

## The secret of the “Blue Parrot”

### Revelation

The "Blue Parrot" is not what it seems. Only a select few are privy to this secret. I share it with you because it makes me not a little bit sad that I am one of them. There are truths you'd rather not know, so you can bear the burdens of everyday life more easily and enjoy it more fully. When these truths are not only unpleasant but also secret, it makes you even angrier—why the hell did they have to share them with you, of all people?

What the "Blue Parrot" presents itself as is an unpresentable and pretty pedestrian bar. Its location suggests a quick bankruptcy or a painful existence for unclear economic reasons. It is situated under the western end of the draw bridge over Boca Ciega in Florida. Traffic rushes past overhead, indifferent and hurried. It's challenging to find an ugly shore, but the one by this bar fits the description. Its only decoration is an abandoned pier. For me, this is one of the saddest sights. The skeletons of half-destroyed piers protrude out of the water like the bones of the failed dreams of the people who built and used them. Between the pier and the bar is an empty field of dried grass and a yard filled with construction materials that will never be used. A few trees along the shore are gray and nearly leafless. From the bar, there's a remarkable view of a nonremarkable auto shop.

You might expect, but the building is painted an unreasonably optimistic bright blue, like the sky and sea in a promotional brochure for Santorini Island. Most of the tables are blood-red, though occasionally one matches the color of the building. The strangest feature is the captain's cabin-like structure, absurdly jutting above the gray roof. You can reach it via a white wooden ladder so clean that it's obvious it's rarely used. When I asked the bartender what this room was, she replied suspiciously quickly: "Oh, just an office."

Even a naive person like me could tell she was hiding something. My distrust was confirmed when she immediately began offering various items from the menu and giving recommendations no one had asked for.

At that point, I suspected that they kept the mummified bodies of non-paying customers there. The cabin has a window, showing a painted lower half of a blue parrot. The upper half, pretentious and driven by ambition, had flown off to more prosperous establishments. The lower half, responsible and compassionate, had remained out of solidarity with the ruins of the pier.

From the ceiling hang the hulls of catamarans, painted baby blue, orange, with a narrow bright yellow stripe. Since they are eager to sail away out of shame, they are securely tied with sturdy metal cables.

In short, the bar firmly insists, both through its location and all its attributes, that it is one of those places serving cheap cocktails tasting like soapy water to retirees from colder parts of America.

I passed by frequently on my way to the beach, usually in the early afternoon. This is a time when bars in Florida are bustling with activity. It's not surprising, given that in some of them, Happy Hour starts at eight-thirty in the morning. Every time I glanced toward it, the "Parrot" was empty. Usually, there were only two or three people, halfheartedly discussing the best way to declare bankruptcy—or at least that's what I imagined.

The illusion fell away from me like wet snow from a steep roof.

One evening, I stayed to watch the sunset over the ocean from the beach. This is a sight that always captivates me. The most magical moments are the first twenty minutes after the sun sinks into the water. The sky, mourning its departure, is painted with an incredibly intense inky blue and fiery orange-red flames.

I hurried home, entirely unprepared for the explosion of music and light that suddenly startled me. Live music was coming from the bar. There's something about live music that immediately makes you realize it's not a recording. It pulses with energy, even when it's a sad and slow melody. Try explaining that to Artificial Intelligence! Well, this wasn't a sad or slow melody but a lively jazz composition, filled with joy. It pulled me in like a fisherman winding the reel of curiosity with the line of my love for music and its performers.

As soon as I entered the bar's covered terrace, my attention was grabbed by about twenty musicians playing with an enthusiasm untouched by their obvious professionalism. This is a rare combination among live performers in Florida. Due to the local population's desire to have fun, this environment is conducive to the emergence and public performance of musicians who would be thrown out of even the most rundown venues elsewhere. Many try to mask their lack of talent by cranking up the volume to levels dangerous not only to hearing but also to sanity.

