

The background of the cover is a collage. On the right, a close-up of a woman's face with long, wavy brown hair and blue eyes. On the left, a mechanical device, possibly a typewriter or printing press component, is shown in a sepia tone. The background also features faint, handwritten text in a cursive script, possibly from a historical document, and a street scene with a car and buildings.

# THE FOURNIERS

BOOK THREE  
THE MEMORY  
OF MUSIC

VERA JANE  
COOK

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# THE MEMORY OF MUSIC

The Fourniers

VERA JANE  
COOK



FANNY



# Prologue

*1956*

Fanny's bedroom was a perfect square; the walls were the color of a robin's egg, barely there blue. The windows opened on to city buildings in shades of pigeon gray, parting only slightly to allow the sun to fall across the floor, an intruder in the dusty gloom. The flimsy white curtains fell in a listless dance, moving in the breeze, lazy and lackluster. The toy chest sat before the windows, richly oiled in brown tones of cedarwood.

Fanny loved the smell, the cedar chest smells, like green forests. Even with the top closed, the rich forest cedar scented the air. It was a good place to hide all secrets, holding back from the world what is most cherished, refusing even a glimpse. But she knew that within the scent of cedar, Hannah's music was near, her notes stilled by wooden walls; her song, a fragile history.

Music is all that the ghost had; perhaps music is all that any of us have. All traces of Hannah's being, the flesh and blood of her, had been captured in magic by the fading and fragile music box, bringing to life what once was. Fanny was afraid to touch it, to hold it in her hands for it could crumble and fall to pieces. The painted piano was barely visible on the top of it, slightly bent, like an ear to the outside world. The music still played though, obstinate music that could not be stilled. When the top of the was box opened, music would hit the air, fanciful and free. Fanny didn't know the song, but it was playful, and it made her smile.

She loved the unknown presence of her grandmother, Hannah Reilly, her warmth, the soothing sense of her when she lay close, her words caught up in brogue. It was stupid not to believe in ghosts, they were here on earth, especially clear to children. Knowing is not at all superficial, sometimes knowing is beyond description. The ghost's laughter mingled with Fanny's until their voices were lost to the other, captured and returned. This kind of knowing could never be translated into anyone's conventional understanding, but Fanny's. She knew the ghost was Hannah and the ghost was there.

Fanny had taken the music box from her mother's drawer; stolen it, you could say. The top of the box was not only bent, but it was also

slightly broken, chipped, disfiguring what had once been perfect. There was something sad about it but Fanny knew about sadness, because that's what a life was, more so than not. It is fragile and broken and sad.

True, she had committed theft by taking Hannah's music box from its haphazard home, but thievery is a good thing. If she'd stolen a dog from someone who'd abused it, she would be a hero, not a thief. She hadn't stolen a thing, she had only protected the music box, rescued it from eternal loss. She knew she had to do what she did. All of Hannah would be gone forever if she hadn't made up her mind to just do it. Her mother would have made the music box disappear; like all things disturbing, it would be vanquished to the bottom of a scotch glass.

One day Fanny would place Hannah's music box right out in the open; she planned it out, she'd be eighteen, only eight years away. One day she'd be brave enough to face her grandmother's sorrow. But not now, sorrow is too frightening and too vast to face alone. One day, she wouldn't be alone, and she'd share the abyss of her feelings. For now, though, all that comes to her of Hannah is light and sweet. In the night, when Hannah comes, it is without tears, without weight, it's as a soft glow in the darkness of her room. It's as a ghost.

Fanny also found a photograph of Hannah along with the music box, both hidden away in the cedar chest. The music box and the picture were so of the times, 1917, 18 ... perhaps. Hannah's round eyes were blue—she had been told of their color—and her hair was a rich, deep auburn; she had been told that, too. Hannah curved at the thigh in the photo, sitting, her shoulders small and narrow, in her arms, two children. The painting behind her muted and beautiful and though the photograph itself was black and white, Fanny saw the greens and the deep gold and the swirl of the ornate brass frame. It was so posed, the way it was back then, even before her mother's birth, but back then, it was new to have a photograph as good as this one.

