

From  
*The House of Dies Drear*

A novel by Virginia Hamilton

Illustrated by Jack White

*Thomas Small and his family are on their way to a new home in Huntington, Ohio. Thomas's father is going to teach at a small college there. Thomas is so excited that he finds it almost as hard to keep still as his little twin brothers do. It is not his father's job, or the thoughts of a new town or a new school, that Thomas is excited about. Thomas is excited about the family's new house.*

*The house is not just any house. It is a house with a history. More than a hundred years ago, the house was a station on the Underground Railroad. The owner of the house, Dies Drear,<sup>1</sup> had been one of the many "conductors" who had hidden runaway slaves and helped them escape to freedom.*

*Thomas finally falls asleep and misses crossing the Ohio River and coming into Huntington. When he wakes, the first thing Thomas sees is the house of Dies Drear.*

Thomas did not wake in time to see the Ohio River. Mr. Small was glad he didn't, for through the gloom of mist and heavy rain, most of its expanse was hidden. What was visible looked much like a thick mud path, as the sedan crossed over it at Huntington.

<sup>1</sup> Dies Drear (DEES DREER)

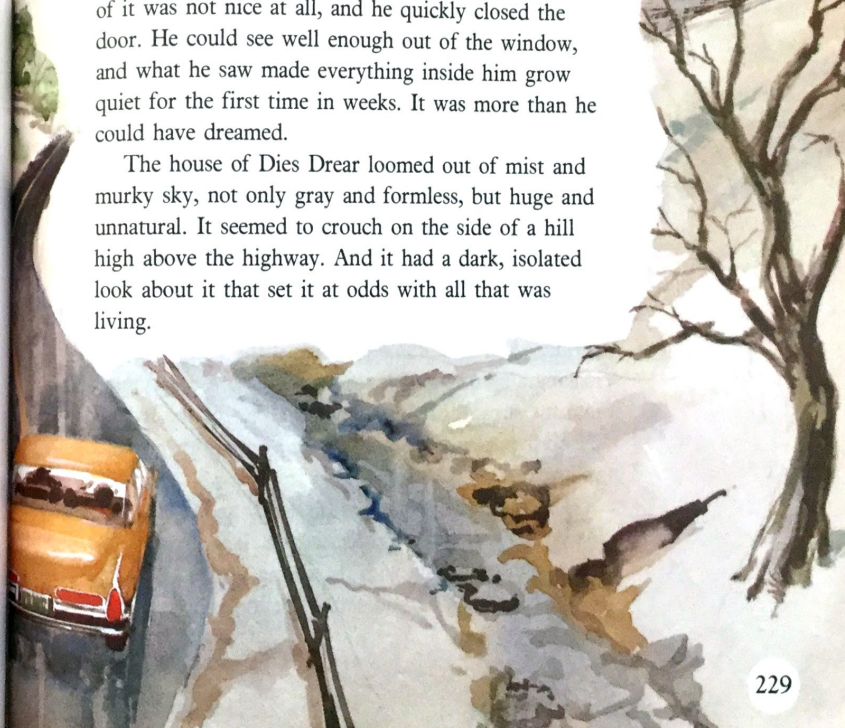
Thomas lurched awake a long time after. The car went slowly; there was hardly any rain now. His mother spoke excitedly, and Thomas had to shake his head rapidly in order to understand what she was saying.

"Oh dear!" Mrs. Small said. "Why it's huge!"

Mr. Small broke in eagerly, turning around to face Thomas. "You've waited a long time," he said. "Take a good look, son. There's our new house!"

Thomas looked carefully out of his window. He opened the car door for a few seconds to see better, but found the moist air too warm and soft. The feel of it was not nice at all, and he quickly closed the door. He could see well enough out of the window, and what he saw made everything inside him grow quiet for the first time in weeks. It was more than he could have dreamed.

The house of Dies Drear loomed out of mist and murky sky, not only gray and formless, but huge and unnatural. It seemed to crouch on the side of a hill high above the highway. And it had a dark, isolated look about it that set it at odds with all that was living.





A chill passed over Thomas. He sighed with satisfaction. The house of Dies Drear was a haunted place, of that he was certain.

"Well," Mr. Small said, "what do you think of it, Thomas?"

"It must be the biggest house anyone ever built," Thomas said at last. "And to think—it's our new house! Papa, let's get closer, let's go inside!"

