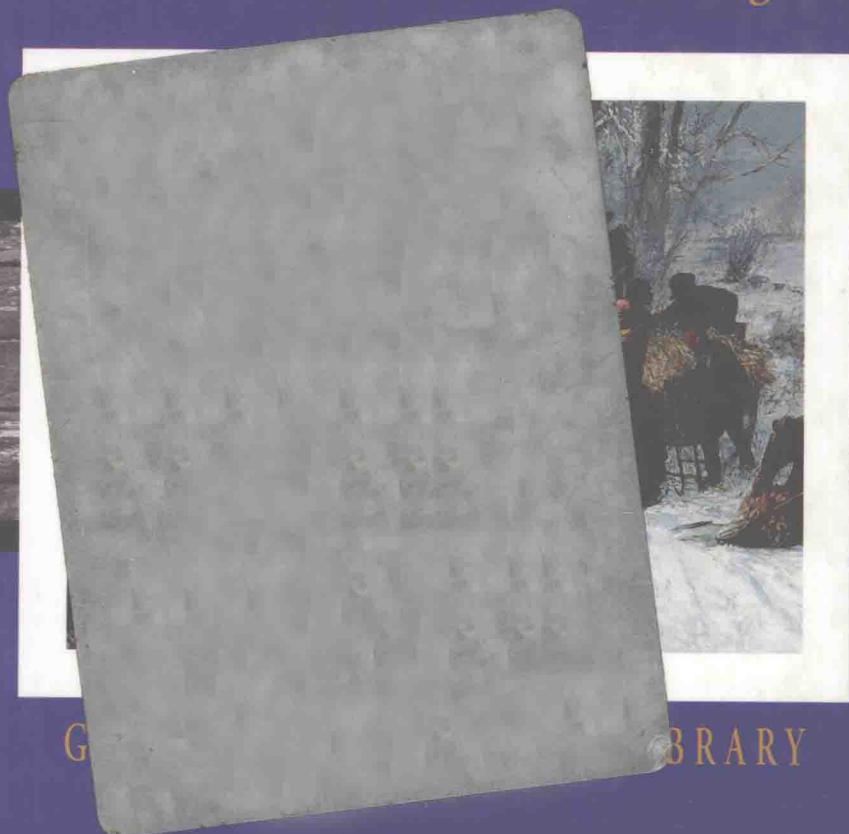


Virginia Hamilton

The House of Dies Drear

with Related Readings



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The House of Dies Drear



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Chapter 1

THOMAS DREAMED he walked a familiar forest, following a time-worn path of the Tuscaroras. The trail seemed the same as he had known it all his life. The way he walked it, without making any sound, was true to the way ancient Indian braves had walked it. But now the once familiar evergreens on either side were gigantic. Their needles were as large as railroad spikes. He had no trouble accepting the great new height of the trees or the long, smooth size of the needles. It was the awful smell of resin and oil over everything that upset him. The odor nearly choked him; the trees gave it off, as though they were raining turpentine. He seemed to feel it on his hair and on his hands. His palms itched and his eyes burned. He tried to get the smell out of his mind and stopped on the path to cut an enormous branch from a fallen pine.

He made tiny marks on the bark with one of his whittling tools, and he didn't find it unusual to be using so small an instrument for such hard work. He'd always used whittling tools to cut branches. He had started whistling to himself when a man swung down from a mile-high spruce.

"Stay back," the man said. He lifted the huge branch Thomas wanted and flung it away as if it were nothing.

Thomas stood still. He began to feel small. "Papa says you will do," he told the man, "but I don't say it. We are going anyway."

"Carolina is for you," the man said. "Stay back." He reached for Thomas with arms covered with curls of white hair. His eyes glowed red and then spewed fire.

Thomas leaped for a tall pair of stilts against a tree. Fastening them to his legs, he turned around on the path.

"I'm running," he said. But when he moved, the stilts sank into the bed of oversized pine needles covering the ground.

The man grabbed Thomas' ankles. Thomas fell slowly forward from a long way up. He could hear the wind whistling by his ears as he fell.

I'll never reach the end of the trail, he thought. And for the first

time, he was afraid.

Thomas Small lurched out of this dream, waking his twin brothers at the same time. The boys leaned against him and looked at him with wide, senseless eyes. Thomas didn't dare move. His heart pounded as the dream fear moved up and down his back. He couldn't think where he was.