I was so pleasantly surprised that I barely noticed the few elderly couples dancing on the floor. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw they were of an advanced age but somehow still managed to follow the rhythm. Their movements were cautious, economical, and stiff in a way that would be praised by physiotherapists as being maximally safe for patients over seventy years old.

According to a sign on the stage, the band was called the "Jazz Tomcats." While I was trying to listen to the solo improvisations, observe the musicians, and catch the waitress's attention, the music suddenly ended. Despite the applause, the performers began packing up their instruments. Some went to sit at the tables with the customers—they clearly knew each other well.

It turned out that the "Cats" play every Monday unless they're busy exterminating rodents or participating in festivals. The audience began to disperse, slightly embarrassed. It was nearly ten o'clock, and the time for evening medications had long passed. Not to mention the risky movements that even the most liberal doctor wouldn't approve of. I watched with affection as these people got into their cars—some with help, others on their own—and I fervently hoped that I would reach their age with the strength and desire to have fun.

As I was leaving, I saw a chalk-drawn sign above the door. It stated that the Cats play on Monday, and on Wednesday, there's a group called "Impacts." Small letters clarified that these guys play old-time Rock 'n' Roll. For the ignorant, there was additional information: here, you can find the "best prices on the beach", and there are special promotions every day. To the left of the "Blue Parrot" sign, it said, "Have you heard?" and to the right, "The bird is the word." Arrows pointed to the name of the bar, making it clear to even the most confused visitor which bird was in question.

There was no doubt I'd be coming on Wednesday evening.

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No need to ask, I was there on Wednesday evening. The musicians were setting up and tuning their instruments, the waitresses were bustling between the tables, the kitchen, and the bar—there was a festive buzz of anticipation. Laughter echoed over the excited conversations, which made me look closer at the crowd. The average age was around 75, but even the oldest among them were in high spirits, determined to have a good time. Reading glasses and hearing aids made communication with the service staff possible. Their clothes were clean and tidy, ranging from modest and decent to playfully extravagant. Outfits from the '60s mingled with the latest fashion trends, as much as a Social Security income would allow. The women had carefully styled hair, though only a few retained the bluish tint that used to be so common among those determined to look their best, no matter how many years had passed since their prom. Most of the men were clean-shaven, which isn't easy to motivate yourself to do when you're not working anymore. Clearly, the occasion was important, or at least their partners thought so. Here and there, strategically placed walking sticks and rolling walkers were ready for use when needed.

Some of the musicians, having finished their preparations, headed to the bar, where the bartender handed them glasses of draft beer. I have done my research. Their history was long and illustrious. “Impacts” was founded in 1960. They toured Florida, spreading the message of rock from its golden era, back when everyone seemed young and full of optimism. According to their website, they still rocked hard.

The moment the first chords rang out, it was evident that the claim was no exaggeration! Strong rhythm, clear vocals, a captivating melody of a popular evergreen—what more could one want? At least for this audience—nothing! Eyes lit up, spines straightened, and the boldest headed to the dance floor. Who cared if the musicians’ hair was white, if the lead singer had clearly had a stroke, or if his legs were swollen? After a few timeless hits, the dancers cut loose, as much as their doctors’ orders allowed. Stiff, restrained movements somehow managed to follow the rhythm. Frozen faces struggled against the ravages of age and plastic surgery. Mouths mechanically repeated familiar lyrics, despite memory’s betrayal. But the eyes—the eyes were the most impressive. They sparkled with happiness and genuine joy. Some gazed at their partners with warmth and love. Others’ eyes wandered far away, to times when they were young, strong, and beautiful. I think neither they nor their partners knew whom they were really dancing with—them or a long-lost love.

The women, as expected, did better. Even those who stayed at the tables or leaned against the bar danced in place with a grace unattainable for the men present.

