The day was bright and the sky shone with a beautiful blue brilliance as five friends walked shoulder to shoulder down a winding dirt road. They laughed and joked with one another, pushing and play punching. The ease and comfort with which they interacted was as natural as breathing. All but one had been friends their entire lives, but nothing was less obvious. He fit in like a puzzle piece, walking with the others and laughing at their jokes. No one knew him for what he was; a guild operative.

The group had been walking for over an hour before the tallest of them leapt in front and began to regale some wild tale. He walked backward, miming the action in the story and mimicking the different voices. His friends laughed in all the right places, and even finished some parts of it. The tale ended with a riotous burst of laughter and applause. The story teller finished with an anticlimactic shrug and rejoined the group in walking.

The group quieted as they reached a lake, still and calm as the stagnant air that smothered it. They all began to take off their clothes and wade into the water, oddly bold for that age. None could be older than 17 or 18, and yet they looked at each other with the innocence of 5 year olds.

*Could this be a ‘slip?’*the Righter thought to himself as he tried his hardest not to stare at the only girl of the group.

*No way, must be bad writing.*he decided as he tossed his clothes to the boy stuffing their belongings into a water tight bag.

Struggling to keep his face as blank as the others he dove into the water and fought to keep up.

This weekend my friends and I will be traversing the familiar old trail to a place we have affectionately and unimaginatively dubbed “The Spot.” It’s been a sort of secret haven for our group since we discovered it as kids. This will be the last time my friends and I will all be together before we venture out on our separate paths into the “real world.” It’s a little sad when I think about it, but honestly I’m glad to get away from this place. Too many bad memories. Memories of my brother, and how he died protecting my mother and I. I’ll still never know how he did it, but I will always be grateful for the second chance he gave me.

This morning, I awoke with a strange feeling. It’s hard to describe exactly, but it feels like an extreme version of déjà vu. Normally I sit in bed for a while and read or watch TV before getting up, but today I felt like I shouldn’t linger in this house too long. I got out of bed, feeling as if I had made each movement a thousand times before, and began to get dressed. Suddenly my vision began to blur and a grey mist invaded my senses. It enveloped my vision and seconds later I found myself trudging down the stairs, showered and groomed for the day. It took a full five seconds for me to convince myself I had imagined everything and simply zoned out while getting dressed.

I sat down at the table with a huge bowl of frosted flakes and had started eating when I heard footsteps on the stairs. Taking what I somehow knew would be my last spoonful of cereal and pushing back from the table, I looked up. It was my mother, sneering at me from the doorway. She stalked toward me, kicking a chair out or her way and swatting my cereal bowl onto the floor.

“What the hell are you doing in my house?” she growled through clenched teeth.

Now I like to think of myself as a calm, cool and collected kind of guy. I expend a lot of energy attempting to hide my anger, but honestly, I’m not very good at it. I wear my heart on my sleeve most of the time, and I’m only saved by the rapidity with which I can temper any negative emotion with a positive one. I call it my silver lining. Normally, in a situation like this I would scream at the crazy woman, now inches from my face with a ferocity that would confirm her status as my mother better than any dna test. Then I would feel horrible for doing so, considering her condition and clean up the mess before leaving the room as quietly as possible in order to avoid another outburst. This morning, however; I calmly got up as if I was already finished with my meal, brushed the speckles of milk, cereal and spittle from my shirt and walked out of the front door.

*Awesome*. I thought to myself as I walked around the house to the road. I wasn’t reflecting on my attitude, which could also be summed up with the same word, but on the reason for it. The déjà vu I’d been feeling all morning is like a sixth sense. An ability to effectively sense the future around me, and act accordingly. Before my “auntie” graced the room with her presence I knew what she was going to do and watched it transpire as if it had happened a thousand times before.

About eight years ago after the incident that split our family I discovered that my mother; Mary, had a second personality. Her normal, soft spoken self would seemingly disappear for days, sometimes weeks and be replaced with a very similar woman with one major difference. This version of Mary absolutely hated my friends and me. She could cook, clean and go to work with no one the wiser, but if I waltz into the same room as her I’d be lucky to escape with all of my limbs. My friends had taken to calling this second personality my “auntie” short for “Aunt Evil.” Mary was only aware of her changes due to the wake of destruction she left in her path, which usually included but was not limited to broken dishes, cracked and shattered windows and even a few broken bones. She had once split her hand open after punching through our fish tank. Needless to say, we haven’t had pets since. None of the doctors could tell us why she acted this way, and many didn’t even believe us. We just attempt to cope with it as best we can. When auntie is home, I stay away. *The Spot* is usually my residence of choice, but sometimes I stay with a friend.