Smiling, Mr. Small kept the car on the highway that now curved up closer toward the house. In a short time they were quite near.

At the base of the hill on which the house sat, a stream ran parallel to the highway. It was muddy and swollen by rain; between it and the hill lay a reach of fertile land, lushly tangled with mullein weed and gold wildflower. The hill itself was rocky and mostly bare, although a thaw had come to the rest of the land and countryside. At the very top of the hill Thomas noticed a grove of trees, which looked like either pine or spruce.

The house of Dies Drear sat on an outcropping, much like a ledge, on the side of the hill. The face of the ledge was rock, from which gushed mineral springs. And these came together at the fertile land, making a narrow groove through it before emptying into the stream. Running down the face of the ledge, the springs coated the rock in their path with red and yellow rust.

Thomas stared so long at the ledge and springs, his eyes began to play tricks on him. It seemed as if the rust moved along with the spring waters.

"It's bleeding," he said softly. "It looks just like

somebody cut the house open underneath and let its blood run out! That's a nice hill though," he added. He looked at the clumps of skinny trees at each side of the house. Their branches were bare and twisted by wind.

Thomas cleared his throat. "I bet you can see a lot from the top of that hill." He felt he ought to say this. The hill was hardly anything compared to the mountains at home. Otherwise the land in every direction was mostly flat.

"You can see the college from the top of the hill," Mr. Small said. "And you can see the town. It's quite a view. On a clear day those springs and colored rock make the hill and house look like a fairyland."

"All those springs!" Thomas said. He shook his head. "Where do they come from? I've never seen anything like them."

"You'll get used to the look of the land," Mr. Small said. "This is limestone country, and always with limestone in this formation you'll find the water table percolating through rock into springs. There are caves, lakes and marshes all around us, all because of the rock formations and the way they fault."

Mrs. Small kept her eye on the house. It was her nature to concentrate on that which there was a chance of her changing.

"No, it's not," she said softly. "Oh, dear, no, it will never be pretty!"

"Everything is seeping with rain," Mr. Small said to her. "Just try to imagine those rocks, that stream and the springs on a bright, sunny day. Then it's really something to see."



Thomas could imagine how everything looked on a day such as his father described. His eyes shone as he said, "It must look just about perfect!"

They drove nearer. Thomas could see that the house lay far back from the highway. There was a gravel road branching from the highway and leading to the house. A weathered covered bridge crossed the stream at the base of the hill. Mr. Small turned off the highway and stopped the car.

"There's been quite a rain," he said, "I'd better check the bridge."

Now Thomas sat with his hands folded tightly beneath his chin, with his elbows on his knees. He had a moment to look at the house of Dies Drear, the hill and the stream all at once. He stared long and hard. By the time his father returned, he had everything figured out.

They continued up the winding road, the house with its opaque, watching windows drawing ever nearer.

The stream is the moat. The covered planks over it are the drawbridge, Thomas thought. And the house of Dies Drear is the castle.

But who is the king of all this? Who will win the war?

There was a war and there was a king. Thomas was as sure of this as he was certain the house was haunted, for the hill and house were bitten and frozen. They were separated from the rest of the land by something unkind.

"Oh dear," Mrs. Small was saying. "Oh dear. Dear!"