During the intermission, both musicians and dancers took a break, refreshing themselves with drinks of choice and friendly conversation. To keep myself entertained, I observed the colorful crowd. I realized that you could tell who came to dance and who came to watch by the design of their shoes. The dancers wore stylish and comfortable ones. The spectators had either sneakers or ugly orthopedic footwear.

With the first notes of the resumed music, the women swayed in place, set down their drinks, and rushed to the dance floor. Why are women more susceptible to rhythm? Or is it true fact? Experiments with newborns of both sexes show that they are equally capable of recognizing rhythm and react with displeasure if a beat is missed. This is observed to a lesser extent in gorillas and chimpanzees. Macaques don’t react at all. The theory that men are genetically closer to them is, for now, lacking solid evidence, no matter how disappointing that is for some.

As I sipped my whiskey, my mind drifted over this not-so-trivial question. For women, dance is catharsis, a release of passions and desires suppressed by societal norms, a revealing of a nature that we otherwise refuse to acknowledge keeping it hidden under the thick makeup of civilization. And since they are more honest than us men, it’s easier for them to achieve this. Dressed in suitable attire, they transform into the bacchantes of Dionysus, ready to sweep away anyone who stands in their way like a raging river. Know-it-alls didn’t learn from the fate of Orpheus and came up with all sorts of theories to justify their inability to shake off the chains of moralistic society. Their reluctance to dance isn’t because they can’t (everyone can), but because of their inner stiffness. Those of them with inferiority complexes fervently explain that women dance to make themselves more attractive to people like them. I, however, think that it’s a woman’s reward for the hardships of pregnancy, childbirth, and the years spent patiently enduring their rigid partners.

Bored with myself, I left a little before the end without having danced.

I paid homage to Terpsichore and Euterpe whenever I could—Mondays and Wednesdays were reserved for them, their priestesses, and their partners.

If it weren’t for this constancy, I might never have touched the true essence of the mysterious bar.

“The Blue Parrot” is one of those places where, if it so chooses, the Fountain of Youth appears. It is unpredictable and capricious, revealing itself only to those who have reached a certain age. The young don’t want to know about the fountain because they don’t need it. They already struggle with the hormonal and emotional storms raging within them. Unbridled ambitions, unfulfilled expectations, unrequited love make

mastering the reins of passion a tough task. That's why they often find themselves in trouble, but that's preferable to dull boredom. According to the elderly, they are peculiar creatures who find masochistic satisfaction even in being lonely and unhappy. This is the right place to quote the remarkable insight of the great gerontologist, Professor Elderman: "Old age sets in when susceptible individuals are exposed to sufficiently high doses of youth." The exception is evil people, who are immune to its ideals and are born old. This has long been proven—bad people have never and can't never been young. Malice and envy consume all their energy, leaving no strength for the passions and bold dreams of youth.

But let me return to the night of revelation.

I arrived a little early so I could watch the musicians, especially the drummer. Music is a shared experience, which is why it's the most powerful live. The musicians tuned their instruments with the precision of soldiers preparing their weapons for battle. How can one strive to bring the touch of divine music to fellow beings, while another brings them the cold kiss of death?

More and more musicians joined in, and the noise grew quite loud. It's amazing how harmony is born from this cacophony and chaos. Even avant-garde classical music and jazz have their harmonious order. This must be why architecture is called "frozen music."

The evening was flowing as usual, the intermission passed without incident, and I was about to leave. I looked around—the regulars were enjoying themselves however they could. Tim, who was partially paralyzed by a stroke, was struggling with a beer. The struggle was evenly matched, and thus fierce. In the end, human thirst won, and he managed to take a sip without choking and spilled almost nothing. An innocent casualty of the battle was his fork, which fell to the floor. I bent down to pick it up. When I straightened up, one of the best dancers stood before him. With a broad smile, she took his hands and gently led him to the dance floor. Like a skilled puppeteer, she guided him in a strange but endearing dance. His paralyzed side seemed to pull him down, his smile was cut in half, and his face was a mixture of fear of falling and pure happiness.