My steps seemed to slow as everything began to blur. My hearing muffled as if my ears were filled with cotton as the grey mist filled my head. It effectively erased my consciousness again, unopposed.

I came back to senses as I hopped a fence and tumbled over the ATV parked right behind it. I righted myself and realized I was in James’ back yard. Swallowing my fear, not wanting to believe what had just transpired, I resolved to continue on as if nothing happened.. I jogged to the back door and burst through it bellowing-

“Honey, I’m home!”

“Where have you been!” a horrible mockery of a nagging female voice replied. “You know little Ray Ray hasn’t even had breakfast? Its almost 1pm, what kind of a father are you?!”

James leapt from a doorway and caught me in an embrace, laughing.

“What’s up man, you’re early.”

“I know, I know. But I did get this milk for little ray ray” I answered as I mimed pulling a carton of milk from my bag.

“You two should just admit you’re in love with each other” a teasing voice called from the room to my left. “Go get married already, while it’s still legal.”

Mia entered the room, tailed closely by Ray, James’ dog.

Ignoring Mia’s taunt I dropped to all fours and stared into Ray’s golden brown eyes. I had read somewhere that this was seen as a challenge in the animal kingdom and had performed this ritual with Ray ever since. The dog’s slender muzzle wrinkled to reveal glinting white teeth. Unafraid, I stalked closer, keeping eye contact. Ray lowered his head as if to submit, and then pounced, surprising me twice. Once with the speed he displayed and once because I had no idea it was coming. My deja vu had failed. Ray stood over me, pawing at me and covering me in dog slobber before I could pry him off.

“Enough, enough” I gasped, between laughs.

Ray relented, leaving me to find my way to my feet. I wiped my face with my sleeve and entered the room with Mia and James. Flopping into Mia’s lap, a move that probably would have crushed her had it not been for the soft cushions of the couch, I threw my arms around her.

“Hey baby” I whispered in a husky voice. “Where’s my kiss?”

“Right here” she said, shoving the palm of her hand into my face and twisting it back and forth.

“Good thing you can cook” I said, rubbing my burning nose. “Because kisses like those won’t be getting you a boyfriend anytime soon.”

I slid off of Mia’s lap and into the empty corner of the couch. Looking over to see James completely absorbed in some video game.

“Auntie’s home” I muttered.

“Shit…I’m sorry dude. You can stay here if you like, my parents won’t be back for another two weeks.”

“No thanks, I’ll stay at the spot.”

Just then, a strange look passed over James’ face. It was gone within a second, replaced with a veil of concentration, and then anger as the character on TV was gunned down by a sinister looking alien.

“Alright man, if that’s what you want” he said, leaning back in his chair and passing the controller to Mia.

“Ryan and Matt’ll be here in another hour or two” Mya said, snatching the controller and proceeding to beat every high score saved on the system. “Until then, I’ll be making this game my-“

“Language, language young lady” James interrupted. “You wouldn’t want little Ray Ray talking like that would you?”

We sat on the couch, playing video games, joking and remembering old times.

The doorbell rang as I was able to finally pry the video game controller from Mia’s fingers. We had been playing each other in a fighting game called “spirit blade.” Mia, who was much better than either James or I in most games, this one especially, had been on a 20 round winning streak. James was finally able to end the embarrassment when I distracted her with a riveting story about my first girlfriend.

Now the story wasn’t distracting in the way most tales of this genre are. Mia was my first girlfriend. Elementary school was a lonely place for a tall, goofy girl with short hair. I was stuck with her as a field trip buddy early in the year and we became friends almost instantly. From that point on all of the other kids called her my girlfriend to annoy and ridicule me. Songs about sitting in a tree and other activities come to mind. We rolled with it and started holding hands and “making goo goo eyes” at one another from across the classroom for a year before actually attempting a kiss, failing miserably and falling back into being just friends. At that age, what else would you expect? Out was simple and harmless. This made changing the story from a tale of two friends in elementary school, to an exaggerated high school anecdote, very entertaining.

