

Agape

by J. E. Cammon

Every time Hector left his home he wondered if it was for the last time. It was Monday at 2:45, so he was standing in the bedroom near the tall mirror, staring into his dark eyes. In the past, she would lovingly help him dress with her tiny, perfect fingers. She made him feel like a big man. Sometimes she would lay on their bed on her flat stomach, playfully kicking her legs, the bottoms of her feet waving at his reflection. Now she was elsewhere in the house, leaving him alone to dress himself. He fingered the brass zipper near his groin and pulled his uniform closed. His eyes drifted along the surface of the mirror until they fell on the reflection of the empty bed.

"All I need is you," he could remember her saying on one of those occasions from before. Hector had been a janitor then, the same as now. That was the only thing that was the same.

He walked through a narrow hallway in their home to the kitchen. Maria was rinsing a black iron skillet in the sink, moving the hot surface beneath the tap, her eyes lowered, a bit of hair falling into her eyes. Hector sat at their small, kitchen table and spread his hands flat against the wooden surface. He read the time off his wristwatch. 2:56. He glanced at Maria who was still at the sink. Next to her, covered cookware rested on the stove. She dropped the skillet gently into the water and pushed her hands into the apron around her waist; the gesture made her thrust her hips backwards unconsciously and Hector dropped his eyes back to his hands.

"Will you leave for me some money?" Maria said without turning.

"Yes," Hector said, and pushed his chair backwards noiselessly.

"No," Maria said suddenly, moving to the stove quickly and gathering the pots in her arms. "Leave it before you go. Eat first," she said as she sat the items in the center of their small table. Hector relaxed his legs and let his thighs flatten against the chair again. He peeked at the sweaty mounds in Maria's dress as she set the pots down carefully. She stood up again and used the back of her

wrist to wipe an eyebrow, and turned towards the cabinets. Hector turned his head slightly to watch her hips sway as she walked, and over her shoulder to see the cabinet door open to reveal the short stack of plates there. She reached her hands inside and when she turned around, she held only one.

"You are not eating," he heard himself say. She stopped for only a moment, staring back at him before answering.

"I want to go to the store," she said, moving to the table and setting to fixing his plate. "Before it gets crowded. We need milk, and bread," he watched the lever of her elbow work behind the skin as she scooped and poured. Maria put the plate in front of her husband gently, without disturbing the food. Hector's eyes trailed up her arm to her shoulder to her neck, where they lingered. He put his head down again; when he saw he had no silverware, Maria was already opening a drawer and collecting the knife and fork. She held them out to him, her small fingers gripping the utensils. Hector took the handle ends of the knife and fork with his fingers and pulled them out of her grip. She inhaled sharply when he took them, and he looked up into her eyes; they wavered, like in a nightmare he knew well.

"Thank you," he said, looking down again to set about eating. Maria put her hands behind her back to watch him for a moment and then moved out of the kitchen down the hallway; her dress swished, a breeze of fabric touching lightly on his arm. Hector stopped eating for a moment. In the dark hallway, Maria waited, but he said nothing. He checked his watch again. 3:01.

"I don't know! I just need something, Hector!" he could remember her screaming at him. He had whimpered, a small, pathetic sound escaping him, as if at any moment all of his bones would break and he would fall to the floor.

"From him?" his eyes had been red, but he hadn't been crying. His hair had been tussled, wild about his head and his hands had shaken.

"I do not want you like that."

Hector never locked the door when he left. He always said goodbye, and he always said I love you. Then, he walked the ten, orderly feet to the wild space of terrain between the road and his chain link fence. The little domain was filled with weeds and crab grass that could not be tamed. He navigated the narrow space awkwardly; it snaked to the end of his street then forked: in one direction the lonely two-lane road pointed toward the highway, and in the other direction, the way lead into town and beyond to the high school, where Hector worked.

The traffic on the road was sporadic. Hardly anyone went anywhere between the morning traffic hours and noon or between the lunch hour and three o'clock in the small town. But even during the busy times, the road easily accommodated the activity. Parents with cars would pick up their children from school or day care and the buses loaded with loud students went this way and that. Hector stayed well off the road until he got fully into town, where he could follow the cracked lines of the sidewalk past the elementary and middle schools. Until then, he walked in the ditches, which were nothing more than a shallow grooves of earth filled with dirt and gravel.

