

LEAVING BLUE RIDGE

written by

Gerald B. Browning

Gerald B. Browning
Gerald@GeraldBBrowning.com
816-213-0853

OVER BLACK:

CRACK of breaking ice. SPLASH. Someone THRASHES in water.
Sudden silence.

Sound of WATER CHURNING; when under water, soft and muted,
almost dreamy, building in intensity.

FADE IN:

EXT. MOUNTAIN LAKE - DAY

An eerie ABSENCE OF SOUND. Rapid, disjointed images --

Broken ICE bounces against water.

A BODY bursts through the surface of the lake.

A HAND clutches toward shore.

LIPS scream for help.

The body disappears, pulled --

UNDER WATER

Sound returns: soft and muted STIRRING of the water. The body
descends, just a shape in the murky water, to the bottom.
There it rests. The sound recedes until just a distant echo.

EXT. MOUNTAINS - DAY

Slow moving panoramic vistas of the Blue Ridge Mountains of
North Carolina. Saturated, vibrant autumn color against the
bluish haze of the mountains. The sun moves in and out of the
clouds, casting beautiful shadows across everything it
touches.

JESSE POLK (V.O.)

My whole life's been spent in these
here Blue Ridge Mountains. I was
born here and I'll die here.

EXT. FARMHOUSE - DAY (1990)

Ancient two-story with a wrap-around porch, nestled in the
mountains. Cracked and peeling paint, the lawn unkempt.
Isolated. Low late afternoon light lays against the house,
creating pockets of shadows.

ON THE PORCH

JESSE POLK, 90, prickly, in ill health, rocks in an old rocker. Beside him, on a stand, a portable TV plays.

MIKEY, 8, and AMY, 6, stare at him, confused.

AMY

Are you gonna die, Mister?

Jesse Polk's puzzled by these two kids staring at him.

JESSE POLK

Do what?

MIKEY

You were gonna tell us about the real Tweetsie train.

JESSE POLK

Jake, I ain't got no time for that nonsense, now.

MIKEY

I'm Mikey.

JESSE POLK

(comes back to him)

Oh... Tweetsie. Well... they used to be a sayin' up here 'round Boone, "Only way to get here is to be born here." Then the railroad come to this part of the mountain in nineteen and eighteen and all that changed.

EXT. MOUNTAINS - DAY (1918)

A majestic steam engine, trimmed in green and red, ROARS along the track, pulling a string of passenger cars, twisting and curving through the mountains. Smoke billows into the sky. Its whistle BLARES.

JESSE POLK (V.O.)

Back then, 'round these parts, we called her the Narrow Gauge or the Stemwinder. Part of the East Tennessee and Western North Carolina Railroad. Some folks called it the Eat Taters and Wear No Clothes Railroad.

EXT. FARMHOUSE/PORCH - DAY

Jesse Polk laughs, but the joke goes right over the kids heads. The whistle BLASTS several more times, but it's different. Fainter. Filtered.

JESSE POLK

Ya'll hear that? Ol' Tweetsie coughin' and whistlin' 'round the mountains.

MIKEY

Hey, Mister, it's --

EXT. MOUNTAINS - DAY (1918)

The train shimmers, fades, and dissolves into the past, leaving nothing but mountains.

JESSE POLK (V.O.)

Only it can't really be Tweetsie, 'cause she quit comin' in nineteen and forty 'cause a flood that washed out part of her tracks.

MIKEY/AMY (V.O.)

Tweetsie's on TV.

EXT. FARMHOUSE/PORCH - DAY

Jesse Polk and the kids stare at a commercial --

ON TV: The Number 12 engine on the tracks near a Wild-West themed depot. The whistle BLASTS. FAMILIES bustle around. The "TWEETSIE RAILROAD" logo pops on the screen.

ANNOUNCER (ON TV V.O.)

Join us for the Ghost Train Halloween Festival. Fridays and Saturdays. Through October thirty-first.

JESSE POLK

(mostly to himself)

Only thing left of ol' Tweetsie is the number twelve engine. Put it in one of them 'musement parks. Now it's just a kiddie ride. Ain't that something?

MIKEY

You ever ride on the real Tweetsie?

JESSE POLK

Now, you know I did Jake. Lord have mercy, I ain't got no time for this nonsense. You and Ginny go --

MIKEY

I'm Mikey. That's Amy.

