

# Adventures in Macondo

## Chapter 1

By Tim Buendia

An early morning in April, while the Caribbean air was still fresh, I was on my way to catch the bus to Aracataca, a sleepy little town at about an hour's drive from the sea, squashed between mountains and the swamp. The tropical heat that challenges the mind's jurisdiction over the senses converting the people around the equator into a slow paced and joyful society, would incite my inevitable daily quest for shade as soon as the merciless sun would rise. I was accompanied by my local friends Carlos and Jorge the poet when I boarded the recklessly driven bus south on the Ruta Del Sol, a beautiful yet perilous highway. Endless banana plantations were being looked over by the majestic Sierra Nevada, keeping us company from the west. We were on our way to a school in the town that gave birth to Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the maximum exponent of literature's magical realism, where we were invited to give informal speeches at a Spanish Language Day event. My talk would have been about my travels around the world and teaching English in

Colombia, but I spoke mediocre Spanish and I didn't feel like delivering an uncomfortably irrelevant talk outside the children's imaginations and confuse the country's only Nobel Prize winner's youngest followers. I was honored, yet I could do nothing but decline. I decided to spectate the cultural event promised to be full of readings, dance and theater. I had not the faintest idea that the land we were approaching would inspire me beyond my imagination.

The people of Aracataca, colloquially known as Cataqueros, generally wake up at the break of dawn to enjoy the coolness of the departing night. School starts at six thirty, so that mothers, whose beautifully blended blood came from all over the world, don't need an umbrella to protect them from the burning sun while they walk to the market or wash their clothes in the river about a mile downstream from the giant white rocks appearing dinosaur eggs to little Gabriel's eyes.

When we arrived at the school that had recently adopted the name of its admired descendant, the event had already started. All eyes were on us when we walked over towards our well situated seats to overlook the literature inspired performances that the children had proudly been

practicing over the last few weeks. I have never enjoyed being stared at, but traveling through little villages off the tourist track with my lengthy dark blond hair and fair coloured skin, I'd somehow gotten accustomed to being an exotic appearance in exotic places. And with my 1.94 height, there was nowhere to hide.

Jorge the poet was almost as tall as I but looked very distinct with his long black hair tied in a ponytail and the facial features of his indigenous mother whom he hated for having given him the appearance of an oppressed minority. He despised her even more since she lost her late husband's fortune. This day, taking into account that his wife had recently been hospitalized in a psychiatric institution, Jorge was admirably animated. He'd come along to sharpen his artillery, as he proudly called his poems. He couldn't wait for his chance to recite.

Carlos was our connection with Aracataca. He and his family are Cataqueros though they had to move to Santa Marta after his father was assassinated by the ruthless paramilitary during the violent nineties. His great grandfather had been a friend of Garcia Marquez's grandfather

during the roaring nineteen twenties, becoming a base for Carlos's passion for both literature and history.

The school was an artistic and cheerful place as kids from many ages were dancing, reciting poetry and acting in plays representing sGabo's magical history and the culture and traditions of their own town. All the favourite characters came along. From Melquiades, the head of the Gypsy caravan that traveled through Macondo to the Remedios who was too ethereal to be in her right mind and on a windy day floated into the heavens. I enjoyed the passion and dedication in the children's art proudly relating anything from their everyday life to Aracataca's greatest representative. It was his legacy that gave them a reason to dream and aspire.

When the crowd had appreciated the kids' presentations for a couple of hours, Jorge the poet, never held back by humbleness, was now ready to actively contribute to the literary experience. With him he had brought a large quantity of his poems and a lot of excitement and he started his first public recital ever pleading for his innocence with a rather personal poem called; I'm not guilty. He, in a Freudian manner blamed his

family, the society, and the entire universe for his problems. Then he continued with verses about his 1965 Chevrolet truck, Macondo's founder Jose Arcadio Buendia being tied up to his backyard tree, his challenges with friendship and much more. There were definitely adults who understood and enjoyed these fragile fragments of a disillusioned heart, but the vast majority of the poetry was clearly too difficult for the lot of the children who were getting bored and anxious. After reading a dozen of his creations, the sun was high above everybody's head and the temperature had risen to an unbearably humid 40°C. The last person on the school property to lose interest, the reciter himself, finally had enough of his poetry for the day and concluded his performance for the weary kids to continue with their stipulated schedule.

At lunchtime the program had come to an end and many of the younger kids came over to our group's table to ask Jorge and me for our autographs. We both were in fact dressed as rock stars, but my participation had only been limited to being present and smiling all morning long. The kids showed their earnest interest in and gratefulness for the presence of a representative from outside of Macondo's core

influential area at their event, but being an accidental hero felt awkward; I had not spoken a word in public. Then again, my presence was a hopeful sign of universal interest for their hometown.

While the kids were leaving the school property to walk home, the director of the school, proud of the successful event, invited the three of us to celebrate lunch with a dozen teachers. After discussing the roots of Macondo's poetical resonance over a delicious meal of coconut rice, fish from the nearby river and the so called national salad, we embarked in the director's car on a tour through town to get another fascinating taste of its realism.

It was a delight to stroll these streets where time appeared to have been standing still since little Gabito walked them, holding the hand of the grandfather who raised him. We stopped at the train station where Gabito would see the bananas being loaded onto the wagons under the watchful eye of the foreign executives who were the masters of the local economy. Gabito would see Colombia through his grandfathers eyes while he learned of the country's history and his imagination would be tormented by the endless wars between the liberals and the

conservatives, when his grandfathers' brothers in arms would visit to reminisce.

In Magical Realism's heartland, I saw a glimpse Colombia's mysterious history and Gabo's necessity of creating Macondo out of it. The literature of Garcia Marquez had been responsible for creating a better understanding between the mestizo cultures of Latin America and millions of readers from all over the world. That day's many stories ended up serving like a magic spell illuminating my mind in realizing that Aracataca was on the verge of a cultural awakening of which I wanted to be part.

The seed of magical realism had suddenly been firmly planted inside of me and it would grow slowly yet unfold extensively and understanding Macondo was a decisive factor for me to be able to spread the rediscovered values taken from its forgotten troubled history. Its fruit would finally inspire the people of the town and many more around the world.

But something was wrong. Something was missing in the official relate of the town's history, and that knowledge, over the 5 years that I studied

and promoted the town's legacy, would turn into an uncomfortable feeling that almost bothered me when I walked, like a pebble in my shoe. Gradually I learned that there was a very destructive force at work in Aracataca and exposing it would be a dangerous undertaking.