Hector thought about his father, the bean picker with spotted skin and strong hands, and his mother, the happy woman whose stomach rumbled when she laughed and had pockets of fat beneath her arms. Hector and his siblings called them wings, and the woman had not taken offense. She had lived long enough to attend the ceremony, before which the two women had sized each other up and Hector had been afraid Maria would shrink inside of herself; his mother was such a powerful woman, but she had stood her ground, his betrothed. She told Hector's mother that she loved him and cherished him and respected him, and would care for him always. Hector's mother had stood in front of her, angry for a moment, he thought, but then burst into that rumbling laughter. They had danced to the songs of the mariachis, and the ceremony was at sunset. Later, Hector's mother had expressed regret that he had

fallen in love with such a skinny-boned woman. She had told him his father would have been proud, though. Hector had been happy, and he stared over his mother's head at Maria during the entire conversation. She was beautiful; her skin was a very light brown, like eggshell, and she was plump enough to pinch but no more. He had known her since she was very young, and for years everyone had said they would make a happy couple. Maria had agreed to marry Hector because of his heart, she had said. Both of her parents were dead, but she had an aunt who said that he was a good man with a kind soul.

They had moved north after being married only a year. For work, Hector had said. He wanted to leave the hills and the heat and the dirt roads. He would not die in the brush like his father.

"It will be hard, but only in the beginning," Hector had told her.

"I can endure anything so long as it is with you."

Hector walked with his head down, aware that the high school was growing in the distance. On a field far from the road, young men practiced American football. Hector knew on the other side of the school cheerleaders would be practicing their flips and twirls in the parking lot.

Hector made his way to a side entrance, a metal rectangle covered in faded paint. He opened the door and stepped inside, listening as he glanced at his watch. 3:29. He was only barely early. Hector reached blindly for the switch and turned on the lights; the room was much longer than it was wide, cleaning machines hugging the walls along with mops, buckets, and brooms. Caution signs hung from the wall above the machines by metal pegs. Hector walked sideways to the end of the room and found a clipboard hanging from the wall. Between the lines of a grid, his name and one other's were signed over and over and over again in the narrow spaces. By each signature was a date, and two different times. Hector Mendez, he scribbled with purpose, 10-1-88. 3:30. 1:30. He replaced the clipboard carefully. The door at the far end of the room opened with a quick jerk, exposing the narrow room to sunlight.

"Chico. Beat me again," Rico said. He was taller than Hector by a head, and was thin to the point that his one-piece uniform draped off his shoulders like from a hanger. He waved the white side of his black hand at Hector. "How you livin', essay?" Hector removed the clipboard from the wall again.

"I am fine, Reeko," Hector responded in his stilted English. Rico had a strange, smooth way of walking foot over foot, almost as if dancing. He moved well even having to shuffle sideways over to Hector, who passed him the clipboard. The man scooped it up in his long hands; he looked at it from an angle as if he could only see out of the bottom of his nose.

"Man, don't nobody ever look at this thing," he said, but signed it anyway. He stared at it for a moment, then screwed up his face again and flipped to the next page and the next. "Chico, you ever wonder who checks these things, man?" Chico was what Rico had called Hector ever since they had been working together. He thought it was funny, Rico and Chico the janitors. He thought it was fitting, to deride their situation as minorities, he had said. Hector extended his arm to accept the clipboard, the two of them standing awkwardly side by side. Rico held the clipboard under his nose again as if to check something then quickly handed it off. "Still think it's bullshit," he mumbled. Hector took the clipboard and placed it carefully back on the wall. Rico sideways walked back to the buffer and manipulated the handle, inspecting the grip and various levers like he was performing some ritual. Hector walked to the opposite end of the room, and opened the door that lead into the high school, then reached for the soap bucket and mop and wheeled them out slowly.

Eventually, Rico followed, patting his various pockets for his cigarettes and lighter, exposing the skeletal frame present beneath his billowy uniform. He had also smoked since Hector had known him. It wasn't in the manual as disallowed, and no one ever watched them work anyway. Plus, they were probably the only two people who knew the smoke detectors didn't work. Rico took a long drag and seemed to chew the smoke in his long face before adjusting his

big lips to blow it out the side of his mouth at a downward angle. He looked down on Hector with his droopy eyes.

"The hell's wrong whichu, man?" he said, bringing his long hand up to wipe across his mouth. "Troubles with elle po-lee-see-ah? Green card strife?"

"I am a citizen," Hector retorted, and looked down to check that the mop was secure in the big, yellow, rolling bucket. Rico rolled his eyes into the back of his skull and took another long drag. His entire head adopted the rolling motion as he smoked. He stamped his foot.

"Then whatchu bringin' me down for?" he leaned backwards, putting his weight on one leg and sweeping his hand over Hector's head. "This shit ain't fun. Scrubbin' up after lil ungrateful muh'fuggas," he pointed a long finger at Hector. "You know I coulda been rich and famous, but naw, I stayed. And do you know why I stayed?" Hector squinted his eyes at Rico's fast-moving mouth. "Cuz we ameeegos, man," and he took a quick step to Hector's side and held him tightly around the shoulders as he blew smoke away from the both of them. "You know, like friends and shit," Hector nodded slowly. "So what's the deal?" Hector thought for a moment about the pleasurable sounds Maria had made, his own panic, and the sweaty back of the man who had been laying on top of her. In their bed, her hands clawing at his shoulders and her naked thighs struggling for purchase. He broke away suddenly from Rico, pushing his little yellow bucket towards the bathroom quickly. The little wheels squeaked in protest as he went.

