



Falconer

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ALFRED A. KNOPF / NEW YORK / 1977



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PUBLISHED BY ALFRED A. KNOPF, INC.

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Published in the United States

by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York,

and simultaneously in Canada

by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Distributed by Random House, Inc., New York.

A portion of this book originally
appeared in *Playboy* magazine.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Cheever, John. Falconer.

I. Title

PZ3.C3983F3 [PS3505.H6428] 76-19382

ISBN 0-394-41071-8

Manufactured in the United States of America

Published March 21, 1977

Reprinted Three Times

Fifth Printing, March 1977

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The main entrance to Falconer—the only entrance for convicts, their visitors and the staff—was 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. How many hundreds had passed under this, the last emblem most of them would see of

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man's endeavor to interpret the mystery of imprisonment in terms of symbols. Hundreds, one guessed, thousands, millions was close. Above the escutcheon was a declension of the place-names: Falconer Jail 1871, Falconer Reformatory, Falconer Federal Penitentiary, Falconer State Prison, Falconer Correctional Facility, and the last, which had never caught on: Daybreak House. Now cons were inmates, the assholes were officers and the warden was a superintendent. Fame is chancy, God knows, but Falconer—with its limited accommodations for two thousand miscreants—was as famous as Newgate. Gone was the water torture, the striped suits, the lock step, the balls and chains, and there was a softball field where the gallows had stood, but at the time of which I'm writing, leg irons were still used in Auburn. You could tell the men from Auburn by the noise they made.

Farragut (fratricide, zip to ten, #734-508-32) had been brought to this old iron place on a late summer's day. He wore no leg irons but was manacled to nine other men, four of them black and all of them younger than he. The windows of the van were so high and unclear that he could not see the color of the sky or any of the lights and shapes of the world he was leaving. He had been given forty milligrams of methadone three hours earlier and, torpid, he wanted to see the light of day. The driver, he noticed, stopped for traffic lights, blew his horn and braked on steep hills, but this was all they seemed to share with the rest of humanity. The inestimable shyness of men seemed to paralyze most of them, but not the man manacled to his right. He was a gaunt man with bright hair and a

face hideously disfigured by boils and acne. "I hear they have a ball team and if I can play ball I'll be all right. Just so long as I can pitch a game I'll stay alive," he said. "If I can play ball that'll be enough for me. I never know the score, though. That's the way I pitch. The year before last I pitched a no-hitter for North Edmonton and I didn't know about it until I come off the mound and heard everybody yelling. And I never got laid free, never once. I paid anywhere from fifty cents to fifty dollars, but I never once shot a lump for free. I guess that's like not knowing the score. Nobody ever give it to me willingly. I know hundreds of men, not so good-looking as me, who get it for nothing all the time, but I never got it once, not once for nothing. I just wish I had it free, once."

The van stopped. The man on Farragut's left was tall, and striding out of the van into the yard, threw Farragut to his knees. Farragut got to his feet. He saw the escutcheon for the first and, he thought, the last time. This was where he would die. Then he saw the blue sky and nailed his identity to it and to the phrasing of four letters that he had begun to write to his wife, his lawyer, his governor and his bishop. A handful of people watched them quickstep across the yard. Then he distinctly heard a voice say, "But they look so nice!" That would have been some innocent, some stray, and Farragut heard a man in uniform say, "Turn your back and any one of them would put a shiv in it." But the stray was right. The blue in the space between the van and the prison was the first spread of blue some of them had seen in months. How extraordinary it was and how truly pure they seemed! They would never

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again look so well. The light of the sky, shining into their condemned faces, showed a great richness of purpose and innocence. "They murder," said the guard, "they rape, they stuff babies into furnaces, they'd strangle their own mother for a stick of chewing gum." Then he turned from the stray to the convicts and began to call: "You're going to be good boys, you're gonna be good boys, you're gonna be good, good boys. . . ." He spread out his call like a train whistle, a hound's belling, some late-night lonely song or cry.

