

# Impersonating God

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The bedroom air was still, almost palpable with emotion. Jimmy Caldwell, 9 years old, wild uncut brown hair falling over his eyes, waited for his father to return from the police station. He stared at his New York Yankee's pennant and his various spelling bee awards stuck on the cork board over his desk. His mom had bought it for him 2 years ago, along with 2 boxes of Crackerjacks, at Yankee Stadium. It was an afternoon game, he remembered, Yankees vs. Red Sox. The sourness in his stomach mirrored what he'd felt at the end of that long eating festival of an afternoon.

He knew something was desperately wrong. The policeman had come to the door, spoken a few words with his Dad, and then they'd left together. His Dad said he'd be back soon, not to worry.

Yeah right.

Mom had gone to breakfast with one of her girlfriends. He stayed back with Dad. They made chocolate chip pancakes and cheese omelets. They drank Tang.

A shaft of dim light eased through his drawn shades. The

late afternoon sun could not muster enough strength to really light up his room. That was fine with him. He preferred to sit in the dim airless room. Something fundamentally wrong had happened and his mind froze rather than face the possibilities.

The front door creaked open. Dad was home. He thought of running to him, but his legs were heavy. Inertia kept him sunken into the edge of his bed.

He heard Dad's footsteps. The slapping of his shoes against the wooden stairs formed a comforting rhythm. A respite, broken by the appearance of his Dad, all salty beard and mustache in his bedroom doorway.

Jimmy looked up at him, with pools of foolish hope substituting for his eyes.

"It's Mom, Jimmy. She's gone." His Dad said it slowly, but he didn't sit next to him, didn't come to comfort him.

The tears shook him, washing the emotion from his body, buffeting him with nine years of memories. Dad looked on, too helpless in his own grief to intervene.

And the tears continued to flow.

# One

September 6, 1993

"What is the value of a single human life?"

No one raised a hand to respond.

Caldwell rubbed his hands together to generate warmth, though the chill of the New York winter was still months away. "Welcome to the first day of Ethics in the Modern World. This seminar is for seniors only, so anyone who has not yet reached that exalted peak should see me after class. If any of you were shocked by that opening question and feel that you're in the wrong class, please stay. You may learn something despite yourself."

Laughter echoed politely off whitewashed walls.

Professor James Caldwell scratched his chin, continuing, "This question I mentioned is the main focus of our exploration of ethics in this class, and I am glad that no one yet knows the answer or we would have been forced to cancel the entire semester."

Caldwell paused to smile at the class. He wanted to bond with them early on, to gain their trust. Like a Buddhist monk,

he appeared serene and in harmony with the starkness of the classroom. It was his temple, and his movements were sufficiently reverent, as he flowed from one pose to the next with minimal motion, the class tracking his progress with radar blip eyes.

His tone suddenly became serious; his cobalt eyes caught fire, like a feral animal catching the scent of its prey. "I submit to you that if there is no intrinsic value to human life, then there is no need for any ethics, no need to treat other people as anything more than obstacles in our path through life. Thus, we shall proceed over these next 16 weeks to methodically examine possible reasons for our existence."

He slowed his quickening pace to a pensive walk, momentarily centering himself. "Why question the value of a human life and not something of more immediate importance, like what's for dinner or when is this class over? The answer my friend the prodigious gum chewer in the back row is what?"

The muscular boy in the tank top appeared dumbfounded. No surprise for someone whose artificial tan had a funny orange hue. "Because it's a basic question of the type asked in philosophy classes," he winked at the hot blonde next to him.

The blonde girl's expression shifted from appreciative interest to disgust in a heartbeat, turning her gaze away from

the narcissistic student and back towards the teacher.

Caldwell smiled warmly, reaching up to brush away his light brown hair, falling in little curls over his ears and his forehead. "Very true. And, what is your name sir?"

