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Memories, Moments and Miracles as a Source of Hope in John Cheever’s *Falconer*

Though John Cheever’s *Falconer* might seem like the furthest thing from escapist fiction, it may, in fact, provide a means of escape for those who feel engulfed in a world of injustice, unfairness and cruelty. *Falconer* is about a college professor named Ezekiel Farragut who is imprisoned in Falconer Prison for murdering his brother. The novel chronicles the major events and defining moments of his time in Falconer, culminating with his eventual escape and return to freedom. *Falconer*, published in 1975, can be interpreted as a reaction to the hopelessness and helplessness that gripped the hearts of many Americans during that troubled time. Though Farragut is routinely mistreated, unjustly harassed and subjected to all kinds of humiliations, he learns, while enduring all of these things, to seek joy and peace in the small, seemingly unimportant moments that make up one’s daily life. Cheever, through his portrayal of Farragut’s eventual awakening to this fact, seems to be encouraging the American people, or anyone who feels crushed by the miseries of daily life, to look for meaning in basic human compassion, the beauty of nature, and in the memories of good times past and reminders of good times to come.

The America of the 1970s was a country far removed from the prosperity, unity and contentment that followed on the heels of World War Two. Bruce Schulman says that the 1970s moved Americans into a “disturbing new world” and that this new era
“defined the terms of contemporary American life” (4). The problems facing Americans, filling them with trepidation and uncertainty, were many. Schulman says that the “loss of U.S. global hegemony remained deeply unsettling” during the early 70s. He explains, saying, “The United States, the world’s strongest nation with the most powerful, technologically sophisticated military found itself locked in a confusing, bloody stalemate, half a world away in Vietnam. Victory was always around the corner the nation’s leaders endlessly proclaimed, but the American people were growing restless” (Schulman 6). Eventually, the country was sharply divided over the issue of the war and tension built between the two groups (Schulman 7). When the media began to openly question the war and criticize specific leaders for their actions, “a campaign of intimidation against the press and television began and immediately started to pay dividends.” People were shocked to see cherished rights, such as freedom of speech, being stepped on (Obst 157). There were also major economic problems in the early 70s. “By 1970, the all-powerful greenback faced sustained attack as foreign investors dumped dollars, driving down its value and forcing the United States to take extraordinary steps to preserve the international monetary system. Inflation accelerated; prices rose at the then-alarming rate of 4 percent per year. Sixty percent of Americans warned the Gallup organization that the high cost of living was the most urgent problem facing them and their families” (Schulman 7). Also, in 1973 there was a severe gas shortage and price increase that shook the confidence of many Americans. It caused them to look towards more economical Japanese cars, which increased their sense of dependency on smaller, less developed and less powerful nations (Schmidt 15). In addition to concerns about the Vietnam War and financial troubles, many liberals began to resent the taxes they were
asked to pay and there was a severe backlash against civil rights (Schulman 8). The civil rights movement, which had been led by Martin Luther King Jr., lacked leadership after his assassination in 1968. The movement broke into several different groups who disagreed sharply with one another and the unity that had characterized the movement’s success was lost (Schmidt 15). As the country struggled mightily with continuing racial issues, many women began to voice their dissatisfaction with the conventional views of gender roles, often in very public and aggressive ways (Schulman 11). The youth culture, influenced by the hippie movement of the 1960s, showed extreme dissatisfaction with society and an intense interest in flaunting their disdain for standard ideas about profanity, indecency and obscenity (Schulman 15-17). The divide between the youth and their parents’ generation in the 1970s can be clearly seen in a letter from a doctor to his son, who was entering college at the time, that was published in a small, medical newspaper. In the letter, the doctor, Paul Williamson, says that if his son is involved in any sort of protest against the government and is killed because of it, then he will side with the government. Williamson explains that it is his belief that government should shoot at any students intent on destroying property in the name of protest (Williamson 28-29). Thrown on top of the government’s inability to handle the war in Vietnam and the angry, protesting factions in America was the Watergate scandal, which convinced many Americans that the government could no be trusted or looked to for help (Schulman 47). The scandal validated the rebellion of the radicals and planted the seed of dissent in the disillusioned people who had been placing their hope in the power of the government to solve their problems for them. Ernest Van den Haag talks about the failures of the justice system in American and explains that police officers can hardly be blamed for
taking bribes when the criminals that they are dealing with seem to be above the law and are heavily armed (31). This inability to feel safe even on a day-to-day basis in one’s own neighborhood filled many Americans with constant unease and fear. The atomic bomb, a concern ever since its use in World War Two, was also in the forefront of many peoples’ minds in the 1970s. Reverend Harold Hofstad wrote in 1971 about the missile installations near his home in North Dakota and about the fear of nuclear attack from communist countries that rested in the backs of many peoples’ minds during that time period (41-43).

Cheever effectively places the characters of *Falconer* in the tumultuous, unsettled society of the 1970s. Farragut, his friends and family, the prison guards, and his fellow-inmates all suffer from the effects of living in a world full of selfishness, miscommunication, confusion, and injustice.

