

How the tortoise got his shell

"We're going to a party!" shouted the monkey excitedly, clutching a gold-stamped invitation in her paw. "Zeus, the great thunder god, is getting married tomorrow and we're all invited."

Throughout the morning, the skies had been filled with bluebirds, swallows and swifts dropping invitations outside every animal's home. In all the forests and meadows, seas and skies, creatures were squeaking, hopping, singing and chattering with sheer delight.

"Gods throw the very best parties," said the monkey enthusiastically. "Everyone's going to be there."

"Not me," said the tortoise, popping his sleepy head out of his doorway to see what all the fuss was about. "I don't think I can be bothered."

"You can't be bothered?" exclaimed the monkey in surprise.

"No," yawned the tortoise. "I think I'd rather just stay at home." He crawled out of his doorway to lie in the sun. In those days, the tortoise didn't have a shell. He was just a bare, wrinkly animal, who never strayed far from his comfortable burrow in the ground.

"Well," said the monkey, "You'll be the only one!" And she was right. The next day, animals from all four corners of the world trotted and scampered, scurried and flew to Zeus' summer palace for the party.

And what a party it was! Garlands of flowers and bright banners hung between the trees, beautiful fountains showered glittering droplets, and heavenly music wove its way through the air like gold and silver threads.

Zeus and his bride showed the guests to their places. Laid out on long tables beneath the trees was the most wonderful feast, with dish after dish of food to suit each and every animal. There were carrot cakes for the rabbit and seed rolls for the birds, honey buns for the bear and all the banana splits the monkey could eat.

As everyone sat down to the feast, Zeus suddenly noticed that there was an empty place. "Who's missing?" he asked the squirrel. "The tortoise," said the squirrel, munching her way joyfully through a large nut cluster.

"Where is he?" asked Zeus.

The squirrel shrugged. "He didn't come," she said. "I'm not sure why. Nobody else would have missed this for the world!"

Zeus nodded, looking thoughtful.

After everyone had eaten their fill, the band started to play. Zeus got up with his wife and danced a merry jig and, one by one, the animals left their tables and joined in. They danced in circles and they danced in lines, holding hands together or whirling each other around in pairs. Night fell and the moon appeared, shining like a huge lantern in the sky. On and on they danced, all through the night. Soon, the moon slipped away and the waking sun began to stroke her fingers across the sky.

As his tried, happy guests prepared to go home, Zeus gave each of them a gift. He gave a song to the nightingale and a hop to the hare, stripes to the zebra and a pair of humps to the camel. Home the guests went, delighted with their gifts, their ears still ringing with the sound of music.

The next day, Zeus went to visit the tortoise. He found the wrinkly creature sunning himself outside his doorway. "Hello, tortoise," said Zeus. "You weren't at my party last night, so I came to see if you were feeling well."

The tortoise opened one eye and squinted up at Zeus, shading his face against the sun with his front leg. "I'm fine, thank you," he said. "I just didn't feel like coming."

"Why ever not?" asked Zeus.

"There's no place like home," the tortoise replied, shutting his eyes and stretching out in the sunshine.

Zeus, who was famous for his hot temper, erupted in fury. "If you like staying at home that much, I'll give you one you can take with you wherever you go," he raged, and he flung out his arms.

KAZOOM! There was a huge clap of thunder and the tortoise was engulfed in a cloud of smoke. Fuming with anger and with his fingertips still smoking, Zeus marched off into the forest. When the smoke cleared, the tortoise found, to his dismay, that he had a large, hard shell on his back. And since that day, he has had to carry his home with him wherever he goes.