

Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left. Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.  
*Matthew 24: 40-42*

# Day 2555

“Up! Up! Up, Chicago! You’re risin’ and shinin’ with the Monkey Man on Classic Rock ZOO-102! And I’ve got some very exciting news! It’s M-O-N-D-A-Y! Everybody’s favorite day of the week!”

The too-sarcastic-for-six-o’clock in the morning voice blared the unwelcome announcement through the tinny speaker of the clock radio. “Well, if it’s any consolation, it’s gonna be a perfect spring day this May third, with loads of warm sunshine and temperatures reaching a high of —”

The DJ’s phony enthusiasm was silenced as the man in bed hit the snooze bar with a heavy, shaking hand, his head throbbing, his deep sleep rudely interrupted. Sam Dimas was in no mood to face another week of work and life, especially starting it off with a hangover from Hades. He cast a bleary look at his sleeping wife whose back was turned toward him, just as it had been when they had settled down last night. That expanse of sheet between them as they slept was indicative of their distance apart while awake.

Sam loved his weekend drinking, when he could really pour his heart out. And why not? It was a time for him to unwind a bit after putting up with everybody’s BS for five days. Didn’t he owe that much to himself? Yesterday, with his best friend Charlie Roberts, he had started watching an afternoon Cubs’ game and didn’t stop until who knew when; hell, he couldn’t even remember what time he snuck into the house last night.

“Damn, Monday already and another week to slog through,” he groaned as he lingered between the sheets, only wanting to pull a pillow over his head and escape to the security of dreamland again.

The company had caught on to Sam’s old ploy of calling in sick long ago — with no flex hours left to burn, and already on probation for days missed, he had no choice but to get to work on time. He couldn’t afford to get fired, because he still owed too much for the almost-upper-middle-class lifestyle he was expected to provide for his ungrateful family. He felt like a beaten mutt staked to a short chain, submissive, getting kicked around by either management or by the wife. He deserved his weekend binges, damn it. It was a brief respite from getting demands barked at him, a few days of just having fun without the disillusionments of life weighing him down.

The sleep timer clicked the radio back on, interrupting Sam’s hung-over thoughts. The newscaster was reporting that peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians had collapsed again and war in that part of the world looked inevitable.

“Who in the hell would want to live in that God-forsaken rock pile, anyway?” Sam asked off-handedly to nobody, as he finally forced himself out of bed. “Oh well, who cares? I’ve got my own problems to worry about.”

Grumbling, he hobbled to the bathroom to begin his usual Monday morning ritual. A handful of aspirins for his pounding head and aching, arthritic knees — the price he was now paying for being a standout high school football star. Drops for his glassy eyes, and a several long gulps of pink antacid were what he needed right at the moment.

“Man, I’m getting too old for this,” he moaned, as he shaved and showered, trying his best to beat the after-effects of having too much fun. Toweling himself dry and clearing a circle of steam from the bathroom mirror so he could comb his thinning hair in place, Sam stood nude in profile and gazed back at himself. “Overweight and under appreciated,” he grouched. Then a strange thing — for a split second he thought he saw his dead father standing beside him, staring back from the glass with a quizzical look on his face, and asking his son, “Sammy, are you ready?”

“Yeah, Pop,” he replied aloud, in a tone of both surprise and jest. “Jesus, now I’ve even got the old man riding my back, and he’s been gone for over twenty years. Miss ya, and would love to chat, but I really have to get to work,” he said, bemused but unsettled.

Returning to the bedroom to get dressed, Sam managed a few hearty chuckles at the prank phone call the disc jockey was making to some drowsy, unsuspecting soul. He turned the radio off and stumbled unsteadily downstairs, far from ready to face reality and the next five days ahead.

The rest of the Dimas family was already gathered for their chug-and-run breakfast when Sam entered the kitchen, best front forward. His wife Sarah, unkempt like the unmade bed she rolled out of while he was in the shower, was up for another day in paradise — her suburban hell, she was so fond of reminding him.

