

She lives in a penthouse on Chicago’s Gold Coast overlooking the lake. When she was a child, she had thought it was the ocean, because the water was so expansive, the sand plentiful, no end to the horizon, and because she had been a stupid child. Now, in her mid-thirties, she has a big-girl job and wears Dolce & Gabbana perfume. She goes for walks along the water and gets drinks with her girlfriends, calls people “hun,” and tips 30% at restaurants. Her penthouse is glorious, with crown molding and a private rooftop, family-owned for generations. Modular furniture, fresh bouquets of flowers, and a spotless kitchen. A kitten named Zebra, and fluffy white duvets. Apparently Oprah once lived in the building, but she doesn’t care for celebrities. Finds their smiles tacky.

In the morning, it is difficult to wake. The sun is an aggressor, the bedding too luxurious. She rolls around in lavender-scented sheets and moans out the sleepiness. She reaches for Zebra, who is never too far away, dozing among the pillows, finding it just as hard to pry open its eyes. She pulls on a robe and slippers, pads her way to the marble island. In the quiet of a sunrise, she makes espresso and a large ice water with lemon. No breakfast—she’s trying to lose weight. Uses the caffeine as a natural appetite suppressant, can last until noon without any hunger cramps. She drinks out of a delicate espresso cup that she had shipped from France. Was so frightened that it would break on the way, so now every sip is a triumph.

She cuddles with Zebra for a few minutes before getting dressed for the day. She sees this time as a necessary part of her routine, a rendez-vous with her furbaby. Snuggles her face up to its squished features, its gorgeous coat that sheds endlessly, its tiny paws and beating heart. Zebra is a Smoke British Longhair. She is five weeks old, and is fed everyday with a bottle. Left alone when her owner goes to work; has the whole place to herself, but nothing to do with it.

She has a car take her to work every morning. Her driver’s name is Yoshi, and he has never once been late or made her feel uncomfortable. He gets a nice Holiday bonus every year that he spends on presents for his children.

One night, she is still awake at 3am. This is unusual for her, a head and soul so well-worked is almost always quick to sleep. She wanders out onto the balcony, watching the soft pull of the waves. She feels the urge to walk along the beach. The air is fresh and biting; it’s a night in early fall, just before the weather gets unbearable. Outside, the streets are deserted save for a few sleeping homeless people. She avoids looking at them as she walks past. She makes it to the beach and takes off her shoes and socks, treads over hard sand to the cold, lapping water.

A few paces down the beach from her is a fat skunk, striped and thick and lumbering, leaving little prints in the sand. It’s walking away from her, making a leisurely path along the water like a soulful intellectual at the cusp of a great breakthrough. But the skunk shouldn’t be this far down by the lake. Don’t they hate water?

She follows the skunk at a safe distance, stepping in its paw prints, letting her shoes dangle from her hands. She finds it strange, and oddly beautiful, to witness a creature acting so human-like. They both decided to take a walk at the same time. For what reason? She can’t explain what made her leave the safety of her apartment, what made her walk down to the cold and wet, and what now is making her stalk a wild animal. But it feels the right sort of whimsy for 3am on a Friday, the correct sort of risk-taking for a woman of her kind.

The skunk cuts up the beach, heading straight for a trash can. She doesn’t keep following it, disappointed in this utterly predictable turn of events. She watches the thing eat trash.

She is walking back barefoot to her apartment building when she sees her car parked around the corner. Steam escaping the exhaust pipes, lights casting a red hue down the street. *It's running*, she thinks. *Why is it running?* She goes to the driver's window and peers in, sees Yoshi sleeping in the backseat. His legs curled in, his hands under his head. Not quite peaceful—there is visible tension in his limbs. She knocks on the window, waking him instantly. He pushes the door open and scampers out, bowing to her. Hair disheveled, and arms marked with the indentation of leather.

“I am so very sorry, ma'am,” he says.

“Why were you sleeping in the car, Yoshi?”

“My wife, we had an argument and she kicked me out for the night. I do not have money on me for a hotel room. It was late, I am so very sorry, ma'am.”

His eyes are puffy, his casual clothing wrinkled. She is used to seeing him in a suit. They are both barefoot on the pavement. He continues his pitiful spiel:

“I will spray perfume in the backseat, and find you a replacement driver by the morning. My friend, he is a good driver. Better than me. I am so sorry, that I have defiled your car and betrayed your trust like this.”

“It's okay,” she says. “Would you like to sleep in one of my spare bedrooms tonight?”

“Oh no, ma'am. I couldn't possibly.”

