

## Chapter 1

### Grilled Cheese & Cookies

Mom, Katie and I lived together in a small two-story condo in a quaint suburb called Orange, Connecticut. When you look out the window, you could see a black-and-white gazebo right next to where the yellow school bus would pick us up and drop us off. Tall trees stood all around the neighborhood and Boston Post Road. The New England foliage would greet us in the fall with bright maple colors – a warm mix of red, orange and yellow.

As a teenager, I would often sit in the living room couch and play videogames on the Xbox by myself. The kitchen was connected right next to the living room, so Katie would sometimes walk down from her room upstairs and see me there. She'd glance at me, go into the kitchen and ask,

“샌드위치 먹을래?” (‘Want a grilled cheese?’ in Korean)

I always nodded yes.

Katie had experience helping out at our uncle’s Korean deli in

Brooklyn during the summers, so she was quite the expert when it came to

grilled cheese and breakfast sandwiches in general. The recipe itself was

simple. Slices of whole wheat bread. Slices of cheddar cheese. Lettuce.

Tomato. And a fried egg with good old ketchup, some salt and pepper to

season. She’d heat up the pan with olive oil and make sure that the outside

of the bread is nicely grilled until it smelled amazing all over the kitchen.

Whenever I smelled the cheese and heard the crackling of an egg being

fried, I couldn’t help but feel excited.

“Here you go.”

Katie would cut the sandwich diagonally in half on a white plate and place it on the living room table between me and the TV. The yellow yolk from the sunny-side up and the red ketchup would peek out from the browned bread slices. The orange-tinted cheddar cheese inside had melted nicely and oozed over onto the plate.

“Ooo, thanks. 잘 먹겠습니다당.” (‘Thanks for the meal’)

I would hurriedly grab with my hands and chow it down, wanting to get back to my videogame as soon as possible. It always tasted amazing though. I liked the texture of everything mixed inside, and the richness of the egg yolk and the slight sour sweetness from the ketchup.

Mom would sometimes get back home from work around these late afternoons and ask Katie,

“너는 요리 다 해놓고 왜 아무것도 안 먹니?” (‘Why aren’t you eating any of it after you cooked everything?’)

Katie would joke and say,

“부성현이 게 눈 감춰버려서 먹을 게 없어” (‘Terry Bu is destroying it so there’s nothing left’)

15 years after her death, I can of course find grilled cheese at a nearby local deli easily. But it never tastes as good as the ones Katie used to make for me. I never realized back then how precious those sandwiches were. I had no way of knowing there was an actual limit to how many times I would be able to experience that. As a kid, the only “communication” I

started with Katie was arguing with her about who would get to use the one desktop computer in the living room and yell at each other to move out of the way. There was no verbal expression of affection, really, for each other. We thought it was embarrassing, that we were too cool for that. Whenever she would cook me stuff, I assumed she was super bored and had nothing else to do at the time, and was just practicing her cooking skills. But I finally realize now that Katie was trying to show me how much she loved me through her cooking.

I wish I'd been nicer to Katie. I look back today and think how I never reciprocated any of it for her. I was like a little puppy just following her around and eating free food. I don't remember at all if I ever got her a decent birthday gift. If Katie were alive today, I would at least give her more compliments on her grilled cheeses. And how awesome of a sister she was

to cook for me all the time. But maybe all that is irrelevant, now that she is dead and gone.

Katie had a bunch of other good recipes too. Fried rice. Miso soup. Pecan pie. Pumpkin pie. Oatmeal cookies. She was especially fond of baking. They all tasted incredible. She would type out her favorite recipes on a Word doc and print them out and save them inside a 3-ring binder. I was so sure that binder existed until after her death, it got lost when Mom and I were moving out of Connecticut. It upset me that I lost all her handwritten recipes. Although when I think about it, even if I happen to dig it up now, it would tear me up to read all that and recreate her recipes on my own without her.

After Katie graduated high school and started her freshman year in college, it became rare that she would get to visit back home from her dorm and to cook for me like before. Her dorm in Storrs was at least a 4-hour drive from home so we would only get to see her twice or thrice a year during the holidays when college was off.

