

Fire in My Head:

A Series of True Stories

Wilson F. Sellner Jr.

University of Wyoming Department of Education Curriculum and Instruction

King of the World

It was an unusually warm spring day in May 1977, sunny and windy. I was feeling depressed, and Keith suggested we ditch school and head downtown to the Plush Cue to shoot some pool and drink vodka. We had to bring our own bottle because we weren't old enough to get served at the bar, but they didn't really care. It was a shit-hole pool hall with tattered wall paper, filthy plastic plants, and losers from the lost and found who were always shooting pool and drinking at ten in the morning.

When we walked in, the familiar rotten-cheese-and-sweat smell assaulted our senses. Heart's song, "Barracuda," was playing on the stereo - *You'd have me down, down, down to my knees; wouldn't you, Barracuda?*

We checked out the pool balls from the guy in back. Mr. Vitalis, we called him because he used a ton of gel to slick back his hair. He had the greasiest hands I've ever seen, constantly running his hands through that hair. We took the table with red felt. The others were all the usual green. We flipped for the break, and I won, but my energy was low and nothing sank.

"So sorry, so sad," Keith said. He took a slug of vodka and handed me the bottle. After a few games, two of which I lost, my brain started getting hot. I knew the feeling well by then and that I was in trouble. I was going to start rapid cycling, going from depression to a manic state and back again. It wasn't a pleasant thing and left me dizzy, going from one state to another. But,

it wasn't anything new, so I went with the high and took another couple slugs of vodka.

Anything was better than sitting in a high school classroom being told a bunch of bullshit.

I was racking up the balls for another game when two guys came up to our table. We'd seen them there at the Plush plenty of times before, hustling pool. The one with the red checked flannel shirt asked if we wanted to shoot for money. "Twenty-five a game," he said. He was tall and muscular with wild red-Irish hair. The other guy was stocky and had thick brown hair and a Burt Reynolds mustache. His flannel was blue.

I was in a full-on manic state by then, full of electric energy and having delusions that Keith and I were the best pool players that ever lived, so I put my money down on the rail and said "We're the best pool players in the West!" They laughed at us, thinking they'd found a couple of easy marks. The stocky guy added their money to ours on the rail and said, "Well, son, since you're the best, you break. We're playing 8 ball."

Keith gave me a look like, *what the hell are you doing, man?* But it was too late. The game was on. I finished racking up the table, trying to stay cool, but I was realizing what I'd done. I mean, Keith and I were pretty decent pool players, but we'd never shot pool for this much money before, and these guys were hustlers and probably knew their way around a table way better than we did. Due to the nerves, I descended again into depression. This rapid cycling was bad. I was thinking, *how the hell we were going to pull this off.* The heat was gone. My delusions were gone. I'd slid the other way.

I gave Keith a look and said, "You break."

He sank two on the break, called solids, and ran the table for several shots. Then Mr. Mustache got up and sank three stripes, missed the fourth, and it was my turn. I was mentally shot at this point. All my energy was gone. I took my time chalking my cue, stepped up to the

table, and checked the angles of the shots I had. Everything went silent in my head. A creepy silent like a dark cellar. After I sank my first shot, I was on autopilot. I couldn't miss. When got to the 8 ball, I called it in the corner pocket, and it sank as smooth as could be. Keith, who hadn't said a word the whole time I was at the table, yelled, "Great job Rick!" Then he turned to the hustlers and said "So sorry, so sad, losers. Better luck next time." I'll never forget the look on their faces, stunned to be beaten by a couple of seventeen-year-old punks.

Keith grabbed our money off the rail and we headed for the door to the tune of the Eagles, "Hotel California" - *And still those voices are calling from far away. Wake you up in the middle of the night, just to hear them say...*

I was still in a daze, but when we stepped out into that glorious May day, there wasn't a cloud in the sky and the wind was still up and I felt the electric energy of the manic state surge through my body again. My head was on fire. I was on fire. I was king of the world.

Shangri-La

It was a fall afternoon in 1977. I was sitting in my 1974 Plymouth Roadrunner. It was a beautiful car, silver with a badass hood scoop and black racing stripes down the sides. I was listening to an eight track of Bad Company's *Straight Shooter*. The song "Shooting Star" was playing.

