

The Mountain

from Tortuga

"The Mountain is an excerpt from Anaya's novel Tortuga, the story of a boy's recovery from a serious accident that serves as his rite of Passage into adulthood.

I awoke from a restless sleep. For a moment I couldn't remember where I was, then I heard Filomón and Clepo talking up front and I felt the wind sway the old ambulance. I tried to turn my body, but it was impossible. Upon waking it was always the same; I tried to move but the paralysis held me firmly in its grip.

I could turn my head and look out the small window. The cold winter rain was still falling. It had been only a gray drizzle when we left the hospital, but the farther south we went into the desert the sheets of icy rain became more intense. For a great part of the trip we had been surrounded by darkness. Only the flashes of lightning which tore through the sky illuminated the desolate landscape.

I had slept most of the way; the rain drumming against the ambulance and the rumble of the distant thunder lulled me to sleep. Now I blinked my eyes and remembered that we had left at daybreak, and Filomón had said that it would be mid-afternoon before we arrived at the new hospital.

Your new home, he had said.

Home. Up north, at home, it would be snowing, but here it was only the dark, dismal rain which swept across the wide desert and covered us with its darkness. I tried to turn again, but the paralysis compounded by the bone-chilling cold held me. I cursed silently.

"It's never been this dark before," I heard Clepo whisper.

"Don't worry," Filomón answered, "it'll get better before it gets worse. You have to know the desert to know rain don't last. It can be raining one minute and blowing dust devils the next. But the clouds are beginning to break, see, to the west."

I turned my head and looked out the window. In the distance I could see the bare outline of a mountain range. Around us the desert was alkaline and white. Only the most tenacious shrubs and brittle grasses seemed to grow, clinging to the harsh land like tufts of mouldy hair. Overhead, the sun struggled to break through the clouds. To the east, a diffused, distorted rainbow stretched across the vast, gray sky.

I remembered the rainbows of my childhood, beautifully sculptured arches reaching from north to south, shafts of light so pure their harmony seemed to wed the sky and earth. My mother had taught me to look at rainbows, the mantle of the Blessed Virgin Mary she called them. When a summer thunderstorm passed she would take me out and we would stand in the thin drops which followed the storm. We would turn our faces up to the sky, and the large, glistening drops of rain would pelt our faces. She would open her mouth and hold out her tongue to receive the large, golden drops. She would stir the muddy ponds and pick up the little frogs which came with the rain. "They are like you," she told me, "blessed by the rain, children of the water." When I was hurt she would take me in her arms and sing

*Sana, sana
colita de rana
Si no sanas hoy
sanarás mañana . . .*

And her touch could drive away the worst of pains. But then the paralysis had come, and suddenly her prayers and her touch were not enough. Her face grew pale and thin, her eyes grew dark. "It is God's will," she had said.

"It's clearing now," Filomón said, "see, the sun is beginning to break through!"

"Yes, the sun!" Clepo shouted. He was Filomón's assistant, a small impish man with hunched shoulders. I noticed he limped when they loaded me on the ambulance.

"I think I see the top of the mountain!" Filomón cried cheerfully.

I was fully awake. The last images of the dreams faded as the darkness of the rain moved over us and eastward. Only occasional peals of thunder rumbled across the sky. Beneath us the ambulance rocked like a ship. Memories of my life moved in and out of my troubled consciousness. My mother's face appeared again and again. She had cried when they loaded me on the ambulance, but she knew it was necessary. The doctors there had helped as much as they could. Now, they insisted, they had to move me to this new hospital in the south where they specialized in taking care of crippled children. If there was any hope of regaining the use of my stiff limbs, it was there. So early in the morning they wheeled me on a gurney to the outpatient area, loaded me onto Filomón's ambulance and the journey began.

"There!" Filomón shouted again, "There's the mountain!"

I tried to turn my head to see, but I couldn't. "What mountain?" I asked.

