

Excerpted from The Heart and Craft of Lifestory Writing, Sharon M. Lippincott. Lighthouse Point Press, 2008.

Mayhem at Camp RYLA

People flew in every direction as the jeep screeched to a halt amidst clouds of dust, frighteningly close to the spot where the crowd had been gathered. For a moment it had looked as if someone would be hit. I couldn't tell who was yelling louder, outraged campers or the junior staffers jumping out of the jeep, waving beer bottles and belligerently holding angry campers at bay. Arms flew in every direction. The situation would obviously break into a riot at any moment.

Just then Roger stepped forth from the crowd to confront the offenders. The other campers drew back at the sight of him, and became quiet. "As designated Constable of this camp, I hereby place all five of you under arrest for the crime of committing mayhem in the Land of RYLA! You have the right to remain silent, and the right to an attorney. Joe, will you and Carolyn please escort the prisoners to the administrative office and keep them there until court is in session?"

Joe and Carolyn stepped forward. "Do we need handcuffs or anything? Do we have any rope?" They both spoke at once.

"I don't think that will be necessary," answered William, a member of the senior staff. He turned to the prisoners and asked, "I think we can safely accept your word that you will make no attempt to escape from your guards while the investigation is being conducted. Can we count on your cooperation?"

"You can," they answered in unison, looking a bit subdued.

Joe and Carolyn led the five across the road and volleyball field, into the cabin that served as the camp office.

William turned to the rest of the campers. "Obviously, from the looks of things, a serious crime has just been committed. A trial will be held this afternoon with Judge Leo Nimsick from Cranbrook presiding. Court will convene at 2:00 p.m. It's now 12:43. We need two detectives to conduct interviews of the witnesses. Who will volunteer?"

Several hands shot up in unison. "Okay, I only need two. I'm thinking of a number between one and one hundred. The two of you closest get the job." Sandie and Q won the spots. "Now, I want the rest of you to answer any questions you may be asked as truthfully as you can. It's up to Sandie and Q to decide what to ask and who to interview. I'll see you in court at 2:00."

William Mitchell-Banks (a family physician in Creston, BC) turned to George Diana (a Spokane attorney) and the two of them walked back toward the cafeteria where they were joined by the rest of the staff: Ray Grout (a justice of the peace in Creston, BC), Gary Lemaster (Ass't Postmaster in Spokane), Leo Nimsick (a Provincial Court Judge in British Columbia) and me (a freelance writer and trainer). Once safely behind closed doors, our jubilation burst forth. "Awesome! Great show! Those kids did a fantastic job. If they didn't actually drink the beer in those bottles, they sure did a great job of faking it!" We whooped with laughter as we recalled specifics of the event. We hadn't told the junior staffers what to do, just that they should discretely disappear during lunch and be prepared to stage a crime of their own choosing shortly after 12:30, when everyone would be gathered in the assembly area after lunch. We made the assignment with full faith we would not be disappointed, but even so, we now realized we had underestimated the extent of their resourcefulness.

George went off to perform his appointed role of preparing the defense. Ray, the appointed District Attorney for the trial, went out to oversee the gathering of the evidence.

When Judge Leo Nimsick strode into the chapel-turned-courtroom on the stroke of two, attired with all solemnity in official judicial robes, all campers were present and seated. "Oh yay, oh yay, the court of the Sovereign Land of RYLA will now convene with Judge Leo Nimsick presiding." Albert's hair looked as if he'd hit the flour barrel in the kitchen in an attempt to look authentic for his role as distaff. A couple of campers snickered. The giggles were cut short by a healthy whack of the gavel.

"You may bring the prisoners forth."

Roger came through the door, leading the five accused junior staffers, who stood facing the judge.

"Will the district attorney please read the charges?"

"Mary, Steve, Linda, Alan and Jennifer, you stand accused this day of committing mayhem in the Land of RYLA, endangering the welfare and even the lives of residents. How do you plead?" intoned Ray, maximizing his British accent.

"Not guilty!" they exclaimed with one voice. This plea met with an immediate chorus of boo's from the audience.

"Order in the court!" thundered Judge Nimsick, his words punctuated by vigorous gavel thumps. "The bailiff will escort anyone from the courtroom who is unable to maintain an attitude of proper respect." After a few startled glances, the campers settled back to watch. Obviously this was not intended as a ribald comedy.

“The Attorney for the Land of RYLA will present his case.”

Ray stepped solemnly to the center of the room, standing sideways so as to speak to both the judge and audience. Your Honor, and fellow Rylarians, this very afternoon, at precisely 12:41, a time when all of us, including the accused, were scheduled to be gathered on the assembly ground, the accused roared into camp in an open-top Jeep vehicle at a high rate of speed, headed straight for the center of the campers who were complying with the designated activity of the camp, causing the fore said campers to run for cover in fright and hysteria. When the before mentioned jeep screeched to a stop, mere centimeters from the footprints of campers who had been previously standing there, the accused staffers jumped merrily forth from the vehicle, waving beer bottles, staggering as if intoxicated, shouting obscenities, and generally behaving in an obnoxious manner designed to provoke a fight. Indeed one person, Miss Mary Diana, was actually seen to be waving a gun! Your Honor, these staff members have violated numerous Rylarian ordinances, including the prohibition of alcoholic beverages on the premises, leaving the premises during camp sessions, behaving in a disorderly fashion, and endangering the well-being of their fellow Rylarians. I urge that they be found *guilty!*”

“You may call your first witness.”

