

Connection

Wind whipped around rocky cliffs, fresh and salty from its journey over the sea. Along the craggy coast there were a few scattered stretches of pure white sand, settling in ripples around the islands of thick black rock that thrust up from the ground. They were tall and rough, pointed as if reaching for the top of the cliffs, longing to be returned to their home.

It was on one of these beaches that Asher stood, wringing out his shirt. Seawater poured in rivulets through his clenched knuckles and down his wrists, paving clear tracks of skin through a fine layer of sand. When the fabric was merely damp, he draped it over his pop-up chair, looking around for a long moment before walking closer to the water. After a time, he kicked the sand and sighed dramatically, flopping down to the ground and letting the sounds of the incoming tide wash over him. *Solitude*, he thought, closing his eyes and soaking up the dying dregs of heat as the sun winked its way down past the horizon.

Night came suddenly, or so it seemed. Asher had spent the earlier part of the day with his friends, but they'd long since returned to their hostel. He had been alone in his decision to camp out on the beach for their last night of freedom, although now that he'd been out here goofing off all evening, he regretted not making more of an effort to convince anyone to stay with him. With a loud groan, Asher rolled over, spitting sand away from his face. He stretched, and his joints sounded like fall, his granddad teaching him to crack walnuts in the palm of his hand.

The evening had been great. Asher had felt the low buzz of a crowd in the tips of his fingers and made the snap decision to follow. Sand had cascaded around his feet, slipping into his sandals as he'd crested the hill, both hands fully tingling with awareness. The activities had stopped, the air arrested in stillness, as his face came into view. He could taste the energy of the crowd, and it was inquisitive. Asher left himself open with a shy grin, and the reflection of his own smiling face with the emotions and perceptions of others washed over him, jarring as always.

Asher wondered if sense of self was so uneasily defined in the pre-connected past. He remembered reading somewhere in undergrad that a well-known psychologist of the past said that who people are is the sum of three parts, and that they're constantly at odds with each other. He wasn't sure that he believed that, but he knew that repeatedly seeing himself tinged with others' perceptions was sometimes frustrating, if only because it seemed like the sense of connection should keep those misinterpretations at bay. This was, he reminded himself, the very point that his Rabbi had spoken about last Friday. Deeper connection requires time. This was true of G-d, and true of humanity.

Eventually he'd been invited verbally to join the circle of smiling faces around the fire, and it turned out that many of the people involved were also in his grad program, celebrating one last night of freedom. It wasn't long before the others felt comfortable connecting with him, and as Asher tended to follow the social cues of others, he let his own walls fall slowly as well. The muffled buzz of the crowd gave way to rapid reading, and he knew from experience that fighting to control it would make for a rough ride.

Images and sensations passed in a breath and were gone again. He was having his quinceañera, he was graduating with honors, he was holding his son after hours of grueling labor. He lived each memory, cherishing them as he felt the sum of his own self being experienced. In the span of a few seconds Asher knew and was known, and he felt himself better for it.

Afternoon faded into evening and Asher broke bread with strangers turned friends. He'd connected with them and past the initial outreach he had grown to understand them. The more that they spoke aloud, the more their connection grew, leading to more communication between their thoughts and feelings. Eventually they had reached an easy rapport born of both connection and familiarity, and time passed both quickly and not at all.

Asher and his new friends had chased each other through the waves, playing a game called telephone from long ago that involved passing a thought from one person to another to see how clear and unchanged it could remain. The sun moved across the sky in a blazing arc, dipping deeper with each moment. Their laughter followed it through the clouds as they played. Asher stayed as long as his new friends could, but eventually everyone made their way back into town, and he took to walking along the beach alone, watching the tide come in.

Stars were beginning to shine by the time Asher finally wrestled his tent into submission and unrolled his sleeping bag. He was shivering slightly by this point, though his skin glistened with the exertion. He would be the first to admit his lack of skill in this area. Asher unashamedly shucked his wet clothes off into a pile on the sand. His deep brown

skin was pebbled from the chill and he dove gratefully into the warmth of his waiting blankets, zipping the tent closed behind him. He lay on his stomach, head pillowed on his arms, and let his own breath warm his face for a moment.

Night moved on, and still Asher was awake. He'd put his pajamas on and was pouring himself tea from his thermos when he finally felt it. There was a gentle pulse that started at his extremities, warming his whole body and then centering in his chest. He exhaled heavily, always feeling more like himself when he wasn't alone.

"Took you long enough," he projected into the connection, and with it went the taste of hot cider on a fall day and the smell of coconut oil.

"I've had a busy day," came the response, and it was tinged with longing and affection.

Asher stepped out of his tent, careful not to spill his tea, and with a billow and a shake gently rested a towel down on the sand. He reached back for a blanket and sat down to watch the stars, projecting the image of them into himself and beyond himself.

Jacob responded in kind, and Asher let the duality of nearly identical night skies consume him for a moment before letting it fade. The two of them sat in silence for a time, Asher on the beach, and Jacob many, many miles away, back at home.

Asher's next projection was soft and deep blue with longing. "I miss you."

"Your program will be over in six months," came the swift response, and it too was nearly overflowing with emotion. "We can manage being apart until then."

Jacob was still, and they were connected just well enough that Asher could make out the view of his mother's kitchen table. "You're visiting my parents?" Asher asked.

"Your mother insisted I come over yesterday evening to break the fast, and I stayed today because of the snow. It kept us all locked in." Jacob projected an image of the news forecast last night, followed quickly by a view that Asher recognized as the street from his bedroom window. He hummed in response, letting the buzzing playfully fill their connection.

"Your room still smells like you," Jacob continued, and Asher swallowed. The wave of longing that followed was harmonious and beautiful, even in all its sadness. The two of them had forged their connection young, and it had bloomed as they grew. Asher knew that their harmony was close to being unmatched; it had to be to communicate so well over such distance. Their connection was unlike any other Asher had ever known, and it was almost physically painful to be this far apart, regardless of their ability to maintain their tether from this great a distance.

From Asher came the quiet calm of the waves and a sampling of the day's events, his new friends and their game, the way the beaches shone when the sun was high, and the accomplishment he'd felt at putting his tent together by himself. Jacob's joy at his happiness reverberated between them, bouncing around until it burst outward, and Asher hoped that there wasn't anyone near to feel it and become curious. As much as he'd desired company earlier, he wanted the rest of the night just for them.

In the stillness it was easy to feel the longing between them, eclipsed as it was by joy. Even at the level they were bound together, the distance was still difficult. Before Asher

had left, the two of them had discussed the opportunity at length, and Jacob had insisted he couldn't pass it up. It helped that both of them knew it was only for six months and that they would reunite like nothing had changed. Although that knowledge was only a small comfort in the actual face of reality.

The stars provided a glimmering background for the rest of the night, and after their initial conversation, there was little in the way of active thought shared. They simply existed, experiencing each other's perceptions in a quiet whisper that lapped at the edges of their conscious minds. Eventually they fell asleep, still connected.