


"Matt Mikalatos's imagination is, simply put, miraculous." A.J. JACOBS

New York Times bestselling author of *The Year of Living Biblically*

NIGHT^{OF} THE LIVING DEAD CHRISTIAN

The word "DEAD" is rendered in a large, bold, sans-serif font. Within the letter "D", there is a black silhouette of a werewolf in a pouncing pose. Within the letter "A", there is a black silhouette of a person running towards the right.

one man's ferociously funny quest to discover
what it means to be truly transformed

MATT MIKALATOS

Advance Praise for *Night of the Living Dead Christian*

“Matt Mikalatos gets what the gospel is all about. It’s not about reform or spiritual cosmetology. We’re dead, we’re monstrous, we’re enemies of God. But because of his great mercy, he desires a relationship. He wants us to become like him. What that looks like is beautiful, funny, and tragic, and it’s captured well in this transformational allegory. Have fun as you read. Enjoy the goose bumps, laughs, and tears.”

CHRIS FABRY, *radio host and bestselling author of Almost Heaven*

“Somewhere between classic monster movies and C. S. Lewis is Matt Mikalatos’s inventive sci-fi gospel drama, *Night of the Living Dead Christian*. Zombies, werewolves, vampires, mad scientists, crossbows, and . . . *Jesus*? It’s all there in this endlessly energetic story about how God’s grace can transform every last one of us. But can monsters really teach us about Jesus? Before you laugh at that question, read this wildly creative, surprisingly insightful book.”

BRETT MCCRACKEN, *author of Hipster Christianity:
When Church and Cool Collide*

“I love to laugh and I love to think. So what a treat it is to find a book like *Night of the Living Dead Christian* that allows me to do both. Often at the same time. In his fun, campy monster book (did I mention I also love monsters?), Matt Mikalatos takes readers on an adventure every Christian needs to take. One that helps us see our own zombie or werewolf or vampire tendencies that make us live like we’re dead and one that teaches us to shed those tendencies and live like we’ve been reborn.”

CARYN DAHLSTRAND RIVADENEIRA, *author of Grumble Hallelujah*

“In *Night of the Living Dead Christian*, Matt Mikalatos sinks his comedic teeth into our spiritual jugular . . . only to find us nearly drained of the new life Christ promised. This is a book that disarms with its wit while driving a stake into our spiritual complacency. With the help of werewolves, vampires, and zombies, Mikalatos takes a fun but penetrating look at the quest for spiritual transformation . . . and us monsters who need it most. Five out of five silver bullets!”

MIKE DURAN, *author of The Resurrection*

Praise for Matt Mikalatos and *Imaginary Jesus*

“Startling, contemporary, meaningful. . . . Mixing questions of suffering and free will with a nexus of weirdness, Mikalatos throws Christian fiction into the world of Comic-Con and *Star Wars*.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Think Monty Python meets C. S. Lewis. . . . Rarely does a book slide so easily from the laugh-out-loud moments to the tender-yet-challenging moments.”

RELEVANT MAGAZINE

“Mikalatos’s debut work takes readers on a hilarious ride.”

CBA RETAILERS + RESOURCES

“I’ve found my new favorite book, not only for the insights it offered me but for the conversation it’s afforded my church. Mikalatos packages honesty with humor that allows us to ask questions we’d rather not ask, but absolutely should.”

TONY MYLES, *YouthWorker Journal*

“Gutsy, irreverent, hilarious, courageous, poignant, eye-opening, bizarre, quirky, mold-breaking—those are a lot of bold adjectives to describe one little book. But *Imaginary Jesus* deserves every one of them and many more. That’s because Matt Mikalatos accomplishes so much in one slim novel that your brain struggles to keep pace with the thoughts that go whooshing through it. . . . Lest you think this is all fun and games, let me assure you that it’s not. Matt’s encounter with the real Jesus is as compelling a scene as you’ll find anywhere in contemporary literature. . . . What a joy it was to find this treasure! I’ll take this book over a thousand sermons and a library full of theological tomes on who Jesus is.”

FAITHFULREADER.COM

“[A] sharp-witted, mind-bending, faith-challenging excursion. . . . If Mikalatos’s wry wit doesn’t pull you into the book within a couple pages, his action-packed chase of Imaginary Jesus will soon have

you flipping pages. But be warned. Beneath the excitement of the adventurous chase and the humor of his comic wit, Mikalatos packs some heavy biblical punches that may send your own imaginary Jesus spinning, leaving you to confront the real One.”