Then, perhaps, only then, Hannah had shed no tears. Fanny placed her grandmother's photograph on a small table near her bed. How does life turn bad, she wondered, when it starts off good?

"I've hidden your music box," Fanny whispered to the photograph. "Don't worry, someday I'll take it out and open the lid and we'll hear the music again. Someday I'll make sure to play the tune over and over, as you did. When I miss you, I'll open the lid, just to say hello."

But then, so suddenly, they were parted, ripped away from one another without any warning at all.

Such a sudden hurt to lose her grandmother, so cruel. The music box gone; the cedar chest emptied. Hannah never returned after that. Fanny

sat and waited but she never returned, never told her where she could be found.

Loneliness came in waves, a fearful feeling. Fanny cried the entire night. Loneliness deeper than the earth can reach, loneliness beyond where the sky extends, was what she left behind.

"Is that what it was like?" Fanny asked.

And for the last time, Hannah whispered, "Yes."

# Chapter One

1960

Everything changed after the robbery. Home for holidays and visiting weekends soon became anxious excursions into Sheela's "house of the unpredictable." Sheela was Fanny Fournier's mother, and the robbery was a direct result of running a whorehouse full of seedy and shady drunks, ex-showgirls, and horny johns.

Over the years, Fanny had gotten used to the cast of characters and the heavy stench of scotch. Prayers for her mother's sobriety and an uninterrupted night's sleep were rarely answered. Her mother was a real pain in the ass when she drank, throwing back the covers on Fanny's bed, calling her "an ungrateful little whore." Shit, she'd never be a whore. She was being groomed at a fancy boarding school in some upper-crust section of New Jersey that turned out society girls, model wives and speakers of broad A English.

"Hey, anybody home?" Fanny called out, letting the door slam behind her like a blast of sudden thunder, an enthusiastic ingress.

She felt the quiet before the realization hit. She was the only one there. Here it was, a visiting weekend and the only welcome kiss she'd received had been from her mother's cocker spaniel.

"Shit," Fanny exclaimed as she threw her suitcase at the door and headed for the kitchen. The cocker spaniel followed in happy pursuit. Sheela must have forgotten to mark on the calendar that November was a long month, translation being that her daughter came home three weekends, instead of only two.

Fanny fixed herself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, cursing her mother to the caverns of hell.

"Mount Fairmont Penitentiary," she said and held up her jellied knife in a toast. "Your forlorn prisoner returns."

She left the peanut butter and jelly where it stood, top off, knife covered in globs of Skippy chunky and raspberry preserves, a nasty little hint. "Hope you get roaches," she snarled.

Fanny could have chosen not to return to Mount Fairmont; not returning would provide her with an opportunity to lay on some heavy guilt. But Fanny didn't want to throw her mother any curve balls. She

didn't want to be found unexpectedly in front of the television set with a six-pack of coke and the snotty tissues she'd used up watching an old Bette Davis drama.

Sheela didn't like surprises, and there was no telling who she'd walk through the door with. That could prove to be embarrassing. "You have a kid?" the john would ask. "Does that mean I have to leave?"



Fanny avoided the pathetic compassionate stare of Mount Fairmont's bus driver.

"Thanks for waiting." Weary, she tossed her suitcase on a seat. "My mother must have forgotten I was due home. She's a busy woman."

"I see." The bus driver gave her a knowing smile.

"Well, the campus was nice, actually, before I left, you know. It was almost too beautiful to leave if you can believe it. A lot prettier than Third Avenue, that's for sure. Thanks for waiting. I was sure she'd be here."

Fanny turned up her nose and flopped into a seat. Well, it was the truth. The country trees, burnt to a gold and crimson splendor, framed the long walk between the entrance gates and her dormitory. And the air was just starting to sting mercilessly; a blast of wind and a sudden chill sent shivers through her flesh and played her ribs as if they were taut strings on a cello.

