

Elmo

By Matt Shea

This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

THESE WRITINGS ARE DEDICATED to Kathleen Marie Shea.

“Kathy” is my big sister and definitely lives up to the billing. She is the 'queen bee' that watches over her five younger siblings while she provides a home for our parents and nurses them. She loves me with an unconditional love that pushes me to develop in all my endeavors. My sister watches me develop as a writer and offers encouragement. This puts wind in my sails as I do my best to illustrate how I feel this world can and should be.

Kathy applies such humanity to the *real world* which in turn inspired me to write this novel. My story is about a small town pulling together to survive, with youth joining the cause. Kathy Shea has been a nurse for over forty years and dedicates her free time to help others. Countries as far away as Hades, Vietnam, Honduras and Rwanda have been graced with her medical expertise and classic bed-side manner. Her wonderful husband, Johann Wassermann even travels with her when time allows.

In honor of how my sister, Kathy devotes her life to go as far and wide as possible to help others:

I hereby dedicate “Elmo” to Kathleen Marie Shea.

Matt Shea

Kathy, I am grateful to know you and to especially have you as that big sister that watches over me. I love you with all my heart and hope that this book makes *you* feel good inside.

Tell Johann I say, "Hello!"

Love,
Mathew.

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Chapter 1

BEN SKATES LOOKED DOWN at the dinner table. The married man with two children did his very best to exemplify all was secure. Little did they know that their father had a secret life. *He* was the new panhandler that loitered at the corner of First and Elm Street; the one the teenagers called *Elmo*.

Elmo only came out at night and his identity was unknown. He became whoever was on shift to wear the hobo outfit and *beg* for any handout. The tattered costume was convincing from the oily black trench coat to the patched baggy pants with dull brown shoes. A large brimmed hat from the 1940s tilted forward over the ski mask that hid his shame. Shiny dark leather gloves further insulated the disguised panhandler from the winter chill.

The dads from Miner were all in on it. The ones that were fortunate enough to have work donated what they could to a community pot and still took shifts wearing the outfit. In their eyes, *all* were working hard to allow their families to survive.

Ben took his soft brown eyes off the meal and looked at his family. The heavy set man with graying hair and a bushy beard gave a warm smile. His high school sweetheart, Gloria, sat facing him. Her flowing brown hair and matching eyes still held the

former Homecoming Queen's beauty. She was a supportive wife and was aware of the cutbacks on Ben's job. Gloria rose to the occasion by running a tight ship at home and saving spare change. What she didn't know was that months ago things got worse, forcing her husband to take odd jobs and panhandle at night.

To Ben's right was his 15-year-old daughter, Susan. She was definitely her mother's daughter possessing her beauty and charm. The teen's brown hair and matching eyes accented a lean pretty face with distinction. Susan was already a popular cheerleader and on the honor roll. Many believed she was destined to become a model.

To Ben's left was his son, Sam. The boy was months away from graduation with an enviable future. He was an exceptional pitcher and was a candidate for a scholarship to play college ball—a dream he'd held onto since childhood. However, there was more to the 17-year-old than baseball. He was also an honor student and blessed with the family genes. Like his father, Sam stood tall at six feet three inches. An athletic body graced the family's brown hair and eyes. He was sought after by every girl in the valley.

It was now time to say grace. Ben's mighty hands extended towards his children and they followed suit. A tight circle was formed with the four bowing down.

The head of household spoke. "Dear Lord, we are grateful for this meal and for this family. We are aware that you provide for us even through the darkest times. As you know, many are struggling to survive. Please continue to watch over everyone and guide us. Bless this meal and thank you."

"Amen," responded the table. The family released hands and sat up looking at one another with gratitude.

There was a brief moment of silence then Sam electrified the room. "Let's dig in!" he exclaimed.

The meatloaf with zesty barbeque sauce was a family favorite. It was accompanied with mashed potatoes smothered in brown gravy, green beans, buttered rolls, and a tossed salad to balance out the meal. As always, a pitcher of milk added the final touch. A free-for-all immediately took place at the festive dining table and once plates were filled, Gloria slowed down the tempo by addressing the children.

“How was school today?” asked the loving mother. Susan began to give a full account on what her day consisted of.

Sam eventually followed. He gave a brief update on how his classes were going and then he talked about his progress in baseball. The father had a gleam in his eye as he was listening because the Skates’ name was locally famous for baseball. Ben himself set high school records years ago that broke his father’s old marks. Sam easily broke his stats and was on track to surpass the former semi-pro star’s career. Ben was proud.

Ben savored the moment as he sat back and watched his family. It was another winter evening at home with everyone present. More important, they were warm, happy, and being fed—a blessing that was being threatened.

