

The Book of Rules

Geoffrey Philp
(Miami Dade College, USA)

Sitting in the staff lunchroom of the Triton Hotel, Sylvia leaned her head towards the lilting voices of her co-workers. Although she didn't speak Spanish or Kreyol – 'a sea of tongues' as her father would have said – the cadence of their voices sounded like the waves that lapped against the boats near her home in Jamaica. She knew it was a foolish idea, but she felt homesick as she watched Gloria, the head maid, huddle with the other maids, just like how the women in Port Antonio would gather at a corner to share secrets or to enjoy the pleasure of each other's company. How they would throw their heads back and laugh when they were discussing a child's birthday or someone's good luck, the small things that made their lives bearable.

'Open up! Police', a voice barked from the back door of the hotel.

Gloria rose cautiously from her chair, looked through the window, and screamed, '*La Migra!*'

There was no need for translation. The women scrambled down the hallways, jumped through windows or hid in open rooms. Yet in the midst of the hubbub, Sylvia kept her cool. She had a plan.

Ever since Trump became president, Sylvia knew this day would come and she was prepared. She sent her cousin, Janet, a text, 'Trouble. You know what to do'. Then, she walked over to the sink, put her phone in the garbage disposal, and turned it on. Just to be sure, she also turned on the hot water and waited until she was sure that her phone had been destroyed.

Now all she had to do was run down the hallway towards the pantry, climb on top of the wooden boxes she had hidden, remove the ceiling tiles, and squeeze herself into the space between the roof and ceiling. Sylvia knew she could do this. She had practiced it at least three times. They would never find her.

Bracing herself, Sylvia ran down the hallway and pushed against the door. It was locked. If Oscar, her supervisor, had told Gloria once, he had told her a thousand times, she had to keep the door open because it was a fire hazard. Now she was going to be deported because Gloria couldn't follow simple instructions.

Sylvia wasn't even supposed to be in the hotel that morning. It was her day off, but Oscar couldn't come to work – more trouble with his boy-

friend – so he had told Sylvia that he would ask the owner, Mr. Turnbull, to pay her double time. When Mr. Turnbull agreed, Sylvia asked Janet to babysit her daughter, Winsome, for her.

Sylvia hated asking anyone, even her cousin, for favors. She would always hear father – a man who could take a minor crisis and turn it into a full-blown sermon about Marcus Garvey – warning her with Garvey’s words, ‘Man to man is so unjust. We know not whom to trust’. But neither Marcus Garvey nor her father could help her now. And how could her father, who had been married for forty years, ever understand what it felt like to fall in love with someone who everyone else called a monster?

As she saw it, Sylvia had only one option – to run up to the office on the second floor and ask Mr. Turnbull’s wife, Nancy, to hide her. Nancy had taken an instant liking to Sylvia from the first day, partly because she was the only one on the staff who spoke English. Nancy had even hinted that if Gloria ever decided to leave, Sylvia would take over her position.

But everything changed when Nancy’s son, Bobby, was killed in a hit and run accident and it turned out that the driver was an undocumented immigrant.

After the funeral, Nancy began to search for a reason why her son, who had served two terms in Afghanistan, had to die on the streets of Miami. Sylvia tried to comfort Nancy in any way that she could. She brought Nancy mint leaves from the plants she grew in her windowsill, and sometimes she would quote a few phrases from the Bible or ‘The Book of Rules’ as her father called it.

“What church do you go to?” Nancy once asked her.

“I don’t go to church anymore, ma’am. But my father was a deacon in the Pentecostal church”.

“Is that the one where they jump up and speak in tongues?”

“Yes, ma’am”.

That was the last conversation Sylvia could remember having with Nancy. These days, Nancy had withdrawn into her office where she was either checking the receipts or listening to the televangelists with whom she would pray at the end of their sermons.

It was now or never, Sylvia thought. She could hear the boots stomping around the foyer while the other maids screamed as they were dragged from their hiding places as if they were common criminals. What was it her boyfriend, Errol, used to say?

“You may think you’re safe because your father is a deacon, but, baby, we are all born with a price on our heads”.

If Mr Turnbull had been there, this never would have happened. He would

have found a way to delay or stop the officers. He'd done it before when he stopped a raid that had been called in by one of his rivals. Mr Turnbull would ask to see a warrant or call in a favour – anything that would give 'his girls' as he called them a chance to escape or hide.

But today he was down on the beach, his regular habit on Wednesdays, working on his tan. Mr Turnbull prided himself on the even tones of his tan, especially when he sidled up to Gloria or the other maids in the kitchen to compare his arms to theirs, "Ain't that the truth?" he said. "Brown meat always looks better than white meat".

Okay. 1, 2, 3, she thought. Sylvia dashed up the stairs at the back of the hotel, ran to Nancy's office, and locked the door behind her.

"Nancy you got to hide me", she said and walked over to the television.

She turned up the volume and whispered, "Immigration's here and they are going to deport me".

"But you don't have to worry", said Nancy. She picked up the remote on her desk and turned up the volume. "You showed me your green card when I hired you".

"It wasn't real", said Sylvia and she inched away from the television.

The preacher was rattling on about the laws of God. "But please, you have to help me".

"So you lied to me?"

"I can't go into it right now, but please help me".

"Give me one good reason why I should help you".

"It's a long story".

"The clock is ticking".

"I can't go back to Jamaica, ma'am. If I go back, I'm a dead woman".

"Did you do something wrong?"

A bead of sweat rolled down the side of Sylvia's face. The sweat was ruining her perm. But that was the least of her worries.

