

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-two. Time was becoming a joke. One day, young man; next day, old man. Now, as the music played, he half expected to open his eyes and find Miss Vanna Vane seated on that chair across the room, slipping

her long legs into a pair of nylons, the cheery white light of 125th Street on a Sunday morning burning through the half-open window shade.

ON ONE OF THOSE NIGHTS WHEN HE COULD NOT SIT STILL IN THEIR apartment on La Salle Street back in 1954, he was in the Palm Nightclub listening to the fabulous Tito Rodríguez and his orchestra and watching the cigarette girl: she was wearing a too tight leopard-skin leotard and her blond hair was long, curled, and swept to one side, so that it fell pouty over half her face, like Veronica Lake's. Every time this blonde walked by, Cesar Castillo bought a package of cigarettes from her, and when she would set her cigarette box down on the table he'd hold her by the wrist and look deep into her eyes. Then he'd give her a quarter tip and smile. In a sheeny black top, her breasts were splendid and large. He'd once overheard a drunken sailor saying to a pal in a bar, "Look at the torpedoes on that broad, mamma mia!" Loving American expressions, he thought of torpedoes with their pointed tips, and was enchanted by the line of sweat congealing across her diaphragm.

After he'd bought his eighth package of cigarettes from her, he invited her to have a drink. Because it was very late, she decided to sit with them, these two handsome brothers.

"My name is Cesar Castillo, and this is my brother Nestor."

"Vanna Vane. Nice to meet you."

A little later he was out on the dance floor with Miss Vane, putting on a hell of a show for the crowd, when the orchestra broke into a furious jam: a conga player, a bongo player, and a drummer with an American kit, pounding out a fast, swirling, circular rhythm. Their playing was so conducive to spinning that the Mambo King unfurled his breast-pocket handkerchief and in a variation of the scarf dance slipped one end of it between his teeth and urged Vanna to do the same with the other. Joined by a pink-and-light-blue handkerchief clenched between their teeth, Cesar and Vanna started to spin quickly like two whirling acrobats in a circus act. As they spun, the crowd applauded,

and a number of couples imitated them on the dance floor. Then they dizzily zigzagged back to their table.

“So you’re a Cuban fellow like that guy Desi Arnaz?”

“That’s right, baby.”

Later, at three in the morning, he and Nestor walked her to the subway.

“Vanna, there’s something I want you to do for me. I have this orchestra and we’ve just made a new record. We’re thinking of calling it something like ‘Mambos for the Manhattan Night,’ that’s my idea, and we need someone, a pretty girl like you—how old are you?”

“Twenty-two.”

“—a pretty girl to pose with us for the cover of this record. I mean to say”—and then he seemed flustered and bashful—“that you would be good for this. It pays fifty dollars.”

“Fifty.”

Decked out in white silk suits on a Saturday afternoon, the brothers met Vanna in Times Square and walked over to the photographer’s studio at 548 West 48th Street, the Olympus Studio, where their photographer had outfitted a back room with fake palm trees. Turning up with their instruments, a trumpet, a guitar, and a drum, they looked quite slick, their thick heads of hair conked high into shining pompadours. Miss Vane wore a ruffle-skirted, pleat-waisted party dress with a tight bodice, gleamy black seamed nylons, and five-inch-high heels that lifted her rump into the air and showed off her nice long legs. (And behind this memory, he didn’t know what they called that muscle up at the high end inside a woman’s thigh, that muscle which intersected the clitoris and got all twisted, quivering ever so slightly when he’d kiss a woman there.) They tried a hundred poses, but the one that made the album cover was this: Cesar Castillo with wolfish grin, a conga drum strapped around his neck, his hand raised and coming down on the drum, his mouth open in a laugh, and his whole body bending toward Miss Vane. Her hands were clasped together by her face, her mouth forming an “Ooooh” of excitement, her legs bent for dancing, part of her garter showing; while to her left, Nestor, eyes

closed and head tilted back, was blowing his trumpet. Later the artist who did the mechanicals for Orchestra Records would add a Manhattan skyline and a trail of one- and two-flagged notes spewing out of Nestor's trumpet around them.

