

# Barnaby and the Blue Fish

By William McBride – Winner



It was Barnaby’s greatest play yet: a piece titled *Rondo and the Princess*.

“Action!” he called out to the cast. Everyone rushed to their places.

Tonight was the opening night, and thousands of fish lined the vibrant seats of the theater. They’d been practicing for many many weeks on his newest play—an unarguable *masterpiece*. When the lights went dim, the crowd erupted in applause and whistles, and the rosy curtain slid open.

The play was a romance about Princess Lucie and a servant named Rondo who fall in love with each other. As the story progressed, relationships became tense, and the prince she was supposed to marry found out about this affair and sent assassins to kill Rondo. But at the climax of it all, Lucie saved Rondo, and they ended the play by riding into the orange and scarlet sunset, unsure of their new life. Once the act was over, the theater roared in celebration for Barnaby’s masterpiece and showered him in roses.

“It was fantastic!” Barnaby exclaimed. “The crowd loved it! Didn’t you think so, Sloan?”

Sloan Bonart stood up straight and proud. “Amazing playwriting, Barnaby! The audience loved it!”

“Aw, I’m not going to take all of the credit! You did exceptionally as Rondo! The same to you, Alice; excellent performance!”

“If it wasn’t for your exceptional writing, Barnaby,” Alice Parraway beamed, “none of this could’ve happened! This play for sure will win the Best Play Award!” Sloan and Alice, along with the other actors and actresses, gave a hand for Barnaby, patting him on the back and giving him many cheers.

The celebration went on for quite some time, many of the cast exclaiming how Barnaby was going to win that best play award. The words rattled around in his brain: *You’re going to get that award, Barnaby, I know it.* He had a good life, and he was *supposed* to be happy, but it saddened him to know that he wasn't really going to win that award. Then all of the cast faded away, back into the dreams they came from. Sloan Bonart faded. So did the lovely Alice Parraway. They disappeared back into Barnaby's mind. The other minor cast faded as well, and Barnaby was left staring at his reflection.

*I won't win that award.* He fiddled with his thoughts, but to finally get them straight he had to use his voice. “No one has witnessed my play today. I come up with the cast, I make up characters, I write the script in my head and remember every line and detail, and the act is executed perfectly,” he said to his mirrored self in the glass. “But I am not a happy fish.”

Suddenly the door swung open. It was Tucker! Barnaby forgot his play and danced excitedly along the glass face, hoping to get Tucker's attention. Tucker was holding something in his childish hands. “New food!” exclaimed Barnaby. Unlike other food containers he has seen in the past, this one was big and translucent with a colorful lid. “Why, it’s big enough I can fit inside it!”

Tucker came closer and gently set the container on the table. “I’ll be back, little fishie!” he called on his way out the door. Barnaby’s eyes were set on Tucker, but then

they jerked over to the clear cup. Immediately the smile on his face disappeared, and terror gripped around Barnaby.

Barnaby finally screamed, "Another fish!" And he swam into his hiding hutch.

*This can't be real it's impossible this is too strange to be real I want to wake up from my dream now or maybe it's just my amazingly vivid imagination that's what it is it's my imagination I want to stop imagining this nightmare now!* He peeked out of the shelter, but the fish was still there. The fish was a royal blue, unlike Barnaby, who was a deep red. Barnaby could tell that the fish was also confused as to what was happening, because it swam around in its cup, sniffing and testing the sides. He thought it was funny at first, but his laughter died when he had a realization: *Tucker's going to replace me!* He was furious and swam to where the container sat opposite of him. "Hey, you!" yelled Barnaby. The blue fish froze, then turned toward the voice. His lips moved, but Barnaby could barely make out the words. "I yelled at you, now you yell back! You're too quiet!" Still, the blue fish spoke, but nothing could be heard. Barnaby sighed. "Once we can hear each other better, we are going to have a word or two about this."

After a very long while, Tucker finally came back. Dirt was smudged on his cheeks and elbows, and he stumbled into the room panting like a dog. He slung his baseball gear onto the bed and walked over to Barnaby. "Hey Barnaby," he said tiredly. He then picked up the cup containing the blue fish and without a moment's pause, dumped him in the water. Then Tucker left, most likely to jump in the shower.

There were bubbles blocking the view at first. Barnaby was thinking of what he was going to say or do, and what will become of him. Then the water cleared up, and there was the blue fish.

Barnaby's heart was sunk, but he was furious at the same time. The blue fish bobbed around for a minute or two sniffing the ground and the walls. His tail waved with his other fins. "Hey, you!" Barnaby said. The blue fish turned in his direction. "What do you think you're doing in my home?"

The blue fish thought about it, and answered, "I don't know. I was just poured in here."

Barnaby straightened up. "Well, I'll have you know that you are *trespassing* into my tank."