Fanny thought of her mother and grimaced. Well, soon, she thought, it would snow the way it does in Alaska, and mounds of it would pile up too high for any bus to ever make it through. She wouldn't be able to get home once the snows came. Her mother would be sorry then, sorry to have forgotten that November was special: an extra weekend home, a date on the calendar that should have been gold starred.

Fanny was enrolled at Mount Fairmont School for Girls, a strict school in the rolling hills of the Garden State. She wasn't exactly fond of community living, much less almost a convent that stifled her individuality, but she'd had no choice; Sheela had insisted.

Unfortunately, Fanny was only comfortable in jeans and saddle shoes, so she cringed at the uniform the first time she saw it.

"I'll never wear that," she told her mother.

But what's a kid to do? Where the hell was she going to go at fourteen? At least, when she was home, she could wear jeans and cowboy boots and whatever the hell she pleased. But the minute her ass hit the dorm, it would be back to putrid green woolen jumpers and sissy blouses that came back from the cleaners with so much starch that it turned her neck red, and she had to scotch tape cotton to the inside of her collar to

alleviate the burn.

Mount Fairmont School for Girls was her third boarding school in four years, so she was used to the routine. She'd been expelled for bad behavior each time — sneaking out with boys, smoking cigarettes and other unladylike acts deemed debauchery and particularly shocking for the 1960s.

Fanny would miss the weekend home, but she had to admit, it would be a relief not to have to contend with a lot of drunken women tripping all over each other and falling asleep wherever they happened to land. She was grateful that her mother had always been careful to keep most of “the girls” and their clients away from her. Sometimes, she couldn't help running into them, but those mistakes were few and far between. Johns and prostitutes didn't like teenagers with attitude, and they headed in a different direction whenever Fanny was around and trying to live in her own space, ignoring and avoiding Sheela's circus of ill-repute.

*It shouldn't be like this, she thought. My whole life should have been different with a normal mother with open arms and a perfectly uncomplicated welcoming, just like everyone else at stupid Mount Fairmont.*

But nothing was ever going to go back to the way it was before the robbery, even though the same crazy women were still hanging out in her mother's living room. Fanny had slept through it all, including the experience of having had a gun held to her head. She'd heard about “the hoods with the gun” the next day from all the neighborhood kids who thought of her as a celebrity because she and her “call girl” mother were written up in the Daily News.

Only thing Fanny did remember for certain is that it changed everything. Her mother was so paranoid after being robbed at gunpoint that she sent Fanny off to a safe environment to get a proper education on Long Island. “I have to protect you,” she'd said.

Lake Grove on the island had been Fanny's first experience with boarding school. The formidable stone estate by the Atlantic Ocean was misleading, not at all the euphoric beach resort it appeared to be. It was more like a gray domelike penal institution, run by a headmistress with an unmistakable resemblance to Hitler, except she wore a dress.



Fanny tapped her fingers on the window of the bus to the tune of ‘Whole Lot of Shaking Going On.’ She was pissed at her mother for not providing her with a normal life. Before the robbery it had been different, at least somewhat different. Her mother's goodnight kiss used

to precede a normal morning, a morning in which the doorman greeted her, Mrs. Cohen's candy store was in walking distance, Riverside Park was her play land, and Alice, who tended to her, was the sanest adult role model she had. Not that any of that changed, she just experienced it differently, as if it all might explode in her face and tear apart the safety net she thought protected her.

Why had life become so complicated ... *when* did it become so complicated? After the robbery? Maybe. The transition was certainly reason enough to be pissed. Since the drama of the gunpoint theft, her mother drank more than ever and her goodnight kiss and tuck into bed no longer offered a safe and consistent fortress against the darkness. No, the world had proven itself as tentative, impulsive, and unpredictable.