In a few minutes, the twins were sleeping again. Thomas could rearrange them and rest his arms.

That was a good dream. Good and scary, he thought. I was in the trees at home and the man was somebody I should know. I can't place him right now, but I do know him.

He glanced out of the car window and smiled. He knew where he was now and everything was fine. The day was a dismal Saturday; the month was March. All around were heavy patches of mist, and there was a steady rain. His papa's sedan with the red trailer attached was the lone automobile on the Blue Ridge Mountain Highway. Thomas was thirteen years old today and never in his life had he been so far from home.

Home, he thought. Well, I'm sorry.

He and his family were leaving an old house and folks who were mostly relatives. He had known the old house and the old people forever.

"Like Great-grandmother Jeffers," he said to himself. His papa had asked Great-grandmother to come with them to live. Thomas recalled how she'd been leaning on her bright blue gate at the time.

No longer was there a fence around Great-grandmother Jeffers' house. Its blue pickets had long since fallen and rotted back into the ground. But the gate continued to stand, and Thomas, since the age of ten, had painted it bright blue every spring.

Great-grandmother had laughed when his father asked her to come with them. Her hand was propped under her chin as she leaned heavily on that old gate.

"You go look at the North two, three times," she had said to his papa. "Then come back here one day and tell me if it is better."

"I'll tell you now," his papa had said. "It won't be worse." He had smiled and kissed Great-grandmother. No need to tell her to take care of herself. She always had. He turned and walked swiftly away.

Thomas had stayed a moment. "Who will keep your gate?" he had asked her. "Who will paint it each spring?"

"You think you are the only boy in all these parts that can paint my gate?" she had asked him.

"I'm the only one who ever has," Thomas had said.

"Well, that's so," she had answered. She looked at Thomas hard. "You can trot back here next spring and paint it again, if you've a mind to. Spring," she said softly. "That's a long row to hoe."

Thomas saw something in her eyes that made him feel sad. But then whatever it had been was gone. She'd looked at him with that mean expression she used only with him and the bobwhite quail that lived off her handouts. He had to smile, for he knew she liked him even better than the bobwhite.

"I've got to go now," she had said. "No telling what fool thought took hold of your papa to leave these hills to go live in some craven house. I'm going to fix my chicory. I expect I'll roast it all night and all day tomorrow. Maybe then your papa will get you all there in one piece." She believed roasting chicory was the best power to ward off calamity. Thomas accepted the fact and was comforted.

Great-grandmother had turned and, not looking back, slowly walked to her house. At the steps, she held up her arm in a wave. Thomas hadn't needed to say anything. Within the wave was everything between them.

Thomas had few children to play with in those mountains he and his family were leaving. Homes were sometimes foothills apart. Most of the families with boys Thomas' age had already gone away North. No one heard from them again and old people like Great-grandmother Jeffers took this to be a sign that the North was a place of sorrow. Still Thomas hadn't minded being alone most of the time. There had been the forest to walk and there had been Great-grandmother to talk to.

He stared out of the car window and thought about the trees spreading up and over the hills behind his old home. There were times when he had sensed a coming rain and raced it to the pines. Diving under heavy branches, he had watched the rain slant into the forest. It never reached where he lay sheltered, but from the tree's farthest boughs made a silver circle around him.

"I won't think about it again," he promised himself. "It'll be fun living somewhere in Ohio." They were to live in a big house, and only his father had seen it.

Thomas sat wondering why it was taking them so long to get there. Maybe an axle will break, he thought. Maybe we'll run out of gas

in the night, with woods on both sides of the road!

If that happened, he would creep through the darkness in search of a house. And at last he would see ghostly lights flickering through the trees.

If it's going to take forever, we might as well have some excitement, he thought.

"Papa," he said suddenly, "tell about the new house again."

His father drove hunched over the steering wheel of the car. When Thomas broke the silence, Mr. Small took up a cloth to wipe the windshield. Then he rubbed the cloth on the back of his neck. He was tired of driving and tired of the rain that had stayed with them since morning. Yet he hadn't changed his plan to reach the new house by this afternoon at the latest.

"How many times must I tell it to you before you get it all?" he asked Thomas.

