

Tallulah's Cab Ride

By Jody, aka JodyJane, aka Pere Jane

Tallulah Panzer had been having a weird day even before she nearly died.

Fucking Ginny, she'd thought in the moment before her forehead met the plastic barrier separating her from the cab's front seat. And then—

Eyes shuttered against the flickering hospital lighting, she touches the knot on her forehead. *It's a volcano*, she thinks, a volcano rising out of the seabed, lava fixing to erupt in scorching rivulets of pain.

The doctor asks her what her name is, and she tells him. And thinks again: *Fucking Ginny*.

But it wasn't Ginny's fault that the cab almost killed the pedestrian. The gun wasn't Ginny's fault, either, and what Tally saw after the gun was *definitely* not Ginny's fault, because *that* vision was the result of Mt. St. Tally, and not a thing that actually happened.

Definitely not, as Rain Man would say. *Definitely*.

"Gin-ny, I'm *hooome!*" Tally called as she opened the door to 19B. Ginny never responded to the Ricky Ricardo, but she never said she hated it, so Tally kept doing it for her own amusement.

Dropping her purse on the entryway table, the one her grandmother had always referred to as the "gas station," Tally saw Ginny and her heart sank. When she left for work that morning, her sister sat at the breakfast bar, and she sat there still. Lank hair fell away from her waxy face, and as Tally watched, Ginny absently dropped her pencil, opening and closing her hand with straight fingers. Tally thought of that move as The Goose.

"Gin?" Tally asked. "Working on something new? A bluedinal?"

"Birds don't work for the woodies," Ginny muttered, head down. "Birdies wouldn't look like birdies, they'd just look like birds."

Tally blinked. Ginny was right. Create a hybrid of a bluebird and a cardinal, and you'd get a purple cardinal.

"So who's the new woodie?" Tally asked.

“Humies,” Ginny said, and held up her sketchbook.

Tally’s breath caught. In contrast to the sweet, weird woodland animal hybrids (creatures Tally named during the long hours as a receptionist at Gray Advertising: the rabbimunk, the squoose, the possubear, and Tally’s favorite, the raccotter), Ginny’s new hybrid stood out like blackened teeth on a smiling toddler.

“Jesus, Ginny, who’s going to buy that?”

“I don’t care,” Ginny said. Ginny never cared if her drawings sold. She never cared what she ate, she never cared what she wore, she never cared if she made any money. She only cared that she had time to draw, and since Grandma Bibi willed them 19B, she had all the time she needed.

Tally cared about everything. Tally shopped, Tally washed clothes, Tally spent nine hours a day answering phones and greeting assholes so Tally could pay bills and feed Ginny. Bibi’s apartment and minor inheritance had been a godsend—no rent or student loans put her about \$80,000 ahead of most New Yorkers her age—but they still needed money to live.

Their recurring tent at the Summer Sunday art fair (managed and rented by Tally, stocked with prints Tally ordered, draped in Tally’s tablecloths) constituted Ginny’s share of their modest income. Customers rarely engaged with Tally, except to wax rhapsodic about her sister’s extraordinary talent, but they paid cash for the prints, and that was enough.

And some customers... they *watched*.

The first lookie, a tall white guy in a buzzcut and salmon polo, arrived in the first week. His glance into the booth stopped him so short that an old woman with a granny cart clipped his ankles, and as he approached Ginny and Tally, her impressive stream of curse words flowed over him like a breeze.

“See anything you like?” Tally had asked. *If he has a granny cart of his own, I bet he’ll buy everything in the booth*, she thought.

“What are they?” he asked.

“She calls them woodies,” Tally said, and nodded at her sister’s bent head. “Woodland creatures. Would you like to buy one?”

“I don’t—I don’t have petty cash on me,” he said. “Do you take credit cards?”

Tally laughed. “Sorry, no. Cash only, petty or otherwise.”

“I need approval—I’m new, and they haven’t—”

Tally wondered how many New Yorkers would rush to their side if this guy started speaking in tongues. “Can I help you with something, sir?”

He closed his eyes and inhaled, the kind of exercise her HR department gave employees when they filed complaints, but it worked. He opened his eyes and cleared his throat.

“I’m sorry, I was surprised by the... content of the artwork. I don’t have cash on me now, but would you mind if I stayed and tried to... I mean, I’m not going to sell it, but I really think someone I know would want to see it...”

Tally gazed at the lookie-loo with her mother’s *I have all the time in the world, dicknose, so just keep trying* face. She was no gallery owner, but damned if she would let someone just *copy* her sister’s work without even buying anything.

“Here,” Ginny said, and Tally jumped. She held out an extra tablet and a pencil. “Have at it.”

The lookie took the paper from Ginny with something like reverence, using the tips of his fingers to pinch the paper from her grasp. He stepped to the side of the tent, crouched low to the baking asphalt, and began to draw. After thirty or so minutes—during which Tally sold two squooses and a possubear to a gaggle of teenagers—he showed his work.

Tally relaxed. He was not competition.

He’d copied the raccotter, the one where the little creature nibbled on a piece of meat wrapped in a leaf. His hand was good, Tally saw, but his rendering had none of the original’s gleaming intelligence. Tally mentioned once that she bet the woodies talked, and Ginny said, without hesitation, “They can communicate with each other, but they can only talk with humans in a rudimentary way. Their physiology hasn’t evolved to human speech.”

