

AJIJIC

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PÁGINA SEIS
EDITORIAL



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The pen of a writer is moved not so much by the rational man that holds it, but by the mysterious intimacy that inhabits him, by the ghosts that hide within the depths of his being.

Ernesto Sabato, quoted by Renato Poma in *Literature is My Vengeance*

*Direct your eye sight inward, and you'll find
A thousand regions in your mind
Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be
Expert in home-cosmography.*

William Habington, "To my Honoured Friend Sir Ed. P. Knight",
quoted by Henry David Thoreau, in *Walden*

I'm lost between two shores

...

New York's home

But it ain't mine no more.

Neil Diamond, "I am... I said"

Suggestion

With the goal of entering the novel in most the intimate and sonorous way, I suggest that readers, as they progress in their reading, listen to the songs and become close to the books and poems that appear there, as threads that have guided the plot forward. That is how I wrote this book, in unending evenings of music and literature, as an homage to those fine arts and to happiness of their existence that makes life more enjoyable.

PART ONE

Ajijic

Chapter I

The Arrival

On the facade of the bookstore, La Renga, in the town of Ajijic, the owner had a verse engraved into a lovely wooden board that read as follows:

No one ever knows who will knock at your door.
Opening it, that April evening,
the wind entered like a blue gust
and the smell of orange blossoms inundated my entire
home.

An afternoon in which the lagoon sparkled with the orange hues of the sun, Juan Sibilino declared that there was no danger whatsoever. It was then that Julio, the bookseller, went out to the cobblestone street to observe the spectacle in the sky. The storm had passed, and hundreds of swallows flew over the town. We were all at peace and Juan Sibilino said that the flight commemorated one more year of the arrival of the first foreigners to Ajijic. We all liked believing in that story. The people of the town, who had shuttered themselves within their homes against the storm, also came out to see the spectacle: the swallows descended like arrows from the top of the mountain called Tepalo, flying at great speeds over the rooftops, and once they reached the lagoon they disappeared into the horizon amidst the dark colors of García Hill. The bells of the

church of St. Andrew The Apostle tolled and the evening prepared itself for the coming stillness of the night.

Rainwater ran down the cobblestone streets, forming streams that flowed towards the lagoon. It smelled of wet earth. A few of the elders of the town spoke among themselves sitting on *equipales* outside their homes, watching the running water, and ruminating philosophically on such a beautiful and peculiar manifestation of nature. They sang verses from that blessed land: "The sun comes up through Ocotlán, the moon comes up through Tizapán, and little by little, the tide rises in the lagoon." In the poetry of the light, the lake is blue at dawn and bathes in amber at dusk. When the evening and night meet and fuse into the thin line of the horizon, the amber yields to an infinite darkness punctured by stars.

Ajijic is a town situated on the shores of Lake Chapala, about twenty-five miles from the city of Guadalajara. Magical and picturesque, it's surrounded by mountains and enjoys some of the best weather in the world. Its portentous flora overwhelms the visitor's gaze. The way into town is by way of Jin Xi Boulevard, flanked by majestic pines, it changes its name to Occidental Highway, where the splendor of jacarandas and flamboyant trees rises. Up ahead, after Columbus Street, the road changes name again to Western Highway, and further yet, at the outskirts of town, it turns into a highway that snakes along the lagoon.

No one knows exactly what year the first foreigners came to Ajijic, but the truth is that, as they arrived, the town was transformed through a cultural miscegenation that intertwined two very diverse civilizations: on the one hand, Canadians and Americans (mostly), and, on the other, the inhabitants of Ajijic and the towns dotted along the shores of Lake Chapala: like the souls of a dissimilar and picturesque painting, a beautiful work woven in a loom, like

a verse from Neruda: “because it is the mystery of a town to be one and be all.”

The foreigners rented or bought homes, in accordance with each of their means, and painted them in a variety of colors. They hung flowerpots on the facades, covered the walls with vines, constructed fountains, drew figures of birds on the thresholds of the outer doors, planted trees in the gardens, and filled every inch with music; they opened cafes and restaurants, craft, and jewelry stores, they created real estate offices to promote their homes for sale and for rent. They participated in the construction of a golf course, started reading and dancing clubs, founded *lakesider* community organizations like The Lake Chapala Society, and with the slogan “When the expats are together” they worked tirelessly to beautify the town, contributing ideas on how to revive it. They founded and constructed the Lakeside Little Theater, a symbolic representation of striving for a better life in community through culture and the high spirit of those who work and enjoy the arts. They participated in the “Viva La Música” festival, helping public parks like La Cristianía of Chapala become clean and properly run places. They propagated order, which enriched the togetherness of daily life in town. They came to Ajijic to live in peace, and they became one with the land, with the water, with the weather, and with the people. They decided to stay forever.

