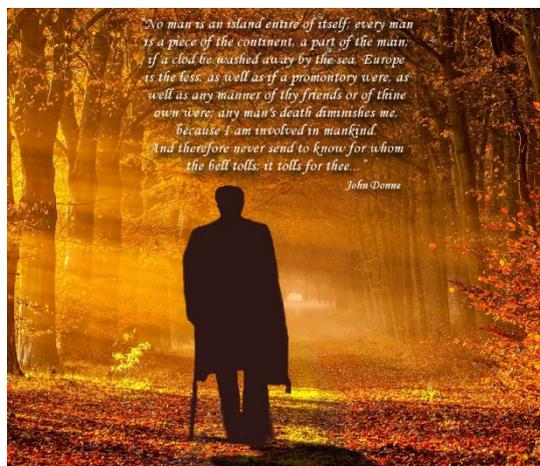


# Is This Heaven...?

By C. J. La Belle



*“When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left, and could say, ‘I used everything you gave me.’”*

*Erma Bombeck*



“Kay...?” Roy Dotrice stammered, his freshly vibrant voice rising in stunned disbelief. “Is it truly you?” The sudden need to caress the startling vision of his late wife, now standing before him, was tempered with the very real fear she would evaporate, and leave him bereft once more.

He cleared his throat, and found no unwelcome obstruction. In the last few years his speaking voice had betrayed him, becoming quavering and frail. As had the other facilities he’d once relied on so heavily for his livelihood. His ability to move freely and express himself in gestures, as he had once done without effort, had long gone.

Old age truly was an unforgiving bitch. *But, now...*

“Is this heaven...?” He blinked, rubbing a hand over his eyes. He’d hoped, and yet, not dared to dream of the possibility of ever seeing his one and only love, again.

“I wished...” He inhaled an unsteady breath, and heaved a sigh. “I don’t believe this. I have missed you so much.” His hand rose again to touch her, but the gesture remained incomplete.

“I know...” Kay smiled her understanding. “And I you, Beloved. It has been too long, since we were parted. It was never my choice, you know that. But now, those ten long years seem as if they were only a heartbeat between our last goodbye, and now a new, hello.”

Roy took a step towards her. “In those same ten years I’ve missed you with every fibre of my being. Every day, every spare moment, I thought of you. And now...” He shook his head. “I remember closing my eyes, because I felt so tired, so helpless. And then...where, exactly, are we?”

He looked around at the old-fashioned saloon he’d suddenly found himself standing in. Dark oak panelling and brown leather booths, illuminated by soft overhead lighting that concealed more than it revealed. Just like the places they’d once enjoyed, when they had been new arrivals in the States, and all things had seemed so very possible.

“Hush, my love...” Lovingly, Kay pressed two fingers to his parted lips. Her smile was as luminous as it ever was, and twice as welcome. “You are where you need to be. We are bound together, for eternity, and beyond. Remember that saying we once found. *Death is not the last thing, it is the least thing...*”

“But...how is it possible...?”

“Oh, you can be such a sweet, innocent fool...” She raised a wifely eyebrow at her bewildered husband. “Because you truly believed that we would meet again,” she breathed. “As did I. It needed no more than that, to make it so.”

She took his hand and drew him towards the bar, where she slid sideways onto a bar stool. Turning her attention towards the hovering bartender she tapped both the area in front of herself and the one at the seat next to her, indicating she’d like a drink.

Roy joined her, sitting on his own stool, before his legs gave way. “I... Well, that is... I mean... I hoped, but I wasn’t sure! Oh, Kay. Is it really, truly you?”

“It really, truly is. And we’re both going to have a shot of very expensive Napoleon brandy. Because we’re celebrating.”

“We are?” Roy asked, wondering at her radiant beauty.

His lovely wife looked like a woman roughly in her forties. Roy realized it was probably her favourite age, in life. The time when the mistakes of youth were far behind and the children were nearly grown. When they had been all things to each other, and the whole world was there to be explored.

“We very much are, my love,” she said, smiling at the bartender as their drinks arrived. Roy recognized the man. He’d been Kay’s favourite bartender in Manhattan, and he mixed up a mean daiquiri. So... he was here, too.

“To us, and to life.” Kay saluted with her glass.

“To eternal love,” Roy added, following her gesture.

“There are others here, for you to meet.” Kay sipped her drink. “Edward comes in now and then. He said he’ll be along, later. He said he wanted to give us a little time. He’s as sweet as ever, and still as in love with Michele as he ever was. But, of course... that’s the nature of this place. Love is what binds us all. We are drawn here by those threads. Like moths to a dancing flame, we are helpless to resist.”

