

Trumpeter (1990)
ISSN: 0832-6193
THE STRAWBERRY

Joe Polisuk
Trumpeter

Joe Polisuk is a graduate of the University of Victoria's Creative Writing Program. He currently lives in Jasper, Alberta, where he is employed by the Warden Service.

The man set out at dawn, when the sun first peered over the jagged mountains. It was a clear day, with just a hint of clouds to the West. The wind was light, and the man, after staring at the pink horizon for a few minutes, pulled his heavy woollen sweater over his head. His footsteps echoed in the morning silence as he descended the wooden steps of the lodge. He draped his sweater across the railing at the bottom of the stairs and began to walk East, down the steep incline at the edge of the clearing where the lodge was nestled, and into the dark woods. He turned to face the lodge once more, but it was out of sight.

The man walked slowly yet steadily, measuring his pace in relation to his breathing, trying to avoid unnecessary bursts of speed. Years of hiking had provided him with the knowledge of how to conserve his energy to the greatest advantage. He wanted to reach the Falls and return to the comfort of the lodge by nightfall. He knew from experience that the greatest push would have to come just prior to noon, so that he could be on his way back before the shadows grew long.

Over the years, he had followed every conceivable path to the Falls. He knew all the well marked trails, well trod under the heels of many hikers, that cut a clean, wide path through the woods, avoiding all the difficult grades. He'd tried the valley trail that dropped immediately to the river's edge, and then swung in a wide arc around a ridge, arriving at the bottom of the Falls. He had even walked higher into the mountains, until he found the small creek that cut its serpentine way through the dense bush. He'd walked downhill with it, gathering speed, growing faster and wilder with each step, each sharp turn of the river, until he'd burst out of the woods at the mouth of the Falls, it swirling waters rushing headlong, unbridled, pounding over the rocks just a few feet away.

Now, as he felt the advancing years working against him, and the demands on his time always increasing, he was determined to reach the Falls for one final time.

He'd been told of a new trail by the middle-aged gardener who worked at the lodge. Many times, while the man limbered up stiff muscles before heading out on a long hike, he'd watched the gardener at work, impressed with the patience and care he expended on protecting the lawn from the encroaching wilderness. The night before, while the man performed his stretching exercises, the gardener had inexplicably approached him, his straggly beard in sharp contrast with the manicured lawns he tended.

"You goin' to the Falls?"

"Why, yes. I am. How did you know?"

The gardener grinned, shuffled his feet nervously. Yet when he spoke, he stared directly at the man with a piercing gaze. His face, riddled with tiny lines, seemed to be a comical mask for the glaring intensity of his eyes. He spoke hesitantly, but directly.

"You look like you're ready to go to the Falls."

"I've been there many times before."

The gardener nodded his head in agreement.

"But tomorrow, you're goin' a different way."

"I've taken every trail already. There are no other paths."

The gardener laughed, a deep laugh that originated in his belly. He clasped his hands behind his back and rocked gently back and forth on the balls of his feet.

"There is another way. It may be a little dangerous..."

"Dangerous? How so?"

"...but it'll be well worth it. I promise."

"You can't be serious. I've seen maps."

"This way won't be on any map. Only I have the map." He paused, and pointed to his head with an exaggerated gesture.

The man felt puzzled. He stepped back from the gardener, momentarily lost in a rush of confusion that threatened to overwhelm him. The gardener seemed to sense the man's hesitancy. He stepped forward and grabbed the man's arm firmly with a sudden gesture that surprised them both.

"This is the only way, the true way. Come with me. I'll show you." And he led him away, despite the man's sputtered protests.

* * * * *

"Where are you going, Dad?"

"Thought I'd go up to the lodge, dear. Take a little hike."

"You're going up there again? You went last month."

"I know, honey, but I like it up there. Didn't you think it was a nice place?"

"I guess so. But you wouldn't let me take my blaster."

"There's no place for loud music in the woods."

"There's nothing there but trees, anyway. It's boring."

"Well, I don't find it boring. It's very relaxing, for me."

"Yeah, because Mom doesn't go!"

"Hey, don't say stuff like that. It's not polite."

"I suppose you'll be taking the car, too."

"Unless you want to pay for a taxi."