But not everything was milk and honey: “hunky-dory”. Years ago, a man came to Ajijic from New York, to change the life of a woman and her son, forever. A man who, like a gust of wind, forever upended destiny.

Chapter II

La Renga

When Julio, the bookseller, opened his bookstore, he was only twenty-five years old. He did it using the scarce financial resources he had, and his initial inventory was made up of just a few books. He started in a two-story house on Morelos Street, that he had inherited from his parents, very close to the town square and the lagoon, and he called it La Renga.

Morelos Street was a cobblestone street like all the other streets of Ajijic, very picturesque with its colorful houses, craft and textile stores, and boutiques. Some of the houses that lined it were made into hotels and several of their facades were adorned with murals and mosaics. The street led to Ajijic's boardwalk, where people paraded all hours of the day enchanted by the beauty of the lagoon and the horizon.

Julio was a thinly built man of medium height, dark skin, and black hair. He had studied Hispanic Literature at the University of Guadalajara and, for some time, had worked as a clerk at a bookstore near the cultural center, Ex Convento del Carmen, but after the death of his parents, he was forced to return to Ajijic. It was in those circumstances that he decided to open his own bookstore. He was an avid reader who would underline and make annotations in the books he read, writing notes on loose pages where he would then write book reviews to place on the counter in hopes of spurring the interest of potential readers.

The catalogue of books of La Renga had grown with time and it was made up almost entirely of old and second-hand books, most of them read by Julio, allowing him to make better recommendations based on the needs or likes of his customers. The first book he sold was a facsimile edition published by the publishing house Porrúa of the original 1749 Widow of Frau edition of *The Book of the Lover and the Beloved* by Raymundo Lulio. The night before the book sold, he had been reading it and reviewing each point of the conversation in which the friend, who was God, spoke to the beloved, who was man. Perhaps it was the mysticism that Julio loved so much, that made him ignore the promise of female companionship, entrenched as he was in his books and reflections, believing that remaining single would grant him the absolute freedom of thought and time. On the corner in front of the bookstore was a cafe, La Colmena, the oldest one in Ajijic, it was very popular with the Lakesiders and the inhabitants of town as well as its visitors. That corner was known as “the heart of Ajijic,” it was where the street 16th of September changed its name to Independence. From there looking towards the mountains you could see at the summit, the cloister that the townspeople used for the celebrations of the Via Crucis and the festival of Santa Cruz, since the town like the majority towns in Mexico was steeped in tradition. The echo of the hubbub of the cafe, La Colmena, reached the bookstore, La Renga, where silence almost always reigned. Julio the bookseller used to say that books inspired in men and women an almost liturgical modesty, and that La Colmena was the breath of conversations often inspired, why not, by the reading of books, so that the cafe and the bookstore constituted a cultural haven at the heart of Ajijic.

The facade of the bookstore was painted white, the windows sills and the bars on the windows were made of wrought iron and were painted blue. The door entrance was on the right side and the name La Renga could be red

in giant letters made of wrought iron incrusting into the wall. A small marquee protected the door from the rain and the sun, and there was a bell that was rarely rung because the door was always open during office hours.

The bookstore contained three bookcases that covered the walls from floor to ceiling giving it an air of intellectuality. The first bookcase was to the left of the entrance, nailed to the inside wall of the facade; the second was on the same side on the back wall then came the counter, and to the right of it was the third bookcase near a staircase let that led to the upper floor.

Julio had commissioned a carpenter to line the shelves of the three bookcases with wood, in such a way that the part that protruded was worked in mahogany, and the surface of the planks had been covered with cheap wood, something trivial as they were hidden by books. "Books hide a thousand worlds inside them," was a phrase that was inscribed on one of the shelves in small letters. In the center of that bookcase was a bronze sculpture of a French soldier, perched on a marble pedestal. It was a gift that an American from the island of Martha's Vineyard had given Julio when the bookstore was still new. The soldier carried the flag of France, on the warpath, and engraved at the base were these words: "*N'abandonne pas.*"

