The Delegation

It's not easy to watch a friend slip away, particularly when a man is yanking her—especially a man whose eyes lurch around his sockets in decadent, exasperated sarcasm. I only met him once, when he picked her up for a party and sat on our couch while she blow-dried her hair. I watched him while he watched his phone. He was angry with her tardiness and expressed it through the tiniest movements: rolling his eyes and shaking his head, commiserating back and forth with his internal dialogue. When they left, the apartment felt too quiet. I turned on a podcast.

She met him at the university gym. While she climbed the step stepper, he lay on the bench press with his thighs spread and shaking. I know she looked cute in her leggings and sports bra, stretched tight against her body. He must have tapped her shoulder to distract her from the Alternative Rock Dance Party. The easy smile and willingness to remove her headphones and step off the stairs encouraged him. He must have felt desire travel in tight vibrations. Soon they worked out together. The sympathetic man commented on how difficult it must be to keep her butt low in a plank because she has an ‘excellent ass.’ My friend’s flushed smile said she’d been waiting to hear those words, a smile that reappeared as she told me the story over butter noodles.

They began to date, going on outings rather than just cable movies and beer in his bedroom with the door shut. This generous man dipped into his grandmother's allowance to finance Saturday night movies with popcorn and a large Sprite. On a rainy Thursday, she fed him sushi at Yama downtown, white saucers with dribsbles of soy sauce stacked between them. I'm not sure what they discussed on these early dates. Perhaps their irritation for a particular professor or love for some new album, the kind of angst people write on library desks. But I do
know he was good about texting and checking in. After a chiropractic appointment, she showed me a text from him. "How'd it feel?" He cared intently about how her body had been touched and moved by Ms. Sarah. Once, he asked for a photo because he missed her after a long 72 hours apart. She stood in front of a dim lamp and took pictures while I sat on the couch and watched her vanity blossom, which I had not seen before to this extent but knew romance would cause. After she changed back into her pajamas, we swiped through her camera roll and selected a top ten, then a top three, and finally, the best to send.

Three weeks in, the two could not stand to be apart. After a microwaved egg and ketchup for dinner, she left the apartment most nights with a stuffed backpack, leaving her binders and graphing calculator on the kitchen counter. I assumed it contained her nightly essentials and later found out it also held a recent purchase of organic lube, a light aloe flavor. Late at night, they read side by side until they started to feel distant. To be caught up in separate and unique worlds, which reading will do for even the closest couples, unnerved them. They checked out two copies of the same book and read together, her leg sprawled atop his hip, a hand on a clavicle, another twisted in hair. They were careful to keep pace, peeking to ensure they were both on the same page.

Her dependence on his arms grew over boyfriend standards she’d talked about since 9th grade. His touch became a nightcap of whiskey to soothe or a cigarette to motivate before homework. Conversations increasingly turned toward sexual fantasies, stories, and experiences, like a compass always points north. But sex was warmth too! I knew my friend felt this way when she attempted to hug a deer wandering in the Safeway parking lot, or how she would cradle a bag of flour like a baby. Sex was yet another tender treat of life; just cuddling turned up one
notch. It took some time to question why a conversation about meeting his friends could shift to masturbation modes within 7 minutes.

But he kept her warm in a way I didn't. So, when she knocked on my bedroom door with teary eyes, wanting to talk about this man, a self-proclaimed individualist who desired polyamorous sex, I invited her in and set my book on the table but winced at the incoming hug. She got the message quickly and sat on the floor rather than on my bed. I comforted her from a mile away and entrusted her heart to this man. She returned to her dark room, brightened only by the white sheet of her phone, and texted him once more, telling herself that closure is real, that you can catch it like a fish or board it like a train.