

Eli's Ghost

Betsy Hearne



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illustrated by Ronald Himler

Margaret K. McElderry Books

NEW YORK

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dead in a hugh swamp where he is sustained by the ghosts
of friends from earlier days and where a brush with
death causes his own ghost to leave his body and get
into all the mischief Eli never has.

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Home

South Star

(MARGARET K. McELDERRY BOOKS)

Eli's Ghost

*For Michael,
friendly presence and
prince of storytellers*

Eli's Ghost

1

In the old days, every little southern town was a world of its own, hard to get into and harder to get out of. There were no telephones, flush toilets, or electric lights, but there were plenty of ghosts. Some were friendly and some weren't. In Eli Wilson's case, they were a mixed blessing. He'd heard about ghosts all his life, yet he wouldn't ever have seen any if he hadn't decided to leave home.

The night he ran away it was pitch dark. Eli tried to square his shoulders, but it wasn't easy. They were round to begin with. His chin was strong, though, for a plump face, and his eyes clear of tears. For a few minutes he walked backward away from the high white house on the hill, seeing it as if for the first time, and maybe the last. Then he turned around toward the swamp. Folks said the swamp was so big it could swallow you alive, the swamp

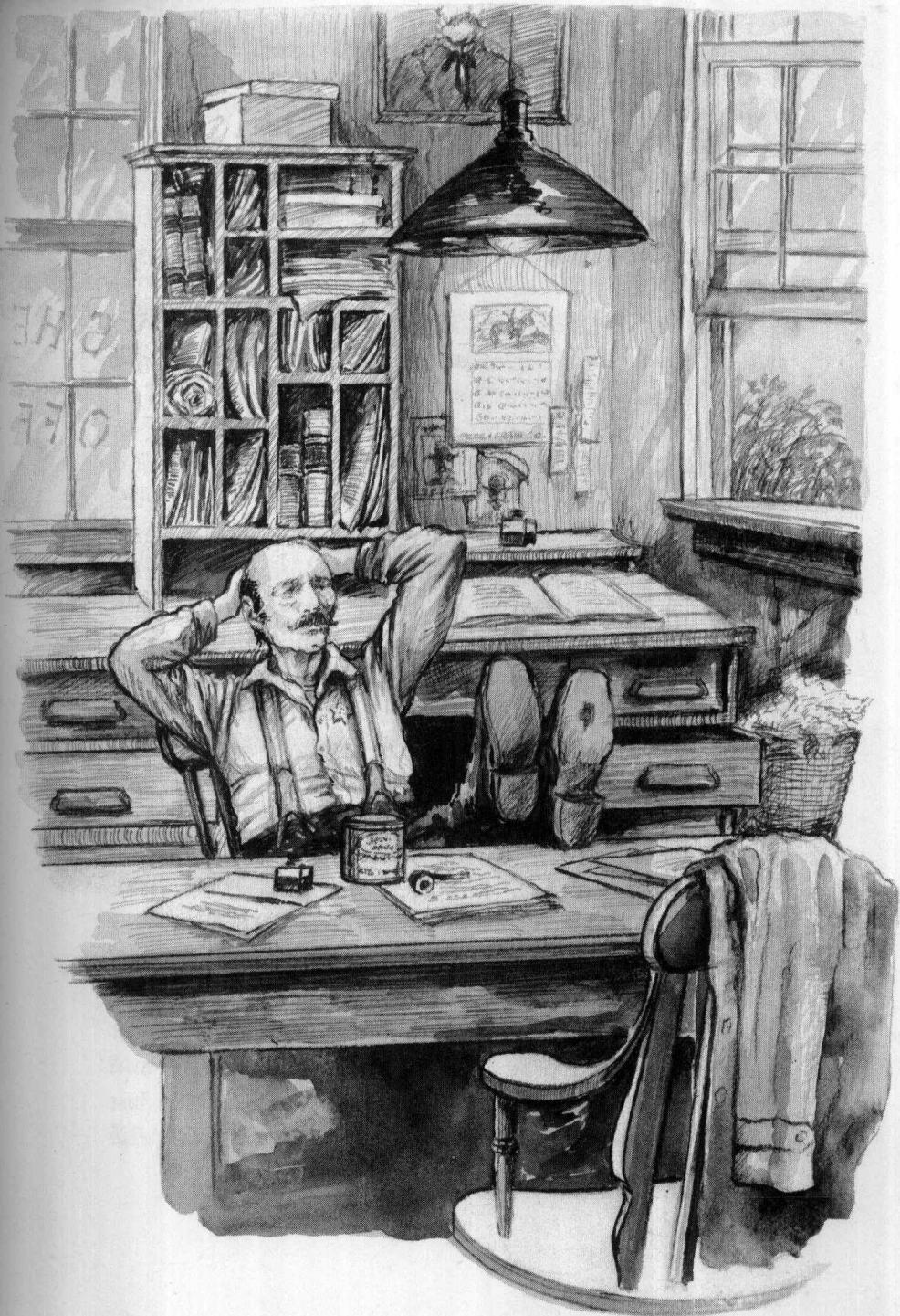
was a ghost yard. Still Eli stepped into its first dark reaches. He knew what was behind. He might as well go ahead.