About one to two months before her suicide, Katie cooked for me one last time, I remember it quite distinctly. It was the summer of 2005; I was a high school senior, and she was a junior at UConn. She came home unannounced all by herself, and I was just on my Xbox as usual, enjoying my summer break.

“Tadaima,” (‘I’m home’ in Japanese) she said.

She went upstairs into her old bedroom, and it sounded like she tidied up a whole bunch of things. Looking back now, perhaps it was her last

chance to check out her old room at home, and to discard anything that she didn't want others to discover after her suicide. Or she might have been picking up supplies she would use for the attempt. She then came downstairs and into the kitchen like the old days and start cooking, not saying much. Katie cooked up her usual grilled cheese and then also a set of cookies. I didn't know that would be the last time I would eat her homemade food.

Katie folded her cookie dough into small round circles, put on her oven mitts and placed the tray of cookies inside the heated oven. Her cookies would have a generous sprinkle of oats on top, and I liked how those oats looked when they finished out of the oven, that slightly scorched brown. I would catch the sweet smell of cinnamon, butter, maple syrup and oats all mixed in, spreading from the kitchen to all over the house.

Sometimes she'd mix in pumpkin puree and I'd smell that too. Maybe I could have gone and watched over her shoulder, I would have learned something.

I took the grilled cheese and cookies from her and chowed them down happily on the couch while watching TV. When I was about to finish eating, Katie packed up her things and walked down toward the front door.

“나 간다.” (‘I’m gonna go’)

I remember she made eye contact with me. Her eyes did look sad. Her face looked quite thinner than I remember, with a bit of sullen, worried look. She had put on lots of dark eye shadow, perhaps to hide the bags under her eyes. But that's all I noticed. When we asked the campus psychologist later, it was around this time that Katie had been suffering from severe bulimia and eating nothing but an apple and drinking nothing

but water to fill up her stomach (and then throwing up everything later). She must have felt quite mentally distraught around this time, right after a breakup with her boyfriend. She was baking all those cookies for me while starving herself.

“Hey, at least I can live vicariously and watch other people eat. It’s therapy.” A long time ago, she had joked like that to me once and chuckled.

I don’t remember the last thing I ever said to Katie. She put on her shoes, and I heard the front door open and close as she left. I could hear her turn on the ignition and see her out the window drive off in her ’97 green Honda Civic. I had my empty white plate on the table, with crumbs of her sandwich and cookies. That was our last interaction. That memory is etched in my brain and often plays over and over again.

Even as a 30-something grownup, I go into cafes and get a bit excited whenever I see grilled cheese or oatmeal cookies on the menu.

Whenever I eat grilled cheese, especially good ones, I remember Katie. 9 times out of 10, Katie's tasted better though.

On special occasions like Valentines' Day or Christmas, I often bake cookies to share with neighbors and coworkers as presents. Whenever I smell cookies in the oven, it reminds me of Katie. To be honest, baking good cookies is a precise art, and as clumsy as I am, mine often turns out ginormous and stodgy. The sizes are all over the place, not precise and cute like Katie's were. But sometimes, somebody eats my cookie and says,

“Hey, it's pretty good!”

It makes me happy. Katie would be proud of me.

“누나, 사랑해요. 그리고 고마워요. 나도 오늘 쿠키 만들었어!”

(Nuna, I love you. And thank you. Hey, I made cookies today!)

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## Chapter 2

### Watching over Her Shoulder

Before we moved to the U.S., Katie and I lived in Seoul in a tiny apartment with Dad and our paternal grandfather. The whole space must have been less than 700 square feet. Our parents had just divorced a few years earlier, and Mom was fighting for custody while making plans to take us to America.

When Katie was in junior high, she would write an “exchange diary” (교환일기/交換日記) with her best friend at the time whose name was Jiyoung. An exchange diary basically worked like this. You first write the date on top and write your journal entry, a few pages long at the most, and then the next time you see each other in school, you hand the notebook to

your partner and the other person would write the next entry—basically having a written conversation with each other over the course of weeks or months. Out of curiosity, I would secretly read out of this exchange diary as a kid when those two weren't around. (Come to think of it, I was such an annoying little brother.)

