

A Pelican From Heaven

Stephen Zemek

This is for everyone who genuinely cares about the planet; and has ever felt that special flutter of happiness as a pelican comes in to land on a stretch of smooth water – beak up, legs down, wings fully outstretched.

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Right from when he'd been a small boy, Bluey Leyton had wanted to be a pelican. Now he was dead and his wish had been granted. It happened like this: Bluey had been recently diagnosed with diabetes and his doctor had warned him off the booze - 'but hell, doc, if a man can't have a drink now'n then, he might as well be dead.'

'I'm warning you, Blue, with blood pressure like you've got and diabetes, you've got to stop all alcohol 'til I tell you differently.'

Bluey's wife, Shirley, had shown him their power bill the day before and he was stunned; then he'd read the paper at smoko and seen the banks weren't going to pass on the interest cut in full. By lunch-time, he was so furious that he shot straight around the corner to the pub and had one too many beers, but the real trouble was, he had three brandies as well. He was a bit wobbly as he climbed back into his straddle crane at one thirty and when he leant forward to slide back his window to catch some breeze off the river, that's when he fell. He hadn't pulled the door properly shut and he just tumbled out. As the concrete rushed up to meet him, he knew he was going to die. Strangely, he didn't feel frightened. When the ambos got to him, Blue was wearing a smile. Just three weeks before, he'd upped his life insurance to seven hundred and fifty thousand, so he had a big win on his way out and Shirley and the kids'd be sweet.

When he woke up in Heaven, the first thing Bluey saw was a pair of soulful brown eyes looking down on him. They reminded him of the spaniel they'd bought for Jimmy when he turned five, but in an instant, he understood they were radiating much more than just inquisitiveness. Genuine caring flooded from them and infused Bluey with an inner glow of peace that had always eluded him on earth.

'Hello, I'm Peter. I'm God's private secretary. I'm sorry he's not here to meet you, but his last meeting's run a bit over time. He's very concerned with the state of the world at the moment: it seems greed has run amok down there and he's just about lost patience with a lot of the bankers and bureaucrats.'

Bluey wanted to nod his head in agreement but he still felt a bit groggy so instead he shook it to try to think clearly.

'Here, give me your hand. I'll help you up.'

'Thanks, mate.'

Peter's hand was calloused and his grip surprisingly strong, then Bluey remembered the old saint had been a fisherman down on earth and he knew that hauling nets on the Sea of Galilee with the other disciples would've been tough work, tougher than sitting in a crane all day on the wharves, that was for sure.

Bluey stood and dusted himself off.

'I expect you'll want to change before you meet the Master?'

'That'd be good. A bloke's gotta look his best when he meets his God for the first time.'

'I thought you'd feel that way. Follow me. Michael only got word you were coming in about an hour ago so by the time we turned you up on heavenlybugle.com and got all your sizes, things were a bit rushed, but still, I think you'll find they'll fit okay. Everything does up here.'

Peter was wearing a cream sports jacket, a brown silk shirt and immaculately-pressed white slacks. The clothes were skilfully cut but they couldn't quite hide the spare tyre around his midriff and with his ruddy complexion and the prominent red rivulets spreading out towards the tip of his nose, Bluey immediately suspected the saint was like

him and didn't mind a little drink or two. The ex-wharfie said a quick prayer of thanks: heaven just wouldn't be heaven without a few cold beers.

As he hurried down the long hall after Peter, Bluey felt a bit of a dag in his torn black singlet and stained boxer shorts with the yellow splash of paint on the left leg, and he was a little embarrassed with the 'flip-flop' of his thongs on the shiny, marble tiles. They were an ochre colour with a faint skein of gold running through them. Shirley would've loved them because just the week before they'd been looking at tiles on special at a place where her sister worked.

'Here we are, Blue. Straight through that door to the left. You can have a shave and a shower and you'll find all your clothes have been laid out on the bench. When you've finished, just push the buzzer and I'll come back for you and take you down to the induction room - nothing to worry about; they'll give you a brochure on the place and one of the young angels will sit you down at the computer and you can make your choice on what you want to do for the next six months.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well some folk find it difficult to settle straight into Heavenly Life, so if you like you can choose to go back to earth for six months as an animal.'