Don't you know you are a shooting star...

I was parked by a gray rusted fence on the side of High School III, waiting for English class to start and downing a pint of Smirnoff. The school was a foreboding place, made of dark red brick and concrete. It looked like a prison. There was a motto carved in granite over the front entrance that said "All who go here seek knowledge." What bullshit. But I was enjoying getting loaded before class; it cut the boredom and the stupidity of forced education.

I did always like English class, though, and that day we were going to be watching a movie of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. I never had seen the movie or read the book, but I had read *The Grapes of Wrath* and I really liked Steinbeck, so I was looking forward to class.

In the air was the scent of a sunflower patch, which smelled like melted crayons. I loved that smell. It hung in the air, more intense because I was loaded, as I stumbled out of my car. Everything was always more intense when I was loaded. I followed the melted-crayon,

sunflower-patch smell, walking along the old pitted and cracked concrete sidewalk to paint-peeled iron door of the school.

I stepped inside to the smell of linoleum and cheap book binders and institutional school lunch. The greasy carpet in the entry hall looked like it had years of shit and piss stains all over it. The walls were filled with cheap Kmart art, stickers still on the frames. That seemed to be the theme of the school: Kmart.

I staggered up the stairs into English class. It was painted light tan with pictures of famous poets and authors on the wall. I thought the posters were pretty cool. It was your standard old classroom, but it held promise because it was an English class.

My rapid cycling was in neutral because I was loaded, self-medicating with vodka as usual because none of the meds they gave me did shit. Nobody knew that I was jacked up, not even the teacher, Ms. Miller. The windows were open because it was such a gorgeous day. The crayon smell came in through the window and made me feel even better.

Ms. Miller was in her forties; she looked much older, though, with frumpy dresses and chalk dust in the creases of her face. She was at the back of the classroom struggling with the reel-to-reel projector, trying to set it up. She finally got it ready and said, "Somebody turn off the lights, please."

I had drunk enough vodka to float the Queen Mary, so I was really into the movie. My favorite character was Lenny Small. He was a big gentle man who was mentally retarded, to use a term of the day, and I was a big person with uncontrolled bipolar disorder, so I identified with him. We were outsiders, Lenny and I. Trying to mind our own business and dreaming of a better life.

The movie rolled on and the posse was after Lenny for killing Curly's wife, and he and George were down by the river. George was telling Lenny, like always, about the place they would live and how life there would be so good, their own little Shangri-La. We heard the angry mob approaching through the trees, men and the dogs, coming closer, and then all of a sudden, before Lenny could finish telling about the rabbits they would have - BAM! George shot Lenny in the back of head. In my drunken state I thought George shot him because of his mental illness. It was like George had shot me: total betrayal.

“What the FUCK!” I screamed out.

Ms. Miller stopped the projector and said, “Rick, you cannot talk like that.” I shouted, “Frau cow, I can say anything I want.” She didn't say anything, just rolled the movie again.

I tried to bolt from the class, but in my drunken state I ran into the door frame before I could get out of there. I heard laughter in the room behind me as I moved down the hall.

I staggered down the stairs and across the stained carpet, hit the door, and burst out into a darkened autumn day. The sunflowers and their melted crayon smell were like death and betrayal, now, and the sun glowed with an eerie calm behind the clouds.

I was standing in the back lot of the school, with the shot still ringing in my head, when this cool lowrider, a red 1965 Impala, came cruising up the street playing Santana's “Oye Como Va”. It was an immaculate car. I desperately wanted to wave him down and ask him to take me to Shangri-La, where people like me didn't have to sack fucking groceries for a crap wage. I wanted to disappear to Shangri-La, to not be an outsider anymore. But those ol' crazy dreams, like the Impala, just came and went.

