



Life at the Precipice

R. F. Vincent

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A wounded man ingratiates himself to a community on the edge in the mythical novel Life at the Precipice.

In R. F. Vincent's humane novel *Life at the Precipice*, a navigator investigates a decimated Canadian hamlet.

On the heels of a failed military mission, Travis is in "The Segway," whose tragedies he hopes to understand. The town was left almost abandoned following an earthquake and subsequent lake level changes. Curious because of rumors about the town, including regarding a lake monster, Travis interviews the quirky residents who remain there, some of whom are said to have discovered the Segway by way of a news-carrying red balloon.

Illustrations illuminate the setting, including of a spider apartment complex, a book house, and a tree dwelling. The Segway seems to be an absurd, high-unknowable place, even as Travis makes note of its geothermal phenomena and water creatures.

The narrative is abstract, moving between Travis's prospective research study and his musing perspective. Travis's research moves apace with the Segway's way of life, wherein the setting plays an important role. Its location is obscured; what is known of it is peculiar and limited, if concrete. The lake changes; earthquakes are a danger. These qualities are treated as unexplainable. Indeed, the Segway is a liminal space, on the edge—something Travis appreciates as he wonders whether not knowing is an acceptable state.

Travis's investigation takes him in differing directions—sometimes pushing him off-track. He claims to be investigating the Segway for scientific posterity, but it's clear that he is driven by more personal motivations. Still, he puts these desires aside as he interviews the townspeople. He comes to understand that these residents' challenges mirror his own; he is an empathetic guide.

In the Segway, people wear their uniqueness on their sleeves. Their dwellings, clothing, mannerisms, and speech patterns announce who they are. They are an entertaining group, and it's easy to see how they distract Travis from his ultimate point. Travis develops affection for them, and he speaks to them with genuine interest and concern. His transcription of their words is patient; their company becomes a safe space from which Travis can explore his unorthodox ideas.

But the Segway's residents are also evasive—as Travis is with them. They establish boundaries that Travis respects. He gets to know his neighbors at a slow pace, without prying. And then, when an object from Travis's past appears in the Segway museum, it forces a turning point. Travis is prompted to tell his own secret; the revelation of his true connection to the Segway is redeeming.

In the whimsical novel *Life at the Precipice*, a grieving man makes a record of a town's liminality.

MARI CARLSON (July 5, 2023)

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