

Hatch/Little Loggerhead - Cut the Glow

The sky above a sleepy wide-open beach in Mon Repos, Australia was like a curtain of silk. Smooth clouds of white drifted as the whisper of dusk kissed the cool afternoon air. The promised streams of moonlight were soon to hang from a looming full moon, suspended effortlessly above the endless ocean horizon.

Mother loggerhead was excited. Instead of her usual forging around in the coral gardens not far from Lady Elliot Island, she had navigated her way back to the waters of her own birthplace, Mon Repos. Avoiding tidal cycle extremes and intense storms she waited offshore for optimal conditions to nest.

Gracefully surfacing for air she looked to the star-studded sky and thought, "*Tonight I will go ashore for the first time since I hatched from my egg 30 years ago. I will lay my babies safely above the high tide mark so they can grow and emerge from their nest in about six weeks' time, just like I did. I can do this!*" Feeling brave, mother loggerhead knew it was the right time and swam into the gentle waves towards the shore.

It felt strange leaving her ocean home but her heart pounded with love and pride. Leaving alternate stroke flipper marks in her wake, she struggled. Heaving her weight from the water's edge up to the dunes to dig her nest was very different to the ease she found swimming in the sea. Determined, she managed to arrive at the top and spent much time carefully scooping the sand with her rear flippers building her chamber to lay her clutch of about 100 ping-pong ball size eggs.

Ensuring she had covered her babies with enough sand to protect them, she shed a tear, fearful to leave her babies behind. She knew most wouldn't survive the dangers ahead, but she also knew she could not stay. She could only hope that one day she would meet them in the ocean.

Six weeks passed....

A little hatchling lay in one of the hundred turtle eggs mother loggerhead buried, sixty centimetres down. "*It is squishy curled up like a rock,*" she thought to herself, shell sucking the side of her face. Her heart pounded as the right time to hatch drew near. Her flippers trembled like waves drumming on the shore, but she was eager to explore. She knew she must move – *now*.

"*It's not scary!*" she thought, conquering anxiety that was trying to creep in. "*The Beautiful Big Blue is waiting for me!*" She wondered what it might look like as her flippers started to calm and instead her snout tapped excitedly on the inside of her shell. "*I can do this!*"

"Take that!" she yelled, whacking her caruncle on the egg wall, repeatedly tearing at it.

CRACK! RIP! RIP!

Grains of sand rained down tickling her head as other hatchlings thumped urgently against her falling shell, knocking her from side to side. "*So bumpy and crowded in here!*" Heaving herself upright, she pushed against the avalanche of sand and clambered up and out of her shell.

"*Up to the top. Wait for the cool. Follow the light,*" instinct begged. Stumbling awkwardly, she climbed from the bottom of the egg chamber towards the surface, trying not to hit any of her many siblings. Mission impossible.

"Get your flipper out of my face!" demanded someone near her.

"It's getting close," said another, whose flipper was excitedly quivering, "I can't wait! I'm going to ride all the currents and swim to the South American feeding grounds, and back!"

"When I grow up, I'm going to explore the prettiest coral reefs!" proclaimed someone else.

They huddled together in the darkness waiting in anticipation for the temperature to drop.

After what felt like forever, instinct told the little hatchling it was now or never. It was safest, but not necessarily *safe*.

"Do you feel that?" a hatchling called out.

"It's really cool now!" said another.

"IT'S TIME!" a hatchling voice echoed down from above.

A sudden frantic scurry of flippers thumped up and out of the nest. The little hatchling heard muffled cries from those above her.

“Finally, we’re out!” someone yelled.

“The light, the light, I see the light!”

“The Big Beautiful Blue beckons me!”

“Look out! There’s something up in the sky...and it’s looking at me!” screamed another.

A wave of fear washed over her, but she forced herself upwards trying not to fall too far behind the mass exit. She saw flickers of light as those ahead emerged, and heard a repetitive loud crashing sound that was strangely comforting.

Flippers flapped furiously as many of the little loggerheads frantically fled in a frenzy for their ocean home, guided by the brightest light on the horizon – the light bouncing off the full moon, reflecting on the water. If she was a lucky one, she would avoid the clutches of a hovering white-bellied sea eagle, the jaws of a lingering fox licking its lips in the bushes nearby, and the trap of a half-buried plastic bag on the otherwise pristine beach.

As she emerged, she caught sight of a fully grown turtle, head hanging low and missing a big chunk of its shell. A spray-painted cross and the word ‘propellor’ was plastered over its broken carapace. She felt somehow connected to the motionless turtle. “MUM?” Silence was all that answered. “Mum, is that you?” she said a little louder. Her heart started to pound as a gloomy, eerie feeling stung her. Adrenaline pumped through her flippers as instinct told her there was no one there, and it was dangerous to wait any longer. She scuttled in a fury towards the light, tears rolled down her face.

Her heart was heavy, but she was glad to have made it. *“I’m in the Big Blue! But where do I go now? Maybe I can find some siblings.”* Instinct told her she should swim fast, follow the light, and find some currents.

The infinite blue depths stretching out in front of her begged for exploration but the tightness in her chest told her she needed to surface for air.

The darkening sky above emphasised the enticing shimmer of the moon, but a new, treacherous glow of light appeared.