Naturally, I had to stay.

The appearance of the fountain was heralded by the arrival of a pair of dancers in their twenties. With the innocent arrogance of youth, they seized everyone's attention. It was clear they weren't well-trained in art. But they didn't need to be. They glided with fluid ease and effortless elegance that only a young body possesses. A bright star that drew the elderly couples into its orbit. Almost no one remained indifferent. It seemed to me that the noise played down, and the light dimmed. Strange fireflies filled the air and swirled among the participants. When the whirlwind settled, figures made of glowing particles materialized around them. I looked closer—each one had their youthful double in front of them, as they had been at twenty years old. The youthful copies began to dance with them, and this was the most natural miracle, for the Fountain of Youth had arrived.

I have no idea how long the magic lasted, but no one came to me.

My time hadn't come yet, which was a huge relief.

### **Confession**

I continue to visit "The Blue Parrot." Now I see it with different eyes. Some time ago, I arrived in the afternoon when there was no music. It was empty, except for me and three other customers and their belongings. At one point, they went to the restroom. It was just me, the luggage, and the empty dance floor. That's when I thought that this was a symbolic image of what awaits the declining bar—the last patrons would leave. Now I understand that they weren't leaving but coming for a pilgrimage. When I mentioned the bar to a waitress in another place, she said:

- Oh, that one has been around for ages...

It has probably existed in one form or another since the appearance of people in these lands, for the Fountain is highly selective.

I also uncovered the secret of the cabin. It stores the ashes of those who wished to remain close to the Fountain. Those who have seen it hope, with their presence and memories, to inspire others to wait patiently for its blessed sprays. The urns are arranged like jars of pickles, covered with the dust of memories of a life fully lived. Others were not blessed with the ecstasy of seeing its golden streams soar upwards towards infinity, with the joy of simply existing. Good people, who spent their lives in honest labor and love for others, they wait patiently even in their death to help those left behind. They humbly hope that one day, the Fountain will shed the unconscious selfishness of youth and come to pay them the respect they deserve. They, of course, know they won't be able to enjoy it, for that happiness is granted exclusively to the living. The dead are left only with the memory of the indescribable, bubbling vitality of youth.

There is some comfort in knowing that their bodies were worn out by their passions, rather than by the dullness of everyday life and the pains of old age. Their reward, as always, will be the bliss that living visitors of the "Blue Parrot" will experience. Throughout their lives filled with noble deeds, they understood that the greatest happiness lies in creating, in giving something selflessly to others. They do not know that one day, their dust will fly towards the stars, to merge with its creator—the Absolute Consciousness. I may be wrong, and perhaps what's stored in the cabin is outdated, useless accounting books and an old computer resting on a desk that once had four legs. But I don't want that to be true; dreaming is one of youth's most defining qualities. Old age only hopes, usually timidly, reluctantly and not expecting much. Why am I even writing this? For myself, to give additional meaning and significance to my time among the living? To feel part of the chosen circle of creators? When I was young, I was deeply impressed by Plato's assertion that artists are voices through which the Divine communicates with people. I have always been suspicious of any claims to elitism and exclusivity, so that is certainly not the reason. Spiritual and emotional exhibitionism, so common among poets, is definitely not one of my virtues. I do not possess the modesty and nobility of that anonymous donor who built a fountain of drinking water to quench everyone's thirst, but I, too, wish to hand something selflessly to people. Humans, these wonderful and mysterious creatures, deserve it. People, life is a gift we should cherish until our final hour. Even old, sick, and weary, there is always something to bring a little joy. Our mission is to help the fallen stand, to make the sad smile, and to give the hopeless believe that happiness exists—and it is attainable for everyone.

I do not know which divine being speaks through me, but I passionately hope it is not the god of delusion and shattered illusions. We have been well acquainted for a long time.