

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Visitors, 1965

OSCAR HIJUELOS

*American-born novelist Oscar Hijuelos (1951–2013) grew up in New York City, raised by Cuban parents who immigrated to the United States in the late 1940s. He funneled the alienation he felt growing up between two worlds into his writing. Hijuelos was the first Hispanic winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, which he received in 1990 for his work *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, later adapted into a film and play. “Visitors, 1965” sheds light on the varying experience of Cuban immigrants and their differing attitudes toward their new home and old homeland.*

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Describe the life that Alejo and Mercedes, both immigrants from Cuba before the Castro revolution, live in the United States. How do you explain their (changing) attitudes toward Castro and Cuba? Why are Alejo and Mercedes so eager and ready to sponsor the emigration of Mercedes’ family? Describe their two sons, Horacio and Hektor, and explain their different attitudes toward life in America. Why is Hektor “sick at heart” for being so Americanized? What is the meaning of his fantasies about Cuba and his “memories” of his trip there in 1954? What enabled the new Cuban exiles, the “Visitors”—Aunt Luisa, Pedro, Virginia, and Virginia—to establish themselves so quickly and easily in America, and to fare so much better than their patrons and sponsors who had come twenty years before? Describe and account for Pedro’s and Mercedes’ different responses to their “visitors”’ success. In hindsight, what function does the anecdote, recounted at the outset, about Alejo Santinio and Kruschchev have in the story that unfolds? Is there any connection between this anecdote and the title of the story? Who, finally, are the “visitors”?

I.

Down in the cool basement of the hotel restaurant, Alejo Santinio looked over a yellowed newspaper clipping dating back to 1961. He had not looked at it recently, although in the past had always been proud to show it to visitors. And why? Because it was a brief moment of glory. In the newspaper picture Alejo and his friend Diego were in their best dress whites standing before a glittering cart of desserts. Beside them was a fat, cheery, beaming face, the Soviet premier Nikita Krushchev, who was attending a luncheon in his honor at the hotel.

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