She continued her way underwater but was surprised some siblings swam swiftly in a frenzy past her in the opposite direction. “Where are you all going?” she called after them.

“Oooohhhh, the light!” exclaimed a somewhat hypnotised hatchling focused on the glow beckoning from the shore.

Another hatchling stopped to reassess his path. “Which way is it? This is so confusing! Are you *sure* it’s this way?”

“Brightest light is this way. Come on,” encouraged a hatchling as it swam past.

Two hatchlings chanted while making different flipper poses, as they played their flipper game. “Oyster-shell – seaweed – rock.”

“Oyster-shell cuts seaweed, damn!”

“Ha-ha! I won. We’re going ... this way!” They continued swimming towards the shore with all the others.

“*What do I do?*” Hatch wondered. *“I thought I was headed the right way. Something tells me this may not be good. Instinct tells me to follow the light – but which light? It IS brighter back towards the shore ... Maybe it’s better to stick with the others than be by myself. Perhaps I was wrong and THAT bright light is the way home.”* Starting to look a little entranced like the others, she turned around. *“It is...sort of...beckoning me.”*

The next day...

A ranger on the beach at the mother loggerhead’s nest was counting eggshells. “One hundred exactly in this clutch,” she states recording the data on her clipboard. The deceased turtle was in a wheelbarrow nearby.

Walking towards her was another ranger, carrying a tin bucket with lifeless hatchlings piled high. “Well, we’ve lost them all then. 99 dead we’ve found. All except one can you believe!” he said. “Those artificial city lights encroaching on the dark sky don’t even give them a chance. Disorientation, exhaustion and dehydration, no fun at all, poor little creatures.”

“Nor is baking in the sun if predators don’t get them first,” she replied.

“One more to find you reckon then? I’ll keep looking.”

Almost lifeless, the little hatchling lay exhausted on the dry grass of a soccer field just above the dunes.

Two boys were playing soccer and kicked their ball right past her, flipping her over and spinning her on her shell.

“Woah! Sorry little hatchling!” said one of the boys. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s obviously very lost.”

“Or wanted to play soccer? It doesn’t look too good.”

“Come on, little one, you won’t survive up here. You need the ocean.” Gently they picked her up and walked towards the dunes. The little hatchling shut her eyes she had no energy to be frightened of the giant human that held her.

The ranger looked at the hatchling in the boy’s hand as they walked over to her. “Well, that’ll be the last one. The entire clutch deceased. The odds are already so stacked against them. Light pollution didn’t even allow these ones a chance.”

Her last ounce of energy disappeared when she heard the humans. “*All my siblings are dead? I am the only one left?*”

“It was alive when I picked it up, it’s flippers moved a little,” the boy offered.

“Okay then, we’ll take it to the research station. It doesn’t look great but maybe you boys can help,” said the ranger.

“Why is it the lights?” asked the boy.

“Hatchlings follow the brightest light, which naturally is the moon reflecting on the water. The light beaming from the sun reflects off the moon and guides them safely to the ocean. But now the city lights are generating a significant glow and the soccer field lights don’t help. The hatchlings get confused and don’t know the difference between the city and the ocean. Instead of following the moonlight to their home, they become disorientated by the city glow, end up on the land and usually die,” stated the ranger.

At the Turtle Research Station, Scientist, Dr Col Limpet had his head buried in a microscope.

“Hey, Col, got a *barely* live hatchling that the boys rescued from the soccer field. We’ve lost the rest of the clutch, 99 this time,” the ranger said.

“Cut the Glow we ask, but unless they see the damage...” Dr Limpet inspected the lethargic hatchling who was woken by the movement. “*Whhhhhhere am I?*” she thought to herself as her insides lurched as another human hoisted her upwards. “*This one has white hair growing all around its mouth.*” Its eyes looked straight at her, through two round things on its face.

“Hello, lucky little one,” Dr Limpet said.

“*He doesn’t sound too scary ...*”

“No doubt a female due to our dark sand and hotter sand temperature. We’ll see if she’s alive in the morning and if so, she’ll be lucky alright!”

“*If she’s alive? Lucky?*” She felt a knot brewing in her stomach. “*I don’t want to die! This is supposed to be a great adventure?!*” As hard as she tried, her eyes wouldn’t stay open and she gives in to exhaustion.

The next day...

The boys anxiously entered the research station to find a relieved Dr Limpet. “She’s as good as gold! I’ve attached a satellite tracker so we can find her if those lights disorientate her again. You boys can release her to the ocean and follow her travels on the computer. Hopefully she will make it to the South American feeding grounds and navigate back here to nest herself in 15 years or so! Got a name for her boys?”

“What about Hatch? She was the only one to survive the hatching!” suggested one of the boys.

“Yeah that’s cool!” said the other. “Hatch it is then.” Dr Limpet recorded the satellite detail against her new name.

“If it weren’t for the humans I would have died, but it was because of the humans all my siblings and my mother died,” Hatch thought as she welcomed the sand under her flippers and fled in a fury towards the water. An urge to thank the humans arose as the foam of the sea reached out and the salty sea spray spritzed her face, but she wasn’t sure if they would have understood her.

Hatch was given a second chance to explore her world and would do so for her mother and all her siblings. It felt strange leaving them behind but she tried to feel brave and swam into the gentle waves. “I can do this!”