KNOWING NOAH
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Noah’s eyebrows knit in frustration. His eyes widened and his shoulders sagged in yearning. The cashier called his name. He hurried up to the counter and retreated back to his seat in the corner. He peeled back the tab on his cup and took in the fumes of his scalding coffee. The smell of coffee opened his mind to the world that often shut him out but was all his own. Noah retrieved his supplies carefully as he did every time: one dull pencil and a tattered pad of paper. He sank into the cushions of the booth and looked around at the people entranced by their smartphones and the regular old ladies doing the crossword puzzle together in the corner. Noah could always tell which people were the tourists, regulars, business people, and his fellow outcasts. He studied them, always wanting to be like the others. They always had a place to go and people to care about them. He studied them but nobody ever seemed to notice him. Being in public made Noah feel alone.

The door opened and ideas for writing flooded into his mind like the cold wind and snow flurries rushing into the café. He held his coffee to warm his hands and looked up. Noah first noticed the snow frosted pom-pom on top of her hat bobbing in the wind. His eyes ventured down. She wore a red scarf shielding her face from the wind and a long dark peacoat. Her peacoat flowed into gray wind pants that did not seem to match the rest of her outfit. The girl hurried in the door; her hands seeking warmth deep in her pockets. Her light breath curled around her mouth and explored her pom-pom before quickly dispersing over her head. Noah followed the path of her invisible breath to the ceiling and across the shop. The girl walked to the counter. Noah continued to study her as she wrapped her arms around herself and rubbed them still searching for the elusive warmth that everybody seemed to desire. She was not rushing to be anywhere; her pace was slow and thorough—not a tourist. Her head tilted a little to the side and her eyes squinted as if she was always questioning or trying to focus on something she did not have; an idea she could not fully grasp. Was she a fellow outcast?

Noah slowly began to write on his tattered pad of paper. Few pieces still remained on the pad and a water stain had taken over and blurred the lines in the bottom right corner. As he wrote, people came and went from the shop, each person coming or going with a big gust of wind. Men with thick jackets hurried back and forth from their trucks while mothers ordered their children hot chocolate, savoring the fleeting moment that their children were quite with their drinks. The old women were long gone by now having completed their cross-word puzzle and their small black coffees. Steam no longer rose from Noah’s cup and the sugar had settled to the bottom. All these people coming and going in a flash never took notice of Noah as he sank further and further into his booth with every word he put on the paper.

After a long while Noah looked up. All new faces were scattered amongst the coffee shop and business had slowed to a trickle. He thought of the girl. Her frosted hat that slowly melted as she made her way about the shop. Her gray wind pants that did not match the rest of her clothes—she did not care. She wore them confidently. Noah felt something when he thought of her pants. He put his things carefully back into his bag and fidgeted in his seat so his hands could feel the warmth of the leather under him. Noah did not acquiesce to the people around him. Like the girl,
he wore his independence confidently as well. Noah’s quest to fit in had failed but he had gained something much more. He realized he was comfortable with who he was. The elusive warmth of fitting in he could not find but his wind pants kept him warm. Noah once more traced the path of the girl’s breath to the ceiling and across the room. She was still there with him in a different way now even if she did not know what she had done for Noah.

Noah’s thoughts of life melted away like snow on a pom-pom hat in a warm coffee shop. He could be whatever he wanted to be. He did not have to conform to the ideas that people possess about people like him. He could be different. Noah’s coffee had long gone cold now. He got up from the booth. A man looked up from his smartphone and tilted his head to the side just a little and his eyebrows came together as he looked at Noah then back down at his phone. Noah’s lips curled up at the sides as he opened the door to confront a gust of wind and snow hitting his face. He noticed the bell ringing above the door of the café as he opened it. His breath slithered up to the sky in the cold winter air.