

Along the Tether (2025)

Since my mother's fall, nearly every day it's can you take me to the sound bath again. She holds her injured arm up for me to see. This bruising down her side could be mitigated. There is numbness to her second knuckles, and her toes. In fact, she blames her lack of improvement on not having gone in so long.

So, nearly every day, I walk her request back in from the gas station side mart, where she now stays, to our rest stop's main building, to the council. Today I find them steeping coffee grounds together from one cup to another by the condiment dispensers. Is that a walk that she could make anymore? Even clipped and following the tether? They shake their heads at the questions that they've posed. Not a one of them will venture outside to evaluate and see her for themselves, however; they'd prefer to know as little as they can about the invalids. There is no help to be offered, after all.

Though I am dismissed, the foreman stands from their group and he pulls me aside to ask if I could help him with something. In the maintenance corridor is a set of mirrors that he's attached to 2x4's and would like to have polished, as signal arms meant for the roof.

We've all started inventing these sorts of new jobs for one another in an attempt to keep busy.

Learning how to flash out codes by catching sunlight in the mirrors will double our communications distance, he says. Triple it.

He wants an as-the-crow-flies conversation about how long I think it'd take to get to the next rest stops and about accounting for the curvature of the earth but instead I wander out the door, out around and to the front parking lot. The foreman doesn't shout after me. Though I did not accept it, this was his way of apologizing: offering an activity. Putting my mind to something else. And it's why I make sure to never promise my mother anything.

Outside, a little crowd has gathered atop the picnic benches that line the rest stop's front bank towards the highway. They're staring at the spot where a piece of the opposite barrier wall has crumbled apart, revealing a high knot of beech roots over a dark opening.

What happened? I ask. Did someone cross the highway?

I get a look from each of them. Of course not.

It was just like that this morning, Marlin says, hardly turning towards me.

We all gasp as, not five minutes later, a tiny man emerges from the opening, crawls up onto a beech root, and stares at us.

There are a few glints from what seems like a spyglass, sweeping back and forth. He takes something out from a breast pocket. A little book? This man is taking notes.

In all my life, someone says, I never would have imagined.

It's a little goblin man.

A fae man, someone else corrects.

He must have knocked the hole in the wall.

I guess so. Are they strong enough to do that?

Under our mounting attention the tiny man suddenly stuffs his things away and disappears.

We argue over whether he had truly vanished or simply jumped down out of sight.

Everyone seems afraid to breathe too loudly.

It's more than I can bear. I take an unattended asphalt rake and no one turns around; they are content to stand on the picnic benches for some time, staring, but I am not.

There are no set working hours but I'm meant to stay on top of things, to preen the cracks from the semi-circle of parking lots surrounding our rest stop and collect any desiccated car parts into my little bag, in case they're worth displaying on the window sills. Though most of the good

stuff has been claimed or traded away by now. The cars themselves by this point barely more than brown insectoid shells.

Around dusk a messenger arrives from the south, from Rest Stop 1202, along the tether. His bag is full and the others crowd him; it is some time before I can confirm that it is Placard, the only of the 1202 folks that I know. He takes his eye mask off and we embrace.

By the guidelines he is not allowed to unclip until within the main building's vestibule, the tether running along our several trees and then through a small hole at the bottom of the door. Too many people have been lost to the open landscape; the tether runs about a hundred miles up and down what's left of the highway, they say, connects a dozen rest stops.

He says that not a single walking convoy has ventured over their suspension bridge in months, before sifting through the cardboard box of sugar rations on top of the trash can, taking a cocoa bomb, and biting into it like a nectarine.

And the bridge is in great shape, he says. Relatively.

I take him in to the food court so that we can sit with our legs touching in my booth beneath the windows.

Have you heard about our little fae man? I ask.

Yes, they all were saying you had a visitor.

It was as if he'd been birthed fully formed from the wilderness, two feet tall, like I could have sat him on my knee.

What's beyond the wall, anyway?

Acadia, New Jersey.

Is there anything left of it?

The tether doesn't pull that far. And we've never given anyone permission to go unclipped and check.

I lean against him while he cleans the chocolate from his hands and face with my station rag, even though it smells like blue cleaner. We touch at the seams of one another's coveralls.

After about 25 minutes he leaves me, vibrating, to go and accept a slab of cinnamon dough from Lex at the kiosk and eat it while playing with her hair.

He needs to make his rounds; I get it.