



IF THERE IS ONE THING that Seth Ferranti wants you to understand, it is that he is not (despite his current confinement in Federal Correctional Institution, Beckley, West Virginia) an "inmate." Refer to him that way and Seth, ordinarily a polite, soft-spoken twenty-seven-year-old, will sharply interrupt you.

"Prisoner," he says. "I'm a prisoner in the War on Drugs."

Arrested in the summer of 1991 for leading a small band of suburban LSD peddlers in his upper-middle-class neighborhood of Fairfax, Virginia, Seth (under federal sentencing guidelines) faced a mandatory sentence of at least twenty years. His reaction to this news, while not exactly smart, was understandable — especially for a kid barely out of his teens at the time. He parked his car near the Potomac River, leaving his jacket, an empty vodka bottle and a suicide note. Then he fled.

The cops immediately saw through the ruse (no corpse washed up on the riverbank), and Seth was placed on the U.S. Marshals list of fifteen most-wanted fugitives. He managed to elude capture for two years — living under a series of false identities, zigzagging from Hollywood, California, to Texas to St. Louis (where, despite his constant fear of cap-

ture, he made sure to catch Lollapalooza when it swung through town). On October 1st, 1993, he was finally brought to ground while lounging in bed in a motel in Bridgeton, Missouri. Extradited to Virginia, he was sentenced to twenty-five years and four months on a charge of

running a "continuing criminal enterprise."

This charge fell under the "drug kingpin" law — a law more commonly associated with the likes of Manuel Noriega or John Gotti. Seth, by contrast, was a twenty-two-year-old, first-time, nonviolent

offender whose crew had consisted of six former high-school pals. There's no chance of parole. Barring the miracle that his mother daily prays for, Seth will see the rest of his youth ebb away within FCI Beckley's off-white walls. His estimated release date is shortly before his

forty-second birthday.

Seated in the prison's anti-septic visitors' room, Seth certainly does not look like a dangerous international drug kingpin. Dressed in an incongruously fashionable yellowish brown prison-issue shirt and pants, and with his dark brown

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BY JOHN COLAPINTO

hair falling to his shoulders, he looks more like a slightly sleepy-eyed, laid-back stoner dude who can't figure out how the living fuck he got where he is. Only when Seth speaks do you realize that he's not laid-back at all – that a tumult of unplumbed anger, frustration, fear and outrage bubbles away constantly under his studiously neutral exterior. After almost five years in prison, he has learned that it is not a good idea to display signs of emotional vulnerability. Indeed, to hear Seth tell it, everything about surviving prison – its tedium and monotony, its physical and mental dangers, its numbing rounds of routines and regulations – is about a willed suppression of instinct.

His cell, which he shares with a cellmate (a young man a few years Seth's junior who is in on a rape charge), measures six feet by ten. It contains one metal bunk bed, a toilet and sink, and two small storage lockers for personal belongings. The cell's one window looks onto a drab vista of prison warehouses, thin woods and the twenty-foot-high, razor-wire-topped fence that circumscribes the entire medium-security compound and the lives of its 1,151 inmates.

Seth's day begins at 7:20 a.m., when he rises and prepares for work. Like the rest of FCI Beckley's inmates, he works in the prison factory, which produces office chairs. For seven hours a day, he fits foam cushions into molded-plastic seat shells and then staples on upholstery. He makes ninety-two cents an hour. He gets a half-hour for lunch, which is served, cafeteria-style, in the prison chow hall. The food – burgers, fish, chow mein – is, according to Seth, "shit." "A couple of years ago, I worked in the butcher shop," he says. "The meat they get is government surplus. It might be five or ten years old, sitting in a freezer somewhere. We get stuff left over from Desert Storm."

Among the many things that Seth has had to learn to adapt to in prison are his fellow inmates. "Not too many of these dudes grew up in the suburbs," as he puts it. Beatings and stabbings with homemade shivs are by no means unheard-of events in FCI Beckley. Seth has, so far, avoided such scrapes – mostly by making sure that he does not

step on anyone's toes. "You might be rude to someone, disrespect them," he says, "and it might just be the day they got their court papers back that say they lost all their appeals." So it's crucial, Seth says, to be polite. But not too polite. Looking like a pussy carries its own dangers. "Most predators are bullies," he says. "They prey on weak people. So you can't look weak. You just have to be assertive with people. Assertive but polite." By maintaining this difficult act of social equipoise, Seth has managed to make a few friends inside. He tends to hang with bank robbers – largely because he's trying to avoid the people who, as he puts it, "got me involved in this whole type of thing in the first place." He's talking about his fellow drug cases – who can be hard to avoid, considering that they comprise a staggering 60.6 percent of FCI Beckley's population.

In his former prison (FCI Manchester, Kentucky, where he spent the first two years of his sentence), Seth formed a rock band with two other inmates and made an 8-track demo of their original songs – an array of surprisingly catchy death-metal dirges heavy on such lyrics as, "My heart is so cold/Locked up in this hell of mine. . . ." But with implementation of the No Frills Prisons Act of 1996, federal prisons outlawed all electronic devices, including electric guitars and recorders. Bereft of his favorite creative outlet, Seth has since turned his hand to poetry and has already written a sixty-six-page opus titled "Horrendous Scenes at the Mall."

There are many things about freedom that Seth misses. Like women. "Look, I've been locked up five years," he says. "I've got subscriptions to *Hustler* and *Fox*, and I probably masturbate every day. At least once a day. It relieves tension." Seth says it's no big deal to negotiate some privacy. "You say to your cellie, 'Yo, dude, I'm trying to whack off,' and he'll go out onto the unit for a while." So far, he has eschewed the other outlets for his libidinous impulses. "They got gay dudes in here," he says. "A lot of closet dudes, too. Me, personally, I'm not into that stuff, but a lot of that stuff goes on in here."

Forbidden to own a Walkman or a CD player, Seth also

misses keeping up with music. Asked his current favorite band, he mentions Tool and their 1993 CD, *Undertow*. With that utterance, Seth reveals just how quickly he is slipping behind in our accelerated culture – frozen in a grunge-alternative world that is already growing restless with electronics, which he has never heard. He has never logged on to the Internet. The highest-tech writing device he has access to is the prison library's electric typewriter. It's with a kind of horror that you try to imagine just how far out of

touch Seth will be when he is released into the world in the year 2015, fully rehabilitated.

Until then, Seth clings to those few things that sustain him. There's his girlfriend, Diane – just one of several whom Seth had juggled on the outside, but the only one who has stuck with him. She writes regularly, takes his collect calls and, although she lives some 800 miles away, in Missouri, manages to make four visits to the prison each year. His parents have also remained an unflagging support. They have already spent more than \$40,000

on legal fees for their son's case. "And all we've done," says his father, John, "is get Seth twenty five years." They have agreed, at Seth's urging, to cease using lawyers. Seth now relies on the reputed legal know-how of one of his fellow inmates. He seems convinced that he's still got a chance at freedom.

"I know I did something wrong," Seth says. "I broke the law and got caught. I've never said I shouldn't do any time. But as of September, I'll have done five years. As it stands right now, I got eighteen years left. Eighteen years left." ❧