She schlepped over to the far countertop to turn on a morning TV show. The murders and mayhem of the past weekend and other people’s problems would be a nice little diversion from their own dismal lives. Besides, the inane banter between the giddy co-hosts would replace any meaningful conversation the family could now conveniently avoid. Sarah shot her husband an accusatory glare as icy as the frozen waffles she popped into the toaster, obviously trying her best to contain her disgust with him until Josh and Ashley were off to school.

“Nothing but caffeine and nicotine for me, thanks,” Sam said with a sorry grin, feigning to appear more chipper than he actually felt, wishing like hell the medication would kick in. “How’s everyone doing today?” He poured himself a cup of coffee, getting back a reply of silence.

He sat down, lit a cigarette, and for some inexplicable reason old memories flowed into his consciousness. Of all things for a Monday morning, he got lost in thought about how Sarah used to tell new friends in their expanding social circle about her and Sam’s early life together. Each time she doted on him there would be a special sparkle in her eyes as she recalled their good times.

Sarah beamed with pride, repeating how the two met at Northwestern University in Evanston in a required freshman poetry class, of all places. Her attraction for him was obviously reciprocated when the handsome, scrappy football player recited Robert Barrett Browning’s poem *Life in Love* aloud in class, from memory, never taking his blue eyes off her during the rather public

seduction. Smart, strong, jocular, romantic and ambitious, Sam had everything a woman could want.

What she failed to mention to others, but harped a million times to him, was that even though he drank a little too much, a little too often — the life of any party — she desperately wanted him to quit after they were married and he got his first important job.

Now, as he glanced at her across the table with bloodshot eyes, a booze-soaked countenance and a resigned, cynical attitude, he realized he should have taken her advice way back then. They both knew, although unspoken, that Sam's pilot light of life had been barely flickering for some time now, and their once perfect union was now on the rocks. He thought about the poem, which had become "their song" and his wedding vow, and ruminated about one verse:

My life is a fault at last, I fear:

It seems too much like a fate, indeed!

Though I do my best I shall scarce succeed.

It dawned on him that he gave up doing his best a long time ago, adding feelings of disgrace to his already overloaded baggage cart of guilt, anguish, and despair.

A special report interrupted the morning show's regular programming as well as Sam's regrets: breaking news of a major earthquake . . . epicenter in Los Angeles . . . preliminary reports of some fatalities . . . much damage . . . more details as they come in. He paid little attention to the news story — he was ruminating about the collapse of his own life.

His head hung low, avoiding eye contact with Sarah out of embarrassment, he thought it odd that these revelations and reminiscences were popping into his brain at such an early hour, at a time when he could barely think straight from all the alcohol. Regardless, his thoughts of his auspicious past continued to haunt him.

His first and only love became his wife shortly after they received their degrees, hers in Fine Arts, his in Design Engineering Technology. Three months after graduation he scored an entry-level position with the Xcelletron Corporation, a worldwide electronics/communication conglomerate headquartered in Oak Park.

He was at the right place, at the right time. The company was diversifying by designing and producing integrated circuits and microprocessors they were more than ready to supply to an eager world idling on the shoulder of the information superhighway. Sam prospered along with the company, although he had to stab a few backs and step on a few toes along the way. Their future looked bright as he ascended the corporate staircase.

Along the climb came Josh, now twelve, and nine-year-old Ashley. Early on, he reveled in fatherhood, but as the children grew he spent more and more time away from home. When questioned about his whereabouts, Sam would parrot a stock response — he had to sacrifice his time so he could supply their every material whim, want and need. He began a slow drift from the kids, always defensive and proclaiming that at least they were among the best-dressed kids in

school. Wearing the latest fashions and keeping up with current fads did not come cheaply. He reveled in his martyrdom.