Bluey frowned and looked at Peter. 'You're not havin a go at me, are you, mate?'

'No, truly.'

Bluey smiled so much that it lit up his eyes.

'I can see there's some animal that appeals to you.'

'Not an animal, a bird. Can I choose to be a bird?'

'Sure.'

Bluey's smile jumped again and Peter could see he was effervescing with happiness.

'I wanna be a pelican.'

'God has to approve everything first of course, so fingers crossed. I'll see you soon.'

Bluey had never enjoyed a shower as much. The water was exceptionally soft and the soap smelt of some sort of herb but he couldn't quite place it.

His new clothes were terrific, better than anything he'd ever had on earth; he looked like a toff - black reefer jacket with gold buttons, a yellow silk shirt, and light-grey trousers. He thought - *I wonder what Shirl and the kids would say if they could see me now?*

When it came time to go in and see God, he was immediately warm and friendly and made the ex-wharfie feel right at home. Bluey really started to relax when he realised there weren't going to be any serious recriminations about some of the bad things he'd done. The only incidents God touched on were Bluey's occasional splurges on the horses and his card playing, then he said, 'Now Blue, we're not wowers up here. We don't mind folk enjoying a few drinks. I'm rather partial to a good red with my meals, but I won't tolerate drunkenness or anything approaching it - understand?' God had the clearest, electric blue eyes and they held Bluey fast. Out of his left eye, Bluey saw Peter lean forward anxiously so he hurriedly replied, 'Yes, God. I've got the message.'

After that there was some small talk and God called for some coffee and biscuits, then he said, 'for Peter's benefit, tell us a little more about yourself, Bluey.'

Bluey took a sip of his coffee and started with, 'Well, God, as you know, the missus is as holy as a mosquito net, but I've never been big on hymns and adoration and the like, although I did screech my lungs out once when I stumbled into a Catholic Church in Brisbane one Christmas night.'

God looked serious. 'Christmas ninety-eight, that was, Bluey; instead of being home with your family, you'd had way too much to drink and you didn't have your bus fare because you'd lost it playing cards at Snooper O'Reilly's place. If I hadn't put that fifty under the rose bush as you came out of the church, you'd have been in real trouble with your wife.'

Bluey shook his head and spluttered, 'I'll be ...' Peter went into a spasm of coughing and Bluey caught himself just in time, then he said, 'You know I've always wondered how come that money was poking out from under that rock?'

'It was pretty windy that night, if you recall? I had to pin it down with something.'

'Thanks, God. When I jumped out of the cab, I used the change to get the kids a large carton of fried rice and a double serve of dim sims from the Chinese joint around the corner. It went over real big because it was raining and a bit cold by the time I got inside.'

As the interview was about to wind up, God agreed that seeing Bluey had been a wharfie nearly all his life and spent most weekends playing about on the water in one way or another, it seemed reasonable to zap him up into a pelican. There had been a bit of lively discussion though about placing him. God had wanted to put him in The Rocks area of Sydney Harbour, but Bluey wanted to nest around Moreton Bay. There were two reasons for this: he'd worked the wharves in Brisbane for the past nine years and would be in familiar surroundings, and secondly, he had arthritis in his right leg and paddling around Sydney Harbour in winter could be bloody cold.

Bluey had been grateful he'd had some time with Pete before the interview and they'd hit it off immediately. In his quiet way, Peter suggested to God, 'Look, Boss, there's a fair bit of pollution in Sydney Harbour right now and the place is already overloaded with pelicans. Being new on the job, Bluey could starve down there and besides, it seems Saint

Michael has completely fouled up his computer just like last year, and dumped way too many mullet in Moreton Bay. As a pelican, Bluey could help thin them out.’ And that’s how Bluey scored his posting to his old stamping grounds. On his first night in Heaven, Saint Peter took Blue over to God’s. On the way over he said, ‘The Master must’ve taken a liking to you, Blue; most people who’ve just come in, rarely score an invite to tea: I’d say he must have a special job lined up for you. Don’t rush him though. He’ll tell you in his own good time.’