"Tortuga Mountain," he said and looked back, "it's right by the hospital. Don't worry, I'll stop so you can see it." He sounded happy, revived, after the long, monotonous drive across the desert. I felt a sense of urgency as he pulled the ambulance onto the shoulder of the road. We bounced along until he found the right spot, then he stopped the ambulance and turned off the motor. He climbed over the seat to where I lay strapped on the small cot.

"Ah, Filo," Clepo grumbled, "you've stopped here every time we bring a new kid. Don't you ever get tired of showing them that damned mountain?"

"It's always a new kid," Filomón smiled as he loosened the straps that held me, "and each kid deserves to see the mountain from here. I want the boy to see it."

Filomón was an old man with a deep wrinkled face and rough, calloused hands, but he moved like a younger man as he lifted me tenderly so I could look out the window and see the mountain.

"There it is," he nodded, "that's Tortuga." His eyes sparkled as he looked at the volcanic mountain that loomed over the otherwise empty desert. It rose so magically into the gray sky that it seemed to hold the heavens and the earth together. It lay just east of the river valley, and the afternoon sun shining on it after the rain covered it with a sheen of silver.

"It's a magic mountain," Filomón whispered, and I felt his heart beating against me as he held me. "See!" he whispered, "See!" I tried to see beyond the volcanic slabs and granite boulders which formed the outline of a turtle, I tried to sense the steady rhythm of his pulse which seemed to be draining into the giant mountain, but I couldn't. I was too tired, and my faith in magic had drained out the night the paralysis came and in the ensuing nights and days which I spent without movement on the hospital bed.

I shook my head.

"That's okay," he smiled, "it comes slowly sometimes. But now at least you know it's there—" He seemed very tired. It had been a long trip for him too. He had had to keep the ambulance on course through one of the worst storms I could remember. But now we were almost there.

"Where's the hospital?" I asked.

"It's on this side of the river, you can't see it from here. See the smoke rising in the valley? That's Agua Bendita. It's a small town, but people come from all over to bathe in the mineral waters from the springs which drain from the mountain—"

"It's a town full of old arthritics," Clepo giggled, "old people who think they can escape the pains of old age by dipping themselves in the mountain's water, but they can't run fast enough from death!" He slap-

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ped his thigh and laughed.

Filomón didn't answer. He sat beside the cot and looked out the window into the desert. "Even as terrible as the storm was for us, it will be good for the plants in the spring. After a good, wet winter the desert blooms like a garden," he nodded and rolled a cigarette. There was something about the way he spoke, the strength of his face, that reminded me of someone I had known—my grandfather perhaps, but I hadn't thought of him in years.

"These old villages cling to the river like the beads of a rosary," he continued, thinking aloud.

"Whoever crosses this desert has a lot of praying to do," Clepo agreed, "it's a journey of death."

"No, a journey of life. Our forefathers have wandered up and down this river valley for a long, long time. First the Indians roamed up and down this river, then others came, but they all stopped here at this same place: the springs of Tortuga, the place of the healing water—"

He talked and smoked. The dull sun shone through the window and played on the swirling smoke. I was fully awake now, but I felt feverish, and I couldn't help wondering what a strange day it had been to ride all this way with the old man and his assistant. I shivered, but not from the cold. The inside of the ambulance was now stifling. It glowed with white smoke and golden light which poured through the window. Filomón's eyes shone.

"How long have you been bringing kids to the hospital?" I asked.

"As long as I can remember," Filomón answered. "I bought this old hearse in a junk yard and I fixed it up like an ambulance. I've been transporting kids ever since."

"We get thirty dollars a kid, dead or alive," Clepo laughed. "And we get to hear a lot of interesting stories. We've taken every kind of diseased body there is to the hospital. Why, Filo and I could become doctors if we wanted to, couldn't we Filo? But we don't know anything about you. You slept most of the way." He leaned over the seat and peered at me.