During the last few years, Sam grew even more detached from the family. He hoped it was simply a mid-life crisis; maybe he would eventually snap out of this funk and again become the husband and father they had once loved so deeply and so completely.

Downing a second cup, his cheerless thoughts turned to his unfulfilling job. Promotions and raises he once strove for were coming less and less frequently. He was consistently being passed over for younger, less experienced employees — sniveling brown-nosers was his favorite term for the eager, enterprising go-getters — and did nothing but complain about the overpaid, know-nothing morons they called upper management. He despised nearly everyone at Xcelletron, and fumed to anyone who would listen about having to spend so many wasted hours in that claustrophobic little padded box. His last spark of ambition faded when he realized that, essentially, his pinnacle of mediocrity had been achieved.

Sam snuck a quick peripheral glance Sarah's way to see if her scowl had melted any. She was meditating on her daily devotional, oblivious to her husband and the sniping of her two offspring as they fought for the last few drops of juice. Although she seemed temporarily pacified, he was not. Most of their intense arguments were either about his drinking or her accusations regarding his increasingly contrary attitude towards religion.

She tried in vain to get him to believe in God, and Christ as personal Savior. But whenever she started up on him he would just ignore her, or respond in mockery that he didn't put much faith in fairy tales, or that God was dead, or that depending on a Supreme Being to help you get through life was irrelevant in the twenty-first century. He especially loved pushing her buttons by going off on one of his tirades — usually primed with a few drinks — about how churches were just out to make a quick, tax-free buck, and how Jesus was nothing more than a religious zealot who died for his own convictions. His topper was always the same, the words that would send her flying out the room and finally off his back: in his opinion, Sarah and all her holy-rollin' Christian friends were the ones out of touch with reality, and were some of the most acrimonious phonies on the planet.

Sarah gave up on the rest of the family and attended church by herself. For him, Sundays were reserved for a full slate of professional sports, and the children had been convinced that belief in a Creator was a waste of time and about as real as Santa Claus. They had been taught early on that the Bible was mostly fiction and that they could get into big trouble if they even wanted to pray in school. Josh and Ashley were more consumed with their computers, cell phones and video games. Besides, they wouldn't be caught dead associating with their Christian classmates. The in-crowd, they sniffed, did not include the uncool kids of faith.

Sam sat at the table watching Josh and Ashley wolf down the last of their breakfasts and Sarah praying, wondering where he had failed. None of them gave him one shred of respect or appreciation. He felt as if he were nothing more than their personal money machine, only there to provide material comfort. The days

of long kisses, tender hugs and expressions of love had flown out the window long ago, replaced with a cool indifference from the three. The vision of his dad and the unexpected burst of self-realization of his present situation had him more depressed than when he first woke up.

Josh finally spoke to him, but for a usual request that proved Sam's point. "Dad, I need fifty bucks," he said, tossing his dirty plate into the sink.

"What for this time?"

"Uh . . . just for stuff."

Sam pulled out two twenties and a ten from his wallet and slapped the bills into his son's hand. "Aren't you even going to say thanks?" he asked, a bit peeved.

"Yeah, Dad. See ya later."

The boy and his sister hurried out to meet the bus, leaving their parents to square off alone. Sam knew Sarah would be starting up on him as she usually did, and he could feel the anger bottling up inside ready to explode.

"And where were *you* all night?" she asked sharply.

"Over at Charlie's . . . the game went into extra innings," he lied, trying to remain calm, his blood pressure skyrocketing.

"I'm sick and tired of you never spending time at home with—"

"And I'm sick and tired of always being on trial!" he countered, becoming defensive and loud. "I work my ass off to give you and the kids everything you want, so — *lay off!*"

Sarah stared at him, a stunned look on her face, but she said nothing.

