

Hide and Seek

by [Sharon Dunn](#) (July 2018)



Ben and Slinky, Winifred Nicholson, 1920s

In a corner of the dining room Heidi had lain down in the winter dark, and her silky golden body gave in to convulsions.

After a minute the shaking stopped, and she went into a deep sleep, huge breaths huffing from her shiny black nose. Avi had wanted to yell for help but there was no one to call to. In his charcoal suit and polished shoes, he kneeled and sat on the oak floor and put his hand on her chest as it breathed up and down.

When was the last time he sat on the floor? It must be years. *Poor poor girl. Poor love.* Too late to call the vet. After a few minutes more Heidi woke, got to her feet slowly, walked around dazed. She was thirteen and had never been sick. No way she would get upstairs to her pillow bed in his room tonight. So Avi slept on the living room couch, Heidi on the carpet beside him, a woolen throw laid lightly over her because Avi thought she might be cold. A few times in the night Heidi stood and walked around the room with the throw over her, even on her head, and she looked comical—Avi watched her in the dark but he couldn't smile. Each time she settled down again right beside him in a weary collapsing: he thought he could hear her bones.

Early the next morning, the sun just breaking through the leafless trees, he brought her to the vet, carried her in his arms though she weighed forty pounds. He left her at the clinic and walking outdoors found himself gripping the rail overlooking the gravel parking lot and sobbed in huge heaves. Crying as he never cried for his dear Naomi whom he lost two years before. Crying as he'd never cried in his life.

He called Jan Stein next door to tell her Bennie shouldn't come by after school to walk Heidi, not for a few days, he expected.

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As a child Avi had never had a dog. He grew up in Brooklyn and his pop always said, "Jews don't like dogs." None of the neighbors had pets of any kind. Well, maybe a parakeet somewhere. It was Naomi, who grew up on Long Island, in Great Neck, who wanted a dog and picked out Heidi all those years ago, from a breeder near Worcester. They drove there mid-day with Jonah, who was ten then, and spent a couple hours looking at six puppies, finally choosing the one that seemed the most independent, the least snippy. And Heidi turned out to be an exemplary animal, easy to train, playful.

Avi had hated to admit that.

From the very first, Heidi was Naomi's dog: wanted by Naomi, walked, fed and de-ticked by Naomi. Naomi brought her to the vet's check ups, arranged for sitters and walkers or boarding when she or they traveled. Naomi got the Invisible Fence installed, took Heidi to obedience training, tried agility training with her—where she coached Heidi to jump hurdles, run around poles, all the while running nearby herself.

Avi merely tolerated Heidi. She was a nuisance, why did they have her? Sometimes when Avi came in from the garage after working late and Heidi greeted him with soft squeals, wagging and a jump, he gave her a kick—her energy at this time of day annoyed him. Heidi yelped. "Don't kick her, Avi!" Naomi shouted from the kitchen. "Come on, it doesn't hurt her, I don't kick hard," he would reply. "Still," Naomi would say,

"please don't." Once he kicked a second time in one week, and Naomi stormed into his face: "I will not stand for this." She began putting Heidi in her work room just before Avi came home.

When they traveled Avi complained about dropping Heidi off at the kennel, and the cost (though they could afford boarding and grooming). Avi complained about the time each evening Naomi spent untangling and brushing out Heidi's coat. "It's a pleasure for me, this brushing," Naomi said to him. "I actually look forward to it, I think she does too." Naomi, who worked at home as a botanical illustrator, loved Heidi's company. Heidi simply followed her mistress wherever she went in the house, like a golden shadow.

Was Avi jealous of Heidi, of the attention she got from Naomi? He had never felt that way when their son was growing up. Or did he? He tried to remember. Still after Jonah was off to college, Avi had allowed himself to admit to Naomi that having Heidi in the household filled in some of the silences, beamed some extra warmth, often was more comfort than irritant.

A stroke five years ago when Naomi was fifty-eight bifurcated her patrician face and left her struggling to make words, this woman who loved words. She had to give up illustration but she still managed to comb out Heidi every evening with her left hand. Heidi, always previously forbidden on the furniture, decided on her own that she was now allowed to jump on the sofa so she could lay her head on Naomi's lap. The hand crested over her brow and down her neck, soothing both of them.

Naomi and Avi managed for three years, her intelligence as sharp as ever. They played Scrabble, ordered in Chinese, watched a movie, or sometimes half a movie every night. By then Avi was well past his occasional kicks to Heidi and of course he fed her, walked her morning and night.

Some kind of mourning had already started in him after Naomi's stroke, because life was so different for them as a couple. Naomi, once energetic and outdoorsy, now stayed mostly in the house. She was embarrassed about not speaking well, about how the side of her face drooped. Jonah and Avi tried their best to cheer her on, but to no avail. No more travel, and only her best friend Zara came to stay. Their world had grown much smaller. Avi still did his work well, pulled his own weight in the practice, got invited to give a speech now and then, to serve as an expert witness. But their world together, that had changed.

But then the second stroke two Junes ago: Naomi, unconscious in the hospital, in a coma. Avi had girded himself for this. At least he thought, their last moments together, the evening he put her to bed, were sweet. Naomi had actually giggled at a story he told her, garnered at a cocktail party he'd been to that very evening: a judge in a nearby town had had a defendant before him who repeatedly addressed the judge as "Your Majesty." At the courthouse all that week, the clerks and secretaries, bowed to him, even the lawyers before him at the bar. So she had gone to sleep, her last night at home, with a smile traced on part of her face.

