



Golden's Rule

by C. E. Edmonson

I was in the Eagle Rock Reservation on the outskirts of Montclair, walking along a trail that circled First Mountain. Mountains are supposed to be majestic, I know, but First Mountain was more of a hill, rising only about six hundred feet above sea level. Its real claim to fame was the view from the summit over the flat lands to the east. Manhattan was fifteen miles away and the New York City skyline was visible on any clear day. A glimpse of the urban jungle from the suburban wilderness.

In the dream, I was far from the summit. Eagle Rock includes more than four hundred acres of wandering trails that lead across hills and valleys. The reservation is also heavily forested and some of the trails cover miles of ground without ever reaching the summit. I didn't know which trail I was on, or whether it would lead to the top. The forest was thick on both sides and the branches of the trees arched overhead to crisscross in the middle, so that I felt I was walking through a tunnel. The only sound was the crunching of my feet on the dried leaves underfoot and I saw none of the usual forest animals: neither birds, nor squirrels, nor rabbits. I was utterly lost and alone.

I made steady progress, though, leaping easily across the occasional stream. I felt no anxiety whatsoever, and my step was light. Curiosity was driving my little ramble. What was around the next bend? Over the next hill? Something good, I was sure, something fabulous. Better, even, than the breathtaking view of the city.

I'd hiked these trails before, with Mom or Dad, or sometimes both. Always, they'd been crowded with hikers, but now I was in complete solitude, which is maybe how it's supposed to be. Four hundred acres may sound like a lot, but there were hundreds of thousands of people living only a short distance away. The reservation was more like an oasis than the forested wilderness Elijah and Golden Lea hiked through. Still, something about my journey echoed theirs. I was trying to find my way somewhere. To a new home? To freedom?

My sense of time wasn't too sharp, but it seemed as if I had walked for hours. Yet the light remained constant, as if the sun had stopped moving, and it was soft and caressing, a pleasure that grew more intense the further I went. Some part of me kept expecting night to fall. Another part knew that it never would.

Though I didn't give it a moment's consideration at the time, I was in perfect health. My hair was elaborately braided, the braids shot through with a rainbow of beads, and I wore a loose-fitting dress, almost a robe, that reached my calves. I might have been a bride led to a wedding, except that there was no one to lead me and I knew I wouldn't find a husband on the other end. I didn't have a clear understanding, but a fuzzy remembrance of lights and tunnels and what they signified was lurking somewhere in the back of my mind—in the portion that wasn't dreaming. I'd heard that people who had near-death experiences came back and talked of these things. And the ones who didn't come back? Well, I guess they reached the light.

I came to an end of sorts, finally, when I reached the summit and walked onto a plaza dedicated to the men and women who died in the attack on the World Trade Centers on September 11, 2001. The light here was dazzling. It shimmered in the near and far distance, dancing around the blocky outlines of Manhattan's office towers, as it danced around the memorial's simple sculptures: first and foremost, a massive bronze book that displayed the names of the Essex County residents killed in the 9/11 attack. Then a narrow, rough-hewn pillar that rose from behind the book to support an enormous bronze eagle in flight. A little girl, also bronze, stood before the book, facing outward. She wore a long dress and cradled a teddy bear against her chest.