"No, ma'am. But my boyfriend did. The police killed him and I am the only one who can identify the detective who did it. The story was all over the newspapers in Jamaica and the detective has a lot of friends in customs. If I go back, I will be dead in an hour".

"Your boyfriend must have been a bad man".

"No worse than the police and the politicians who killed him. Ma'am they're coming up the stairs".

"Hide in my closet. But I have one more question".

Nancy walked toward Sylvia and stood within an arm's length.

"Do you love my husband?"

"No, ma'am. Why would you say a thing like that?"

"I saw the two of you in the laundry room".

Sylvia bowed her head and looked down at the lines in her palm. Her life-line reached all the way down to her wrists. Janet, who always fancied herself as a fortune teller, once told Sylvia that she was going to have a long life. But what was the use of a long life if she was going to live like this?

“If I didn’t have sex with him, he would have fired me. And then, what would I have done? I have a child to take care of”.

“You have a child?”

“Don’t worry, it’s not Mr. Turnbull’s”.

“How do I know that you’re not lying to me now?”

There was a knock on the door. The two women faced off, and then, Sylvia turned toward the closet.

“Open up. Police!”

“Just a moment, I’ll be right there”, said Nancy. Once Sylvia was inside, she locked the key to the closet, and put the key in her pocket.

“Everything will be all right”, she whispered.

In all the years that Nancy had known her, Sylvia had never mentioned a child. For the first in a long time, Nancy wished she hadn’t given up drinking to serve the Lord. She needed time to think and would have given anything for a shot of Macallan, neat.

Although her hands were trembling, Nancy went to the front door and opened it.

A heavy-set officer wearing a black t-shirt with ICE across his bullet-proof vest showed Nancy his badge. Two other officers, a male and a female, stood behind him.

“Officer Gonzalez, ma’am. We’re with Immigration and Naturalization Services and we’ve been told that there may be one or two illegals on the premises. May I come in?”

“Why certainly, officer”.

“*Quedate aqui*”, said Officer Gonzalez to the two officers behind him.

Standing in the middle of Nancy’s room, Officer Gonzalez scanned the walls, the filing cabinets, the computer, and the television.

“You watch TBN, ma’am? It’s my favourite channel”, he said and brushed his hair from his brow.

“Yes, I watch it every day. It helps me a lot”.

“Me, too”, said Officer Gonzalez, and then his eyes landed on the photograph of Bobby that Nancy kept on her desk.

“Is that your son, ma’am? Where did he do his basic training?”

Officer Gonzalez walked over to Nancy's desk, picked up the photograph, and held it between his hands.

"The same place I did my basic training. Fort Bragg", said Nancy.

"Just like me. You must be proud of him".

"Yes, he died last year".

"I'm sorry ma'am. If I had known".

"It's all right", said Nancy. She took the photograph from him and laid it face down on her desk.

"Officer Gonzalez", she said. "I hope you don't mind, but were you born here?"

"No, ma'am. My parents are from Venezuela".

"So you don't feel guilty about rounding up people, I mean, people who speak the same language as you?"

"We may speak the same language, but my parents followed the rules, ma'am. You gotta follow the rules. It's like what the Good Book says, 'It is better to obey than to sacrifice'".

Nancy nodded in agreement. Officer Gonzalez was right. This was how anarchy began, by turning a blind eye to what was right. That was the reason why the country was in such a mess and disorder was rampant. And no one was doing anything to set things straight. *It had to begin somewhere, so it might as well start with me*, Nancy thought.

"Well, I best be going, ma'am", said Officer Gonzalez. "Sorry to have wasted your time".

"Oh no, but you haven't", said Nancy and she took the key to the closet out of her pocket. "I believe one of those illegals that you were looking for is hiding in the closet", she said and handed him the key.

"Why thank you, ma'am".

"It was nothing. I was the one who called your office".

Officer Gonzalez motioned to the two officers who had been waiting by the door. They rushed in through the door and then, positioned themselves on opposite sides of the closet. With his left hand, Officer Gonzalez handed the key to the female officer and he placed his right hand on his gun.

"C'mon out", he shouted. "You're surrounded. And don't try anything stupid".

The female officer turned the key, pulled on the handle, and placed her hand on her gun. Sylvia gently pushed the door open and stepped out into the office.

“Nancy, I can’t believe you would do this to me? You told me everything would be all right”.

“But it is,” said Nancy. “You broke the law and now you have to pay”.

While the female officer placed the cuffs on Sylvia’s wrists, the other officer read Sylvia her Miranda rights.

Officer Gonzalez spun Sylvia around and pointed her toward the door. Sylvia shrugged her shoulders and held her head high, confident that whatever she was about to face, she knew that her daughter was going to be safe. But she also wasn’t going to leave before glaring one last time at Nancy to let her know that she was never going to forgive her for the betrayal.

“What will happen to her?” Nancy asked as she turned away from Sylvia’s stare. “I mean, she’s not like the rest of them. She’s from Jamaica”.

“They’re all the same. Dominicans, Haitians, Jamaicans. If they are illegal, they will be deported”.

“I see”, said Nancy.

“But don’t worry, ma’am”, said Officer Gonzalez. “You did the right thing today. And on behalf of Immigration and Naturalization and the President of the United States, I want to thank you for bringing these illegals to justice in our country”.

Before Officer Gonzalez left the room, he saluted Nancy and she returned the salute. Then, he made a heel to toe turn and marched out of the office leaving Nancy in the empty room.

“This is the day of the Lord. Let us praise him”, the preacher shouted.

Nancy plopped down in her chair, picked up Bobby’s photograph, and turned off the television. It had been a long time since she had felt this alone.