Inside the small notebook, I noticed the two distinct handwriting styles of the two girls. Katie's best friend had an extroverted and confident personality, and you could tell from her writing. Full of humor and foul swearing about her older brother who was captain of the Judo club and would throw Jiyoung around as a part of his mischievous practice. Jiyoung would also write about the fun fads at the time: Dance Dance Revolution, fangirling on musicians like **컨츄리꼬꼬** and Deen, fantasy fiction books like

Dragon Raja. (Jiyoung went onto become a popular webtoon comic artist in Korea as an adult.)

But when the page turned to Katie's portion, it did not read the same.

Katie wrote about our parent's divorce, how she didn't really like coming home from school because it felt so empty and gloomy with nobody around. How she had just argued with Dad or Grandpa about something. How she felt sad for me because I looked so unkempt and untidy in my appearance while going back and forth from school. How much she disliked her own appearance and personality.

"I think I look too fat and ugly, Jiyoung."

"I hate staying at home. That's why I don't return home until late."

"I envy your bright and fun personality. I wish I had it."

"I wish I had an older brother I could lean on like you do."

Katie's best friend would of course have no idea how to respond to these sentences after she got the notebook back. Understandably, Jiyoung would often write,

“Oh, man ... It sounds like you are really struggling lately ... I can't think of any good words to write to you in this situation, Katie. I'm sorry.”

But Katie did treat this exchange diary very fondly and kept it in her possession until her death. She treasured Jiyoung for being a reliable, precious friend that she could confess to about her struggles. There must have been a lot of mental anguish inside Katie around this time, and although Jiyoung was unable to comprehend everything that Katie was going through, just putting them into words and opening up on a piece of paper seemed to have helped Katie. She held many of these emotions back from Dad, Mom, Grandpa or myself and never expressed them except

in these diaries, perhaps trying to shelter us from her negative emotions.

Even as a young teenager, she was already bearing so much weight on her shoulders.

After we moved to the U.S., Katie still treasured her social relationships and friendships. She almost seemed hypersensitive about how she came across to others. This was understandable. She had experienced bullying, teasing and ostracizing in her early years at an American high school, and never felt like she was “home” or belonged to a particular group. She did treasure the few honest friendships she did have. Whenever she would have friends over at home, I remember Katie putting up her best effort to look perfect in front of them. Whenever I would do or say something childish or embarrassing, as little brothers often do, she

often apologized profusely to them and really hated it when I acted like that.

I remember one time, she was trying to teach her American friends how to make California rolls, and I did an awful job cutting them with a knife at the end, so the sizes of the individual pieces came out all over the place—some being the size of a quarter and some being the size of a kiwi. Katie would say to her friends,

“I’m so sorry, guys. Terry is just terrible at this. Terry, go back to your room and don’t bother us anymore.”

Sure, it was usually my fault, but still.

Also following the high school kids’ fashion trends of the time, she had bought about 15 new pairs of ripped jeans. When Mom looked inside Katie’s closet one day, Mom got pretty mad saying,

“What a total waste of money! What’s wrong with you lately?”

Katie started using a lot more eye shadow around this time too. The Katie I saw in my eyes at the time was a girl who lacked nothing, always strong and smart, nothing to fault. But when I think about it, Katie had cared quite a lot about her appearance and image, perhaps thinking that she is not pretty, cool or cute just the way she was, that she had to try extra hard to be accepted by those around her.

When Katie had her first breakup as a junior in high school, she looked more silent and distressed than usual. Mom went on a business trip one weekend, and Katie invited three, four of her friends to drink beer and vodka together to drown her sadness.

“Don’t you tell Mom,” Katie warned me with a stern face. I was usually scared to cross Katie so I just nodded along.

Her tolerance wasn't even that good, she was only about 16 years old after all. I remember her and her friends drinking for hours late into the night, shit-talking the ex-boyfriend and calling him a "f-ing asshole." And then they all threw up in the bathroom toilet together later. I was around 8<sup>th</sup> grade, so it was quite entertaining to watch all this from the sidelines, a bit worriedly. I remember one girl going into our kitchen and cutting up huge slices of wheat bread and then urging Katie to eat them all while she was busy throwing up, saying something like,

"Katie, the carbs will help absorb the alcohol."

Even as an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, I thought that was a load of bull. Lady, she is already throwing up. Too little, too late.

