

Old Paul Elly  
By Libby Belle

**Not many people would smile** at old man Paul Elly. Sitting near the curb slumped over in a plastic lawn chair wearing his dark blue house robe and worn-out army boots he could have easily been mistaken for a rusty yard ornament. I don't know why it is that one day I felt compelled to greet the broken-down, gray-haired geezer that no one acknowledged. I tend to do things like that, off the cuff; something deep within drives me that way.

Everyone in our small suburban cul-de-sac knew Paul Elly as the crazy old grandfather visiting the Connors', whose household consisted of two ill-mannered teenagers, parents that both worked and yelled a lot, and an ugly dog that barked incessantly until what started out loud and bold at the break of dawn, ended in a wheeze by dusk. The other families steered their children away from the paint-chipped house on the corner; quickly picking up their pace every time they walked past the unkempt yard.

I was a tall and gangly eleven-year-old living next door to the Connors with my younger sister and older brother, a two years' difference either way. Our mother was the kindest woman you'd ever meet. She refused to talk badly about anyone, and I swear I never heard one cuss word come out of that beautiful mouth. Never. It was my capricious and witty Irish father with the hypersensitive skin that cornered the market on profanity.

The first time I saw Paul Elly was on a late Saturday afternoon, seconds before dark, returning home in our 1961 Plymouth sedan after spending the day at the YMCA. There he was, buck-naked showering under the garden hose in the front yard of the Connors' home. My

mother turned off the car lights and entered the driveway slowly, so as not to disturb him.

“Mom, he doesn’t have any clothes on!” my little sister shrilled, while I pressed my body against the back seat, holding my breath, squinting, trying not to look, as my brother leaned out the window, his eyes practically popping out of his square head.

“Quiet now, kids. Give the man his privacy, and when you get out of the car, don’t say a word and go directly into the house.” Our mother’s soft and velvety voice made us want to follow her to the moon.

Somehow, I knew my mother was right, and even at my young age I didn’t quite understand eccentricity, but I learned to respect it, mostly because my own family was pretty quirky. My silly dad wrote funny jingles while sitting on the toilet – he said the bathroom was an inspirational place to create. And my mother tried, in vain, to teach her clumsy daughters how to tap dance in the garage, while my brother raised pigeons, a raccoon, a rooster, and for only a week, a pony that had wandered into our small backyard. My chubby sister loved to sing like Ethel Merman and her sturdy voice would resonate throughout the entire house. Me, well, I sat in trees like a monkey for hours on end contemplating my small world and sometimes allowing my thoughts to venture beyond the rooftops. We were anything but ordinary.

Occasionally, unusual and interesting family members from all over would come to visit. Like the time my little Aunt Alma, who was a mere four-feet-six-inches, (my mother said her growth and intellect was stunted from lack of oxygen when she was born) came from Kansas

with her seven-foot-tall boyfriend who would hold her on his lap while they sipped beer when visiting with my parents. They looked like some kind of ventriloquist act. I can't explain that unsettling feeling I had seeing the giant man frequently lean down and kiss my tiny aunt.

When my grandmother from Oklahoma visited, she brought her sister – a disturbingly obese woman in thick pancake make-up and bright red rouge, who huffed and puffed just to get across the room. She would insist that one of us rub her fat, aching feet with a dreadful whine that would send us kids and the dog flying out the screen door not wanting to return until we were called in for dinner, or she drove north, whichever came first.

My grandmother was just the opposite, kind and lovely; she wore furs and expensive jewelry and a hat with a tiny feather. She looked odd sitting on our old, brown, vinyl couch in her stockings and leather heels. When I hugged her she smelled like a gardenia doused in a sweet liqueur that made me a little nauseated. I asked my mother about the powerful scent, and she said that elderly people liked to wash their clothes in some kind of sweet perfume concoction – they did it to hide the old people odor. I didn't understand what my mother meant until later.

