VIRGINIA HAMILTON
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... it was just my good luck to have descended from a slew of talkers and storytellers—plain out-and-out liars at times—who did not merely tell stories, but created them when they forgot parts of real stories or family history, who in effect, recreated who they were and where they came from and what they would become through acts of imagination.'

Virginia Hamilton was born into a family of storytelling characters.

Their stories swirled around her like the summertime fireflies that flitted on her family’s land in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Their stories illuminated her mind with images of slavery, family, adventures, home, and freedom. Their stories floated into her imagination, their glow staying with her for years after.

When their memories of real events faded, Virginia’s family would get creative with their tales. She referred to this gray area between fact and, well, not quite so much, as Rememory. Virginia defined it as “an exquisitely textured recollection, real or imagined, which is otherwise indescribable.”

As every story needs someone to tell it, let’s begin Virginia’s with those who would create these rememories.

The patriarch of the family was Levi Perry, Virginia’s grandfather.
Levi was just five years old when his mother, Mary Cloud, smuggled him into Ohio. Mary and Levi were living as slaves in Virginia. In 1857 Mary escaped and traveled from Virginia to Jamestown, Ohio, by the Underground Railroad.2

Many Perry family members had settled around Jamestown in the flat farmlands of the southwestern part of the state. Once safely there, Mary left Levi with relatives and was never seen again.

Levi was taken in and thrived among his family members. As a young man, he met and married Rhetta Adams. Her family members were also freed slaves and had settled in nearby Yellow Springs. The family took root and grew. Levi and Rhetta’s family blossomed as well: they had ten children. And at least once a year, all his children heard the story of how Levi came to live in Ohio.3

Levi would gather Virginia’s mother, Etta Belle, and her siblings and tell how his mother brought him home to his family. “Set down, and I will tell you about slavery and why I ran, so that it will never happen to you.”4

“And this was the original story as far as I’m concerned,” Virginia said. “That was the beginning of the family culture and, after that, storytelling must have been in that family from early on, because everyone told stories.”5

As Levi was just a child when they escaped, details of the journey were as fleeting as the fireflies. The power of the story was in the accomplishment. Mary’s actions provided freedom for Levi and his children.

Virginia remembered taking walks with her Grandpa Levi, holding on to his fist. His hand was permanently closed into a fist and scarred from a fire in the gunpowder mill where he worked as a younger man. He would lift her up and swing her around, and around, Virginia giggling away.6

“I knew him as this old friend, chewing tobacco, barely five feet tall, who, at eighty, could jump from a standing-still position into the air to click his heels together three times and land still standing. Never ever could I do that.”7
Years later when Virginia won the Coretta Scott King Award for her book *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*, she honored her grandfather in her acceptance speech. She told the audience, “Levi Perry’s life, or the gossip about his days, has elements of mystery, myth, and folklore. . . . It is from hearing such tales that I became a student of folklore.”

As loving as Levi was, he was also strict as a father.

Virginia’s mother, Etta Belle, rebelled against Levi’s rules. Levi insisted when she began dating that she only go out with ministers. Etta Belle was so upset with his restrictions that she once jumped out a window and ran away. Eventually, Etta Belle moved away from Yellow Springs, to Detroit. While there, she traveled to visit her sister Bessie and Bessie’s husband in Canada. The trip would change the course of Etta’s life.
Bessie’s husband had a friend, a handsome man named Kenneth James Hamilton.

Kenneth had graduated from Iowa State Business College in the late 1890s. Back then, not many young black men completed high school, much less college. After obtaining his degree, Kenneth was told by his mother, a cook for a prominent banker, that there was a position for him at the bank. Kenneth dressed up in a suit and tie to apply for the position. He walked into the bank, prepared for perhaps his first job as a teller. Instead of being shown to the customer counter, however, he was given a mop and bucket. Kenneth walked out of the bank.⁹

Kenneth began traveling the country, playing his mandolin, and working various jobs, from serving on the wait staff at the Palmer House in Chicago to holding a position as a porter on the Canadian Pacific Railway.
One night during her visit with Bessie, Etta went to a dance hall. Ballroom dancing was quite popular then. Kenneth was an excellent ballroom dancer. He waltzed into the room to an orchestral rendition of “Bye, Bye, Blackbird” and Etta decided right then and there that he was the man for her.10

They fell in love and married. Kenneth wanted to move to a big city, but Etta felt drawn to return to her home and family. They came back to her land in Yellow Springs. Kenneth drew on his work experiences and settled into a job as the headwaiter of the Tearoom, the dining hall at Antioch College. Kenneth eventually became manager of the hall, and was beloved by teachers as well as students.

Etta and Kenneth started their own family, raising their five children on the twelve-acre farm.

