



**A Tiny Speck of Black and then Nothing**  
(extract)

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*Anna has gone over to Apartment 603 to meet the elusive Loll, a Western nightclub hostess who works in the entertainment district of Ōsaka. But when Anna arrives at Loll's home, she finds she isn't there. Her flatmate Rob tells Anna to make herself comfortable and then promptly disappears to his bedroom.*

Twenty minutes past two now. Along the corridor, Rob stayed silent. The only sounds came from outside: hip hop sifting from the flat below, clunking of pipes in the vaults of the building, the occasional screech of cars. I'd begun considering setting off for home again when I caught the whoosh of the lift between the block's floors. High heels clacked along the landing. They stopped at the door of the flat.

Something falling to the floor. The rattle of objects tumbling inside a bag. The doorbell gave a buzz. 'Rob!' a voice called.

'It's OK. I'll get it.' I slid across the lounge, just as the security system crackled into action.

On the mini C.C.T.V. screen by the door, Loll's black-and-white image appeared: wide-rimmed sunglasses on her eyes, mouth half open in an almost-smile, drapes of blonde hair around her shoulders. Even under the camera's colourless glare, I could see she'd stained her lips scarlet.

I undid the latch. She looked me up and down as she came in, flicking off her stilettos with kicks, making herself considerably shorter. Her platinum hair came away with a single grasp. Laying it on the table, she ruffled the razor-slashed locks that remained. Dark brown, almost black.

She asked, 'You're Anna?'

I nodded. 'Hi,' holding out my hand.

But she just stood there, taking in my appearance. I imagined her eyes, very still, behind her dark glasses and it occurred to me that I'd been staring at her with the same

attention just moments earlier. But that was at her image on the security screen, before she came into the flat.

Loll took a step towards me. By then I'd dropped my hand. Grabbing my shoulders, she tipped herself forwards, skimming my cheek with hers. The plastic edge of her shades knocked the side of my nose. Her body felt angular against mine.

'I have to wear that wig for work,' she explained. 'Mama-san's orders. She thinks men only like long hair. I'm glad to get it off; it itches.' Opening the small, red suitcase she'd deposited on the floor, she placed her blonde locks around a stand inside it. I spotted waves of sheer stockings, padded bras and silk scarves. 'I have to cart this lot about with me at weekends,' she said, 'just on the off-chance I'm asked to go away.' Then, tugging me into the kitchen, she suggested a drink. Pulling open the door of her cocktail cupboard, she asked, 'Does a Sake Martini sound all right?'

I watched her pouring gin and sake over ice, stirring the liquid until it chilled. Loll's nails didn't look like her own – long and perfect-shaped, encrusted with jewels, but with bitten skin around the edges.

'I'm sorry I'm late,' she said. 'I got held up on my way home. I haven't really had much sleep.'

'Oh, do you want me to leave you to rest?'

'No, no.' She adjusted her dark glasses.

I wondered, although I didn't like to ask, why she felt the need to wear them.