Dinner continued with extra helpings passed around and more stories being told.

Soon the table was cleared and Gloria’s homemade berry pie was served with vanilla ice cream off to the side.

“Thanks, mom!” cried out the brother and sister.

“Gloria, thank you for what you do for us,” said the husband. “Nobody knows their way around a kitchen like you do.”

Eventually dinner was over. It was six o’clock and Gloria went into the family room to watch her favorite television show. Sam and Susan did their after dinner chores: clearing the table and

washing the dishes. When the last utensil was put away, Sam called out from the kitchen. “Dad, I am finished with my homework. Can I go out with my friends for a while?”

“I don’t see why not,” answered Ben. “Just remember that you have school tomorrow.”

“Okay, dad,” said the son. “Thanks!”

Susan called out next. “Mom, I am almost done with my homework. Can I have a friend over later?”

“Sure you can,” said Gloria.

“Thanks, mom!” cried out the daughter.

The household was now spread out, with each member having separate plans.

Ben sat alone at the dining room table. This gave him more time to reflect on his problems and count his blessings. He was still, however, grateful for many things: they were all healthy, still had a home, and weren’t going hungry—yet.

And thank God for Troy, Ben quietly thought to himself. He still refuses to avoid me when I approach him.”

Troy Meeker was a friend of Ben’s who served twenty five years in the Army and promptly retired. The lean man with short, curly red hair stood just over six feet tall. His black framed glasses personified an intellect from the 1950s and his sincere blue eyes displayed a compassion that showed he was available to everyone. The good man never married. Instead, he lived with his aging mother and looked after her. This dedication allowed him to understand the struggles that other families were going through. Troy eventually became a deacon in their church so as to serve God and the community in anyway fit.

Ben patted the pen pocket of his red flannel shirt that held two folded twenty dollar bills. His thought continued. *He must have lost track on how much I have borrowed from him; bless his soul...*

The tranquil moment was interrupted by a light tapping on the front door. Looking at the clock he realized that the recognizable sound could only be one person: Sharon Wilson. She was the sweet old lady that always baked cookies for the entire neighborhood. The widow that lived two doors down from him and always knew where to go when she needed help without losing her dignity. Sharon traditionally asked for five dollars; Ben always gave twenty.

The father got up from the table and walked to the living room. Approaching the entryway, he paused to gather his composure. With game face on, he opened the door. There before him stood Mrs. Wilson.

The petite woman barely stood over five feet tall with a forward lean to her stance. She wore a pink knitted ski hat that only allowed her Nordic-weathered face to be exposed. Matching pink gloves held a small black purse with a vintage gray wool coat keeping the old woman warm. Bright blue eyes peered through the intense cold as she looked up to her hero with hope. It was apparent that she was looking for a ‘port in the storm.’

Ben looked at the woman he took grocery shopping once a week and could sense fear. The 72-year-old had no one and heavily relied on the man with broad shoulders.

The gentle giant immediately gave his patented ear to ear smile. “Good evening, Mrs. Wilson!” exclaimed Ben. “It’s so good to see you. Would you please come in and get warm with us?”

The old woman was delighted with the reception. “Oh, I would love that,” she said with a tone of relief. Her mood quickly changed as she leaned closer to him. “Ben,” she cautiously spoke

in a soft tone. “I am almost out of cat food and I will get my social security check the first of next month.” Nervously she continued, “Five dollars would...”

Ben interrupted. “Mrs. Wilson, after all that you have done for us,” he said with conviction. “The cookies you bake for us and the wonderful visits we get mean everything to us. Please accept this and do not worry about paying it back.” The struggling father reached into his pen pocket and pulled out a folded twenty dollar bill. He handed it to her as she placed both hands over his. With direct eye contact, she thanked him for being so kind. She opened her tiny black purse and put the money inside.

“Now please come in and visit for a while,” said Ben as he opened the door further. Happily, Sharon Wilson entered the home that always welcomed her.

“Let me help you get that coat of yours off,” offered Ben. “Well hang it on the coat rack and let it get nice and warm.”

Sharon took off her hat and gloves and placed them in her purse. Next she started to unbutton her coat as Ben stood behind to assist. In one motion he gracefully pulled off the opened garment and hung it on the rack.

By this time the rest of the family entered the living room to greet their guest.

“Hello, Mrs. Wilson,” said Gloria. “What a wonderful surprise this is! Would you like to have some tea with us?”

The face of the lonely woman on a fixed income lit up. *This* was the only family she had. “Why, I’d love that!” she exclaimed.

“Hello, Mrs. Wilson,” greeted a cheerful Sam.

“Hi, Mrs. Wilson,” said Susan.