On a wooden rack, behind the counter, Julio had placed various objects that some clients had given him and others that he had decided to collect himself: a Lagenaria gourd for mate, a ceramic bull, a reproduction of the Coit Tower in San Francisco, a porcelain duck, a wire figure of a walker from Santiago, several roosters from Sweden, a terra cotta pot from Oaxaca, a postcard from Portugal, a tiny copper casserole from the Lasserre restaurant in Paris, an inlaid jewelry box from India, a clock without the hour, a globe, a small 1966 Volkswagen van and a miniature Big Ben, a dried maple flower, a bottle of Niagara water, an American aircraft carrier, an iron Brooklyn Bridge, a scale

reproduction of Chapala fishermen with their nets, a photograph of Nevski Avenue, and a sign on the wall, stamped on a wooden board, that read:

Only books will save us!

At the back of the bookstore was a small but very pleasant patio, accessed through an archway. The courtyard walls were covered with jasmine and two bougainvilleas. Jasmine covered the back wall and bougainvillea the two side walls. In the right corner, between the jasmine and one of the bougainvilleas, Julio had planted a shrub known as “Queen of the Night” in a pot. The plant gave off a delicious fragrance that, when mixed with the wind that came from the lagoon, flooded the bookstore. In the courtyard there were two tables, each with four *equipales* covered with green, white, and red striped cushions. At the bottom of the jasmine wall, there was a small stone fountain whose floor was covered with blue and white tiles, on which a stream of water fell from the mouth of a stone-carved lion embedded in the wall. On the wall that separated the patio from the bookstore, under a marquee, was a small cupboard with a sink and a coffee machine with a grinder, as well as a small shelf and a stove.

The customers at La Renga would usually snoop around the bookshelves for a while, and then go to the patio to sit and have a cup of coffee, while reading a book or the day’s newspapers that were stacked on the tables. Julio had instituted the custom of giving a cup of coffee to anyone who bought a book.

The attic, on the top floor of the house, was a small convent-like room where Julio lived, with the walls lined with books that he did not share with anyone. It was his personal library. There was a twin bed, a desk, a reading

chair, and a tiny bathroom. In the afternoon, after closing the bookstore, Julio would go to the boardwalk to watch the sunset and sometimes, depending on the season, he would wait for nightfall to see the line of light that the moon cast over the lagoon towards the shore, sketching out a path by which one could ascend towards the starry sky. Then he would go back to the attic and sit in his chair to read in solitude and imagine himself travelling through countries and cities as had Xavier de Maistre around his room. He was comforted by the knowledge that the freedom of a man lay in his thoughts, and thus, traveling with his mind through hidden worlds, he would go to bed at peace while the wind from the lagoon swayed the treetops, lulling him to sleep.

Chapter III

The Mysterious Visitor of La Renga

One day in April, at five o'clock in the afternoon, the sound of the bell was heard at the door of the bookstore. A man crossed the threshold and entered, the gust of wind blowing behind him swept the papers off the counter. He was tall, strong, and graceful with dark skin and blue eyes, brown hair, and the fine features of miscegenation. His features were firm and his gaze brave and determined. He was a resolute man and had the gait of those who know very well what they want. He had good manners, was meticulous, and always dressed in fine and impeccable clothing. It was not the first time that he had entered the bookstore, for he was a regular customer; his visits were always mysterious.

After entering, without saying a word, he walked to the left and settled in front of the first of the bookshelves. He began to look at the books, silently. He took one, flipped through it, then another and flipped through it too. He read the front covers, the back ones and returned the books to their places. Then he went to the second bookshelf and repeated the procedure. He took a book and then another, looked at them, flipped through them, and returned them to their place. He turned around, walked past the counter, and went to the third bookshelf without looking at Julio, who was watching him sideways, holding a pen in his hand and the bookstore sales ledger in the other. There he took a book and looked at the front cover and the backside. He opened it and began to smell it, holding it with both hands,

bringing his nose closer to the threads of the spine. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath with the book touching his face. He absorbed, like a ritual, the smell of the work of the writer and the publisher, of the paper and the ink factories: the sweet smell of the printing press. "How much work and sweat must have gone in to giving life to this sea of words!" he thought. Then, pulling the book away from his face, he opened his eyes, let a few seconds go by, and then held it at the level of his heart embracing it. Then he looked at it again, flipped the pages, touched the spine, and with great care put it back in its place. He took another book and repeated the ritual, always in silence. Julio watched entranced, sipping his coffee.