Angelina, my mother's cousin, resembled and longed to be Carmen Miranda, dubbed the Brazilian Bombshell, a famous singer that wore fruit on her head in the 1940's. Angelina came to visit our simple home one summer toting a cornucopia of fruit-laden hats in the trunk of her car. That night my mother shoved all the furniture against the wall and cleared a path for her to give us a special performance. There she stood in our tiny living room with

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my family sitting erect, hands in our laps watching this vulgar woman moving and swaying her body, snapping her fingers and trying not to trip over our German Shepherd while holding the fruit bowl on her head in a comical attempt to entertain us. My father nearly fell off his chair laughing, and my sister and I sang “Chica Chica Boom” for the next two weeks until my mother begged us to stop.

So, seeing Paul Elly showering in the yard, just feet from my bedroom window, didn’t make me feel all that uneasy. I think he did everything he could to stay outdoors; avoiding the terrible occupants living inside. That evening while tucked in my bed, I listened to him whistle lullabies as he whittled away at a stick with a knife. The delicate tunes lulled me to sleep and I dreamed that I could whistle just like him.

On Sundays we always had waffles and stacks of bacon and sausage and the smell of all of those things mixed with coffee brewing seemed to make the whole family happy. No one spoke at the breakfast table about the strange incident – a naked man showering in his front yard was not nearly as important as who would get the next waffle.

After everyone ate and I helped clean up the kitchen, I went outside to see what the day held, while my stuffed and content siblings lounged in front of the TV watching the Dallas Cowboys game with our father. He was the ruler of the television set, and we all knew better than to ask him to change the channel. Our time would come later that evening when Disney came on, and mom would

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make a special dessert just for that occasion. We'd sprawl out on the floor holding a big bowl of ice cream with a brownie on the bottom, sometimes with a banana and a cherry on top, and we'd never take our eyes off of the little black and white screen. It was a magical hour that we'd carry throughout the rest of our lives.

Outside it was a warm, but windy day, and with a full belly and the taste of maple syrup still on my lips, I felt like the world was all mine. I sat down on the cracked pavement and watched ants struggling to carry things bigger than their bodies across the wide driveway. Their determination reminded me of my mother and how hard she worked each day to get the house clean, the ironing done, and dinner ready before my dad arrived from a hard day welding ornamental iron. She adored him and did everything to make him comfortable. It was the same for her children, but we knew that dad always came first.

The neighborhood was quiet. I guessed they were all mostly at church; not crowded around the television like my family. I thought I had the cul-de-sac all to myself until I heard whistling to my left. Under the pretty Spanish Oak – the only nice feature of the Connors' place – sat Paul Elly. He was looking down at something in his hand and whistling up a storm. I didn't know the song, but it was charming, and it circled around my head and lured me toward the old man.

"That's a pretty tune you're whistling," I said, standing just near enough to make sure he had on all his clothes.

Paul Elly tiredly raised his head, almost as if it was too heavy to lift, while fumbling for his shirt pocket where he

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stuffed the photo that he had held in his hand before he slowly smiled at me. The teeth in his mouth seemed very tiny for his face, but his smile was nice just the same. He had the bluest eyes, nearly as blue as my little sister's, only his were small and half hidden behind flaps of drooping eyelids that made him look sad. He twitched his mouth back and forth, as if he were winding it up to talk, then he said, "Like my whistling, do you?"

"I do. It's really nice. I try to whistle like that. Sometimes I sit up in that big tree over there and practice." I pointed to the grand oak whose limbs stretched across our backyard almost touching the roof.

Paul Elly turned to look behind him and said, "Oh yes, that's a great place to practice, right up there with the birds." Then he asked, "Can you whistle me a tune?"

I bit my bottom lip and felt myself smile, an awkward smile as if he'd just asked me to perform in front of my entire fifth grade class. "I, uh, well, I've been practicing, but I can't whistle like you. But, I sure do want to."