“You're not fired, Yoshi. It's okay. I accept your apology. And I doubt your friend is a better driver than you.”

She convinces him to come up with her, to take a pair of fleece pajamas and get under soft down. She lays out towels, a bathrobe, and a toothbrush for him in the adjoining bathroom, places slippers by his bedside table. He is such a petite man, everything should fit him nicely.

She goes to bed with flushed cheeks, pleased with herself. Thinks about the skunk, and what else it has gotten up to at this hour.

She wakes that morning with the first rays of the sun and feels around in the sheets for Zebra. She isn't there. Walks down the hall, looking for the tiny black-and-white kitten. The door to the spare bedroom is open. She peeks in and sees Zebra sleeping on the pillows of a perfectly made bed. Yoshi is gone. The shower is still wet.

He is waiting outside her apartment like usual. Dressed in a crisp suit, hair slicked to one side, dark sunglasses on. He nods a good morning to her, and thanks her again for last night. Nothing more is said on the matter, and they ride to work in silence. The backseat smells of lavender and incense. *His Holiday bonus will be bigger this year, she thinks. Most definitely.*

Sometimes she fantasizes about Yoshi in the safe confines of her solitude. Wonders what would have happened if he'd tip-toed down the hallway that night and woke her with breath on her ear, a whispered word that she would have pulled into an embrace. But fantasy never comes naturally to her. Her mind is chock-full of the what-ifs and the multilayered cakes of anxiety and misinterpretation, but quite lacking in imagination and spontaneity. She has never once surprised herself. In fact, she finds it pitiful to be daydreaming about her driver. The city is full of entrepreneurs, savvy businessmen, and other insufferable characters, men with Rolexes and thick credit cards and dead eyes. So what if she prefers to hone in on the soft-spoken charm of a man entirely on the fringes, holding on by his fingertips?

She goes for another walk along the beach one night, when winter is rolling onto the city like a sheet of wrapping paper. The water is ice-cold, and even the sand chills the soles of her feet. She sees the skunk on its walk, just as before. Its tottering form flops down the surf, and then it keeps going. She’s shocked, watching the skunk walk into the lake. She stands still, wondering if she should do something. The skunk starts swimming, heading into deeper water. *Am I dreaming?* She thinks. *The skunk is swimming.* The emotion she feels is beyond wonder—she is aghast, and slightly horrified. The image looks so wrong to her, this lump of an animal paddling itself out to certain death. She doesn’t do anything, just watches until the skunk is imperceptible on the horizon.

She walks back to her apartment and gets under the covers, holds Zebra close, says a little prayer. Her room is sulking and hollow, the ceiling too tall, the shadows too suspicious. *Something has surely broken tonight,* she thinks. *The skunk has swam out to sea.* She half-expects Yoshi to climb through the window, or for Zebra to start talking. But nothing extraordinary happens, and she is left saddened at the cruelty of the world. To start something so spectacular—a crack in some unsaid rule of the animal kingdom—but then fuse safely back together again, falling far beneath the waves. *Break!* She thinks. *Go on, break in two, and leave me dangling off the edge. I dare you.*

That winter the weather is horrid, her thoughts even more so. It’s a Sunday, and the Lord is nowhere to be found. She pounds on the floor-to-ceiling windows, hating the tint of the sky. Something was off in the espresso, or perhaps she is just rioting. In any case, she refuses to put Zebra down, cuddling her with a ferocity. Layering the two of them in blankets and watching the

sun fight its way to an overcast. Her mind is somber, thinking of the countless ways she could have, would have, should have.

So she decides to seduce Yoshi. It’s the only action lately that sends a chill through her bones and gets her heart going. *He will fall hopelessly for me*, she thinks, *and he will like it. No, not like, love. He will love me.*

Her plan is silly and stupid, ill-fated and reckless, destined to fail. She starts dressing outrageously for the office, all tight skirts and shapewear, higher heels and bolder lips. As if Yoshi will fall for a corporate hooker. She teeter-totters to the car each morning, the perfume still wet and dripping on her neck and inside her wrists. When she enters the car, she leans slightly forward to wish Yoshi a good morning. It appalls her to act this way, but thrills her even more. If she weren’t the COO, she’d have been reprimanded for the company dress code by now. Her work—what used to be the key motivating factor for every step she took—suddenly becomes marginal and filled with blisters. Her “Good morning’s” are shot with desperation and sickly sweetness. It is unclear whether Yoshi is uncomfortable, or if he has even noticed the change. After all, things are bad at home, and this can make even the most acute of minds wander far from the present moment.

