
When Skeptics Die

A Story

Yael Goldstein

THE OTHER day I was trying to catch a cab in the pouring rain in midtown, the umbrella I had purchased on a whim from an Ian Schrager hotel blown inside out, my cashmere sweater set so drenched that after it dried I would be able to donate it to one of the better-dressed poodles in my neighborhood. I waved madly at each passing cab, knowing the exercise was useless and that I was going to miss an appointment to get my hair done. The overpriced, inside-out umbrella was more hindrance than help, and it was pretty clear I ought to let it go—I had thought I was getting to be quite the pro at letting things go—but I kept a zealous grip on the silly smashed thing, sprinkled with the names of sleek pleasure domes from around the world. It had been at the Mondrian, in Los Angeles, that I acquired this umbrella, a business trip for me, though Richard had come along. We'd forgotten that it ever rained in LA.

I noticed that I had competition: another woman, effectively umbrellaed, had suddenly appeared with her arm thrust out to hail a yellow cab. I turned to glare at her, and she at me, and we realized at roughly the same moment that we knew each other. About fifteen years ago, in Cambridge, we had belonged to the same circle of friends, all of us graduate students. We used to give weekly din-

ner parties as proof that we'd grown up. We were all connected to Harvard or MIT or BU, and most of us actually lived in down-scale Somerville rather than Cambridge. The most distinct memory I could attach to her was that she had once made a Sumerian feast (she claimed it was, anyway) as a send-off for an Assyriologist acquaintance of ours who'd struck it big with a job at Chicago's Oriental Institute. There'd been grilled quail, boiled leeks, something extraordinary with white beans, and hand-stuffed grape leaves. It had been very impressive, even if no one could verify that any of it was actually Sumerian.

Clearly a woman of far-flung ambitions. She had been a flirt, too, if memory served. We were all more or less temporarily paired—at least for me it had been temporary, a fellow graduate student in English who never finished his dissertation and turned misogynist when I managed to get mine done and land a plum job—and she used to play up to the male contingent, basking in their attention. Her field had been psychology, and I used to wonder, as she tossed her silky mane in the direction of some man, how she could have so little self-awareness.

"It's really you, isn't it?" we laughed, and she, to my surprise, gave me a quick hug. Our acquaintance hardly merited the gesture, though maybe I'd forgotten the degree of our friendship, a lot of memories having blurred over for me. I pulled hurriedly out of her embrace and then, the initial jolt of recognition over, we sized each other up, trying to

Yael Goldstein, a new contributor, is a young writer living in Brooklyn. She is at work on her first novel, *Failure: The Dazzlingly Successful Life of Tasha Darsky*.

measure what the intervening years had wrought. My friend, at roughly forty, looked oddly girlish, still the wide-eyed waif, the mane still long, though limp with the weather. Perhaps it was the rain, I thought, melting away her maturity and accomplishments. Of course, I had to wonder what she saw when she looked at me. I like to think that I've outgrown questions of that sort, but there's nothing like having an old acquaintance emerge from out of the anonymity of a drowning midtown street to make you wonder what they're seeing in seeing you.

It turned out that for the past few years we'd been living two blocks apart on the Upper East Side. I said that was the sort of thing that could only happen in New York, and we exchanged those sorts of ready-to-mouth comments on the city's demonstrable superiority over all other locales, congratulating each other on having had the good sense to settle here. She was originally from Boston, I remembered now. She was the only one in our little circle who wasn't a transplant.

WE HAD ducked into a coffee shop by now, and were both distractedly patting the damp out of our clothes while the waitress cleared a table. The space was overheated and crowded, umbrellas dripping next to every seat. I was still gripping my mangled specimen. There was a strong smell of wet wool. The waiters seemed a little panicky, bumping into each other and the customers as they wound their way around bodies and chairs. I kept thinking that I really ought to call the hair salon and tell them I couldn't make it; I didn't want some snooty young receptionist acquiring a grudge against me.