"Robert. Robert Marco." Muscles popped from his steroid charged physique, flaunted by his tight pastel tank top. He proudly wore his jet black hair in a mullet.

"Mr. Marco let us take your life as an illustration. How much is it worth to you?" The hunt was on. Caldwell would run with the scent to the ultimate kill.

Robert's smile turned into an oblivious grin, the eyes of the class upon him. Caldwell pinned him with an uncomfortable stare.

Caldwell noticed that the majority of the seven women in the class were watching Robert ponder his answer. They seemed entranced by his cocksure bravado. In contrast, the ten men in the class were shifting their eyes back and forth between student and professor, eager for the response. Caldwell waited patiently, hands clasped in front of him, seeming to expend no energy in his stance.

Finally, Robert responded, "Well, my life is worth quite a lot to me. Obviously it's not some dollar amount. Say it was worth a million dollars. Then to get the million I would have

to be dead and if I was dead I couldn't enjoy the money. So uh..."

The class laughed in shared nervousness, a flock of seagulls turning as one.

"Excellent. We have now established that the value of a life is not quantifiable in monetary terms, or have we?" Professor Caldwell circled in closer, nearing the kill. The spry buck was cornered by its youth and inexperience. "Mr. Marco, what if I paid your dying mother, who needs a million dollar operation to live, a million dollars in exchange for your life? Is your life still not worth a million dollars?"

Robert's face looked pained at the question, and a twinge of pity crossed his attractive neighbor's face.

He answered slowly, leaning his bulky frame onto the creakily protesting chair-desk. "I think under those circumstances I might take the money for my life."

"So, we seem to have reached an impasse. Sometimes life is worth money and sometimes it's not. Can anyone help us out?" Professor Caldwell scanned the class as he sat down on the front edge of his desk, smoothly avoiding crunching the tail of his tweed blazer.

Sharon, a petite brunette in the front row, raised her hand. Her attention had been focused on the professor's shoes when

part of her brain stirred and she offered, "He wouldn't give up his life for the money. He is giving up his life so that his mother can live."

Professor Caldwell pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose before parrying the blow. "So, now we are back where we started. It is simply unresponsive to answer that the value of a human life is another human life, although you are certainly correct in your conclusion as to Mr. Marco's dilemma. If I ask you how much X is worth and you answer X, it gets us nowhere. Simply a tautology, when one thing is equal to itself. Let us move along, for we are not yet any closer to knowing why we must find a value for human life. Mr. Marco has had enough for today, how about you there on his left. What is your name?"

"Amanda Hunter."

Professor Caldwell noticed her slim waif-like figure, tussled blonde hair and green eyes without missing a beat in the blackboard jungle. A white silk camisole hung from her frame, black leggings completing her look. Like a proud lion, he would pee now to mark off his territory. "Amanda, I want you to imagine your worst enemy in the world, someone who you have always despised and wished were dead. Do you have someone in mind?"

"Yes." Amanda shivered in bitter memory.

"You used to actually wish this person dead, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Him or a her?"

"A girl in fourth grade."

"Why didn't you kill her if you wanted her dead?"

Silence.

Caldwell knew their thoughts were troubled. This path they traveled down was dark and filled with torment of the soul. He raised his eyebrows, urging Amanda to respond.

Her voice was strong as she answered, "Well, because civilized people don't behave that way."

"Why not?"

"I guess maybe because if everyone went around killing people that they hated, there might not be anybody left."

"Excellent. So you didn't kill her because you were afraid that someone else might then kill you?"

"No. I would go to jail if I'd have killed her, but that's not why I didn't do it. It was because of my sense of morality."

Professor Caldwell stood up, bringing his full six-foot presence to bear on their now charged psyches. "Class, it is that sense of morality that we will explore over the semester. We will attempt to nail down what it is in each of us that makes us value human life. For without some value attached to human

life, there exists no reason to prohibit the taking of a life."

