

# ▼▼▼ *I never cried* FOR ELVIRA

Jennie Fowler Wendland ▼

A small child squatting on haunches, almost appearing to rock, in the dust and grime of a driveway. Squatting beside a battered, red pick-up truck, studying something in the dirt at his feet. One stubby arm is stretched out and one finger seems to be tracing a pattern in the dust. His older sister is in the background, looking like she's used to being in the background. She's scratching her thigh, hiking up her skirt with the movement. Her smile is tremulous, and it looks like her other hand is rushing up to cover her face. The wind is playing with her hair, leading it in a mindless dance, sending strands rippling to one side in the sunlight. Fading afternoon sunlight, caught and held still. There's a white frame house in the background.

A woman, looking like she's rocking rocking rocking, in careless tune with the porch boards underneath her spindle chair. The peeling paint of the weathered house forms a frame around her. The same kind of wind that caught the girl's hair is tied up in hers, sending wisps of it across her face. She shades her eyes with one slightly bent hand as she peers out to nowhere, transfixed by sights that remain shadowed and secret. She looks like she's waiting as the fingers of her other hand get tangled in her graying apron. There's a doll flung down on the stairs. Its china face is peeling.

A nervous woman, caught unawares, suitcase in hand, looking back toward a white house. She's balanced on one foot, pivoting, ready to fly off at any time. Her hat is askew and her coat is whipped by the

wind so that it folds around her legs and moulds to the body that's too small for it. Her eyes look startled. She's clutching a doll tight, holding it hard and urgently against her coat. A doll with a chipped and scarred china face.

I let the book fall shut. I didn't know her then. Maybe if I had I wouldn't have resented her so much. Resented her all my life, even as she grew so old and feeble around me. I wouldn't have cringed at her smell, the sickroom smell that clung to her. Or at the bits of lavender that Aunt Elvira left strewn in paths around the house. She was always wrinkled. When I was growing up I thought her wrinkles were perma-press, and came with the face. And her iron-clad hair had always been bunched into the proper bun that sat perfectly still on the nape of her neck. And she always seemed to be sitting. I used to fantasize that the chair was a permanent fixture, glued to her derriere, and that the flesh that overhung it was folds of decorative upholstery that she'd done in petit point. I always sedately called her Aunt Elvira, using her full title as if doing so were an incantation. My mother had called her Ellie. It didn't suit her. I remembered how glad I'd been to escape the house she lived in with Mom and me when I finished school. How good it felt to move into my own apartment and breathe air that wasn't crowded by Aunt Elvira.

I inherited her back, along with the house, when my mother died and I went back to live there. And the house still felt overpowered in Elvira's presence. My

mother had been small and birdlike, and she sang as she flitted around the kitchen. She was always in the kitchen. I used to think she spent her whole life there and never went to bed. When I'd wake up in the morning she was already there, pouring juice for the three of us. I've always thought that Mother must have acquired Aunt Elvira when she married my father and moved into the house. Like an extra piece of furniture; a permanent fixture. Elvira sat primly at the breakfast table every morning, giving me admonishing looks for an unending variety of childhood sins. And if Elvira chanced to leave the house, which was seldom and a solemn occasion, she was like a ship in full sail. After a long and detailed ritual of preparation including donning of her hat and gloves, the English brig sailed toward her chosen destination and people seemed to melt away from her path. I always thought that was unusual but didn't question it. It was just another facet of Elvira.

And yes, I resented Aunt Elvira when I inherited her. But I kept her. Mother had willed her to me, so I did. And I still miss my mother. I guess I always will. I thought of the funeral that had been held that morning. A memorial service for my dear, departed, dusty aunt. I had perched lavender flowers on the foot of her coffin. It seemed fitting. She had wafted lavender talcum powder through the house, shedding it like dandruff in every room. The bathroom was the room I resented the most. I hated standing up from the toilet with lavender leavings clinging to my rear. After every bath I'd douse myself with Jean Naté, drowning out the smell of lavender as best I could.

There was always a film of lavender and dust over the heavy rosewood furniture that was crowded into her darkened room. She left fingerprints in the film and didn't seem to notice. When I first took her over, I'd removed the film weekly, trying to look after her with the care and regard my mother had shown. I couldn't. And my removal of her cobwebs and lavender became a less and less frequent occurrence. Her room depressed me.

Today, it had intimidated me. I'd felt like an intruder, a childish purloiner of cookies, when I'd gone in to sort out her desk. Put her affairs in order, so they call it. I'd taken the key, entrusted to me by a somber mortician (they'd taken it from a chain around her neck), and approached her solid rosewood desk with trepidation. It was orderly and organized and the contents were neatly stacked piles of Elvira. That's where the photo album had come from. Funny how I can realize now that I lived with her for years and never knew her. Not at all. I guess I never tried to know her. We had always been at war, a battle over possession of my mother. Mother was all I had. I guess she was all Aunt Elvira had too. I can admit that now. Now that they're both safely departed. After Mother's death, Elvira had seemed to fade, become less disapproving. I thought of how she'd looked in her coffin. A wax figure with a smile sewn securely into place.

You could see the glistening threads that were holding her in place. Her eyes were perfectly nothing. Total voids. In life, even though she'd moulted lavender and sat so much, her eyes had been searching. They'd seemed to look through everything, looking for something that she couldn't ever find. I had stared down at her, studying the threads that were holding her together, wondering what she'd been searching for. I'd never wondered much about her in life. She was just always there. She had a place in my life equivalent to the sofa or easy chair, mixing inseparably with my background. When I was growing up there had been an aura of mystery about Elvira. People paused in their conversations and looked at her askance when she sailed down a street. I had asked Mother about that once, and she said to hush and not to bother. Said I was too young to understand. By the time I was old enough I'd stopped asking. I didn't care any more and she wasn't real to me. She was background.