Cheever’s picture of society in *Falconer* is certainly bleak. On numerous occasions, Cheever gives examples of a world in which people constantly pursue their own ends at the expense of others. Bitterness, greed, loneliness and disinterest touch and taint the lives of every individual. People find it very difficult to achieve anything beyond momentary happiness and the governing authorities, doctors, artists and entertainers can do very little to counteract this sad fact. The world as it is presented in *Falconer* is apparently unjust, not only within the boundaries of crime and punishment, but also in the daily lives of its inhabitants.

This sense of injustice is most obvious in the case of Farragut. The corruption of justice is referenced almost immediately in *Falconer*. As the bus that brings the convicted criminals to prison pulls into Falconer Prison, Cheever describes the entrance as being
“crowned by an escutcheon representing Liberty, Justice and, between the two, the sovereign power of government. Liberty wore a mobcap and carried a pike. Government was the federal eagle holding an olive branch and armed with hunting arrows. Justice was conventional; blinded, vaguely erotic in her clinging robes and armed with a headsman’s sword. The bas-relief was bronze, but black these days – as black as unpolished anthracite or onyx” (1). With the portrayal of these institutions designed to protect mankind as changing from bronze-colored to black with old age, Cheever seems to be pointing to the ways in which these institutions have become corrupt and polluted, incapable of performing as they should. Chicken Number Two, an inmate that Farragut meets upon his arrival in cell-block F, declares, “It’s all a terrible mistake,” by which he means Farragut’s imprisonment. He says that one day they’ll discover their mistake and beg Farragut for forgiveness. But, he says, until that day, “All I wanted to tell you is what you already knew – it’s all a big mistake, a terrible mistake” (Cheever 9-10). Chicken Number Two is expressing the feelings of all those who have been treated unjustly and he appeals directly to the similar feelings that he assumes Farragut to possess. Chicken Number Two believes that yes, society has mistreated him, but in the end, all will be made right. Chicken Number Two fails to realize the extent of the injustice perpetrated against him and Farragut. He does not understand that society has condemned him as a criminal and there will be no admission of mistakes on the part of the government nor any begging for forgiveness.

Cheever’s account of Farragut’s trial gives further specific instances of gross injustices leveled against him. Farragut did not mean to kill his brother, Eben. He meant to hit Eben with a fire iron, certainly with the intent of hurting him, but Eben was drunk,
fell over and struck his head on the hearth, which killed him. The argument that concluded with Eben’s death began when Farragut intervened on behalf of Eben’s wife, attempting to convince Eben to stop yelling at her and insulting her. Rather than standing up for Farragut at the trial, the very woman who Farragut was standing up for, Eben’s wife, ruins his case. “The widow testified that Farragut had struck his brother eighteen to twenty times, but she was a liar and Farragut thought the doctor who corroborated this lie contemptible” (Cheever 212). Farragut’s wife, though she smiled sadly at him while on the stand, did nothing to help him and agreed with the prosecution’s characterization of Farragut as a “drug addict who put the procurement of his fix miles ahead of his love for his wife and only son” (Cheever 213). Three people, all of them capable of at least helping Farragut to receive a lighter sentence by simply telling what they know to be the truth, choose to put their own feelings and desires first by sending a basically innocent man to jail for murdering his brother, who happened to be a terrible person anyway. With all that Farragut goes through in prison, the knowledge that he is unjustly paying for a crime that was merely an accident caused by a brief lapse in judgment is always with him. Refusing to believe this, and supported by the lies and half-truths of the witnesses, the judge ruling over Farragut’s case rails against him for his shamelessness and the fact that he is in a position of instruction, as a teacher, and therefore responsible for the impact that his actions will have on those he teaches. The judge says, “We are here to help. Until you confess to shame you will have no place in the civilian world” (Cheever 7). The judge also makes rash generalizations about Farragut’s character, saying, “Society has lavished and wasted her riches on you and utterly failed to provoke in you that conscience that is the stamp of an educated and civilized human being and a useful
member of society” (Cheever 212). Though his conviction is based upon misunderstandings, lies and intentional deception, Farragut is forced to deal with the humiliation of having his entire life and character attacked by a judge who only assumes that he knows the whole story. Though justice is blind to the truth, in Farragut’s case, this does not prevent it from coming down on him with hard, heavy-handed force. Once Farragut has been in prison for a while, he attempts to file a suit against the prison for refusing him his fix of methadone for an extended period and allowing several guards to watch his suffering for its entertainment value. When the lawyer talks to Farragut, the lawyer tries to make him sign a release that will exempt him from charges brought against him for attempted escape, which was really just a frantic dash for his methadone fix once he was let out of his cell (Cheever 67). Farragut is denied the opportunity to see justice brought upon those who persecuted him and is, instead, subjected to more false accusations. Those who are in power are the ones that decide who is guilty and who is not. Real justice can never be achieved since the people with power are intent only upon maintaining their hold on power.