When we finally slid into a booth my friend leaned languidly against the back of her bench and the expansiveness of the gesture seemed to indicate that she had all the time in the world. She ordered a soup and a sandwich from the waitress without even asking whether I had the luxury of sitting through an entire meal. I was beginning to remember why we'd lost touch in the first place when suddenly she said, in a strange, quiet voice that was somehow more forceful than her usual one, "I once knew a girl who liked New York only because it was unfamiliar."

"Was this a patient of yours?" I asked distractedly. I had noticed while she was speaking that there was some sort of commotion at the door—an old man was trying to bring a large, wet golden retriever into the restaurant—and I was much more interested in seeing how that situation would play itself out than in this conversation, which seemed

to me to be quickly losing steam. I was beginning to resent having allowed myself to get netted into this encounter. I wondered how she had manipulated it. My friend's field, I remembered now, had been behavior modification. She had gotten her doctorate in clinical manipulation.

"No," she said. "It was my sister. You remember my sister? The scientist?"

The man with the dog left without much fuss. He hadn't looked like the sort who would throw in the towel so easily, and I was slightly disappointed in him. I turned my gaze back toward the woman across from me and put my mind to her question. Now that she mentioned it, I did remember this younger sister of hers; she'd been some sort of prodigy. Harvard at fifteen, junior faculty at MIT at twenty-two. She had never joined our circle, which made her, I remembered now, good material for her older sister's anecdotal talents. In fact, by the time our little dinner parties were petering out, I was pretty sick of hearing about this sister. As if we all didn't have enough trouble keeping ahead of the game without some wunderkind throwing us off balance.

"Oh, does she live in New York too?" I asked, not trying very hard to keep the exhaustion out of my voice.

"Not anymore. She was here for a very brief period, just long enough for it never to become familiar to her."

I didn't intend it, but my face must have slipped into skepticism, a look that Richard once described as indicating, "I'm not buying it, pitch it to me from another angle"; obligingly she tried again.

"It was having no memories here, I'm pretty sure. She told me that sometimes she'd pass a lonely stretch of street or an outdoor café filled with glossy-looking people, and she'd think, 'I have no memories of this spot or any like it,' and she'd feel OK for an instant. She tried very hard not to make any memories here by doing almost nothing with her time."

"Burnout?" I asked. It happened when you pushed too hard at a young age. I wondered, without much interest, what the stats were on prodigies, how many of them actually ended up doing something spectacular in their maturity. Maybe they were just like those girls who get chesty when they're ten and make the fifth-grade boys wild. By high school their breasts are just breasts.

I noticed that the man with the dog was back. He had a police officer with him, and I felt my faith in humanity's predictability restored. The guy had looked too ornery, with his eyebrows hanging

into his eyes and scowl lines that were decades-deep, to submit without a quarrel. The restaurant manager—an elderly Hispanic who looked as weary as I felt—was talking quietly to the pair.

“Her husband died.”

“OH,” I said, startled to hear those three terrible words stated so baldly. I studied her face, but her eyes were downcast and she seemed not to feel me watching her. She was playing with the napkin holder, opening and closing the dispenser. I thought again that I really ought to call the hair salon. The police officer was laughing now, and so was the manager, but the old man with the dog looked ready to do violence. It occurred to me that you never really hear about the elderly committing violent crimes. Perhaps at a certain point even the energy for rage is drained out.

“They’d been married only a year. They’d known each other less than two.” She’d stopped fiddling with the napkin holder, and was now just looking at me. I thought she was going to change the topic. I didn’t know whether I wanted her to or not. I tried to remember whether I’d ever even seen this sister of hers. I had a very distinct image of her, but it might just have been constructed over the course of hearing so much about her. I pictured a scrawny, prepubescent figure, with her sister’s luxurious tresses lassoed in a ponytail, and the same delicate prettiness hidden behind owlsh glasses. Yes, I was probably just constructing my image of her out of tired clichés. “But they were madly in love. You could feel their happiness in the air whenever they were around.”

“How did he die?” I asked rather hurriedly, embarrassed by the cloying element my friend had just inserted into our already overly humid air. But it was the natural question to ask.