DC CHRISTIAN FICTION EXAMINER

“Take the theological forcefulness of Bonhoeffer, combine it with the imaginative whimsy of C. S. Lewis and the wit of Charles Spurgeon, and you get Matt Mikalatos. He is a gifted writer, a true Christian, with a first-rate mind. *Imaginary Jesus* is a startlingly original, comedic, and theologically true tour de force. It marks the debut of one of today’s most prominent young Christian writers.”

GARY THOMAS, *author of Sacred Marriage and Pure Pleasure*

“Matt Mikalatos writes like a happy-go-lucky C. S. Lewis. *Imaginary Jesus* is relentlessly funny, with surprisingly profound spiritual insights.”

JOSH D. MCDOWELL, *author and speaker*

“If there is such a thing as a holy romp, this is it. I laughed, I applauded and cheered, I thanked God. Every Christian I know will want to read this one!”

PHYLLIS TICKLE, *author of The Great Emergence*

“Matt Mikalatos has written a funny, surprising, gutsy tale. Through his writing, I recognized many of my own false assumptions and shallow beliefs, and possibly even more importantly, I really enjoyed the journey.”

SHAUNA NIEQUIST, *author of Cold Tangerines and Bittersweet*

“Matt Mikalatos has an incredible gift that is highlighted throughout *Imaginary Jesus*. While this book is hilarious, it will also cause you to stop dead in your tracks and evaluate what you really believe about Jesus. I was convicted over and over at how many times I’ve created an ‘imaginary Jesus’ to fit my self-centered, ego-driven, materialistic desires.”

PETE WILSON, *author of Plan B and pastor of Cross Point Church in Nashville*

“I didn’t know what I was getting into when I started reading *Imaginary Jesus* by Matt Mikalatos. By the second page, I was hooked by its humor and challenging insights. Be prepared to have your relationship with Jesus enriched and enlarged by this fun and fascinating look at how we tend to picture Jesus on our own terms.”

TREMPER LONGMAN, *Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies at Westmont College*

“Like anyone, I suppose, I was wondering what was in store for me as I opened the inaugural book written by an unknown author. As I finished *Imaginary Jesus*, I had a response I had never experienced before. I was astonished! *Imaginary Jesus* not only entertained me to the point that I was embarrassed by my public outbursts of laughter, but it also challenged my faulty thinking on who Jesus was and is. Matt’s zany sense of humor was only outdone by the fact that he made so much sense! I’m grateful he let us into his wacky universe!!”

CHRIS ZAUGG, *executive director (Keynote) of Campus Crusade for Christ*

“Crazy and creative and utterly captivating. *Imaginary Jesus* is an entertaining annihilation of all the false and frustrating idols that need to be kicked around a little more.”

DALE AHLQUIST, *president of the American Chesterton Society*

“Matt Mikalatos is a crazy man. But he is a wise crazy man. *Imaginary Jesus* is a crazy book. But don’t let that fool you. It has a powerful message that is desperately needed for our insane times. So just go with it and let Matt take you on a hilariously serious journey through the oddly firing synapses of his brain. And don’t be surprised if you lose some unnecessary baggage along the way.”

COLEMAN LUCK, *Hollywood screenwriter, executive producer (The Equalizer, Gabriel’s Fire), and author of Angel Fall*

“Perhaps the funniest Christian book of all time. Including the future. But more enjoyable if read in the present.”

KEITH BUBALO, *national director of the Worldwide Student Network*

“Imaginative, thought-provoking, funny, and especially convicting. This book exposes my own imaginary Jesus, as well as the many

others out there. It reads like an updated version of Phillips's *Your God Is Too Small*, only with a lot more wit and creativity. This is the Matt Mikalatos I know—sharp, hungry to know God, passionate to reach a lost world. Matt helps all of us see our own propensity to idolatry and brings us back to the real Jesus.”

DR. JOHN E. JOHNSON, *associate professor of pastoral theology and director of the Doctor of Ministry program at Western Seminary; senior pastor of Village Baptist Church in Portland*

“*Imaginary Jesus* is the most powerful and clever book I’ve read this year. I am already recommending it to everyone I know. Which now includes you. . . . Read it.”

LEAD SINGER, *Page CXVI*

“With uncompromising awareness and hilarious creativity, Matt Mikalatos delivers a tour de force that is accessible, entertaining, and thought provoking. You’ll laugh out loud at Mikalatos’s brilliant humor, but watch out—while you’re laughing, he’ll hit you square in the jaw with a solid right hook when he presents you with your own mythology about Jesus.”