Because Orchestra Records worked on the cheap, most of their recordings were 78s, though they also managed to put out a few party-size 33s, with four songs per side. In those days, most record players still had three speeds. Pressed in the Bronx, these 78s were made of a heavy but brittle plastic, never sold more than a few thousand copies each, and were to be found in *botánicas*—religious knickknack shops—alongside statues of Jesus Christ and his tormented disciples, and magic candles and curative herbs, and in record stores like the Almacén Hernández on 113th Street and Lexington Avenue in Harlem, and in bins in the street market and on tables manned by friends at dances. The Mambo Kings would put out fifteen of these 78s, selling for 69 cents each, between 1949 and 1956, and three long-playing 33s (in 1954 and 1956).

The A and B sides of these 78s were titled “Solitude of My Heart,” “A Woman’s Tears,” “Twilight in Havana,” “The Havana Mambo,” “Conga Cats and Conga Dolls,” “The Sadness of Love,” “Welcome to Mamboland,” “Jingle Bells Mambo!” (“Who’s that fat jolly guy with the white beard dancing up a storm with that chick? . . . Santa Claus, Santa Claus dancing the ‘Jingle Bells Mambo!’”), “Mambo Nocturne,” “The Subway Mambo,” “My Cuban Mambo,” “The Lovers’ Mambo,” “*El Campesino*,” “Alcohol,” “Traffic Mambo,” “The Happy Mambo,” “The New York Cha-cha-cha,” “Cuban Cha-cha,” “Too Many Women (and Not Enough Time!),” “Mambo Inferno!,” “*Noche Caliente*,” “Malagueña” (as cha-cha-cha), “*Juventud*,” “Solitude,” “Lovers’ Cha-cha-cha,” “How Delicious the Mambo!,” “Mambo Fiesta!,” “The Kissing Mambo!” (And the 33s: “Mambo Dance Party” and “Manhattan Mambo”—1954—and their full-length 33, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, June 1956.) Not only did the Mambo Kings feature winsome and beautiful Miss Mambo pinup girls on each of these records, but sometimes a dance instruction box was

included. (By the mid-seventies, most of these records had vanished from the face of the earth. Whenever Cesar would go by a secondhand store or a “classic” record rack, he would search carefully for new copies to replace the ones that had gotten smashed or lent out or given away or just worn out and scratchy from so much use. Sometimes he found them for 15 cents or 25 cents and he would walk happily home, his bundle under his arm.)

Now the narrow entranceway of Orchestra, where those records were made, was blocked off with boards, its windows filled with the remnants of what had become a dress shop; a few manikins were leaning backwards against the glass. But back then he and the Mambo Kings used to carry their instruments up the narrow stairway, their enormous string bass always banging against the walls. Beyond a red door marked STUDIO was a small waiting room with an office desk and a row of black metal chairs. On the wall, a corkboard filled with photographs of the record company’s other musicians: a singer named Bobby Soxer Otero; a pianist, Cole Higgins; and beside him, the majestic Ornette Brothers. Then a photograph of the Mambo Kings all dressed in white silk suits and posed atop a seashell art-deco bandstand, the photograph crisscrossed with looping scrawls.

The studio was about the size of a large bathroom and had thickly carpeted floors with corkboard- and drape-covered walls, and a large window looking out on 125th Street. It was hot and airless on warm days, without air-conditioning or ventilation when they were recording, save for the rusty-bladed fan that sat atop the studio piano, which they’d turn on between numbers.

Three big RCA ball microphones in the center of the room for vocals, another three for the instruments. While making their records, the musicians would remove their shoes and walk quietly about, careful not to stomp their feet during the recording session, as this would get picked up as “thumps” on the microphones. No laughing, no breathing, no whispering. The horn players would stand to the side, the rhythm section—drummers and string bass and pianist—on another.

Cesar and his brother Nestor side by side, the Mambo King playing the claves (the wooden instruments making the 1-2-3/1-2 clicking sound) or shaking maracas, strumming a guitar. Sometimes Cesar played trumpet melodies with Nestor, but usually he stepped back and allowed his brother to take his solos in peace. Even so, Nestor always waited for his older brother's signal, a nod, to begin. Only then, would Nestor step forward, his mournful solos flying like black angels through the group's lavish orchestrations. With that, Cesar returned to the microphone or the pianist took his own solo or the chorus sang. Sometimes these sessions lasted until the early morning, with some songs coming easily, and others played again and again until throats grew hoarse and the streets seemed to blur in a phantasm of lights.