After the unique procedure was complete, the man returned to the first bookcase, took a book, and tucked it under his arm; he went to the second bookcase and took another book, also putting it under his arm; and finally, he went to the last bookcase, the one earmarked for the smelling ritual, and there, taking a little bit more time, he calmly pulled a book out, and then went to the counter with the three books. He deposited them next to the cash register and waited silently for Julio to hand him the bill of sale. As Julio made annotations in the sales ledger and typed the prices on the cash register, the man gazed undaunted at the arch through to the back patio of the bookstore and seemed impervious to the conversations and laughter of the customers chatting back there, leisurely seated in their *equipales*. It was as if he was looking at a threshold in fear of crossing it. When Julio gave him the bill of sale, the man took out of his pants' pocket a bill holder that had the figure of the Statue of Liberty engraved on it. He separated the bills from lowest to highest denomination and paid. When he received his change, he put it in his other pants' pocket, took the three books, slightly bowed his head towards Julio in a gesture of gratitude, and went

to the door of the bookstore. Before leaving, he poked his head onto the street looking to his left and then to his right. He departed to his right, towards the lake, and at the corner he turned left onto 16th of September, losing himself in the calmness of the street in Ajijic.

Julio was never able to decipher the meaning of the ritual that the man repeated whenever he visited the bookstore. He had also noticed that in all those years the man never took more than one book from each bookcase, and he never walked between the books and the people browsing the bookshelves. If luck would have it that on a given afternoon, the man would arrive and see that another customer was already perusing the first bookcase, the man would wait stoically until the other customer finished his search, before approaching and beginning his routine. On a certain occasion, Julio was reviewing the bookstore's sales ledger and discovered that there was a clue to the books the man purchased: they were all books that dealt with searches, losses, abandonments, and returns.

One morning when Juan Sibilino was cleaning the back patio of the bookstore, Julio came up to him and asked him a question. Juan Sibilino was an older man, short, lean, with indigenous features, brown skin, and coarse, black hair. He was not cultured, but he was a wise connoisseur of the human soul and its nature. He was the butler of the mysterious man who visited La Renga, and in the mornings, during his spare time, he worked at the bookstore helping Julio organize the books and doing the cleaning. He was very tightlipped with respect to his boss, which seemed needless to Julio, since he never said a single word about that man and left everything shrouded in a cloud of mystery.

"Juan Sibilino, tell me something. Your boss is a mysterious man. What is he hiding? What's his secret? Who is he really? Why does he act so strange? You work for him, and you live in his house, but you never say a word. You

know very well that he comes here every so often, buys the books in a very peculiar way, and never says a single word. He doesn't even say thank you, he just bows his head and leaves. Why so much mystery with him?"

Juan Sibilino put the rag he used to dust the *equipales* on the table, and turning to Julio, said:

"You know very well, young Julio, that he is my boss. I take care of him and serve him, but I don't meddle in his affairs. He is a prudent man. He does not ask me anything about other people, doesn't meddle in the affairs of others, I'm not sure if you can understand me. It's unusual for him to talk to me about his affairs, he locks himself in his library and reads for hours, writes, and listens to music. So let him be, after all he's been a big help to you by buying so many books from you; let the world take its course. He is a good man, don't worry, he will never cause you any problem."

"Alright, alright," Julio replied. "But why so much mystery?"

A prudent and loyal man, Juan Sibilino was not going to reveal anything to Julio about the life of his employer. He picked up the rag again to continue his work, and turned to Julio, saying dryly:

"I really don't know."

"I've never seen him on the street or in the town square, or in the boardwalk. I mean, doesn't he have any friends or family?"

"No, he doesn't have anyone. In the past, he enjoyed having a good time, but for several years now he's rarely left the house, and since he has no family in town..."

"How strange," Julio said, patting Juan Sibilino on the shoulder and, smiling at him, made a gesture of gratitude towards him. He went inside the bookstore and settled in at the counter to continue writing reviews of his books.

Chapter IV

The Book

One afternoon, before the sun began to set, the man visited La Renga for the last time. The bookstore bell rang loudly. Julio, who was in the back patio washing some coffee cups, shuddered. He knew it was him because he had heard the bell. Who else but him would ring the bell when the door is open? Julio crossed the arch and stood next to the counter, still with rag in hand, and, breaking the unwritten rule of silence, the norm mutually understood by the man and the bookseller, which he had been respectful of for years, he said, without hiding his excitement or being able to contain himself:

“Good afternoon, sir. You are very welcome.”