He paused, counting silently in French - un, deux, trois - before continuing. "It will slither away from us and sometimes escape our grasp, but we will persist and attempt to define what Ms. Hunter calls her sense of morality. See you next time."

He quickly snapped closed his briefcase, hoping to avoid the inevitable onslaught of brownie-point questions. No one yet understood enough to ask an intelligent question and, more importantly, he was late to pick up his daughter Sarah from cheerleading practice.

Caldwell exited the room, striding outside to the ivy-laden quad, proud of his skillful showing in class today. Slowly, a knowing grin spread across his face. He thought, I'm taking these students on a joy ride through morality and mortality. I wonder if my Ph.D is really enough of a credential for that? He giggled, turning a few curious heads as he entered the parking lot.

A scruffy faced gardener, toiling in the tulip beds adjacent a black Volvo, looked up as Caldwell approached. He peered at James through thick coke bottle glasses, earning a scathing look of contempt in return for his curiousness. Why did the gardener stare at him? Caldwell scoffed, shrugging it off, but not before thinking how fortunate he was that this guy couldn't dig into

his mind and uncover the rotting corpses buried within.

## TWO

Caldwell wanted to think of himself as a visionary, not afraid of new challenges. This new seminar was a big challenge, perhaps the biggest of all. The search for the meaning of life was no minor inquiry. He wondered if Descartes had ever been afraid of what he might find on his quest for knowledge.

He wasn't afraid. He pulled his car out of the shaded faculty parking lot and turned right onto store-lined Hempstead Turnpike. What did he have to be afraid of? He had a lovely family. His wife Nancy was a law professor at NYU. His daughter Sarah was in the utterly pleasant North Hills Junior High School. He lived in a nice, modern house in Roslyn, on Long Island's prestigious North Shore.

The day was bright and filled with streaking sunshine, and he definitely was afraid. He feared that there would be no answer to find. No meaning to life. Nothing. No purpose at all. Cogito ergo nada! His wife, daughter, house, car, and Ph.D would all be found worthless.

James shivered, and began nervously tapping his foot to some remembered beat, his radio switched off. The car went, almost on autopilot, as he segmented off one part of his brain to drive, while his higher functions began to wander.

He thought of his daughter Sarah, as he sped down the now grey, featureless road in his black Volvo. She was a wonderful daughter, smart, pretty, popular and growing up to look just like her mother. Sarah usually wore her coal black hair in a ponytail, making her look even younger than thirteen. Nancy never wore her hair in a ponytail. Nancy wanted to look older, not younger. Her attractiveness always interfered with people taking her law career seriously.

Merging onto the Meadowbrook Parkway, he cursed the construction, omnipresent as a meddling ghost. The parkway, built in the 1930's, was designed by Robert Moses to be a second route to bring people to Jones Beach. It seemed to be scarcely modernized since then, hampered in part by historical protections. The short entrance and exit ramps still reflected the slow speeds of the Desotos and the Deussenbergs that cruised to the beach on weekends past.

The students in his Honors Seminar seemed bright enough, and there were even a few attractive girls in the class. He smiled at one of the unheralded perks of teaching college kids.

Shortly, the Meadowbrook Parkway flowed into the Northern State Parkway with an ease borne of familiar lovers. However, this late in the afternoon, despite the fact that he was supposedly moving west towards Manhattan against rush hour, the

traffic snarled and staggered. Minutes later, he merged into the perpetual crawling festival known as the LIE, the Long Island Expressway. Tree lined and naturally beautiful despite the intrusion of man, Long Island's major thoroughfares could not hide the fact that they cut through what was once a great forest filled with Red Maple, Northern Red Oak, and White Oak trees.

One girl, Amanda, had caught his attention with her silken blonde hair guarding her vulnerable blue eyes. He imagined himself stroking his hand through her hair, gliding it gently down her lithe neck. Pausing at the top button of her sweater, he could see the soft outline of her full breasts as they pressed against the black cotton. He undid the top button with his right hand, while his left continued to caress her neck.