I pryed the controller from Mia’s hands yelling-

“Pass the sticks. Loser!” in my best Mia imitiation.

She turned red, or as red as a girl of her complexion could turn and wrapped her hands around my neck, shaking me back and forth with all of the “homeric” fury she could muster. I gasped-

“Not the face, it’s my money maker!”

She stopped long enough to look me in the eyes, and fall to the floor in a laughing fit.

“Well, its true.” I said in mock indignation.

I crawled back to the couch as James, also laughing, helped Mia to her feet. The doorbell rang again and I rose to answer it, my prize firmly grasped in my hands.

Ryan and Matt stood on the front porch with blank expressions.

“Guys?” I said, snapping my fingers in front of them.

Animation returned to their faces as suddenly as if a switch was flipped.

“Hey Eliot!” Matt and Ryan said together cheerfully as they walked into the house.

“Didn’t I tell you guys that ‘twin thing’ you do creeps me out?”

“What do you mean?” they said in perfect harmony. Turning to face me. “Come and play with us”

I laughed. And barreled through them. “You two should have a show”

“We know” Ryan said, stepping away from his twin.

“We’re working on it” Matt finished.

We walked down the corridor to find James fiddling with his controller and Mia staring at the pause screen blankly.

"Thinking about that 'L'" I said to her teasingly.

Ignoring me completely, she snapped out of her trance, and proceeded to greet the twins enthusiastically. She and Ryan had always been very close, Matt was a different story. James and I could tell there was something between them. We knew it was a train wreck in the making.

"It’s been so long since I’ve seen you guys!" she said, hugging Ryan and pushing Matt to arm’s length for a hand shake.

“I’ve been busy with school” Ryan said,

“And I’ve been working out” Matt grumbled, breaking the twin routine and flopping on the couch.

Matt and Ryan may look alike, but they’re as different as two brothers could be. Somehow, despite those differences they were still very close. I always thought of them as two sides to the same coin, the perfect coin. Ryan was book smart, and an all-around nice guy. He was great at sports, but chose not to play them, and could be very social when he wanted. Matt was a typical jock, but was just as smart as Ryan. He chose to get average grades and focus on sports, and was very popular because of it. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t more than a little jealous.

“Yea, yea, yea” I said, “We can talk on the way to the spot”

James hopped up from his chair and said “yea, let’s blow this popsicle stand”

Ryan, Matt and Mia looked at him in puzzlement.

“What the hell does that mean” Matt said, obviously speaking for all of them.

“Um, it means let’s get the hell out of here” I answered, a little annoyed.

“Since when? I must have missed that memo” Ryan retorted.

“Since…I don’t know, just since whenever.” I stammered, walking through the front door “Let’s go guys, I’m getting stir crazy”

As we all began our trek to the lake, I thought about what had just happened. All morning I had been gifted with a strange feeling of déjà vu. It seemed like I knew what was going to happen before it did, except in a few cases. When Ray *attacked* me I was caught completely by surprise, and just now the whole exchange between the twins and I felt completely new. I began to think about the other phenomena when I felt that now familiar gray mist invade my senses. I panicked and stumbled to my knees.

“Whoa, smooth moves Eliot” a voice behind me called, but it sounded distant and seemed to drawl on forever.

The mist took me.

What could have been minutes, hours or days later I came to, gasping for air, lying on my back. Darkness enveloped me like the sky on a starless night. As my senses returned I attempted to open my eyes, but couldn’t. Panicking I threw my hands out to feel around. As I did this I realized my eyes *were* open, it was just so dark wherever I was that I couldn’t see anything, even my hand in front of my face. I was suddenly aware that I was soaking wet. I sat up and felt around for some clue as to where I was.

My hand fell onto an outstretched arm, as wet and cold as my own. I recoiled, and at that moment I realized where I was. Still breathing in ragged gasps I tried to calm myself enough to find the lamp. I was at the entrance to the spot.

