, a scammer or any kind of evil entity for that matter. It was too boring. And when you deal with something boring you can be pretty sure you're dealing with something real.

Not fully trusting my gut reaction, I went to the site, only to discover a page that was even more boring than its address. The site appeared to be closed for unauthorized visitors, so all I could do was to stare at the organization's logo. A black-and-white scientific-looking emblem with the letters ESI in the center was staring back at me, suggesting that I should either forget about the email or reply to it.

I chose the latter.

The answer came back fifteen minutes after I had sent my laconic "I am interested" response.

"Dear Mr. West," said the second message. "Thank you for your interest in this opportunity. Certain aspects of our research require specific voice characteristics. In order to continue with the application process, please submit a one-minute voice sample using the content of your choice."

Another alarm went off in my mind, but I quickly silenced it. My voice was hardly a secret, thanks to several podcasts posted on multiple sites in my startup days.

I sighed, went to the bookshelf, picked a random book, which turned out to be *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and diligently read a page from the middle into the microphone. As I

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