

# Paulie's Very Long Journey

By Warren Swenson

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Hello, I'm Paulie the Pelican  
And I hope I can make it quite clear  
What it is that I mean when I tell you  
I am so very glad to be here.  
Not just to tell you my story  
But just to be here at all  
For not long-ago we pelicans  
Were very few as you may recall.

Though in nineteen hundred and sixty-six  
We were honored when we heard  
That we pelicans had been chosen  
To be Louisiana's state bird,  
Still, with all of that recognition  
It really would have been sad  
If the only pelicans left  
Were the ones flying on the state flag.

But that is what almost happened.  
We pelicans were so few  
And no one knew the reason why  
Nor what there was to do.  
Man had been using a chemical  
That had a really long name  
They called it  
Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane  
(dī clorō dī fē nul trī clorō thāne

They were using it as a pesticide  
And said it was otherwise harmless  
So, it got into all of the rivers  
Then it got into all of the fish.  
And of course, we ate the fish  
And so, it got into all of us.  
But at the time we all felt fine  
And no one thought it was dangerous.

We soon starting laying eggs  
With shells that were much too thin  
They would crack and break before they hatched  
So, there were no little pelicans.  
When the men that they called scientist  
Came to understand  
The cause was this bad chemical  
It was immediately banned.

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That happened in nineteen seventy-three  
And the scientist, having learned  
The solution to the problem,  
Were determined to have us return.  
From Florida they took several of us  
To Baratavia Bay  
To an island called Queen Bess  
And they were hoping we would stay.

So it was that a new colony  
Of pelicans began  
On the island of Queen Bess  
Down in south Louisiane  
We pelicans more than survived  
We began to thrive  
Everything was going great.  
Then in two thousand and five

In the Gulf of Mexico there formed  
The largest hurricane  
To make landfall in the United States.  
Katrina was it's name.  
There was no doubt  
This hurricane packed a lot of power  
With sustained winds of about  
One hundred and sixty miles per hour

With a nineteen-foot storm surge  
That hit Baratavia Bay.  
It practically washed Queen Bess Island  
Completely away.  
What once was thirty-six acres  
Of nesting grounds and shore  
Had been reduced to five acres  
And not a single square foot more.

But we pelicans like you people  
Were determined to stay  
We simply weren't going to let  
That storm chase us away.  
Now all of this had happened  
Way before my time  
So maybe now you're wondering why  
I call this story mine

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Well, the answer is very simple  
It's my family's history  
Which makes that part of the story  
A very special part of me.  
So now, if you will listen,  
I will tell to you the rest  
Of my story. I was hatched  
On the Island of Queen Bess

I grew up hearing these stories  
About the hardships of the past  
And how we pelicans  
Were always able to outlast  
Even the toughest of times  
And when they came again  
We would still outlast them  
Because we were pelicans.

I was proud to be a pelican  
From the Island of Queen Bess  
But little did I know  
We'd soon face the greatest test  
Any pelicans had faced  
And likely ever will  
When in April of two thousand ten  
There was the BP oil spill

There was oil everywhere  
As far as I could see.  
The oil covered everything  
And that included me.  
I was really scared  
For no matter how I tried  
With all the oil on my feathers  
There was no way I could fly.

Then people started showing up  
They came from everywhere  
In helicopters, planes and boats.  
What were they doing here?  
I was wondering when I realized  
It was very obvious  
They came here for one purpose,  
Which was to help clean up.

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Not just to clean the oil up  
On the shore and in the sea  
But they also came to rescue  
And cleanup creatures just like me.  
We were triaged so we could be sent  
For rehabilitation  
To a very special place  
At some unknown location.

Which means they took us somewhere  
To help us all get better  
By cleaning all the oil off  
Our faces, beaks and feathers.  
It took much more than just a week.  
I think it was twelve days.  
But then I thought they'd take us home  
To Barataria Bay.

So, I was really quite upset  
When I realized just how far  
From home I was when they took me  
To New Brunswick, Georgia.  
At the time I did not understand  
But later I would learn  
How our home was so polluted  
They could not let us return.

While I was at the Coast Guard Base  
They put a red tag on me.  
Rather than call me by my name  
I was Pelican 33Z  
I thought at first that they were rude  
But I thought better of it when  
I realized people just don't know  
How to speak Pelican.

I knew that we were very far  
From Barataria Bay  
But just how far I did not know  
Till I heard somebody say  
It was about seven hundred miles  
As the crow would fly.  
So I thought if a crow can fly that far  
Then certainly so could I.

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And so, I then decided  
I would take it on my own  
To leave this place called Georgia  
And find my way back home.  
I decided to fly by the coast  
And though I cannot say  
Exactly just how long that was  
It was a very long long way

But when it comes to flying  
We pelicans all know  
When you're flying over water  
It is best to fly down low.  
When the wind blows over water  
And hits a wave it has to rise  
Providing lift under our wings  
That makes it easier to fly.

And so I flew for many days  
Maybe a year or more  
But I will never forget the way  
I felt when I first saw  
My home there in Baratavia Bay  
But I did not recognize  
The island of Queen Bess  
For it was seven times the size

Of the island I remembered  
But then I suddenly realized  
This was the pre-Katrina island  
That my grandparents described  
In the stories that they told me  
Of the hardships they endured  
I had no doubt the island  
Had been completely restored.

In fact, it was even better  
Then it had ever been before  
On the south side of the island  
About ten feet from the shore  
Was a massive wall of rocks  
Keeping the island secure  
From the constant beating of the waves  
And behind it there was room  
For the little pelicans to play  
In a calm and safe lagoon.

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It was a sight that was well worth  
Every mile I had flown  
And I could not have been happier  
To finally be back home.  
So now that you've heard my story  
You can't fault me when I brag  
That we pelicans have earned the right  
To be on the state flag.

For the perseverance and  
For the resilience we have shown  
For which Louisiana's pelicans  
And her people are well known.  
So, as we say it does not matter  
Where you live or where you've flown.  
If you're from Louisiana  
It will always be your home.