

# Turtle Shell

*from Tortuga*

*"Turtle Shell" 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. Tortuga meets Dr. Steel in a hospital for crippled children, where he gets his nickname. Tortuga is in for a surprise when he learns that the pain he is experiencing will lead to a spiritual awakening.*

"Well, let's give him a shell, then. You ready?" Dr. Steel asked. I nodded and they went to work. They worked quietly and efficiently. One of them mixed the gypsum with water and a smell of fresh, wet earth filled the room. Dr. Steel and the other man covered me with cotton bandages and a thick gauze. They wet the bandages in the mixture and covered me with them, winding the bandages around and around. The cast grew quickly, covering me from my hips to the top of my head with a hole left for my face and ears. I closed my eyes as the shell grew. With Dr. Steel directing the operation I felt in safe hands. He was a cold, methodical person, but he knew what he was doing. So I lost interest in the process and retreated into my thoughts, and there I saw the image of the mountain, imprisoned like me, until, as Filomón said, an earth change would come and free it. Did he mean that I would have to learn to be patient like the mountain, to sleep in my shell until the blood clotted and I was barely alive . . . just waiting for the spring . . .

"But why the spring?" I wondered aloud.

"Yeah, almost through," the doctor answered.

The shell tightened around me, from my navel to the top of my head, with holes for my arms so I could drag myself around like Tortuga, when the sea swept over the desert again . . . white and pure as the plaster my mother's saints were made of . . . Outside the winter wind moaned and I wondered what time it was. Someone sang

*Who'ca took'ca my soda cracker  
Does your mama chew tobaccer . . .*

"Damn kids," the doctor laughed. He leaned back and lit a cigarette. They were done. Only Steel continued pulling and tugging at the cast, trying to get it perfect.

"Good enough to dry," one of them said. They looked at Steel. Finally he nodded. "Yes, good enough to dry. It's going to set straight as a ramrod."

So I was safe, safe in my new shell, safe as the mountain, shouldering a new burden which was already tightening on me.

"You'll feel it tighten a bit," Steel said, "but that's normal. We'll give it a little while to dry and then we'll x-ray to make sure it's set straight. Then you're on your way," he patted my arm and they went out of the room, closing the door behind them.

Safe as hell, I thought. Safe in my new shell. Safe as the mountain. With the door shut the room grew hot and stifling. I drifted in and out of troubled sleep. Once I thought I heard someone open the door.

"Hey, there's somebody in here."

"One of Steel's new ones . . . drying out, looks like."

"Let's use another room."

"Whatever you say nurse . . ."

They went out and so did the lights. The dark grew more oppressive. The cast tightened like a vise around my chest, its sharp edges dug into my stomach. I called out a couple of times, but no one heard me. With the door shut I couldn't hear any of the sounds in the hall, but if I lay very quietly I could hear the sound of water running somewhere. I listened to the rushing sound for a long time, then no longer able to hold my own water I wet the gurney mattress and the sheet that covered me. I cursed, tried to turn my head and discovered that I no longer had even that freedom. I cursed again and tried to sleep, but I couldn't with the cast tightening in on me and the heat of the room suffocating me. The nurse had cleaned my bedsores and powdered them with something, but they were hurting again, burning and sending stabs of pain up my back. I was about to call again when I heard the door open, saw the shaft of light on the ceiling, then heard it close.

"Doctor!" I called out. "Nurse!" But there wasn't anybody there. Someone had just looked in and I had missed my chance. Then I felt a presence in the room. Someone had come in and was standing by the door! I held my breath and listened and I heard someone moving very softly towards me.

"Who's there?" I asked. There was no answer, but someone was in the room. "Who's there?" I called again.

"I been watching you since you got here," a voice answered.

"Who are you?"

"Never mind who I am! But I know who you are," the voice answered. There was a threat in the sharp answer.

"Call the doctor," I said.

"No!"

"Then I'll call him myself—" I started to shout but a thin, withered hand clamped my mouth shut. I gagged at the rancid fishy smell on the hand. I spit and tried to shout but the dirty, scaly hand held tight.

"The doctors are all on a coffee break," he taunted, "and by the time they get back it will be too late, turtle!" He laughed and drew closer and I could smell his bad breath and see his yellow eyes shining in the dark. "Don't shout!" he hissed, "Don't shout and I'll let you loose—" Slowly he removed his dry, twisted hand from my mouth.

I gasped for air. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I heard you were here . . . you came today with Filomón. Did he tell you his crazy stories about the mountain?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I answered. He sounded crazy.

"Oh yes you do, Tortuga!" he snapped. "Don't get smart with me! I saw Filomón bring you in! I know Cano cut your hair! Now they put you in this turtle shell, trying to make you like a turtle! So Filomón says everytime the mountain moves somebody in here moves! That's his story. And he thinks you can beat the paralysis that keeps you on your back like an overturned turtle. Well, I think that's a bunch of bull. You hear me, Tortuga? Bull. Go ahead! Try moving! Try it!" His voice rose, shrill and insane.

"You're crazy," I said.

"Crazy, huh," he sneered. "See this hand?" He held up his withered hand for me to see. "It's been drying up like this for a year, and nobody can do anything about it! I used to believe in Filomón's crazy stories, but that didn't do any good either!"

He was shouting and panting. His spittle fell on my face, and his eyes opened wide and glowed in the dim light.

"So you're supposed to be the new Tortuga, huh! They gave you a large shell, just like the mountain, huh! Well I'm going to find out if Filomón's story is true or not! Let's see if you can move!"

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He struck a match. The light flared in the dark and filled the air with the sharp smell of sulphur. In the light I could see his face, twisted and angry, and his withered hand which was brown and wrinkled.

"I'm going to find out if you're Tortuga!" he shouted and brought the match close to my eyes.

"Tortuga!" I shouted, "You're crazy!" I tried to turn my face from the hot flame but I couldn't.

"Move!" he shouted. "Move, mountain! Come and cure my hand! Move, Tortuga!"

"No!" I cried. "I can't!" I closed my eyes and smelled my singed eyelashes.

"Move, Tortuga!" he shouted insanely, "Move! Show us the secret!"