

People Call

Jacob Aiello

People call. The people who call ask me how I'm doing, if I'm still operative. They say, "We just want you to know we're thinking of you," and "Let us know if there's anything we can do." They're amazed by how well I'm doing. They say, "If it were us, we don't know how we'd make it," and then they shake their heads. I can't see them shaking their heads but I can tell, hear the motion of their heads shaking against the receiver.

I've come to believe that they wish to see me fail. They wish to see me weep and they pursue this with their calls. That I haven't failed, haven't wept, have managed not to miss even a single game of tennis confounds their sense of order and grief. "Surely if it were us," they say, "we wouldn't be able to consider even a single game of tennis ever again." I can't argue that their imagined response to my scenario is more honorable than mine. I don't even try. Few are the born worshippers of equanimity, I say. Few enjoy a classic game of tennis as much as I do.

There's the underlying implication in their calls that I can't possibly be a real person to want to play tennis, and who knows? Maybe I'm not. Maybe you weren't either. Maybe instead we were pendulums, and one day we swung into each other's arc and stayed there for a while, the briefest dialogue of soft green thread, before swinging back out again.

The Strangest, Most Amazing Thing I've Seen All Day

Jacob Aiello

She's got no clothes on, the woman has, nothing but a pair of galoshes. Galoshes I suppose on account of it's raining outside, but can't imagine for the life of me why she's got no clothes on. She's sitting across the aisle from me on the bus, the woman is, legs crossed I suppose because in spite of everything she's still a lady, has the face, the poise of a lady, sensible like a lady to wear galoshes when it's raining outside.

There's no one else that seems to notice that the lady's got no clothes on, which I find odd because even if it is the city where strange things happen every day, there's also always someone around to notice the strange thing that's happened, to mark it, record it, mention it later at dinner parties or in casual conversation, and here's a bus filled with people and one of those people is a lady who's got no clothes on whom no one even seems to notice but me, and I think this means everyone else has already seen something even more strange and amazing than a naked lady on a bus, something they've already squirreled away for dinner parties or casual conversation.

I think this and all of a sudden I feel terribly sorry for the naked lady whose nakedness isn't even the most amazing thing all these people have seen all day, like what else could they have possibly seen that was more amazing than this? Like don't they know a naked lady is the most amazing thing in the world? I want to tell her, "You're the strangest, most amazing thing I've seen all day," and "I will tell them about you wherever I go," but I don't. Instead I stare at her. I don't stare at her breasts or between her legs that are naked and so far away across the aisle, but at her collarbone, her knees. I stare at the play between her shins and the tops of her galoshes.

She sees me staring at her and she stares back at me. I don't see her staring at first since I've got my eyes on the one part of her that's still clothed, but eventually I look up. "What?" she says. "You've never seen a naked woman before?"

It's a rhetorical question of course but I feel obliged to answer, if not to her

than at least here, now. I've seen naked women before. I've seen a naked woman naked in front of me and been the only one there to see her and say, "You are the single most amazing thing I've seen today and when I leave I'm going to tell them about you wherever I go." It's something special, a naked lady, not to be taken for granted, and even though the naked lady in front of me now isn't necessarily my naked lady, I imagine somewhere there's some poor guy wishing he was sitting here in front of this particular naked lady or this naked lady was naked in front of him, and likewise I can't help but imagine somewhere out there my naked lady is naked in front of some other guy just like me and if she is, I'd hope that guy wouldn't take it for granted, this amazing thing, how amazing it is to see, to be there, and how quickly, just like that, it can be gone.

"I said, you want to stop staring at me, you dirty fuck?" says the naked lady, not necessarily the diction of a lady, sure, but I can tell she's still a lady, a brief and perfectly excusable lapse of moral judgment, like a lady a hundred years hence might have hitched up her petticoat to cross a muddy road, inadvertently revealing a flash of skin in aid of maintaining the constitution of her dress.

"No," I say. "I don't, actually. You're the single most amazing thing I've seen all day," I say. "I just don't think I'd ever be able to forgive myself if I looked away now. I mean, I just don't even think I'm capable of such a lapse in moral judgment."

And just so you know, just for your own edification, it turns out that's just the kind of thing that can lead to getting thrown off a bus, in the middle of the pouring rain, without even the forethought to wear a pair of galoshes.

Jacob Aiello's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Pinball*, *Vending Machine Press*, *Fiddleblack*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Litro Magazine*, *Drunk Monkeys*, and *Storychord*, among others. He lives in Portland, OR, with his wife, dog and four cats, and is amassing a collection of stories consisting of far too many pronouns.