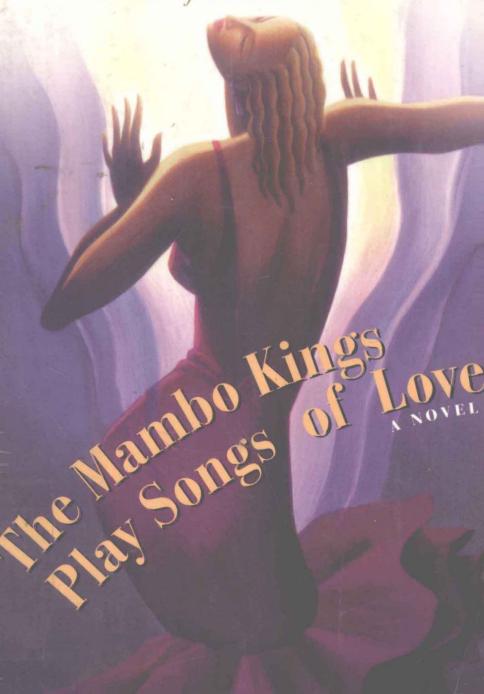
oscar hijuelo

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize



## THE MAMBO KINGS PLAY SONGS OF LOVE

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It was a Saturday afternoon on La Salle Street, years and years ago when I was a little kid, and around three o'clock Mrs. Shannon, the heavy Irish woman in her perpetually soup-stained dress, opened her back window and shouted out into the courtyard, "Hey, Cesar, yoo-hoo, I think you're on television, I swear it's you!" When I heard the opening strains of the I Love Lucy show I got excited because I knew she was referring to an item of eternity, that episode in which my dead father and my Uncle Cesar had appeared, playing Ricky Ricardo's singing cousins fresh off the farm in Oriente Province, Cuba, and north in New York for an engagement at Ricky's nightclub, the Tropicana.

This was close enough to the truth about their real lives—they were musicians and songwriters who had left Havana for New York in 1949, the year they formed the Mambo Kings, an orchestra that packed clubs, dance halls, and theaters around the East Coast—and, excitement of excitements, they even made a fabled journey in a flamingo-pink bus out to Sweet's Ballroom in San Francisco, playing on an all-star mambo night, a beautiful night of glory, beyond death, beyond pain, beyond all stillness.

Desi Arnaz had caught their act one night in a supper club on the West Side, and because they had perhaps already known each other from Havana or Oriente Province, where Arnaz, like the brothers, was born, it was natural that he ask them to sing on his show. He liked one of their songs in particular, a romantic bolero written by them, "Beautiful María of My Soul."

Some months later (I don't know how many, I wasn't five years old yet) they began to rehearse for the immortal appearance of my

father on this show. For me, my father's gentle rapping on Ricky Ricardo's door has always been a call from the beyond, as in Dracula films, or films of the walking dead, in which spirits ooze out from behind tombstones and through the cracked windows and rotted floors of gloomy antique halls: Lucille Ball, the lovely redheaded actress and comedienne who played Ricky's wife, was housecleaning when she heard the rapping of my father's knuckles against that door.

"I'm commmmming," in her singsong voice.

Standing in her entrance, two men in white silk suits and butterfly-looking lace bow ties, black instrument cases by their side and black-brimmed white hats in their hands—my father, Nestor Castillo, thin and broad-shouldered, and Uncle Cesar, thickset and immense.

My uncle: "Mrs. Ricardo? My name is Alfonso and this is my brother Manny . . ."

And her face lights up and she says, "Oh, yes, the fellows from Cuba. Ricky told me all about you."

Then, just like that, they're sitting on the couch when Ricky Ricardo walks in and says something like "Manny, Alfonso! Gee, it's really swell that you fellas could make it up here from Havana for the show."

That's when my father smiled. The first time I saw a rerun of this, I could remember other things about him—his lifting me up, his smell of cologne, his patting my head, his handing me a dime, his touching my face, his whistling, his taking me and my little sister, Leticia, for a walk in the park, and so many other moments happening in my thoughts simultaneously that it was like watching something momentous, say the Resurrection, as if Christ had stepped out of his sepulcher, flooding the world with light—what we were taught in the local church with the big red doors—because my father was now newly alive and could take off his hat and sit down on the couch in Ricky's living room, resting his black instrument case on his lap. He could play the trumpet, move his head, blink his eyes, nod, walk

across the room, and say "Thank you" when offered a cup of coffee. For me, the room was suddenly bursting with a silvery radiance. And now I knew that we could see it again. Mrs. Shannon had called out into the courtyard alerting my uncle: I was already in his apartment.

