

*David Woodward*

**WEEDS ARE WILDFLOWERS**

Chapter 1

He woke up worried, again. It's the kind of inexplicable, unreasonable fretting that makes no sense — like being suddenly naked in a dream. Where are my clothes? Why is everyone watching me urinate against the livingroom wall? Why can't I find a private washroom? And why am I not relieved after having micturated for the umpteenth time in these strange and overly public places?

Whatever the reason, he knows he won't get back to sleep once the runaway thoughts begin. He staggers out of bed, careful not to wake Mary (she has to work tomorrow), and heads to the kitchen to check the stove. It's off. He remembers his dream now — fire. Maybe that could explain his need to check on the oven numerous times a day. But, it doesn't explain why he will now check to see if the door is locked, the heat is turned back (even though it is summer) and the grocery list isn't missing any key items. While doing his nightly rounds, he stops to look at one of his notes that he's posted on the hall mirror. John, don't forget to call brother regarding last discussion, it says. No, it's not from Mary, but from himself. He writes notes addressed to himself on top of all his other eccentric behaviours. However, he doesn't write notes exclusively to himself — as he often addresses Mary with little pieces of paper strewn strategically about the house. He's not being rude or antisocial. Nothing about John is overtly or intentionally rude; he's just afraid he'll forget and he has a lot to remember or, more precisely, to worry about. Things pop into his head randomly and more often than not he wants to share them with others — others being Mary or his brother. The notes help organize the random thoughts which creep in without warning. They give him order in all the chaos that surrounds him. In a sense, they are his bible.

Sometimes John has a new theory he wants to share. Like the time he had a vision of himself as a goat after having had a plateful of goat cheese. He reasoned that if we eat animals, the animal that we were in a previous life would be revealed to us when we eat the right one. It was all a matter of auspicious taste buds. Yes, he believes in cross-species reincarnation as

he likes to call it — after having seen a connection between the human animal and that of our lower cousins. It came to him in a dream after he had read about Dolly, the sheep who was cloned by that Scottish biologist. He was fascinated that man could create life without the involvement of sex. He did some research of his own on genetic manipulation and genetic engineering and found that we now have the ability to cross the species barrier. John was aware of the history of breeding domestic animals and the cross-pollinating plants to create new strains. But it was different now. The rules had changed. Dolly, adding and taking away genes, manipulating life into forms we decide meant we had more control. Godlike command. To be capable to create completely new forms of life that had previously not existed was unbelievable to him — even if he found it to be unnatural. If man was able of this, then it is highly likely that the natural lines that divide us and other animals could be crossed over in a more natural way. For this to occur, though, one would need to pass over to the other side; in other words, it could not happen until we finish one life.

To further prove his point, he would say that since we all eat each other (to varying degrees), we eventually become each other. Consuming the flesh of other animals, we intersect and divide, interspersing our lives with one another, taking on different forms as we travel through space and time. Maybe the more you eat of the same animal, the better the chance you have of coming back as that animal. But then, how would you explain vegetarians? Maybe they became fresh produce.

Back to the goat theory. John wasn't certain what animal he was in his previous life but he was determined to discover what it was — as he saw this as quintessential in his search for a more complete understanding of the self. So he ate meat. A lot of meat. All kinds of meat. And no, he didn't stop with farm animals. He tasted every animal he could get his hands on, looking or tasting for the right feel. He wasn't sure what this sign would be but he was certain it would reveal some lost knowledge that is somewhere within us. He believed this to be true. On the menu during the two years of his animalistic self-discovery was the regular diet of farm animals, along with: bison, deer, wild boar, elk, antelope, bear, coyote, fox, wolf, rodents of all sorts including rats and squirrels, most of the weasel family, poisonous and nonpoisonous snakes (large

constrictors such as boas and pythons were excluded, as he did not want to know if he had been such a beast; he had an aversion toward large snakes for personal reasons — although not based on reason). Through some extremely secretive black market he found on the internet — purely accidental I must add — John somehow managed to get large predators from Africa such as lions and leopards. Cheetahs were excluded since the price was too high for such an endangered feline. (He secretly hoped it would be one of these large stealthy cats and prayed it wouldn't be a jackal or hyena.) Even giraffes and hippopotamuses found their way into his stomach. He was on a long and arduous journey. Discovering his past life was something he was resolved to find, no matter the cost — priceless cheetahs apparently the only price he wouldn't pay. In the end, he would use up his entire inheritance in his desperate attempt to learn what he used to be, his brother footing many a bill so John could eat — another day. His parents were smart enough to leave the house to him.