"Just once more, Papa," said Thomas. He had the story straight after the first time he heard it. He simply liked the tone of his papa's voice whenever he spoke about anything so full of history as the new house in Ohio.

"Well," his father began, "it has gables and eaves and pillars. It's large, quite large. There are many windows from floor to ceiling and there's a veranda all the way around on the outside."

"It must look like a plantation house," Thomas said. He pictured a gold mansion with green trim and a lawn as long as forever.

"No, not quite like that," said Mr. Small, smiling. "Not that stately. Our place is more . . . more . . . well . . ." he hesitated.

". . . more sinister," Mrs. Small finished for him.

Neither Thomas nor his father had realized that Mrs. Small was awake. For most of the morning's journey, she'd slept in the front seat with her head cradled on a pillow. Now she shivered and sighed.

"How I could let myself get talked into this!" she said. "Going off to live somewhere I've never seen. Rattling around in a big old place!"

"You're just as excited about going as Papa and me," Thomas said. He leaned forward against the front seat and looked sideways at his mother. He liked the way she almost smiled when he teased her. "I don't think she'll like walking in the rain much anymore though, Papa," he said.

His father laughed, and his mother had to laugh, too. No, she didn't like so much rain. That was why she'd slept so long. She didn't

like thinking about a big Civil War house she had never laid eyes on. It had been an important station on the Underground Railroad, and Thomas still wanted to hear about it, even if his mother didn't.

"Does the house look haunted?" he asked.

Mr. Small was a long time answering. He finally shrugged. "It's a handsome place, once you get used to it," he said. "A fine period piece. It will be the talk of the whole town once I have it painted and landscaped properly."

"What's the town like?" Thomas asked.

"Oh, it's like any small village," Mr. Small said. "And like most Ohio towns, it has a good college at one end of it. But our house isn't in the town, Thomas."

"I thought it was," said Thomas.

"No, it sits alone on a rise in a kind of wilderness." His father spoke then to Mrs. Small. "I believe the townspeople thought I was out of my mind when I finally signed that lease."

Thomas heard caution come into his father's voice. "I never did get the complete floor plans from the real estate people—did I tell you that? They said the plans had been missing for years. They've no idea how many hidden rooms and such the house has. We do have the partial plans though. I should be able to puzzle the whole of it out from them. But it's odd, don't you think, that all the complete plans should be gone?"

"That should tell you there's something funny about that house and anything to do with it," Mrs. Small said.

Thomas' father cleared his throat loudly and gave Mrs. Small a warning glance. But Thomas had heard what she said and he let his mother's words pass into his mind in a neat line. He would think about them some other time. Right now, he was thinking about the new house sitting alone.

"I do wish the rain would stop before we reach that place," Mrs. Small said. She shivered again and tied her scarf tighter about her neck.

"Papa . . ." Thomas said, "does 'wilderness' mean the soil is dead and trees can't grow? Does it mean there's no hope left in the land?"

"What a funny thing to think of!" said Mrs. Small.

"I did say the house stood alone," Mr. Small said. "Thomas was thinking of that."

"No, I was thinking about North Carolina and Great-grandmother,"

said Thomas. "I was thinking that Great-grandmother and all the other old people had lived in wilderness just forever almost. Maybe that's why she wouldn't come with us. Maybe she thought she was only changing one wilderness for another."

Mr. Small was silent for a time. "Some folks might think a hundred-mile stretch of pine was wilderness," he said, "although you wouldn't, Thomas, because you grew up in pine country. And some might call the prairie wilderness, but I suspect it must have looked pretty good to the pioneer. No, I meant by 'wilderness' that the house itself has about it an atmosphere of desolation."

"But you say it's by a town," said Thomas.

"Yes," Mr. Small said.

"And you say it sits alone."

"Absolutely alone," Mr. Small answered. "There's no way to describe the feel of it or its relation to the town. You have to see it and know about it that way."

"I wish we'd hurry and get there," Thomas said. "It feels like we've been riding forever."

They lapsed into silence. Thomas could think of no better birthday present than to have the new house suit him. He wanted to like it in the same way he liked the masses of clouds in front of a storm or the dark wood of the pine forest back home.