“Edward? Edward Woodward?” Roy swallowed a mouthful of his drink. It burned a slow fire throughout his system, warming his blood and quickening his pulse. He had never felt more alive. He frowned. This was a sensation he’d also forgotten.

“I can think of no other.” Kay smiled, saluting him with her glass. “And there’s also that nice gentleman you used to work with. The big man we had drinks with, that one time, back when you were working on *Beauty and the Beast*. James.”



“James Avery?”

“That’s the one. I looked up one time, and... there he was. He just walked in. His smile can light up a whole room. He gave me a hug that like to have crushed the breath right out of me. I don’t imagine you’ll escape him.”

“This truly is an amazing place.” Roy looked around the softly lit room.

Tall stools lined up in front of a wide expanse of polished oak, and glasses gleamed from overhead racks. He felt a frisson of certain awareness that there were others here, inhabiting the shadows, but they remained unseen. He understood instinctively that the business of others was their own to pursue.

Suddenly, somewhere, there was soft music playing. 1940’s jazz, deep and soulful. Roy couldn’t remember the name of the tune, but he was sure he’d heard it before. It moved through him, plucking at his senses, and making his foot tap to the beat.

He stared down at his hands enclosing the fragility of the brandy goblet. Once again they appeared young, and unlined. The fine hairs on his lower forearms were dark and crisp. Suddenly, nothing seemed impossible, and the limits, boundless.

“Dance with me?” he said urgently, turning to Kay, even as she slid her feet to the floor and reached for him.

Roy didn’t hesitate to answer her embrace. There was nothing more important than embracing the beautiful woman in front of him, which he did with a grateful heart. If this was nothing more than a dream, he wished it would never end.

“I thought you would never ask,” Kay whispered against his cheek, as they moved effortlessly to the music.

“I can’t have Jim Avery thinking he has exclusive rights to hugging my wife.” Roy dropped a kiss into her hair, holding his love again for the first time since the day she’d parted from him.

He ignored the tears that ran down his cheeks. He had too much to be thankful for.

“There’s also another Edward here,” Kay pulled back marginally to look up at him, as they moved slowly across the floor. “Another of your *Beauty and the Beast* cast mates.” Her gaze grew misty. “He was already here when I first arrived. Almost as if he had been waiting for me. He is so incredibly generous.”

“I remember.” Roy nodded. “Edward Albert played Elliot. Catherine’s romantic interest in New York. I knew him as a giving and gifted human being. I was so sorry when he died far too young.”

“He died of a broken heart,” Kay whispered. “His father was his life. Edward has been so lovely to us. He’s like our town sheriff. He makes sure no one gets lost, or misses out on what this place has to offer.”

“Brandy and old-fashioned music...?” Roy queried, as the music died away, and a softly breathing silence stole in.

“This place is everything you could ever wish it to be, and more.” Kay moved closer, within his slackened embrace. She smoothed the tears from his cheeks with the balls of her thumbs. *“My bounty is as boundless as the sea. My love as deep; the more I give to thee, the more I have, for both are infinite.”*

Roy nuzzled the softly fragrant warmth of her neck. *“Romeo and Juliet. I see you have not forgotten your Shakespeare.”*

“You taught me too well to be able to forget any of it. Besides, Paul Robeson still does Shakespeare in the Park, when the mood takes him. And he still chuckles when he tells the story of the time you taught them all to play baseball. All those stiff upper-lipped, Englishmen. I’m sure we’ll see him later... if you’d like. Even... join in, if you’ve a mind to.”

Roy breathed in, and the smell of cognac, leather, and old times, good ones, filled his senses. So much of what he loved was here. This was a good place. A very good place.

“Will it always be like this, Kay? I am so afraid of losing you again, when I have just found you. Is there anything we can do to make it last forever?”

“We only have to believe, Beloved. That is all it takes. Simply knowing that we can never be parted, no matter what. There will be other times, and other lives to live. But that is for the future. For now, there is only this moment, and this time.”

*There’s a truth beyond knowledge*, he thought, remembering the long-ago line from the old show.

“I see...” Roy pulled her close again, resting his chin in her hair. “Whatever happens, whatever comes, know that I will always love you...” he said, recalling

another one. That line had been delivered with such heart-wrenching pathos, by Ron Perlman, not him. But it was still a good one. It said everything he was feeling, and thinking.

He remembered, *everything*. It was all so clear, now.

“Always...” Kay laid her cheek against the strong beat of his heart, and as the music began to play again, they moved slowly in complete harmony.



*“You've gotta dance like there's nobody watching,  
Love like you'll never be hurt,  
Sing like there's nobody listening,  
And live like it's heaven on earth.”*

*William W. Purkey*

