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The Flipside of Skin by Jeferson Tenório is one of the novels featured in the autumn 2021 Portuguese reading group run by And Other Stories.

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A pediatra (The Paediatrician)

Andréa del Fuego

Translated by Jethro Soutar

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We ran over an opossum at three in the morning. My husband at the wheel, me in the backseat so as not to get travel-sick. We were on our way to the coast, to and fro to buy a plot of land. He was trying to find some lively music to help him keep awake when the animal appeared in the headlights, its little body smashed against the car, something came off from underneath. We pulled into the hard shoulder. We couldn't see the dead opossum, my husband said it was a sign he should end his fast, he'd not eaten for three days. He was irritable, hyper, ketosis breath. Our insurer came to rescue us, the car towed away, us squeezed into the truck. My husband made the driver stop at a petrol station, he scoffed a pork and relish sandwich and we set off again. We got home exhausted, he woke up anxious the next day, tapping his feet on the floor. I warmed up some coffee and said that by this time next week we'd have bought the plot of land and put the whole morbid incident behind us. He didn't reply, I don't know if he even heard me, I left him in the kitchen and rushed off to the clinic.

Doctor, there's been a complication at the hospital with the premature baby, the mother tried to get you on your mobile, the maintenance guys are coming in this afternoon about the air con, and I have to leave early. The secretary followed along to hand me a couple of other messages, I opened the door to my consultancy room, she only went in with my permission, I closed the door. I opened it again to hang a sign on the doorknob: do not disturb.

2

A husband so unhappy he'd sap the life out of a jequitibá tree. I threw my stiff

joints in his face, said I had fibromyalgia because of him. He'd been signed off work from the family construction firm for months, the treatment for his depression had some effect at first. I took heart for a while, then he slipped back into the mire, I stayed out longer, took my time going from the clinic to the supermarket to buy frozen food and fresh herbs, got back with him already doped up in the bedroom. Every pill brought me closer to the end of my tether, putting off confrontation, reluctant to fire the first shot of separation, my stiffness now accompanied by migraines, nausea and formication.

The depressive never went out, of course, but I still did things. I was introduced to Celso at a little gathering held by a common friend, a cardiologist who worked in the same building as me. She'd been to school with Celso, he'd gone on to become a business executive, they'd not seen each other in twenty years. Celso was the only person at the party who tucked into the peanuts, everyone else prodded a fork into the artichoke tart and talked about hospital admin and travel agents. When the peanuts ran out, he started biting his nails. I went over and offered him a cigarette, which he declined, but he came out with me onto the veranda and lit mine. He told me he lived in Florianópolis but came to São Paulo every week to manage an account. It left him a bit spun out and his wife was pregnant and did nothing but cry. Me being a paediatrician, the conversation then turned to children and sickness.

Celso complained about everything, but breezily, a little distracted, though not entirely, I wanted to keep him close to me, this interloper in the house of a friend who didn't even know his wife. I turned on the charm. The next time he was in town he called me, asking if I could recommend an emergency dentist, maybe we could grab a beer before his anaesthetic, that way he'd arrive nice and relaxed for his treatment. I understood everything he was saying, there was no dentist appointment. Celso ended up doing consultancy for more companies in the city, we'd get together after his meetings, I'd get home flayed. My husband's days improved as, unburdened, my mood lightened, my pains dissipated. My menstrual cramps went away, I dispensed with my regular fungicidal ointment, my crotch was a nectarine.

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If I didn't live so far away, you could deliver my child, Celso said. I reminded him that I didn't do deliveries, but I was a neonatologist and I knew the best obstetrician in the country. He convinced his wife that the birth of their child would be safer with a specialist team. She was already on maternity leave at the company she worked for as a lawyer and agreed to the plan. They left their apartment down south, child's room ready, rented a flat in São Paulo and relocated for the last month of pregnancy. With his wife in town, we met up in a hotel near their flat so that he didn't get home late. I booked the couple in for a prenatal consultation, as was customary. An hour before the appointment, Celso came to the clinic so that we could practice acting as strangers when he came in with Camila, his wife. We fucked in the bathroom, my vagina was still bloated when he walked in with her an hour later. Clutching her belly, knee-length dress, fat shins, huge. Thankfully Celso managed to play his role of husband as if I weren't sitting there opposite them stuffed full of the same semen that had impregnated her. This helped me maintain my professional demeanour, which was, in any case, unflappable. I'm going to show you how to hold the baby, Dad, pick up the doll. His name's Celso, the mother-to-be informed me. Celso cheerily took hold of the toy

child with the faded tummy. I explained that I wouldn't be there at the start of the birth, I'd come to the hospital when the obstetrician called for me. I thought it best not to warn them that the kind of birth she wanted could go on all day, I'd just show up before the baby crowned, before the head tore the perineum.