Two shapes followed him to the edge of the swamp. One glowed like a round black pearl. The other appeared as some sharp shadow cast at noon, except the sun had set. Unnoticed from house or hill, they watched Eli as they had watched him through all the years since they had died. Without rightly knowing it, Eli sensed their presence and shivered.

"Lord have mercy," sighed one to the other. "Eli's leaving home."

Sheriff Stone leaned back in his swivel chair and stretched out his short legs to rest on the desk. A fly circled above him, fresh from the mule and wagon tied outside. Sheriff Stone linked his fingers on top of his head right over the bald spot. This way, it appeared he had a lot of hair, and it was his favorite position for thinking.

He was thinking about fishing. Or had been. Now he had to think about Eli Wilson. If people would just stay put and not get into trouble, a sheriff's job would be a lot easier. This was a small town. A body would think people could just keep themselves in one spot. No need for any trouble. Now this boy Eli, gone all night. Never been in any trouble before. A-perfect, according to everybody. Probably couldn't be anything else with old man Wilson breathing down his neck. Mean man, Wilson, mighty mean. Stingy, with just a little twist to the mouth that told a person more than enough to stay away. But rich, with that high white house on the hill. Spooky house, said



to be haunted. Darn fool stories, but most everybody stayed away, whether from ghosts or Henry Wilson was hard to say.

The fly began to buzz louder round Sheriff Stone's head. He batted at it, losing a little of the balance he had practiced through so many years of propping his feet up on the desk.

Maybe the boy was kidnapped. But who? Who around town would dare and who out of town would know? Or maybe he was lost. But he wasn't the kind of boy who wandered around where he wasn't supposed to, or did anything he wasn't supposed to: just school and home again. There were rumors he played with Tater Sims and Lily Tilman, but nobody ever saw them run around together. Just one of those town gossips trying to get even with old Henry Wilson's overcharging everything in his store. No use trying to round up Tater or Lily. Know-nothings, both of them—never even showed up in school. Eli Wilson wouldn't run with a pack of field hands, anyway, not if his pa had anything to say about it.

There was the teacher, Eileen Smith. Maybe she would know something. If she didn't know, she'd sure have an opinion on it. Or maybe one of Eli's school buddies would have some idea of what he'd been up to lately. Better take old man Wilson along over to the school. Just the sight of him would scare a kid's tongue loose.

The thing was, Eli was so dang good. If it was one of those King boys, or the Jacksons, that would be a different matter. They could be out there setting up a still and drinking bad whiskey. But Eli Wilson would be the last person in the world to get in trouble, or put anybody else

to any trouble. The boy was naturally, honestly, reliably, truly good. Where he got it from, now that was a puzzle. Certainly not from his pa. And his ma was long gone. Used to be a couple of servants around, was all, of no account, sat around swapping stories day and night. Probably started that whole story about ghosts. But those servants were long dead. Buried somewhere back of the hill, if he recalled right. Henry Wilson would never pay for a proper gravestone.

Eli did have a dog, funny old dog, followed after him like a shadow every time he stepped out the door. But now that's interesting, did the dog disappear with him? If not, something must have happened to the boy, must have fallen in the river or something. Could have slipped off one of those overhangs down by the bridge. Better hunt the river first, then cover the swamp. Boy was forbidden to set foot in the swamp, according to his pa, but he did play down by the river.

That was a sad thought, the river, because disappearing in the river would be the end. Disappearing in the swamp left a little hope, but the boy would never have crossed his pa to go in there. Old man Wilson sure hated that swamp worse than poison. Got all greeny-white in the face even saying how no son of his ever set foot in it.