She asks him questions about his life, and his answers are short and to the point; she interprets this as nerves, and decides to tone down her wardrobe. She does, however, begin leaning further over the front seat in the morning, seeing how far her salutations will take her.

His maddening professionalism makes her task difficult. He is so afraid of messing up or overstepping, terrified to run a red or chew gum too loudly. She’s attracted to this tension, this infuriating, invisible barrier. He seems incapable of blushing. Many days she thinks this

seduction impossible, and feels her own face flushing in shame. Other days, however, she'll get a hint of a smile or a flash of eye contact, and all systems go, target in focus, every hair in place. She comes home fresh with sweat and laughter, cracking up as soon as she steps inside the door. She lays out her outfit the night before, meticulously filling her head with the superficial chess pieces of sex and love.

When the snow melts, and the water flows once more up to the shore, Yoshi doesn't show up for work. She stands outside her apartment building, clutching her work bag and peering out at the city through oversized sunglasses. Her car is not waiting for her. Her immediate thought is about getting to work on time, but it shifts quickly to Yoshi's wellbeing, and what has happened to Yoshi, and is his family alright? She calls him, and he doesn't answer. She stomps a heeled foot on the ground and lets out a noise of displeasure. She looks amazing today, has perfected the wardrobe of a slutty working professional. Her over-drawn eyes well with the stupidity of this whole affair, that she has spent yet another morning dolling herself up for the sake of a man who has now abandoned her. She calls him again.

She ends up taking a car service to work, fuming the whole ride, clutching the hand bar around turns. Her heart angrily yearns for Yoshi. She wipes off her heavy makeup with a cotton pad. She feels overlooked, like her womanhood is a moot point. She calls him again.

Yoshi wouldn't have missed work without a serious reason. She figures that she should leave things to the police, but what fun is that? She needs her driver back.

When she returns to her apartment that day, she goes out onto the balcony. She takes a few deep breaths to stop herself from spiraling. Finding Yoshi won't be easy—it will be like

looking for a skunk in the lake. She gets the feeling that if Yoshi wanted to go away, he would make himself very hard to find. She hears a distant yelp from down below, kids running in the street. She hugs herself to stop from shivering, but can't seem to go back inside. Perhaps if she stays out, she will be Yoshi's lighthouse, a beacon of a frozen woman guiding him home.

She thinks about the skunk, and how when it swam into the lake, she was unlocked in a curious way. Suddenly stripped raw, her true feelings for Yoshi laid bare in the cold sand. A skunk-shaped key—a crack, letting her peek through to the possibilities. The skunk is her only lead, she is sure of it. Out on her balcony, the curtains billowing behind her, she asks herself, *Where do skunks go, and where has my driver gone?* As soon as the question is posed, she feels silly. But perhaps she is onto something. She goes back inside to the warmth of an electric fireplace, and snuggles with her kitten.

Her wardrobe changes with the seasons. Spring arrives with a blooming flower and open-toed shoes. No sign of Yoshi. She has a new driver who is considerably less skilled at navigating Chicago traffic than Yoshi was. She has stopped styling her hair, and people have started fearing her at work. She wears flats, and carries a Montblanc in the breast pocket of her blazer. She often seems distracted, or maybe she's just sad. She leaves her apartment windows open to the elements, and doesn't clean up after herself. Her friends see her less and less, chalk it up to stress at work. She is stringent and terse with everyone except her kitten. Zebra now weighs eight pounds, and has a coat of fur more luxurious than some people's head of hair. She buys notebooks, and fills them with scribbles only she can read. Her mother dies. The funeral is gloomy, held on a rainy day. During the drive to the cemetery, she almost gets into an accident; it was the first time she'd driven herself in a long time.



For some reason, she thinks that Yoshi’s disappearance is her fault. If she hadn’t flirted so much, or pried into his life, maybe he would have stayed. Maybe she was the final, grating reason for his take-off to wherever.

Every day, she visits a new place where Yoshi might be. She knows this is futile, as pointless as her failed seduction, but she continues. The places are small and of little note. She thinks of them late at night, just as she is falling asleep. The location will come to her like a final breath, and she will sit up and turn to the notebook at her bedside, scrawling down the name of a park or a diner. Someplace a skunk would like.

She often visits the strip of beach where she first saw the animal. She walks to the trash can near the road and sits against it, holding her breath against the bad smell. She waits until her lungs puff out, and then she runs to the waves, getting her feet wet. The water keeps her grounded, reminds her that she is not gone to the elements yet.

She visits the parking lot behind a popular diner, the bathroom at a hole-in-the-wall restaurant, a park that is nearly always deserted.