The wind came up, a storm moving in, and all I had on was my jean jacket with the Harley eagle on the back. I suddenly felt cold. I jumped in my Roadrunner and hit the vodka

again. I pondered what to do. I was too jacked up to drive, so I put my collar up and got out of the car. A hard chill was now in the air, and it hit me like a weight. I stumbled along the dilapidated sidewalk, thinking, *how does it feel, how does it feel, to be on your own, with no direction home, a complete unknown.*

Night Moves

I had a fire in my head as I was speeding toward Burns, Wyoming to pick up my girlfriend, Liberty, for the high school dance. This was 1978, and I was, as per usual, drinking vodka to combat my mental illness. I popped in an eight track of the Ramones, “I Wanna Be Sedated” - *twenty twenty twenty four hours to go/I wanna be sedated/ Nothing to do, nowhere to go/I wanna be sedated!*

Liberty and I had met in art class. Her paintings were good, and since I was a painter, too, we’d hit it off right away. She was a busty, medium-build brunette with a cool personality, and she accepted me for who I was, even with my mental illness, even though no one else did. So, to say the least, I was excited to see her and take her to the dance. I’d even turned down the invitation for my band to open for my friend John’s band that night so I could go to the dance with Liberty, and I knew she was excited about going, too. It was going to be a great night.

The drive to Burns was pretty boring, so I just sipped on my vodka, listened to the Ramones, and cruised along in my ’74 Roadrunner past the corn, the rural farms, and every here and there, a house. Boring as it was, Liberty was at the end of the road. She had made such a difference in my life; we both loved art and went down to the Denver Art Museum to see shows.

Burns was a one-horse town at that time. This was the first time I’d been to her house, out in the middle of bum-fuck Egypt, and once I got to Burns it took me half an hour to find the

damn house. It was a quaintly styled ranch house, light yellow stucco with red shutters and a huge yard with giant pine trees. It was a nice place. Her dad worked as a parts manager for a trucking firm and made decent money.

I didn't know whether or not Liberty had told her father that I was bipolar, but I found out as soon as he opened the door and I introduced myself. He started freaking out, saying I was a mental case and no way was I taking Liberty to the dance.

"What the hell," I said. "I haven't done anything wrong. I just have mental illness."

"You get the fuck off my property," he said, "You forget about my daughter."

I turned around and left. It was either that or kick his redneck ass.

I fired up the Roadrunner and tore out of there, pissed as hell. I slammed in an eight track of the Sex Pistols "Anarchy in the UK" and sped down the highway, hitting the vodka hard, with the volume cranked - *I am an anti-christ/I am an anarchist/Don't know what I want/But I know how to get it!*

After that, Liberty's dad started driving her to school because he knew that if she drove herself she would come see me, so we could only see each other in art class and at lunch, and I couldn't call her at home. I finally told her it wasn't working out and that I wanted to break up. Afterwards, I walked out of the school and into the pale sunlight. I was numb and upset. I sat in the Roadrunner and cracked a pint of vodka, thinking the words of Patrick Henry, "*Give me Liberty or give me death.*"

American Nights

It was a warm spring Thursday night in May, 1979. Me, Keith, Susie, Cindy, Donna, Jill, and Jamie all were going to meet at Keith's house for a night of partying and cruising the strip. My silver '74 Plymouth Roadrunner was too small to hold everybody, so we were meeting at Keith's house up on the rich north side of Cheyenne for what was going to be a great American night. Keith's parents had a 1975 green Volkswagen bus with a white camper top that could fit all of us, the booze we were going to buy, and our weed.

I pull up in front of Keith's parent's Tudor house in the Roadrunner. He was standing in the yard and said, "Where the hell have you been? The girls are in the basement getting high. We're waiting on your dumb ass to get here." He called to the girls, "Rick's here, let's go!" The girls stumbled up the stairs all high, mumbling, laughing, and joking.

Keith backed the bus out of the garage and opened the sliding door and said, "Get in." We all piled in. Cindy rode shotgun, and I sat in the back with Donna, Susie, Jill, and Jamie. These women were sexy! Keith reached back and handed me thirty-five bucks and said, "You have to buy--you're the only one that is nineteen." At that time the legal drinking age in Wyoming was nineteen.

Keith started the bus, backed it out of the driveway, put in an eight track of AC/DC. We Headed to DJ's Liquor Store on the east side. DT's was a shithole but they had a wide selection of booze. I bought five cases of Buckhorn beer, one 5th of vodka, and one 5th of rum. I stashed the liquor in the back of the bus, and we headed for the strip in downtown Cheyenne.