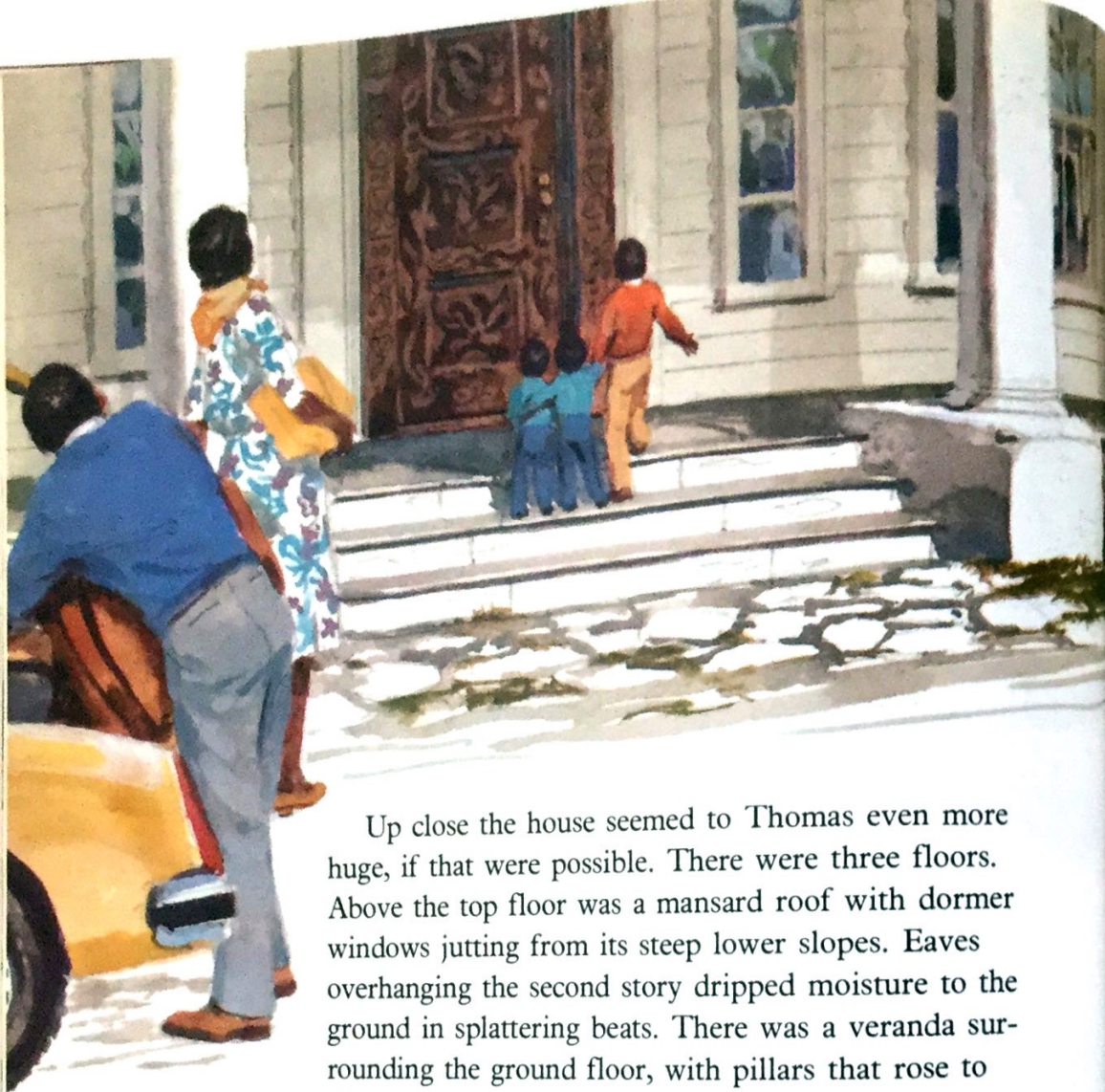


Suddenly the twins were scrambling over Thomas, wide awake and watching the house get closer. By some unspoken agreement, they set up a loud, pathetic wail at the same time.

"Look!" Thomas whispered to them. "See, over there is clear sky. All this mist will rise and get blown away soon. Then you'll feel better."

Sure enough, above the dark trees at the top of the hill was deep, clear sky. Thomas gently cradled the boys. "There are new kinds of trees here," he told them. "There will be nights with stars above trees like you've never known!" The twins hushed, as Thomas knew they would.





Up close the house seemed to Thomas even more huge, if that were possible. There were three floors. Above the top floor was a mansard roof with dormer windows jutting from its steep lower slopes. Eaves overhanging the second story dripped moisture to the ground in splattering beats. There was a veranda surrounding the ground floor, with pillars that rose to the eaves.

Thomas liked the house. But the chill he had felt on seeing it from the highway was still with him. Now he knew why.

It's not the gray day, he thought. It's not mist and damp that sets it off. There are things beyond weather. The house has secrets!

Thomas admired the house for keeping them so long.

But I'm here now, he thought happily. It won't keep anything from me.

The twins refused to get out of the car, so Thomas had to carry one while his mother carried the other. They cried loudly as soon as they were set on the veranda.

"They don't like the eaves dripping so close," Mr. Small said. "Move them back, Thomas."

Thomas placed the boys close to the oak door and then joined Mrs. Small in front of the house. His father was already busy unloading the trailer. The heavy furniture and trucks had come by van a week earlier. Thomas guessed all of it would be piled high in the foyer.