She visits an underpass by the lake, and it is while she stands in a spot smelling of piss that she decides to adjust her search criteria. Yoshi would never turn up in a place like this. He is no skunk. She shakes her head, trying to root out this estranged connection she has made.

She now focuses on places she can imagine being frequented by a gentle Japanese man. The lobby at the Drake (specifically one booth near the bar), a small movie theater that plays Fellini, a coffee shop with plush seating. But who knows? It could also be an erotic theater (if those still exist), a stationary store that smells of lemongrass, the side of a highway at dawn. She has next-to-no details to go off of, no help from his evaporated figure.

She throws out her notebook in a late-night fury, ripping up pages of random, useless places. She paces around in a silk nightgown, clenching and unclenching her soft fists. She finds Zebra curled up in the spare room, and this fills her with rage. How dare her kitten find rest in the former bedroom of Yoshi? How dare Zebra close her eyes against this horrid, obvious wrong?

Perhaps she is still grieving her parents, both gone too soon. They had gotten used to a luxurious life, and had stopped moving after a certain point. Once you are rich enough, money moves everything for you. Of course, “wealth” was not the official cause of death. But when you can build industry from inside a home office, have masseuses come to you, and have chefs cook three-course dinners every day, your body becomes a vessel for diamonds, a rack for designer, and a throat for truffle. There is no longer anyone to impress—because the money is your first and last impression—so you don’t work out, go out, or look in the mirror. Her parents had each other until they didn’t, her father dead of a sudden heart attack. *What did he have to stress about?* Her mother had wondered aloud at the funeral. *He had everything he needed, or could have wanted.* She didn’t say it to her mother at the time, but that is precisely what killed her father. His heart beat with excess.

So perhaps this grief is translating into misdirected fury, a clawing to bring her devolved driver back. But she would never admit this. She would more likely divert to the gross injustice of her one true love being wiped away like a makeup smear—and if you inquired whether she really loved him, or was he maybe just a distraction from the banality of her life, she would move to strike you with a limp hand.

In any case, her warped grief lasts for a while. She’s grumpy, short-fused. She curses at her new driver when he hits a pothole, and walks with a grudge. She misses her parents, misses their idiotic logic to life. She wishes she could call them up, ask how they were so content. Zebra is her only comfort. The kitten walks around the large apartment with muted paws, stepping from the walk-in closet to the pantry to the heated drying rack in the bathroom. Zebra is prone to zoomies lately, zipping down the endless hallways with a crazed energy, causing her owner to moan and throw pillows across the room.

One night in late spring, she airs out her woes and goes for a walk. It has been a while since she’s stepped onto this patch of sand, feet pale and stance unsure. She is sad—apparently another stage of grief—but it’s twinged with an odd reclusiveness of power. Slowly, calmly, her confidence is crawling back to her. All those days and nights spent running around the city fill her with embarrassment. But standing on an empty surf under the stars, now this is true authenticity. Not chasing someone who will never be caught, probing for sympathy or empathy or praise and getting a blink in return, not sitting alone and hibernating while the trees bloom, but rather standing and taking up space, calling friends just to say hello, moving on and moving up in her career. She stares out across the water, and she can once more imagine it being the ocean.

Something has washed up on the beach. She sees it from a ways away, and starts walking. When she realizes what it is, she runs, kicking up sand. She falls beside Yoshi’s body, full of exhaustion and relief. He has come back to her. His skin is somewhat decomposed, but Yoshi is still recognizable, still wearing his suit. She knows she shouldn’t touch him, but feels an urge to stroke his blue face, tell him he was the most loveliest, and apologize for her behavior. She lies by his side, even as the sand coats her body, even as the moon acts like a second sun, shining an

unsettling glint into Yoshi’s eyes. She thinks about calling the police or Yoshi’s wife—but doesn’t right away. He has washed up just for her, and to ruin this moment would be a disservice to his efforts.

She still lives in a penthouse on the Gold Coast overlooking the lake. When she was a child, she used to run into the water at full-speed, lungs burning and arms pumping. She’d splash into the lake and jump over the little waves. Her one-piece swimsuit had watermelons on it. Now, she can’t look at the water without seeing it hugging Yoshi’s body, ebbing and flowing him into her arms. She can’t walk along the beach anymore; people laughing and frying in the sun make her feel ill. She often thinks about moving, getting away from the heinous view from her balcony. Maybe people aren’t meant to live in penthouses for all their lives. It’s not sustainable, or healthy. There comes a time when people should change up their surroundings, try something new. Or perhaps—just maybe—her lifestyle is more bearable at night, when, on the beach, skunks still lumber and swim, and drivers still have a glint in their eyes.