His father had given him a book for his birthday. It was a volume, bound in real leather, about the Civil War, the Underground Railroad and slaves. Thomas loved the smell of real leather, and he rubbed the book lightly back and forth beneath his nose. Then he leaned back, flipping idly through the pages. In a moment his brothers were nestled against him, but Thomas did not even notice.

He had come across a curious piece of information earlier. Of the one hundred thousand slaves who fled from the South to Canada between 1810 and 1850, forty thousand of them had passed through Ohio. Thomas didn't know why this fact surprised him, yet it did. He knew a lot about slaves. His father had taught Civil War history in North Carolina. He would be teaching it in Ohio in the very town in which they were going to live. He had taught Thomas even more history than Thomas cared to know. Thomas knew that Elijah Anderson had been the "superintendent" of the Underground Railroad in Ohio and that he had finally died in prison in Kentucky. He knew that in the space of seven years, one thousand slaves had died in Kentucky.

But the fact that forty thousand escaping slaves had fled through Ohio started him thinking.

Ohio will be my new home, he thought. A lot of those slaves must have stayed in Ohio because Canada was farther than they could have believed. Or they had liked Elijah Anderson so much, they'd just stayed with him. Or maybe once they saw the Ohio River, they thought it was the Jordan and that the Promised Land lay on the other side.

The idea of exhausted slaves finding the Promised Land on the banks of the Ohio River pleased Thomas. He'd never seen the Ohio River, but he could clearly imagine freed slaves riding horses up and down its slopes. He pictured the slaves living in great communities as had the Iroquois, and they had brave leaders like old Elijah Anderson.

"Papa . . ." Thomas said.

"Yes, Thomas," said Mr. Small.

"Do you ever wonder if any runaway slaves from North Carolina went to Ohio?"

Mr. Small was startled by the question. He laughed and said, "You've been reading the book I gave you. I'm glad, it's a good book. I'm sure some slaves fled from North Carolina. They escaped from all over the South, and it's likely that half of them passed through Ohio on their way to Canada."

Thomas sank back into his seat, arranging his sprawling brothers against him. He smoothed his hand over the book and had half a mind to read it from cover to cover. He would wake the twins and read it all to them. They loved for him to read aloud, even though they couldn't understand very much.

No, thought Thomas. They are tired from being up late last night. They will only cry.

Thomas' brothers were named Billy and Buster and they knew all sorts of things. Once Thomas had taken up a cotton ball just to show them about it. They understood right away what it was. They had turned toward Great-grandmother Jeffers' house. She had a patch of cotton in her garden, and they must have seen her chopping it.

They loved pine, as Thomas did, although they couldn't whittle it. Thomas' papa said the boys probably never would be as good at whittling as he was. Thomas had a talent for wood sculpture, so his father said. There were always folks coming from distances offering Thomas

money for what he had carved. But Thomas kept most of his carvings for himself. He had a whole box of figures tied up in the trailer attached to the car. He intended placing them on counters and mantles all over the new house.

Thomas could sit in front of his brothers, carving an image out of pine, and they would jump and roll all around him. When the carving was finished, the twin for whom it was made would grab it and crawl off with it. Thomas never need say, and never once were the twins wrong in knowing what carving was for which boy.

They were fine brothers, Thomas knew.

If the new house is haunted, he thought, the twins will tell me!

Chapter 2

THE SEDAN headed through the Pisgah National Forest in the Blue Ridge Mountains, and then out of North Carolina. Thomas had seen a sign and knew exactly when they entered Virginia.

"That's done with," he said to himself.

If Mr. Small noticed they had left their home state, he gave no hint. Mrs. Small slept or at least kept her eyes closed. The twins awoke, and Mr. Small told Thomas to give them their lunch. Soon the boys were subdued, staring out the windows and eating, looking far below at the bank upon bank of mist nestled in the deep valleys of the Blue Ridge.

Thomas was thinking about the new house in Ohio. The house was a relic with secret passages and rooms. In Civil War times it had been one of the houses on the Underground Railroad system, which was a resting and hiding place for slaves fleeing through the North to Canada. Such houses had been secretly called "stations."

When Thomas' father read about the station house for rent in Ohio, he had written to the foundation that owned it for a full report. For years he had hoped to explore and possibly live in a house on the Underground Railroad. Now was his chance. But not until he saw the report did he find out how important the Ohio station had been. Those who ran the house in Ohio had an even greater task than the care and concealment of running slaves. They actually encouraged the slaves to let themselves be caught and returned to slavery!