"But I need the car, Dad. There's this party I have to go on Saturday."

"You'll have to find a lift. Take the bus."

"The bus? What do you think happens to girls alone on the bus? What do you think I am?"

"Your mother's daughter. At least if you took the bus, you'd make it home at a decent hour."

"Oh, sure. That's all you ever care about. You don't even think about me!"

"Why should I? Do you care about me? Did you once tell me to be careful? To enjoy myself?"

"You promised you'd buy me a car!"

"For your eighteenth birthday. If your marks are good."

"I can't wait to turn eighteen, and move out! Then I'll quite school."

"Frankly, I can't wait for you to turn eighteen either."

"Oh, wait till I tell Mom what you said."

* * * * *

The man had set out alone, following the way the gardener had laid out for him. He was carrying his hand-carved walking stick, a branch of knotty pine that he had shaped and formed with extreme patience and dedication until it was as smooth as skin, but hard as bone. The stick had been moulded into a comfortable crutch, and he handled it unconsciously, as if it were an appendage of his body.

The gardener had told him of a path, a skyline route that followed the high ridge East of the lodge. It was a narrow trail that demanded plenty of exertion on the hiker's part, but rewarded its believers with magnificent glimpses of the Falls. For the final stretch, the trail dropped rapidly into the dense forest before finally emerging right at the mouth of the Falls. The man eagerly anticipated the final approach.

The gardener had drawn him a crude map, but he didn't feel the need to consult it. Whenever he arrived at a fork in the path, he instinctively decided which way to go. He allowed his feet to choose their own direction, trusting his impulsiveness at every turn of the winding trail. The sun was now high above him, the air sweet and hot with pungent summer smells. He wiped his brow often with an old handkerchief, but never broke his controlled, measured pace.

As the morning passed into afternoon, the man began to notice that the forest seemed quite different here from the other paths he had taken. Whiskey-jacks circled around his head, swooping in to perch on nearby branches when the man sat down to eat his lunch. Despite the glaring sun, the wildflowers, some of which he'd never seen before, retained fragile drops of early morning dew on their petals. The woods teemed with life; chirping birds and buzzing insects. Once, he heard a telltale snap of branches off in the woods, as a large animal picked up his scent and moved out of his way.

There was a rich, musky smell that invited the man to draw air deep into his lungs, savouring every breath. Even as he walked, the ground beneath his feet felt soft, cushioning every step as if he was being enticed into this new part of the woods. Despite the close confinement of the trail, it was devoid of any exposed roots or loose stones, making the hike more enjoyable. He felt as if somehow it was natural for him to be on this trail, as if he'd walked it every day of his life.

On several occasions, he caught glimpses of the Falls in the distance. It was hard to gauge how far away they were, but he could see the sun reflecting off the tumbling water, sparkling like milk-white pearls. On first spotting them, he found it hard to distinguish any motion, as if the Falls hung suspended like a lace curtain over a cliff. He was still too far off to hear them, but at least he knew he was on the right path.

After a few hours of walking, he felt the humidity of the Falls, a gentle warm mist that he could smell more than see. He knew he was close. He stopped and stood perfectly still, letting all the sounds and smells of the forest wash gently over him. He sorted out every sound, assigning each one a place in his memory: the screech of a hawk, the cry of a jay, the soft whistle of the breeze through the trees. Eventually, he could discern his own heartbeat amidst the forest's ceaseless murmurings. And beneath that, the roar of the Falls.

He congratulated himself for having successfully followed the gardener's direc-

tions. He suspected that he'd always known of this path but had been reluctant to seek it out for fear of complicating plans that had seemed so rigid before. But it had been so simple, and now the Falls lay to his immediate right, just over the next rise. With every step, he sensed their raw power drawing him closer. Being so near to his goal, he decided to stop, in order to better savour the moment. He ran his fingers through his hair, enjoying the cool breeze, and then waded into a patch of berries, intent on picking some juicy fruit to celebrate his arrival.

* * * * *

"Did you really tell Liz to move out?"

"What? Of course not! Did she tell you that?"

"She told me that you said she had to move out as soon as she could."

"Do you really think I'd say something like that? I don't know where she gets her ideas sometimes."

