

velocity

no brakes, no excuses...

project synopsis:

Fleur is a wounded, guarded young loner. Returning to the city for a wedding, she stays and becomes a bicycle courier. She's attracted to an extraordinarily talented fellow courier, O'Hare, but trapped in unresolved grief for her dead brother Troy.

Through the risks of the underground 'alleycat' racing scene, a mysterious street artist and the love of her newfound friends, Fleur comes face to face with death and learns to live again. Changed, she changes her world.

Velocity is a new kind of racing story about friendship, freedom and mortality. It's a celebration of difference and pluralism. It shows a group of people who work, play, live and love on two wheels, not simply to earn a living, but to rise above the mundane and enter a higher, mystical realm. It's about the windows into that place – speed, art and dreams.

When we meet Fleur, she isn't even planning to become a bike courier. She's a freelance photographer who rides a motorbike; a young woman who's cultivated a tough exterior to protect herself from the world. After years away, she comes back to the city for the wedding of her older friend and de-facto big sister Ula, who's getting married to a fellow bike courier called Mook. The wedding, on top of a condemned multi-storey car park, gives Fleur her first glimpse into the strange and magical secret world of the couriers.

Afterwards, Fleur encounters her estranged, crippled father Charlie, at his bike-oriented pub the Yellow Jersey. A silver-painted Angel busker seems to be watching over her. She's attracted to O'Hare, an amazing rider who defeats her in an impromptu street race (Fleur's engine is no advantage), but the city is full of painful memories of her beloved elder brother, Troy, an Olympian cyclist, who died in a hit and run accident fifteen years before.

On her way out of town, Fleur tries to find Troy's grave, but can't. She dreams of herself as a child, on training wheels, with Troy riding ahead – she can't catch him. Fleur wakes in the cemetery. Before she can leave the city, her motorbike and camera are stolen. She's lost everything, but the police are useless. Fleur walks through the city until she finds the courier company where Ula works. It's a place called Bat Out of Hell, a ragtag operation on the wrong side of the tracks.

2.

The boss and dispatcher of Bat Out of Hell is the wheelchair-bound but very feisty Aunt Vera, who rules by a simple mantra: 'No Excuses'. Aunt V offers Fleur the damaged bike and room of a courier called Chook, who appears to have met a sticky end. If Fleur wants to stay, even for a couple of days, she has to work. Fleur decides to accept this offer when she realises the delectable, always-smiling O'Hare is another of Aunt V's employees.

Aunt Vera sends Fleur to meet the wizard-like mechanic (and SP bike race bookie) Dr Spoke and his eccentric assistant Mr Universe. Spoke repairs Fleur's French bike 'Fayette', a stripped-down brakeless velodrome bike with one gear and no freewheel. Very reluctantly, he adds a brake. Ready or not, Fleur is thrown on to the battleground of the streets.

Fleur's fellow couriers attempt to teach her what she needs to survive. For Mook, every day is an exciting gamble. For Ula, now pregnant, and carrying the hope for the future, life is a political struggle between cars and people. (In her own way, Ula is also grieving for Troy – her first boyfriend.) For the Zen-like O'Hare, who rides with no brakes and speaks in actions more often than words, life on two wheels is about existing on a different, almost supernatural plane.

Telling herself this is only temporary, Fleur plans to make enough money as a bike courier to pay back Aunt Vera and leave the city. Subconsciously, Fleur is driven by a deeper quest, to complete the stalled grieving process associated with her brother Troy's death, which happened when she was six. The initial shock of that accident, her father's decision not to let her attend the funeral, and their subsequent estrangement (when Fleur couldn't live up to her brother's achievements) have all conspired to freeze Fleur emotionally. After all these years, she's still unable to cry.

For Fleur, all that remains of Troy, apart from dreams and visions, is his silver cycling medal from the Seoul Olympics, which he entrusted to her before his death. When the precious medal is almost stolen, Fleur takes it to her father Charlie for safe-keeping, but Charlie loses it to a loan shark. (Secretly, he has a major gambling problem.)