"It's old," Mrs. Small remarked, looking up at the dormers of the house. "Maybe when the sun comes out. . . ." Her voice trailed off.

Thomas placed his arm through hers. "Mama, it must be the biggest house for miles. And all the land! We can plant corn . . . we can have horses! Mama, it will be our own farm!"

"Oh, it's big," Mrs. Small said. "Big to clean and big to keep an eye on. How will I ever know where to find the boys?"

"I'll watch them," said Thomas. "Wait until it's warm weather for sure. They'll be with me all the time."

"Let's go inside now," Mr. Small said to them. He had unloaded cartons beside the twins on the veranda. "Thomas and I will have to set up the beds the first thing."

"And I'll have to get the kitchen ready," said Mrs. Small, "and you'll have to drive into town for food."



Goodness, there's so much to do, I won't have time to look around." Then she smiled, as though relieved.

Mr. Small went first, and Mrs. Small held the door for the twins and Thomas. At once the boys began to cry. Thomas watched them, noticing that they avoided touching the house, especially the oak door trimmed with carved quatrefoils. Mrs. Small hadn't noticed, and Thomas said nothing. He scooped up the boys and carried them inside.

When the heavy door closed behind them, they were instantly within a place of twilight and stillness.

*While his parents are looking over the new house, Thomas goes back out on the veranda. His attention is caught by the intricate carvings on the heavy oaken front door. Thomas begins to study the door more closely and discovers a hidden button. When Thomas works the button, the front steps of the house move—revealing a large, dark hole. Thomas lies down on the edge of the hole to investigate, loses his grip, and falls in!*

"Move slowly. Think fast," Thomas whispered. "Keep in mind what's behind and look closely at what's in front."

Thomas always carried a pencil-thin flashlight, which he sometimes used for reading in the car. He sat up suddenly and pulled out the flashlight. It wasn't broken from the fall, and he flicked it on. He sat in a kind of circle enclosed by brick walls. In some places, the brick had crumbled into powder, which was slowly filling up the circle of sod.

That will take a long time, thought Thomas. He looked up at the underside of the veranda steps.

Thomas got to his feet and made his way down the rock stairway into darkness. At the foot of the stairs was a path with walls of dirt and rock on either side of it. The walls were so close, Thomas could touch them by extending his arms a few inches. Above his head was a low ceiling carved out of rock. Such cramped space made him uneasy. The foundation of the house had to be somewhere above the natural rock. The idea of the whole three-story house of Dies Drear pressing down on him caused him to stop a moment on the path. Since he had fallen, he



hadn't had time to be afraid. He wasn't now, but he did begin to worry a little about where the path led. He thought of ghosts, and yet he did not seriously believe in them. "No," he told himself, "not with the flashlight. Not when I can turn back . . . when I can run."

And besides, he thought, I'm strong. I can take care of myself.

Thomas continued along the path, flickering his tiny beam of light this way and that. Pools of water stood in some places. He felt a coldness, like the stream of air that came from around the button on the oak doorframe. His shoes were soon soaked. His socks grew cold and wet, and he thought about taking them off. He could hear water running a long way off. He stopped again to listen, but he couldn't tell from what direction the sound came.

"It's just one of the springs," he said. His voice bounced off the walls strangely.

Better not speak. There could be tunnels leading off this one. You can't tell what might hear you in a place like this.

Thomas was scaring himself. He decided not to think again about other tunnels or ghosts. He did think for the first time of how he would get out of this tunnel. He had fallen five feet, and he wasn't sure he would be able to climb back up the crumbling brick walls. Still, the path he walked had to lead somewhere. There had to be another way out.

Thomas felt his feet begin to climb; the path was slanting up. He walked slowly on the slippery rock; then suddenly the path was very wide. The walls were four feet away on either side, and there were

long stone slabs against each wall. Thomas sat down on one of the slabs. It was wet, but he didn't even notice.

"Why these slabs?" he asked himself. "For the slaves, hiding and running?"

He opened and closed a moist hand around the flashlight. The light beam could not keep back the dark. Thomas had a lonely feeling, the kind of feeling running slaves must have had.

And they dared not use light, he thought. How long would they have to hide down here? How could they stand it?