In the beginning of their relationship, Hector had admired Rico for many different reasons. The easy way he shrugged off difficult things and the friendly way he was with Hector, joking, and playing. Hector imagined he was somewhere around sixty, but he couldn't really tell, and he'd never asked. Rico was the only person he had met who thought Hector would not be a janitor forever.

Hector had told him once that his ultimate aspiration was to own a restaurant, to greet people as they came in and walk around the dining room to make sure they enjoyed their food. Where he was from, anyone who owned their own business was a success in; they

had big houses and many children and happy, laughing wives. He had told Rico that he would take a picture with himself and Maria standing out front and frame it and show it to his children one day. And Rico hadn't laughed. He laughed at just about everything else Hector said, but not that.

Rico was using the broom and dustpan and Hector followed behind slowly with the mop and bucket. They would go back to the room around the outside of the building and repeat the process with the waxing machine and buffer. They did this for every hall and every room in the building three times a week. It was how Rico had shown Hector to do it when he had first got the job, and they hadn't deviated from it ever. Sometimes Rico would stop and pretend the mop handle was a microphone and he would sing a famous song. Sometimes Hector would laugh. Today, though, there was no singing or laughing.

Some men had to be left alone for awhile, Hector's mother had told him, once. His father had suffered coughing fits every morning before breakfast; in the beginning it was frightening, the noises he made. Toward the end, the familiarity of the noises dulled the terror, even when everyone knew what the fits meant. Hector remembered the way his father's shoulders would bounce and shudder. His mother would touch his father gently on the back and walk the hand up to his shoulder, where his father would grip her hand tightly. I am okay, he would say, even though everyone knew he wasn't.

"You know I was married?" Rico asked without turning his back. Hector stopped for a moment to look up, no longer concentrating on the design of suds he was weaving as he mopped along. "Well, wuz-gone-be married. She left." Hector stared at Rico's back and his thin shoulders. The man stooped over to scoop up a few articles of dust tenaciously stuck into a corner. "But she loved me, you know? Everythin' was cool," he stood up and stretched his back, looking at the ceiling tiles while he tapped the back of his wrist into the small of his back. He looked old and happy for a moment, before turning back around to continue sweeping. "Then she got pregnant. And we ain't have no money for no kid, you know? They say them things is

fool proof, them condoms." He took the last drag from his cigarette and dropped it into the dust pan, exhaling the smoke into the air in front of him. Rico froze for a moment as if he saw a specter of something in the air. "Yeah. Yeah, so, we was in a tight spot: young couple, no bread, kid on the way. S'pose it was wrong of me to assume she wouldn't do it, the way she was," he turned around then and made a spectacle of patting himself down again for his cigarettes and lighter. Rico found the pack and removed a slender white stalk from the package. He looked up and met Hector's eyes. "Bitch killed my kid, man. Said I wasn't no kinda man to raise a child. I wasn't no kinda man, you hear what-I'm-sayin?" he said, his eyes falling slowly as he lit the end of the cigarette and sucked in deeply. Hector blinked, trying to focus on the new man before him. He could only be surprised, though. "Shit happens I guess, s'what dey say, right? Shit happens," and he put both hands on the end of the broom and leaned, staring at Hector with his eyebrows. "You gone be alright, man. It don't never go away, but once you realize it don't kill you, or stop you from breathin', it ain't so bad." There was a brief fracture in the strange smoothness of Rico, and then it was gone, and he was seamless again as he spun around and went back to sweeping.

"Is that why," Hector heard himself say, still standing in the same place, unable to move. "Is what why you are here?" Hector was sure there were better words to use, but he couldn't quite think of them. Somehow, he was glad Rico didn't turn his back.

"Diff'rent story, Chico," the sweeping man said. "Might be why I ain't got no wife, and no family, though."

"I don't want things this way," Hector said, more to himself and his bucket than to Rico; the other man coughed and wheezed. He turned around briefly to look at Hector, grinning.

"That's why I love you Chico, man, you really tryna be good 'n shit, be better," he took a long drag and continued his sweeping. "Ain't gone get nowhere if you stay happy with whachu got, but if you throw away old shit for new shit, you ain't gone have much, is

you?" Hector looked sideways, as if he might be able to read the words again in the thick smoke pouring out of Rico's mouth.