Bewildered, Jesse Polk tries to cover.

JESSE POLK

I knowed that. Now, go on. Go do some chores or play or something.

The kids run to the broken-down fence and dense woods that line the property.

JESSE POLK

You young'uns stay away from them woods. Ya'll hear me?

Lost in play, they pay no attention. The past intrudes on the present causing the colors of the trees to shift from oranges and reds to summer green. Mikey and Amy become other children from long ago --

LITTLE GINNY, 8, chases LITTLE JAKE, 7, around the yard. LITTLE DOREEN, 4, wearing leather and steel leg braces, does her best to keep up with them. All wear circa 1927 clothing.

JESSE POLK

Ginny, ya'll hear me? You want me to get a hickory?

LITTLE GINNY

Oh Daddy, Jake and me'll watch after little Doreen.

A BLAST of Tweetsie's whistle echoes.

LITTLE DOREEN

Twee'sie!

LITTLE JAKE

Tweetsie, Daddy!

LITTLE GINNY

Tell us the story, Daddy. Tell us about the times you rode ol' Tweetsie.

JESSE POLK

I ain't got no time for that nonsense now.

His children disappear, replaced by Mikey and Amy running past a dusty, fifteen-year-old Chevy, a new Lexus and a shiny Jeep Cherokee in the driveway.

JESSE POLK

Seth went out to them woods. He stayed there. It upset Mama. He went out to them woods.

Jesse Polk's mind creates another vision, somewhere between dream and memory, and he finds himself in a --

EXT. CLEARING IN THE WOODS - DAY

Jesse Polk in his rocker. Bits and pieces of the porch and yard coexist with towering trees.

A kissing couple, dressed in circa 1913 clothing, fades into existence. They are Jesse Polk's older brother, SETH -- 16, handsome and strapping -- and Seth's girlfriend, VIRGINIA -- 16, a striking, beautiful blonde.

JESSE POLK

Seth and Virginia sittin' in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G...

They immediately separate. Seth, furious. Virginia, embarrassed.

JESSE POLK

... First comes love, then comes marriage. Then comes Virginia with a baby carriage.

SETH

I told you to scram.

Suddenly, snow whirls around and wind blows hard.

With a blast of blowing snow, the disjointed porch disappears and Jesse Polk is thrust onto --

EXT. THE SHORE OF A MOUNTAIN LAKE - DAY

Jesse Polk in his rocker. An even deeper, more surreal illusion of his mind. Bits of trees. Limbs hang from nowhere. Green grass from the yard visible through gusting snow. Seth and Virginia by a frozen lake.

SETH

Come on, squirt, I'll race you.

Seth vanishes into the driving snow, leaving Virginia behind. The manifestation takes on a hazy, nightmarish quality. Raging snow engulfs everything.

VIRGINIA
Make him come back.

Jesse Polk attempts to rise from his rocker.

JESSE POLK
I can't... I can't seem to...

His old legs just won't cooperate. He gives up. Settles in the rocker, confused and tired.

The snow envelops Virginia until she, too, disappears. Nothing but snow.

The quick and steady GALLOP of a horse builds in intensity.

A SHADOWED FIGURE on horseback bursts through the blizzard. The figure keeps riding toward Jesse Polk, but gets no closer. A moment caught in time. And it's gone --

EXT. FARMHOUSE/PORCH - DAY

Jesse Polk stares ahead into the calm empty yard.

MIKEY (O.S.)
Hey, Mister...

Jesse Polk feels a tug on his shirtsleeve and turns to see Mikey and Amy staring at him.

MIKEY
Hey, Mister, who you talking to?

A married couple, MIKE and LUCY, 30's, bursts through the door. Followed by Jesse Polk's daughter, GINNY -- 73, haggard, looking older than her years -- and his son, JAKE -- 72, gruff and impatient.

MIKE
Mikey, I hope you and Amy haven't been out here pestering Mr. Polk, now.

JESSE POLK
Jesse, name's Jesse. Mr. Polk was my Pa.

MIKE

Mr. Polk -- sorry -- Jesse, you got a beautiful fine old house here.

JESSE POLK

My granddaddy built this house. Eighteen and seventy-seven. The year my Pa was born. Now, that little house. The one way back yonder. That was built by my Pa and me 'bout nineteen and eighteen. That's the year you's born Jake and the year Tweetsie done come to the mountain --

JAKE

Daddy, Mike and Lucy don't wanna hear all your stories.

