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The People on the Precipice
by Ian Watson
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First published in Interzone Autumn 1985

Fictionwise Contemporary
Science Fiction
Year's Best SF Pick; Interzone Reader's Poll Winner

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One evening Smear climbed down to our ledge and told us a story about people who lived in a two-dimensional world.

He had made the story up, of course. To amuse and enlighten. (This could have been Smear's motto.)

"Just suppose," he said, as the daylight dimmed, "that a whole world is as flat as a leaf! And suppose that creatures live within that leaf, who themselves are perfectly flat. Imagine that this narrow ledge here simply carries on" -- he chopped his hand out into empty space -- "in that direction forever! Imagine that it is a simple, infinite surface with nothing above it and nothing below it. And with no precipice to jut out from."

Bounce giggled at this idea so much that she almost fell out of her bower of vine-rope.

Tumbler, our chief -- who had no sense of humour -- said, "Preposterous! What would hold your ledge up? How would we ever get over the lip, to harvest sweet fungi below?"

"I'm asking you to imagine a different kind of world. A plane -- with no 'below' or 'above'. With no 'up' or 'down'. The inhabitants are flat, too."

"But how can they grip anything? They'll all slide away, and slide forever."

"No they won't. You see, they don't live upon the flat surface. They're part of the surface."

"You'll do me an injury!" squealed Bounce.

"So how do they make love?" enquired Fallen. "How can they squeeze on to one another?"

"Aha," and Smear winked at her, "now you're asking."

"Tell us!" cried Bounce.

But Tumbler interrupted. "I hear that young Clingfast from three ledges down fell off yesterday. That was his mother's fault for giving him such an unlucky name. 'Bounce' is a risky name, too, in my opinion."

This remark annoyed Bounce. "Just you try to invade my bower, Tumbler, and you'll get bounced -- right off the cliff. That'll teach you what my name's all about."

"Can I please tell my story?" asked Smear.

And so he did.

He regaled us with the hilarious adventures of Ma and Pa Flat in their flatworld; and what preposterous antics those were, to be sure! Still, his story seemed to have a couple of sly morals buried in it. Compared with the imaginary flat-people we were fortunate indeed -- being gifted with all sorts

of mobility denied to Ma and Pa Flat. In other words, things might be a lot worse. But also, Ma and Pa at least tried to make the very best of a bad job -- did we always do likewise?

By the time Smear finished it was black dark, and we had long since tightened our tethers for the night. Obviously Smear would be spending the time of darkness on our ledge.

Soon after, I heard suspicious scraping sounds, suggesting that Smear was recklessly edging his way along to reach Bounce's bower. (He had positioned himself close to her.) Subsequent smothered giggles and gasps indicated that he had succeeded: a surmise proven true in the morning when light brightened and we saw Bounce and Smear clinging together asleep in her harness of vines.

Smear quickly roused himself and departed upward, his horny toes in all the proper cracks, his left hand holding a guidevine, his right hand reaching up in approved style for well-remembered, reliable holds. You could never wholly trust guidevines with your total weight. They might snap or rip their roots free. Then you would be taking the long trip down through empty air.

* * * *

We breakfasted on the leftovers from yesterday's harvest of berries and lichen, rockworms and beetles.

The pearly void was bright; the day was warm. Below, the precipice descended forever. Above, it rose forever. To left and right, it stretched out unendingly. Occasionally, thin silver water-licks oozed from the rock, dribbling down till the droplets bounced into space. Here and there were still some surviving pastures of moss and fungus and fleshier plants; though by now our appetites had stripped most decent rock-fields bare, adding to the area of naturally occurring barrens. Soon we would all have to migrate -- just as we had already migrated at least a hundred times since I was born. A planning conference was slated for today high up on Badbelay's ledge. Tumbler as our chief would attend.

As our tribe clung to the rockface considering which way to forage, a scream from above made us tighten our holds. We tried to flatten ourselves completely -- just like Smear's mythical beings. A young lad plunged past, an arm's length away. I could have reached out to touch him, if I was foolish enough.

"Butterfingers!" shrieked Fallen in sympathy. The lad probably never heard her.