When Katie left home to live in a dorm, our relationship got better perhaps because we saw each other less and argued less. I did miss her a bit and had gotten slightly more mature going into high school, so our conversations got deeper whenever we did catch up. Katie shared with me her latest favorite music and anime, and introduced musicians and artists she was into. She took me out for Starbucks once and talked fondly of Utada Hikaru, Crystal Kay, Boyz II Men, Brian McKnight and Mariah Carey. She advised that I had to watch Japanese anime like Naruto, Bleach and Full Metal Alchemist, that I was missing out big time. Sometimes she would find funny memes on the internet and send them to me. Katie was usually the quiet and calm type in front of others but still loved to laugh.

Katie also happened to be a talented singer and sang in the church choir since childhood. Choir directors would soon find her talented and give

her lead solo parts during performances. When she was attending the University of Connecticut, an older Korean senior discovered her on campus and suggested that they record the Korean version of a CCM song “Shepherd of My Soul (선하신 목자)” together in a professional studio and release it as a MP3. Katie’s clear, strong voice came out wonderfully with help from the studio acoustics. Whenever I miss Katie’s voice, I listen to that recording. 15 years is a long time, and to be honest, sometimes I can’t remember her voice perfectly. So I am glad that this recording remains. It’s a proof that Katie lived. And it gives me strength whenever I listen.

The recordings are available below for you to download and listen, in case you want to hear Katie’s voice too:

**Shepherd of My Soul (Korean version):**

<https://terrybu.com/downloads/shepherd.mp3>

**Motherland by Crystal Kay:**

<https://terrybu.com/downloads/motherland.mp3>

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## Chapter 3

### I thought I would be fine

I turned 28 years old in 2016 and thought that I never ever have to worry about getting depressed myself. I considered myself a mature grownup and was getting paid a decent salary at work. I had confidence that I wouldn't repeat the mentally destructive habits I had as a kid back in college. But when I least expected it, it came back to destroy me. Following a series of events, I had the worst depressive episode of my life that year, wanting to commit suicide. To be honest, I consider it almost a miracle that I am well-recovered today and writing this book, when I think about how bad it was back then.

I had just completed a coding bootcamp program in New York City and successfully made a career transition into becoming a software engineer. I luckily had received a job offer with a six-figure salary for the first time in my life so I was feeling quite excited. Around this time, as long as you uttered the words 'coding' or 'developer', it was possible to snag a job at a tech startup with a huge salary as long as you passed the technical interview. Because of this, I was perhaps feeling quite cavalier and overconfident in my abilities. I thought nothing could go wrong.

'Okay, since I got this new job, making good money, I can probably relax and have a bit of fun in my life right about now,' I thought to myself.

Boy, was I wrong. They say hindsight is 20-20 but for sure, I made a series of bad decisions around this time. With less than six months under my belt on the new job at a new company, I signed a lease to move into a

fancy new apartment called New York Tower, a 38-story luxury high-rise in the middle of Murray Hill neighborhood, about a 10-minute walk from the center of Bryant Park in Manhattan. The rent was stupendously high. Not only that, but I also started shopping around and jumping between job offers a little bit too much, going into one startup one day and then interviewing with other companies the next. Outside of work, I was also running around like a crazy person with non-work-related matters, trying to juggle standup comedy, church, volunteering, social life and a girlfriend all at the same time. I remember on Christmas Eve of 2015, I brought my girlfriend at the time to one of the most expensive brunch places in New York City and giddily exchanged gifts while sipping on freshly squeezed orange juice that cost an arm and a leg. If I had known I would be flat out broke soon after that, I'd never have squandered money like that. If I could

go back in time to face the old me, I would slap that guy in the face multiple times.

'Man, this is so great! My life is on fire, I'm so busy ... I must be doing everything right!'

What I didn't realize at the time was that I was putting myself into an incredibly unstable situation and taking high financial burden at the same time when my ability at work was still unproven. It was like building up the foundational pillars of my life (career, finance, health, time investment, relationships) on an extremely thin layer of ice, ready to crack at any moment, and I had no idea. Less than one year into this lifestyle, that ice cracked from right under me, and my life fell apart so fast in pieces, it was almost surreal.