"Let me hear what you got." Paul Elly slowly lifted his gnarly hand and wiggled his index finger, signaling me to start.

I pursed my lips and out came a tiny whistle that sounded so bad I had to muffle a laugh. I tried again, and a little more sound came out. This time I couldn't hold back the laughter, imagining my lips sticking out like a chimpanzee, my eyes bulging. It wasn't a pretty picture.

"Hmmm," he moaned, studying my face and waiting for me to compose myself. "Put your tongue behind your bottom teeth. Don't press hard, just let it stay there and try again."

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I did as he told and after a few blows, I made a better sound.

“Now what’s one of your favorite songs?” He bent over to pull up his sock that had inched its way down into his old boot.

“Oh, let’s see. I like Raindrops on Roses and Whiskers on Kittens...On Top of Old Smokey all covered with cheese...and my favorite that my mom sings to us is Que Sera, Sera, you know, the one that Doris Day sings.”

The last song made the old man perk up and while he shifted in his chair, he directed me to sit down. I sat not far from his feet, folding my legs underneath me in an Indian style, the thick Augustine grass tickling my ankles.

“Que Sera, Sera is a good start, because the notes aren’t too high for you,” he began. “You want to start with a comfortable song first.”

I’m not sure how long I sat there transfixed, listening to Paul Elly teach me to whistle. His words were simple, but made so much sense. He said that when he was a boy he had learned to whistle from a black man that sang the blues. The stories he told about his childhood in Louisiana made me laugh. Then he asked me if I had homework and told me I should go home and do it now so that I had time later to climb the big oak before dark and practice whistling. I did what he said, and I stayed up in that tree until my lips were chapped from licking them too much.

It had been the perfect weekend, and I felt good whistling on the way to school the next day. My little sister,

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watching me in awe as I held her hand to cross the busy street, eagerly waited until I was finished to ask me how I did it. When I told her that it was Paul Elly who had taught me, she was horrified.

“Don’t be silly,” I scoffed. “He’s a nice man.”

I couldn’t wait until school let out so that I could show Paul Elly what I had learned. When we got to our house, I was pleased to see him sitting in his lawn chair in the same place by the tree. My little sister ran past him, nervously glancing over her shoulder, anxious to get inside to the safety of our mother’s arms, not really knowing why. I stopped at the curb and waited for Paul Elly to lift his head. When he didn’t, I slowly approached him and cleared my throat to wake him.

“Sir, sir, it’s me. Are you awake?” I said softly, not wanting to startle him.

He slowly lifted his head, just as he did the day before and gave me the same smile, only a little wider.

“Here for your second lesson?” he asked.

“Yes, thanks. I did real good up in the tree yesterday. My mom put lots of Vaseline on my lips before I went to bed. I think I licked them a little more than I should have.”

“Can’t do that. You have to rest in between, or it’ll become work instead of fun.”

He whistled an Irish tune for me that sounded like the one my father sang while puttering around in the garage. I sat down in the same spot and waited patiently for his next instruction. When we finished, we whistled a tune together just before my brother called me in.

That evening while doing my homework on my bed, I heard whistling outside my window. I got on my knees

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and peered out, and beyond the bushes I could see just a little of old Paul Elly's lily-white bottom while he showered under the garden hose. He seemed really happy, and I thought about how great I felt playing under the water sprinkler during the summer and how good it felt to whistle, and it occurred to me that it wasn't weird at all that old Paul Elly was doing something he liked, only with less clothes on. I smiled and went back to my homework, knowing that it was disrespectful to spy, even though my sister and I did that once when my brother had a really cute friend over that we just couldn't help staring at. He was the closest thing to Ricky Nelson we'd ever seen, except for the limp, and for years after, my little sister told everyone with certainty that the famous singer had visited our home. There were times I actually believed her.