Living with old man Wilson, come to think of it, might not be much better than disappearing in the river. But the boy was too young to think of that yet. Seemed the kind of child that just lived his life along, minding his own business, what business there was to mind.

Maybe he was hiding out somewhere, though. Maybe the old man pushed the limit and came down on him too

hard. In that case he'd come home as soon as he got hungry. Plump, mighty plump little boy. Pale face, near-white hair—just about glinted in the sun—and plump. Big eyes, though, always looked hungry. Just lonesome, like as not. Lonesome eyes. Gray eyes. Always kicking a stone down the road every time a body saw him. Probably just passing along a kick from the old man. Some children turned mean from a bad parent, and some just hurt inside.

Now all this was doing nothing in the way of a search. Better get on with it. Pity, too, with a perfect day for fishing. But duty first. Citizens before catfish. The thing would be to round up old man Wilson, if he'd leave his store long enough to look for his son, go over and talk to the teacher, then round up a few men and search the river. See if there's any talk of strangers been seen poking around. Check all the old sawdust piles around the mill to see if he got buried in a cave-in. Not likely, but known to happen. Happened to the Howard girl a few years back. Spread the word around the county. Cover the swamp. Too bad there weren't some good dogs around. Now that Tracker was dead, there were just those no-account, mangy hunting dogs hanging around Kings and Jacksons. No use setting them on a trail. They'd just as soon tree a cat. Better use the horse and cover ground and see what turns up.

Sheriff Stone played a waiting game with the fly, easing his hand into position for the final swat. Suddenly, he leaned sideways and lunged, felt the chair tip just a hair too far on its right rear leg, and met the ground with a whack. He lay there a moment, his thoughts circling. It was an undignified position, but getting out of it seemed fairly tricky.

If the boy were to turn up alive, there sure wouldn't be much skin left on his back when old man Wilson got finished with him. But on the other hand, a body's got to be strict with these kids. They get away with murder these days. Duty first, they might as well learn right off from the start. Eli Wilson better get his tail back here fast if he's alive, and if he's not . . . well, where would he be?

Sheriff Stone waved his legs awkwardly in the air as the fly zipped out the window.

2

Eileen Smith called her class to order the next day and cast her sharp eyes around for anything amiss. The big thing missing, of course, was Eli, but there was nothing they could do about that. The sheriff had men spread all over the county, and Eli's father was not one to let ground go uncovered when it came to one of his own good name.

Also missing was a tree snake which Lily Tilman had brought in for science on one of her rare days at school. Eileen Smith waved her cardboard fan at the thought of a snake crawling around her classroom.

The class was uneasy. Whenever something like Eli's disappearance happened in a small town, thought Eileen Smith, or in a small class, it took all eyes off work. It pre-occupied the minds of everyone because there was so little else to occupy them. Even she felt discombobulated.

There was something very odd about her most reg-

ular, most considerate student being absent and unaccounted for. It raised thoughts that she did not want to entertain. What if something had happened to the boy? This was certainly out of the ordinary. Spitballs might fly and pigtails be pulled as a regular procedure of the universe, but Eli was never absent, as far as she could remember, and certainly not missing. That was a thing that did not sit well with Eileen Smith. And evidently not with her class. They were sitting more quietly than usual as if waiting her direction, all eyes turned away from Eli's seat and yet drawn toward it furtively, as if expecting to see him suddenly appear.

They were so quiet that Lily Tilman's tree snake began to unwind from his hiding place behind the empty back desk and think about mouse hunting.

The whole class knew about Eli, of course. The word traveled fast. Newspapers were unnecessary in Wilsonville, always too late. Eli Wilson was missing from his home and in fact had not been seen since dinnertime two days before. The river had been dragged, and the old sawdust piles, which occasionally caved in and buried children jumping or sliding down them, had been searched. Miss Smith was really at a loss for words. Neither she nor the rest of the class seemed able to concentrate, yet there was really nothing else to do. At last she stopped the assignment out of a sense of discomfort—itself an unusual thing—and said simply, "Perhaps there is some way we can help Eli. Does anyone remember anything he said recently, or did, that was unusual? Perhaps someone has overlooked an important item of information, someone here in this class."

There was silence. Eli, in fact, talked to everyone