Farragut isn’t the only character in *Falconer* to be confronted with the injustice of the world. His wife dreams of being a painter, but she never achieves the recognition that she seeks. “She had painted and painted and painted, but her work had never been received with any enthusiasm at all” (Cheever 25). A man that Farragut sits next to on the bus bemoans the fact that he never had sexual intercourse without paying for it. “I know hundreds of men, not so good-looking as me, who get it for free all the time, but I never got it once, not once for nothing. I just wish I had it free, once” (Cheever 3). One of Farragut’s fellow inmates, a man that everyone calls Tennis, had a career in tennis thirty
years before Farragut meets him in Falconer Prison. "He had been picked up for a check
forgery when he was working as a delicatessen clerk" (Cheever 31). Later in the book,
Farragut notes that all four of the truly great beauties that he has known have killed
themselves (Cheever 81). These are all examples of people whose relatively modest
dreams have no been realized. Farragut’s wife has not received recognition for pursuing
the one thing that she loves to do, the man on the bus has never received the physical,
intimate contact that he really wants without having to pay someone for it, and Tennis is
left with nothing but memories of a career that came to a pitiful, miserable end. The truly
beautiful women found no consolation in their natural gifts and took their own lives. The
injustice of life may be most embodied in the character of Chicken Number Two. After
Tiny, the guard, tells Chicken Number Two that he’s worse than dead, Cheever says that
Chicken began to “weep, until they heard the sound of a grown man weeping, an old man
who slept on a charred mattress, whose life savings in tattoos had faded to a tracery of
ash, whose crotch hair was sparse and gray, whose flesh hung slack on his bones, whose
only trespass on life was a flat guitar and a remembered and pitiful air of ‘I don’t know
where it is, sir, but I’ll find it, sir,’ and whose name was known nowhere, nowhere in the
far reaches of his memory, where, when he talked to himself, he talked to himself as
Chicken Number Two” (171). Old, alone, and certainly no longer a real threat to society,
if he ever really was, Chicken Number Two’s entire life has been left in ruins, both inside
and out, because society, long ago, determined that he should never be allowed to live
like a human being again. He is so alone that when the prisoners of Falconer are allowed
to have their picture taken next to a Christmas tree and sent to a loved one, Chicken
addresses his picture to “Mr. And Mrs. Santa Claus. Icicle Street. The North Pole.” The
photographer thinks that Chicken Number Two is joking until he looks around, sees no one else is laughing, and grasps the "solemnity of Chicken's loneliness" (Cheever 175). Chicken Number Two serves as an example of the way in which society leaves those behind who cannot fight for themselves or will not assert their importance with enough force. At one point, because of a minor offense by one cat in the prison, the guards at Falconer attempt to massacre all of the cats, creating a huge mess and killing many of the prisoners' best companions. When the whole grisly scene is over, Farragut lies on his bed and kneels, thinking "Blessed are the meek," but he can't remember what comes next.

Cheever seems to be saying that though the passage says that the meek will inherit the Kingdom of God, here on earth they only receive beatings, have their possessions taken from them, and otherwise bow to the demands of the forceful, brutal and cruel. Farragut ponders the character of one of the guards, Marshack, and thinks about how this man "would gun down a hundred men with no excitement and no remorse." Farragut associates Marshack and his kind with shaved skulls, and thinks, "The shaved skulls will always be with us. They are easily recognized but impossible to alter or cure" (Cheever 152). These kinds of men will always be around to eliminate the weak and the helpless, carrying out the dirty work of whoever is in power at the time. Marshack himself, the machine-like killer, is insightful enough to comment on mankind's own destructive power and its own ability to wipe itself out, saying, "Long ago when they first invented the atomic bomb people used to worry about its going off and killing everybody, but they didn't know that mankind has got enough dynamite right in his guts to tear the fucking planet to pieces. Me, I know" (Cheever 153). Even without technological advances that make killing simpler, humanity cannot seem to get enough slaughter. Cheever uses
Farragut’s thoughts concerning Marshack and Marshack’s comments to point to the constant stress that human beings live under as they live their lives surrounded by potential murderers. Near the end of the book, Chicken Number Two, using many reference points to the American society of the 1970s, sums up the injustice, terror and constant struggle of living modern society. He says, referring to riots as an attempt to escape prison,

> Who would want to riot to get out of a place like this? In the paper now you read there’s unemployment everywhere. That’s why the lieutenant governor is in here. He can’t get no job outside. Even famous movie stars with formerly millions is standing in line with their coat collars turned up around their necks waiting for a handout, waiting for a bowl of that watery bean soup that don’t keep you from feeling hungry and makes you fart. Out in the street, everybody’s poor, everybody’s out of work and it rains all the time. They mug one another for a crust of bread. You have to stand in line for a week just to be told you ain’t got no job. We stand in line three times a day to get out nice minimal-nutritional hot meal, but out in the street they stand in line for eight hours, twenty-four hours, sometimes they stand in line for a lifetime. Who wants to get out a nice place like this and stand in a line in the rain? And when they ain’t standing in line in the rain they worry about atomic war. Sometimes they do both. I mean they stand in line in the rain and worry about atomic war because if there’s an atomic war they’ll all be killed and find themselves standing in line at the gates of hell. That’s not for us, men. In case of an atomic war we’ll be the first to be saved. They got bomb shelters for us criminals all over the world. They don’t want us loose in the
community. I mean they’ll let the community burn before they set us free, and that will be our salvation, friends. They’d rather burn than have us running around the streets, because everyone knows that we eat babies, fuck old women up the ass and burn down hospitals full of helpless cripples. Who would ever want to get out of a nice place like this? (Cheever 181-182).