John had heard of a woman who had stopped eating fruits and vegetables because she reasoned they took up the place of her beloved wildflowers. This gave John the idea to try out some wild versions of orchids, petunias and irises — even rare endangered ones since his quest was perhaps symbolic in nature and, being already a rare specimen himself, he figured he might be one of the last remaining wildflowers: or ex-wildflower, whatever the case may be. He didn't believe that he could have been a manmade flower so pansies and tulips were off his menu. He ingested roses, but only the wild versions. Neighbourhood dandelions (perfect in salads), coltsfoots, spring beauties, creeping Charlie, clovers (sweet and delicious) of all sorts, black-eyed Susan, goldenrods (very bitter), asters — the large and ubiquitous Asteraceae family wouldn't survive his insatiable appetite for answers. Neighbours came to know him as the strange hippie grazer. They joked that he'd rid your lawn of unwanted weeds — naturally, to boot. He briefly thought of starting a business to do just that. However, he preferred the weeds to natural grass. John came to love what most people call "weeds." He loved the unwanted, and weeds were certainly unwanted; they were precious; they were delicious, even when bitter; they were in him. They were wildflowers in his lexicon. John persisted in his quest, not deterred in the least by the ignorance of man.

Still, man being man, there came a day when even he was on the verge of giving up. Bugs, critters and insects would be his final attempt. He tried bugs of all kinds until he finally decided to give up his foolish quest. Tired and frustrated, he thought he had misinterpreted his dream. Although it could have been the digestive problems he'd been experiencing due to his exotic diet — not to mention the cocktail of noxious pesticides he must have consumed from the various lawns. A few months later, after having forgotten about his whole theory, he ate a plate of goat cheese and with it a sublime vision of immense, delectable pastures, horns, goatees, endless eating, unrelenting braying and asses in the form of jackasses (of a most pleasing, sexual nature), he reasoned he must have been a goat. Being highly susceptible to new theories, he was overjoyed. However, he failed to see the coincidence of his discovery, his chosen animal having no discernable tastes.

Goat theories aside, the notes he leaves around the house are mostly reminders to do things because of his worrying nature. The note he left on the mirror that he is now glaring at is in reference to the last time he saw his brother and their rather heated debate — one of many. He's tempted to call him right now, even though it's three a.m. Their latest verbal contest was over a familiar family theme in their thirty odd years together: religion. While John is not necessarily an atheist (he believes in any and all possibilities, so he finds it hard to classify himself), he isn't religious according to the guidelines of any organized religion — or any other less-organized religions which seem to crop up almost daily on talk shows, the self-help variety included. Agnostic is probably a better way to describe his beliefs or lack thereof, depending on how you look at it. John sees anything and everything as possible. In that sense, he is the ultimate optimist.

His brother, Thomas, on the other hand, is very religious and not the type to keep it to himself, especially where his little brother is concerned. It's his mission in life to "save" him from his unhealthy and wildly secular life. John's blasphemous "goat theory," as Thomas likes to put it, is seen by Thomas as some sort of cult following — even though John is the only one that he knows who ascribes to this unique philosophy. Gnosticism peaks John's interest, but it's still too all-or-nothing for his anything-is-possible theory. (Suppressed documents and gospels are

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fascinating but it would probably mean he would have to get more involved, other people entering his world, discussing, arguing . . . meeting, perhaps even in his home! John already had a full social life; Mary and brother Thomas were plenty, thank you very much.) Could reincarnation be considered a religion all on its own? Would he become a Buddhist, a Hindu? Probably not. Again, they were too organized for his liking, too many humans involved. Thomas saw the lack of organization, the lack of human involvement in his brother's life as a major part of his problem. Collective thought and decision making was absolutely necessary for critical thinking. And critical thinking meant following what a large mass believed, the larger the better. The closer to home the better. (To Thomas, following your own mind was equivalent in recklessness to Satanism.) He was convinced that his wayward brother was somehow worshiping the goat, which he believed had some negative, religious connotations somewhere in the bible.

Their last vociferous debacle went something like this:

"Matthew 25:33, And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. It's right there in the bible. Look it up for yourself if you don't believe me," said brother Thomas.

"What? Am I doomed to the internal fires of hell because I happen to believe I was a goat in a previous life, or, because I'm left-handed?" said brethren John.

"Your latest theory has no basis in reality, nor is it anywhere in the scriptures. Reincarnation is an abomination in the eyes of the church."

"I don't follow your church! I never did. Why can't you accept that?"

"I don't want to lose my little brother to some goat-whim theory which is purely allegoric."

"And the bible isn't?"

"What's that?"

"Allegoric."