The whispered pieces of conversation that I'd heard formed an unfinished patchwork quilt in my mind, a shroud for Aunt Elvira's memory. People used to whisper that Elvira wasn't "quite right." Hadn't been since the accident. I knew she'd had spells. All old people had those when senility set in and took up residence. Our house would become quiet and still, and mother would tiptoe, telling me it was best to play outside. I'd heard somewhere once that she'd been hospitalized for her spells, and I remember hoping that whatever it was wasn't catching. I remember that clearly because the word *hospital* had been said in italics. Elvira's pattern is fuzzy. There's so much I don't know. When I was young, I remember that she used to sit and hold that doll at times, and rock it. The doll on her bedside table. The doll from the picture, the one with the peeling face. A funny part of Elvira's room was that it had no pictures. Finding the album had come as a shock to me. She had always seemed so one-dimensional, devoid of life.

I ran my fingers over the album's leather cover. It was cracked and peeling just like the doll's face. And the pictures were yellowing and tired. They were brownie black-and-white. I opened the book again and randomly turned a few more pages. I stopped, mesmerized. A tall man in a uniform, R.C.A.F., close-cropped hair, hat in hand, smiling down at what must have been an earlier version of my Aunt Elvira. Before the wrinkles set in and became perma-press. It was a revelation to me to really feel that the wrinkles hadn't come built into the face. He had his arms around her and they were posed in front of a cake. A wedding cake. My mother and a man who must have been my father stood on either side of them. I never knew him. He was Aunt Elvira's younger brother and had been killed in the war.

I turned the page. The next picture stunned me. My Aunt Elvira with a baby on her knee. Not me, because my pregnant mother stood beside her, holding a doll

out toward the baby with one hand and softly touching the baby's cheek with the other. The doll had a painted china face and a starched lace dress, an earlier version of the doll on my aunt's nightstand.

I sat back in the spindle chair and let the book slide off of my lap and land in the dust on the floor. I hadn't cleaned the room for a while. Couldn't be bothered. I hadn't cried for my Aunt Elvira at the funeral earlier. Had never in my selfish life seen the need to waste my tears on her. Spent too much time resenting her omnipotent presence. Now I sat wondering what she had thought of me over the years. I half remembered times when, as a little child, she'd reach out and touch my hair, looking at me kind of funny. I would shrug her off, so after a while she ignored me with a studied expertise that matched my own. We had lapsed into a mutual tolerance of each other. Mother was our centre, the axis we carefully turned around, avoiding any contact or confrontation. I wonder now, did Mother will me to my aunt, asking her with sunken eyes to look after me.

I walked my eyes around the room, letting them pause now and then to get their bearings. I tried to feel the room, feel the person who had co-existed with me in this house, but lived only in this room. The room was hard for me to focus on. It was as fuzzy and incomplete as the patchwork quilt shrouding my Aunt Elvira in my mind. There were no pictures or knickknacks. Just the doll, a clock, and petit point. Neat, orderly piles of petit point beside Elvira's chair. More piles of what I knew of Elvira.

I closed my eyes and drifted back, attempting to focus on almost forgotten incidents. I remembered my mother dragging me out of bed one night, a dark and rainy night. She'd bundled me into the car and driven up and down streets, with the window wipers keeping time with her rapid breathing. What we doing, Mummy? Hush, child. Just going for a drive. Your aunt went for a walk and I thought I'd see if she wanted a ride home. But it late Mummy. I'se tired. Don't wanna go drive. Shshsh, child. Go to sleep. I had closed my eyes, pretending to sleep, knowing something in my world was wrong. Something wasn't "quite right." I had resented Aunt Elvira for making my mommy sad. And for making her take me out into a cold and rainy night. Mother found her at the train station, standing in the downpour, soaked to the skin. She was wearing an old black coat that wouldn't quite do up any more. The coat from the picture. And she was holding the doll by one foot, letting its hair drag in the pool of water she was standing in. Talking to herself as she looked down the track into nowhere, shading her eyes with one hand. Mother ran over to her and hugged her hard, standing in the onslaught of the rain, rocking her back and forth like one might do to a child. A lost and frightened child. Then Mom slowly led her to the car. That was the last time she had touched my hair. She'd reached out and awkwardly wound one strand of my hair around in her

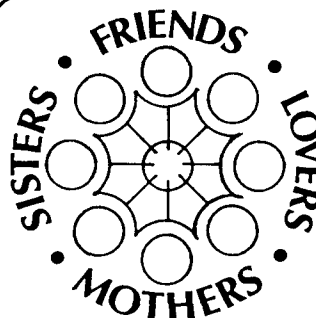
fingers until it tangled and pulled and I'd shrieked at her. Mother didn't say anything, just looked at me. Aunt Elvira never left the house without Mother after that. Up until the day she died.

I thought about the way people had always glanced at her sideways, out of the corners of their eyes. I guess I did that too. Now I'm sitting alone in an empty room realizing that I have no one. And my smell of Jean Naté is just as overpowering as her lavender was.

The funeral had been quiet, but a lot of people had crowded in for one last look at my Aunt Elvira. And at me. Her legacy of lunacy and dust. My thoughts strayed over the worn-out old man who'd shuffled painfully and slowly up the aisle, and had stood staring down into Elvira's coffin for what seemed to be an eternity. His clothes were creased and ill-fitting and he had a vacant air about him. I had resented his presence there. He was a stranger and she was my aunt, after all. He'd stood there, ignoring everyone else in the room, then smiled quizzically, taking a single red rose out from under his hat and laying it gently on her folded hands. When he'd turned and shuffled out, I'd caught a glimpse of something shiny, a button on his lapel. R.C.A.F.

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