"Not even joking with her?"

"You know I wouldn't joke about stuff like that."

"Good. Because, well...she's still a baby."

"She's sixteen!"

"...and I know you've been under a lot of stress recently."

"Don't remind me."

"I mean, with the Shorewater thing. When are you doing..."

"Don't mention it."

"...the presentation?"

"Tuesday morning. I was thinking of taking Monday off."

"That would be great. We could house shop. I've seen this place..."

"I'm going up to the lodge again. Just to relax, before the big day."

"The lodge? Again? Wouldn't you be more relaxed staying here? You know how you hate driving on the freeway."

"I just feel like taking a long walk, doing some thinking. I'll be back for dinner, Monday."

"You're going then? For sure?"

"Yes, I've already called and reserved."

"You've already called, I bet, before even checking with me."

"Well, I didn't want to wait until the last minute."

"Why didn't you ask me?"

"Ask you what? If you wanted to come? You hate it up there."

"What if I had something planned?"

"Like what?"

"Like, I don't know. I just thought it would be a good weekend to look at a new house."

"What's the matter with this house? I like it here."

"You know. After this deal you're doing goes through, we'll have to move."

"Why?"

"Why? Because this house is too small."

"Too small? For what? Liz is moving out, remember? They're not going to pay me in square feet for clinching this deal. The deal, Sweet Jesus, I didn't want to think about it."

"It won't adequately reflect our new income."

"Are you serious? Do you think every buck I earn becomes another room?"

"Why don't you ever want to do anything with me any more?"

"Let's not start that again."

"You're not going up there alone this weekend, are you? That's it, isn't it?"

"Oh, Sweet Jesus..."

* * * * *

A great clamour erupted from amongst the stillness of the forest. The man watched as a patch of berries rippled like waves on a stormy sea, until they parted before him. A huge black bear emerged from the berry patch, sniffed, and stood on its hind legs, waving its massive paws in the air.

A mere few feet away, the man could see the snarling teeth of the animal, saliva dripping from its fangs behind a snorting brown muzzle. The bear lowered its head and tucked its ears back, its eyes filling with rage. The man began to edge away cautiously, speaking softly, hoping that the bear would lose interest in him. Its nose was twitching fiercely, as if trying to pick up a missing scent. Suddenly, in one swift motion, the bear let out an enormous roar, snapped its jaws, and charged the man.

* * * * *

"I wonder if I could have Monday off?"

"Really? I'm surprised. I thought you'd like to prepare for the Shorewater presentation."

"I do. That's why I want it off."

"How can you prepare at home? All of the materials are here."

"I figured I'd set up in my study, go over the proposals again, maybe draft a few new charts."

"But the video's finished."

"I know it is. I won't touch the video."

"You can't change the video. It's finished. It's perfect."

"I know it is. I only want to..."

"Why should you want to change the video?"

"I don't want to. It's just that..."

"It's pretty late in the game to throw a wrench into it like this."

"I'm not..."

"Why didn't you speak up sooner?"

"I LOVE THE VIDEO! It's great! It's the best clip I've ever seen. I just thought..."

"Maybe we should delay the presentation if you don't think it's adequate. We could work on it all weekend."

"NO! It's perfect. Don't change it!"

"You seem pretty tense."

"I am. I'm all wound up."

"You should relax more. Don't worry about work so much."

"I try."

"You know what? I just had a great idea!"

"What?"

"Take Monday off. Relax. Go fishing, get some fresh air. Then you'll be well rested for Tuesday."

"That's a great idea. I could really use a break."

"Sure. Go. Take it easy. And try not to think about Shorewater. I mean, it's only the biggest deal we've ever handled...worth millions...but you can clinch it. Try not to think about it."

"I will."

"Good. Have a nice weekend. And say hi to Charlene for me."

"Sharon."

"Right. Go get 'em."

* * * * *

From where he was on the ridge, the man had his back to the Falls, but he pivoted and ran in their direction. The terrain began to slope suddenly. As the man crashed through the underbrush, he recalled everything he had heard, fact or myth, about bears. He knew that loud noises would sometimes deter a bear, yet now everything but running seemed futile.