As kids my friends and I spent most of our days swimming at the local watering hole. It was a good sized lake, with clear blue water. I’m told now, that the water was so clean because of the amount of rocks it flowed over in the stream from the main body upstate.

We all thought we were great swimmers, and one day we had the chance to put that notion to the test.

I was first to spot the struggling body about a hundred yards from the shore. It bobbed up and down, spraying water as it breached the surface and splashing as it struggled to stay afloat. I swam out to it, peppered in shouts to come back and closely followed by Ryan, Matt and Mia. Working together we were able to calm the flailing body and drag him back to shore. That was the first time I met James.

He wasn’t outwardly grateful for us saving his life. Looking back, after knowing him for so long, I know he was just as grateful as he was embarrassed for being in that situation in the first place. After having spent the day together getting to know each other, James explained how he had almost died that day. He was testing how deep he could swim underwater when he found a gleaming section of metal. He had been going back and forth from the object to the surface for air, attempting to investigate it. After several dozen trips he had brushed it off enough to realize it was the top lip of a large pipe. On his last dive he attempted to get to the bottom of it. He overestimated his abilities and barely made it to the surface in time to snag a quick breath and sink back below water with exhaustion. From that point on, it was a fight to keep his head above water.

After hearing this story, we immediately decided to go investigate the pipe together the next day, and that marked the day we discovered “the spot.”

The spot is a dark dank underwater cave. It’s filled with air, and we assume it opens above water somewhere since the air has remained cool and breathable through all of our trips. To get in we had to swim down into the pipe, and crawl through the bend about 10 yards to a hatch. The swim was at the edge of our capabilities as children, and since the lake rose every year, it remained there as we grew and our abilities matured. Because of this we always took turns swimming down to the entrance. Any more than two people at a time was approaching suicide. The tube was deep and only allowed one person at a time, so we developed a simple rule. We go down in an order similar to a relay race. The second strongest swimmer goes first, followed in turn by the weaker swimmers, and then the strongest comes last carrying everyone’s things in the water tight bag. The first person would leave the hatch open for everyone else and turn on the lights in the small cavern the tube led to. Matt and Ryan were the strongest swimmers so they usually traded first and last place.

We followed this rule, and spent many a lazy summer day in this underground cave. We began as kids simply exploring a new area, but after the initial excitement of the find wore off and the scales of youth fell away from our eyes it became our haven. Any time something went wrong, we met at the spot. Bad grades, groundings, relationship problems, sports issues, you name it and we’ve hashed it out in the underground cavern.

Considering the amount of time we’ve spent there, it was pretty bare. The explored area was a small cave with about a 100 yard diameter. It was cut off from the rest of the cave by boulders and stalactites, too large to squeeze by. The ceiling was about 20 feet from the cave floor which held nothing more than a few conveniently shaped rocks for sitting. Be it ever so humble.

The limp hand I touched sent me into panic mode. I mean, imagine yourself in the same situation. You wake up in the dark, blackness so thick it takes you a moment to even realize your eyes are open. You feel around and come across a cold wet arm, lying limp on the ground. I’m pretty sure you’d panic too.

Somehow I calmed myself enough to turn the lamp on. Bright light shone from the newly charged device, blinding me. After a few moments I was able to discern shapes and movement. A few more moments allowed my mind to settle and piece together my situation. Not only was I at the entrance to the spot, but everyone else was there as well.

The light illuminated my immediate vicinity and I caught a glimpse of James face. He was lying on the ground, spread eagle, panting. His face was pale, possibly because of the blue tint of the lamp.

Holding the lamp higher I could make out Matt and Ryan calmly walking to my right. Neither appeared to be hyperventilating the way I was, which was strange considering they were usually first and last through the hatch. Ryan bent over and picked up a soaking wet bag. He pulled out several wads of cloth, which I recognized as clothing and tossed them to Matt, James and I. Matt caught his, while James’ clothes landed unceremoniously on his face. He grunted in protest, but seemed to be too tired to make any other move. My clothes landed at my feet. Looking down at them, I realized I was only wearing my boxer shorts.

“Shit” I muttered, crouching to pick them up and cover myself.

Ryan pulled his own clothes out before tossing the bag over my head. Awkwardly I dropped the lantern and my newly recovered clothes in an attempting to catch it.

