

Luce

by Peter Wood

Luce shrugs into the corner of the train's seat. She envelopes her iPod in both hands like she's praying or holding a conch shell safe and secure from the elements, like the one she found as a kid at a Morcombe beach in the holidays. The only giveaway's the white headphone cord.

Paulo Nutini serenades her. He's telling her and her alone that there's always troubles ahead, but he'll always be there, that they're get-through-able.

The carriage shudders then re-starts.

Her expression turns from pensive to calm again. The trick is always to keep moving. Isn't that right, Luce?

Her deep-crumpled posture on the seat seems to open a touch. Still, still, what? Guarded? Maybe. But nothing's going to happen. Nothing bad at any rate.

Not while Nutini sings.

The only major event will be the spooling and shifting scenery: from cityscape to vacant down-town outhouses and lockups melding into rolling translucent green countryside. Just a change of scene. That's all this is.

She closes her eyes. Awake but dream-tired.

Luce's coat swamps her. If she lowers her head she'll be near invisible. Like a jacket at one of those parties where everyone dumps the coats in a pile on a bed. Her eyes are hollow black marks, cheekbones pinched out, skin white as blotting paper.

Her hair, black and long looks frail as dried egg-shell, a sprinkle of dandruff. She's just a student that's been burnt the candle at both ends too many nights in a row, maybe up all night on energy drinks to finish an essay or thesis. Or maybe a Goth or a computer geek that needs a little more daylight on the skin. That's how she looks.

And that's how it will stay. Isn't it, Luce?

That won't change. Will it?

If you look close, her hands shake. Not major-obvious but it's there.

On the pull-down tray-table is a half-read book, *The Outsider* by Camus, her ticket, and a chain-store cup of coffee that claims eco-credentials, but everyone knows how self-serving that all is.

Everything is organised for Luce's efficiency; ticket a quick-curling hand-swipe from tray-table to conductor's hand in a single movement. Coffee in the far corner so some effort is required. The book, well, the book bores the shit out of her, but Luce likes the title and anyway, it gives the right look.

The most important things are in her jacket pocket and in her hands: iPod and a small leather zip-bag that contains a lethal-looking syringe with two inch changeable needles.

If she loses those remnants of life it will collapse and crumble. More than it has already.

But right now, right here, nestling between the headphones and enveloped in Nutini's voice she will survive. For now.