In this speech, Chicken refers to many of the very current concerns of the early 1970s, including unemployment, violent crime and the threat of atomic warfare. Cheever uses this speech to place his characters squarely in the midst of the crumbling society that his readers would have been experiencing.

In *Falconer*, perhaps the most important statements made about the faltering of society are those that Cheever makes about the needless cruelty that human beings inflict upon one another. It is the cruelty that people direct at loved ones and family members that he seems to find especially damaging.

Farragut’s life has been persistently filled with painful experiences with his family. These include everything from conflicts with his parents and brother to bitter arguments with his wife. Despite his numerous extra-marital affairs, Farragut seems to genuinely love his wife, although she refuses to give him the peace and satisfaction that would come from knowing that she loves him in return. Once, upon returning from a trip to Italy, Farragut’s wife jokingly asks him if he is crazy. Farragut responds by saying, “Almost everyone I love has called me crazy. What I’d like to talk about is love.” Rather than thank him for cleaning up the house, Farragut’s wife begins scrubbing the refrigerator door with a sponge, saying that the place is still filthy, and responds to his statement about love with a dismissive, “Oh, is that it. Well, here you go.” She then
makes grotesque faces at him, mocking his real feelings of affection and rejecting his attempt at forming a loving connection between them (Cheever 18). On another occasion, Farragut catches his wife kissing a woman in their kitchen during a party. This occurrence eventually leads to one of Farragut’s wife’s characteristic outbursts. She screams about her hatred for their house, appliances, and the life that they have made together, refusing to even allow Farragut to prepare some eggs for himself for breakfast (Cheever 20). Sadly, these outbursts and bitter words, according to Farragut, define the relationship between himself and his wife. Farragut observes that the lines of their quarrels “were as ritualistic as the words and the sacrament of holy matrimony.” When his wife screams, “I don’t have to listen to your shit anymore,” Farragut is stunned by the fact that he was about to say the exact same thing. Later, Farragut’s wife tells him that he is the biggest mistake that she ever made (Cheever 24). Their marriage becomes primarily characterized not by love and support, but by cruelty, strife, and intentional opposition to one another’s desires and goals. The most dramatic example of the depths that Farragut’s marriage has descended to occurs when he returns from a rehabilitation clinic in Colorado where he had been staying because of damage to his heart caused by his use of heroin. Upon arriving home, Farragut informs his wife of the doctor’s instructions to avoid high-pressure or tense situations because they could be potentially fatal. After Farragut explains this danger to his wife, she storms down the hall, slamming the door behind her and causing an immediate reaction from Farragut’s heart that leaves him dizzy and breathless. When she emerges, Farragut’s wife asks him if there’s anything that she can get him. Farragut says, “Some sort of kindness. A little kindness.” Rather than pitying him or showing him any kind of love, Farragut’s wife refuses his request and
says, “Kindness? Do you expect kindness from me at a time like this? What have you ever done to deserve kindness? What have you ever given to me?” (Cheever 49-50).

Through this scene, wherein Farragut’s very life may depend upon a little kindness from his wife, Cheever symbolically shows the poisonous results of a society that emphasizes self-gratification and concern only for one’s own needs. Farragut, through his drug use and admitted infidelity, has certainly contributed to the wretched state of his marriage and the consequences of his pursuit of personal happiness, regardless of its effect on his marriage, have left both Farragut and his wife in a near constant state of misery and hatred. Cheever uses Farragut’s tragic marriage as a picture of the importance of human kindness and the serious problems that arise when it is absent.