"Yes, yes, it is meant to be a parable and symbolic in our everyday lives," Thomas replied impatiently, releasing a big sigh. "But that is so we can take the time to think things through. It gives the messages more weight, and, therefore, a better understanding. Mere facts don't sink in."

"Exactly! We've evolved individual brains to think things through so that we will all come up with our own conclusions; so we can make our own interpretations of this, this . . .," John stuttered nervously, "ephemeral experience on . . ." John added, pointing emphatically down to the earth.

Thomas glared down at his brother's messy floor in a disgusted manner, as if looking in the fiery pits of hell.

John, full of vigour, spurted out, "Our very own brains make any and all things possible. My mind craves possibilities . . . ambiguities. Does that make me bad? Evil? Wrong? Condemned?"

"John, John, John," Thomas said, shaking his head doubtfully. "Why are you so stubborn? We all love you."

"That doesn't explain anything! Can't you just stick to the discussion at hand without bringing that word into it all the time? Wait for a more appropriate situation to use such a powerful word. You're taking all the meaning out of it by throwing it around indiscriminately like a dirty old washcloth in hopes that it will clean up any unpleasanties which you see as infecting our tidy existence!" John ranted, as he could feel his frustration rise under his secular collar.

His brother knows how to push his buttons. John still hasn't learned how to respond to the pressure. Thomas is much less passionate than John and remains calm during such debates. Thomas continued his pitiful gaze; this infuriated John further. He began to lose control of the situation as his thoughts joined his brother's irrational line. Brothers indeed.

"Goats are useful, hardy animals, going back to biblical times. They give

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us milk, meat, wool, not to mention cheese. Have you ever had a goat cheese pizza? Delicious. They're very practical animals. Some breeds thrive on very little water; makes them excellent farm animals, especially in desertic conditions. Others survive at higher elevations . . ." John paused a moment to catch his breath.

Arms crossed, Thomas gazed down at his little brother with a slightly amused look.

"They must have been highly sought out animals in those old days. "

"Sounds as though you've done your homework, little brother."

"Some. They're fascinating creatures. Even their less selective diet is practical to man in harsh environments. Pigs are as well, but they don't sweat, so they're no good in hot climates," brethren John reminded brother Thomas. When he gets into something, he never leaves a stone unturned. He'll surely look up Matthew 25:33 when he gets home.

"Yeah, well, your diet is certainly less selective. I'll give you that much,"

"They got a bad rap. Why?"

"Matthew 25:33," Thomas reminded him.

"Precisely my point."

"What does that mean?"

"Never mind."

"You lack faith, John. That's your problem in a nutshell."

That's another thing that gets John's goat. All his problems boiling down to one easy solution and more often than not it's somehow related to: faith. His brother knows this and uses it to antagonize him — usually when little brother has got him. But, instead of walking away, he will surely retaliate only to regret it later.

"It's outdated! Are we to condemn the left-handed people of the world as well, because of something that was written two-thousand years ago? Living in the past is dangerous. Let's make a new start!"

"John, you're the dangerous one here — you're completely losing it," Thomas replied in his calm, almost sedate manner.

"To hell with you, Thomas the doubter-in-yourself!"

Thomas knows how to handle this and as the bigger, older brother, he did what he felt needed to be done when little brother has lost sight of his rank and is behaving insubordinately. He rolled his long fingers into a tightly knuckled fist and unleashed his controlled corporal punishment in one swift lunge to the nose. No emotion is apparent in this remedy. It is done strictly out of his version of love. It wasn't the first time.

"Ow! Fascist!" John screamed and looked at his brother in shock — even though he should know by now that this turn of events is inevitable, especially when he curses in front of his righteous brother. He cupped his bloodied nose with both hands, glaring sadly at his brother between his index fingers. He didn't want him to see his tears. He turned around and ran home, his brother calling out his usual response, "I didn't hit you that hard!"

Halfway down the street he stopped when he realized he was running from his own house. He looked back. His brother was still inside. He decided to go for a walk; he was not numb enough to return and face his aggressor.