We're not doing anything wrong, Celso said later, I wouldn't entrust this to anyone else. His faith made me feel like a dutiful neonatologist, proud of my profession. Camila didn't see me as the main doctor, which I wasn't, so our contact was minimal, just that first consultation and then again in the maternity ward. With labour underway, the obstetrician summoned me, there was no rush, the baby was still high, but the mother's blood pressure was unstable, so I wasn't to take too long, a Caesarean was on the cards. I entered the delivery room focused, Celso was on the sofa with his laptop on his knees, checking through messages. I stationed myself at the foot of the bed, the mother had been administered with analgesia and didn't know when to push, the obstetrician told Celso and me to press on her belly to get the baby down. I pressed as hard as I could, Celso less so, afraid of hurting her. The child wasn't very animated when it came out, I performed the neonatal protocols, stimulated reflexes, dropped silver nitrate in the eyes, stripped away the vernix, there was no wriggling, no crying. I handed the bundle to the shocked and exhausted mother, Celso kissed the maternity hat tucked on the boy's head. I went into the en suite bathroom, Celso followed me in, we embraced while the mother gave birth to the placenta. I heard my name, the obstetrician was calling me back into the room. Cecília, stitch her up here, I'm going to adjust her serum. Celso's wife had a second-degree laceration at the perineum, blood from the tear was mixing in with the afterbirth, soaking the bedsheet. I wasn't sure why the obstetrician was going for serum, why she'd needed to leave the room. I sat before the vagina that had taken the same dick as me, now ripped apart by her firstborn. She was on another planet, drugged up on hormones. Celso left the room too, probably because he saw his lover sewing up his wife's vagina. Sitting on a stool, I put a few more stitches in than necessary. I was tempted to seal the whole thing up.

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I was with Deise and Robson in the living room when the intercom went. Robson had the day off that Thursday, or he'd resigned especially to be there, who knew. Deise had persuaded me that we needed more voices to sing happy birthday. I opened the door, Bruninho was in his father's arms, dressed in his school uniform. As soon as he saw me he raised an arm, swung his legs, leaned out towards me, slipping into my arms like a hand into a glove, making me warm with pleasure. Celso in the doorway, a bit happy, a bit disconcerted by the decorations and the guests. Are you out of your mind? I ignored him, took Bruninho over to the cake. Robson and Deise were standing there and greeted him. Celso must have thought Robson was Deise's husband, filling the home with family wholesomeness. You're the guy with the Corolla that clipped the Corsinha, aren't you? Robson said, recognising Celso. I played distracted and deaf, Bruninho asked for *wet, plea*, I led him by the hand into the kitchen, we'd have more privacy there. He tried to get up into the chair, I helped, his innocence brutally wounding me, I used to ask my father for water, please, too, my mother the night nurse, we never saw each other.