"I—I didn't know I was trespassing."

"Well, this tank is rightfully mine; I was here first. I'll have you straight away know that this entire aquarium is mine." Barnaby waited for the blue fish to reply, but no response came, and the fish's eyes just stared off into the distance. "Well? What do you have to say about that?"

"I'm just confused," he said. "I don't want to take your home. And who's Tucker?"

"Tucker—Tucker is the human! Why do you think he brought a new fish home, hmm? Exactly! He brought you here to replace me! So..." He glanced at the blue fish, who sat there staring off into the distance. "Will you look at me when I'm talking to you, please?" Barnaby snapped.

"I try my best," the blue fish said innocently. "But it's hard for me to do so."

"I mean, it's easy! You just—"

"I don't wish for any trouble. I'm a nice fish, and I'm willing to accept any rules, since I'm unable to enjoy your home."

“You can’t enjoy my home? My home is gorgeous! Are you saying that—”

“I mean I’m blind. What’s your name?”

“That’s Barnaby to you, thank you. And blind as in, you can’t see?”

“Can’t see my own two fins. At least I think I have two; I can’t really check myself. But yep: for six or seven months I’ve been blinder than a rock.”

Barnaby opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Now that he said it, Barnaby saw that the fish's eyes had a glazed and pale quality to them. Blinder than a rock. Frustrated and dumbfounded, Barnaby stormed to the other side of the tank, where tall artificial fronds walled off a large semi-circle section that he used for thinking.

As he laid behind the decorative plants, he thought about all the wrong things that had happened. *This is awful! This is horrendous! This is...abhorrent! (very nice word choice) He’s blind! Hold on, Tucker is smart, so that must mean he knew the blue fish was blind, which means he had compassion for him. So, he brought the fish home to replace me because he feels sorry for it!* He thought of the time when Tucker first took him home. He remembered the dread of getting a tiny home no bigger than his cold and dim cup, but instead he was dumped in a large tank with many plants, plastic pirate ship shelters, and clean water. The place was *his*, and he earned it after a long time of living on a shelf. *Why does Tucker want to replace me?* he wondered. *I’m a good fish, right? I eat, follow his finger, and entertain him. I can do all those things! The blind fish can’t do any of that!*

Barnaby exited the plastic bushes, and swam to the blind fish, who was neatly dilly-dallying in the corner. "Hey, you!" Barnaby snapped. "You *trespasser*. We are going to get some rules down. Unlike in plays, trespassers in real life are never the hero

of the story—I am! So, the first rule is this is your swim area—" he started setting gravel stones around the edge of the tank, just enough room for the blue fish to swim and stretch, "—I know you can't see it, but I set these stones here so you can tell where your area is. Clear?"

"You write plays?" said the blue fish. "I didn't know you wrote plays. And I don't see how that and the first rule are related."

"It doesn't matter whether they're related or not!...and yes, I do write plays."

"Could you give me an example of your playwriting?"

Barnaby was about to snap at him again, but instead straightened up proudly. "*My princess, my princess, where have you gone! I thought you loved me with your all heart up to the stars! But I turned my back to you, and you betrayed me and my people! Oh, my princess, why have you done this?*"

"You have very wonderful skills, Barnaby."

"Thank you." He gave a bow. "That monologue you heard—that was from a play titled *'Deceive'*, a tragedy about a princess who betrays her kingdom because of her thirst for power. Now, back to the rules! Rule number two! When Tucker comes, turn your back to the front aquarium face, and stay completely still. I'm the star of my home! You are...much like a side character—a civilian no one cares about. Got it?"

"How do you know so much about plays?"

"You're supposed to be focusing on the rules! I know about plays from what Tucker tells me and what I see him reading. Tucker's in a drama class."

"What does he learn in drama class?"

"He learns how to...let me give you an example. Take my fin and let me escort you over *here*...and I'll go over *here* a distance away. What Tucker learns is how to be dramatic and how to *become* the character he's playing. Is that too much for you to understand?"

"I believe I got it."

"Good. One of the first things he did was act out his character dying, which is what we're going to be doing. I'm going to stumble toward you and fall into your arms while crying some lines. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Good. Now, here we go. I'm going to be as dramatic as possible. My motivation is I am a princess and you're my true love."

"You're actually a girl and you're in love with me? Well, I guess I shouldn't assume—"

"*Figuratively*, my blind friend. I meant in the *act* I'm a princess and you're my true love. Now, three, two, one, action!" Barnaby summoned up all of his drama skills he had taught himself over the long time he had been in his aquarium. He placed his fin on his forehead and began to stumble and contort and pretend to almost faint as he made his way toward the blue fish. Barnaby groaned and clutched his stomach, crying out, "*My love! I've been bitten by the fang of a poison arrow!*" Once in fin's length of the blue fish, Barnaby did a spin-around and leaned on him. "Put your fins around me and act like you're weeping!" Barnaby ordered. "*Oh, my love, my vision is beginning to darken, and I have one more request...that you tell me once more that you love me...*"

"I love you?"