Thomas got up and went on. He placed one foot carefully in front of the other on the path, which had narrowed again. He heard the faint sound of movement somewhere. Maybe it was a voice he heard, he couldn't be sure. He swirled the light around over the damp walls, and fumbled it. The flashlight slid out of his hand. For a long moment, he caught and held it between his knees before finally dropping it. He bent quickly to pick it up and stepped down on it. Then he accidentally kicked it with his heel, and it went rattling somewhere over the path. It hit the wall, but it had gone out before then. Now all was very dark.

"It's not far," Thomas said. "All I have to do is feel around."

He felt around with his hands over smooth, moist rock; his hands grew cold. He felt water, and it was icy, slimy. His hands trembled, they ached, feeling in the dark, but he could not find the flashlight.

"I couldn't have kicked it far because I wasn't moving." His voice bounced in a whisper off the



walls. He tried crawling backward, hoping to hit the flashlight with his heels.

"It's got to be here . . . Papa?" Thomas stood, turning toward the way he had come, the way he had been crawling backward. He didn't at all like walking in the pitch blackness of the tunnel.

"I'll go on back," he said. "I'll just walk back as quick as I can. There'll be light coming from the veranda steps. I'll climb up that wall and then I'll be out of this. I'll get Papa and we'll do it together."

He went quickly now, with his hands extended to keep himself from hitting the close walls. But then something happened that caused him to stop in his tracks. He stood still, with his whole body tense and alert, the way he could be when he sensed a storm before there was any sign of it in the air or sky.



Thomas had the queerest notion that he was not alone. In front of him, between him and the steps of the veranda, something waited.

"Papa?" he said. He heard something.

The sound went, "Ahhh, ahhh, ahhh." It was not moaning, nor crying. It wasn't laughter, but something forlorn and lost and old.

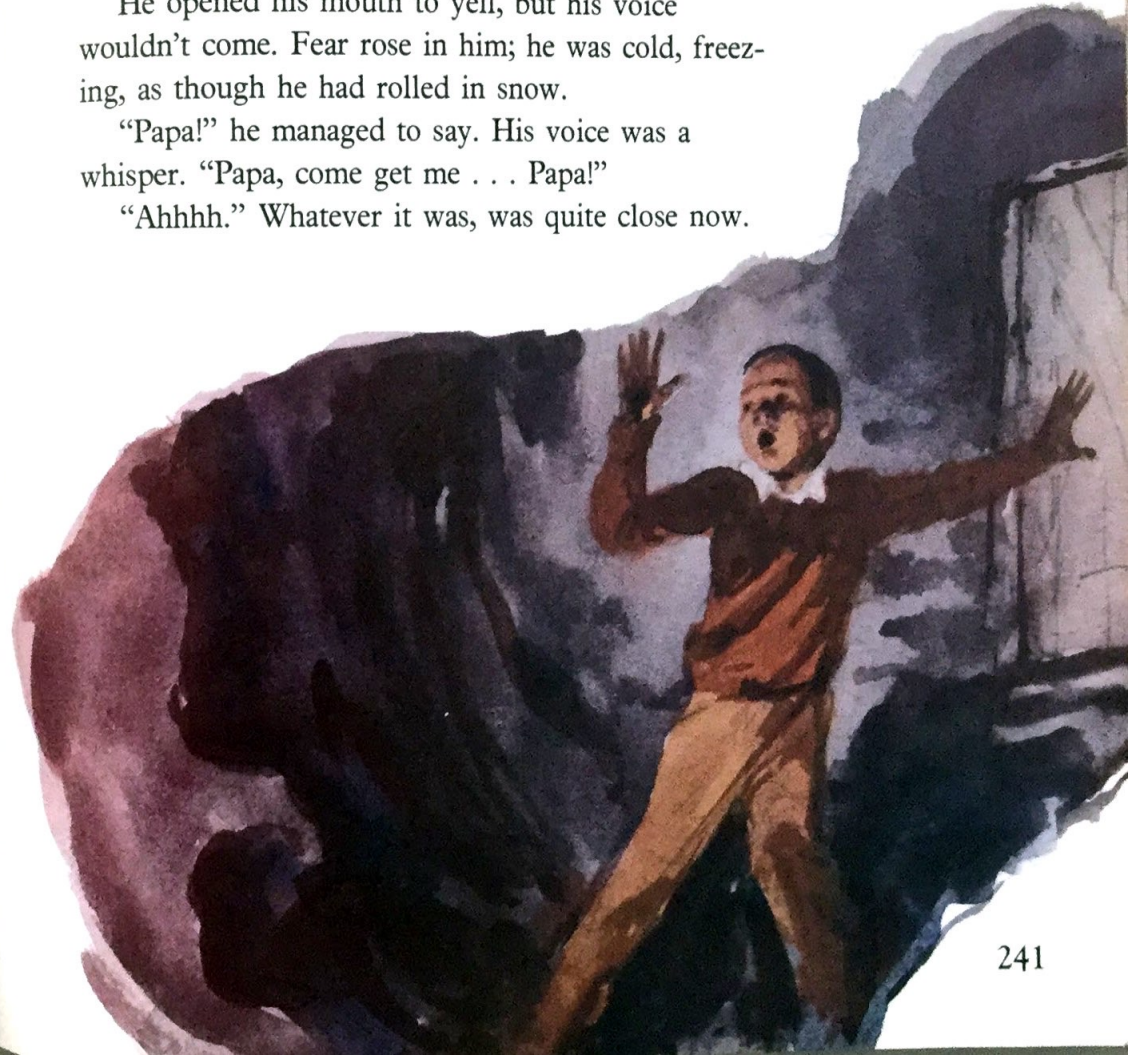
Thomas backed away. "No," he said. "Oh please!"