She slept during the day, my father went to the clinic, I was left with the nanny, several nannies, until they finally found one they trusted not to let me cut my finger with the fruit knife or break my arm in the playground while she, her back turned or nowhere to be seen, made friends with the concierge or caretaker. But my personality has got nothing to do with having distant parents, quite the opposite, my genes are remarkably strong, no physical or mental illnesses of note, elastic emotions, and tendons, quick to bounce back to their previous state. Bruninho still had some way to go, he could take me further, I'd know when to let go and put myself back in neutral, the inertial state, ready for my next stimulus. Bruninho drank all the water, handed me the glass and ran off towards Deise's room. The narrow bed with covers tangled up in sheets, the open wardrobe, Deise never tidied her own space. Bruninho climbed up easily onto the bed and began bouncing on the mattress, higher every time, vigorous, certainly not anaemic, pneumatic, no genetic components out of place. Cecília? Celso had found us in the depths of the apartment. We've got to go, I can't get back late with him. I needed to calm Celso down, he was still uncomfortable with the party. We'll sing a quick happy birthday. Celso seemed to like my objectivity, I offered Bruninho my arms, they were promptly accepted. We passed through the service area, I was too timid to smell the boy's neck with Celso behind me. I stood aside to let him pass, he did so, annoyed, I squeezed Bruninho, bringing his face close to mine, I pinched the softness, he yelped in protest, I'd pinched too hard, I recoiled at my lack of tact, there was a trick to keeping him close to me. We got to the living room, Deise, Robson and Celso positioned themselves around the table, overladen for so few guests, for so little time, for no party at all. Celso took Bruninho from me, I felt robbed. Deise lit the candle, the tip began its mini, controlled explosion, happy birthday commenced, we clapped, Bruninho became agitated in Celso's arms, he reached for me with his hands, I thought it best not to take the boy from his father at the precise moment we were commemorating the fact he'd fucked Camila and spawned my child. The candle's explosion ended, automatically lighting a flame. Celso held Bruninho in close, he didn't have enough puff to blow it out. Aunty will help, I said. I stood next to him and we blew together, the smoke went up my nostrils, wiping the earlier perfume off my nasal walls, the boy's purity. Deise cut a thin slice of cake and gave it to Bruninho. Now who's the little prince going to give it to? Bruninho didn't understand the question and gave it to his father, naturally, he was glued to him, pressurising him. We all ate, I felt exhausted. Celso wanted to leave immediately and without taking anything, not even a sweetie or a balloon, forty of which hung about the room. He grabbed Bruninho's school rucksack, I went with them out to the lift. Celso smarting, the magnitude of his promiscuity dawning on him, he ought to have gotten used to it by now. I didn't kiss Celso in front of Bruninho, any carelessness from me and Dad would be off, just a gentle caress for the boy. Celso went down in the lift, leaving me standing there, superfluous. In the living room, Deise and Robson wanted to say something. Can he stay the night, Cecília? I nodded, overcome, not for the first time, it was hardly a shock. But I don't want to wake up and find this party in the living room. They both immediately started taking the balloons down, I went to pass out on the bed, Robson took the chocolate-tower cake into the back.

I studied Bruninho's medical file, I could oversee his treatment from outside the hospital, my father could coordinate things from wherever he was in Asia. I spent the day going back and forth between my neonatal patient in the ICU, the staff comfort zone and room 212, where Bruninho was. Celso called me. For the love of God, don't go anywhere near Camila. I told him that, as a paediatrician, I couldn't ignore my duty of care, he needed to calm down, chill out. We're finished, don't come looking for me, don't call me, leave my family alone! Has the youngest one been born yet? He hung up on me. It had been, I knew because I'd seen Camila in the ICU when I went to check on my client's premature baby, which had a much better chance of surviving than theirs. Camila and I had exchanged no further words, not my choice, she didn't even register my presence, she was so out of it. There was no release date on the horizon for their premature newborn, but Bruninho's discharge was pending, in one or two days' time, discharge with express instructions for endocrine support. I asked the nurse ward to let me know when he was leaving.