Susie cracked the first beer and lit a joint. Keith said, “The AC/DC shit has to go - pull out the 8-track and pop in Judas Priest. “Breaking the Law” came on. *So much for the golden future I can't even start. I've had every promise broken I can't even start, there's anger in my heart, Breaking the law, breaking the law.*

“Now that’s more like it,” Keith said as we motored towards the strip.

We hit the strip drunk and high. The strip was packed with cars with hipsters, cheerleaders, long hairs, and just general freaks. It was a strange mix of people but that made it fun. We would cruise down Warren and up Central and through the Owl Inn Drive Thru. The strip always had people driving souped up cars racing and being chased by the cops. But we were driving round in a Volkswagen bus. My grandmother in her wheel chair could catch us.

We saw Kevin and a carload of jocks coming up behind us. Kevin yelled out his car window, “Hey Rick! When are you going to graduate?” I yelled back, “Fuck you and your clown posse!” Keith flipped him off and yelled out the car window, “A least we’re cruising around with a busload of hot women and not a bunch of guys, so fuck you!” The jocks had stunned looks on their faces. Nobody ever talked to them like that.

I really didn’t care about the state of my mental health that night. I was too high and drunk to really give a shit. I was cruising around with five sexy women, having fun; what the hell did I care about my mental health.

Half way down the strip we saw Art in his green 1970 Dodge Coronet, so I yelled out the window for him to pull over. We pulled over onto a side street and we all stumbled out of the

bus. Art got out of his car, and we all stood around and shot the shit. We were smoking cigarettes and thinking we were cool. The night breeze felt incredibly good blowing through my long hair as I stepped to the back of the bus and got the 5th of vodka. We all stood around taking hits off the fifth, just drinking mash and talking trash. Jill wanted to hear her favorite 8 track, The Runaways, so I put on the song “American Nights.” *American nights, you kids are so strange, American nights, you are never gonna change...* So we stood in the shadows like thieves in the night and drank, smoked weed, and rocked out.

The women were getting bored and wanted to go to the Owl Inn Drive Thru. They had waiters and waitresses on roller skates that would bring your food to your car. We piled back in the bus and headed toward the Owl Inn.

We were so high and drunk by then that I was surprised Keith could get us there. We pulled into a stall, rocking out, drinking beer and vodka, and opened the bus door to order some food when this fat cop suddenly appeared and said, “What the hell is going on here?”

“Nothing,” I said “Get the hell outta here.”

The cop said “Watch it, son. Let’s see IDs.” We pulled out our ID’s, and the cop checked them. “Every one of you is underage,” he said, “except you, Sellner.”

He called for back-up and arrested all the women and Keith for drinking underage. To me he said, “Sellner, since you’re of age, drive the bus to your house.”

I was so drunk and high I could barely walk, and this moron ordered me to drive the bus home, but I didn’t want to get into a hassle with the police. The year before I had punched a cop in the face when he reached into my car and tried to pull me out after he’d pulled me over for reckless driving. He finally got me out of the car, and I ended up looking down the barrel of his gun. He cuffed and stuffed me into the back of his police car and took me to jail. I finally got a

hold of my Dad, and he came and bailed me out. On the way out of the jail I thought I saw a tear in his eye.

I got in the bus, fired it up, and drove the back roads to Keith's house. When I got to Keith's and parked the bus, Mrs. Harris came out and said in her British accent, "Where the hell is Keith? And where are the girls?"

"Mrs. Harris," I said, "they were arrested for drinking underage."

"Go into the living room," she said, "and wait until I bring you some coffee. You're drunk!"

"I sure as hell am," I said with a smirk.

She called down to the basement. "Harry! The girls and Keith have been arrested for drinking underage. You need to go bail them out!" Harry came up the stairs and he was pissed. He came over to me in the living room and said "What the hell is all this drinking nonsense? It's 11:30 at night! I have to work tomorrow, and now I have to go and bail Keith and the girls out. I'm not going to tolerate this crap."

He got his coat on, slammed the front door, and went out to the bus. There were beer cans everywhere, empty vodka bottles, and an empty rum bottle. He was furious when he had to come back inside to get the keys for the Toyota.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Harris made me drink enough coffee and tea to sustain the British Empire. After about an hour I was coherent enough to head home, so I told Mrs. Harris I'd see Keith in the morning. I stumbled out the door and headed home, where I stumbled into the front door of my run-down ranch-style house, made my way up to my bedroom and passed out.