"Ahhh, ahhh," something said. It was closer to him now. Thomas could hear no footsteps on the path. He could see nothing in the darkness.

He opened his mouth to yell, but his voice wouldn't come. Fear rose in him; he was cold, freezing, as though he had rolled in snow.

"Papa!" he managed to say. His voice was a whisper. "Papa, come get me . . . Papa!"

"Ahhhh." Whatever it was, was quite close now.





Thomas still backed away from it, then he turned around, away from the direction of the veranda. He started running up the path, with his arms outstretched in front of him. He ran and ran, his eyes wide in the darkness. At any moment, the thing would grab him and smother his face. At any time, the thing would paralyze him with cold. It would take him away. It would tie him in one of the tunnels, and no one would ever find him.

“Don’t let it touch me! Don’t let it catch me!”

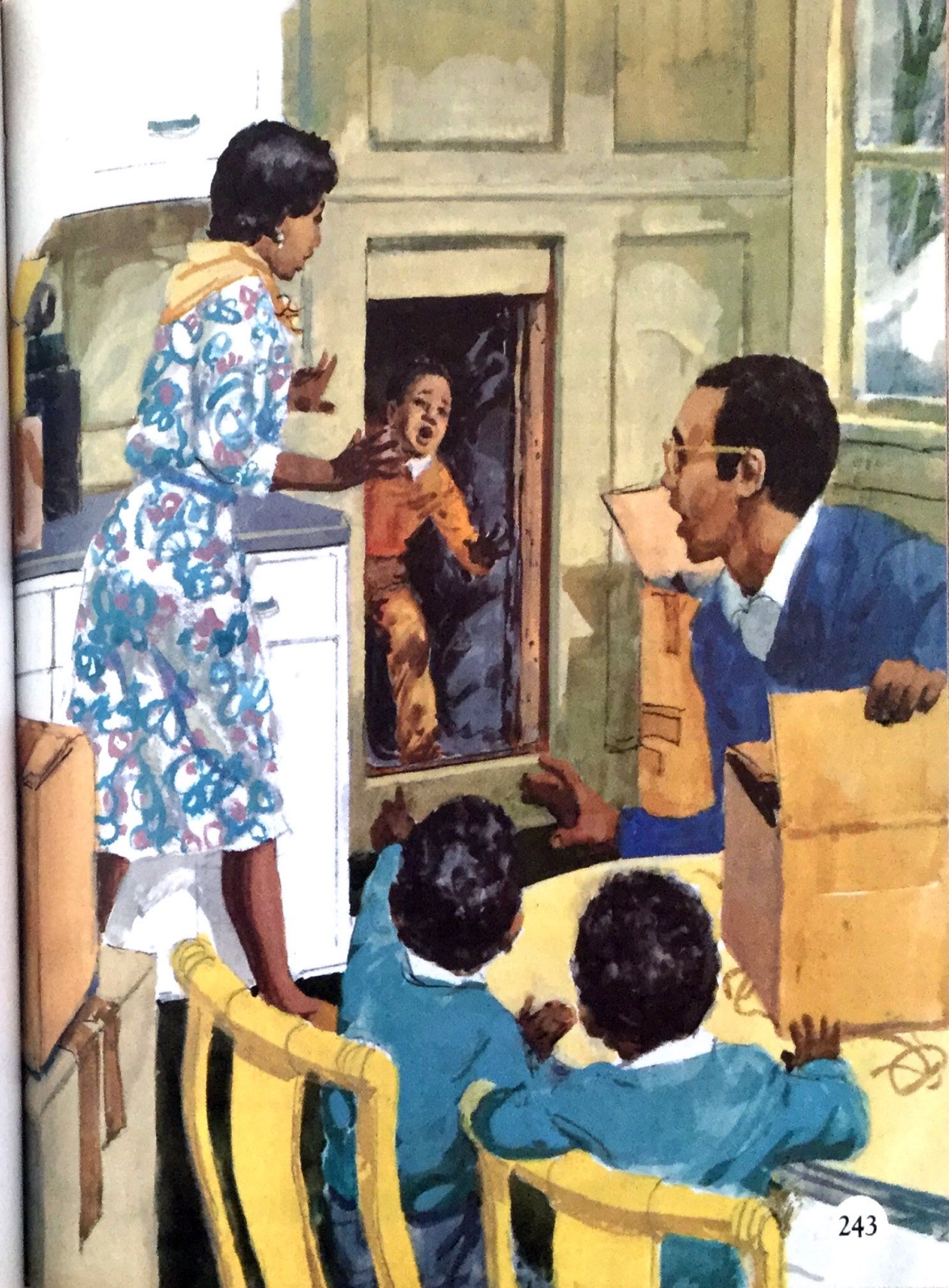
Thomas ran smack into a wall. His arms and hands hit first; then, his head and chest. The impact jarred him from head to foot. He thought his wrists were broken, but ever so slowly, painful feeling flowed back into his hands. The ache moved dully up to the sockets of his shoulders. He opened and closed his hands. They hurt so much, his eyes began to tear, but he didn’t seem to have broken anything.