First, I got dumped by my girlfriend whom I loved. In many ways, it was my fault. As a result, I started to brood about the breakup and holed up in my apartment, not socializing much with my friends. I kept ruminating about the breakup repeatedly, with all the should-have's and could-have's, useless regrets all over my head. Now that I look back, I was wasting time and acting like an idiot because there was no reason to cling onto a woman who had firmly made up her mind to leave. I was an emotional wreck and couldn't focus at work either. My boss and colleagues were understanding at first, but when I was noticeably distressed about this breakup in the office and didn't seem to focus properly on my job for weeks, they eventually fired me. My boss called me and said,

“Terry, we hired you because we thought you were a smart guy who could help us take on this massive project we have in front of us. But we

are a tightly strapped startup and just don't have time for this. Please find another job, I'd be happy to be your reference,"

and hung up the phone. I could not freaking believe it. It was literally the worst epic fail of my life.

Depression causes an imbalance in your neurotransmitters and dopamine levels, which means that once you fall into that downward spiral, it becomes difficult to get out of that hole. As my lifestyle habits became worse and worse, my appearance got worse and more unkempt as well, so this situation certainly didn't help with my job interviews. It felt impossible to line up a new job, especially because my resume was just all over the place, and I came across a big, unreliable "flight risk." Since I no longer had income coming in, I felt so stupid living in that luxury apartment. Every second living in that space was screwing me financially.

'I really fucked up this time. I should just die,' I thought to myself.

I had nobody else to blame. In my defense, sure, I couldn't have predicted that a romantic breakup would lead to depression, or how everything would then result in a huge screwup at work. But I just couldn't get myself together afterwards.

"Just forget about her and find a new girlfriend," people said. "Just find a new job," people said. Everybody tried to talk some sense into me. But all I could get myself to do is ruminate, brood, and regret at home. I had lost all focus during job interviews and would repeat escapism habits and addictions, overeating and oversleeping. Due to stress, I gained a hair-pulling disorder, and lost a lot of hair during this period. So inevitably, my situation did not improve. I felt so embarrassed even to run into people I knew in the streets, so I would only walk out to convenience stores at night

and then order delivery for food. I felt like a hikikomori, a social recluse. I remember running into one acquaintance from church who looked at me and then said to me worriedly,

“Terry, what happened? You look so out of it. Your eyes are totally out of focus. Are you alright?”

I lived on the 34th floor of New York Tower. If you open a little door from the living room, you could walk outside onto a balcony made out of black metal frames and stand outside and feel the wind. I had once loved inviting friends over and out to that balcony, bragging about the view of the New York City skyline of skyscrapers. Now, I was thinking to myself, if I fall from that balcony, I could possibly get myself to die. But I didn't even have the courage. I threw down a couple of coins into the air from the balcony to

see if the coin would properly land all the way down to the ground (A few days later, the building management sent out an angry email to all the residents saying that nobody should throw stuff from the balcony as it could kill someone). I was afraid that I would actually survive the fall, and not die. I imagined myself in a wheelchair, never being able to walk again and breathing through a tube.

I spent about 4,5 more months in that god-forsaken apartment and finally ran out of money to pay the rent. I asked Mom if I could go back and live in my old room in her house in New Jersey for awhile, and of course, she said yes. I packed up all my things, and Mom and Felix (Mom's boyfriend) came to pick me up with a real worried look on their faces.

“Depression will never bother me. I’m gonna live a fun and full life. I don’t have to worry about getting depressed like in college or the way that Katie did. I’m doing awesome. I’m a grownup. I’m mature,” I had said those words to myself once. All those beliefs flew out the window in 2016. My life was a royal fuck-up in every sense of the word.

Afterwards, there wasn’t a significant improvement. I spent every day in my tiny room at Mom’s place. Mom must have been quite frustrated with me too; I barely talked to Mom or Felix, and was still escaping in my head. I would eat out so often at Burger King and fast-food joints that I was looking more and more like a pig. I had lost contact with all my friends long time ago. I was so embarrassed to be myself.

## Chapter 4

### Running Away

I lost the motivation to do anything.

'Screw job interviews. Screw my life,' I thought.

