

Arribadas

by M.K. Hall

That August, the week I was supposed to deliver the baby I had miscarried, Joe and I went to Costa Rica to watch the turtles lay their eggs. The trip had been my idea. I wanted to both run away and press into my loss. “The turtles arrive in the rainy season with the new moon,” I had said, enchanted by the grand synchronicity of their motherhood. “They come out of the water all at once and dig their nests in the night.”

When we arrived, the sun was setting. Exhausted by our travels, we decided to forego the guided nighttime expedition into the Ostional Wildlife Refuge, opting instead to stretch our legs at the beach not far from our hotel. The formal tour was supposed to be spectacular. Our innkeeper told us that in a span of only four days between 150,000 to 200,000 olive ridley turtles visited the beach. It was a phenomenon, he assured us, “not to be missed.”

At Playa Ostional, the tide was low. A faint odor—like a fish tank due for cleaning—tinged the summer wind. Black winged zopilotes pecked at broken shells, the beach otherwise empty. Without a guide, we didn’t know where to look for turtles and spent more time taking photos than watching the water. Photos of the sunset that failed to capture the multitudinous sky. Photos of our bare feet covered in sand. Photos of us looking not at all mournful.

Perhaps because we were not paying attention, her arrival in the early blue dusk felt like magic. She dragged herself onto the gravity-stricken sand, her carapace heavy without the sea’s buoyancy. After a flip or two of her fins, she would pause, her neck panting, and blink those big wet eyes at us. I had not imagined her journey to the nesting zone to be so laborious.

“Come on, mamma. Lay some eggs,” I said.

At my first prenatal appointment, my doctor had been unable to detect a heartbeat so she sent me across the street to the hospital where their equipment was more sensitive. I lay down on the examination table in a too cold room while the technician unwrapped a condom for the ultrasound probe. When it was inside me, she maneuvered the probe around like a joystick, and did not hide her impatience whenever I winced.

“Sorry, just a little bit longer,” she would say unapologetically, then complain that my doctor had called a few too many times to check on the results. The technician had to pause the exam at one point to answer the phone.

“She’s the mom of a childhood friend,” I explained. “I guess she cares about me.”

The technician started to ask me questions about my friend and we realized that we went to high school together. I remembered auditioning for Model United Nations in front of the technician and doing a terrible job because I didn’t know anything about global politics or making oral arguments. She had the same unimpressed look on her face when she confirmed that there was no second heartbeat in my body.

“And what do you do now?” she asked, helping me sit up.

“I’m a lawyer.”

She laughed, “Of course you are.”

I laughed too, grateful for her lack of bedside manner. Maybe what was happening to me was not supposed to make me feel so sad? For her, my loss was routine.

Later I researched the mundanity of miscarriage. The March of Dimes website states that ten to fifteen percent of recognized pregnancies result in miscarriage. Falling down the Internet’s rabbit hole eventually lead me to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. According to the CDC, nearly one in five women in the United States is raped, and that eighteen percent only represents reported cases.

“There is something terribly wrong with the world,” I thought, staring at my computer screen. My grief had grown in the aftermath of the exam, after telling my friends and family that I was no longer having a baby, after recovering from surgery to remove the ‘uterine contents’ that I had already named. “Still. I want to bring new life into it.”

As dusk deepened at Ostional, more turtles heaved themselves from the water. Between the high tide line and tall grass, the turtles began to dig, their flippers ineffective shovels, scattering broken shells. At first I thought the shells—soft and smooth as ping-pong balls—were remnants of hatchlings who had made their way to the sea the season before.

Then the zopilotes came. Black shrouded and wearing wrinkled gray masks, the vultures brazenly snatched eggs right from the prostrate bodies of laboring turtles. Those delicate orbs were broken before they even touched the nests meant to incubate the babies for the next three months. Other zopilotes would riffle through just buried nests, devouring, as the mothers scurried toward their true homes, their flippers leaving divots in the sand. It was with palatable relief that the turtles crashed into the waves and disappeared.

As the day faded to twilight, more tourists arrived. Groups would encircle a nesting mother, shooing the birds. (For their part, the turtles did not exhibit a preference between vultures and voyeurs.) I watched one girl break from the circle to chase the zopilotes away, chastising the birds in a British accent when they returned to their watchful positions, and I recognized a younger version of myself in her futile anger. At thirteen I would have done the same. At thirty-three, I thought I understood something about death's role in the cycle of life.

