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When I Go A-Warbling

CHARACTERS

WARBLER: *age indeterminable, instigator*
YOUNGER REGGIE: *13, has retrograde amnesia*
OLDER REGGIE: *27, narrator*

[SOUND: *wind through the trees, hoot owls, hum of waves crashing nearby.*
Think wilderness near Lake Superior.

SPOTLIGHT on OLDER REGGIE, *who paces stage left as he speaks to the audience.*]

OLDER REGGIE: He appeared in similar ways each time. Inhibiting me from seeing what was really there. But you already know that. Every time is another chance for a breakthrough, right, Doc? [*Pause, circling the mound.*] What I remember... Well, in the most recent one, there was something buried deep under the earth.

[OLDER REGGIE *stops behind the mound of dirt heaped three feet high on a tarp center stage. The spotlight illuminates the pile and stays there.*

LIGHTS UP, *but dim.*

WARBLER, *looking scruffy and dirty, sleeps against the pile, looks dead, with his hiking pack strewn to his left as if lost in a struggle.*

YOUNGER REGGIE, *wearing a baseball cap and carrying a book bag, enters humming – “Peter and the Wolf” preferably – from stage right where there is a deer crossing sign.*]

OLDER REGGIE (CONT'D) [*distancing himself from the other characters, stage left*]: I returned to the north woods of Michigan where my father took me on my first hunting trip. Like all the other times, I am the same age, thirteen. And Warbler is there waiting for me.

[YOUNGER REGGIE *notices WARBLER. He looks around, goes up to WARBLER and kicks him in the foot waking him up.*]

WARBLER: [*scurrying to his feet, sing-song*] I see the bad moon's arising.

YOUNGER REGGIE: I told you to get lost, Warbler.

WARBLER: I did. You didn't specify how long.

YOUNGER REGGIE [*sitting down with his back against the pile, closing his eyes*]: Really. It's been fun. Thanks for all the company, but I sleep alone.

WARBLER: Alone?

YOUNGER REGGIE: That's what I said.

WARBLER: No man sleeps alone, Reggie, especially in the wild. All those critters staring at you, watching your every move. Some hikers spotted a cougar in Grand Marais last week. Makes my skin crawl.

YOUNGER REGGIE [*looking around, frightened, sits up*]: I'm up now.

WARBLER: Good. I wanted some company.

YOUNGER REGGIE: No kidding -

WARBLER: Gets lonesome on these one-man treks. [*Beat*] Need to keep moving, Reggie. [*Beat*] The first time I met you, you were fidgeting beside your old man struggling to hang onto the shotgun you were toting. Skiddish. Ready to shoot anything that moved.

YOUNGER REGGIE: That was a long time ago.

YOUNGER REGGIE: Maybe, but you look the same.

OLDER REGGIE [*shaking his head*]: Thirteen. The age I was when my father died. Same age, same place. I was convinced my subconscious would transport me to a different locale when I found what I was looking for. What I had subconsciously buried. But those treks with Warbler seemed so real. So natural.

WARBLER: If we continue, we could take the long way back to town. Give us a little more time to hunt.

YOUNGER REGGIE: It's dark.

WARBLER: Perceptive. Yes, but there is moonlight.

YOUNGER REGGIE: Pass.

WARBLER: Could be fun? Two people, who meet again by happenstance, in the northern woods, and join forces to reach a common goal - [*hesitating, thinking*] slaying the almighty cougar. Forget deer. Then returning home triumphant with our packs over our heads with Rocky music blasting in the background. You can't make stuff like that up.

OLDER REGGIE [*suspicious*]: It was not happenstance. My father and I met him on the trail when he was en route from Sault Ste. Marie to Munising. A wanderer, he called himself. I thought he said Warbler. He trekked along the lakeshore for two days and looked scraggly, as if a bear had mauled him. Soon after we met him...

[SFX: *gunshot. A thud.*]

OLDER REGGIE and YOUNGER REGGIE [*flinch*]. WARBLER [*shrugs it off*].

WARBLER [*gleeful*]: Must have been a big one. [*Beat*] What do you say, Reggie? Want to go back?

[*simultaneously*] { YOUNGER REGGIE: No. Not until I remember.
OLDER REGGIE: No. Not yet.

WARBLER [*mumbling*]: Stubborn kid.