With my heart racing, I turned on the big black-and-white television set in his living room and tried to wake him. My uncle had fallen asleep in the kitchen—having worked really late the night before, some job in a Bronx social club, singing and playing the horn with a pickup group of musicians. He was snoring, his shirt was open, a few buttons had popped out on his belly. Between the delicate-looking index and middle fingers of his right hand, a Chesterfield cigarette burning down to the filter, that hand still holding a half glass of rye whiskey, which he used to drink like crazy because in recent years he had been suffering from bad dreams, saw apparitions, felt cursed, and, despite all the women he took to bed, found his life of bachelorhood solitary and wearisome. But I didn't know this at the time, I thought he was sleeping because he had worked so hard the night before, singing and playing the trumpet for seven or eight hours. I'm talking about a wedding party in a crowded, smoke-filled room (with boltedshut fire doors), lasting from nine at night to four, five o'clock in the morning, the band playing one-, two-hour sets. I thought he just needed the rest. How could I have known that he would come home and, in the name of unwinding, throw back a glass of rye, then a second, and then a third, and so on, until he'd plant his elbow on the table and use it to steady his chin, as he couldn't hold his head up otherwise. But that day I ran into the kitchen to wake him up so that he could see the episode, too, shaking him gently and tugging at his elbow, which was a mistake, because it was as if I had pulled loose the support columns of a five-hundred-year-old church: he simply fell over and crashed to the floor.

A commercial was running on the television, and so, as I knew I wouldn't have much time, I began to slap his face, pull on his burning

red-hot ears, tugging on them until he finally opened one eye. In the act of focusing he apparently did not recognize me, because he asked, "Nestor, what are you doing here?"

"It's me, Uncle, it's Eugenio."

I said this in a really earnest tone of voice, just like that kid who hangs out with Spencer Tracy in the movie of The Old Man and the Sea, really believing in my uncle and clinging on to his every word in life, his every touch like nourishment from a realm of great beauty, far beyond me, his heart. I tugged at him again, and he opened his eyes. This time he recognized me.

He said, "You?"

"Yes, Uncle, get up! Please get up! You're on television again. Come on "

One thing I have to say about my Uncle Cesar, there was very little he wouldn't do for me in those days, and so he nodded, tried to push himself off the floor, got to his knees, had trouble balancing, and then fell backwards. His head must have hurt: his face was a wince of pain. Then he seemed to be sleeping again. From the living room came the voice of Ricky's wife, plotting as usual with her neighbor Ethel Mertz about how to get a part on Ricky's show at the Tropicana, and I knew that the brothers had already been to the apartment—that's when Mrs. Shannon had called out into the courtyard that in about five more minutes my father and uncle would be standing on the stage of the Tropicana, ready to perform that song again. Ricky would take hold of the microphone and say, "Well, folks, and now I have a real treat for you. Ladies and gentlemen, Alfonso and Manny Reyes, let's hear it!" And soon my father and uncle would be standing side by side, living, breathing beings, for all the world to see, harmonizing in a duet of that canción.

As I shook my uncle, he opened his eyes and gave me his hand, hard and callused from his other job in those days, as superintendent, and he said, "Eugenio, help me. Help me."

I tugged with all my strength, but it was hopeless. Still he tried: with great effort he made it to one knee, and then, with his hand braced on the floor, he started to push himself up again. As I gave him another tug, he began miraculously to rise. Then he pushed my hand away and said, "I'll be okay, kid."

With one hand on the table and the other on the steam pipe, he pulled himself to his feet. For a moment he towered over me, wobbling as if powerful winds were rushing through the apartment. Happily I led him down the hallway and into the living room, but he fell over again by the door-not fell over, but rushed forward as if the floor had abruptly tilted, as if he had been shot out of a cannon, and, wham, he hit the bookcase in the hall. He kept piles of records there, among them a number of the black and brittle 78s he had recorded with my father and their group, the Mambo Kings. These came crashing down, the bookcase's glass doors jerking open, the records shooting out and spinning like flying saucers in the movies and splintering into pieces. Then the bookcase followed, slamming into the floor beside him: the songs "Bésame Mucho," "Acércate Más," "Juventud," "Twilight in Havana," "Mambo Nine," "Mambo Number Eight," "Mambo for a Hot Night," and their fine version of "Beautiful María of My Soul"—all these were smashed up. This crash had a sobering effect on my uncle. Suddenly he got to one knee by himself, and then the other, stood, leaned against the wall, and shook his head.

"Bueno," he said.

He followed me into the living room, and plopped down on the couch behind me. I sat on a big stuffed chair that we'd hauled up out of the basement. He squinted at the screen, watching himself and his younger brother, whom, despite their troubles, he loved very much. He seemed to be dreaming.

"Well, folks," Ricky Ricardo said, "and now I have a real treat for you . . ."

The two musicians in white silk suits and big butterfly-looking

lace bow ties, marching toward the microphone, my uncle holding a guitar, my father a trumpet.

"Thank you, thank you. And now a little number that we composed . . ." And as Cesar started to strum the guitar and my father lifted his trumpet to his lips, playing the opening of "Beautiful María of My Soul," a lovely, soaring melody line filling the room.