COACH CULBERTSON, *editor of Coach’s Midnight Diner and coeditor of Relief Journal*

“*Imaginary Jesus* is a fast, wild, unnerving ride. Think J. B. Phillips (*Your God Is Too Small*) on six shots of espresso running crazy through the streets of Portland, Oregon.”

DAVID SANFORD, *author of If God Disappears: 9 Faith Wreckers and What to Do about Them*

“When I read *Imaginary Jesus*, I laughed so hard milk came out of my nose . . . and I wasn’t even drinking any.”

ADAM SABADOS, *just some guy*

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MATT MIKALATOS


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Night of the Living Dead Christian: One Man's Ferociously Funny Quest to Discover What It Means to Be Truly Transformed

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*To my father, who taught me all a boy needs to know about monsters
and many other astonishing things. Thanks, Dad. I love you.*

Contents

Introduction xv

CHAPTER 1:	Who Are the People in Your Neighborhood?	1
CHAPTER 2:	Prologue	19
CHAPTER 3:	Zombies vs. Vampires	23
CHAPTER 4:	Kill Thy Neighbor	31
CHAPTER 5:	Full Moon, I Saw Him Standing Alone	37
INTERLUDE:	And Now, a Word from Our Werewolf	45
CHAPTER 6:	In the Wolf's Chair	49
CHAPTER 7:	"No, Luther Martin."	55
INTERLUDE:	A Werewolf Shares His Thoughts about Fathers	63
CHAPTER 8:	What's Missing in Church?	CH _ CH 69
CHAPTER 9:	Brains, Brains, We Want Your Brains	77
CHAPTER 10:	Singing, Just Singing 'bout Your Brains	83
CHAPTER 11:	No Body Knows the Trouble I've Seen	89
INTERLUDE:	A Werewolf's Thoughts on Transformation	93
CHAPTER 12:	My Pet Zombie	97
CHAPTER 13:	Family Matters	103
CHAPTER 14:	Face of the Vampire!	109

CHAPTER 15:	The Cure	115
CHAPTER 16:	Der Verevolf und der Shrink	125
CHAPTER 17:	What a Vampire Has at Stake	137
CHAPTER 18:	Who Soothes the Savage Beast	145
INTERLUDE:	A Werewolf Shares His Thoughts about Love	155
CHAPTER 19:	The Not-So-Secret Lair	161
CHAPTER 20:	Born-Again Ice Cream	169
CHAPTER 21:	Clockwork Jesus	175
CHAPTER 22:	You're Not My Father! No! It's Not True! I'll Never Join You!	185
CHAPTER 23:	The One Where I Set the Church on Fire	193
INTERLUDE:	The Werewolf and the Molten Man	201
CHAPTER 24:	Lawn of the Dead	207
CHAPTER 25:	The Symphony of the Mad Scientist	213
CHAPTER 26:	No Longer Married to a Werewolf	225
CHAPTER 27:	The Skin We Find Ourselves In	231
CHAPTER 28:	A Werewolf Shares His Epilogue	235

Acknowledgments 241

Interview with the Author 245

Discussion Guide 251

Are You a Monster? 261

Rejected Titles and Taglines 269



INTRODUCTION



Monsters do, of course, exist.

Despite our preferences, despite our denunciations and scientific proofs, despite illuminating our porches at night in the vain hope that these brave lights will keep the darkness from our homes, this simple fact remains. I know this all too well, and from common experience. I do not speak of metaphors or children in skulled clothing at Halloween, but true monsters—creatures of darkness who walk among us with impunity and ill intent.

Nevertheless, when our children cry out in the night we hush them and say, “There is nothing to fear” before we triple-check the locks on the doors, before we shut the windows and draw the blinds. We reassure our children that they are safe, despite the fact that we know such assertions to be demonstrably false. We all know that there are pale-skinned creatures in the darkness, and that the howl at full moon is not always the neighborhood dog, and that fear in a world such as ours is a sane and laudable emotion designed to spare us harm.

We prefer Seneca, with his noble *homo homini res sacra*, to the earthy insistence of Plautus that *lupus est homo homini*.

Seneca observes humans treating one another as sacred beings, but Plautus sees us tearing one another apart like animals. Plautus observes the human race more keenly, for we all know in our moments of deepest honesty that human beings, at least some of them, are scarcely disguised wolves dressed in designer clothing. This stubborn refusal to embrace the reality of the world around us is, perhaps, the quintessence of the human experience. Nevertheless, this is the story of one neighborhood much like your own. A neighborhood that I know intimately because—make no mistake—I appear in the pages of this book.