“Car accident. He was on the interstate coming home after a conference. There was a big rain-storm, he skidded off the road.”

“How gruesome,” I said. It wasn’t a very sensitive choice of words, I realized after I’d spoken, not exactly gleaned from the empathetic-guidelines list. But my friend surprised me.

“It *was* gruesome,” she agreed. “And so was my sister’s reaction. Of course, we all expected it to be difficult for her, but we never expected it to be so eccentric.” “Eccentric” hardly came out of the guidelines, either. “The thing was that, at first, she took it very well. She cried, but not that sort of uncontrolled sobbing that makes you want to flee, sympathy be damned. She made all the funeral arrangements, burial, everything, did it all herself.

But then at the memorial service a few weeks later, when she got up to deliver the eulogy, instead of speaking, she just stood there and stared. Just stared at all of us, blankly, as if she had no idea what she was doing there. After a few minutes like this—I don’t know, could it have been that long? It felt like even longer—she got down very calmly and walked out the back door. We all thought she’d gone to the ladies’ room to start her real sobbing at last, but when we came to look for her she was gone and so was her car. She drove to New York that night, and she stayed here for six months, just burying herself in the unfamiliarity of it. I don’t even think she read. We were in contact, but she asked me, asked all of the family, not to visit.”

“She couldn’t come to terms with his death,” I said in a facile way that surprised even me. My friend gave me a searching look, perhaps wondering that I could respond so glibly to this tale that was clearly causing her some anguish to relate. I shifted uneasily in my booth, and the mangled umbrella that I had been holding between my knees clattered to the floor. At the same time that I was thinking how pat I had just sounded, I was also thinking with real urgency that I *needed* to call the salon, as if my hairstylist was a worried mother, frantic that I might be lying injured in the street somewhere. But my friend had positively trapped me in this booth. I wondered if she told this same story to everyone, and what her motive might be. There was something in the way she was carrying on that made me think of a scene I’d once witnessed in a park: a group of children, they could have been siblings, were dancing to some street music, but looking as if they’d rather be doing almost anything else.

“COULDN’T COME TO TERMS WITH HIS DEATH?” She rolled that over in her mouth neutrally. “No, that wasn’t it at all. His death she could come to terms with just fine. It was her *loving* him she couldn’t get past.”

I had been gazing around the restaurant, wondering how many of these people were similarly pressing on in conversations for no reason other than the rain, but now I looked straight across the table at her.

“That seems strange,” I said, and even, I thought, far more gruesome than dying on the side of a highway.

“Well, she never really could understand it. I mean, it didn’t make *sense* to her—good, rational sense—and sense was the only thing she believed in.”

Now I was remembering some other facts about

this sister, stories my friend would regale us with at our dinner parties. She'd always had this tendency to reveal too much. It was a kind of psychological hijacking, I had decided, this forcing of intimate facts.

Anyway, the younger sister was beginning to assume a rich remembered form: the little prodigy, I recalled, had been an almost fanatical atheist from about the age of five, which was a strange thing to be in the household of an Orthodox rabbi. Over Sabbath lunches with nice women from the synagogue she used to get up on her chair, all three feet of her, and give speeches about *sense* and *reason* and *evidence* until she was blue in the face. I don't know too much about the Orthodox, having grown up as one of those Jews who think that God's primary commandment is to eat bagels and smoked salmon on Sunday, and I remember being surprised to hear that this was something they would tolerate. They probably indulged her because she was such a sad and lonely child. Or was she? I don't remember my friend ever telling me that, but I'd always assumed it was true.

"Was he a religious man?" I asked, trying to put together these pieces of information.

She seemed to think it was a strange question. "Religious? No, it's funny you should say that, though. You see they first fell in love because they were both such skeptics. *Rabid* skeptics, is what she would say. They met at a conference, all because she overheard him make an atheistic joke. He was advising an engaged friend to cut down on strife and be married as a Hindu, his girlfriend's religion. He said, 'What do you care which God you don't believe in?' She thought it was very clever. She never would have approached him otherwise, because she was, you know . . . well, at these conferences she was quite the star."