The Morning After

I woke up the next morning to a fucking hell of a hangover. I staggered out of my bed in my shitty house, managed to get to the bathroom and took a piss and tried to get ready for school. I made it to the kitchen and choked down a bowl of oatmeal. I felt like shit.

I bolted out the front door and headed to my badass silver Roadrunner parked in the drive-way, jumped in, popped in a Janis Joplin 8 track. The song “Down on Me” was playing - *Down on me, down on me, it looks like everybody in the whole round world is down on me.* I put the car in drive and hauled ass to school.

On the way to school I stopped by 2 Bar Bowl Liquor and bought a pint of vodka. I was feeling so hungover I figured I’d just start drinking again. I pulled into the parking lot, unscrewed the cap, and took a hit. It was rough. It tasted like rubbing alcohol and burned all the way down. I about threw up, but after a couple of more shots things started to normalize.

I finally got to school, late and loaded as usual. I parked the Roadrunner on the side of the building and took about four more shots so I could at least act somewhat normal. Art class was my first period, so I snuck in and got things ready to paint. By this time I had a good buzz on and was thinking about my girlfriend, Gloria, and the gig my band was going to play that weekend and how much I liked rocking out with my electric guitar. We’d been working on The Doors’ version of “Gloria” in honor of my girl, a gorgeous brunette with a slim figure. In the words of

Jim Morrison, she was “my queen,” and I was “her fool driving around after school.” The Doors was one of my favorite bands. I loved Morrison’s spontaneous poetic raps in his songs. We were hoping to have the song ready for the weekend gig. I didn’t know if Gloria would like it or not, but it was balls to the wall for rock-n-roll - *your Dad’s at work, your mother’s out shopping around, you took me upstairs and showed me your thing... why did you do it baby?*

G.L.O.R.I.A... Glooooooria!

I’d been in class for maybe twenty minutes when the loudspeaker came on and a voice said, “Rick Sellner report to the principal’s office - Rick Sellner to the principal’s office.” The teacher told to me to go on, so I headed out the door and thought, “What the hell now?”

The principal’s office was on the other side of the school, so I started down the long hallway, past the shitty lockers and the cheap posters put up to cover the crumbling wall paint. I was wondering what bullshit I was getting called in for and wishing I’d stopped off at my locker for a swig. Then I thought, damn, maybe they had found the weed and vodka in my locker. Or was it some crime we’d committed last night? Either way, by the time I turned the corner to the principal’s office, I was expecting to find the cops waiting there for me. I was sure I was going to jail and would miss the gig and piss off Gloria, but there were no cops, just the principal’s secretary in her little cubicle outside his office. She sent me right in.

His office walls were white and empty except for a floral painting behind his big maple desk. He was sitting in a plain office chair with a smirk on his face. Behind him on a shelf were some academic trophies from somewhere. He was thin, bald, and wore a polyester suit and tie.

Once I’d sat down he said, “Mr. Sellner. You have enough credits to graduate this spring if you don’t flunk any of your courses.”

I was floored. I had no idea that I had anywhere near enough credits to graduate. “Well, then you can give me my diploma right now!” I said.

“As I said, you still have to pass all your courses this semester,” he said. “You haven’t graduated yet.”

“Then give me the god damned diploma case,” I said.

“Now why would I do that?” he said.

“You know, I hope that I don’t grow up to be a loser like you,” I said, “a product of the failed education system, a real bullhead loser. I’d rather try to be an angel-headed hipster who paints and plays music and writes poetry than a fucking loser straight A student. High school is a joke.”

“Sellner,” he said, “you will never amount to anything.”

“Fuck you,” I said, “I’ll get a PhD to prove your ass wrong.”

“That’ll never happen,” he said. “Now get the hell out of my office.”

“Gladly,” I said and staggered out of his office. I didn’t go back to class. I just wandered around outside wondering what to do next. I decided to go back to the Roadrunner and drink more vodka. I opened the door, got in, cracked a pint, put in an eight track of Alice Cooper and rocked out... *School’s out for ever...school’s been blown to pieces.*