The falling body diminished until it was a mere speck deep below.

Bounce surprised us by saying, "Next time we migrate we ought to head upwards and keep on migrating upwards for a whole lifetime, to see what happens."

"That'll be one of friend Smear's fancy ideas, I suppose?" Tumbler spat contemptuously into space. "What a strain that would be, and what peril, compared with migrating sideways. My dear Bounce, it's all very well to climb up a few ledges, and down a few ledges. Indeed this keeps all our muscles in trim. But to climb one way only? Faugh! Do you imagine our grandchildren would reach a top? Or a bottom, suppose we migrated downwards? And what would be at this imaginary bottom? Bones and rubbish and shit, floating in foul water, I shouldn't be surprised!"

"I didn't mention any bottom."

"And what would be at this top of yours? Not that it exists! I'll tell you: a place where our muscles would weaken through disuse so that we could no longer harvest the precipice. We'd starve within a generation. Our present way of life is perfect."

"Clinging on by your fingertips all life long is perfect?" she retorted. "There might be a huge flat space up at the top -- with oodles of really big plants all over, because they wouldn't have to worry about their weight ripping them away."

"What's wrong with hanging on by one's fingertips, pray?"

"A certain tendency to fall," she said. "Especially when you get old

and sick and mad and exhausted."

I spoke up, since something had been worrying me for a while. "When we migrated here, it seemed to me that this particular patch of precipice hereabouts was ... well, strangely familiar. When we arrived I felt as if I'd been here before -- when I was only a child. All the cracks and finger-grips were somehow known to me."

"That," said Tumbler, "is purely because of the expertise you develop at clinging on after twenty or thirty years."

"So why do experienced adults ever fall off?"

"They get tired and ill and crazy," said Bounce. "Everyone does, in the end, after a lifetime of clinging on."

"We always migrate leftward," I pointed out.

"Obviously! Who on earth would migrate back to a patch which had been stripped the time before?"

"What if," I asked, "the sum total of our migrations has brought us back to the very same place where we were years ago? What if our precipice isn't a straight wall but a vast ... um..."

"A vast cylinder," said Bounce.

Tumbler pointed impatiently to the right where the view was more barren. "Look: if that isn't straight -- !"

"Maybe it only seems straight," said Splatty unexpectedly, "because it's so enormous. Maybe it bends ever so slightly? We can't actually see the bend, but after tens of years of travel ... If so, what's the sense in migrating?"

"To find food, slippery-thumb! To survive! Suppose we do come back to the same patch eventually -- so what? The pastures have fleshed out again."

"It's hardly progress," said Bounce.

"Progress? Cylinders? Bends? Have you people gone nuts? Are you planning to let go and dive into the abyss? This is all Smear's fault. Listen: we hang on by the skin of our teeth. We make daily forays up and down for food. When we've scalped a patch we migrate sideways. That's life."

Even Topple joined in. "It's life. That's true. But is it living?"

"Damn it, it's as good a life as any! In fact I can't imagine any other. How about you?"

Topple shook his head. "I've been clinging on for a lifetime. What else do I know?"

"And you'll die clinging on. Or rather, you'll die pretty soon after you stop clinging on. Now, today I'm climbing up to the Chief-of-Chiefs for that conference. Bounce will guard our ledge and keep the kids tied up. Loosepiton" -- that's me -- "will escort me upwards."

"Why me, Boss?"

"Perhaps you would like to plead your notion that we're climbing round in a circle. That ought to raise some laughs." (Aye, and likely damage Smear's advocacy of migrating upwards....)

"The rest of you will forage. Splatty and Fallen and Plunge can head far to the left, and chart the distant cracks while they're about it. Slip and Flop can forage to the right for what's left of the familiar pickings. Gather well, my tribe! We need to store some supplies in case we have to cross wide barrens." To me he said, "Come on, Loosepiton. Best foot upwards!"

And he began to ascend the sheer precipice, toehold by toehold.

"On what wide surface shall we store our huge harvest, oh Chief?" Bounce called after him. He ignored her.