“Well hello everybody!” replied Sharon.

Ben walked towards the coffee table in the living room and pointed at a rocking chair closest to the fireplace. “Why don’t you sit here and I’ll get a fire going,” suggested Ben.

“I’ll make a pot of tea,” said Gloria.

The old woman did find her port in the storm. She sat down in the rocker she always sat in and placed her purse on her lap. Tonight, Sharon Wilson would not be lonely; she would have an evening in front of a fireplace with loved ones. “I’ll get some wood,” said Ben.

When he walked towards the back door, he was confronted by Sam. “Dad,” he began, “can I ask you something?”

Ben was curious and replied, “Sure, son.”

The teenager looked seemingly disgusted at his father and asked, “Why do you always give Mrs. Wilson money when you know that’s what she comes for? Mom told us that your work has slowed down and that we have to be careful.”

That comment struck a nerve with Ben. Without hesitation he lost all facial expression and looked straight at his son. In a stern voice he said, “Sometimes we all need a little help.” The father stormed outside in a fury to get the firewood. Sam’s ride was waiting for him out in front. He left digesting his father’s response.

Soon the living room was rich with the crackling of a fire and the aroma of spiced tea. Sharon craved the attention she was getting from Ben and Gloria. This compelled the old woman to tell stories about her childhood one after another, after another...

Several cups of tea and a few logs later Ben noticed the time. It was getting close to nine o’clock and almost time for *his shift*. He

politely drew attention to the living room clock and expressed that he had an appointment at the fellowship hall that night.

“I am afraid that I have to leave,” apologized Ben.

Looking towards the wall that held the brass time piece, Sharon became excited. “Oh!” she exclaimed. “I need to get home and feed my Nightingale. She must be starving by now.”

Ben capitalized on the moment by saying, “I’ll walk you home on the way to the hall. Besides, it’s icy outside and I don’t want you to take a chance on falling.”

Sharon gave her undivided attention to Ben while nodding her head.

The old woman finished her tea and placed it on the matching small plate that lay on the stand next to her. Placing the empty cup on the plate, she turned to Ben and Gloria. “Thank you for such a pleasant evening,” she said in an appreciative tone.

Holding her purse, the independent senior was still able to get up from the chair and follow Ben to the front door. The host already had her coat open for her and all she had to do was turn around and extend her arms. Like a duo in ballet, the coat systematically draped over her body in one motion.

Sharon opened her purse to put her matching pink gloves and hat back on. By the time she was finished, Ben was already dressed for the walk. He wore a stylish brown leather western jacket and an ‘Indiana Jones’ hat.

With arm in arm, the would-be mother and son team left the warm home to brave the frosty evening. The strong man cautiously took small steps to stabilize his cargo. He stared down at the old woman’s feet and safely guided her. The senior who lived alone possessed a sense of security; she knew that she was protected and felt that she belonged.

“Watch your step,” cautioned Ben.

“I promise I will,” vowed Sharon Wilson.

The length of the two properties seemed to take an eternity to travel. Finally, they stood at her front door. “I want to thank you so much for everything,” remarked the widow.

“The pleasure’s mine,” said Ben. “Just promise me that you will always let me know if you need anything, and that includes visiting us at any time.” Ben meant what he said and knew that Sharon understood it.

“I promise to let you know if I ever need anything,” she said in relief. Sharon reached into her purse and pulled out her keys. It took a minute for the trembling gloved hand to find the keyhole. She found her mark, slid the key in, and turned it, opening the door to find her 10-year-old calico cat patiently waiting for her.

“Meow, meow,” greeted the cat.

“Nightingale!” cried out Sharon. “You must be hungry; let mommy feed you now.” The old lady entered her home.

Ben was happy to see that she had a loved one waiting for her. “You two have a good evening,” he said with all his charm.

“Oh, we will,” answered Sharon. “Thank you for the wonderful evening. You be careful out there,” she advised.

“Don’t worry about me,” laughed Ben. “Good night, Mrs. Wilson.”

“Good night, Ben,” she said as she closed the door and locked it.

Ben felt *right*. His humble neighbor was a vulnerable old lady that he *knew* was assigned to him. He thanked God for being the one chosen to live close to her.

Matt Shea

It was now time to continue his evening. The Good Samaritan walked down the path that led to the ice-packed sidewalk. Taking a sharp left, he continued his trek to the fellowship hall. Looking at his watch he saw that he had the needed fifteen minutes to arrive on time and relieve the shivering comrade waiting for him.

It would soon be Ben Skates disguised as a hobo holding the sign that begged for mercy. While his family would be sleeping at home, *dad* would be slowly freezing on a street corner.

A necessary evil needed to survive...