OLDER REGGIE [*shooting WARBLER a dirty look, then looking out to the audience*]: I want to remember. I can hear the shot, but where is the evidence I can turn over in my hands? More importantly, why can't I remember anything after it? [*Beat*] You throw out big words like "repression" and

“retrograde” and “amnesia,” Doc, but they mean nothing to a kid who just threw a handful of dirt on his father’s grave. [Pause] All right, I’ll close my eyes and try again.

WARBLER [*to* YOUNGER REGGIE]: Things happen for a reason, right? Maybe you don’t need to know. [Beat] Stay grounded. Stop circling. Keep trekking.

YOUNGER REGGIE: What about –

WARBLER: You are the classic runaway, Reggie.

YOUNGER REGGIE: No, I’m not.

WARBLER: What do runaways want?

YOUNGER REGGIE: Something better.

WARBLER: And you want?

YOUNGER REGGIE [*pronouncing his words carefully*]: To know who fired the shot.

WARBLER [*talking a little faster*]: Still searching for something better. Not satisfied with what is laid in front of you.

YOUNGER REGGIE: I hardly think –

WARBLER: Head west and everything will clear up. Sunny skies. Moonlight. Dig up this piece and everything will be okay, right? Once you can remember better days, if they were better. [Beat] Open your eyes. You’re not seeing clearly.

YOUNGER REGGIE: I’m not paying you for this session. Don’t psychoanalyze me.

WARBLER: You’re not thinking straight.

YOUNGER REGGIE: What if I am thinking straight? What if this is the first time –

WARBLER [*listing them off*]: A) Whenever someone mentions it is the first time, it isn’t. It just sounds better. B) If you were thinking straight, you wouldn’t have circled around the North Country trail.

YOUNGER REGGIE: Wait, that wasn’t –

WARBLER: C) You’re thirteen.

YOUNGER REGGIE: What does that have to do with –?

WARBLER: D) You’re thirteen! E) You’re wearing a baseball cap. Do you also have a slingshot in your back pocket? F) You’re sleeping against a pile of dirt. [Beat] First rule of attempting a nomadic lifestyle: bring a niche. Sleeping bag. Tent. Army cot. Bear skin cocoon. The rain will never magically disappear when you lie down and sprout a lovely, comfy mound of... [WARBLER *abruptly stops and tries to position his body in front of the mound, as if to hide it.* OLDER REGGIE and YOUNGER REGGIE *both notice and begin to move in toward* WARBLER.]

YOUNGER REGGIE [*suspicious*]: A comfy mound of dirt. That was what you were going to say.

WARBLER [*brushing it off, hurried speech*]: Who knows? The time is past.

Move on.

YOUNGER REGGIE: This was not here before, when I saw you the first time. I don't remember it being here.

WARBLER: You don't remember a lot of things.

YOUNGER REGGIE *and* OLDER REGGIE: Or you don't want me to remember.

[OLDER REGGIE *rifles through* WARBLER's *pack*. *He pulls out a shotgun shell.*

YOUNGER REGGIE *circles the mound*. *He focuses on* WARBLER's *dirty clothes*.]

OLDER REGGIE: Look what I found, Doc. [*holding it up like a trophy, thinking aloud*] Why does the fast-talking bastard have an empty cartridge in his pack?

YOUNGER REGGIE: What have you been up to, Warbler?

WARBLER: Must be dirt castle contractors. You know if they have dirt sculptors up here?

YOUNGER REGGIE: Transforming the almighty clump?

OLDER REGGIE: Hardly.

WARBLER: Precisely.

YOUNGER REGGIE *and* OLDER REGGIE: Liar.

WARBLER: I'm a wanderer not a digger. These arms aren't built for hard labor. [*holding out his hands*] Check for calluses.

[YOUNGER REGGIE *refuses, but careens his head to look around the mound*.]

WARBLER (CONT'D): You suspect me? Fine. Leave it at that and move on.

[OLDER REGGIE *and* YOUNGER REGGIE, *in tandem, circling around the mound as if they have found the Holy Grail*. WARBLER *hesitates in front of it, but eventually moves aside*.]

WARBLER (CONT'D): You got to stop coming to see me like this, Reggie. Always going in circles. Ready to shoot everything that moves. Enough, man. Move on. [*pause, pleading*] Stop looking back.