* * * *

When Tumbler and I paused on Smear's Ledge for a quick rest we learned that Smear had already preceded us upwards. Apparently Smear had done a lot of shinning about, visiting other ledges and telling merry stories, recently.

"He's campaigning to change our lives," I remarked to Tumbler.

However, our chief seemed more annoyed with Bounce. "That woman's a fool," he grouched. "A vertical cliff puts constraints on the amount we can store. Of course it does. That stands to reason. So this limits the amount we

can sensibly harvest. Consider the alternative! If we could tear up everything and pile it all on some vast ledge we'd exhaust our resources much more rapidly. What's more, we'd overeat. We'd grow fat and clumsy and far too heavy to haul ourselves up and down."

We climbed onward together.

Another body fell past us; a woman's. She held her arms wide out on either side of her, as down she flew.

"Diver," puffed Tumbler. "Deliberate dive."

"Dive of despair."

"What's there to be desperate about, eh Loosepiton? Beautiful weather today. Soft breezes. No slippery stone." He plucked a crimson rock-worm loose with a "plop" and popped it into his mouth.

Not long after, some excrement hit him on the shoulder. Excrement usually falls well clear of the wall but some freak contour must have directed otherwise. Without comment Tumbler wiped himself clean on a nearby danglevine.

We passed six more ledges, rested and ate a meal courtesy of the tribe clinging to the seventh, then climbed past fifteen more. We reached Chief-of-Chiefs Badbelay's ledge in the early afternoon.

The ledge was already crowded with a line of chiefs -- and in the middle Smear was chanting out another of his stories about bizarre worlds. In this case: about people with suckers like a gripworm's on their feet who lived on a huge ball afloat in a void. Smear was leaning quite far back to call his words past the intervening bodies.

"Shit in your eye," Tumbler greeted him grumpily as we two forced a space for ourselves on the ledge.

"Aha," responded Smear, "but up here, where would that crap fall from? Either another tribe of tribes clings immeasurably high above us -- or else not. If not, why not? Why do no strangers ever fall from above? Because no strangers live higher up! Yet if our precipice extends upwards infinitely, surely other people must dwell somewhere higher up. Ergo -- "

"Unless those other people have migrated further along than us!" broke in Tumbler. "Unless they're further to the left -- or to the right, for that matter."

"The reason," Smear continued suavely, "is that our precipice isn't infinitely high. It has a top."

"The real reason," growled Badbelay, "may simply be that we are the only people. All that exists is the precipice, and us."

"Maybe we're the only people on the precipice itself. But maybe hundreds of tribes live on top -- and every now and then they gaze down and have a good laugh at us."

"Why should anyone laugh at us? Are we not courageous and ingenious, persevering and efficient, compassionate and clever?"

"Undoubtedly," Smear replied, "but perhaps if we were fools, liars, cheats, thieves, and slovens we would have slid down to the bottom years ago instead of trying to cling on here; and we would have been living in rich pastures."

"So now it's the bottom that's our goal, is it?" challenged Tumbler. "Kindly make your mind up!"

"I spoke by way of illustration. Obviously, with all our fine qualities, it is ever upward that we ought to aspire. We may reach the top within a single lifetime."

"Then what do we do?" asked another chief. "Sprawl and sleep?"

The argument went on all afternoon.

Eventually Badbelay gave his judgement. We would all migrate in ten days' time -- diagonally. Leftwards, as was traditional; but also upwards, as Smear had urged.

"If we do find lush pastures leftward and upward," explained Badbelay, "we can always steepen our angle of ascent. But if we run into difficulties we can angle back down again on to the time-approved route."

Some chiefs applauded the wisdom of this compromise. Others --

particularly Tumbler -- voiced discontent. Smear looked disappointed at first but then perked up.

That night we slept in vine-harnesses on Badbelay's ledge; and in the morning we all climbed back down again.

* * * *

A couple of days later Smear paid another visit to our ledge -- with apprehension written on his face.

The rest of our tribe had already fanned out across the precipice, a-gathering. I myself was about to depart.

"Tumbler! Loosepiton! Have you looked out across the void lately?"