Like his music, the Mambo King was very direct in those days. He and Vanna had just been out to dinner at the Club Babalú and Cesar said to her, as she chewed on a piece of plantain fritter, "Vanna, I'm in love with you, and I want the chance to show you what it's like to be loved by a man like me." And because they'd been throwing down pitchers of the Club Babalú's special sangria, and because he had taken her to a nice movie—Humphrey Bogart and Ava Gardner in *The Barefoot Contessa*—and because he had gotten her a fifty-dollar modeling fee and an expensive ballroom dress with pleated skirt so she could appear between himself and his younger brother on the cover of "Manhattan Mambos '54"; and perhaps because he was a reasonably handsome man who seemed earnest and knew, as wolves know, exactly what he wanted from her—she could see it in his eyes—she was flattered enough that when he said, "Why don't we go uptown?" she said, "Yes."

Maybe it was on that chair that she had first set down her fine ass while going about the delicate business of hoisting up her skirt and unsnapping her garters. Coyly smiling as she rolled down her nylons, which she afterwards draped across the chair. He lay down across the bed. He'd taken off his jacket, his silk shirt, his flamingo-pink tie, stripped off his sleeveless T-shirt, so that his top was bare—save for a tarnished crucifix, a First Communion gift from his mother in Cuba,

hanging from a thin gold chain around his neck. Off with the lights, off with her wire-reinforced Maidenform 36C brassiere, off with her Lady of Paris underwear with the flowery embroidered crotch. He told her exactly what to do. She undid his trousers and gripped his big thing with her long slender hand, and soon she was unrolling a heavy rubber prophylactic over it. She liked him, liked it, liked his manliness and his arrogance and the way he threw her around on the bed, turning her on her stomach and onto her back, hung her off the side of the bed, pumping her so wildly she felt as if she was being attacked by a beast of the forest. He licked the mole on her breast that she thought ugly with the tip of his tongue and called it beautiful. Then he pumped her so much he tore up the rubber and kept going even when he knew the rubber was torn; he kept going because it felt so good and she screamed, and felt as if she was breaking into pieces, and, boom, he had his orgasm and went floating through a wall-less room filled with flitting black nightingales.

“Tell me that phrase again in Spanish. I like to hear it.”

“*Te quiero.*”

“Oh, it’s so beautiful, say it again.”

“*Te quiero, baby, baby.*”

“And I ‘*te quiero,*’ too.”

Smugly, he showed her his *pinga*, as it was indelicately called in his youth. He was sitting on the bed in the Hotel Splendour, hidden by the shadows, while she was standing near the bathroom door. And just looking at her fine naked body, damp with sweat and happiness, made his big thing all hard again. That thing burning in the light of the window was thick and dark as a tree branch. In those days, it sprouted like a vine from between his legs, carried aloft by a powerful vein that precisely divided his body, and flourished upwards like the spreading top branches of a tree, or, he once thought while looking at a map of the United States, like the course of the Mississippi River and its tributaries.

“Come over here,” he told her.

On that night, as on many other nights, he pulled up the tangled sheets so that she could join him on the bed again. And soon Vanna

Vane was grinding her damp bottom against his chest, belly, and mouth and strands of her dyed blond hair came slipping down between their lips as they kissed. Then she mounted him and rocked back and forth until things got all twisted and hot inside and both their hearts burst (pounding like conga drums) and they fell back exhausted, resting until they were ready for more, their lovemaking going around and around in the Mambo King's head, like the melody of a song of love.

Thinking about Vanna threw open the door to that time. The Mambo King found himself walking arm in arm with her—or a woman like her—into the Park Palace Ballroom, a huge dance joint on 110th Street and Fifth Avenue. That was his favorite place to hang out on his nights off, when he wanted to have fun. It would feel good to make an entrance with a pretty woman on his arm, a tall blonde with a big heart-shaped ass: Vanna Vane, splendid in a bursting black sequin-disk-covered number that blinked and wobbled clamorously when she'd walk across a room. He'd strut in beside her, wearing a light blue pinstriped suit, white silk shirt, light sky-blue tie, his hair slick and his body scented with Old Spice, the mariner's cologne.