Oh, it was all coming back to me: the small article in the *Times* I'd clipped for some reason, then thrown out, the long story in *Boston Magazine* I couldn't bring myself to read. She was quite the star all right. Tiny goddess of science. Of *neuroscience*. I was remembering it all.

"Was he a scientist, too?" I asked.

"No, that was part of the problem. He was a philosopher. He worked on consciousness."

"Oh," I said, because I did not at all get the significance of this fact. It sounded like a funny thing to work on.

"That first night they met, they spent hours talking in the hotel lobby. Turned out they'd both been the children of rabbis, both escaped breathless into the realm of reason and evidence. Both lived in Cambridge, for God's sake. It all made such

perfect sense. It was the world showing itself once again to be eminently rational."

"Sounds lovely," I said. I realized with some surprise that my thoughts were drifting to the night I'd met my own husband. I hadn't thought about that night in years, and once again I had the feeling of being the victim of psychological hijacking. Still, hijacked or not, there was a very pleasant feeling spreading through me while I let my thoughts drift over the details. We were both book editors, and he'd caught my eye from across the room at a crowded party in another editor's townhouse. I was talking to a group of people I had never met before, being pretty new to the business. I had walked away from my tenure-track job in Yale's English department after only a year, having gotten it into my head that I could better serve literature by going into publishing. Richard was standing alone in front of some bookshelves, studying the titles. He was wearing a cheap suit that fit him badly, and he was leaning over so that he could read the titles on the bottom shelves. It looked like a painful position, his neck jutting out sideways from his hunched shoulders.

He was very tall, painfully thin. He pulled out a book and I could see—I had wandered over so that I was standing just a few feet behind him—that it was an early book by one of my own authors. Those were the days when I was still doing books by authors like that, before the self-help craze and the discovery that I had a talent for knowing which warmed-over *bobbe mayses* would turn big profits. The man at the bookcase looked to be as old as my father (it turned out he was three years younger), but there was something about the way he was holding the book—as if it were something sacred—that made me feel very protective toward him. Not even I, back then, had that sort of exaggerated reverence toward the books I worked on. But Richard's obvious feeling for the object in hand was moving, it was endearing, and it was also slightly deforming, like a hunchback's hump. I remember thinking precisely that as I reached out and touched him gently on his bony shoulder and introduced myself. That warm and intimate gesture still mystifies me, but if I hadn't stepped so completely out of character for that one moment, who knows whether any of the rest of it would have followed? I had somehow already committed myself to gestures that weren't like me at all.

"WELL, IT was lovely for that one night," my friend was saying. "But the next day, after her own big talk, she went to hear his small

one. She was one of only about ten in the room, and so she couldn't hide her reaction very well, which was embarrassing for her. You see, the talk was an attack on just the sort of work she did. He was one of those philosophers who think science can't get to the heart of consciousness, that there's something in our experience that won't be explained by explaining which neurons fire when. And she was one of those neuroscientists who think they're a few years away from unlocking every last secret the mind can yield. Every time he said the word "neuroscience"—*naive* neuroscience, *oversimplifying* neuroscience, *overconfident* neuroscience—she thought she could hear him saying her name instead. But it wasn't so much what he thought of her work that upset her. What upset her was that she considered his ideas a flim-flammy web of ignorant prejudices and primal fears."

Her voice had modulated as she said those last words. She sounded as if she was quoting, and I asked her if she was.

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact I am," she answered. "Those were more or less my sister's words. Also that he spoke with a look of dumb wonderment on his face, the sort of look our father used to get when he spoke about the Talmud and God's law. To escape the irrationality of religion for *this*—what was the point, what was the difference? Coddling mysteries, purposely trying to add things to the ranks of the unknowable—I'm quoting again—that was the attitude she was at war with. She felt betrayed."