"Why should we waste our time looking at nothing?" demanded Tumbler with a scowl.

Smear pointed. "Because there's something."

To be sure, far away in the pearly emptiness there did seem to me to be some sort of enormous shadow.

Tumbler rubbed his eyes then shrugged. "I can't see anything."

I cleared my throat. "There is something, Chief. It's very vague and far away."

"Rubbish! Nonsense! There's never been anything there. How can there be something?"

Tumbler, I realized, must be short-sighted.

Smear must have arrived at a similar diagnosis. However, he didn't try to score any points off Tumbler. He just said diplomatically to me, "Just in case, let's keep watch, Loosepiton -- you and I, hmm?"

I nodded agreement.

* * * *

Whatever it was seemed to thicken day by day. At first the phenomenon was thin, then it grew firmer, denser. No one else glanced in the empty direction -- until the very morning when we were due to migrate.

Then at last some fellow's voice cried out, "Look into the void! Look, everyone!"

Presently other voices were confirming what the man had noticed. For a while minor pandemonium reigned, though Tumbler still insisted: "Fantasy! Smear has been spreading rumours. Smear has stirred this up!" Which was the very opposite of the truth.

Bounce clung to me. "What is it?" Now that her attention had been directed, she could see the thing clearly; though as yet none of us could make out any details. All I could be sure of, was that something enormous existed out in the void beyond the empty air; and that something was changing day by day in a way which made it more noticeable.

"I've no idea, dear Bounce."

"Migrate!" ordered Tumbler. "Commence the migration!"

And so we began to migrate, leftward and upward; as did the tribes above us, and the tribes above them.

* * * *

Over the course of the next ten days the business of finding novel fingerholds and toeholds occupied a huge amount of our attention. Besides, we had our kids to shepherd, or to carry if they were still babies. Consequently there wasn't much opportunity for staring out into the void. Splatty made the mistake of doing so while we were traversing unfamiliar rock. He forgot himself, lost his poise, and fell.

On the tenth evening Smear climbed down to our camping ledge.

"Don't you recognize what it is by now, Loosepiton?" he asked.

"There might be some kind of dark cloud out there," allowed Tumbler, peeved that Smear was addressing me.

"It isn't any cloud, old chief -- nor any sort of weird weather. Look keenly, Loosepiton. That's another precipice."

I perceived ... a faintly wrinkled vertical plane. Like a great sheet of grey skin.

"It's another precipice just like ours; and it's moving slowly towards

our precipice day by day. It's closing in on us. As though it ain't bad enough clinging on by our fingertips all life long...!" Smear crooked a knee around a vine for stability and held his hands apart then brought them slowly together and ground them, palm to palm, crushingly.

The wrinkles in that sheet of skin out there were ledges. Without any doubt. The hairs on the skin were vines. My heart sank.

"We oughtn't to have migrated in this direction," declared Tumbler. He was simply being obtuse.

Smear gently corrected him. "We aren't migrating into an angle between two walls. Oh no. That other precipice faces us flat on. And it began to move towards us before we ever started our migration. Or perhaps our precipice began to move towards it. The result is the same."

"We'll be squashed between the two." I groaned.

* * * *

To have survived bravely for so many years of hanging on by our fingernails! We had never railed excessively against our circumstances. Sometimes certain individuals took the dive of despair. But children were born and raised. Life asserted itself. We had hung on.

All so that we could meet a second precipice head-on -- a mobile precipice -- and be crushed!

This seemed a little unfair. A little -- yes -- hateful and soul-twisting.

Days passed by. We had settled on our new cliff pastures. We explored the cracks and ledges. We wove vines. We foraged. We ate worms and beetles.

All the while the approaching precipice became more clearly discernible as just that: another infinite precipice, limitlessly high and deep, limitlessly wide.

As the gap narrowed pearly daylight began to dim dangerously.

Smear had conceived a close affinity for me. "Maybe it's just a reflection," I said to him one day.

"If that's the case, then we should see ourselves clinging on over there. I see no one. If I could bend my arm back far enough to throw a chunk of stone, my missile would hit solid rock and bounce off."