The first course was curried prawns. Bluey instantly waved it away but Peter kicked him under the table. ‘God’s watching you, Bluey; He’ll be offended.’

‘I’ve got an ulcer as big as a dinner plate: the curry’ll tear me to pieces.’

‘Don’t be an idiot, Blue,’ whispered the old fisherman, ‘once you walk through our gates up here, all that’s gone.’

Bluey hesitated for a few seconds then took the old man’s advice. He spooned a small portion into his mouth and chewed slowly. The flavour was just right and when the first mouthful went down without his oesophagus feeling as if it was on fire, he tucked in gleefully. He ended up having seconds. The oysters too were out of this world. Blue’s best mate back on earth, Bob Tingle would have loved the main course and the sweets.

Whenever Bob and Blue’s other mate, Tom Kelly, took the wives out for dinner, you could bet Bob would always order the most expensive main course. It wasn’t exactly fair because Tom and Blue were pretty plain eaters, steak and chips guys really, and when they split the bill up at the end of the night, it was always way over the top because of Bob’s expensive tastes. Blue immediately thought of Bob when God’s French chef trotted out the main course - Eye Fillet Chateaubriand - flamed individually in Courvoisier Cognac, right beside you; then to finish, a homemade ice cream laced with Grand Marnier liqueur with eight

strawberries rising to a point that defied gravity. All this had been exquisitely sculptured to make a perfect miniature of the Eiffel Tower.

The dinner conversation was light and good natured. On God's right was a woman who had been a sole parent all her life and struggled to bring up her four kids plus the two she had adopted. Blue thought it was a nice touch on God's part to elevate someone like that. Bluey had an American sitting beside him who was affable enough at the start but after a few reds started to exaggerate about how good the beaches were in California. Bluey held up his hand and said, 'Hey listen, sport, you ever been to Noosa?'

'No, but, back home we have ...'

Peter could see the American was really starting to get under Bluey's skin so the saint suggested to the fellow he look closely at the strawberry he was about to eat. Almost immediately it grew to the size of an orange and fell off his fork. After dinner, God called Bluey into his reading room. 'Did you enjoy your meal, Bluey?'

'Too right. Everything was perfect.'

'I'm glad. Marcel only came in two weeks ago. I've made him head chef; he's worked in some of the best restaurants all over the world. Now, I've got a special job for you.' God's blue eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. Bluey sat forward attentively. 'I'm very concerned about pollution and climate change throughout the world. It's pretty bad on some of my other planets too, but then I've had people on them for a lot longer. I want you to go back down to earth and collect as much information as you can in about six weeks from the animals and birds. I'll fix it so that you'll have no trouble conversing with any species but you're not to try to talk to any humans. When you're finished, I'll send a thermal for you and it'll bring you back up to us. Being a pelican, it won't seem odd for you to disappear into the clouds for a while. Forgive the pun, but Peter seems to have taken you under his wing, so

you can report directly to him. Oh, and Bluey, just one more thing, while you're down on earth, I want you to find a trustworthy source who can give you reliable information about the health of my Barrier Reef. It's one of my most important creations.'

'Yes, God.'

As they left, Peter asked, 'How'd it go?'

Bluey stopped and subconsciously wriggled his shoulders. 'Well, I'm a bit nervous about this special job God's given me. Pollution and Climate Change are big stuff and I didn't do much good at school. Why pick me? I reckon a younger person could do it better. After all, they're all clued up on computers and everything. I'm not. I was only a wharfie.'

The saint moved so that he was square on to Bluey, then reached out and gripped him gently by the forearms. 'Christ was only a carpenter and look what he achieved. You have to learn to trust in God's judgement. You've always been close to nature and you have life experience. With the fast pace of the world today and all its complications, young people are struggling. Sometimes God does send younger people back to earth on assignment but not this time. He knew exactly what he was doing when he chose you, Bluey.'