Cheever, through Farragut’s memories of his childhood, also depicts the ways in which families fail children. Farragut blames his addiction to heroin and his prison sentence on the dysfunctional environment that he grew up in. Cheever says of Farragut, “He had been raised by people who dealt in contraband. Not hard drugs, but unlicensed spiritual, intellectual and erotic stimulants” (Cheever 55). Cheever states that Farragut’s family had “endeavored to be versatile at every political, spiritual and erotic level. It helped to explain the fact that he was an addict” (Cheever 56). This lack of identity left Farragut feeling unstable and confused, fostering a need for drugs to help him deal with the frustrating inconsistencies of the world. When he got older, Farragut found that his father had wanted to “have his life extinguished as he dwelt in his mother’s womb, and how could he live happily with this knowledge without the support of those plants that draw their wisdom from the soil?” (Cheever 58) Later, Farragut’s father threatened to kill himself because his wife, Farragut’s mother, had flung a list of her failings as a woman
that he had made into the fire. Farragut went searching for his father and found him making an embarrassing scene at an amusement park. When his father finally came down from the roller-coaster, having not killed himself, Farragut said “Oh, Daddy, you shouldn’t do this to me in my formative years” (Cheever 64). These instances of family strife and dysfunction all worked together to form Farragut into a person who relies on drugs for peace and fails to have a happy family life of his own. Farragut was started on the road to discontent and emptiness at a young age. Farragut’s relationship with his brother, Eben, also figured heavily into the direction that his life took. One time when they were both children and walking on the beach together, Eben suggested that Farragut take a quick swim. Farragut, always eager to swim, began to get into the water when suddenly an old man ran up and warned him of the riptide and sharks in that area of the beach (Cheever 48-49). On another occasion, Eben and Farragut were both at a party and someone pushed Farragut out of a second-story window from behind. Though he never found out who it was, he strongly suspects that it was Eben (Cheever 51). Farragut views both of these instances as evidence that his brother hated him enough to attempt to kill him. Farragut eventually kills Eben, which is why he is sentenced to prison. Farragut claims that the killing was an accident, though he certainly intended to strike his brother. During a bitter argument at Eben’s house, right before Farragut strikes him with a fire iron, Eben screams, referring to their father, “He wanted you to be killed. I bet you didn’t know that. He loved me but he wanted you to be killed. Mother told me. He had an abortionist come to the house. Your own father wanted you to be killed” (Cheever 212). The incredible amount of resentment and apparent rivalry between the two brothers are, once these feelings come to a head, what cause Farragut’s incarceration. Farragut’s
family, unable to provide him with any kind of support as he faces the problems of modern society, actually pushes him further into a reliance on drugs. This reliance on heroin is the result of Farragut’s need for some way to make sense of the world. One example of this is the way in which he views his own mother. Cheever explains the problem that arises when Farragut thinks about his mother, saying, “There is a Degas painting of a woman with a bowl of chrysanthemums that had come to represent to Farragut the great serenity of ‘mother.’ The world kept urging him to match his own mother, a famous arsonist, snob, gas pumper and wing shot, against the image of the stranger with her autumnal and bitter-smelling flowers” (Cheever 58). In order to deal with this crisis, this “gap,” Farragut feels that he must consume drugs that enable him to reconcile his actual life with his ideal life. Farragut also uses the story of a girl he knew, Polly, to illustrate the fact that drugs are necessary in order for him to deal with the world that he has encountered through his experiences with people and their cruel inconsistencies. Polly’s mother, a professional singer, gives a performance that Farragut and Polly attend. Polly, who is fat, cannot restrain herself and, during the course of the performance, eats all of the complimentary rolls on the table. At the party after the show, Polly’s mother heads straight for her and says, “Polly, I could have killed you. You sat right in front of me, right in front of me, and during the first set of my big comeback you ate a whole basket of rolls – eight: I counted them – and you cleaned up one of those ice cream scoops of butter. How can I follow my arrangements when I’m counting the rolls you eat? Oh, I could have killed you.” Crushed and crying, Polly and Farragut return to the hotel and use cocaine in an attempt to numb the pain of a direct attack from a loved one. “What else could you do?” (Cheever 59). Farragut truly believes that family cannot
help a person deal with the pain of living in modern society. In fact, family members and family responsibilities are often the sources of the most intense pain. Because he cannot rely on loving kindness from those he is close to, he feels that his only hope is to turn to heroin to help him attempt to make sense of his life. This, in turn, leads to even more family strife, creates an all-consuming addiction, and damages his heart. Cheever seems to be saying that pain is unavoidable in our society. Authority figures, loved ones, and methods of distraction are incapable of completely curing a person of heartache and misery.

Farragut’s life and perspective on living changes steadily once he is imprisoned in Falconer. Because his daily life in Falconer is so vastly different from his daily life as a free man, he begins to think in different ways. By the time Farragut escapes from prison at the end of the book, he has become a very different, much happier and more content man.

When Farragut is on the bus that is taking him to Falconer to begin his sentence, the windows are “so high and unclean” that he cannot “see the color of the sky or any of the lights and shapes of the world he (is) leaving” (Cheever 2). Farragut is entering a whole new world, from his perspective, and he cannot even see the basic elements or outlines of the free world that he is leaving behind. Now, as a convicted criminal, even his view of the world of the free citizens is restricted. Later, after a severe rainstorm, Farragut is struck by the fresh, invigorating scent of the rain. Cheever says that, to Farragut, there was only “a trace, a memory of this primitive excitement, but it had been cruelly eclipsed by the bars” (131). Even the small tastes of the outside world that Farragut receives are constantly altered by the fact that he is imprisoned and confined.
As a prisoner, Farragut is at the mercy of other people in a way that he has never experienced before. Because the prisoners are so lonely, they grow to develop very strong senses of affection for the thousands of cats that have the freedom to roam all over Falconer. Cheever says, “Loneliness taught the intransigent to love their cats as loneliness can change anything on earth” (38). This simple love for another creature is a product of the new, changed Farragut. But, unfortunately, the cats are eventually slaughtered by the guards and Farragut is wounded deeply by this experience. But the change in his character is undeniable. During a riot at another prison, The Wall, all of the guards at Falconer become very worried. Farragut and the rest of cell block F are forced to undergo a short arm inspection, which is a check for sexually transmitted diseases by a civilian doctor. During short arm, explains Cheever, “they would be humiliated and naked and the power of mandatory nakedness was inestimable” (157). He continues, stating that the doctor “wore a felt hat to stress the sovereignty of sartorial rule. He, the civilian judge, was crowned with a hat while the penitents were naked, and with their sins, their genitals, their boastfulness and their memories exposed they seemed shameful” (Cheever 158). Here, in Falconer Prison, Farragut has felt what it is like to be treated as less than human. He begins to understand the ways in which the people with authority impose rules and regulations to stress the differences between those with power and those without. When Farragut first arrives at cell block F, Tiny, the guard, lists the kinds of men who Farragut will now be living with and associated with. Tiny says, “F stands for fucks, freaks, fools, fruits, first-timers, fat-asses like me, phantoms, funnies, fanatics, feebies, fences and farts” (Cheever 8). Rather than being regarded as a well-to-do, socially acceptable college professor, Farragut is now lumped in with the absolute outcasts of society. They’re not
only considered dangerous, but also pathetic. Robert Beuka explains that for Cheever’s characters, the “worm in the apple” of their happiness is the “paranoid fear of losing one’s place in society – of falling through the cracks (106).” This ultimate fear is realized in Farragut’s case.