I read afterwards that while predators consume a few thousand eggs, the majority of eggs do survive. In fact, harvesting eggs is permitted at Ostional Wildlife Refuge in the seventy-two hours after the turtles first start to appear because subsequent arrivals destroy the nests of their sisters as they dig to make their own. Still, those avian thieves with their Grim Reaper robes and scythe beaks were hard to root for.

Since we had sneaked onto the beach without a guide, Joe and I were at liberty to remain loyal to our turtle. The first arrival. We kept a respectful distance, grumbling about the groups farther up shore who crowded the nests, as if we ourselves weren't

eco-tourists invading the spaces that belonged, for generations, to these reptilian creatures.

Other mothers had already constructed their nests, labored, and left. Our turtle was still only partway to the grass. A wash of iridescent pink and soft beige brightened her skin. The turtle lifted her head toward the grass and the ravenous black birds and the great distance she still had to climb, and suddenly changed course.

“Mamma turtle, I didn’t see you lay any eggs. Where are you going?” I asked, though it was clear she had turned back toward the sea. Her tracks made an actual “U” in the sand. Joe and I watched a wave swallow her.

I didn’t know turtles could do that. I thought their biology compelled them to swim thousands of miles to the same natal beach where they had been born, to lay their eggs, to return season after season, year after year until they died out in the water. It never occurred to me that a sea turtle might journey to the beach and decide not to participate in the tremendous feat of motherhood. To change her mind.

Or maybe it hadn’t been a choice. Maybe her body simply could endure no more. Maybe our presence frightened her away.

I stared at the place she had vanished for a long time.

“She did good,” I told my husband. “She tried really hard.”

He held me as the sun went down. We made our way blindly to the car, arms outstretched against the dark, afraid we were stepping on buried eggs.

I should add that a few days before our departure, I found out I was pregnant. Joe had phoned me from work, frantic. “We forgot to get vaccinated. Call your doctor.”

She was able to squeeze me in that afternoon. We had only just started trying again, but I figured Typhoid and Hepatitis A were probably unwise injections to receive in the unlikely event I was with child. I took a detour to the drugstore, rushed home. On the toilet, I did my best to aim my pee at target surely better designed for a man to hit. The result came back positive. I peed on another. And then one more.

I found my happiness untrustworthy. Late for my appointment, I decided not to call my husband until I was certain. At the medical office, my doctor said she would run

a blood test, but that the drugstore results were reliable. She recommended precautions to avoid disease, assuring me that although I would arrive uninoculated, Costa Rica would be safe.

And so, the trip that was originally intended as a kind of closure on mourning turned into an unexpected babymoon. I had to skip surfing lessons and hot springs and tropical cocktails. At one point, Joe and I got into a fight because I insisted on flinging myself down a resort's spiral water slide, laughing as my body crashed into the pool.

"If you lose this one, don't blame me," he said, darkly.

We argued. I cried.

Then I went down the slide again out of spite.

At my various doctor's appointments over the next several months, I would routinely be asked, "Is this your first pregnancy?" No matter how domed my belly grew or how forcefully my baby kicked at my guts, there remained that pecking reminder of loss.

I told myself that once I cleared the first trimester and the risk of miscarriage subsided, so, too, would my worries. When I entered my second trimester, I reasoned that once I felt the baby move, I would be relieved of my anxieties. By my third trimester, I accepted that I would never stop fearing for the safety of my child. I was already a mother.

We never did go back for the guided expedition to see the turtles fill the beach. At night, there were supposed to be so many arrivals the shore seems made of turtles. Maybe the spectacle would have stirred something deeper inside us, but Joe and I agreed what we had witnessed was enough.



M.K.Hall is a graduate of Harvard Law School and the MFA program at NYU, where she taught creative and expository writing. Her work has appeared in publications including *The Rumpus*, *Open Letters Monthly*, *The Margins*, *American Literary Review*, and *Literary Mama*. She lives in Los Angeles with her husband, rescue dog, three-legged cat, and son, who was born the April after the journey to Costa Rica.