I eventually found one temp position by luck that paid decently but I hated it with a passion and barely went into the office. I was still living inside my head in the past. I couldn't forgive myself for the way my resume became a mess, how I let a personal issue influence me at work.

'I shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have made that mistake. I shouldn't have said that to my ex. I should have been more careful.'

I kept ruminating over and over, all kinds of repetitive regrets in this terrible mental loop. I remember wanting to eat and overeat all the time. At least while I was eating, I could temporarily escape from the rumination and

painful thoughts. Naturally, I gained so much weight during this time. I was completely not present and just swimming in that locked up prison inside my head mentally, beating myself over and over again.

I resigned from my temp job a few months into it, but I was also feeling ashamed about being an unemployed grown man living at Mom's house. So I secretly decided to take a road trip with no other plan but to get out of this mess as far as possible. I knew I needed a desperate change and being pampered with free food and laundry from Mom at home probably wasn't going to change anything. Perhaps I just hated myself and wanted to run away from everything.

I didn't tell Mom. I just left a post-it saying that I am going on a trip. I packed one suitcase, put it in the trunk and drove off. At least I still had a car to my name. I started driving. With no plan whatsoever, I just got on the

highway. It was the December of 2016. I kept getting suicidal thoughts on the way.

I drove all day and all night. The weather was frigid so I put on my down jacket inside the car and could still see my breath. When the sun set, I realized I was somewhere around the south of Maryland. I randomly booked lodging on my smartphone and checked into a place, probably a Marriott. I paid everything on my credit card and wasn't exactly clear whether I would pay it off later or maybe I would kill myself so it wouldn't matter anymore. I remember going into the downstairs restaurant and eating dinner by myself. Since I was in Maryland, I decided to treat myself to some crab cakes, but everything tasted terrible to me back then. I just ate to not think for a while.

I came back to my hotel room and spent the night on a cold, hard bed. I sat there alone and turned on the TV because I couldn't fall asleep right away. I think I just watched some local Maryland news. I cried a little bit trying to fall asleep. I think I also did something stupid like peeking at my ex-girlfriend's Instagram which just aggravated every single wound. The repetitive thoughts kept bothering me,

'Why did I do that. Why did I do that ...'

I did feel better when I was in bed sleeping. At least while I was sleeping, I could turn off my brain. I was hoping when I wake up and open my eyes, everything would go back to normal, the time before I made all those mistakes.

I got up next morning and went down to the same restaurant again to have breakfast by myself. I was dressed like shit in a gray hoodie and sweatpants. I evaded eye contact with the waiters and hotel staff.

While I was waiting for my food, I could see something in the distance across the lobby in the hotel conference room space. There was a whole bunch of young undergraduate college students dressed up in suits having a career fair in the hotel. Booths and tables were spread out with company representatives from all over, Big 4 accounting firms, you name it.

Recruiters and senior-looking business people were manning their stations and handing out flyers while the students made their rounds holding their resumes in one hand. I watched as the college kids chatted up the recruiters and with each other with such hope and optimism in their faces.

For some reason, I envied those college kids so much that morning. I had gone to similar career fairs when I was in college 6,7 years prior. But me sitting there, after getting dumped by a woman I loved and fired from my job, I felt so pathetic compared to them. I had graduated college a long time ago and now felt like an unemployed loser with a failed track record. It seemed these kids had such an exciting, bright future ahead of them and would never have to experience the same shitshow I had just experienced. It teared me up a little thinking like this. The 30-year-old Terry I imagined a long time ago was somebody who would be a strong senior role-model to these younger kids—sharp, smart, making tons of money with a kickass job living it up in the big city with a plenty of wisdom to teach and charisma to share. Instead, I was just a few steps away from the mental hospital.

I couldn't really stand it anymore in that self-pity, so I checked out and hurried out of the hotel that morning. I needed to get out of Maryland.

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## Chapter 5

### Finding a Guide

Started driving again. I wanted to get out of Maryland as fast as possible. I drove all day, all the way down the highway. I stopped only to fill up when my gas ran low and for bathroom breaks.

'Well, at least I have money for gas,' I thought to myself, a bit relieved.

