

THE UNIVERSITY OF GOOD LIVING

Joining his neighbours one evening, Dan Baron Cohen finds himself immersed in a spontaneous conversation about culture, justice and sustainability that would be rare inside the halls of academe.

After dinner, I carry my red armchair to the circle of neighbours sitting by the railings to catch the faintest breeze from the River Tocantins. Dos Reis, notebook open in his lap and pen poised, studies Zequinha's fingers, improvising chords on his guitar. They inch identical steel-frame armchairs closer to one another, greeting me with broad smiles. 'You just missed the *boiúna* (black snake), Dan,' Zequinha recalls. 'Fifty metres long! The whole community gathered as the snake passed!' I scrutinize the circle of artists. Does everyone here see the mythical as real?

Reinaldo smiles his welcome while humming the new refrain. Antônio, blinded from toxic froth produced by the nearby Tucuruí dam, smiles and edges towards Carolzinha, Zequinha's teenage granddaughter, straightened hair scooped into a fountain above her all but shaven head. She cradles her new niece into the hollow of her neck to complete the sideways shift of chairs, and I enter the circle of five Afro-indigenous generations. Animated circles of Cabelo Seco's 'community university of the rivers' line the boardwalk towards old Marabá.

In the distance, people mill around the home of Ruan. 'What happened?' I ask, still shocked by the news of the murder of the 21-year-old by the military police, two days earlier in the neighbouring state of Goiás. Ruan had mentioned joining the military police, the night before I left for Auckland. Zequinha rests his guitar on his lap. 'With everyone on the mobile phone today, you only know your son's trafficking children or crack when his coffin arrives at your door.' I look towards the wake, imagining our neighbour Renilde receiving the body of her only son.

Dos Reis sings a fragment from a 1970s lyric of resistance. 'That was when dictatorship wore a uniform,' says Reinaldo.

Zequinha nods. 'Today, we're all complicit. The mobile phone addicts us to the values of a corrupt world order.' Reinaldo takes a deep breath. 'Uncle, Cabelo Seco is born guilty. Here in the Amazon, we're living a permanent assault. Justice sentences us to prove the innocence of the State. My Brando received eight years for holding up a corner shop with a toy gun, to feed his daughter. Today our sons are executed by the police to cut prison costs, or by the dealers to seal our lips.'

'That's why I visited the future.' Everyone turns towards me. 'And to get younger, flying back.' Laughter of relief. Rerivaldo and Gabriel, two youths filming the university, join us. 'Imagine a government elected to eliminate child poverty, clean the rivers, and provide free university and cheap housing for young people. All sustained by community economies, powered by solar energy. That's New Zealand/Aotearoa's good living project.'

Ana-Luisa, a health worker for indigenous communities, joins the circle. 'And what's the highest priority of the Minister

of Water, a Māori mother of six?' I ask. Carolzinha risks an answer. 'The Amazon?' I nod. 'The Māori people understand that when we can no longer hear the whisper of the *boiúna*, their project turns to dust.'

Rerivaldo smiles. 'Tomorrow, we'll interview the commander of the military police. After the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam turned Altamira into the most violent city in Brazil, he studied climate justice and earned that Castanheira tree badge on his uniform. He wants our university to help his headquarters become Latin America's first solar-powered school of citizen security. If we link his story with your music and lyrics and send it to the Māori youth, in exchange for a good living story, the *boiúna* will stretch between our continents.'

I look at Rerivaldo, who is still struggling to pass primary school. 'Remember that night Antônio, when you carried your Toím 1,000 metres in your arms?' Antônio nods. 'And when we sat up all night, Zequinha, with your Everton, waiting for dawn to bury him?' Zequinha stares at the river. 'Every family on this street has buried a son.' I gesture towards the young artists. 'This pain becomes knowledge.'

Ana-Luisa puts her hand on my shoulder. 'Shall we go?'

We walk to Ruan's home. Women are gathered in a circle around his open coffin. A collective chant of rhythmic prayer inches forward, bead by bead, transforming Renilde's inconsolable grief into regular breathing. She caresses her son's brow. She knows Ruan is innocent.

DAN BARON COHEN IS AN ECO-CULTURAL ACTIVIST WHO LIVES IN MARABÁ AND HAS BEEN WORKING IN THE AMAZON SINCE 1999.

ILLUSTRATION BY SARAH JOHN.