The man did not say a word and did not even turn to look at Julio, but instead began to look at the books on the first bookcase. Julio felt as if a train had stopped him cold in his tracks and held back his words, pretending he had not intended to say anything; his heels spun him around and, following the inertia of this movement, he made a beeline to the back patio stammering incoherently on his way to restarting the washing of the coffee cups. The man smiled, without Julio noticing.

The day before, a seller of old books had left a beautiful copy of *The Iliad and the Odyssey* for consignment in La Renga. It was a Greek edition by the Scottish brothers, Robert and Andrew Foulis, from the year 1756, and had been on sale at the Bardón bookstore in Madrid. The salesman had heard of La Renga, “that nice little bookstore

in the town of Ajijic," so he had decided to try his fortune hoping that one of its customers might be interested in the book.

"It's going to be impossible to find a customer for that book," Julio had told the salesman. "It's extremely expensive and only a connoisseur or a collector would appreciate it."

"Have faith, sooner than you can imagine, the book will be sold."

Julio had placed the book on the third shelf. When he returned from washing the coffee cups, he saw that the man was right in front of that bookcase, which meant that he was in the last stage of his ritual. The man took the valuable book and opened it at the part where *The Odyssey* began. He closed his eyes and smelled it for a few very long seconds. Julio looked at him, excited, petrified. The man muttered words under his breath that Julio was unable to make out, he could only hear him say something more or less like this: "departure... it's time." It was the first time that Julio had heard the man's voice, albeit ever so faintly. The man stood in front of the bookcase for a long time admiring the book, leafing through it, rubbing its spine with both hands, first with the right and then with the left. Then he brought it up to his chest and embraced it close to his heart. He put it back in its place. Then, as always, he went to the first bookcase, took a book, and tucked it beneath his arm; then he went to the second bookcase and took another book, which he also placed beneath his arm. Julio's nerves were on edge, now, like flashes of energy that electrified him from the inside. The man had to go to the third bookcase. "If he were to take that book, I would get out from under the hardships I find myself in today," Julio thought. He took a first step, then another, and just as he was about to reach the bookcase, a large man with white hair and white beard, wearing a blue sailor's beret, wearing gabardine trousers and a flowered shirt, entered

the bookstore leaving behind him a wake of tobacco and tequila, smoking profusely from a beautiful pipe.

He was a retired American, a baby boomer, in whose heart burned the fighting spirit of a man who had risked his life for his homeland, but he had done so fighting in Vietnam with a divided heart because he hated war. He defended freedom and the right of the oppressed to demonstrate and protest. After the war he worked for the United States government at the Pentagon, until he retired. He was known by the nickname of Sugar and he owned a small nursery on the outskirts of town, near La Canacinta, which was a business but also a source of entertainment for himself in the arduous monotony of the days. He was originally from New York and was at the time sixty-five years old. His eyes were blue, like the beret he wore, and a funny belly hid beneath his flowered shirt. His gaze was parsimonious, and he didn't wear glasses. He was of medium height, always wore tennis shoes, and was a New York Yankees baseball fan. He was a music lover, played the guitar and piano, and liked to cook while listening to Neapolitan songs performed by Pavarotti, like some Italian immigrants he had met in Manhattan. He spoke a passable Spanish after so many years of sharing his time with the townspeople and the customers of his nursery, and he practiced it by watching subtitled movies and memorizing the translated lyrics of the songs that he liked so much. At night, before going to bed, he would often listen to the melancholic melody "Taps," as if it were a prayer for peace. A pragmatic and uncomplicated man, he was a promoter of lake-life for the benefit of the retirees, and he used to say that there was no better place in the world than Ajijic: "where we have the best weather in the world!"

Sugar looked at the man and without saying anything except "Hi, sir!" stepped between him and the bookcase and began looking at books. Julio was sweating profusely thinking that his sale would disappear, because he was sure

that the white-bearded American wasn't going to buy that book. Things happen for a reason, Julio thought, and that episode might turn out be an omen that the day would not be a fortuitous one. Sugar took the valuable book in his hands and started flipping through it. Julio was startled and looked at the mysterious man who, undaunted and without moving, was waiting with two books under his arm. Then Sugar, holding *The Iliad and the Odyssey* in his hands, stepped away from the bookcase and headed for the counter. He almost hit the other man when he turned around, but he barely said "sorry," showing the slight outline of a smile. The man did not answer, as he stood in front of the center of the bookcase, stiff as a board, without even blinking. Sugar placed the book on the counter and smiled again, showing his teeth among his white beard, and said:

"How much for this little treasure, mister?"

