

DIRT

Denise Gosliner Orenstein

Scholastic Inc.

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

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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.

A Four-Armed Octopus

That fall, school started earlier than usual, something that I found to be irritating, to say the least. The end of August was still summer, wasn't it, and it should have been illegal for school to start before September.

The school hallways still had their musty smell, the lightbulbs in the stairways still flickered on and off, and the kids were already waiting to find someone, anyone who was different. That someone seemed to be me.

On the Friday morning before Labor Day weekend, I stomped briskly up Robert Frost Middle School's concrete steps and through the double front doors, my arms wound around my khaki jacket like a four-armed octopus, determined not to let anyone get my goat. I found it helpful to remember that an octopus has three whole

hearts—if one was ever broken, there'd always be another two to fall back on.

In any case, a long weekend was just ahead and nothing was going to get me down.

I tried to start each day at school the same way: shoulders squared, arms wrapped around my chest, my head held high. But, sure enough, it wasn't a few minutes before I heard someone calling behind me. I immediately recognized that nasal, high-pitched voice: It belonged to none other than the one and only disgusting Heywood Prune.

Prune was short and stumpy with a slash of blistery lips, pink rabbit eyes, a shaved head, and pale skin. He smelled like corn chips, and his nail-bitten fingers were stained from the red pistachio nuts that he always kept crammed in his pockets. Not appetizing, to say the least.

I'd known Heywood Prune since kindergarten. Lucky me.

And peculiar that such a shrunken varmint turned out to be the biggest bully of my life. How did that even happen? It wasn't as if I couldn't take care of myself or was easily pushed around. Hardly. I was tough as they come.

Yet Prune somehow knew how to make my life miserable.

"Whatcha doing, Miss Deaf and Dumb?" His words smashed against my back like hard-packed snowballs as I walked down the hall.

I may have dropped my head just a little. I may have picked up my pace just a tad.

Prune chortled. His ugly laugh sounded like a smelly hyena's, although I had never actually heard or seen a hyena in person before. Actually, maybe they weren't smelly at all.

"Who's fonder of Yonder?" Prune's voice was squawking loudly and I heard his steps catch up to mine. The scent of corn chips made me swallow hard. But I kept marching forward. I knew not to stop.

"No one's fonder of Yonder!"

The little creep was on a roll.

"Hey, Yonder," he continued. I imagined a foam of white spit flying from his blistery mouth. "Headed to your locker?"

Actually, I *was* going to my locker. I needed to hang up my jacket and find my language arts composition book. Luckily, my locker was just a few steps away. Unluckily, Prune and a growing gang of followers were right behind me.

I stood still for a second, thinking about a possible escape, but it was too late. The boys crowded together, chortling and licking their lips in anticipation. Maybe some stupid Robert Frost teacher or even Principal Flint would make a surprise appearance to provide emergency assistance. And it wasn't often that I wished for the appearance of any adult at school. No way, no how.

The first thing I saw was that my locker handle was coated with greenish slime. Yuck. But I pretended not to notice. This had happened several times before—someone leaving nose cooties all over the handle—and I didn't want

to give Prune and his followers the satisfaction of seeing my horror and disgust all over again. So I simply nudged the locker open with my elbow and reached inside for my book.

I heard the mash of boys behind me squeal. I felt dampness on my hands and looked down. There was something strange about the blue-and-white gym shorts that were hanging on my locker hook and that brushed my arm below. Yes, there was definitely an inky black mark of some kind and a sharp, familiar odor filled my nostrils. It reminded me of the cleaning stuff my father sometimes squirted on our dirty kitchen table when I'd stained it with paint or marker. I squinted in concentration. The smell grew stronger. The boys laughed with pure delight.

“Oh, Yonder”—Prune was practically bent over in glee—“guess you won't be wearing your gym shorts today!” And then Prune and his entire crew pranced gleefully in unison, just like they'd rehearsed their ugly dance in Mr. Tisdale's performing arts mobile (think trailer) classroom. Mr. Tisdale had insisted we all learn the authentic version of the Virginia reel, something I was actually quite good at.

“Yonder can't wear her gym shorts!” the mini-mob chanted mindlessly.

Clearly, these nitwits were one sandwich short of a picnic.

I looked down at my shorts again. What was that smell, and why were the shorts beginning to glob together? And it quickly became apparent that the pretty, faux-silk fabric was

attached to my hand. Yup, no doubt about it. The hems of my brand-new gym shorts were covered with glue and pen ink, the very same cement glue and black ink we had used the day before to make our class Greek diorama. All at once, I recognized the odor and I felt the squish on my fingers. The glue was apparently yet to dry and probably never would. Silk and adhesive are not a good mix. It figured that Prune and his band of idiots didn't realize that.

Prune was laughing so hard that I thought he might choke. Then he grabbed my shorts right out of my hand and smashed them back into the right sleeve of my mother's khaki jacket so there was glue everywhere, all over me.

That's when I lost it. I felt my face and neck turn the color of my hair.

I hate all of you, I screamed in my head. You're a bunch of pathetic losers!

I spun around to face my enemies, throwing my composition book at Prune and then waving the gym shorts in front of my face like a weapon. Matadors in Spain have been known to use the exact same move in bullfights.

To my surprise and relief, Prune and each and every one of his gang had somehow vanished. There wasn't a single fifth-grade delinquent in sight. Instead, to my surprise and distress, my previous wish from a few moments before came true right in front of my flushed face.

"Young lady," Principal Flint said sharply, hands on her hips, "what in high heavens has gotten into you?"

I craned my neck to look down the corridor, on the lookout for the missing criminals. I wanted to tell her what in high heavens had gotten into me. I wanted to tell her about how miserable Heywood Prune was making my life. But as usual, I had no words.

Principal Flint raised her voice an octave.

“Yonder,” she said without an ounce of sympathy, “I’m really mystified about your behavior lately, but enough is enough.” She wiped her forehead in what seemed to me to be a very theatrical gesture. “This is the second example of your poor behavior this month. We’re still cleaning up those unpleasant things you wrote about your fellow students on your desk. Permanent marker is called that for good reason. My office right now!”

Let me tell you:

Justice is most definitely blind.

Principal Flint suspended me for two days, so I stopped going to stupid Robert Frost Middle School for an entire week. Just like that. Why not? Why shouldn’t I live it up and prolong the suspension as long as I liked? Who would even notice or care? Our home phone had been cut off for months, and I hid the first school notice, and then the official school letter, from my father without a second thought. He slept until late afternoon on the days he didn’t work anyway, and

on work days at the orchard, my father didn't get home until early evening. That's when he made it into work at all.

"How's school, darlin'?" he'd sometimes ask absentmindedly over a dinner of baked apples or apple bread. "Learn anything?"

I'd nod and he'd nod.

Then he'd smile and lay his large paw of a heavy hand next to mine and look right at me, his eyes glassy. Sometimes he'd say gruffly, "Wish I was a better dad to you, my Yonder girl. Wish I could be better."

And soon my eyes would water from the hot apple steam and his eyes would water too and we'd look at each other like strangers. Then I would almost be able to see both of our hearts fill as clearly as a glass pitcher poured with cider. I'd see our two battered hearts fill, the way a sinking car fills up with pond water, the way a grave fills up with earth. A heart so flooded isn't worth squat.

But I was wrong about some things back then, and I was wrong that nobody noticed I stopped going to school.