The bulb shattered and all light was immediately cut off. Before the darkness encroached again I had turned enough to see that Ryan was tossing the bag to Mia, standing behind me. In that moment I saw that she was soaked as well, wearing shorts and a swim suit top. The same old “gettup” she usually wore to swim to the spot.

She was reaching up to catch the bag with a blank, unfocused look on her face as the light disappeared.

“What the hell Eliot!” James cried out breathlessly.

“My ba-“ I began, suddenly cut off by a thought.

“Guys?” I said.

There was a moment of silence before I went on, not waiting long for a reply.

“What the hell is going on? How did we all get here?”

A light turned on behind me. It was Mia, she had found the other lantern.

I squinted as my eyes adjusted to the light.

“What are you waiting for!” she called to no one in particular. “Lets go!” and she took off walking towards Matt and Ryan, completely ignoring me. I saw, as she walked by that she was completely dry and dressed now. So too, were Matt and Ryan.

“Geez, what did you do to piss her off?” James said hesitantly as he stood up.

The light was receding fast as Mia, Ryan and Matt walked deeper into the cave. *Are Mia and Ryan holding hands?* I thought to myself as I pulled my gaze away from the dimming light and looked for another lamp to turn on. James beat me to it and turned on the lamp nearest the entrance.

“Here” he said. “Take this and clean up the mess you just made. I’ll catch up with the others and see what I can find out.”

He handed me the light and took off behind the group calling for them to “wait up.” I could see, with relief that he was soaked to the bone like me.

I pulled on my clothes, almost ripping my shirt as it clung to my wet arms and back.

*I’m losing my mind* I thought to myself. First this déjà vu thing pops up. Its cool, and pretty useful now that I think about it. But it doesn’t seem to be too dependable.Next I black out, and wake up doing something else, as if my body was on cruise control. I remember watching a show on the science network that talked about a phenomena called “high way hypnosis.” People would completely zone out when driving to work because they knew the route so well. They would get in the car, buckle up, then look up and be parked in their drive way and have no memory of actually driving.

Maybe this is similar. *Or maybe I’ve got another personality living in my brain* *like mom*.

“No” I said out loud. “I’m not losing my mind. I’m perfectly fine.”

“That’s right” a calm angelic voice said. “You’re not crazy Eliot. You’re perfectly normal, better than normal.”

I dropped down into a crouch and looked around.

“Who’s there?!” I called out.

No answer. I backed into a corner, straining to hear. *Well this is just perfect*. A few moments went by, and the silence was ringing in my ears when the disembodied voice spoke again.

“Be calm Eliot, everything will be explained in due time.”

“This isn’t funny guys!” I screamed. “I know it’s you Mia. Quit playing around!”

I looked in the direction the others had walked. Nothing. That couldn’t be right, the cave was only about 100 yards wide, they shouldn’t have been able to go so far that the light was no longer visible. The voice spoke again in its half whispering tone.

“Do not trust the ones you call your friends. They are not who they say they are.”

“What?” I answered. Forgetting for a moment that this was all a prank. It had to be.

“They are dangerous. Do not trust them, and do not let them know you’re aware of their falsehood.”

“Dangerous?”

Realizing the others were probably laughing at my gullibility, I called: “Good one guys, you can come out now”

Hearing nothing, I repeated. “Guys?”

I was answered by a small shuffling sound behind me. Dressed now, I grabbed the lantern and turned around. Nothing was there. I swung the lantern in an arc and strained my eyes. I could see a dim light off in the direction my friends had gone. *Why didn’t they turn on other lanterns?*

Another shuffling sound emanated from my left. I turned, holding the lantern in front of me, as if to ward off whatever was making the sounds.

I backed away, ready to run when I felt a sharp pain in my back. Whatever was stalking me was now behind me and had taken hold of my shoulder. I was jerked off of my feet and pulled backwards. I felt jaws digging into my back and collar bone as the creature secured its hold. I imagined a wet crunching sound, my collar bone breaking. I swung my right arm, not ready to die without a fight, when suddenly, it stopped. The pain was gone and I was in blackness again. *I did it?* I thought to myself.

A voice rang out, the same voice from before, but deep and commanding. “Go now!”