That was the thing in those days: to be seen with a woman like Vanna was prestigious as a passport, a high-school diploma, a full-time job, a record contract, a 1951 DeSoto. Dark-skinned men like Nat King Cole and Miguelito Valdez would turn up at the dance halls with blond girlfriends. And Cesar liked to do the same, even though he was a white Cuban like Desi Arnaz. (Why, he knew of this fellow, hung around in the clubs, who made his brunette girlfriend dye her pubic hair blond. He knew it because he'd taken her to bed once, when she was still a brunette, and then later, on the sly, he'd talked her into going somewhere with him, maybe the Hotel Splendour, where he planted a kiss on her navel and slid her panties off, slipping his tongue into the sweetness of her new, improved golden Clairol hair.) Moving through the ballroom crowd, he liked to watch the heads turning in admiration as he and his girl would make their way to the jammed bar. There he'd play the sport and buy his friends drinks—in the 1950s, rum and Cokes were the rage—joking and telling stories until the orchestra broke into

something like the “Hong Kong Mambo” or the “Mambo de Paree” and he would take his girl back out onto the floor and dance.

Later he might go into the cavernous Park Palace rest rooms to get his fancy two-toned shoes shined, or to place a bet with one of the bookies who worked out of a long stall where magazines and newspapers, condoms, flowers, and reefers were sold. A dollar tip for the shoeshine boys, a piss in the urinal, a comb through his wavy hair, and then out again, his metal-heeled shoes tap, tap, tapping down the tiled halls, like shoes in the arcades of Cuba, toward the beautiful music. Then he’d dance or rejoin his quiet brother at their table, sipping drinks and gratefully observing the juicy babes around him. (Yeah, and even if he’s in the Hotel Splendour, it’s as if he’s back in that dance hall again, checking things out and noticing that there’s a nice brunette looking over at him. And who should come by when his date gets up to use the ladies’ room but that brunette, and even if she’s not a blonde, she looks seriously fly in a tight pink dress and bops toward him with a drink in her hand, and *Dios mío*, but she looks hot from dancing, with beads of sweat rolling off her chin and onto her breasts, her stomach damp and transparent through the clingy material of her dress. And what does she say but, “Aren’t you Cesar Castillo, the singer?” And he nods and takes hold of her wrist and says, “My, but you smell nice,” and he gets her name, cracks her up with a joke, and then, before his date returns, he says, “Why don’t you come back here tomorrow night and we can talk some more and have a little fun,” and he jumps ahead, feeling her nipple stiffen in his mouth, and then he’s back in the Park Palace, watching her walking off—he can just barely make out the outline of her panties through her dress, and she’s in bed tormenting him with the ball of her thumb, a rolling motion over his opening that makes the head of his penis the size of a Cortland apple, and then his girl’s sitting beside him and they have some more drinks, he remembered that.)*

* And, behind that another recollection about the way the ladies dressed for those nights of love: they wore skull-hugging turbans, low-riding clothes, banded

The Mambo King flourished in that ballroom with its friendly crowds, good food, booze, companionship, and music. And when he wasn't out to dance or to play jobs with his orchestra, he was visiting the friends he had made in the Park Palace and other dance halls, fellow Cubans or Puerto Ricans who would invite him over to their apartments to eat dinner, play cards, listen to records, and become a swaying ring of arms in the kitchen, singing and always having fun.

It was at the Park Palace that the Mambo King and his brother found many of their musicians. When he and his brother had first turned up in New York in early 1949, the beginning of the mambo boom, they had gotten jobs through their fat cousin Pablo, with whom they had at first lived, working in a meat-packing plant on 125th Street by day so that they could have enough money to party and set things up at night. They met a lot of people then, a lot of musicians like themselves, good players. There was Pito Pérez, who played the timbales; Benny Domingo on the congas; Ray Alcázar on the piano;

berets, and feathered pillbox caps. Heavy drop earrings made with fake rubies, crystals, and pearls; white creamy pearl necklaces hanging down into low-riding necklines, breasts plumped up and sweet underneath; sequined dresses with slit skirts and pleated midriffs, tied up by black sable belts. Frilly slips, step-ins, girdles and garters, brassieres, lacy-fringed and transparent at the nipples. Good for kisses on the belly, roll of the damp tongue on the navel, nose roving over a line of black pubic hairs below. Flower-crotched flame panties, black-seamed white panties, panties with felt-covered buttons, fluffy ball panties, panties whose waistbands snapped tight and left faint pink lines along the ridges of tender female skin; hips warm against his face; black sable panties, fake leopard-skin panties, butterfly-wing panties. (And if these ladies didn't wear the right kinds of little things underneath, he would head into the lingerie department of stores like Macy's and Gimbel's, flirting with the salesgirls and happily looking over these little things in the display cases. Like a student preparing for an exam, he would squint and arch his handsome brow, checking out the names on the labels: Tropical Rhapsody, Bronze Twilight, Tigress, Nights of Desire.