Their youngest was a little girl with dark wavy hair, big hazel eyes, and the beautiful light-brown skin of her ancestors. Born on March 12, 1934, she was named after her grandfather Levi’s home state, Virginia. She listened to her parents weave tales during the day and fell asleep at night to the sounds of her mother’s lullaby. “Rockabye baby-bye, sleep little tot . . . I’ll rest you in the elm shade when the day gets too hot.”11

Virginia benefited both from being the youngest child and from having older parents. Etta Belle was in her forties and Kenneth in his fifties when Virginia was born. She was “spoiled” when she was young and allowed a lot of freedom to play with her cousins. Yet her parents had high expectations of her.

“My mother, Etta Belle Hamilton, was a perfectly round, small woman, not five feet tall. . . . She had a commanding presence, and a stern look from her could stop me cold. She was awfully good to me though and a wonderful teller of tales. I did my best to please her,” Virginia wrote.12

Beautiful and determined Etta Belle could “take a slice of fiction floating around and polish it into a saga.” She’d say things to her little ones like, “God doesn’t love ugly” and “Don’t care won’t have a home.”13
VIRGINIA AS A BABY

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Virginia’s older sisters and brothers were off to school at the break of dawn. Little Virginia tagged along with her mother while she took care of household chores, including tending to six hundred leghorn chickens.

As chicken was a staple in their evening dinners, Etta knew how to “ring a chicken”—taking hold of the bird’s neck and twirling it around and round until the body separated from the head. The sight disturbed Virginia’s brothers and sisters.

Virginia didn’t mind.

“It sounds cruel, I know. But chickens were the food we ate, like vegetables. What we didn’t grow or raise, we didn’t eat.”

Etta also grew tomatoes and cucumbers and sold them, along with the eggs, to the local grocery. The money she earned from the sales she called “Extra.”

“And Extra money meant new Easter coats or new school clothes for the children,” Virginia said.

Her mother would fill her little ears with tales that made their way into her heart—folklore such as “Br’er Rabbit and the Tar Baby.” Whenever she finished a tale, Etta would say, “Be it bowed, bended, my story’s ended.”

Virginia’s father was the one with “the Knowledge,” stories of African American heroes. Virginia’s father opened up the world to her, by teaching her about others who came before her and accomplished great things.

Kenneth would take off his white work jacket from his job at the Tearoom, loosen up his tie, and share his wisdom. Virginia sat on her father’s lap and listened to his soft, modest voice teach her about baseball player Jack Johnson, who played for and managed the Kansas City Giants in 1910 and 1911. And, as Virginia liked to sing, he’d thrill her with stories about Florence Mills, a cabaret singer, dancer, and comedienne, and Blind Lemon Jefferson, a blues and gospel singer.

Kenneth told her stories about Paul Robeson and William Edward Burkhardt Du Bois, otherwise known as W. E. B. Du Bois, two men she
would write biographies about later in her life. Paul Robeson was a handsome and talented athlete, actor, and lawyer who was an international activist against racism. W. E. B. Du Bois was the first African American to earn a PhD from Harvard in 1895. He wrote about racism and became one of the cofounders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Kenneth was well read and subscribed to the New Yorker and The Crisis, the NAACP magazine. Virginia’s father had many coverless, old, and musty periodicals stacked around the house. She discovered a picture of the Watusi people in one of the magazines. The Watusis are the tallest people in the world. The image stayed with her for many years, and ultimately served as the basis for her first novel for children, Zeely. Her father also read the Sherlock Holmes mysteries by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Virginia got caught up in the stories, and learned how mysteries were written and plotted as a result. These books were early inspiration for Virginia’s The House of Dies Drear, a mystery.

Of all her siblings, Virginia was closest to her older brother Bill, a dreamer. She stood by while he tried to dig a hole to China. He was certain to get to the other side of the world. She played up in the tree house he created, looking up into the Ohio sun-filled summer sky, taking in the scent of sweet, country air.

Bill had a paper route in Yellow Springs. In the winter, he pulled Virginia around on a sled as she held his papers for him. He shared his dreams for the future.

Virginia played with siblings and cousins so hard that some days she was plumb tuckered out. Her cousin Marlene was her best friend and the two of them ventured through all the neighboring family farms.

“Memories of all those years, of summer days and winter nights, storms and sunshine, have given ample food to my imagination all my life,” she wrote.

Words from her female relatives filled her world. “Whether while resting from the hot summer heat and enjoying sassafras tea, or warming up by the fire in the parlor on a cold winter’s evening, tales were
And, there were amusing stories told, too. There’s the one about an uncle who apprehended the bandits who robbed a nearby bank. To the culprits, her uncle looked like a madman, with wild hair, dressed in his pajamas and shooting two pocket pistols at them. To avoid him, they dove into an empty well, breaking their arms and legs. The uncle was beside himself and fell into the well after them.