"He's tired," Filomón said.

"Yeah, but he's awake now," Clepo grinned. "So how did he get crippled? I know it ain't polio, I know polio. And how come his left hand is bandaged, huh? There's quite a story there, but he hasn't said a word!"

He seemed put out that I had slept most of the way and had not told the story of my past. But since the paralysis the past didn't matter. It was as if everything had died, except the dreams and the memories which kept haunting me. And even those were useless against the terrible weight which had fallen over me and which I cursed until I could curse no more.

"Do you take the kids back?" I asked.

"No, we don't!" Clepo said, "That's against the rules!"

"I picked you up," Filomón reminded him.

"I was hitch-hiking," Clepo said smartly, "somebody would have picked me up."

"You were lost. I found you in the middle of a sandstorm, crying. Lucky for you I came along."

"I wasn't crying, I had sand in my eyes," Clepo insisted.

Filomón smiled. "It doesn't matter, you've been a good assistant." That seemed to satisfy Clepo, he grunted and sat back down. Filomón drew close and looked at me. "We can't take anybody back, that's not our job. But when you get better you can make the trip back home by yourself. Just wait till spring, and you'll be better. I know it looks bad now, but in the spring the river comes alive and the desert dresses like a young bride. The lizards come out to play in the warm sun, and even the mountain moves—" He touched my forehead with his fingers, then he leaned close to me and I felt his forehead touch mine, perhaps he was just leaning to retrieve one of the straps to tie me up again, but I felt his forehead brush mine, and I felt a relief from the paralysis which I hadn't felt since it came. Then he tied the strap and climbed back into the driver's seat.

"Filomón says you gotta keep your eyes on the mountain," Clepo said to fill in the silence.

"Well, it's helped us," Filomón answered, "it's been our faith in this wasteland . . . and it's helped a lot of kids. There's a strong power there."

He started the ambulance and let it coast down the long slope of the hill into the valley. I knew he was still looking at the mountain, still feeling the strange power that resided there for him.

"The water from the mountain springs is holy," he mused aloud, "long ago the place was used as a winter ceremonial ground by the Indians. They came to purify themselves by bathing in the warm waters . . . the waters of the turtle . . . Later, when the Spaniards came, they called the springs Los Ojos de la Tortuga, and when they discovered the waters could cure many illnesses they called the village Agua Bendita . . ."

"Who lives here?" I asked. We had entered the edge of the small town. Through the window I could see the tops of rundown gas stations, motels and cafes. There was a dilapidated movie house, a brownstone hotel, and many signs which creaked in the wind as they advertised the hot mineral baths.

"Mostly old people who come for the baths, people who work at the hospital, and a few of the old people who try to make a living from the small farms along the river—"

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Filomón turned the ambulance and I caught a glimpse of a weathered sign that read *Crippled Children and Orphans Hospital*. The arrow pointed up the hill, so from the highway which ran through the small town we had to turn up the hill again towards the washed-out buildings which huddled together at the top. I struggled to turn to see more, instinctively, as I had so many times before, but it was useless, I couldn't move. I could only turn my head and watch the mountain across the valley. An air of hopelessness brooded over the dull mountain as the remaining winter clouds huddled at its peak. It seemed lost and out of place in the immense desert which surrounded it, and I wondered what secret rested in its core. Whatever it was, it was something that made Filomón's voice ring with hope and made his eyes sparkle even after the fatigue of the long journey.

"The doctors here can work miracles," Filomón was saying, "they've got ways now of straightening out bones and sewing together nerves and flesh—"

"Yeah, but they didn't fix my limp," Clepo said. "And they sure as hell don't believe in all this mumbo jumbo you've been giving the kid."