"*Ooh la la,*" he would say to the salesgirl, shaking his right hand as if his fingertips were on fire. "Which one would you wear, miss?")

Manny Domínguez, who played the guitar and the *cencerro*; Xavier from Puerto Rico, the trombone; Willie Carmen, the flute; Ramón “*El Jamón*” Ortiz, the bass saxophone; José Otero, violin; Rafael Guillón, the rattle gourd; Benny Chacón, accordion; Johnny Bing, saxophone; Johnny Cruz, horn; Francisco Martínez, vibraphone; Johnny Reyes, the *tres* and the eight-stringed *quatro*. And, among them, the brothers themselves: Cesar, who sang, played the trumpet, guitar, accordion, and piano; and Nestor, flute, trumpet, guitar, and vocals.

Like the brothers, many of the musicians were workers by day, and when they played jobs and were on a stage, or went out dancing, they were Stars for a Night. Stars of buying drinks, stars of friendly introductions, stars of female conquest. Some of them were already famous like the Mambo King wanted to be. They met the drummer Mongo Santamaría, who had an act back then called the Black Cuban Diamonds; Pérez Prado,* the emperor of the Mambo; the singer Graciela; Chico O’Farrill; and that black fellow who liked Cubans so much, Dizzy Gillespie. And they met the great Macedonio Rivera, a dignified and dapper-looking mulatto, who would hang out at the bar of the Park Palace, his wife by his side, receiving his fans and their occasional gifts of jewelry, which he would calmly tuck into his jacket

* Puff of smoke, a swallow of whiskey, the sensation that something was pinching the small of his back, something with razorlike claws, making its way along the mysterious passages of his kidneys and liver . . . Pérez Prado. When the Mambo King, ensconced in his room in the Hotel Splendour, thought about Pérez, he recalled the first time he saw the man on a stage, off in another world and bending his body in a hundred shapes, as if he was made of rubber: prowling like a hound, on his haunches like a cat, spreading out like a tree, soaring like a biplane, rushing like a train, vibrating like a tumbling washing machine, rolling like dice, bounding like a kangaroo, bouncing like a spring, skipping like a stone . . . and his face a mask of concentration, conviction, and pure pleasure, a being from another world, his stage another world. Thin Pérez giving the Mambo King some of his jazzier stage moves, the loquacious and cheerful Pérez out by the bar, telling everyone around him, “Fellas, you must come and visit me in Mexico! We’ll have the time of our lives, tell you what, my friends. We’ll go to the races and the bullfights, we’ll eat like princes and drink like the Pope!”

pocket. Later the jewelry would end up in a teakwood Chinese box that Rivera kept in his living room. Visiting at his apartment in the West Eighties, the brothers would see this box, thick with engraved watches, bracelets, and rings, its lid decorated with Chinese swirls and inlaid with the image of a mother-of-pearl dragon devouring a flower. And Cesar would say, “Don’t you worry, brother, that’s going to be happening to us one day.”

Cesar had a picture from one of those nights, tucked in the soft cloth pocket of his suitcase in the Hotel Splendour: the two brothers decked out in white suits and seated at a round table, the mirrored walls and columns behind them reflecting the distant lights, dancers, and the brass of an orchestra. Cesar, a little drunk and pleased to death with himself, a champagne glass in one hand and, in the other, the soft, curvaceous shoulder of an unidentified girl—Paulita? Roxanne? Xiomara?—looking a lot like Rita Hayworth, with her nice breasts pushed up into the top of her dress and a funny smile because Cesar had just leaned over and kissed her, licking her ear with his tongue, and Nestor beside them, a little detached and to the side, staring off, his brows raised slightly in bewilderment.