His skin burned from stinging nettles, and his face was bettered from crashing into low branches. Behind him, he could hear the bear smashing through the woods, relentless in its pursuit. He turned his head for a fraction of a second, enough time to see the bear plowing after him. Tiny hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

The sound of his heart pumping and the snarling bear drowned out the thunder of the Falls. He hadn't realized how far he had run until the ground dropped away abruptly from under his feet. The Falls were directly beneath him. He tottered on the brink, felt the steep incline on the cliff, and rushed over the side, his hands and feet clawing desperately at the soft moss and bushes protecting

the cliff's rocky face.

He let go of the walking stick, and watched as it floated down in a graceful arc along with some small rocks and branches he had uprooted, to be pounded into splinters in seconds by the torrents of rushing water. He imagined himself falling; the few quiet seconds as his body rushed to meet the green, swirling water, and the impact into the icy river. He saw himself submerged, rising to the surface, only to bob momentarily before being swept over the hungry mouth of the Falls.

His heart pounded against his chest, threatening to tear out of the flesh that restrained it. Still shaking with fear, he tried to assess his predicament. He wasn't falling any more, but had managed to grasp a vine with his right hand. His feet kicked aimlessly at the empty space beneath him. The rock face was too old, too worn for him to be able to get a solid grip. His left hand clung to a sharp stone that was nearly out of reach. His shoulders screamed with pain. As his feet scrambled to find purchase, he could feel the rock in his left hand begin to shift under his weight.

He looked up and saw the top of the cliff about three feet away, hopelessly out of reach. Above him, he could hear the bear snorting. It peered over the cliff, as if it knew the man was trapped. A giant claw, its razor nails fully extended, made a swipe at his head, missing only by inches.

So this is how it ends, he thought, hanging onto a cliff at the mercy of a small vine. He thought of his family, the office, the Shorewater project he would never see through to completion. He thought of friends he would never see again, the couch in the den he loved to lie on and watch hockey games. Faces, blank and nameless, flickered across his memory like a strobe light.

Below him, the indifferent Falls tumbled. The air was damp with mist, and he felt his grip on the rock slipping. He knew he could not hang on much longer. The pain in his arms and shoulders was unbearable. Closing his eyes, he pictured his rescue scene; an arm, a rope dangling over the cliff. But the only image that came to mind was his own bloated body, covered in bruises, eyes open, floating, to be snarled by dead trees, nibbled on by curious fish, eventually caught on some unsuspecting angler's hook in a dense fog on a quiet stretch of river miles downstream.

He thought that the cold would be impossible, a cold he had never known.

Looking up, he noticed that near the vine he so precariously clung to was a small strawberry plant. Most of the berries had fallen, being so late in the season. Upon closer inspection, he saw one juicy, red, ripe strawberry hanging vulnerably on the bush, much as he was perched on the cliff. There was a drop of moisture on the strawberry, and the sun glistened off of it, giving it the appearance of a small, precious jewel. He stared at it, momentarily forgetting

the pain he felt. He thought of the patch of berries he'd innocently wandered into, disturbing the bear. He thought of strawberry jam, and was immediately overtaken by a flood of warm memories; of summer days as a child picking wild berries and of the taste of pectin in his mother's home-made jams.

He ignored the Falls beneath him, focusing all his attention on the strawberry. He eyed it with a strong mixture of awe and desire.

Above him, the bear lunged again, its hairy claw passing so close to the man's head that he felt it disturb the air. It startled him, and as he looked up, he thought he saw the face of the gardener, looking down. Instead of feeling surprised, the man was filled with a hot sensation. For a moment, all he could think of was that the gardener's face seemed so peaceful, so full of elation and understanding that it showered warmth down upon him, comforting him, allowing him to forget the cold chill of the waters waiting for him.

The gardener smiled, and offered his hand. As the man took his left arm off the rock to wave at the gardener, he began to fall. He made one final, frenzied lunge for the plant, grabbed the strawberry, and plucked it.

Citation Format

Polisuk, Joe (1990) THE STRAWBERRY *Trumpeter*: 7, 3.
<http://www.icaap.org/iuicode?6.7.3.15>

Document generated from IXML by ICAAP conversion macros.
See the [ICAAP](#) web site or [software repository](#) for details