The narrator and my neighbor, Matt Mikalatos, inexplicably styles these events into a comedy, and though I felt nothing but pain at the time, this story is, after all, one that meets the Greek definition of the *commedia*. It is a reminder that despite our monstrous lives, our every story need not be one of tragedy. Which is to say, the missive that follows is not a horror story. It is a mirror. Take courage and gaze into it carefully.

Cordially,

Luther

A concerned citizen and friend of the author

CHAPTER I

WHO ARE THE PEOPLE IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD?



MONSTERS DON'T EXIST. I had been telling myself that for nearly a week. But it was the sort of night you could almost believe in them. A bone-white moon hung in a field punctuated with bright stars, and dark clouds moved across the sky like slow-moving barges. It was nearly Halloween, and despite the cobwebs, giant spiders, tombstones, skulls, and electronic screams, it was a pleasant night. But I didn't feel pleasant. I felt nervous. It was a week ago today that I accidentally interrupted the argument between my neighbor and his wife, and since then I had felt jumpy in the neighborhood at night. Nervous. Always looking over my shoulder. But, I told myself, there's no such thing as monsters.

I was on patrol, like every night. My neighbors hadn't shown any interest in starting a neighborhood watch program, so I walked the beat myself, a solid pair of walking shoes on, gloves with no fingers, a pair of binoculars swinging jauntily around my neck, and my cell phone in hand, the numbers 911 already dialed and just waiting for an eager thumb to press SEND. In my other hand I held a long, heavy flashlight for bludgeoning ne'er-do-wells. I couldn't let a little incident like last week's keep me from my appointed rounds.

Up ahead, on the corner of 108th Street in the middle of a cluster of identical houses with the identically perfect lawns that permeated our neighborhood, stood a lanky man in a long white lab coat, a pair of goggles pushed up into his disheveled hair. A thick nest of electrical wires coiled out of a nearby streetlight and into a box he clutched with thin, white hands, and he was laughing and doing a sort of merry jig as I approached, the box squealing and flashing with a riot of handheld casino gaudiness.

"Excuse me," I said. Of course I needed no excuse since it was, after all, my neighborhood, and I was not the crazy person connecting wires to streetlights. But it always pays to be polite. Although when you're a neighborhood watch guy out on patrol, sometimes it also pays to be a no-nonsense guardian of the suburbs. I was just waiting for this guy to give me an excuse to go all "no nonsense" on him. He looked like the kind of guy who probably had too much nonsense in his life, and I was the perfect person to change that.

The man turned to me and grinned. He held the box out

toward me. “No doubt you would like to ask me about the work of inexplicable genius I hold in my hands.”

“As a matter of fact, yes.” I shifted my stance and held the flashlight nonchalantly over my shoulder, making it clear that I could give him a glancing blow if necessary. “Do you have a permit for that big mess of electrical wiring there, sir?”

His eyes widened, and he tittered nervously. He glanced furtively up the street, then shoved the box into my hands. “One moment.” He ran halfway down the street, his lab coat billowing up behind him, and shouted, “Hibbs!”

A gate swung open on the Murphy house, which had been sitting empty for three months. A man came walking from the backyard, easily seven feet tall. His arms and chest were thick where the scientist’s were thin, and he gave the impression of a man who had been stuffed full of something, that he held more than blood and muscle and bone under his skin. He wore a tight shirt that showed off his muscles. Stenciled across his chest were the words THE HIBBS 3000. He regarded me coolly.

The scientist grabbed one enormous arm and asked, “Hibbs, do we have a permit for this endeavor?”

Hibbs looked at me and then back at the scientist. “Negative. This power source, which we require for our experiment, cannot be legally accessed, Doctor.”

The scientist smiled at me, relieved. “Well, there you have it. Can’t get a permit for something that’s illegal, now can you?” He snatched the box away from me. “Would you like to watch our experiment, good neighbor?”

“You can’t do illegal experiments here in our neighborhood!”

The scientist cocked his head sideways. “Oh. Why’s that?”

“It’s breaking the law.”

“Ha ha. So is speeding, my dear boy. But that doesn’t stop anyone.” He took my hand and shook it firmly, then chuckled to himself. “So is cloning human beings, ha ha, at least in one’s garage, but that never stopped me, no!”

“That’s it, pal,” I said, and I set my flashlight on the sidewalk and whipped out the tiny little notebook and even tinier pencil I carried in my back pocket, wet the tip of the pencil with my tongue, flipped open the notebook, and put my pencil at the ready. “What’s your name?”