Then there was the one about how, back in 1938, Virginia’s Aunt Leah was listening to the radio on Sunday, October 30. Orson Welles was on the air. His broadcast of an adaptation of H. G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds* was in progress. Wells’s story tells of an invasion of Earth by Martians. The radio play suggested that the invasion was actually taking place. The show created panic all over the country, including in many of the Hamilton and Perry households. Aunt Leah, being very superstitious, roused family members “in three counties.” She, along with many male relatives, policed the skies throughout the night, shooting at anything that moved. Virginia’s family was much more reserved in their approach. They sought shelter for hours in Grandpa Perry’s root cellar.

There were stories, always stories, being told by and about the many characters in Virginia’s extended family.

But, just as a firefly’s light dims, so too can stories that are passed on through word of mouth.

Virginia didn’t remember telling stories as a child. She did not spin a yarn as her relatives did.

Virginia’s gift was capturing the essence of her family’s storytelling magic in her writing. She began putting her stories down on paper from an early age.

When she was nine she began “The Notebook.” This journal included secrets that her parents and other family members whispered about. Little Virginia was not expected to understand the gossip shared among the elders. She took notes, hoping to comprehend the mysteries when she grew older. Sadly, she lost her journal a year later. The family secrets remained as such in Virginia’s mind.
THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD AND ELIZA HARRIS

The Underground Railroad was a secret network of homes, churches, and farms throughout the North and South that provided safety and shelter to the thousands of runaway slaves seeking freedom. Slavery was legal in the United States from 1619 until 1865 when the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolished it. In the early 1800s abolitionists—people who wanted to eliminate slavery—began a network of “stations,” safe locations for runaway slaves. Ohio, Virginia’s home state, had more than two hundred safe houses.

Just as Virginia’s great-grandmother escaped slavery with her young son, so too did a woman named Eliza Harris. Eliza lived in Kentucky, just south of the Ohio River. Eliza was left with just one child after her other two children died very young. When she learned that her slave owner was going to sell her and her baby to two different owners, Eliza decided to try to escape. Eliza took her baby in the middle of a winter’s night and walked to the Ohio River. Some winters the river froze solid. However, as Eliza discovered in the early morning hours, the Ohio was only partially frozen. Ice chunks floated by. With slave hunters hot on her trail, Eliza jumped from one ice floe to another to get to the other side. Sometimes she had to toss her baby on to the next floating ice chunk and then jump into the freezing cold waters and pull herself up onto the ice with her child. Eliza escaped the slave hunters and eventually made her way through the Underground Railroad to freedom in Canada.
MAP OF THE OHIO UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Courtesy of the Ohio History Connection, SA1039AV_B1502_044
Virginia set aside her sadness over the loss of her journal and turned to writing her first novel. She stretched out on the slanted, hot tin roof of the hog barn and wrote. She filled page after page with passionate prose under the scorching summer sun.23

As she grew older, Virginia was determined to write for a living. “I never thought seriously of any other career.”24

That same little girl from Yellow Springs, the one who sat at her grandfather’s knee and heard the story of his escape, who listened to her mother’s tales and learned about her father’s heroes, did become a writer. Just like the firefly that shares its light with the world, Virginia released her stories.

Boy, did she ever.

Virginia became the most honored author of children’s literature.

Her forty-one award-winning books drew upon her family’s accounts of events, both true, and some not so true.

She graced us with stories of characters who lived in her native Ohio, and those who lived in her ancestors’ land of Africa. Virginia wrote of the horrors of slavery and the joys of family. She created worlds of fantasy and reflected both urban and rural landscapes in her books. Her stories were as diverse and as special as she was.

“I write books because I love chasing after a good story and seeing fantastic characters rising out of the mist of my imaginings. I can’t explain how it is I keep having new ideas. But one book inevitably follows another. It is my way of exploring the known, the remembered, and the imagined, the literary triad of which all stories are made.”25

But it wasn’t easy becoming the award-winning author so many have come to love. How did she go from the carefree little girl listening to her family’s stories to the amazing writer she was? What obstacles did she face along the way?

As grandfather Levi Perry would say, just sit down and let me tell you a story.

Virginia’s story.
The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center opened in Cincinnati in 2004. Visitors can learn the stories about freedom’s heroes, from the time of the Underground Railroad to the modern day. A “slave pen,” a 21-foot by 30-foot, two-story building that had originally served as a holding pen for slaves until they were sold at auction, is found on the second floor of the museum.