Fleur battles to recover her talisman through her work as a courier and then through illegal, high stakes 'alleycat' bike races. These dangerous, theatrical events take place through the streets of the city, usually at night. The challenges come not just from the other competitors, who ride all sorts of strange pedal-powered machines, but from the police and unwary traffic.

For Fleur, the endless movement of the bike courier world is punctuated by moments of stillness, particularly when she encounters the frozen, silver-painted Angel busker and enigmatic pieces of street art. As she comes to believe Troy is somehow still alive, and watching over her in the guise of the Angel, the colourful chalk and pastel street art seems to become directed at her personally.

Ula and the other couriers cover for her mistakes as Fleur becomes increasingly self-absorbed. Worried about her, Ula attempts to get Fleur involved with the anarchic cycling movement Critical Mass, but she seems more interested in her quest for the silver medal. Ula urges her to live for the living. Reluctantly, Fleur joins Ula and Mook at a Critical Mass gathering, but no one else shows up, and the ride is a fiasco. Ula and Fleur argue, and part on bad terms.

One day, in traffic, after an exhausting day, Fleur believes she sees the car and driver who killed her brother. In an explosion of violence, she drags the driver out of the car and is about to beat him to a pulp when the Angel intervenes. Fleur rides away before she can be identified. The driver, Culley, refuses to press charges or have his attacker pursued, but a detective, Lint, won't drop the case.

Anger towards her father and inspiration from O'Hare – both romantic and metaphysical – pushes Fleur to bet everything she has on herself in the biggest alleycat race of the year. It's held at the time of the Melbourne Cup, when the streets are quiet. Following O'Hare's advice, Fleur takes the brake from her bike. Near the end of a rough and tumble race, in which the police are also involved, O'Hare rides with Fleur through an apparently suicidal red light intersection. On the other side, she enters a new state of existence.

The finish line of the alleycat is in the cemetery, but Fleur forgets the race when the Angel leads her to Troy's grave. At last, she's able to accept that he's dead, and cries. Tears turn to anger as her passion to recover the medal is redoubled – now it's her only tangible link with Troy. Using her U-lock, she steals his silver medal from the loan shark's shop. Police pursue her to sea cliffs, where she throws the medal into the ocean rather than return it.

At the police station, Lint puts two and two together and urges Fleur to give evidence against Culley. Despite the danger of incriminating herself in the recent attack, she agrees, and is bailed out by Aunty V and O'Hare. Fleur discovers Ula has miscarried, and fallen into a suicidal depression. Horrified at her own selfishness, she rushes to the hospital, but the Ula she remembers isn't there any more. Somehow, Fleur has to help her friend recover her spirit.

She returns home, utterly exhausted, to find a pickup job waiting. Aunty Vera reminds Fleur of the golden rule: 'no excuses'. She has a choice – leave forever, and wipe her debt, or stay and take the job. Fleur takes the job. When she gets there, the address doesn't seem to exist. In a deserted part of town, with cavernous skyscrapers and a lonely wind, Fleur fumbles and breaks her radio. Worried about her, Aunty V sends O'Hare after her.

Lost, Fleur comes across a painted yellow brick road. In the distance she hears children's voices. With some trepidation, Fleur follows the 'road' to a concrete square. It's illustrated with a spectacular giant floriade of chalk and pastel. O'Hare finds her there. They dance and whirl through the virtual flowers. The colourful spectacle gives Fleur a wonderful idea.

Fleur arranges for Mook to bring Ula to an intersection for a surprise; thousands of body-painted riders turn out for the biggest Critical Mass celebration ever, completely taking over the streets. Fleur and O'Hare are in the centre of it all. For once, the car-mad metropolis is a bicycle city. Ula is elated. Joining the procession, Mook carries her on his cargo bike.

Fleur encounters the silver Angel among the camouflage of the painted cavalcade. Up close, he looks like Troy, frozen at nineteen. In an echo of what happened fifteen years earlier, he gives her back the silver medal, still wet from the sea. They say goodbye for the last time.

At the ocean, everyone leaves their bikes and runs into the water, playing like children as the paint washes away. Fleur and O'Hare kiss in the waves.