I drove for at least 8 hours straight, so the sun was setting, and I saw a sign that read "Welcome to Virginia." Apparently, I was in a random town called Fredericksburg, Virginia. I didn't know anybody in Virginia and thought my head would explode if I kept driving like this, so I again booked lodging on my phone. I checked into a motel and lied down on the bed. As I

stared at the ceiling and took a deep breath, I just felt like I was wasting my life so I figured I would grasp at straws and book a therapy appointment. I had always been disappointed in psychiatrists, but this wasn't the time to be picky or choosy. I was desperate for something.

I googled the words "depression" and "therapy" around the local area; the first result that came up on Yelp was a clinic specializing in "hypnotherapy." As I clicked the link and read the description, I learned about this one youth pastor in his 40s who had just started this hypnotherapy clinic and was quite popular with the locals in Fredericksburg according to the reviews. I called right away and booked an appointment for the following morning. I had nothing to lose after all, and I was curious.

So the next morning, I found myself in the middle of this random Virginia town visiting Fredericksburg Hypnosis completely by accident.

When I entered through the front door of a small clinic, there were three or four older men and women waiting quietly in the reception area, a couple of them looking as grim as me. I remember seeing an older African American lady who had a relieved, gentle expression on her face as she slowly walked out of the therapist's office room.

“See you again next week, Nathan. Thanks for a great session,” she said.

Then the receptionist told me to go enter the office. I stumbled in there nervously.

“Hey, welcome, Terry. We spoke briefly on the phone. My name is Nathan,” a man offered out his hand as I entered.

That's how I met Mr. Nathan Gist, the founder of the clinic who was also a youth pastor. He was comfortably sporting a tieless black business suit and casual slacks. His facial expression seemed quite bright and pure with a gentle, kind smile. I could feel Nathan's positive energy from his eyes. He even looked a lot younger than his actual age.

"I know we talked briefly about your depression, but could you describe to me again what you were going through? I'm very curious to hear your story, Terry."

He sat me down, and I started confessing my guts out to this guy whom I met for the very first time. Breaking up. Getting fired. Repetitive regrets. Self-hatred. Disappointments. Suicidal thoughts. Katie's suicide in the past. Nathan would quietly listen to all this and nod and empathize. I felt it was part of the healing process, to dump all my feelings out to Nathan.

“That really is a tragic series of events in your life, Terry, especially about your sister Katie. I feel your immense pain. I’m so sorry.”

When I was just about done telling my story, Nathan jotted down notes on his small notepad and started explaining his method for hypnotherapy. I had never been familiar with it before, but Nathan started convincing me on its effectiveness quite clearly and logically.

“Terry, one of the reasons why you are having great trouble coming out of this depressive episode might be related to what’s happening in your subconscious. The pain that’s residing in your past memory of what happened, the guilt, the hurt ... all of those emotions might not have been properly resolved when it happened. So it keeps clawing at you over and over.”

It was the first time somebody had explained to me about what might be happening in my subconscious, so I initially thought Nathan was some kind of an alien, a mind reader or a bullshit quack. To be honest, I didn't have any confidence in hypnosis whatsoever, that it would do anything remotely useful for me. But when Nathan started explaining my pain in this way, it did make sense. I couldn't help but admit I was running away from my negative emotions.

“Hypnotherapy is not just me as a therapist telling you ‘you should do this’ or ‘you shouldn't feel like that.’ It's more about me helping you communicate with your own subconscious. It also helps in things like fighting addiction or increasing your self-esteem. In your case, Terry, we want to work on resolving what happened in your past, and the emotions that got stuck.”

When you are under heavy hypnosis, it's almost like being in a dream where you get to see things visually in your mind and feel quite comfortable although you are not quite asleep. By listening to the hypnotist's suggestions, you are then able to engage your subconscious and visualize things in your mind. You retrieve past memories of situations that bothered you and also bring up the feelings that arose when the event was unfolding. In the medical world today, hypnotherapy is quickly gaining ground as a legitimate form of treatment. Under hypnosis, it becomes easier to address and access the emotions that are harder to catch under a normal conscious state.

Following Nathan's instructions, I lied down on a long chair, closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Nathan started to talk to me in a relaxed, slow manner and started his hypnotic induction. I just had to follow his

voice, and very soon, I would be under this very deep trance state. Now when I look back, it was quite a peculiar experience going through this somewhat strange therapy in a random place in Virginia where I just happened to end up during my depression.

