



# Bottle-Caps And Cigarette Butts

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IT ROLLED LIKE TUMBLEWEED DOWN THE STREET IN THE WAKE OF the SEPTA bus. Rolled like an empty beer can, fluttered like crumpled newspaper and yellowed ginkgo leaves and pigeon feathers, then slipped through a storm grate, where it watched me suspiciously with eyes like cigarette butts and bottle-caps. Watched me watching it, then blinked twice and dropped out of sight.

Can't say I begrudge its circumspection. The city requires a bit of wariness from us all, don't it? Whether we be human or critter or something else entirely, we all show a bit of the same behavior. We all keep an eye out for shadowy doorways. We all take particular notice of those who're giving us a bit more attention than we want. In the end, we're all potential predator, and we're all potential prey. And why should the Fae be any different? At least, that's the way I figure it.

I jaywalked at a break in traffic and peered down the storm drain. Didn't see anything, of course. I might've been looking right at it, but if so, it blended in so well with the trash that had collected at the bottom as to be invisible. I fumbled in my laptop case and found a package of Starburst candies and half a Mounds bar. I opened one of the Starbursts and popped it in my mouth, then dropped one through the grate. Never hurts to leave an offering. Once upon a time these folks were Door Things and Kitchen Things and Stable Things. The spirits of trees and streams and rivers and rocks. I think. But there's no room in this world for Door Things and Kitchen Things. Not anymore.

And the trees are all caged and replaced before they can push up the sidewalks. The streams are all paved over. People

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don't even have time to notice the Place anymore, much less the Spirit of the Place.

As I walked away I felt eyes watching me—an itch in the center of my back, hair raised at the base of my neck. I turned to look at the storm grate but I saw no hint of the Street Thing I'd seen. Still, the disconcerting feeling remained. I threw another Starburst at the grate (and missed), attracting the attention of a handful of jeering children as they passed me on the street. A flash of movement caught my eye as I turned to walk away. When I looked back, the candy was gone.

I smiled as I continued walking, ignoring my lingering apprehension.



That evening I had dinner with Amy and Taylor, who were visiting Philly for a week, and my friend Stephen, at a small restaurant on Fifth and South. A bit pricier than my post-student budget could comfortably accommodate, but how often do I get to see Amy and Taylor, since she got accepted at the University of Washington and he followed her and became a programmer for the very same Evil Empire he'd spent years mocking?

We were well into our second bottle of wine by the time the appetizers arrived and I was well into a fantasy in which the evident tension between Amy and Taylor turned into a full-fledged fight, and she turned to me and said, *I should never have left you.*

And she turned to me and said, “Why do you keep looking over your shoulder?”

I hadn't realized that I had been. But I had. I kept stealing glances out the window to the street, but there was never anything there. You know. Except for people. And cars.

“I don't know,” I said. “I keep feeling like I'm being watched. It's been going on all day.”

Taylor grinned. “You become a spy since we've been gone?”

“No.”

“Witness in a mafia trial?” Stephen offered.

I rolled my eyes.

“Nikki's stalking you.” Amy looked over her wine glass at me. Taylor and Stephen laughed, but Amy didn't. She knew better.

“Gods, no. She's, I dunno, off stalking someone else. I think she moved out of town.”

“Good.” Amy's lips curled into a crooked smile. “So who's watching you?”

I felt my face flush. “It's nothing. It's silly.” I shook my head. “You'll think I'm crazy.”

“So what's new?” Taylor flinched as Amy backhanded him.

“All right,” I said. I rubbed my temples. “It's like this. I see faeries.”

Stephen cocked his head. “Hello? You're just now figuring this out?” His grin would've shamed Puck.

“Drink your wine.”