They were singing the song as it had been written—in Spanish. With the Ricky Ricardo Orchestra behind them, they came into a turnaround and began harmonizing a line that translates roughly into English as: "What delicious pain love has brought to me in the form of a woman."

My father . . . He looked so alive!

"Uncle!"

Uncle Cesar had lit a cigarette and fallen asleep. His cigarette had slid out of his fingers and was now burning into the starched cuff of his white shirt. I put the cigarette out, and then my uncle, opening his eyes again, smiled. "Eugenio, do me a favor. Get me a drink."

"But, Uncle, don't you want to watch the show?"

He tried really hard to pay attention, to focus on it.

"Look, it's you and Poppy."

"Coño, sí . . ."

My father's face with his horsey grin, arching eyebrows, big fleshy ears—a family trait—that slight look of pain, his quivering vocal cords, how beautiful it all seemed to me then . . .

And so I rushed into the kitchen and came back with a glass of rye whiskey, charging as fast as I could without spilling it. Ricky had joined the brothers onstage. He was definitely pleased with their performance and showed it because as the last note sounded he whipped up his hand and shouted "iOlé!," a big lock of his thick black hair falling over his brows. Then they bowed and the audience applauded.

The show continued on its course. A few gags followed: a costumed bull with flowers wrapped around its horns came out dancing an Irish jig, its horn poking into Ricky's bottom and so exasperating him that his eyes bugged out, he slapped his forehead and started speaking a-thousand-words-a-second Spanish. But at that point it made no difference to me, the miracle had passed, the resurrection of a man, Our Lord's promise which I then believed, with its release from pain, release from the troubles of this world.



## SIDE A



## In the Hotel Splendour 1980

Nearly twenty-five years after he and his brother had appeared on the I Love Lucy show, Cesar Castillo suffered in the terrible heat of a summer's night and poured himself another drink. He was in a room in the Hotel Splendour on 125th Street and Lenox Avenue, not far from the narrow stairway that led up to the recording studios of Orchestra Records, where his group, the Mambo Kings, made their fifteen black brittle 78s. In fact, it could have been the very room in which he once bedded down a luscious and long-legged party girl by the name of Vanna Vane, Miss Mambo for the month of June 1954. Everything was different then: 125th Street was jumping with clubs, there was less violence, there were fewer beggars, more mutual respect between people; he could take a late-night stroll from the apartment on La Salle Street, head down Broadway, cut east on 110th Street to Central Park, and then walk along its twisting paths and across the little bridges over streams and rocks, enjoying the scent of the woods and nature's beauty without a worry. He'd make his way to the Park Palace Ballroom on East 110th Street to hear Machito or Tito Puente, find musician friends at the bar, chase women, dance. Back then, you could walk through that park wearing your best clothes and a nice expensive watch without someone coming up behind you and pressing a knife against your neck. Man, those days were gone forever.

He laughed: he would have given anything to have the physical virtuosity now that he did when he was thirty-six and first brought Miss Mambo up those stairs and into the room. He used to live for that moment when he could strip a woman down on a bed: Miss Vanna Vane of Brooklyn, New York, had a mole just below the nipple of her right breast, and, boom, his big thing used to stick out just like

that, just by touching a woman's breast or standing close to her and sensing the heat between her legs. Women wore nicer clothes back then, more elaborate delicate things, and it was more fun to watch them undress. Yes, perhaps that was the room where he'd take Vanna Vane on those glorious unending nights of love so long ago.

He sat in the flickering street-lit window, his languorous heavy-jowled hound's face glowing like white stone. He'd brought up a little phonograph, used to belong to his nephew Eugenio, and a package of old records made by his group, the Mambo Kings, in the early 1950s. A case of whiskey, a carton of cigarettes—filtered Chesterfields ("Folks, smoke Chesterfields, the preferred tobacco, the Mambo King's favorite!") that had wrecked his nice baritone voice over the years; and a few other items: paper, envelopes, a few BiC pens, his tattered address book, stomach pills, a dirty magazine—something called *El Mundo Sexual*—a few faded photographs, a change of clothes, all packed in a beaten-up cane suitcase. He was planning to stay in the Hotel Splendour for as long as it would take him to drink that whiskey (or until the veins on his legs burst), figuring he'd eat, if he had to, at the Chinese place on the corner with its sign saying, "Takee Out Only."

As he leaned forward, placing on the buzzing phonograph a record called "The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love," he could hear footsteps on the stairway, a man's and a young woman's voice, the man saying, "Here we are, baby," and then the sound of the door opening and closing, and the moving about of chairs, as if they were going to sit in front of a fan together to drink and kiss. Black man's voice, Cesar figured before clicking on the record player.

A sea of scratches and a trumpet line, a habanera bass, a piano playing sentimental, sad minor chords, his brother Nestor Castillo in some faraway place in a world without light, raising the trumpet to his lips, eyes closed, face rippled by dreamy concentration . . . the melody of Ernesto Lecuona's "Juventud."

Sipping whiskey, his memory scrambled like eggs. He was sixty-