It is in this environment, where Farragut has no freedom and is treated as if he has no inherent value, that he begins to understand the problems that confront society on a greater scale, outside the walls of Falconer. From his window, Farragut can see the people coming and going from the visitors’ center at Falconer. Watching, he notices the fact that these people are oblivious to their freedom. Cheever, expressing Farragut’s thoughts to the reader, says that these people “were free to run, jump, fuck, drink, book a seat on the Tokyo plane. They were free and yet they moved so casually through this precious element that it seemed wasted on them. There was no appreciation of freedom in the way they moved” (28). Farragut notices that these people, unaware of how good they have it, do not take advantage of the relatively unrestricted lives that they lead. A little later, Cheever describes the people that Farragut watches going about their mundane lives, using umbrellas, rooting through handbags, and drying tears with paper scraps, saying, “These were their constraints, the signs of their confinement, but there was some naturalness, some unself-consciousness about their imprisonment that he, watching them between bars, cruelly lacked” (28). Farragut recognizes that these people are trapped by their lives, but that they lack the realization and awareness that would allow them to take full advantage of their opportunities. Only through time in prison, where his ability to choose has been removed, can Farragut really begin to understand how important it is to exercise the ability to choose when the opportunities are presented. After the short arm
check for STDs, Farragut's fellow inmates begin to bicker and fight amongst themselves over extremely trivial matters. During this time, the prisoners over at The Wall have captured a large number of guards and are making demands on the government. Farragut sees this as extremely important. He believes that what happens at The Wall could have a direct effect, positive or negative, on the lives of all the prisoners in Falconer as well. But The Cuckold, one of the inmates in cell block F, and Chicken Number Two, as well as a few others, can only focus on the insignificant events right in front of their noses, failing to understand what is really important on a large scale. At this point, Farragut realizes how ridiculous the men around him are. Cheever explains: "Naked, utterly unbeautiful, malodorous and humiliated by a clown in a dirty suit and a dirty hat, they seemed to Farragut, in the climax of the light, to be criminals. None of the cruelties of their early lives - hunger, thirst and beatings - could account for their brutality, their self-destructive thefts and their consuming and perverse addictions. They were souls who could not be redeemed, and while penance was a clumsy and a cruel answer, it was some measure of the mysteriousness of their fall. In the white light they seemed to Farragut to be fallen men" (162-163). Farragut is disgusted by the ridiculous ways that these men allow themselves to be diverted from worthwhile goals by stupid, petty conflicts. He does not understand their extreme short-sightedness. Near the end of the book, Farragut sees a TV show playing on a TV at the end of a corridor in the prison, but he cannot hear what the characters are saying. Describing the scene on the television, Cheever says, "Out of the window beyond their heads and shoulders Farragut could see waves breaking on a white beach and the streets of a village and the trees of a forest, but why did they all stay in one room, quarreling, when they could walk to the store or eat a picnic in the woods or go for
a swim in the sea? They were free to do all of this. Why did the stay indoors? Why didn’t they hear the sea calling to them as Farragut heard it calling, imagine the clearness of the brine as it fanned out over the beautiful pebbles?” (215). The comparison between the men in cell block F and the family on the TV is clear. When confronted with the possibility of improving their situation, the prisoners fail to notice, too caught up in miniscule grievances against each other to take any action. The people on TV, free to do whatever they could happen to want to do, are call caught up in quarreling with each other, indoors, while the beautiful world outside their house is ignored. Farragut recognizes the value of refusing to let minor, unnecessary issues distract him from appreciating life and the few opportunities for happiness and contentment that it offers. Farragut’s time in prison is directly responsible for his shift from a focus on the distracting details of a generally unpleasant life to a fuller understanding of the important aspects of human existence. In fact, it is through his time in prison that Farragut is able to break his addiction to heroin. One day he discovers that he’s been receiving nothing but placebos for some time and he is intrigued by the fact that Falconer Prison was able to achieve in him what the professional rehabilitation clinics were not (Cheever 199). Falconer’s role in cleansing Farragut of his heroin addiction can serve as a symbol for the way that Falconer acts on Farragut to produce a real appreciation of freedom and moments of clarity and honest joy.