The doctor looked at his box, which was humming now. I felt a mild heat coming off of it. “Hibbs, that last electrical boost seems to have done the trick.” He jumped, as if his brain had prodded him that I was waiting for a reply, and said, “Oh yes, my name is Dr. Daniel Culbetron. And my associate there is the Hibbs 3000. He’s a robot.”

“Android,” the Hibbs 3000 said.

Culbetron threw one hand up in the air. “Potato, tomato. Don’t be so sensitive, Hibbs.” He turned to me, as if confiding a great secret. “Robots are notoriously unbalanced emotionally.”

Hibbs turned to me, another coil of wire in his hands. “You have yet to exchange your appellation with us.”

“I’m Matt Mikalatos, Chief Officer of the local Neighborhood Watch.”

The box in Culbetron's hand started warbling and beeping, and he laughed and waved it at Hibbs. "We had best find a safe observation point." He looked over his shoulder, as if he had misplaced something, then over his other shoulder, and then turned in a complete circle, wrapping himself in cords and giving the appearance of a circus clown looking for a small, collared dog. "Where is our benefactor, Hibbs? Do you think he'll want to see our device being tested?"

I tapped the box. "What exactly does this thing do?"

The Hibbs 3000 paused, then looked at me and said, "The apparatus creates a surge of auditory effluvia that is anathema to the lycanthrope."

Dr. Culbetron, midway through unraveling his Gordian knot of electrical wiring, sighed and shook the box at Hibbs. "In English, Hibbs. This poor neighborhood constable cannot possibly comprehend your robotic ramblings." He handed me the box and stepped gingerly over a cord. "It's a device designed to create sounds that will be upsetting to werewolves."

"I don't understand."

"It's quite simple, really. Perhaps you have seen anti-rodent devices that plug into an electrical socket. They produce a series of high-pitched squeals, above the range of human hearing, that drive away mice and some insects. It sends them scurrying out of their little hidey-holes, charging past the devices screaming their furry little heads off as they head for the woods." He snatched the box and held it over his head. "This box does precisely that—for *were*wolves."

I tightened my grip on my flashlight and a chill ran through me. "There's no such thing as werewolves."

Hibbs was setting a ladder up against the side of the Murphy house. "There is a 63 percent likelihood that the device will evoke a similar response from multiple monster species."

"There's no such thing as monsters!"

Culbetron put one hand gently on my shoulder. "Werewolves, of course, are rather rare in this part of the world. You're quite right about that. The vast majority of the lycanthropic population has been confined to Eastern Europe."

Hibbs shook his head. "Scientific research on this topic is irresponsibly scant. Dr. Culbetron does not represent scientific fact with his previous assertion."

"Well then, Hibbs, let us start some scientific research of our own!" With that he and Hibbs pulled earphones on, and Culbetron slammed his palm down on the button in the center of the box. A sound something like a mix between a jetliner, a baby crying, and fingernails on a chalkboard came screaming out of the box.

"One minute and forty-seven seconds, Doctor!" Hibbs shouted.

"Thank you, Hibbs. To the roof! Let the science begin!"

They climbed a metal ladder onto the roof of the Murphy house, Culbetron struggling to ascend with the box in one hand and Hibbs waiting patiently behind him. I put my hands over my ears, and Hibbs fixed me with a curious

look. I shouted at him to ask if they had a third pair of ear-phones, but he didn't answer. I was about to ask again when Culbetron shouted from the roof, "Zombies!"

"There's no such thing as zombies!" I shouted back. I could barely hear him over the horrible shrieking of the machine. The volume was growing, and the lights in the neighborhood dimmed.

"Look, Hibbs! Coming from the south—a horde of the undead! It works, Hibbs! It works!" There was a popping sound from the roof, and sparks came flying out of Culbetron's box. Startled, he fell backward into Hibbs, who tried to catch him, and they both stumbled over the apex of the roof, slid to the edge, and nearly fell before the electrical cords caught on the gutter. The box, however, flew to the ground and smashed to pieces. The sound, mercifully, stopped. Culbetron and Hibbs hung from the roof, their feet dangling thirteen inches from the ground.

I took my fingers out of my ears. I heard a dull roar, a sort of rumbling echo in my ears. It appeared that Culbetron's box had temporarily deafened me. I looked to Culbetron, who was frantically trying to climb back up the electrical wiring and get onto the roof. I could hear him telling Hibbs over and over that they must get on the roof before the zombies came. So my hearing wasn't gone after all. Then what was that strange rumbling sound?