[*simultaneously*] { YOUNGER REGGIE: Criss-cross. It won't work.
OLDER REGGIE: I call bullshit, Doc.

[YOUNGER REGGIE *and* OLDER REGGIE *begin digging in the mound*. *Throwing handfuls of dirt to the side*. Warbler *pretends he does not care, but fidgets*.

YOUNGER REGGIE *notices*.]

YOUNGER REGGIE (CONT'D): What are you hiding, Warbler?

WARBLER: Your childish innocence.

YOUNGER REGGIE: No, really.

OLDER REGGIE: No, re –

[OLDER REGGIE *stops digging*. *He moves stage right, stricken, transfixed on* YOUNGER REGGIE *eagerly digging into the mound*.]

WARBLER: Really. You're so eager to run away from what you do have. So eager to place blame that you've never considered... [*Beat*] You can't even see straight.

OLDER REGGIE [*exasperated, shouting*]: What am I supposed to see?

[OLDER REGGIE *stumbles around the stage reacting to the surroundings and the*

sounds as if he is starting to remember.

SFX: *gunshot. A thud. A groan.*

WARBLER *winces at the sounds, but YOUNGER REGGIE is unaffected. OLDER REGGIE freezes as a second SPOTLIGHT lands on him.*]

OLDER REGGIE [*painfully repeating what he once said years ago*]: I got him, Dad! It sounded like a big one! [*Beat*] Dad?

[*YOUNGER REGGIE nears the bottom of the mound as it now looks like a crater. WARBLER is watching expectantly. YOUNGER REGGIE turns over a large clot of dirt with something sticking out of it, but he is digging so fast he does not see it.*]

YOUNGER REGGIE: Nothing?

WARBLER [*sighing in relief, moving closer to the mound*]: Some things are better left unknown.

YOUNGER REGGIE: I was so sure this was the time I would find it. Find something.

WARBLER: There will be more times. [*mumbling*] Unfortunately.

[*YOUNGER REGGIE moves away from the mound, looks stage left. WARBLER notices the item sticking out of the mound and discretely pushes it back into the mound with his foot.*]

WARBLER (CONT'D): Even though this journey was unsuccessful, it doesn't mean we can't have a little fun.

YOUNGER REGGIE [*skeptical*]: What do you have in mind?

WARBLER: I hear hikers spotted a cougar near Grand Marais.

[*YOUNGER REGGIE brightens and begins humming Peter and the Wolf again as he and WARBLER exit stage left. LIGHTS OUT. SPOTLIGHTS only. OLDER REGGIE watches them go. He circles the mound and the two SPOTLIGHTS MERGE. He kneels in front of the crater and begins digging for the item at a slow, careful pace. He pulls out a muddied baseball cap – the same one YOUNGER REGGIE wears. He then fills in the crater and smoothes out the mound to resemble a bench. He sits on it and turns the cap over in his hands.*]

SFX: *The SOUNDS stop, instead there is a scratching sound like pencil on paper.*]

OLDER REGGIE: 14 years. 10 months. 11 days. 5,429 nights of the same dream. The same vision. 252 therapy sessions to dig up the truth. [*continuing to tally*] An empty cartridge. And a baseball cap dropped in the mud. [*pause*] Tonight they add up. Tonight a breakthrough. [*Beat*] Or a break down. [*He gets up and walks out toward the audience.*]

YOUNGER REGGIE [*Off Stage*]: He – the vagrant, I mean – told me his name was Warbler. He wavered between obscenity and philosophy. Reality and fantasy. His voice etched out realistic scenes...

OLDER REGGIE [*finishing YOUNGER REGGIE's statement*]: But he was only a bystander, but he knew. An unfortunate witness, Doc.

YOUNGER REGGIE [*O.S.*] and OLDER REGGIE: The second person on the scene... [*Beat*] the first being me.

[SFX: *The scratching stops. Silence.*]

OLDER REGGIE (CONT'D): You're wondering, Doc, is it better to know? After all these years.

[OLDER REGGIE *returns to the flattened mound and sits down.*]

OLDER REGGIE (CONT'D) [*slowly putting on the baseball cap*]: I'm tired of searching for the memory that broke off – the almighty clump. [*Beat*]

I've spent too many years digging in the dirt.

[LIGHTS OUT.]