Farragut’s capacity for latching on to small, pleasant moments and using these moments to help him cope with the harsh realities of his life in prison is what saves him from becoming like the other inmates that surround him. John Gardner says of Farragut’s experiences in prison, “What redeems this miserable, ghastly world is miracles – the
small miracles of humor and compassion that we may without lunacy extend to universal principle, even to a loving though somewhat feeble God” (128). In a letter that he composes to the bishop of his church, Farragut acknowledges that he believes God’s basic essence to be judgment. That is, he believes that men are punished with much more passion than they are rewarded with. Farragut believes that the “hell” of Falconer Prison is much more passionately constructed and operated than the “paradise” on the other side of the walls (Cheever 77). He is perfectly willing to acknowledge that the pain in the world far outweighs the pleasure and happiness. Rarely does the punishment fit the crime, in Farragut’s opinion. However, it is his willingness to take his consolation from the pleasant and reassuring moments, his decision to hold tightly to the good things in his life that enables him to cope with the disastrous, destructive society that surrounds him, whether inside or outside the walls of Falconer.

Although, at first, he is unable to experience real joy in his encounters with the seemingly-mundane points of calmness or optimism in his days, Farragut realizes immediately that these details are necessary in order to keep from being overwhelmed with cruelty and struggle. When he arrives at Falconer, he realizes that this is the place where he will die. But before Farragut can be overwhelmed by this thought, Cheever says, “he saw the blue sky and nailed his identity to it” (7). As he is marched into prison, Farragut sees a man feeding bread crusts to pigeons. Cheever explains the impact that this scene has on Farragut, saying, “This image had for him an extraordinary reality, a promise of saneness. The man was a convict and he and the bread and the pigeons were all unwanted but for reasons unknown to Farragut the image of a man sharing his crusts with birds had the resonance of great antiquity” (5). When he steps inside the prison
building itself, Farragut notices a small strand of Christmas garland hanging from the ceiling, which to him seems to “represent a grain of reason” (Cheever 6). When his wife visits him the first time, Farragut glances out the window and sees the prison laundry blowing in the breeze. At this sight, Cheever says that Farragut “for a moment...felt himself to be a man of the world” (14). These common occurrences seem neither good nor bad, but merely neutral. To Farragut, however, they are important, allowing him to feel as if there are still things in the world that are normal and understandable. It is the assured feeling that he obtains from these moments that causes him to wake up to the potential for joy, even in the confines of Falconer Prison.

Farragut, through his gradual awakening to the possibility of finding love and beauty while a prisoner, has several experiences that stand out to him as powerfully moving moments. While mowing the lawn on a hot, summer day, Farragut thinks to himself, “I have my memories. You can’t take my memories away from me” (Cheever 144). Even though Farragut, in the present, is trapped inside of a cold, cruel prison, surrounded by criminals, he is able to find peace and contentment through the process of journeying through his pleasant memories. Despite all of the sad, bitter and angry moments that he recalls with his wife, Farragut also remembers two especially fulfilling and love-filled moments. To Farragut, one of the happiest moments of his marriage was one day, after his wife woke from a nap, when they both sat naked in the bathroom discussing the effects of Brie on their bowels while his wife bathed. Cheever says, “That was their marriage then – not the highest paving of the stair, the clatter of Italian fountains, the wind in the alien olive trees, but this: a jay-naked male and female discussing their bowels” (19). The other moment from his marriage that Farragut
remembers fondly is the time that, waking in the middle of the night, he heard their new puppy vomiting downstairs. When he went down to clean it up, his wife followed and helped him. Then, after she hit her head on the piano, they embraced and made love, brought closer through the mutually shared project of cleaning up after and caring for the puppy (Cheever 19-20). Though these moments do not seem especially romantic and though they are far removed from Farragut’s life in prison, he is able to lift his spirits by thinking back to moments of such intimacy and tenderness. He is able to appreciate the moments in their simplicity and innocence, secure in the fact that they happened and cannot be undone.

Able to hold on to uplifting times from his past life, despite the fact that it was often unfulfilling, Farragut is also open to the surprising, life-affirming occurrences that spring up unexpectedly in Falconer Prison. A fitting example of this can be seen when the cardinal comes to Falconer for a special ceremony. When the cardinal climbs into the helicopter, leaving the prison after the conclusion of the ceremony, Cheever describes the scene, saying, “Someone put a recording of cathedral bells on the public address system and up they went to this glorious clamor. Oh, glory, glory, glory! The exaltation of the bells conquered the scratching of the needle and a slight warp in the record. The sound of the chopper and the bells filled heaven and earth. They all cheered and cheered and cheered and some of them cried” (138). The transcendent sound of the bells overcoming the limitations of the public address system is symbolic of the way that Farragut’s joy overcomes his dirty, confined existence. He is able to experience real, profound emotions through experiences that a person who has not come to appreciate the more subtle goodness of life through time spent in prison could not. When the prisoners are offered a
chance to have their picture taken next to a decorated Christmas scene, Farragut is impressed with the quality of the scene. “The intelligence or the craft of the hand that had set this scene filled Farragut with the deepest admiration. He listened for the clash of men, the sirens, the roar of mortal enemies, tearing at one another’s heads, but this was gone, conquered by the balm of the plastic tree, glittering with crown jewels and surrounded by treasure” (Cheever 172). Later, after their pictures have been taken, Ransome, an inmate, climbs up on a chair and rips scraps of paper into chunks, sprinkling them in the air like snow and singing “Silent Night.” Several of the other prisoners pick up the carol, and they all sing together, happily, truly enjoying the moment (Cheever 176). Though they eventually return to their cells, Farragut can hold onto that joyful moment and experience those positive feelings over and over again.