John now stands gazing at the note on the mirror in the hallway. It's been a week since the incident and Thomas hasn't called to apologize. Why does he always have to be the one to apologize? He was the one that got hit! He looks at his nose. The swelling has gone down, but it's still numb and probably will be for the rest of his life. It's so crooked now that he doesn't bother getting it set back in place anymore. He can't even remember what it's supposed to look like. Maybe his nose was always far-off to the left, the nostril plastered to the side of his face and the bump



like that of a one-humped camel. Breathing has been a difficulty since childhood. His parents assumed he had asthma. He looks like an unsuccessful boxer and, in a way, he is. He always fought back at his brother, but never physically. Unrelentingly, he got back into the ring even when he knew he would suffer yet another beating. When Thomas would get physically aggressive, he would run away (this childhood response to his brother's aggression would never leave him). Yet, he would always come back to finish what was started. Returning a few hours later he would try to get back on his brother's good side only to bring up the topic that wasn't finished. He was stubbornly persistent and Thomas respected him in spite of his flying fists. He was quite possibly jealous of a little brother, who had a spunky nature that was imaginative and full of innocent fervour — or maybe he just saw him as a little pest seeing as they were four years apart. Even though Thomas saw him as a cry baby, and he did cry a lot after he was struck (and still does), he never ran to Mum and Dad. His parents never figured out why their youngest son had the nose of a warrior. They figured he was just clumsy. When asked how he broke his nose for the umpteenth time, his reply was, "I fell down," "I fell into . . ." He was constantly falling down and into things. Actually, he was a little on the awkward side and certainly not prone to athletics like his big brother. His breathing problems further worsened his many attempts at various sports. So, it wasn't questioned, nor was the big brother's "perfect" reputation.

John's twisted nose reflects back at him in the mirror, questioning him about the stove, the thermostat, his other notes. He forgets his brother for the time being and walks through the house to investigate any small disturbance he might encounter. Anything could set him off, but not knowing is worse. He gives in to worry. Again.

As usual the place is a mess despite Mary's good-natured attempts at trying to put things in order. Everything is buried deep beneath layers of papers, books, magazines, plates, clothes, even garbage, as John plans on making something with the increasing rubble collection once he has time to sort it out — one day. If Mary were to discard of any one item within the massive pile that stretches from one end of the house to the other, John would know even before he entered the room where the missing item lay or used to lie. He quite possibly has a sixth sense when it comes

to objects in his house and a compelling force that drives him to attend to his collection. He plans on restoring the fragments of decay; to him nothing is worthless, except the limitations of thought. He is forever moving stuff in and around. To the untrained eye, it is merely a heap of garbage — piles of abstract matter distracting us from the real events that go on around us. But to John, it is a compendious hill of litter, the pick of the litter of his own creation — even if at times he spends more time with his mountainous pile of trash than with Mary. He knows his heap so well he can find anything within it: keys, detailed notes of some kind, a buried book, a lost sandwich, a wayward tool of some sort, or any of Mary's items as well. To the observer, it is like watching someone find a treasure — as John will go in and resurface with the object he intended to find. It is no treasure hunt to John; he knows where everything is. This passive pirate needed no map to guide him. Spending so much time wallowing in his rubble has given him a keen sense indeed. Mary knows this and respects his eccentric nature since he seems to be aware of what he's doing. His brother, on the other hand, is wary of this behaviour and reviles the pile as yet another one of his blasphemous ways. "Cleanliness is next to Godliness," he'll say. As children, he would clean up after John all the time. Maybe that was how he atoned for bopping John on the nose, again and again. When he comes over now to visit and John goes about pulling stuff out of the pile in front of him as though the items were in plain site it frightens Thomas in a mystical way — spirituality without the order, the organization. He wonders why John can't be more like him — normal. John has no concept of normalcy nor does he wish to explore such a crude word.

Making his rounds again to check that the house is functioning properly he stops dead suddenly like a tracking dog and reaches down into his mound of rubbish and pulls out a bible. What did his doomsayer of a brother say to him about the goat? Something about an ominous, left-handed devil destined to the fiery pits of hell, he thinks. This time of night makes it effortless for the mind to exaggerate one's worries. John should know better, but what else is he to do? Sleep is not an option for his racing mind. He remembers hearing the book of Matthew but can't remember the chapter or verse. He starts at the beginning.

The Book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of

Abraham. Abraham begat Isaac; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren; And Judas begat . . . Phew! He is discouraged by the following names that are filled with hyphens, lines above the letters and what appears to be little squiggly upturned lines that resemble the letter U. He feels like he's in a high school exam, unprepared for the material he sees in front of him (another one of his nightmare scenarios). He begins to fret, once again. He goes back for another tour of the house to make sure it is still standing. A sentinel can never rest. He comes back to the bible somewhat relieved, yet not satisfied. He continues on.

And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ . . . He reads on past the Pharisees, Judas Iscariot, Samaritans, Beelzebub, the many righteous and hypocrites, destruction, virgins . . . ah there it is! 25:32-33. And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Does Thomas think he's the lamb? John wonders whether his brother memorized the verse specifically for him. He reads on to discover there really is a bias toward right-handed people as the righteous sheep will be set on the Lord's right hand and be rewarded with everlasting life while the . . . Who are the others referred to as? Besides goats, that is. Cursed goats, he supposes. They get everlasting punishment into the everlasting fire. Why goats? Because they eat everything? Therefore, they lack self-control? The horns? The goatee? Their little tails? They can't help that. They were born that way. It's discrimination, man! Maybe they're exceptionally horny.