They pulled one another up some stairs into a shabby room. Falconer was very shabby, and the shabbiness of the place—everything one saw and touched and smelled had the dimension of neglect—gave the impression, briefly, that this must surely be the twilight and the dying of enforced penance, although there was a tenanted death house in the north of the place. The bars had been enameled white many years ago, but the enamel had been worn back to iron at the chest level, where men instinctively held them. In a farther room the guard who called them good boys unlocked their irons and the deep pleasure of being able to move his arms and his shoulders freely was something Farragut shared with the others. They all rubbed their wrists with their hands. "What time you got?" asked the man with boils. "Ten-fifteen," said Farragut. "I mean what time of year," said the man. "You got one of them calendar watches. I wanna know the time of year. Here, let me see it, let me see it." Farragut unstrapped his expensive watch and passed it to the stranger and the stranger put it in his pocket. "He stole my watch," Farragut said to the guard. "He just stole my watch."

"Oh, did he rahlly," said the guard, "did he rahlly steal your watch?" Then he turned to the thief and asked, "How long was your vacation?" "Ninety-three days," said the thief. "Is that the longest you been out?" "The time before last I was out for a year and a half," said the thief. "Will wonders never cease?" asked the guard. But all of this, all that there was to be seen and heard, was wasted on Farragut, who perceived nothing but paralysis and terror.

They were marshaled into a broken-down truck with wooden benches and driven down a road within the walls. At a turn in the road Farragut saw a man in prison grays feeding bread crusts to a dozen pigeons. 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. He stood in the truck to watch for as long as he could. He was similarly moved when, in the building they entered, he saw, high on a water pipe at the ceiling, a tarnished silver Christmas garland. The irony was banal but it seemed, like the man feeding birds, to represent a grain of reason. Under the Christmas garland they went into a room furnished with writing chairs whose legs were broken, whose varnish was gone, whose writing surfaces were scarred with initials and obscenities and which seemed, like everything else in Falconer, to have been salvaged from some municipal dump. The first of the screenings was a psychological test that Farragut had already taken in the three drug addiction clinics that he had been confined to.

"Are you afraid of germs on doorknobs?" he read; "Would you like to hunt tigers in the jungle?" The irony of this was immeasurably less penetrating and moving than the man feeding birds and the silver link to Christmas, hung on a pipe. It took them half that day to answer the five hundred questions and then they were marshaled into the mess hall for a meal.

This was much older and larger than what he had seen in the house of detention. I-beams crossed the ceiling. In a tin pitcher on a window sill were some wax flowers whose colors, in that somber place, seemed fiery. He ate sour food with a tin spoon and dropped his spoon and plate into dirty water. Silence was enforced by the administration, but they had themselves enforced a segregation that put the blacks in the north, the whites in the south, with a middle ground for the men who spoke Spanish. After chow his physical, religious and professional characteristics were examined and then, after a long delay, he was led alone into a room where three men in cheap business suits were sitting at a wrecked desk. At either end of the desk were sheathed flags. On the left was a window in which he could see the blue sky beneath whose light he guessed a man might still be feeding pigeons. His head, neck and shoulders had begun to ache and he was very stooped by the time he reached this tribunal and felt himself to be a very small man, a runt, someone who had never experienced or tasted or imagined the greatness of immodesty.

"You are a professor," said the man on the left, who seemed to speak for the three. Farragut did not raise his head to see his face. "You are a professor and the

education of the young—of all those who seek learning—is your vocation. We learn by experience, do we not, and as a professor, distinguished by the responsibilities of intellectual and moral leadership, you have chosen to commit the heinous crime of fratricide while under the influence of dangerous drugs. Aren't you ashamed?" "I want to be sure that I get my methadone," Farragut said. "Oh, is there no shame in you!" the man exclaimed. "We are here to help. We are here to help. Until you confess to shame you will have no place in the civilian world." Farragut made no reply. "Next," the man said, and Farragut was shown out a door at the back. "I'm Tiny," a man there said. "Hurry up. I ain't got all day."