“Makes sense,” Tally said, as she always did when Ginny dropped a fact that wasn’t a fact. After all, it did make sense. Animals wouldn’t be able to talk like humans because they didn’t have larynxes, or even lips. But rudimentary speech? Well, sure.

“What are you planning to do with that?” Tally asked.

“Just what I said,” he said. “I’ll be back next week.”

He returned as promised, with two more lookies and an envelope of crisp bills to buy one of each woodie. The third week, the lookies brought camp chairs and asked if they could sit in the tent; they paid her \$100 for the opportunity to watch Ginny draw, whispering to themselves and taking

notes. When Tally asked Ginny if she didn't think the lookies were pervs, Ginny said, "No, they're doing research, they're fine," and that was that.

Tally had no idea what they saw; she had no talent for art herself. She could letter pretty well, and made all the signs, but everything else looked like a first-grader's stick figure. "It's because you don't *see*," Ginny said once, and Tally supposed she was right, but what she was supposed to see, Ginny never mentioned.

She saw something in this *humie*, though. That was the thing with Ginny's work; her details compelled close study, like if Durer and Bosch had a baby. (*Another hybrid!* her mind shrieked with a touch of hysteria.) But a detail on the woodie meant a flea on the chipbunny's ear, grains on the squoose's antlers, a fine-haired honeybee shambling over a black-eyed Susan behind the raccotter.

Details on this humie monstrosity included blood trickling from a slit in the thing's neck, just above a butterfly collar. The loathsome, exquisite feathers sprouting from its face must have taken hours. A furry hand slipped into a bulging suit jacket—*it's a gun*, Tally thought, *a gun*—and the hand seemed *aged* under the fur. And the forehead—

"What made you decide to switch tracks?" Tally asked, throat clicking.

"It's getting late," Ginny said.

"It's only 6."

"You know what I mean," Ginny said, looking up for the first time. Tally stepped back, into Bibi's gas station. Keys jangled to the floor.

"What do you mean?"

Ginny cocked her head. *She thinks I'm pretending I don't know*, Tally thought.

"Never mind," Ginny said.

"Fine, then," Tally said. "I'm going to shower and head downtown to meet Josh."

"The Robot?" Ginny asked, eyes back on her sketchpad.

"Yes, the *robot*," Tally said. Funny, dynamic Josh was anything but a robot, but Ginny wouldn't refer to him any other way. Tally knew it was because of his work as a mechanical engineer for some corporation, but the jibe still rankled.

Tally headed into the bathroom for her shower.

“Do you like the music?” the cabbie asked, startling Tally. Ginny had suggested she take a cab because it would help her “see better.” Tally suspected her sister hoped the cab ride would mellow her feelings for Josh.

“I like it,” she said, and she did. It sounded like bellydancing music.

“I like New York in June,” he said. “How about you?”

Tally smiled. “I like a Gershwin tune.” He laughed, and his delight delighted her.

Fucking Ginny, she thought, trying to spoil her New York June evening with horrorshow artwork, and that’s when the brakes squealed, and when her head slammed into the partition, and people always said accidents happen in slow motion, but they happen in a single burst of lightning from a clear sky, splitting your head like that horrible red eye in the humie’s forehead, and please god, don’t let that be my final thought—

—and then the cabbie opened his door, and he was a *giant*, he was a bellydancing helicopter of a giant—

—and a kid, a *kid* pounded on the car, waved around something shiny, a *gun*, it was the humie’s *gun*, and that *would* be her final thought—

—and then she stumbled out of the car herself, dumb move, Tallulah, a little boy is going to shoot you dead—

—and she fell to the ground, and threw up—

—and found herself eye-to-eye with a raccotter.

Not Ginny’s raccotter; Ginny’s raccotter had brown, almost black eyes, and this one’s eyes seemed to have wedding rings in them, and seemed even *more* intelligent than Ginny’s woodies. With this raccotter, she could carry on some very nice conversations about cabbages and oysters and teatime. The creature sniffed her pile of vomit and cocked its head, and drool fell from her mouth.

“Hi, Woodie,” she said.

The raccotter tilted its head—like a dog, she thought, a dog!—and barked at her. She winced at the sound, and its head drew back and then dipped; she became sure it was apologizing for the noise, and what a nice creature, to apologize to a perfect stranger.

Just before she slipped into unconsciousness, she smiled at it, and it smiled back, and another thought swam up; and then blackness.

Now, sitting on white paper and shielding her pained eyes against the ER fluorescents, she recalls about that odd bark, and how she wanted to take the animal home to Ginny, a real-live woodie for their pet. *That kid would have killed you if you had*, she thinks, and knows that to be true, even though she also knows the animal never existed.

Definitely not.

Tally lays on her side, arm over her eyes. She thinks about the tender egg jutting from her forehead; and about standing up Josh; and about whether she can run the Sunday booth with a concussion.

She tries not to think about the thought that drifted up before she faded to black.

Raccotters are real, her darkening mind had whispered.

If raccotters are real, bunnymunks could be real.

Possubears could be real.

Squooses could be real.

Humies could be real.

It's getting late, Ginny had said. *It's getting late.*