

# **Artificial Flame**

**By John DiFelice**

The wedding was in three months, and she did not love him. When it had been four months away, she had not loved him, or five months, or six. Yes, six. Six months, and she could no longer deny it. Each month that she could not bring herself to tell him was another month closer to the wedding. To tell him was to hurt him, but not to tell him was to hurt him more, to hurt him forever. She couldn't bring herself to do it because she loved him. She loved him as a person—his manner, his habits—and she found out too late that what she loved most about him was how much he loved her. She had fallen in love with the way he loved her. It was a malleable love that she could hammer into any form, and she had molded it into a shape that looked exactly like the love she had always wanted. She could have continued to live with the fabrication had she not met someone who stirred something real in her. She had tried to forget him, but could not.

She had awoken at two in the morning again, into a life that didn't feel like hers. She lay in bed until late in the afternoon, when she rose, put on her slippers, and walked into the living room. Her landlord rewarded her for being a loyal tenant by letting her paint the living room however she liked. She painted broad, alternating vertical stripes around the room, but the appeal quickly faded. Spending time in the room now caused her anxiety.

She stood before the large window facing north, out toward the Hancock Building and beyond. Somewhere in the enormous city below, her fiancé rode to her in an Uber from O'Hare. It was dusk, and the sun smeared red and orange light over the skyscrapers. It showed

in her eyes. He would arrive soon. She imagined the scenario that had played out each time he had visited. He would be so happy to see her that he would hug her around the waist, pick her up in his arms, and hold her against him. He would cup her face in his hands and kiss her cheeks, her lips; he would let her long hair slip through his fingers. After not seeing her for a month, his passion would be great. He would want to take her by the hand and lead her to bed, and she would let him, and she would die inside.

She had told no one else, not her mother or her best friend. Instead, she made herself say it to her reflection in the bathroom mirror so she could hear it aloud. She would scream it, sit on the edge of the tub, and cry.

The sun's rays grew faint and were replaced by lights in the buildings. The familiar patterns greeted her like stars—fixed, artificial flames to replace the ones she could no longer see above. She wished upon one. She saw one light in the Hancock Building night after night. She recognized it because it was one of the few visible during her insomniac wanderings around her apartment. Within that room was a person who also couldn't sleep. She wondered who that person was. She created a backstory for her that she embellished each night until it reached the level of myth. The person was a woman. She was happy and needed no one else. Her happiness was self-contained and did not rely on a man. She was sophisticated and uncompromising, sure of herself. This woman went through life without a single doubt. She never would have lied: not to him, not to her family, not to herself.

She wanted to be this other woman so badly. She wanted to be anywhere but in her apartment, waiting for the buzzer to announce her fiancé's arrival.

She buzzed him in. As she waited, she saw things more clearly than she could ever see them. It was so obvious, so simple. A child could have seen it. She saw her life as the

fantasy it was, a dream that had quietly unraveled. Their relationship had stretched out in miles instead of years. Seeing him once a month had the effect of viewing art with missing lines, and her mind had filled them in and made them whole with connections that weren't there. She imagined it all, and now her imagination had abandoned her.

She heard him at the door and opened a window to let air in. Her chest had tightened. She unlocked the door, and he entered her apartment. The wind caught the heavy door and slammed it shut, and she jumped.

He smiled at how she startled and told her he adored her. He picked her up and kissed her face. He told her how much he had missed her. Her tears fell before him. What was wrong? he asked. She laughed at the simplicity of the question.

They lay together on the bed. She squeezed him tight and cried into his chest. What is it? he asked. She was so lonely, she said. He had no idea how lonely she was. He told her everything would be OK once they were together. That was the problem. He started to talk about the honeymoon. She told him to stop. Didn't she care where they went? She said she did not. He didn't understand. He asked why. He wanted her to be honest with him. She said she was tired. He reminded her how many hours he had flown to see her. He said he knew what would take her mind off things. He kissed her, but she stopped him. What was wrong? he asked again. She stood up and paced along the bed in front of him. She looked out her bedroom window but couldn't see her light. He told her to stop walking and talk to him. He said he wanted to know what was wrong.

"I don't love you."

She said it to him finally because he made her. She averted her eyes as she said it in a voice that held the emotionality of a toaster announcing the morning bread. He asked

“why” over and over again until the word lost all meaning and collapsed into discordant tones. From there, they were canceled entirely; she could no longer hear him and could only watch the mute movement of his lips form the pucker of the “W” before widening into the contortion that completed the word, the one that conveyed their history together from first kiss to last futile plea, a mouth she had kissed so many times, but never again. Why? She told him she didn’t know.

Is there someone else? he asked. No, there’s no one else. Is there someone else? Yes, she replied.

He rose and walked to the bedroom door. She called after him, begging that they postpone the wedding. He turned toward her. No, he said. This is all quite understandable. This is all normal. Just pre-wedding jitters. She needed to come home. She needed to come to where he was, to live with him again. She needed to quit school and leave this place. That would fix things.

He left the room, and soon after, she heard the front door open and shut behind him. She dried her eyes and walked into the dark living room. She looked out the window and saw it. She saw her light shining high above the city. It was there as it had been all these nights. She wished she could trade places. She wondered if someone in that lighted room looked across the sweeping landscape of the city at the light on in hers and wished for the same thing. She wondered if there was anyone there at all.