My friend had apparently finished with her soup, having gently pushed away her bowl with her two upraised hands in a gesture that seemed to say "enough," and I excused myself to go to the bathroom. It was grimy but smelled alright, and I took several deep breaths. Then I called the hair salon to schedule a new appointment. The receptionist sounded fine with my change of plans. When I returned to our table my friend was sitting just as I'd left her, and whatever had been gripping at my chest these past few minutes had passed. I settled back into the mist-heavy atmosphere, returning the Schrager umbrella to safekeeping between my knees, and asked what had happened next.

"Well, the thing was that even after she discovered that their respective work was so incompatible, she still found herself drawn toward him, maybe even stronger than before. They got involved and then, at some point, he spoke to her about the afterlife of skeptics."

I'd been watching a young couple make their entrance, laughingly shaking off the water, glowing in

the full possession of their healthy animal spirits—Richard and I had missed out on all that—and so I wasn't sure I'd heard her right. "The what?" I asked.

"The afterlife of skeptics."

"Is that a book?" It sounded like something my imprint would publish: *The Afterlife of Skeptics: Find Belief in God in 9 Simple Steps*.

"No, it was a theory of his. Or maybe it was a metaphor. I don't quite know. But she became obsessed with it after he died."

"But what does it mean, the afterlife of skeptics?"

"That even after skeptics die, they reason the way they'd always reasoned in life: based on all we know about the physical world, they say to themselves, no part of a person could possibly survive the death of the body. Wherever it is they've gone—paradise, the great beyond, the big white light—they simply can't believe they're there. They act as if they don't exist, because by their logic they don't. They continue to molder in mock nonexistence forever, just feet from bliss. Paradise is all around them and they're just too stubbornly rational to see it."

"**S**OME PILLOW talk," I joked. My friend didn't smile. In fact, I was pretty sure that her large waif eyes were unnaturally glistening. Those sorts of eyes always have a suggestion of sadness in them. Even when she had been so determinedly amusing at our old dinner parties, telling her anecdotes and tossing her hair, her eyes had seemed to offer a contradicting subtext. And of course now there was every reason for them to look as sad as they did. I thought of asking her to stop telling this story, but whichever way I tried phrasing it in my head, the request sounded cruel.

She was fiddling with the mustard cap, ignoring her sandwich. "When my sister was going through her . . . New York phase, she spoke a lot about the dead skeptics. She said she felt like their kin. She had always taken a lot of pride in her skepticism, but now it made her feel terrible. It made her doubt whether the two of them had ever really loved one another."

"But why?"

"Because it made no *sense*. It was illogical. He represented something vile to her. I'm not kidding." I must have made a face, thinking of murderers and rapists and child molesters as compared to a man dubious about the powers of neuroscience. "To her there was something positively unethical about an intelligent person who *liked* to be

lieve in the mysterious. She called it a crime against reason.”

“But this only began to torture her *after* he died?”

“Well, yes,” she said slowly. “In the presence of love, doubt can’t maintain itself.” It struck me that her pronouncement had a slightly theistic tinge to it. It was a kissing cousin to: in the presence of God, doubt can’t maintain itself. Could she be quoting her sister again? I would have thought the neuroscientist would have disapproved of so metaphysical-sounding an assertion. I didn’t think that I approved of it. Was its converse that doubting love was a natural response to losing love? That seemed plain absurd to me—juvenile, in fact. It made me wonder whether the little neuroscientist, or her older sister, for that matter, had ever learned the slightest thing about love. And a thought occurred to me that I used to have many times when I was still involved in academia: that only such smart people could have ideas that were so stupid.

I was looking around the restaurant now, in impatience. It had emptied out somewhat; either the rain was abating or people just had to brave it and get on with their lives. My young couple were still lingering. He was talking and she was intently listening. He looked like he was going on about something, expounding some view, and she looked fascinated, nodding solemnly from time to time, her expression trying to convey how well she understood and agreed with him.

My friend seemed to think better of her pronouncement and sighed, “I don’t know, maybe the unlikeliness of their love did bother her while he was alive. Maybe she’d think about it from time to time, but then when she saw him and *felt* him around her, she’d let herself forget about it.”