So began our sessions. I kept coming back to the clinic every single day for about a week, about two hours per session each time.

“You are at a relaxing beach with the warm sun beating down at you, and you see Katie there. What color is the ocean? Can you hear the waves? Can you smell the ocean? What is Katie wearing? If she could give you advice now, what would Katie say to you?”

Under hypnosis, I saw Katie wearing a white dress and a sun hat smiling very relaxedly walking barefoot on the sandy beach. She said,

“It will all be okay, Terry. Everything will turn out alright. Live every day to your fullest and do your best. This will all pass,” and patted me on my shoulder. She looked quite happy on that beach.

“We are gonna back to the time you broke up with your girlfriend. Where were you two? Can you picture the chair that she was sitting on? If we could go back to that moment, Terry, what are you feeling at that moment?”

In my memory, I saw my ex-girlfriend with an angry face, sitting on my desk chair in my New York Tower bedroom. It was a memory that I didn't want to access but I continued, thanks to Nathan. Obviously, I knew this wasn't happening in real life, but I could picture it in my head like a movie.

“I’m feeling sad and devastated. I see her crying. I see her trying to walk off and leave the room,” I said to Nathan with my eyes closed.

“Let’s freeze that moment, Terry. What would you say differently this time around? If you can ask for forgiveness, how would you say it? Your girlfriend is asking for forgiveness. What is she saying to you?” Nathan said.

I saw me asking for her forgiveness for hurting her, and saw her asking for my forgiveness for hurting me. I could visualize the conversation that never happened in real life.

“I’m so sorry. There’s no need for arguing with each other anymore, who was right or who was wrong. It’s all in the past, and we should move on. I apologize for all the mean things I said to you,” I said to my ex-girlfriend, and she said the same thing back to me. I felt tears flow down my

face with my eyes closed. I felt I could finally let go of that person. My ex-girlfriend and I gave each other one last hug that never happened in real life.

“We are 10 years into the future, and you see yourself standing in front of you, and that person is you 10 years from now. Where are you? What kind of clothes is the future-Terry wearing? He’s giving you a big hug. What is he telling you? What kind of advice does he have for you? What does he think about the current turmoil you are having in 2016?”

I still remember the guy who was standing in front of me. The future me seemed very confident and relaxed with a warm personality and a gentle smile. He seemed so much stronger and more mature compared to me now. He said,

“Terry, don’t worry about anything. I know how hard it must be for you experiencing this right now but it’s all going to be okay. In life, there’s peaks and valleys, hard times and good times. But don’t you ever give up now. Seize every day, live it to the fullest. Believe in yourself and follow your biggest dreams. You will get through this. I’m so proud of you. Stay strong.”

About one week of continuous therapy with Nathan, I felt exponentially better as if a huge weight dropped out of my chest after every session. If I had not discovered this random hypnotherapy clinic in Virginia, if I had never met Nathan, would I truly have been able to recover from that deep depression? I am not totally sure. I look back and think it was a true blessing from heaven. Nathan seemed happy to see me respond effectively to hypnotherapy as well. Near the end of the week, he could see that the

worst part of my emotional stress was over, and I thanked him for his therapy.

It was like I had taken off a pair of tinted sunglasses. I looked up and could appreciate the blue sky again. I could feel good again. I felt like I wanted to live again. I was alone, yes, but still had the energy to get up and do things. In the mornings, I hopped around different breakfast diners trying out local favorites. I remember eating a lot of pancakes and omelets, and of course grilled cheeses. When I was done sightseeing, I realized it was time for me to get out of Virginia. I asked myself, “hey, what the hell am I doing here again?”

I checked out of the motel, got in my car and phoned a friend from college. Sean was one of my dearest Korean friends from UNC whose

wedding had just happened a year prior and at the time, living with his partner, Justin, and two dogs in Cary, North Carolina.

“Hey, Sean. Long time no talk! So I’m in the area. Hey, I don’t mean to be annoying, but can I come stay with you and Justin in North Carolina for like the next three months?”



(From Left → Justin & Sean, Me, Chung, Jessica, Heyne)

*To Be Continued ...*