I didn’t need to be told twice. I scrambled to my feet and dove to the hatch, flipping the cover up as I slid to it like it was home plate. Just as I began to crawl in, I thought about James, Mia, Ryan and Matt. I imagined the creature that almost got me, tearing them apart. I couldn’t leave them down here alone with whatever that was. It only took a second, but I made my decision. A decision that I knew could, and would probably get me killed. Somehow it didn’t bother me. I felt distant, and sure that I couldn’t leave them.

I slammed the hatch closed and darted toward the light, calling out. As I ran I could hear something scrabbling behind me. It sounded like a gargantuan dog or wolf, maybe the size of a horse. Its gait was huge and powerful, yet quick and precise. I could hear its claws scraping against the hard stone floor and it’s growling intake of breath with every step. I imagined it seizing my shoulder again and finishing its interrupted work. The sound grew louder behind me as I ran. I pushed myself to my limit, and then pushed harder. My legs were pistons, hammering at an ever increasing rate. My body was nearly horizontal, leaning so far forward that the only way to keep my balance was to go faster. *Faster*. I stretched my arms forward with every step as if I was pulling on a life line. *Faster.* Willing myself forward, I moved quicker than ever before. *Faster.* I reached my limit, and broke free of my boundaries. In that moment I realized the seemingly fast dashes to first base I had been praised for, were only half of my true speed, no, only a tenth. The breakaway runs I frequented on the football field were nothing compared to what I was doing now. In five seconds I had gone from laying prone on the ground by the entrance, to wondering why the cave wall had not shattered my face a hundred yards away.

I didn’t have time to think about where I was, it was obvious this was no longer “the spot.” Not only had I ran the entire length of the underground cavern in what had to be a record breaking time, but the scenery and lighting had changed completely. I went from a dark and wet cavern, to what appeared to be a white hallway with no end in sight. I could still hear the creature behind me, it had kept my pace and was gaining. Perplexed, I pushed on until I passed a doorway. With no way to gracefully stop, I dove forward and turned my body around, using my legs to kick against the floor and my arms to push myself off of the ground. I looked up, praying that the creature behind me would be unable to stop, and it was then that I got my first look at it.

In my wildest nightmares I had never seen anything so terrifying. The creature was in fact the size of a horse, with a deep chest and muscular limbs. I didn’t get a good look at whatever was at the ends of its huge legs, but I could see the damage it was doing with each powerful stride. Chunks of the floor seemed to disintegrate at each step and reappear behind it in a plume of dust and debris. Its head was huge, covered in fur and bisected by a ludicrously menacing grin. Teeth sprouted from its broad muzzle and its long red tongue lolled out of the side of its mouth, flapping drops of spittle in its wake.

As it approached, I felt the same knowing feeling from earlier that day. I knew to duck, and roll to the right. Doing this I dodged its first effort to bite at my face as it passed, as well as its second attempt to claw again at my back. Thanking God, I pushed myself to my feet and ran to the door I had slid past. I must have been running pretty fast because the door was almost forty yards away from where I had finally stopped. I reached it, and pulled on the handle. It was locked, I pushed, hoping it would budge with no luck. Looking around I saw that the creature had finally managed to stop and turn around. It was a hundred yards from me, accelerating to full speed. As I watched it began to change, splitting like a cancerous cell into two identical creatures, but somehow both retained the original’s size and menace.

A grey mist began to form at the corners of my vision. *No, not now!* I shook my head, fighting it and turned to look into the window at the top of the door, prepared to plead to anyone on the other side.

Inside I was able to make out opaque glass cylinders standing against a white wall. They were the only thing in the room and were about eight feet tall. I could see the unmistakable silhouette of a human body in each.

The grey mist continued to invade my vision. I turned away from the door feeling hopeless. Nothing seemed to matter anymore. I observed that the creatures were only feet from me as my vision blurred. I felt distant, as if I was watching this happen to someone else. One stopped inches from my face and snarled, the other moved to my left and did the same. All of a sudden, I didn’t care. Somewhere off in the distance I thought I could hear screaming. It was me, I was screaming at the creatures. I could see my arms lashing out at them. I felt a wet pop as one of my fingers connected with the left eye of one of the beasts. The gray mist completely invaded my vision and swiftly turned to black. I felt nothing else.