“So when he died . . .,” I prompted, because I knew that I should evince some interest in the next stage of the story. But I was also thinking about how often it is that you catch couples in this position, he expounding and she listening. The missionary position, I suppose you could call it. I glanced back at the couple and smiled slightly, my cynicism making the sight of them more bearable.

RICHARD HAD only once called me a cynic. We were standing in our red-walled library, between the shelves of books and the deep leather couches, all of which had been paid for with money that I, and not he, had earned. He was telling me about a poet he wanted to sign on, and I told him it was enough with the poets already, that the house just couldn’t carry these delicate souls any longer,

not even for the sheen of high culture they bestowed on the rest of us, and he called me a cynic, in his characteristically playful tone of voice but with something utterly unamused hovering above his crooked smile. We stood still for several moments letting the comment fill the air between us, and then the phone rang.

It was an important call and I had to take it, and when I came back to the library he was deeply immersed in a book, and I didn’t want to disturb him. But for weeks the comment perched in my mind and heckled me at odd moments. It had never occurred to me before that he resented the way I spoke about books, breaking it all down to the bottom line. That was just the way we were: he with his little literary gems that never sold, and me with my *bobbe mayses* that pulled in a bundle and kept us comfortably housed and attired and librated. And then I’d had an epiphany in a taxi, heading back from a long lunch with an author who was going to make us lots of money: it was wrong of Richard to hold my cynicism against me. I never held his impracticality against him. No one *chooses* to be a cynic, was what I had planned to tell him.

“Well, as I said, at first she was doing pretty well.” My friend was picking at her sandwich, and looking me full in the face, searchingly, in a way that both baffled and annoyed me. “The problem began when she sat down to write the eulogy. What could she say about him? The defining fact about him, as far as she was concerned, was that she loved him, and she couldn’t say why she did. He was a man who hadn’t believed in her work. Their love had made no sense. It almost made more sense to her that he would die on the side of an interstate, driving home to her in a rainstorm. So she didn’t write anything down, and when she stood in front of the audience she didn’t say anything. That’s when she moved here, and died a sort of death herself. She started mimicking the nonexistent.”

“So what happened to her finally? How did she snap out of it?” No part of me resented the little prodigy any longer. In fact, I felt tender toward her, protective even, because if you can’t help being a cynic, you certainly can’t help being a skeptic, and what a thing it was to molder in mock nonexistence.

My friend was quiet for a while, examining her fingers. I began to feel irritated: if there is one thing I hate in a narrative, it’s the lack of a proper ending, and I was particularly eager for some nice neat bow to be tied around this one. It dawned on me that the little prodigy hadn’t snapped out of it at all—that she’d simply returned to Cambridge, to

her lab, to her work, out of a sense of duty, or an attempt to trick herself into believing success was the same thing as life. Perhaps she was still moldering in mock nonexistence, piling up the awards and honors and neuroscientific discoveries like flowers on a grave.

But finally my friend said, “She was on the subway, just riding nowhere like she did every day. There was a man, she thought he was probably Puerto Rican, making eyes at her, being flirtatious. She kept trying to avoid his gaze, but finally he caught hers and held it. She realized he was making the face her husband would make when they were kidding around in bed, a sort of caricature of the leering man. It was the oddest thing, like seeing her husband peering out through unfamiliar features, and she couldn’t look

away. She was holding the gaze of this man in the most inappropriate way, completely stepping out of character for those few moments.” My friend smiled weakly, her eyes glistening too much, and I smiled weakly back. Yes, I could see it quite clearly. “And then finally the man said, ‘*Chica*, open your eyes. Paradise is all around you.’”

Neither of us said anything else for a while after that. I was listening to the rain battering every inch of the city, and so, I’m certain, was my friend.

Finally I said, “I don’t know if the news ever reached you, but I got married—to a man named Richard.”

“Yes, of course I knew you were married.”

“He died a year ago, almost to the day.”

“I know,” she said. “I heard.”