I turned on my flashlight for comfort and walked down the street, toward the rapidly increasing sound of riot in the southern part of the neighborhood. I looked back and could

see the two crazy people clambering back onto the roof of the Murphy house. Maniacs.

I had walked half a block when I saw them come around the corner and turn toward me, just one or two at first, lurching out of the shadows and dragging their stiff legs along the sidewalk. But then a few more came, and then more, and then a terrifying conglomeration of people with green-painted faces and torn clothes and makeup that gave the appearance of torn flesh. My finger hovered over the SEND button on my cell phone, but I hesitated. What would I say to the dispatcher? I ran through the conversation in my head. First the operator would ask me the nature of the emergency. I would say zombies. The operator would ask me what the zombies were doing. I would say running around, but that I was afraid they might bite someone. The operator would remind me that this was, after all, America, and zombies are allowed to walk around and that I should call back if the zombies ate someone or a house caught on fire or something. By the time I got to this point in my imaginary conversation, the first zombie had reached me—a fast zombie in running shoes and sweatpants—and he snatched the phone away from me, hit SEND, and shouted into it.

“Hey!” I said, and I grabbed the phone away from him and shut it. “I’m Chief Officer of the local Neighborhood Watch, sir. You can just tell me the nature of your emergency.” Looking frightened, the zombie pointed at the horde running up behind him. “Zombies?” I asked. He shook his head furiously and pointed again. “Zombies!” I said again.

"I know. I see them." He shook his head and held up three fingers. "Three words." He nodded. "First word." The zombie made a terrible face. "Indigestion? No. Bad taste? No. Wait. Is it . . . monster?" The zombie nodded and held up two fingers and started running in place. The rest of the zombie horde was almost on us now. "Run? Chase? Chasing?" The zombie nodded and held up a third finger, then pointed at himself. "Monster chasing me!" The zombie smiled and jumped up and down and pointed at my phone. Then he looked at how close the other undead were to us, gave a little shriek, and ran away. Zombies were nicer than I thought—or that one was, at least. The rest of the zombies were starting to speed past me now.

"Ruuuuuuhhn," one of them moaned. A snapping, growling sound came from behind it, and I looked past the zombie-things to see a large, furred creature biting at their legs and herding them toward me with a ferocious speed.

I stared in wonder at this vicious animal. "Is that . . . a giant badger?" But before I could get a good look I was swept up into the tide of the undead. Against my will, my feet started moving, and the looks of real terror on the zombie faces convinced me I didn't want to get too close to that angry badger at the back of the crowd. I started pushing zombies out of my way. I could hear the badger-thing right behind me now, the snapping of its long, white teeth right at my heels. One zombie looked over at my scalp and licked his lips. My wife has always said she loves me for my brains, which is great, but attractive brains are a real disadvantage

when there are hungry zombies around. I pushed him into a thornbush along the sidewalk, and a panicked laugh bubbled out of my mouth. "Sorry," I said. I wasn't sure whether being polite to zombies pays off or not.

The zombies were starting to scatter now, disappearing by twos and threes down side streets, under hedges, and between parked cars. The badger was getting closer and had a disturbingly wolflike appearance.

"A werewolf!" Culbetron was yelling at me from the rooftop. I kept running, but looking back at the badger I could see now that it was definitely more wolf than badger. It was, in fact, more man than badger too. It was bent over like a man running on all fours, its back twisted down toward canine legs and clawed, furred hands. A fountain of drool was pouring from the creature's fang-studded mouth, and I could tell as it got closer that it was bigger than me. Culbetron cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "You should run faster!"

I considered shouting a sarcastic thanks to the doctor, but I was already short on breath, so instead, I took his advice. I could hear the snapping teeth of the wolf getting closer, and the sound of its claws clicking on the sidewalk. I threw my flashlight back at the wolf, but I heard it clatter to the ground and the wolf growled. Then I felt the sudden, considerable weight of a large, clawed mammal settle into my back, and I fell onto the cement, skidding along for several feet before we stopped.

The wolf rolled me over and huffed in my face. Despite my expectations, its breath didn't smell one bit like rotting flesh.

I put my hands on its face and tried to push it back. “Your breath is surprisingly minty.” The wolf snarled, a menacing, terrifying sound. A small voice in the back of my head informed me that since the wolf took such good care of his teeth, he should have no problem eating me right up. I let out a low moan and tried to think how to get out of this situation. I felt like I was about to start crying, and the wolf was pushing his gaping maw uncomfortably close to my tasty face. Finally, I gave him the only compliment I could think of: “My, what nice teeth you have.” As soon as I said it I regretted it. But I start to babble when I’m panicked, and before I could control myself I said, “Why do you think the wolf in ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ didn’t just eat her in the forest instead of running ahead to Grandma’s and waiting there to eat her?” Which, if you think about it, really is an excellent question.