Thomas hadn't believed slaves went willingly back into slavery until his father had explained it to him.

"If you'll recall your history, Thomas, you'll remember that the incredible history of the Underground Railroad actually began in Canada," his father had told him. Slaves who had reached Canada in the very early 1800s and established settlements there returned by the thousands to this country in order to free others. They came back for their families; they became secret 'conductors' on the Underground Railroad system. And they returned to bondage hoping to free masses of slaves.

"But slaves continued to flee by whatever means," Mr. Small had said, "with or without help. Upon reaching the Railroad, they might hide in our house in Ohio, where they would rest for as little as a week. Some of them were given rather large sums of money and returned again to slavery."

"What would slaves need with money?" Thomas had wanted to know.

"Even a fleeing slave needs maneuvering money," his father had said. "He would need food and shelter and the best and safest way for him to get it was to buy it from freed Negroes."

"But the slaves connected with the house in Ohio were going back into slavery," Thomas had said.

"Yes," said Mr. Small. "And after they were caught and went back, they passed the hidden money on to other slaves, who would attempt to escape."

Still Thomas couldn't believe slaves could successfully hide money on themselves without having it found.

Some slaves did have their money found and taken away, his father said. It was dangerous work they were involved in. But others managed to return to bondage with the money still in their possession.

"Remember," his father had told him, "the slaves we're talking about weren't ordinary folks out for a peaceful stroll. Many had run for their lives for weeks from the Deep South. They had no idea how far they had to travel and they were armed with little more than the knowledge that moss grew only on the northern side of trees. Any who managed to get as far as Ohio and the Underground Railroad line had to be pretty brave and strong, and very clever. Most of them were young, with a wonderful, fierce desire to free themselves as well as others. It was the best of these who volunteered to return to slavery. They were hand-picked by Dies Drear himself, the abolitionist who built our house in Ohio. He alone conceived of the daring plan of returning numbers of slaves to the South with sizable amounts of money hidden on them."

"He must have been something!" Thomas had said.

"He was a New Englander," Mr. Small said, "so independent and eccentric, most Ohio abolitionists thought him crazy. He came from an enormously wealthy family of shipbuilders, and yet his house in Ohio was fairly modest. To give you an idea how odd he was," said Mr. Small, "his house was overflowing with fine antiques, which he

neither took any interest in nor sold for profit. All the furniture remained in great piles, with just enough space to get through from room to room, until the house was plundered and Drear was killed.

“But when his plan to send slaves back to slavery worked,” said Mr. Small, “there grew among freemen and slaves an enormous respect for him. You know, they never called him by his name, partly because they feared he might get caught, but also because they were in awe of him. They called him Selah. Selah, which is no more than a musical direction to raise the voice. And yet, Selah he was. *Selah*, a desperate, running slave might sigh, and the name—the man—gave him the strength to go on.”

Selah. Freedom.

Thomas sat so quietly in the car with his eyes closed, he appeared to be sleeping. But his mind was full of thoughts about what else his father had told him was in the report from the Ohio foundation. The report went on to say that three slaves whom Dies Drear had hidden for a time were caught in an attempt to reach Canada. In truth, they were headed south again, but because they were captured on the northern side of the Ohio River they were believed to be fleeing to Canada. Their hidden money was discovered. Two of the slaves were killed by the bounty hunters who caught them. That same week, Dies Drear was murdered.

There had been pages and pages of the report from the foundation. Thomas recalled his father poring over it until very late at night, often jumping up and stalking about the room with obvious excitement. Then his father had made a trip to Ohio. He was gone three weeks, nearly ten days longer than he had intended. While he was gone, Thomas found the report and read it.

Thomas smiled to himself, his eyes still closed. He had discovered something in the report that his father hadn't mentioned. There was a legend that came with the house of Dies Drear. The report made light of the legend, but when Thomas read it he was at once frightened and pleased. The legend was that two slave ghosts and the ghost of Dies Drear haunted the house to this very day.

Right away Thomas had made up his mind that the two ghosts had to be the two slaves killed by bounty hunters. And the two ghosts had then killed Drear in revenge for their own deaths. But if all this were true, Thomas was faced with a problem.

Why would two slave ghosts haunt a house owned by the man