

# **DIRT**

**Denise Gosliner Orenstein**



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For André Bertram Siegel  
*and for Duncan and McNeill,*  
*brave, naughty, and magically intuitive pony friends*

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stopped talking when her mother died, and she stopped going to school because of the bullies, knowing that  
her father would never even notice (although the social worker did); indeed the only creature that seems to  
care about her is the one-eyed Shetland pony called Dirt who lives on the neighboring farm—so when she  
discovers that Dirt is about to be sold for horsemeat she is determined to find a way to save him.

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# My Rocky Road

My father once explained that they named me Yonder because there's always something to learn, way up ahead, yonder. Always a surprise right around the corner, sometimes sweet and sometimes sad, but always a fork in the road that could change your life.

When my mother died four years ago, my father said, "Here is the fork, Yonder. Here is the learning just up ahead. We can choose to stop moving up that rocky path or we can decide something else. What will you do? What will we do together?"

Silence draped my little crooked house and the windows went dark. I crawled into quiet and decided to stay there. After all, words didn't work. Did it really matter if you called out at night, all alone in your narrow bed: *Bring her back. Please bring my mother back.*

Did it matter if you yelled at the top of your lungs until your throat hurt? If you yelled and yelled for her and there wasn't a single answer?

It did not. It did not matter one bit.

So I decided not to speak. Silence seemed safer.

"An unusual childhood disorder," the clinic doctor told my father, but it was almost as if my father hardly noticed that I stopped speaking. He was so lost in his own sadness.

One afternoon at the Shelter Library, I looked up "speech disorders and children" and found this: "a condition in which a child who can speak stops speaking because of trauma or anxiety." *Well*, I thought, *I suppose the doctor might have gotten it right*, although I wasn't sure if I really could speak anymore, even if I wanted to. I wasn't sure and I was scared to try.

What if I opened my mouth and ugly words spilled out? Better to be quiet than say what it was like to lose my mother and father at the same time, my mother in body and spirit and my father just in spirit. While he hadn't died in the car accident, he was not the same father as before. This new father heaved himself around the house as if his body were filled with cement.

This is what I remember about my mother: how she loved to read to me before I went to sleep at night, the way her cheeks pinked up in the fall, and the broken front tooth that she cracked when we were ice-skating on the Shelter town pond. I remember my mother's short, wavy dark hair

and the soft khaki jacket that she wore even inside. The one with the blue ink stain on the left shoulder, both sleeves torn to the elbow, making it look like she had four arms. My mother's fingernails were long and splintered from cold Vermont winters; sometimes they scratched my scalp when she brushed my hair. She smelled like maple syrup, burnt sugar, overripe apple.

Even though I was little, I knew that the fork in the road my father talked about offered only one possibility. We would surely walk that rocky path because we didn't have a choice. We would move forward because there was no going back. The fork in the road was there, just as he always told me, but we would take the more difficult turn and keep struggling uphill. And so we did.

I didn't understand how rocky a road could be back then. I didn't understand how slippery or how full of twists and turns. And then my fork led the way to a lonely pony who needed me as much as I needed him. But I didn't know Dirt was coming way back then.