He backed away from the table, pushing his chair in hard. "I've got to go! Slave away to make the sky-high mortgage payments on time, try to stay at least *one* step ahead of the credit card debts *you* ring up, and make enough so I can shell out a hundred dollars for torn and faded designer jeans the kids can't seem to live without!" He grabbed his briefcase and stomped towards the foyer. "To be perfectly honest, I'm sick and tired of it *all!*"

Sarah sobbed inconsolably as the echo of their argument faded through the kitchen. He heard her implore for God's help, turning back one more time to see the deluge of tears raining down on her unfinished breakfast. "Please, Lord, help us all," was the last mournful plea he heard before he slammed the door behind him.

Sam hesitated in the garage fumbling to find the car keys in his suit pocket, a twinge of remorse for his outburst beginning to set in. He took a deep breath and tried to psyche himself up for the daily grind ahead of him. "I just wish *somebody* understood," he sighed, observing a bank of low-lying clouds coming in fast from the west, casting dark shadows on the ground below. "It's supposed to be a beautiful day, weather-wise at least. What the hell do they know, anyway?" He noticed the wind whipping through the trees and shrugged his shoulders. "Oh well, the atmosphere matches the mood I'm in this morning".

He knew from living in the Midwest all his life that spring storms could crop up quickly, but then blow off just as fast. As he watched the sky turn the sickening green of stagnant water, he thought this one could produce some hail.

"There's no use dinging up my new car if I don't have to. Screw it, I don't care if I *am* late for work." He began to feel a little seasick from watching the sky as it now seemed to pitch and roll like storm-tossed waves on Lake Michigan. The

wind gathered strength, the churning clouds boiling deep purple, black and blue as they battered and bruised against each another. Sam heard the roll of distant thunder and stayed put.

It grew dark as night as the clouds obliterated the last traces of sunshine and he began to feel uneasy watching the ornamental lights that lined the sidewalk flicker on. He became more shaken by the strobe light effect caused by the lightening that shattered the horizon from end to end, accompanied by a deafening thunderclap.

"It's getting closer," he started to fret, preparing himself for whatever was to come. Suddenly, the wind stopped and the atmosphere grew so eerily calm that not a single leaf on the newly budding trees stirred. The air pressure grew heavy as he struggled to breathe. "And favorable for a tornado."

He began to feel dizzy and disoriented, as the ground appeared to spin beneath his feet. He tried to determine if it was his body or the earth that was now trembling so badly. He clutched his chest trying to get oxygen; the air was becoming heavier, as if the molecules in the atmosphere had morphed into lead. It was like trying to inhale through a straw with broken ribs.

Everything went black as he lost his balance and fell to his knees.

Without warning, a blinding burst of light that seemed to bombard the entire sky flashed around and through him. For a split second, Sam could see the bones in his hands, as if some weird meteorological X-ray had just been snapped. As he slowly regained his vision, he remembered the documentary he had watched on PBS about the Manhattan Project and the development of the atomic bomb. This seemed to be more than lightning — it was as if a nuclear device had been detonated in his front yard. Terrorists?

As he struggled to breathe, he heard what sounded like a deep, booming voice that seemed to clamor: "*Come home!*" The shout — more like a vibration at a very low frequency — shook the sky and permeated his very soul. Accompanying the command, what sounded like the last sustained crescendo of some awesome celestial symphony filled the air. The music lingered, then very slowly faded away, leaving Sam confused and stupefied as he gazed upward.

"That was one wild ass storm!" He got back on his feet, relieved that the disturbance was beginning to break apart. "Man, I've got to get my ears checked . . . hearing voices in the air. Sam, you've got one wild imagination."

He tried to smile as the sun reappeared, fighting through the overcast sky. "Every silver lining has a cloud," he remarked, ever the pessimist. "Well, hell, I guess I'd better get a move on. If I put the pedal to the metal, I can still make it too work on time." He checked his watch, surprised that the entire storm had lasted only a few minutes — it was as if time itself had been suspended — and was relieved there was no property damage and no insurance adjustors to battle.

When he started the car, the radio came on loud from the night before.