“The prosecution calls Roger Woodward.” Roger strode to the front of the room and was quickly sworn in. “Please tell the court what you saw.”

“Well, I was really surprised. I hadn’t noticed that these guys were missing, so when they came roaring up like that, I was just, well, surprised.”

“Could you tell the court what you saw that caused you to be surprised?”

“Oh. Yes. The five people sitting over there were piled in Steve’s Jeep, which came roaring into camp, headed straight into the middle of the crowd. It looked like they were going to run right over us.”

“And, Mr. Woodward, what did you do then?”

“I jumped back, trying to get out of the way, and knocked Cathy flat on the ground. She was standing behind me.” Roger continued by stating that at least Linda, Alan and Jennifer were taking swigs from bottles of beer.

“Thank you, Mr. Woodward. You may step down.”

The next witness was Sally Johnson. “Miss Johnson, please tell the court what you saw.”

“Well, I saw pretty much what Roger told you.”

“But you also saw something he didn’t mention. What was that?”

“Oh, the gun,” her voice was quavering. She seemed about to break down in tears. “Mary had a gun. She was waving it around, and I saw her aim it directly at me.”

“What did you do then?”

“I hit the ground!”

“Did you hear anything out of the ordinary?”

“Yes ... I heard a gunshot.” At this point, tears were streaming down Sally’s cheeks. “I just couldn’t believe that Mary, of all people, would be shooting a gun. Especially not around people like that.”

“Thank you, Sally. You can take your seat.”

The next witness was Greg. He saw Alan point a finger right at him and say something to Steve, who aimed the car directly toward him. The final witness was Beth. She saw Steve looking over his shoulder talking to the girls in back as the Jeep raced toward the group.

“Your Honor, the prosecution rests its case.”

George began the defense. He called Roger back to the stand. “Mr. Woodward, how close would you say that the Jeep came to the spot where people were standing?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It looked like it probably would have run over someone if we hadn’t moved so fast. I know it wasn’t far.”

“Thank you Mr. Woodward.” He then called Sandie to the stand. Sandie testified that she had measured the distance from the foot prints closest to the Jeep, which had been left standing where Steve stopped. The actual distance was six feet, eight inches.

The next witness was Alan, who verified a piece of evidence as the bottle he’d been holding in his hand when the Jeep returned to camp. It was a root beer bottle. Mary came next. The evidence she identified was a silver-colored water pistol. This evidence had been collected from the defendants in the office immediately after they were escorted there.

A buzz arose among the campers.

“Order in the court!” Judge Nimsick gaveled them to attention. “On the basis of the evidence and testimony, it is the finding of this court that the defendants are innocent. It is also the finding of the court that the whole lot of you is guilty of interpreting what you saw and heard through the filters of fear, personal experience, and assumptions, to mention a few. I sentence you to an additional session of listening training to be conducted by Ms. Lippincott. Court adjourned!”

I was thrilled. When we planned this mock court as part of the curriculum for the Rotary Youth Leadership Awards in 1983, our intention had been to illustrate the workings of the legal system in the two countries represented. It did that quite well. As an added bonus, it illustrated better than anything I could have planned the extent to which personal variation affects human perception. All of the campers were equally surprised. None of them

expected this “surprise attack” and no two of them had experienced the event the same way.

The most striking difference was the addition of the gunshot that Sally testified in utter sincerity, under oath, that she had “heard.” None of us had previously known that Sally had been involved in an armed robbery a few months earlier. An innocent bystander in the bank where she worked as a teller was wounded during a holdup. The mere sight of a gun sent Sally into a frenzy! Today she had heard what she expected—and feared—to hear: A gunshot.

The final session of the communication skills module I’d been leading all week was the most energetic of the week, and made the strongest impression of any I’ve ever taught. If they never remember anything else, not one of those campers will ever again think of eye witness reports as infallible.

This story is a prime example of a personal story that has wider potential. My *purpose* in writing it was to document the experience for myself and for whatever purpose the District 509 RYLA committee found for it in the future. To ensure as much accuracy as possible (an ironic undertaking, considering the subject matter), I relied on my own notes, and had the story reviewed by Leo Nimsick and Ray Grout. The story has enough inherent drama of its own that there was no temptation to enhance a thing.

A story of this sort requires the use of dialogue. To keep the dialogue credible, I left personal linguistic quirks and idioms intact to emphasize the individuality of the speakers.

For our purpose as lifestory writers, this story demonstrates the plasticity of both initial perception and memory. Each of those witnesses was 100% accurate. They reported precisely what they observed, understood, and believed to be true. No two agreed. In this case, indisputable evidence was available to demonstrate the empirical truth. Every person involved left camp with a changed understanding of Truth.

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