

## Touched by the future

Valdir claps his hands four times at a discrete distance from our little Florianopolis cottage overlooking the Atlantic. I lower the screen of my Mac and descend the winding path of stones to meet him. His greeting places him from the rural interior, where communities still have no electric bell, though few now leave their doors open. He lays his huge knife at the foot of our papaya tree and shakes my hand. The handle of another knife pokes out of his belt, like all peasant workers across Brazil. 'When did you arrive?' he asks, his accent locating him near the Santa Catarina-Argentinian border. 'Last night,' I smile, tightening my scarf. His leathered face breaks into a map of wrinkles. 'My brother lives near you. Just past Eldorado dos Carajás. Where those landless were massacred.'

He pinches the sleeve of my sweater to hold my attention. 'Trucked up to the Amazon in the 80s just with flip-flops. Panned his gold. Bought land. Felled forests. Built a ranch. Grazed 1,500 cattle. The rest he locked in his mouth.' Valdir rests his hand on his knife handle. 'A man tried to kill him for his teeth. When the police came for the corpse, they thanked my brother. Honest worker. Six sons. One vagabond less.' He pinches. 'How long you staying?'

'Two weeks,' I reply, still reeling from the news about a dawn shoot-out between the Military Police and the São Paulo mafia's First City Command, in our community Cabelo Seco. 'To get some distance.' Valdir nods. 'Nowhere's safe, today. I'm ashamed of my country. Corrupt elite in power, stealing a fortune, logging forests, damming rivers, and condemning the poor for pimping their daughters and neglecting their sons. I'd leave tomorrow if I could. My brother invited me to work in your region. Too dangerous. Why don't you return here?'

In an instant, I'm back in Cabelo Seco, Kaylane and Bianca playing chess in the street, surrounded by teenage friends, their rich, earthen Afro-indigenous complexion highlighted by the deep blue walls of the House of Rivers cultural centre. All admire Kaylane's headless black queen leaping over chipped white knights and bottle-top pawns. Brenson's ready to step in as soon as the white king falls. Behind them, tiny children slide down the cultural centre's ramp on flattened Coca-Cola bottles. Two infants play mothers and toddlers with a circle of bricks on a meticulously laid-out floor-mat. In the village square, young artists push a bike laden with potted shoots on its cross bar, house to house, to revive the community's herbal medicine gardens, stolen by 'development'. And as the sun sets on the boardwalk overlooking the River Tocantins, Zequinha, the village poet, prepares to barbecue the day's Tambaqui catch for his extended family's evening feast.

Hours after we leave, the calm is shattered by gunfire.

'I'm rooted in Marabá now,' I answer simply. I want to tell Valdir about the good life in the Amazon, which people like his brother and their powerful friends place at risk. Was his brother involved in torching the clothes, ID cards, community bus and mobile phones of the landless movement families in the Hugo Chávez camp in the

middle of the night, last week? He's probably one of the agro-industry billionaires who direct the civilian dictatorship to deregulate 'development' in the Amazon. I keep mum. In Marabá, impromptu conversations end in assassinations.

Valdir leans forward and, tightening his pinch, lowers his voice. 'People say you and your wife are there to help protect the Amazon.' He nods in approval. 'We suffered El Niño here. Erased the beach below in a night. Destroyed all our homes. Same across the world. California. Kerala. Athens. Cape Town.' He spits decisively. 'I'll fence your cottage just for expenses.'

I smile at Valdir's unexpected solidarity. He lets go of my sleeve and picks up his knife. 'I'll send an audio-message with a quote, later.'

I climb the stone stairs and return to the online news. Two of the chess players have been imprisoned, involved in a videoed group rape that went viral. All minors. The violence cascades down. The Amazon will need all the medicinal plants it has to heal its people. And solidarity.

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