Straight away Bluey felt lighter. 'You couldn't help liking him could you? If Shirley was here, she'd describe him as "unpretentious," and he's got a special way of making you feel you don't want to let him down. You know - that you want to do your very best for him. When I was a kid at school, I had a footy coach who was a bit like that.'

'We had the CEO of a big firm come in a few weeks ago who used that word about The Boss - "unpretentious." Did you ever notice when you were back down on earth that the guys who'd made it, acted as if they hadn't, and those who hadn't, acted as if they had?'

'Yeah, I know exactly what you mean. Not long after Shirl and I were married we lived next to a couple like that. Drove us bloody crazy.'

The old disciple stopped immediately and wagged an admonishing finger. 'Excuse me, Bluey, but no swearing up here. If God hears you, he'll go right off. He just won't tolerate it.'

'Sorry. It won't happen again. I was telling you about this couple next to us who were always putting on the dog and talking as if they had a plum in their mouths, then one day the finance mob came and repossessed all their furniture. They were up to their eyeballs in debt.'

'We had a chap with us who was inclined to get a bit carried away, too - young Thomas, you've heard of "Doubting Thomas?" Bluey nodded his head. 'He's a nice enough sort of chap really, but back on earth, he was always pushing us to buy a bigger and flashier boat. We were only poor fishermen. It took Christ to talk him out of it; we couldn't. Something painted fire- engine red with black racing stripes would've looked way out of place on the Sea of Galilee. Well, here we are, Blue. This is where I live. You're in that bungalow next door for now. If you need anything or feel like a snack through the night, there's an intercom at the side of your bed. I think the line to the main kitchen is **4**, although you better check on the brochure they gave you. You see I don't eat between meals these days.' He gave a little smile and rubbed his belly appreciatively. 'See you in the morning, Blue.'

'Right, Pete, and thanks for all your help.'

'No problems at all.'

'Hey, what about a nightcap before we turn in?'

‘Some other time, Blue. We’ve got a fair few new arrivals tomorrow and I need to see that I don’t make any mistakes with the Boss’s appointments. He doesn’t like it if I ever double-book him; but look, if you really feel like a drink, there’s the Columbus Club, round the corner and down the hill three blocks. It’s an easy walk and you can’t miss the place. There’s a revolving multi-coloured globe of the earth above the door. If you decide to go, tell Chris I sent you. I’m sure he’ll do his best to get you a good table.’

Bluey’s mouth dropped open. ‘You don’t mean Christopher Columbus do you? The fourteen ninety –two bloke who discovered the New World? We all learned about him at school.’

‘Yes, that’s him. Chris is still the adventurous type; when he floated the idea of a nightclub with God, we all thought he’d be refused, but of course up here there’s no crime of any description, and everything’s good clean fun so he got the green light and the club’s proved a great success. A lot of his regulars are old sea salts like himself but you have to give it to him - he’s a very clever promoter. A few weeks back he had some big name on as his star attraction and people were lined up for a kilometre and a half.’

‘Thanks for the info but on second thought, I might see how I feel after my head hits the pillow. It hasn’t been easy trying to take everything in.’

‘I know what you mean. I still remember the day I died and then found myself up here. Blue, I won’t say sleep well. We all do in Heaven; once you get your mind round the idea of eternity, you’ll be fine.’

‘Fair enough, and thanks again.’

As Bluey let himself into his bungalow, he wondered about Peter’s last remark.

ETERNITY – it was a big concept to get your head around, particularly for a bloke who’d had the responsibility of: a wife, two kids, a six hundred thousand dollar mortgage, a fidgety

cocker spaniel, and a white cockatoo that screeched abusive remarks whenever it was reprimanded for discarding the husks of sunflower seeds over the edge of its cage onto the floor of the laundry; Bluey's horizon had only ever been able to stretch from payday to payday.

Bluey hoped sleep would come easily because he was a little worried about something - many pelicans spend a lot of time standing on one leg and his right was riddled with arthritis. It would mean putting a lot of strain on his one good leg, still, he'd give it a go. He'd never been one for backing away from a challenge.

