*This is an extract from Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s autobiography where he writes about the true story that inspired his novella Chronicle of a Death Foretold. The murder happened in a town called Sucre, with which Marquez was familiar, and he first hears about it from a friend of his called Mercedes Barcha, who lived there.*

I heard from her [Mercedes Barcha] again after a month, on January 22 of the following year, with an unadorned message that she left for me at El Heraldo: ‘They killed Cayetano.’ For us it could be only one person: Cayetano Gentile, our friend in Sucre, a soon-to–be doctor, an organizer of dances, and a lover by trade. The immediate version was that he had been knifed by two brothers of the young teacher at the school in Chaparral: we had seen him ride with her on his horse. In the course of the day, from one telegram to the next, I learned the complete story.

It was still not the time of easy telephones, and personal long-distance calls were arranged first by telegram. My immediate reaction was a reporter’s. I decided to travel to Sucre to write the story, but at the paper they interpreted this as a sentimental impulse. And today I understand, because even back then we Colombians killed one another for any reason at all, and at times we invented one, but crimes of passion were reserved as luxuries for the rich in the cities. It seemed to me that the subject was eternal and I began to take statements from witnesses, until my mother discovered my hidden intentions and begged me not to write the article. At least while Cayetano’s mother, Dona Julieta Chimento, was alive, the most important of the reasons being that she was my mother’s *comadre* because she had been godmother at the baptism of Hernando, my brother number eight. Her statement  - indispensable in a good article – was of great significance. Two of the teacher’s brothers had pursued Cayetano when he tried to take refuge in his house, but Dona Julieta had hurried to lock the street door because she believed that her son was already in his bedroom. And so he was the one who could not come in, and they stabbed him to death against the locked door.

My immediate reaction was to sit down to write the report of the crime but I found all kinds of impediments. What interested me was no longer the crime itself but the literary theme of collective responsibility. No argument convinced my mother, however, and it seemed a lack of respect to write it without her permission. But after that not a day went by that I was not hounded by the desire to write the story. I was beginning to become resigned, and then, many years later, I was waiting for a plane to take off at the airport in Algiers. The door to the first-class lounge opened, and an Arab prince came in wearing the immaculate tunic of his lineage, and carrying on his fist a splendid female peregrine falcon that instead of the leather hood of classic falconry wore one of gold encrusted with diamonds. Of course I thought of Cayetano Gentile, who had learned from his father the fine arts of falconry, at first with local sparrow hawks and then with magnificent examples transplanted from Arabia Felix. At the moment of his death he had a professional falcon coop on his farm, with two female cousins and a male trained to hunt partridges, and a Scottish kite skilled in personal defense. I knew about the historic interview of Ernest Hemingway by George Plimpton in the Paris Review regarding the process of transforming a character from real life into a character in a novel. Hemingway said: ‘If I explained how that is sometimes done, it would be a handbook for libel lawyers.’ But after that providential morning in Algiers my situation was just the opposite: I had no desire to continue living in peace if I did not write the story of the death of Cayetano.

My mother remained firm in her determination to prevent this despite every argument, until thirty years after the drama, when she herself called me in Barcelona to give me the sad news that Julieta Chimento, Cayetano’s mother, had died without ever getting over the loss of her son. But this time, with her strong moral sense, my mother found no reasons to interfere with the article.

‘I ask only one thing as a mother,’ she said. ‘Treat Cayetano as if he were a son of mine.’

The story, with the title Chronicle of a Death Foretold, was published two years later. My mother did not read it for a reason that I keep as another of her gems in my personal museum: ‘Something that turned out so awful in life can’t turn out well in a book.’