Several people from upper ledges took the dive of despair. A few parents even cast their children down; and that is real despair.

Yet consider the difference between taking the dive -- and being slowly crushed to death between two walls of stone. Which would you prefer? Maybe those individuals who dived died peacefully from suffocation on the way down. Or maybe they did reach a bottom and were instantly destroyed, before they knew it, by impact.

* * * *

The remaining daylight was appallingly dim by now. The other precipice with its cracks and ledges and vines was only a few bodies' lengths away. In another day or two it might be possible to leap over and cling on -- though that hardly spelled any avenue of escape.

I paid a visit to Smear.

Friend," I said, "some of those ledges over there are going to fit into spaces where we don't have ledges. But others won't. Others will touch our own ledges."

"So?"

"So maybe there'll be a little gap left between the two precipices. A gap as big as a human body."

"Leaving us uncrushed -- but locked inside rock?"

"We'll have to wait and see."

"See?" he cried. "With no light to see by? Yet I suppose," he added bitterly, "it will be a different sort of world. For a while."

* * * *

Different. Yes.

Yesterday -- though "days" are now irrelevant -- the two precipices met.

All light had disappeared but with my hand I could feel the inexorable pressure of the other rocky wall pushing forward -- until from above, from below, from left and right there came a grating, groaning, crackling noise; then silence for a while.

Nobody had screamed. Everybody had waited quietly for the end. And as I had begun to suspect some days earlier, the end -- the absolute end -- did not come.

I was still alive on a ledge in utter darkness, sandwiched between one wall and the other.

Voices began to call out: voices which echoed strangely and hollowly down the gap of space that remained.

* * * *

Yes, we survive.

There's even a little light now. Fungi and lichen have begun to glow. Maybe they always did glow faintly; and only now have our deprived eyes grown sensitive enough to detect their output.

We can still travel about -- along a ledge to the end, then by way of cracks up or down to the end of another ledge. We scarcely see where we're going, and have to guess our way through the routes of this vertical stone maze. Also, it's still possible to fall down a gap, which would cause terrible injuries.

Yet in a sense travel is also easier nowadays. We can brace ourselves between both walls and shuffle upward or downward or left or right by "chimneying".

Perhaps I should mention a disadvantage which has actually stimulated travel. Excrement can't tumble away now into the void. Stools strike one wall or the other.

What's more, the collision of the two walls destroyed a lot of vines: nor can lush foliage thrive in the ensuing darkness.

Consequently we are ascending steadily, just as Smear once recommended.

Instead of living one above the other, our tribes are now strung out in a long line; and all of us climb slowly upward, foraging as we go, eating all the available lichen and fungi, worms and beetles. Now we're permanently migrating.

Are we moving towards somewhere? Towards Smear's mythical top? Maybe.

And maybe that place is infinitely far away.

The new kids who are born to us on the move will enter a world utterly different from the world of my own childhood. A vertical world confined between two irregular walls. A world of near-total gloom.

They will live in a narrow gap which extends sideways forever, drops downward forever, and rises forever.

How will Bounce's child (who is also either mine or Smear's) ever conceive of the old world which we will describe: that world where one precipice alone opened forever upon the vastness of empty, bright space? Will he (or she) think of it as a paradise which might yet exist again some time in the future if the two walls ever move apart? Or will the child be unable even to understand such a concept?

Sometimes I dream of the old world of open air and light, and of clinging to the cliff. Then I awaken to darkness, to the faint glow of a few fungi, to the confinement of the walls.

The other day Smear said to me, "We didn't know how well off we were, did we, Loosepiton? But at least we survive, and climb. And maybe, just maybe, right now we're well off -- compared with some future state of the world which will limit us even more severely!"

"How could we be more limited?" I asked in surprise. "What new disaster could occur?"

"Maybe this gap will shrink to become a single upright chimney! Maybe that'll happen next."

"Life forbid! It hasn't happened yet."

"Not yet."

Meanwhile we climb upward. And upward.

Amazingly Smear still tells his peculiar tales about imaginary worlds;
and tells them with gusto.

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