Tiny's size was frightening. He was not tall, but his bulk was so unnatural that his clothes would have had to be sewn for him alone, and in spite of what he said about haste he walked very slowly, impeded by the bulk of his thighs. His gray hair was cut like a brush and you could see his scalp. "You got cellblock F," he said. "F stands for fucks, freaks, fools, fruits, first-timers, fatasses like me, phantoms, funnies, fanatics, feebies, fences and farts. There's more, but I forget it. The guy who made it up is dead." They went up a sloping tunnel past groups of men who hung around talking like men on the street. "F is temporary for you, I think," said Tiny. "The funny way you talk, they'll put you in A, where they have the lieutenant governor and the secretary of commerce and all the millionaires." Tiny turned right and he followed him through an open door into the cellblock. Like everything else, it was shabby, disorderly and malodorous, but his cell had a window and

he went to this and saw some sky, two high water towers, the wall, more cellblocks and a corner of the yard that he had entered on his knees. His arrival in the block was hardly noticed. While he was making his bed, someone asked, "You rich?" "No," said Farragut. "You clean?" "No," said Farragut. "You suck?" "No," said Farragut. "You innocent?" Farragut didn't reply. Someone at the back of the block struck a guitar and began to sing in a tuneless bluegrass voice: "I got those innocence blues/I'm feeling blue all the time. . . ." This could barely be heard above the noise of radios which—talking, singing, performing music—sounded like any city street at closing time or later.

No one spoke to Farragut at all until, just before the lights went off, the man by whose voice he recognized the singer came to his door. He was skinny and old and had a light, unpleasant voice. "I'm Chicken Number Two," he said. "Don't go looking around for Chicken Number One. He's dead. You've probably read about me in the paper. I'm the famous tattooed man, the light-fingered second-story worker who spent his fortune on body art. I'll show you my pictures someday when I get to know you better." He leered. "But what I come to tell you is that it's all a mistake, a terrible mistake, I mean you being here. They won't find out tomorrow, it'll be a week or two before they discover this mistake they made, but when they discover it they'll be so sorry, so ashamed of themselves, they'll feel so guilty that the governor will kiss your ass on Fifth Avenue during the Christmas rush. Oh, they'll feel so sorry. Because you see, every trip we make, even for the boneheads, has something good at the end of it

like a pot of gold or a fountain of youth or an ocean or a river nobody ain't never seen before or at least a big porterhouse steak with a baked potato. There has to be something good at the end of every journey and that's why I wanted you to know that it's all a terrible mistake. And during the time you're waiting for them to discover this big mistake you'll have your visitors. Oh, I can tell, just by the way you sit there, that you got thousands of friends and lovers and a wife, of course. Your wife will come to visit you. She'll have to come and visit you. She ain't going to be able to divorce you unless you sign the papers and she'll have to bring them here herself. So all I wanted to tell you is what you already knew—it's all a big mistake, a terrible mistake."

Farragut's first visitor was his wife. He was raking leaves in yard Y when the PA said that 734-508-32 had a visitor. He jogged up the road past the firehouse and into the tunnel. It was four flights up to cellblock F. "Visitor," he said to Walton, who let him into his cell. He kept his white shirt prepared for visits. It was dusty. He washed his face and combed his hair with water. "Don't take nuttin but a handkerchief," said the guard. "I know, I know, I know. . . ." Down he went to the door of the visitors' room, where he was frisked. Through the glass he saw that his visitor was Marcia.

There were no bars in the visitors' room, but the glass windows were chicken-wired and open only at the top. A skinny cat couldn't get in or out, but the sounds of the prison moved in freely on the breeze. She would, he knew, have passed three sets of bars—clang, clang, clang—and waited in an anteroom where there were pews or benches, soft-drink engines and a display of the convicts' art with prices stuck in the frames. None of the cons could paint, but you could always count on some wet-brain to buy a vase of roses or a marine sunset if he had been told that the artist was a lifer. There were no pictures on the walls of the visitors' room but there were four signs that said: NO SMOKING. NO WRITING. NO EXCHANGE OF OBJECTS. VISITORS ARE ALLOWED ONE KISS. These were also in Spanish. NO SMOKING had been scratched out. The visitors' room in Falconer, he had been told, was the most lenient in the East. There were no obstructions—nothing but a three-foot counter between the free and the unfree. While he was being frisked he looked around at the other visitors—not so much out of curiosity as to see if there was anything here that might offend Marcia. A con was holding a baby. A weeping old woman talked to a young man. Nearest to Marcia was a Chicano couple. The woman was beautiful and the man was caressing her bare arms.

Farragut stepped into this no man's land and came on hard, as if he had been catapulted into the visit by mere circumstance. "Hello darling," he exclaimed as he had exclaimed "Hello darling" at trains, boats, airports, the foot of the driveway, journey's end; but in the past