

Freedom of Movement

The recumbent bicycle mounted on the wall of the museum's fifth floor is not behind glass. Neither for that matter am I, though I'm not at liberty. From here I see the newfangled thing out of the corner of my eye: Charles Mochet's Velo-Velocar invented Paris, 1932. Obviously I don't turn my head but I hear things, see things, I, Bodhisattva Weituo, protector. Palms pressed together, high on my plinth, I look down through the central atrium to the balcony of the floor below, where the café is. I watch over the comings and goings, listen in on conversations. People talk about the exhibits less than you might think, but now and again they do. I like it best when they talk about the Velo-Velocar. A wonderful machine. Useful.

According to the sign attached to my plinth, bodhisattvas are beings who have chosen compassionately to remain on this earth, guiding others toward enlightenment. Which is about as easy as it sounds. I watch from up here as people reach unwisely for each other's hands across the café's tables, or utter quiet words that land like fists. I watch as keys are lost amongst the clutter of discarded cups and napkins, as food is left unfinished. Unappreciated. This morning I saw a young woman answer her phone, listen for a moment then flee, leaving half a slice of lemon drizzle cake uneaten on her plate. She didn't even finish the icing.

I see it all. I can't help.

I'm tired.

Every morning the baker arrives at six. I don't remember now why I first noticed her, how she came to stand out from the rest. But she does. She did. She has a way of crossing the floor first thing, not fast but purposeful, taking her coat off as she goes. Just before opening time she reappears with flour on her apron and dots of pink on her cheeks, to arrange cakes and biscuits in rows behind the counter. Sometimes she exchanges a word or two with one of the café staff. I like it when she does this. I like to see her laugh.

She has a lover.

A lover.

Even the word sets something vibrating in my bowels, my spine a plucked string. The lover is an ordinary-looking Polish man who works Wednesday to Sunday in the café. Sometimes they manage to synchronise their breaks. Then they stand together with their hands on the railing, looking down into the atrium – that great emptiness – her lately saying you can't leave and him saying, perhaps I must. Her saying you've been here years they can't make you and him saying, yes, they can. Her saying where would you even go, both your parents dead, no house to live in, no work there, him giving that shrug not angry only bewildered.

I see it all. I can't help.

Truth is I've had enough. I've been here since lunch time, wondering what to do, hands pressed together and the usual smile playing round my lips. Now the museum is closed. I watch the security guard make his final round and listen for the click of the side door as he leaves, then I blink, wiggle my fingers, and slowly climb down off my plinth. Everything about me aches. I'm so stiff I almost topple over as I go along the balcony past typewriters and other engines, past a giant thermometer, past collections of shells, corals and sponges. My arms feel funny, hanging by my sides. I let them swing. The movement seems extravagant, like showing off, though there's no one here to see.

And here's the Velo-Velocar, high on the wall. It doesn't look comfortable, hard leather seat and wheels made of wood, no give in them, but that's just part of the fun. Luckily I'm tall: so tall, in fact, that back in China they built a special kiln to fire me in. I lift the thing down easily under one arm, hoik up my robes and step on.

In my day it was horses, which stay upright on their own, so I'm not used to this careening from side to side. Wobbling all over the place I narrowly miss a glass case full of transit theodolites as I swing round the end of the gallery and start back up the other side. Exhibits flash past: Asklepios, Greek god of medicine; Clarity; Hercules; a citizen of Oxyrhynchus in his toga; John Logie Baird; Vishnu; a Heavenly Beauty (nameless); various Buddhas. I'm getting the hang of it now, skidding past the toothy big cat skeletons at the far end and back towards my starting place.

There's an ancient wooden door going nowhere, rare crystals from the slopes of Vesuvius, and an empty plinth: mine.

I keep going, faster and faster. Typewriters again. Shells.

Transit. Clarity. Beauty. Skeleton. Door.

Circumambulating really. Or whatever you call circumambulating when you do it on a bicycle.

The world expands. Centuries blur. Air rushes past my face.

I could do anything. Go anywhere.

The baker arrives at six. Brings the cold morning with her, in her clothes and hair.

Buses rumble past. Shoes tap. She crosses the floor, taking off her coat.

My palms are pressed together. Usual smile. Calf muscles a pleasant ache.

Just before opening time, she's back. Apron. Flour.

Lover. He's here early. They stand together looking into nothing: the atrium.

Her saying don't leave. Him saying, I must.

You'd have to call it love. They go on, round and round. There isn't any answer, or if there is they haven't found it.

I, Bodhisattva Weituo, protector, watch from my plinth. The café's empty tables are before me, the Velo-Velocar returned to the corner of my eye.

I see it all.

I can't help.

Far below, on the ground floor, the museum's doors open. Unenlightened beings pour in from the sunlit street, shining.