Olive Green

by David Booth

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Five years ago—or maybe ten—I clipped an article containing a quote that has haunted and inspired me ever since, and tacked it to my wall. Describing the success of diplomats from nearly ninety nations to convene in Oslo, Norway, and agree on the wording of a treaty banning the use of antipersonnel landmines, a delegate from France called it “one of the rare moments in international life where the reasons of state encounter the sentiment of peoples.”

Whether I read those words five years ago or closer to ten hardly matters. What matters to me right now is that not long after finding the story I went to bed and dreamed about a beach. I remember this beach vividly. The sun was low in the sky. The water was rough and reddish and oily looking. According to the rules of my dream, I knew that I was standing on a beach that on a clear day I could see from my bedroom window, on the second story of the house where I was born. Most importantly, I couldn't take a step in any direction without landing on what looked like an upright helmet, an infantryman's helmet, olive drab, buried halfway to the crown in the sand. Without even a clue as to what they really look like, I immediately understood that in the world of my dream these helmets were antipersonnel landmines. I was stuck there. I couldn't move without being killed or maimed.

The United States stayed away from the conference in Oslo on the grounds that landmines were an essential aspect of the overall security of US troops stationed along the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea. The Landmine Ban Treaty is

nevertheless one of the few treaties actually being enforced in the world today.

I'm thinking about those "…rare moments in international life where the reasons of state encounter the sentiment of peoples" for two very different reasons. The first is that diplomats and activists are, at this time early in the new century, gathering in Zagreb, Croatia, to discuss the ongoing international campaign to ban antipersonnel landmines and to help landmine survivors. My second reason for revisiting this issue is that—miraculously and years after the fact—I am at this very moment staring at a photograph of the beach I visited in my dream. Every detail is at least outwardly the same. The sun is low in the sky. The water is rough. And yes, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of green helmets embedded in the sand. Of course, they're not really helmets at all, but *carapaces*, and this beach is nowhere near my home. The caption underneath the photograph reads: MEXICO'S OLIVE RIDLEY SEA TURTLE MAKES A COMEBACK. Citing increased protection from poachers, the environmental protection agency in Mexico known by its acronym PROFEPA reports that sea turtles, though still endangered, are spawning in record numbers along the Pacific Coast.

I wonder if you can easily picture these animals. They're small for sea turtles, maybe a foot or two long, with heart-shaped carapaces and flippers for feet. Their olive green bodies are streamlined. I picture them gliding effortlessly over some sandy seafloor, their shadows slipping along after them. Returning to the beach where she was born—her natal beach—a gravid female waddles ashore, clearing an area in the sand with her front flippers and digging a nest with her rear flippers. She isn't alone. Hundreds if not thousands of Olive Ridley sea turtles have come ashore, forming an *arribada*, the Spanish word for *arrival* and also a mass nesting of turtles. While in decline throughout the world, they come ashore at Gahirmatha Orissa, the last arribada beach in India. They come ashore at Playa Nacite and Ostionales in Costa Rica. They arrive at La Escobilla, Oaxaca, and at beaches in such countries as Surinam.

They dig their nests, deposit their eggs, and return to the sea in the same amount of time that the moon takes to transit through its phases.

I want to see one of these huge nests for myself, just as I want to witness the extinction of antipersonnel landmines. Who are the people—their names, their dreams for themselves and others—gathering in places like Zagreb, and Oslo, in Norway? Do the great nations who are not onboard with such a treaty stand in the way of their effort, or do they merely look the other way like individuals with conflicted emotions? How does word come down that a new field has been Okayed for clean up? Who are the people who go into the fields and the woods and, in the name of those who have been or may be blown to pieces, defuse or detonate the forgotten explosives? I have a hard time imagining how one goes about ridding an area, a beach, a field, woodland, of bombs. They must detonate them, but how? Maybe they shoot them from a distance. They mark them somehow—with a flag or by chalking a circle around them—and then they shoot them. Or maybe they cover them with a metal or a stone bell, a bell with a plunger running through the crown that acts like the leg of a wanderer. Finally I wonder who the flesh-and-bone wanderers are—their names, their desires—who stray into mined areas, climbing a hill, for instance, unknowingly.