Thomas felt frantically along the wall. The wall was wood. He knew the feel of it right away. It was heavy wood, perhaps oak, and it was man made, man hewn. Thomas pounded on it, hurting himself more, causing his head to spin. He kept on, because he knew he was about to be taken from behind by something ghostly and cold.

“Help me! It’s going to get me!” he called. “Help me!”

Thomas heard a high, clear scream on the other side of the wall. Next came the sound of feet scurrying, and then the wall slid silently up.

“Thomas Small!” his mother said. “What do you think you are doing inside that wall!”





## About VIRGINIA HAMILTON

Virginia Hamilton was born in Yellow Springs, Ohio, where her grandfather and his mother had settled after traveling the Underground Railroad to freedom. She grew up in a large family that owned a small farm. As a child, Virginia Hamilton freely explored the farmland owned by her family and nearby relatives and kept notebooks in which she often wrote down her thoughts. Because she came from a family of storytellers, she also listened—and learned. Virginia Hamilton says that her brother Billy's stories of his life's dreams "taught me to dream large and lucky—which is something all young people should learn to do."

Virginia Hamilton left Yellow Springs to attend college at Ohio State, where she studied writing. After college she went to New York to work. She submitted many stories to magazines, but none were published. Then an old college friend urged her to rewrite a story she had written at Ohio State. That story, *Zeely*, became her first published book, followed by *The House of Dies Drear* and many others. Though her childhood is long past, Virginia Hamilton keeps the memory of it "very much alive. And it is from such memories . . . that the best of my writing comes."

### More Books by Virginia Hamilton

*The Time-Ago Tales of Jahdu*  
*Arilla Sun Down*



Think about the story. Finish the diagram on page 227 by filling in details that describe the house. Then answer the questions.

1. Use your diagram. What details tell you that there is something scary about the house?
2. Why do you think the author chose Thomas as the main character of the story?
3. Thomas finds it hard to sleep, or even sit still, on the drive to Ohio. Why is Thomas so excited about his family's new house?
4. Would you be excited about moving into a house like the house of Dies Drear? Explain why or why not.
5. Thomas hears something in the tunnel with him. What do you think it is?
6. Thomas faces the unknown without finding out what it was. How might Thomas discover what was with him in the tunnel?
7. If you were Thomas, how would you describe what being in the tunnel was like?
8. Do you think the noise would have frightened Thomas if he had not been in a dark and scary place? Explain your answer.

## Think and Discuss