The wolf shook its head, and its yellow eyes narrowed. Its ears perked, and it looked back over its shoulder. It looked quickly back to me just as a straight, silver arrow sprouted from its left shoulder. It let out an animal squeal of pain. I was so startled that I let the wolf fall forward onto my chest, and its muzzle brushed my ear. It snorted, but it almost sounded like it had said a word. Like it had said, “Help.” It pushed itself up from my chest, and the look in its face seemed to change from savage hatred to an almost elemental fear. It looked in my eyes one more time, only this time its eyes seemed almost human, as if they were scanning me to see if I might be a source of help, as one soul crying out to

another. It was as if the wolf wanted help, not just to escape the hunter, but to escape something inside itself. It jumped from my chest and loped up the street, then catapulted its body over a fence across the street.

I stood up and brushed myself off. My back hurt from the wolf's claws, and my chest hurt from hitting the pavement. The wolf and the zombies had disappeared like sunbaked snow. The neighborhood was quiet again.

A short man with a broken face came charging up the sidewalk, cradling a crossbow in his arms. I realized the silver arrow must have been a bolt from the crossbow. When I say the man's face was broken, that is not an exaggeration. His nose had clearly been broken many, many times, so that he had the unmistakable look of a sheep, and there were scars and lacerations covering his arms and face. Weapons and strange sachets hung from his belt and a bandolier was slung across his chest. He grabbed my arm, and with an intensity that made me enormously uncomfortable he said, "Did the wolf bite you?"

"The wolf?"

"The verewolf."

"Oh. No. It knocked me down, though." I looked the way the werewolf had come instead of the way it had run off. Something about the look in its eyes after it was wounded made me want to help it, even if it couldn't find the words to ask. "It went, uh, over there."

The man with the broken face shook me, hard. "There are wampires and verewolves and zombies about. You had best get inside."

Culbetron and Hibbs came running up. A little late, I thought. Culbetron clapped the hunter on the shoulder. "The device worked admirably, sir, did it not?"

"Yah, yah, wery good."

"Until the malfunction," Hibbs said.

Culbetron touched a finger to the broken-faced man's shoulder. "You appear to be carrying a crossbow and a great deal of weapons, Borut."

"Yah. To kill the volf."

Hibbs and Culbetron exchanged glances. "That is anti-theoretical to our purposes," Hibbs said.

Culbetron's face flushed bright red. "We are scientists, sir! Our goal is to capture and study these creatures, and perhaps to cure them."

Borut laughed. "You cannot cure the volf. Here is the only cure." He patted the crossbow cradled in his arms.

Culbetron lifted his nose and said haughtily, "Ours is both a spiritual and a scientific endeavor, Borut. We kill the monsters only as a last resort. This association is finished!"

"As you vish. Now I must find the volf." Borut ran the way I had pointed, the moonlight shining off the cement and glinting on the silver bolt in his crossbow. As he turned the corner and left our sight, a chilling howl came from behind us. Culbetron and Hibbs both turned toward me, looks of wonder on their faces.

"Yeah, it ran the other way. Come on, we have to make sure it doesn't eat my wife and kids!" We ran in the direction of the howl, and I showed them where the wolf had leapt the

fence. A pair of yellow eyes glared at us, and a deep-throated growl came from the creature. On the ground I saw the bolt, swathed in the creature's blood. The wolf bared its teeth, then turned and jumped into the next yard over. We ran alongside the fence. The creature seemed to be moving toward my house, but at the last moment it turned and headed west. About six houses down from my house it ran into the backyard, and we followed. The werewolf was getting ahead of us, but I skidded into the backyard just in time to see a flash of fur and an oversized doggie door flapping in the back door. Note to self: never get a doggie door.

"We have to warn your neighbors," Culbetron said.

"I say we leave well enough alone."

"You're the Neighborhood Watch person!"

"Oh, fine." I walked up to the door and pounded on it. "Werewolf in your house, werewolf in your house!" I ran down the steps without waiting for an answer. "Let's get out of here."

But the door had already opened, and I could see the silhouette of a thin man in the doorway—the same man from last week, I thought. "Can I help you?" His voice made it clear he had no desire to help us, that he saw us as an annoyance. I couldn't see his face in the shadows.