I really like Tuesdays. I can't explain why. Just the name alone makes me smile. It's like having two days in one. So, when I got home from school, I was already happy before I walked over to visit Paul Elly. He sure does sleep a lot, I thought, tiptoeing up to him so as not to scare him.

"Mr. Paul Elly," I said softly. "Mr. Elly," I said again. Then I tried, "Paul Elly, sir." He didn't move, so I cleared my throat and plunked my books loudly onto the ground. He still didn't move.

I don't know why I didn't walk away and just let the man sleep. Somehow, I knew he enjoyed my company, so I didn't think it would bother him for me to wake him up. I tapped his shoulder, and he didn't move at all. I tapped it again and then before I did it a third time, I noticed in

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his hand a black and white picture of a pretty woman standing next to a younger Paul Elly.

I stood back and studied him, so peaceful, the sunlight shining on his hands, shadows of leaves moving slowly across the faces in the photo. A fly landed on his ear and then walked around to his nose. Paul Elly didn't flinch or even swat at it. When the fly landed on his mouth, I had to do something to stop that filthy insect from carrying germs to my friend, as my mother often told me they do. So, I brushed it off his mouth, but my fingers hit his lips, and Paul Elly's head fell forward, and in slow motion his entire body crumbled to the ground. There he lay in a heap with only the sound of the thud left hanging in the air, as the wind carried the picture off across the yard.

I ran to pick it up and returned hoping to see the old man sitting up laughing at his silly fall. "Paul Elly, Paul Elly!" I cried. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to knock you out of your chair!" His body was stiff, and only the little tuft of hair at the back of his head moved with the breeze. I leaned over him and said his name again, and at that moment I smelled the old people odor that my mother told me my grandmother hid with perfume. It was pungent and strange. I made a sour face and stepped back.

I wanted to pick him up and place him back on the chair, but I tried to picture myself lifting him, like I've tried to lift my older brother, and I knew I didn't have the strength or the height. So, I decided right then to whistle a song for him, thinking maybe he would like that enough to get up himself.

I whistled *Que Sera, Sera*, the best I could, and it

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sounded so good to me that I knew he'd lift his head and smile at me with his small teeth. Then when I got to the end, I barely sang the words, "what will be, will be", and with the picture still in my hand, I ran home crying to my mother, knowing then that something was terribly wrong.

It seemed like it took forever for Saturday to come. We took our regular trip to the Y and when we slowly drove up our driveway, I looked for Paul Elly, hoping to see him showering under the garden hose whistling a tune. He wasn't there. My mom reached over and touched my hand and said, "He's not coming back, honey. It was his time to go. But don't you worry, he's with his sweet wife now."

That night, the wind picked up and the moon was full, and it filled my bedroom with so much light, I thought I could read by it. Lying on my belly, squinting over an Archie comic book, I calmly listened for a whistled tune beyond my window. When I thought I heard it, I jumped up on all fours and strained to hear more. It turned out to be only the wind, slipping in and out of the chain-link fence entwined with clinging rose vines that my mom had planted neatly along the side of the house.

I was feeling restless, so I put on the clothes I had worn that day, grabbed my sweater, and carefully pried open the screen on the window. I had done that many times before during the summer when Mother thought I was napping. Effortlessly, I slipped out into the moonlit night.

It was easy to see the limbs on the old oak tree, and I thought I could've climbed them blindfolded anyway. I had memorized the shape of each knot in the branches

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that I had used to lift myself higher, and I knew the perfect place to sit and lean my back against the trunk, letting my legs either dangle or rest on the limbs below. From that spot the whole moon was in view, situated between two branches and right where I could watch it without moving my head. I took out the picture of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Elly from my sweater pocket and carefully secured it between my knees. I puckered my lips and whistled the song I learned was called Danny Boy that I once heard stream from Paul Elly's old lips and from my own father's voice earlier that day. When I got to the last verse I sang the words softly just for old Paul Elly, "I'll simply sleep in peace until you come to me."

And then I whistled the song again, this time for his lovely wife.