In Faloner Prison, Farragut experiences true love. Despite priding himself on his ability to sleep with beautiful women, Farragut finds himself very much in love with a younger man named Jody. Referring to Farragut’s homosexual relationship with Jody, Cheever states, “From what Farragut has read about prison life in the newspapers he had expected this to happen, but what he had not expected was that this grotesque bonding of their relationship would provoke in him so profound a love” (96). Farragut finds the kind of love in Jody that he did not receive from his wife. He feels a sincere, deep love for Jody that encourages him, sustains him and provides him with hope. After Jody starts an affair with another man in order to facilitate his eventual escape, Farragut does not react with jealousy or anger, but rather with an intense desire for all that Jody is. Cheever describes Farragut’s want for Jody, saying, “The longing began in his speechless genitals, for which the brain cells acted as interpreter. The longing then moved up from his
genitals to his viscera and from there to his heart, his soul, his mind, until his entire carcass was filled with longing” (104-105). Farragut is not simply interested in Jody as a temporary replacement for a woman. He truly seems to love him for all that he is. This is shown even more clearly when Farragut hears from Jody’s lover who helped him escape, DiMatteo, that Jody made it into the civilian world and married the daughter of the owner of a factory. When Farragut hears this he responds with loud laughter, thrilled at Jody’s success, whereas DiMatteo reacts with resentment and bitterness (Cheever 146). Farragut is truly happy for Jody because he truly loves him and wants him to be happy. Prison has shown Farragut what true love entails.

The kind of man that Falconer Prison has turned Farragut into is evidenced at the end of the book, when Chicken Number Two gets very sick. Since the infirmary’s beds are full, the guard asks Farragut to take care of Chicken and Farragut agrees. Though both the guard and Chicken tell Farragut that he doesn’t need to wash Chicken’s body, Farragut insists on providing that kindness for him (Cheever 202). Later, Cheever describes Farragut’s tenderness toward Chicken, saying, “He went to the chair beside Chicken Number Two’s bed and took the dying man’s warm hand in his. He seemed to draw from Chicken Number Two’s presence a deep sense of freeness; he seemed to take something that Chicken Number Two was lovingly giving to him” (216). In this way, Farragut finds that the act of providing kindness to someone else can provide meaning and fulfillment. He shows a real concern for the comfort and interests of another person, a person who is dirty, smelly, crude and unloved, and as a result he transcends the harsh reality of the life he leads. And, because of this kindness, Farragut is also able to physically escape Falconer by hiding in the body bag brought for Chicken’s body. He is
carried outside in the bag and set on the ground. While inside the bag, preparing to cut his way out with a razor blade, Cheever says of Farragut, “He needed time, but he would not pray for time or pray for anything else. He would settle for the stamina of love, a presence he felt like the beginnings of some stair” (220). Farragut, a changed man since his time in prison, now feels an apparent love inside of him, caused by his sincere gratitude at being alive and capable of appreciating all that life has to offer. He is free of heroin and possesses a genuine kindness.

After his escape becomes reality and Farragut is free to roam through the city at night, he meets a man at a bus stop. This man is very nice to Farragut and very generous. He offers Farragut a place to stay, speaks to him in a friendly way, invites him to sit next to him on the bus, gives him a coat since it starts raining and compliments Farragut on how good he looks, all without commenting on Farragut’s prison issue clothing (Cheever 224-225). When Jody escapes from prison, earlier in the book, he is also assisted by a person who has no reason to help. The cardinal helps Jody to complete his escape by comforting him and helping him to purchase a new set of clothing (Cheever 139-141). Both Jody and Farragut are enabled in their escapes from Falconer with the aid of two strangers, who have nothing to gain by helping them but merely act out of compassion. Cheever uses these examples to show how small acts of human decency can positively affect the lives of other people in very significant ways. When Farragut gets off the bus, his new outlook on life comes all the way to the forefront. Cheever says, “Stepping from the bus onto the street, he saw that he had lost his fear of falling and all other fears of that nature. He held his head high, his back straight, and walked along nicely. Rejoice, he thought, rejoice” (226). Elated by his physical freedom, yes, but also elated by his
freedom from heroin, his newfound ability to appreciate the subtly wonderful things in
life, and the joy of shared human kindness, Farragut, a much different man than when he
entered Falconer Prison, returns to the world prepared to experience it as completely as
he can.

By passing through the crucible of Falconer Prison, Farragut emerges with a
much clearer sense of what matters. He seems to be driven by a compassionate spirit and
a profound joy for life. Cheever, aware of the nervous, uneasy and frightened attitudes
that held Americans down in the 1970s, uses Farragut as an example of someone who has
experienced even greater pains than the average American, but is still capable of
gratitude, kindness and inner peace. Cheever, in *Falconer*, is encouraging the
directionless, hopeless people of 1970s America to stop allowing corruption and injustice
to keep them down. He is showing his readers that lasting happiness is built through the
accumulation of instances of momentary happiness that can be recalled and dwelt upon in
times of severe struggle or pain. If Ezekiel Farragut can do it, an imprisoned heroin
addict with no support from his family and no cause for any hope at all, then so can
anyone else, regardless of the unfair, uncertain, or unstable aspects of modern life.
Works Cited