He runs over to another area of the pile and pulls out a dictionary, Webster's. He prefers Merriam. He finds Oxford to be pretentious and lacking in lengthy definitions. The Concise Oxford will not do, definitions too short, too taciturn too . . . concise. Goad, go-ahead, goal...go around. Goat. He reads the definition: 1a: any of the hollow-horned ruminant mammals...That does not mean he's horny though — however, hollow might imply devoid of depth. He reads on: related to the sheep... Aha! It's practically a lamb itself. Unless people think of it as a wayward sheep. Maybe that's it. He continues, eagerly anticipating the next tidbit of information (this is only one sentence yet he relishes every precious moment): but of lighter build with backwardly arching horns ...

Of course, backward horns! This must signify their regressive behaviour. It's obviously a cynical animal with no hope of advancement in life. It must be lacking the necessary hope to be a true Christian. He's athirst for more knowledge. He pursues onward: a short tail (possibly short-sighted, he thinks), and usually straight hair (walking the straight and narrow, that's good, but perhaps its not heading right, the right direction). b: Capricorn. He has no idea what that means, so he lets it go. 2: a lecherous man. Now he's on to something. He riffles through the dictionary to look up: lecherous. Lecherous: given to or suggestive of lechery. Aha! He still doesn't know the exact definition of lechery, though he knows it isn't good. He looks it up. It's not far. It's on the next line. Lechery: inordinate indulgence in sexual activity: lasciviousness. Feeling vindicated, he blames Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (tenth edition) for perpetrating the myth of the villainous goat. Then, he reads the third definition: scapegoat. That sounds devious, underhanded, as though someone got a raw deal— the goat, that is. He looks up scapegoat: 1: a goat upon whose head are symbolically placed the sins of the people after which he is sent into the wilderness in the biblical ceremony for Yom Kippur. Somewhat incriminating, he thinks, but the next part cinches it: 2a: one that bears the blame for others. b: one that is the object of irrational hostility. He senses that state of euphoria he felt when he discovered his reincarnation theory and the moment he found his true animal-self (or past animal). Everything makes sense to him now. Poor goat, it doesn't deserve such confounded, propagandist lies. People are irrational. These books are written by people; therefore, these books are irrational. From that day on he would love the goat more than ever. If told he is a goat by someone he will take it as a compliment — not that he was ashamed before, but now he has the power that only newfound knowledge can give.

The sun is now creeping its way through a small crack in the living-room blinds, soothing John with its wily ways. Normally, he would wander throughout the house looking for incongruencies, but he doesn't feel the need at present. He dozes off in the seductive rays that enlighten his being.

When Mary comes down for her morning breakfast, John is fast asleep in his favourite old chair. An affectionate lump forms in her throat at the

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sight of his limp head leaning over the backside of the tattered chair, his scraggly hair poking out in the back in a fibrous, solid clump like that of a bird's nest. She wonders how she could love this man so much, any man or person for that matter. Some days she can feel every bone in her body aching for his simple warmth; she imagines herself slowly breaking off into separate pieces until she sees him again, and with this, the reassembled fragments of herself. Nobody should have that much power over another. It makes her feel cheated, vulnerable, scared. Then, she looks at him for the first time again, and she sees nothing but beauty, relieving her, only to feel scared all over again. She doesn't understand the ambiguity of these feelings but accepts them anyways and trusts in the greater scheme of life for reasons unknown to her.

Shuffling over in her dusty slippers, she carefully watches his easy breathing. The in and out, up and down rhythm is so peaceful; she wants to crawl into him. She sighs at the thought of this troubled man who is not the easiest person to live with. Though she knows this, she would never leave him. That is not an option. She looks down at his lap and sees the book, the book of Matthew. She reads at the top of the page: The last judgement described Judas' treachery. The "Lord's supper." The tiny opening in the blinds that allows the sun to penetrate illuminates only John. She shakes her head and smiles fondly down at him as she thinks of the irony. My little, devilishly tortured man looks like such an angel. Maybe someone is watching out for him. She hopes so because she's not sure she is enough for him. He is a handful — both left and right.

*– David Woodward is a wildlife biologist by trade but now spend his days writing and teaching. He has several poems published in Word Catalyst Magazine and one short story upcoming in Menda City Review, March '09.*