I went straight to the clinic from the maternity ward, I was in a bit of a daze, but professional, I filled out my prescriptions, antipyretic, plenty of liquids, sometimes double corticoid and antibiotics, stamping Cecília Tomé Vilela on the order forms. Celso couldn't finish with me in the midst of such an intense situation. Irresponsible. If Bruninho had entered the hospital as the child of a paediatrician he'd have been treated better than as the child of a lawyer, the same went for the Arte de Crescer nursery, and the same with nannies, I could tell the difference between a bite from an adult and a friend in the playground. My last patient left, I sent the secretary home. Down the corridor, my father's door was closed, lights off. A paediatric endocrinologist rests but is never tired, he sleeps and sleeps again, he told me as he sewed up a big gash on my knee, another on my shin, unconcerned by the choppy waters, stop crying, little girl, otherwise the wound won't heal. I remained in my consultancy room, laid out on the sofa where broken mothers sat, pulled the throw off the upholstery and over me. I tried to sleep, the shock wouldn't let me switch off. I'd cut open a brain-dead baby before, removed viscera to put in a thermos that didn't get to the new host in time, I'd had to saw through the chest, the noise was as you'd expect sawing through a person's chest to sound, the bones crush until they break. Bruninho, my little boy, on the cusp of a coma, or not even that, just crying from a fever was enough to crush my chest, I needed help. I couldn't let go of the boy, he wasn't mine, he never would be, his father was gone, the whole family would go and live far away from me. My entire body hurt on the soft sofa, I gathered my strength and went home. I passed Arte do Crescer, satisfied parents at the gate, their pride at managing to live with this fear, a fear I had without having anyone to save, at least they had their children to rescue from the precipice, I didn't want a child, I wanted Bruninho. I got back to the Quinta dos Açores, parked my car in the garage, I knew Bruninho wouldn't leave the ICU unit for a while yet, I needed to hibernate.

The nurse rang when I was going up in the lift. The patient leaves tomorrow, the hospital's packed. I was pleased, his discharge wouldn't only be because of bed places, Bruninho clearly wasn't suffering from too high a level of diabetes after all. I missed my floor, people got in, people got out, I was digesting things, a hostage to any news, hopelessly captive. Deise served me soup as if I were

a sick child, beans, spaghetti bits and parsley. Even she was acting like her boy had been interned, shoulders slumped from the shock, walking on eggshells, afraid of being dismissed. The sooner I dismissed her the better, she'd be giving birth on the kitchen floor at this rate, Robson cutting the cord with his motorbike key. I'd deal with it later, but soon. I took a pill and passed out. I woke and informed my secretary that I had personal problems, she was to cancel the rest of the month's appointments, take a few days off herself. I stayed in bed. Deise brought me meals, I left the telly on waiting for it to be time to take my next pill. I slept as I woke, without moving. Deise came in with breakfast, does Misses need help? No. She seemed to have adjusted to the unexpected circumstances. She came back later with lunch, I refused it, I wasn't hungry, formication, aches everywhere and nowhere. Deise kept quiet out in the back, I took another sleeping pill before midday. This routine repeated itself for seven days. On the eighth day, Deise said she was going to call a doctor. I told her to do the laundry. On the ninth day I woke to a call from Celso, I didn't answer it, afraid, waited for him to call back. I sat up in bed, drank the water Deise had left on the bedside table, the phone didn't ring, I dialled Celso's number.

Forgive my behaviour, I was talking nonsense. Fine, I said, standing in the bathroom, putting toothpaste on my toothbrush, feeling myself coming back. I breathed deeply. It was an understandable reaction, nothing's changed on my part, you're still welcome at my place. He promised to come over that very night. I opened the window, Deise sensed the movement and came to ask if she should make lasagne, I took a long bath. My bedroom was in an awful state, I asked Deise to clean it, to go and get fresh flowers for the living room. I got dressed, modest clothes that I wear for the clinic, Celso wasn't to be in any way alarmed by my spirit. I greeted him expectantly, he wasn't the same man. He cried a bit, asked what my prognosis for Bruninho was. A normal life, everything will fall into place, I said. Camila would be in hospital with the premature baby for a good many days yet, he told me. Bruninho would go back to school when he turned four, they'd hired a nanny with dextral experience. Excellent, I said. Bring him here tomorrow, I chanced, I'm not working. Celso agreed, feeling obliged to please me, I wasn't some invalid, I was a paediatrician, he could trust me. I got ready for Bruninho. I gave Deise a list of things to buy right away, things for a diabetic from the supermarket and the pharmacy. Celso sent his nanny home in the morning, he'd leave Bruninho with me for the afternoon and fetch him before dark. I opened the door to my boy without the previous excesses, a mood of total calm. Bruninho saw me and his face lit up, unspoiled joy, docile, I would measure his blood sugar five, eight, ten times a day, I'd give him the correct doses of insulin. I put food and supplies in the boot of the car, fastened Bruninho into the child-seat. He'd gone a bit pale, I noticed in the rear-view baby mirror. I filled up at the nearest petrol station and we headed for the coast.

The above extract was translated by Jethro Soutar

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