“Your mom a working woman?” the bus driver called out, invading Fanny’s fantasy of walking on a country road with a change of clothes tied to a stick over her shoulder, walking so far south her mother would never see her again, and she’d blame herself forever for not being there on her daughter’s free weekend. She’d live a life of misery and regret while her daughter lived in a castle on an island in the Caribbean among movie stars and other such royalty.

Fanny bit into her sandwich. “Yeah,” she said. “She’s rich, too,” she mumbled, the peanut butter clinging to her teeth like wet sand on beach bark.

He tossed her back a smile. “Bet she’ll miss you.”

“Sure,” she said. “Like hiccups.”

But Fanny would miss *her*, despite everything.

“Say your prayers, honey. ‘*Now I lay me down to sleep...*’

“Yes, Mommy.” *I pray all your bottles of Johnnie Walker blow up in smoke.*

“Goodnight, sweetheart. I worship you. Truly I do.”

*Worship* was a word her mother used often. That was an odd contradiction for Fanny. Worship? Why then, an hour into her sleep, would it be necessary to keep the puppy close to protect him from any flying glass? Those broads in the living room could get awfully good at tossing scotch glasses against a wall. Fanny heard them yelling and screaming at each other, waking her out of a dream, cursing at each other like Mafia crime bosses. She struggled to understand why being “worshipped” didn’t stop her mother from preventing those loud-mouthed women from disturbing her sleep; living inside her mother’s fun-house mirror made boarding school look like a fantasy island.

It was a wicked world she didn't understand, filled with confusing circumstances. Her fate seemed a random short straw. What was it about alcohol that brought out the worst in people, she wondered?

So many nights, her mother invaded the sanctity of her dreams. She tried to block her out, but there they came, images and words that made her want to crawl into a hole and not emerge until she was twenty-one.

"Get up you little prick licker. Whore!"

There it was: nails on a chalkboard. Prick licker? Whore?

Fanny would snore, feign sleep, and pretend she couldn't hear her mother swearing or weaving over her, even though Sheela had turned on all the lights, with a blast of intruding incriminations.

She tried to wish her mother gone like a magic act she'd seen on television where the rabbit went into a hat and disappeared, gone to illusion, and assumed missing, but not really. No, not when she still needed to be taken care of. Shit, she was still a child; children shouldn't be treated like they were whores and prick lickers.

Fourteen was still not old enough to be out on her own, so she was stuck. She'd turn furiously to the wall and clench her jaw. Sometimes, Boarding School didn't seem so bad. Sometimes, she wished she were back in that blessed paradise of little girls and somber, but sober women.

Fanny Fournier lived within the dichotomy of 'wish it were so' and 'wish it weren't.' So, there she was again, on the other side of the pendulum, on her way back to 4 o'clock milk and cookies, and teachers more like Minotaurs than women, fire-breathers who threatened miles around a labyrinth for misbehavior.

Fanny picked the peanuts from between her teeth and breathed a sigh of relief. "Better the Minotaurs than my crazy mother, I guess."

"The campus will be nice," the bus driver said. He was being kind. He thought of her as a kid with absent parents, someone to pity. She wished he didn't feel the need to communicate.

"Sure will be nicer than home," she said. "Safer."

Fanny always felt at risk. Why, if home weren't a dangerous place, she wouldn't be wearing a green uniform. She'd be hanging out with Willie and Alice. Problem was, Sheela made home *unsafe*. Fanny often thought she'd be killed. Why not? If the robbers didn't get her maybe the unpredictable ex-showgirls would.

"It's either going to be me or you, Bobo. My crazy mother may even throw us both out of the window in a drunken fit," she often told the cocker.

Bobo would give her a knowing wag. The puppy knew she wasn't exaggerating.



Fanny had a terrible fear of being lifted and tossed out of the window, but Sheela never even hit her, even when she must have wanted to. Never remembered a thing in the morning either. The scenario was always the same: Act like a lunatic, and then, drown out the guilt with a bottle of scotch.

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