With Naomi out of the house at the hospital going on three days, Heidi had been restless and unmoored. She walked from door to door, sniffing, and would not eat her food.

Periodically she would whimper, very softly. Jonah told Avi it was exactly, exactly when Mom died, five in the afternoon, that Heidi relaxed and become herself again, stopped whining and perked up ready for a walk outside. This was a mystery to Avi and Jonah, who had taken turns at the hospital vigil. How did Heidi know? Across twenty miles? How was that possible?

Avi never told anyone: sometimes on weekends before the strokes when his wonderful wife was out of the house, he played a game with Heidi. Why hadn't he ever mentioned this to Naomi? Maybe because he didn't want to break the mythic tale of his indifference. Avi would tell Heidi, "We're going to play!" He put her into "Sit" and then walked away, out of sight and shouted out musically "Come find me!" once he was hidden behind the coats in the front hall closet or in the shadow of the shower stall, or behind the door to the cellar. He would *beep, beep* to give an auditory clue when Heidi came close. Avi, corporate lawyer, partner, expert in marine law, enjoyed this game no end. Heidi's tentative sleuthing around corners, listening and sniffing, gave him great pleasure. After three or four seeks, he gave Heidi three special liver treats, the ones she loved the best. Avi wondered if there was any way that Heidi thought Naomi was hiding, when away in the hospital in that coma. Was Heidi's obsessive roaming of the house her final seeking?

Over the last five years or so, Heidi got Avi out of doors, under the stars at night. He would look at the constellations, the moon rising and feel his smallness. It was good to feel small after his day at the office, where work seemed to take on an importance that was, frankly, ridiculous. You'd think the partnership would die if we lost Client X, or we could never replace partner K, who specialized in trusts. All really small potatoes, in the large cosmic stew. In the mornings

Heidi brought him out to experience the change in seasons, morning dew, the silver of rain and puddles, birds and insects and flowers, the warmth of the sun on his face, the sheen on snow like baked Alaska. She loved retrieving a tennis ball and never tired of running, creating her own path on the hillside in their back yard in Milton. She would drop the ball in front of him on the deck and nudge it with her nose so that it rolled closer to him. She looked up at him, at his hand and his arm ready to throw, her whole body poised to race again.

After Naomi was gone, with more and more time with Heidi as his companion, Avi realized how much he liked looking at Heidi. When he left her in the car to stop at Cumberland Farms, she would leap into his driver's seat and he would return to see her sitting tall and sober behind the wheel as if she were ready herself to chauffeur him home. She reclined everywhere Sphinx-like, front paws extended, torso long, head erect and noble. On her L.L. Bean pillow bed monogrammed with her name, Heidi would curl up in a circle, beautiful with all her curves, her tail tucked, her ears flat and silky as lily pads. Why had he never noticed her beauty long ago?

He grew to like her company, to depend on it, even. Her rapture when he came home, those scrabbling nails dancing on the wood floor, her low sweet whimper of utter happiness. Yes! It was her joy that touched him so. He forgot that he ever kicked her.

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He visited the vet the next day and they said Heidi was doing

well, had eaten and probably would come home tomorrow. He let out a large sigh. They had given her a blood transfusion. The next day, the phone rang at eight in the morning as he was dressing for work, and the tech said, "I'm so sorry, Mr. Stone, Heidi didn't make it through the night. We couldn't wake her this morning, she was gone."

Avi put down the phone. The house seemed so large and so empty at this moment. He sat on the edge of the bed, felt the wind knocked out of him, his spirit spiraled out of his heart. His hands and his feet felt like lead. What can be done with this real grief? There is no Kaddish for an animal, there is no way to deal with this latest loss. We will not talk about the tears.

Later the tech called, on his Avi's cell, at the office. No, he didn't want the ashes. No thank you.

A week later he got a printed card in the mail from the veterinary practice. It was a form note which read "We are sorry for your loss."

When spring came, another tech called and said, Mr. Stone, what do you want done with Heidi's body, it's been in cold storage since she passed in February. Oh dear me, he thought. He also thought: those assholes.

His friends asked, "When are you getting another?" He answered, "I don't know." But he really knew. Heidi was the animal love of his life and he would have no other, she the

Queen of the Leather Leash, the Ball, the Blue Bowl.

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That summer Avi was in Israel, invited to the University for a panel dealing with the intricacies of modern maritime law, his third visit there. On the way from Jerusalem back to Ben Gurion Airport for the flight home his taxi driver was an Arab, an expansive soul who enjoyed talking as they drove in his white Mercedes along the highway. He told Avi he was married to a Jewish woman, and they had two children who were being raised Jewish. He was fine with that, he said. He loved his family. But, he confided, showing Avi a photo on his mobile phone, his passion was his horse, a beautiful Arabian.

“I see him several times a week. He knows when I am coming. Without seeing me, he hears something, or smells something in the air. And he whinnies greeting me. Every time.” Then the driver tells Avi, “When I am troubled, I go to him. I tell him what is going on inside me, my doubts, my struggles. I always go to him,” he says, hitting his chest softly with his right hand.

And Avi says to him, “I understand. I really do.”

Sharon Dunn has published two books of poetry: *Refugees in the Garden* and *My Brother and I*, as well as a memoir *Under A Dark*

Eye: A Family Story (Texas Tech University Press, 2017). Her nonfiction book, *The Shadow Mother's Dream of Home* was serialized in four issues of *LAIKS* in 2018.