Julio told him the price and glanced at the man who had still not moved from his place. Sugar laughed out loud, slapped the book, and put it on the counter. He walked out of the bookstore to the right, down the street, just managing to say with a laugh, when he had already turned his back to the others:

"¡Goodbye, mister...goodbye, sir!"

Julio waited a moment for the man to react, but he still did not move. So, Julio took the book, left the counter, and returned it to its place on the shelf. Having done this, he returned to his place behind the counter. After a few tense moments, the man took a few steps and stood in front of the bookcase. He took the valuable copy of *The Iliad and the Odyssey*, and now, with the three books under his arm, he approached the counter. Julio's heart was about to explode, a big drop of sweat ran down his back. The man turned towards the arch of the back patio of the bookstore, but this time his gaze was much more fixed and penetrating, giving the impression that he was not just

contemplating something but, containing an inner cry, crumbling on the inside. His eyes were perceptibly moist, and he opened and closed his hands, leaning his body slightly forward and clenching his jaws. Next, he turned to look at the cash register as a sign that he wanted to know if Julio had finished doing the sum. "What was going on with that mysterious character?" Julio mused as he left the receipt next to the books. The man took it and looked at it, unperturbed. He reached into one of the pockets of his pants, took out the bill holder, and looking at the stamped figure of the Statue of Liberty, removed bills until he had collected the requested amount, which he slowly put on the counter. It was, as has been said, a considerable amount of money by La Renga's standards. Julio counted the bills; it was the exact amount. The man took the three books and left the bookstore towards the right, down the streets towards the lagoon, withdrawing from Julio's eyes forever.

That afternoon Julio was very happy. With the sale of the valuable book, he would pay off his debts, paint the bookstore and have a not insignificant amount left for his finances. It would take some time before Julio knew who the mysterious man who had visited the bookstore for years in such an extravagant way really was. At night, before he began to read in his attic beneath the light of a lamp, he opened his sales ledger again to review the books that that man had purchased from La Renga. He did not have all the records, because he kept those belonging to the first years of the bookstore in a cellar with expired files. Since he did not know the customer's name, who also always paid in cash, he had recorded his purchases under the initials MM: "mystery man." As he scrolled through the lines of the pages he had been able to find, he saw, without causing his curiosity to wane, that the man had acquired several cheap editions of *The Odyssey*, and books such as *Pedro Páramo*, *The Invention of Solitude*, *Kokoro*, *Resurrection*, *Don Quixote*, *The Last Encounter*, *The Invisible Man*, *The Trial*,

The Barcarolle, Hopscotch, The Book of Disquiet, Paradise Lost, Invisible Cities, Walden, Duino Elegies, The Book of the Friend and the Beloved, The Master of Petersburg, A Mortal Spring, The Novel of My Life, To Kill a Mockingbird, Zorba the Greek, The Impostor: A True Story, Kyoto, Just Kids, The Kingdom of This World, Verses On the Death of His Father and The Treaty on the Brevity of Life, among others. Julio had read those books and was reflecting on their point in common. They had, in effect, a point of contact, a common denominator: searches and losses.

Chapter V

The Gathering

One day, after the event of the purchase of the valuable book, Sugar received a call from his friend Niagara, inviting him to participate in a meeting of expats that was going to take place at his home. Niagara was a retiree from Ontario, Canada, who had been living in Ajijic for several years with his wife Ava. He was a man about Sugar's age, short, thin, and black-haired, with skin as white as snow. He wore round glasses, was assertive and regularly wore light colored jackets. He was an avid reader, well-versed in literature, and had a respectable library. His ability to recite passages from novels and long poems from memory was surprising, and he liked to do so often in conversations with his friends. In his interchanges with Sugar, he'd speak as if he were quoting from a book or a poem, and Sugar would speak as if he were savoring a song. The two let their conversations be driven by the plot of a novel or the lyrics of a song. That's how they were.

Niagara and Ava's house was located in the upper part of La Floresta, on a street called Paseo del Mirador. La Floresta was a neighborhood in Ajijic, divided in half by the Jin Xi Boulevard. It was a place where a large number of expats and other families from Guadalajara had settled, Sugar and Niagara used to go there to walk in lazy afternoons, talking and admiring the flamboyant trees and jacarandas that bloomed in the spring coloring the cobblestone streets when the first rains came. Sugar would call out to Niagara the names of the trees they would