"Don't mind Clepo," Filomón laughed, "he just likes to act tough, but deep down inside he knows—"

But what is there to know, I wondered, as the huge bulk of the mountain held me hypnotized. The shape of the old volcano was obvious. Its hump curved down like a bow to a reptilian head. Huge, volcanic slabs of dark lava formed the massive plates of the shell. Near the bottom, jagged hills and the shadows of deep ravines created the illusion of webbed, leathery feet. Even the glaze of rain glistening on its back reminded me of the way the back of a snake or a toad will shine with oily rainbow colors. The more I gazed at it the more alive it grew, until I thought I was actually looking at a giant turtle which had paused to rest for the night. But where was its magic? Nothing seemed to grow on its sides; it was bare and dark and gloomy.

"Listen carefully and you'll hear the underground river which flows from Tortuga," Filomón was saying. "There are huge caverns beneath the mountain, and through them run powerful rivers, rivers of turtle pee. Yes, that old mountain is alive . . . a real sea turtle which wandered north when the oceans dried and became deserts. But it's alive, just waiting for another earth change to come along and free it from its prison. And it will happen. The old people told the stories that everything comes in cycles, even time itself . . . so the oceans will return and cover everything as they once did. Then Tortuga will be free—"

"You're crazy, Filo," Clepo laughed.

"And is that its secret," I asked bitterly, "to wait until the ocean returns? I don't want to wait that long! I want to move, now!" I cursed

and struggled against the paralysis which held me as tight as the earth held Filomón's turtle.

"It takes time," Filomón said.

"Yeah, time," Clepo agreed.

"How much time?" I asked aloud, "How much time?" I agreed with Clepo, Filomón was crazy. The sea would never return. The earth was drying up and dying. Even the rain which pelted us during the trip fell hot and boiling on the empty desert. I had no faith left to believe his crazy story. Already the paralysis seemed to have gripped me forever.

"Here's the hospital," Filomón said. He had turned into a graveled driveway bordered by bare trees. I looked out the window and caught sight of the grey buildings. Winter-burned juniper bushes pressed against the wind-scoured hospital walls.

"It was a long trip," Clepo stretched and yawned, then he added, "I'm glad I'm not at this damned place anymore. Gives me the shivers—"

"It's always a long trip," Filomón said as he turned the ambulance and backed it up to the door, "and just the beginning for him—" I knew he meant me.

Clepo jumped out and opened the door. The cold air made me shiver. Overhead the wind drove the thin, icy clouds towards the mountain.

"Looks like snow," I heard someone say. "This the new kid?"

"It ain't Goldilocks," Clepo chattered. The voice belonged to the attendant who had brought a gurney. Together they slid out the cot and lifting me gently onto the gurney, covered me with a blanket, then pushed me through the open door and into the darkness of an enormous room.

"Filomón!" I called.

"Right here," he answered.

"Are you going back now?"

"As soon as the doctor signs the papers—"

"As soon as they sign the papers we're no longer responsible for you," Clepo added.

"Where are we?" I asked. The size of the room, its gloom and staleness were disturbing. I turned my head and peered into the darkness. I saw people lining the walls of the room, mostly women. They were dressed in dark clothes. Some held small children in their arms. All seemed to be crippled. Some wore braces, some crutches, others sat quietly in wheelchairs. Above them, on the high walls, hung huge portraits of solemn-looking men.

"This is the receiving room," Filomón explained. "Everybody that comes to the hospital gets admitted here. All the doctors' offices are up here, behind them is the surgery ward. Don't worry, as soon as the

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doctor checks you in you'll get sent to a ward in the back."

"How many wards are there?" I asked.

"Too many," Clepo answered. "I'm going to buy a Coke," he said and wandered off.

"It must be visiting day," Filomón continued, "the parents who live close by can come and visit their children." Then he added as if in warning, "Your folks are way up north, and it's hard to make that long trip across the desert . . . don't expect too many visits."