LUCY

It's all right --

MIKE

Oh, it's fine --

GINNY

Oh, Daddy'll talk your ear off if you let him.

EXT. FARMHOUSE/DRIVEWAY - DAY

Mike and Lucy load their kids into the Jeep Cherokee.

Ginny and Jake wave as the Jeep backs out of the driveway.

EXT. FARMHOUSE/PORCH - DAY

Jesse Polk, still and quiet, loses himself in the rustling of leaves in the crisp fall breeze. A COMMOTION draws his attention to Jake holding open the front door as Ginny pushes a wheelchair onto the porch.

JESSE POLK

Where'd your friends git to?

JAKE

They're not friends, Daddy.

GINNY

Jake, not now.

JAKE

Why not now?

GINNY

Let's get you inside, Daddy.

JESSE POLK

Leave me be, now. Just leave me be.

GINNY

No now, none of that orneriness
this afternoon. We've had a fine
day with some good company. Don't
you go spoiling it now.

She and Jake help him to stand, ease him into the wheelchair.
Even this little bit of exertion is tough for him and he
sighs in frustration.

INT. FARMHOUSE/LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Agitated, Jesse Polk sits in a recliner, a TV tray with
dinner in front of him. Jake and Ginny argue.

GINNY

Now's not the time, Jake.

JAKE

When is the time? I've been up here
almost a week and all we've been
doing is pussy footin' around the
issue. Showing the house to people,
and pretending they're just friends
stopping by to say, "Hey."

JESSE POLK

Who wants it? Who's so all fired to
buy my land?

JAKE

That nice couple who was here this
afternoon with their young'uns, for
one.

JESSE POLK

Well, I ain't sellin'. They can
have it when I'm dead.

JAKE

You're impossible, Daddy. Honestly.
(to Ginny)
I don't even know why you're
bothering with these other people.
The Appalachian Land Company
offered twice what this land's
worth. Twice.

(MORE)

JAKE (CONT'D)

That's more money than any of us
have known our entire lives. And
you need the money, Ginny.

JESSE POLK

Who needs money? Ginny don't need
no money. I got money.

JAKE

Daddy, you used the last bit of
savings you had to take care of
Mama before she died. Fifteen years
ago.

JESSE POLK

No, sir. That ain't true. I saved
my whole life.

JAKE

Ginny's been paying for everything
since she came here ten years ago --

GINNY

Jake!

JAKE

Food, electricity, your medicine,
the taxes, everything.

JESSE POLK

That ain't true!

(to Ginny)

And you come back here 'cause you
had nowheres else to go.

GINNY

Don't you be spiteful, now.

JAKE

You're broke, Daddy --

GINNY

Stop it, Jake. Just stop.

JAKE

State's about ready to put a lien
on the property --

JESSE POLK

I ain't sellin' this land. They can
have it when I'm dead.

He pushes the tray over. The food and dishes CRASH to the floor. Ginny is startled, but remains calm. She's used to his bluster. Jake is livid.

JAKE

I'm done. We've been having this same conversation for ten years. I'm going to bed. See if you can talk some sense into him. I'm done.

JESSE POLK

Run, Jake. You good at that, ain't you? Run like you always done.

Jake's body clenches.

JAKE

Mama would be so ashamed of you right now. So ashamed.

GINNY

Stop it. Both of you. Just stop it.

Ginny marches into the hallway. Jesse Polk watches as Jake follows her.

The hallway light flips on, revealing DORA, 16, -- a pretty, vibrant redhead, dressed circa 1917 -- framed in the doorway.

DORA

Oh, Jesse, you're the sweetest boy.

JESSE POLK

Dora...

Dora runs to him and takes his hand.

EXT. FARMHOUSE/FRONT YARD - DAY (1917)

Spring. Sunshine. Flowers. TEENAGE JESSE, 17, pulls Dora to a large hickory tree. Points to something carved at the base. Her fingers trace the message: "D - love forever - J."

DORA

Oh, Jesse... That's the sweetest thing. Forever's a long time...

TEENAGE JESSE

Forever ain't long enough.

He goes in for a kiss. She stops him, looks to make sure no one's around.