"Ah, that's the problem right here." He smiled, turning the volume down. "Way too much rock-and-roll played at large decibels over the years." He laughed to himself as he put the gearshift in reverse, backing out of the driveway.

The sun was again at full force, and he glanced over at the neighbor's yard and noticed an unattended riding lawnmower that was cutting its own crazy quilt patterns through the thick grass. Strangely, the overalls, work gloves, and straw

hat that old man Jankovitch always wore while doing yard work was piled on the seat.

“Now there’s a lesson to be learned . . . if you’re going to run around outside in your birthday suit, always remember to put your mower in park first.” Sam laughed as he backed into the street. “God, what a gruesome thought for a Monday morning.” He put the car in drive, the storm forgotten. “I better get a move on if I’m going to make it to the salt mine on time.”

He drove a block or two until it dawned on him that traffic was unusually light for a weekday morning.

“What is this, one of those bogus government holidays I forgot about?” His hopes rose for a moment that he could return home and go back to bed. “Wishful thinking,” he sighed as he headed towards the expressway that would deliver him to Oak Park.

He approached a busy intersection and noticed the line of cars that were idling at the stoplight, their drivers absent.

“Great place to park, idiots!” He called them every derogatory name that came to mind as he weaved around the empty vehicles when the light turned green.

It was already a bad start to a long week. He turned the radio back on, hoping that the Monkey Man would have some funny gags or a good tune that would help him chase away his Monday morning blues. He was in luck as the familiar opening guitar riff from a classic rock song was just starting.

He grinned, feeling better, his long fingers keeping time on the edge of the leather-bound steering wheel. “Maybe this won’t be such a bad day after all.” “*I’m on the high-way to hell,*” Sam sang along, smiling, realizing the truth in the lyric. “*I’m on the highway to —*”

He was enjoying himself immensely, when suddenly the song was cut cold, the DJ breaking in, sounding nervously confused.

“This just in . . . and, uh, I don’t really know what to make of it, but our phones are ringing off the hook with reports that, that people . . . have disappeared all over Chicago . . . just minutes ago during the freak storm! We’ll, uh, pass along more details as they, uh, come in,” he stammered into the microphone.

“Who thinks up this crazy stuff?” Sam wondered in amusement as he enjoyed the put-on. He laughed aloud as he observed people coming out of their houses and standing in their yards, some looking bewildered, others panic-stricken. “The power of the media — they can get people to believe just about anything,” he smirked, shaking his head at their gullibility.

“Hey lady, it’s only a radio prank. Contain thyself!” he hollered in jest as he sped past a hysterical woman who was sitting on the curb, bawling uncontrollably as he neared the Highway 55 on-ramp. “Man, this station must have a lot of listeners to create a stir like this.”

Two blocks from the freeway and traffic was backed up bumper-to-bumper, moving nowhere fast. Sam became agitated when he saw the dense clouds of black, billowing smoke rising up over the road ahead.

“This is great, just great! A wreck jammed up everything. Now I’ll have to take the side streets to get to the next on-ramp, losing more time.” He checked his watch, letting four-letter words fly as he lit another cigarette and turned the radio

off. This people-disappearing gag was going on far too long and was beginning to get annoying.

Continuing his detour, he saw a car that had veered off the street and hit a tree; another had come to rest in a yard after shearing off a mailbox. Moreover, he noticed more people clustered about in small groups, wandering about like zombies in a horror movie.

“This is getting a little weird,” he whispered, as he rounded the curve that led past Memorial Gardens, speeding, trying to make up for lost time. He was concentrating on the road ahead, and would not have noticed the cemetery he had passed a thousand times had he not flicked the butt out the window. Suddenly it hit him head on that something real — something bizarre — had happened this morning in his city. He slammed on the brakes, stunned at the vista he was surveying.

In one fleeting, transient moment, Sam Dimas knew the life he had known had come to a sudden, screeching halt.

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