"I know," I nodded. How well I knew the poverty and misery which surrounded us and suffocated us and held us enslaved as the paralysis held me now. There would be no money, no way for my mother to come, and perhaps it would be better if she didn't come. What could she do for me now, sit and look at me as the women who lined the walls sat and looked at their crippled children? No, that I didn't want. Better to write her and tell her not to worry, or to send a message with Filomón and tell them that I understood how hard times were and that whatever happened to me here at the hospital it was better if I worked it out alone. Pity could not help me, and I had long ago lost the faith in my mother's gods.

"Tell them not to come, if you see them," I said to Filomón.

"I will," he nodded. At the same time a young girl appeared by the side of the gurney and Filomón's eyes lit up. "Ah, Ismelda," he smiled. "What are you doing here?"

The girl smiled. "I'm helping the nurses bring the kids from the wards for their visits . . . it's been a busy day, in spite of the cold. Is this the new boy?" she asked and looked at me. She had a warm smile. Her dark eyes and long hair set off the most beautiful oval face I had ever seen. She was about my age, maybe a little older, but dressed in the white uniform of a nurse's aide.

"Yeah, we just brought him in," Filomón nodded.

"Paralysis," she murmured as she touched my forehead and brushed back my hair. Her touch sent a tingle running down my back and arms. Her eyes bore into mine with the same intensity I had felt in Filomón's eyes. She rubbed my forehead gently and looked at Filomón.

"He busted his back," Filomón said, and added, "he's from up north."

"I can tell that from his dark, curly hair," she smiled. "And he's thirsty." She disappeared. How she knew I was thirsty I didn't know, but I was. My throat felt parched and I felt a fever building up deep in my guts.

"What does she do here?" I asked Filomón.

"She lives with Josefa in the valley, just on the outskirts of the town. They both work here. They do beds, sweep floors, help in any way they can—"

She returned and held a straw to my lips. I sucked greedily and felt the cold water wash down my throat. It was the first drink I had had all day and it instantly refreshed me.

"Good," I said when I had finished, "tastes strong."

"The water of the mountain is strong," she nodded, "that's because it's full of good medicine."

I didn't know if it was the water which had refreshed me or her touch, but I felt better. When I looked from her to Filomón I had the strange feeling that they knew each other very well. They had greeted each other like old friends and the sense of ease that passed between them helped to dispel the dread which had filled me the moment I entered the room.

"I have to go," she said and touched my hand. "Visiting hours are almost over and we have to return the kids to their rooms. But I'll come and see you." She squeezed my hand and I felt the pressure. Instinctively I squeezed back and felt my fingers respond, lock in hers for a moment, felt a surge of energy pass through our hands, then she was gone. Someone stuck a thermometer in my mouth before I could call her name.

"You'll dream about that girl," Filomón smiled, "she's very strong . . . knows the mountain."

Clepo reappeared. He had poured salted peanuts into his coke bottle and when he held it up to drink his red tongue reached into the bottle in search of the illusive, floating peanuts.

"Want some?" he asked me. I shook my head.

The nurse pulled out the thermometer, glanced at it and motioned for an orderly. "Get this kid over to Steel's receiving room," she snapped. "That's it, Filomón," she said as she signed the paper on his clipboard, then she walked away.

"Hey, you're getting Steel for a doctor," Filomón whispered, "he's the best."

"The kids like him," Clepo nodded, "he used to be my doctor."

The orderly began to push the gurney. Filomón stopped him for a moment, leaned over and whispered, "Remember, keep your eye on the mountain, that's the secret. Watch this girl Ismelda, she and Josefa know a lot of strong medicine . . ." Then the orderly began to push the gurney again and I saw Filomón and Clepo wave goodbye.

"Wait till spring!" Filomón called, and Clepo repeated, "Yeah, wait till spring!"

Somewhere in the enormous room a harsh voice called, "Visiting hours are over!" The people rose and began to leave, some of the children cried. I turned my head to call to Filomón, because the dread of the hospital had returned and I didn't want to be alone, but I couldn't see him.