I was suddenly struck with the ludicrous nature of what I needed to tell him. "I think a wild animal might have come in through your dog door."

"Our dog just came in. Is that what you saw?"

"Well, I didn't actually see it go in."

“It was our dog. If that’s all you have to say, then good night.”

“Sorry to disturb you. Good night.”

He closed the door without further comment, which seemed a little rude. I rubbed my arms and looked around nervously. “So there’s still a werewolf out here somewhere.”

“Don’t worry,” Culbetron said. “We’ll help you catch it.”

“You’ll help me do what now?”

Hibbs interrupted, “Doctor, it appears that the zombies have recovered their equilibrium and once more roam the night seeking to assimilate the living.”

I turned to Hibbs. I could see several zombies lumbering up behind him. “When you say ‘assimilate the living,’ do you mean turn us into zombies?”

“Affirmative.”

Culbetron rubbed his chin. “Or eat us. Those are the options when dealing with zombies, to be assimilated or digested.”

The zombies were clumping up now, flowing in from around the neighborhood, down streets, under rosebushes, and behind cars, and they seemed to sense the three of us on the sidewalk, because they were headed our direction. “Follow me.” I ran down the street on the sidewalk farthest from the zombies, Culbetron and Hibbs close behind me. “My house is just ahead.” But when we got to my house, there were three zombies milling around on the porch. They appeared to be stuffing flyers into the handle of my front door. These were very strange zombies. I punched my fist

into my palm. “I knew I should have put up a ‘No Soliciting’ sign.” I looked at the other zombies. Now that I noticed it, most of them had bright green flyers in their hands. I picked one up off the ground and read it out loud: “REVIVAL IS COMING. Join us this Sunday for our weekly REVIVAL. The Lord is coming to Dr. Bokor’s church. Are you?” The church name and address had been torn off. Weird. I folded it and put it in my pocket.

Maybe the Lord was going to Dr. Bokor’s church, but I wasn’t planning on being there. I have my own church, after all, and I was pretty sure that God would be there, also. Minus the brain-eating, flyer-leaving parishioners.

Culbetron asked, “What now?”

My neighbor Lara’s house was behind us, but there were zombies in our path. I knew she would let us in, but the slow approach of the undead threatened to cut us off. Some of them looked hungry. The choice appeared to be move forward to be eaten or remain where we were. “We could go to my Secret Lair,” I said reluctantly. “I usually only go there alone to hatch secret plans where my wife or daughters won’t get in the way.”

“I suggest we move swiftly.”

I pulled my keys out. “Quickly then!” I unlocked the door to my Toyota Corolla and leapt into the driver’s seat, slammed the door, and unlocked the back door just in time for Culbetron and Hibbs to crowd in. Their knees were in their faces, but they were safe from the groping hands of the zombies hitting the glass. The zombies looked through the windows at us in uncomprehending confusion.

“Drive!” Culbetron shouted. “Lead us on, sir, to your Secret Lair!”

I cleared my throat. “This is my Secret Lair.”

Culbetron looked out the window, where a zombie was absently smashing his palm into the glass, over and over. Hibbs shifted his long legs, which caused both Culbetron and me to rearrange. Culbetron scratched his chin, as if thinking carefully what he should say in response to this revelation. When he finally spoke, he said, “This is the worst Secret Lair ever.”

“If it weren’t for your earsplitting invention, we wouldn’t be in this mess. I guess we just wait here until the zombies move along.” But the zombies didn’t move along. They gathered around the car and started to push and shove at it.

“We’re going to be fine,” Culbetron said.

“There is a high likelihood that this will end poorly,” the Hibbs 3000 said dispassionately.

“You’re such a pessimist.”

“It is in my programming.” One of the zombies started to smash the rear window with a brick.

Culbetron suggested we drive away, but the Secret Lair was out of gas. A zombie tried the door handle. I started getting nervous. Hibbs counted the zombies outside the car (twenty-seven) and said, “A zombie population of this density in a suburban neighborhood is statistically unlikely.”

“A good point, Hibbs 3000. Matt, perhaps you should tell us if you have noticed anything strange in the neighborhood during your patrols.”

A zombie crawled up onto the hood. I turned on the windshield wipers to try to get him off, but he grabbed the blades and started chewing on them. “Well. There was this one weird thing a week ago.”

More zombies were gathering, and as they pushed on the back passenger door I heard the crunching sound of metal denting inward. “You had best tell the story quickly,” Culbetron said.

“Yes, of course. It all started when we heard the screaming . . .”