"Goodbye, my love." Barnaby's eyes closed, and he went limp. He shot up.  
"Bravo! That was a rather good performance, don't you think?"

"It was uncomfortable, but I think I understand. You're a very good actor,  
Barnaby!"

Barnaby bowed. "Thank you! I think we're quite good together! We make a wonderful team! Now, I bet I could come up with a play involving me and you, and we could act it out!..." His grin faded. "Never mind," he said. "It's getting rather late. Tucker will be here to turn off the light soon."

Barnaby swam to the fake fronds. Before making himself comfortable, he could hear the blue fish call out, "Good night, Barnaby! I had fun!" Though Barnaby had a hard time admitting it, he had fun, too.

In the middle of the night, while the water was pitch-black and the fish were sound asleep, an unusual current swept the blue fish out of his corner and into a bundle of bushes. Upon awakening the following morning, Barnaby immediately went to check on his guest. He was struck with surprise when he found he wasn't in his designated corner. Barnaby shouted, "Where are you at?!"

"Over here!" came the answer from behind some other bushes in the far corner of the tank.

Barnaby's cheeks went flaming red. "What are you doing back there?! That's a private section!" He swam to where the blind fish was, almost boiling the water around him. "Why aren't you in your spot?!"



The blue fish didn't turn. "I must've drifted here. I tried to relocate the stones again, but instead I found this pile of rocks." He gestured at the neat mound in front of him. "On top of the mound, I felt a fake plant twig that was stuck between the stones. I have been trying to figure out all night what it means, because obviously you made the pile."

Barnaby stared long and hard at the blind fish and the mound of stones. His anger was gone, and he sighed. He turned away. "Before, I thought my life was a hero drama. I found out that it's actually a tragedy. What you stumbled upon is a burial mound, something humans do when someone dies. It shows respect and...remembrance for the one that passed. You understand?"

The blue fish calmly listened. "I think I do. Who died, Barnaby?"

"Rosy," Barnaby answered. "That was her name."

He began to leave, but the blue fish said, "Tell me more. I would like to know more about Rosy."

"Rosy...well...Rosy was..." His jaw shifted. "Rosy was creamy pink—like a light pink, with pretty eyes and flowery fins. I only knew her for an hour or such. She was overcome by a painful sickness, and not long after Tucker dumped me in, he scooped Rosy out. That happened in the past, and I have not given much thought to it since then. You see, do you know what the difference is between a drama and a tragedy?"

"I don't suppose so."

"Dramas have a sad middle and a happy ending...Tragedies have a sad beginning and a sad end." He closed his eyes, and a shiny tear slid down his cheek. Even though the blue fish was blind, Barnaby didn't want him to see the tear, and he wiped it off.

Just then, Tucker entered the room.

"Is the human here? Tucker?" asked the blue fish.

"Yes. He just entered the room." Barnaby went to the front of the tank, right in the light, so Tucker could easily see him. "I'm not mad at you," Barnaby said to the blind fish. "There's a lot to you for him to love. That's what I've found out."

"What do you mean?"

"The last time he brought a new fish here, the previous one was replaced. So if he really did bring you here with the intention of replacing me, then he will swoop me up. And if that's so, then I won't resist."

Tucker went closer to the tank and bent over to get a better look at Barnaby. Barnaby thought of his plays, and how there's always that one character who gets poisoned and then cries out their final monologue. Barnaby couldn't think of any words. All he had was a sickly feeling in his heart.

Tucker grinned, and said, "Hi, Barnaby. Hi fishie." He thought for a moment. "You need a name, li'l fishie. What about...Wally? I like Wally! Wally and Barnaby." He nodded to himself, slung on his backpack, and left the room, calling as he went, "Bye fishies!"

Barnaby was stunned there for a moment. A relieving...peace...filled him.

He turned to the blue fish, who said, "I don't think your life is going to have a sad ending, Barnaby."

"No," Barnaby said. "I don't suppose so." He pondered something for a minute, something deep he couldn't describe. Then it hit him. Barnaby faced the blind fish. "I... don't think we need those rules anymore."

"That's good," Wally said.

"And Wally," Grinned Barnaby, "I think I'm going to write a new play. A friendship-drama play about two fish who become good friends. They will have hardships and complications along the way, but they will always work them out—that's the hope anyway. And in the end, they don't have everything exactly figured out nor do they know what troubles the future will bring, but they do know they're going to be friends."

Wally smiled. "That sounds like a very wonderful play, Barnaby."

The End