"Thank you for your words," he replied, genuinely. Rico saluted slowly.

"Day nada," Rico smiled. He was a proud man, perhaps of the wrong things, but Hector did not imagine that a terrible way to be.

After all the floors were cleaned, mopped, waxed, and buffed they were done with the hardest work. As if to confirm that, Hector's arms and back and legs screamed their distress. He walked oddly, tilted to one side at times, and the other way at others. Rico didn't lean; he just slowed down, things inside his uniform popping and cracking whenever he stooped over to inspect a specific something with his finger tip.

Together, they trudged back to the thin storage room in search of bathroom cleaning supplies.

"Why don't you go home, man, I got dis," Rico said, making no effort to keep the tired out of his voice. Hector looked down at the toilet brushes.

"The bathrooms," Hector began.

"Shit man, somebody give me time off I'd do a jig and click my heels," Rico wiped his mouth once over and scratched beneath his chin. He stared Hector down. "This ain't no big city, Chico. Folks know things. You need to go," Hector opened his mouth but Rico opened his hand and exposed the crisscrossing brown lines on the palm. "I asked you earlier, and you ain't wanna say so don't tell me now. I can guarantee you shit'll be dirty tomorrow, though, you wanna clean so bad." Hector watched the man's lips until they stopped moving, and then up to his eyes. Hector kept eye contact while he dropped his brush back into the container and took a tentative step toward the exit, then another. Rico smiled broadly and dismissed him with a gesture, like a king. Hector reached the door, more quickly than expected, turned and waved in the manner Rico was accustomed to waving at him.

"I will see you tomorrow," Hector said.

"Ah Deeyos, man," Rico coolly flashed two fingers and hunched over slowly, intent on something. Hector took a step back and let the door close in his face.

Outside, the sky was dark, not quite as deep a darkness as nearer to midnight, but the sidewalk beneath his feet was still poorly lit. Hector stood there facing the door for a while and then began walking home.

He thought about his wife.

Hector reached for the handle in the darkness and opened the door forcefully, making sure it swung completely and hit the hallway wall audibly. Hector waited a moment and then stepped inside. The sound in his memory was not in the hallway, was not in his house, but there was still no relief. Hector closed the door gently and locked it securely. When he turned back around, he saw Maria at the end of the hallway. She was naked but for one of his undershirts which she had become accustomed to sleeping in. Maria distinguished those she had marked as hers by cutting the sides and the front; when she wore them, it exposed the curve of her thighs from the side and the space between her breasts from the front. She looked frightened for a moment and then calm, holding him with her gaze.

"I am home early from work," he said quickly, tracing her lines with his eyes. She looked to be holding something in one of her hands. She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and closed her teeth gently. Hector took a step sideways. Maria took two forward. Right then, Hector did not want to look at her. The house had never seemed so small in all the time they had lived there. Temporary is what Hector had called it when they had moved in.

Maria took another two steps forward and extended an empty, dainty hand toward her husband. Hector swallowed deeply, staring at the offending appendage. Her hand lingered as she walked and then moved to cup his face. Hector reached up quickly and snatched her by the wrist. She gasped at the contact and Hector screwed up his face as if burned.

"You do not want me," Maria said. Each word was purposefully exact, plain. Hector's throat slowly closed and again the anger subsided to shame. He moved her wrist slowly, lovingly back to her side. When he was satisfied it would remain there, he released her, not looking at her eyes. Hector stared between her legs, down further to linger on each toe. He chanced a look into her eyes and found them locked on his. He did not know what he saw there: hope, anger, sadness, perhaps even some shame. Hector moved his hand up her without touching her, coming within inches of the shirt. He smelled her hot breath and watched her chest heave. Hector closed his eyes and reached forward, gently touching her left breast, the soft flesh beneath the cotton. His thumb brushed against the stubborn nipple and Maria gasped. Hector's eyes flew open and he took a step back, as if struck in the stomach. Maria stared back at him, panting. His eyes dropped to the floor and he turned and walked away from her.

Maria waited a long time in the hallway, trying to hold onto the warm sensation in her stomach. The jubilation was brief, but enough to keep her alive; it even pushed the pain of the cut on her palm to the back of her mind. Maria closed her eyes and clutched at her breast again, and cried a little.

Eventually, she went to their bedroom to find Hector dressed in his sleeping clothes, balled up and tense on his side of their bed. He stayed on the outer edge only, pushed over as far as he could, on the window side as if he thought to escape once she was asleep.

That night, before Maria lay down herself, she prayed. And before the heat in her stomach was overcome by the pain in her chest, she nurtured the little flame like it was a mountain pass fire. She wept silently when it was blown cold by the miscarriage of her grief; she clenched her fist, preferring the pain of his cutting her.