A horn blared, as the drivers doomed to repeat their daily treks fought the inevitable with rude blasts of sound. Caldwell ignored it all; it was par for the course driving on what has been called the world's biggest parking lot. The LIE, aka 495, was begun in 1956 with an estimated capacity of 80,000 cars a day. The goal was to provide a route through the potato fields to the newly sprung up post WWII suburbs of Levittown and other middle class havens. Now handling over 600,000 cars per day, it was basically a big parking lot ferrying family men to and from

NYC to work.

The second button fell open in his hand with barely a turn of his fingers, revealing ample soft flesh anchored in a lacy white bra. A third button came loose quickly. He kissed the top of her now exposed breast, tasting a complex melange of salt and sweet.

The sight of an American flag fluttering in the wind atop a flagpole yanked him abruptly from his musings. He mused often, strayed never. Too much of the good husband and father, he guessed.

On autopilot he'd reached his daughter's school in twenty minutes. Not bad, he thought, for one of the many commuters "packed like lemmings into shining metal boxes" as Sting sang in that old Police tune, which he began to hum. Sarah was waiting for him outside, her red cheerleading skirt fluttering in the wind.

*Another industrial ugly morning...*

"Hi Daddy," she threw her Pom Poms to the floor and kissed him on the cheek.

"Hi sweetheart, how was school?" He gave his daughter his, mostly undivided, attention.

*Contestants in a suicidal race...*

His schizoid musings coexisted with his love for his family,

pressuring his thoughts, making it a struggle to stay calm.

"Good. Y'know the same old stuff, tests, homework, lunch, gym. Are we meeting Mommy for dinner?" She futzed around in her pocketbook for some gum.

"Uh huh. At La Trattoria. We're heading there now."

"Can I get Baked Ziti and Shrimp Cocktail?" Finding some Juicy Fruit, she unwrapped the silver foil off a piece and popped it into her mouth. She began trying to peel off the foil from the paper wrapper.

"Sure sweetie. Anything you want." He laughed while grinning, a contorted movement which always hurt his cheeks afterwards, but which he endlessly and happily endured around Sarah.

They drove to the local Italian restaurant *La Trattoria* and he noticed his wife's white Legend sedan parked in front of the brown brick facade as they pulled up. Sarah continued to work on the gum wrapper as they walked under the red awning and into the dimly lit restaurant. The restaurant was straight out of the Godfather movies, with red checkered tablecloths and pictures of the old country on the walls. It was a place that called its red sauce gravy and everything was served parmigiana.

Nancy was waiting for them at a table in the corner. She was sharply dressed in a navy blue pant suit.

Billy Joel's "Only the Good Die Young" played in the background as they entered and James toyed with the philosophical meaning of the lyrics while glancing at the familiar menu. He discovered nothing new in the lyrics, beyond the already familiar exhortation of 'carpe diem.'

They promptly ordered. In response, the waiter soon brought both chicken parmigiana and baked ziti family style. James quickly reached for some chicken.

"Easy James, we're not going to steal your food. Take your time, enjoy life." Nancy smiled at him, calmly chastising him with a glance.

"Okay, okay. So anyway, how's this year's class of students Nancy?" James asked, popping a garlic knot into his mouth.

"They seem bright. Who can tell this early? Wipe your chin James, you have liquid butter dripping." Nancy smiled again and handed him another napkin.

"Thanks." He said dryly, his face tinged with red. He had trouble focusing as the undercurrent of darkness tugged at him.

He glanced around the red sauce joint. Two tables away there was a grey haired lady coughing and smoking without pause. Her dinner companion, probably a grandson, wore his Polo shirt with the collar turned up and obediently listened to her hack and try unsuccessfully to choke on her minestrone soup.

In the front of the place, a younger good looking couple held hands and drank cheap Chianti. The waiter was making a Caesar salad from scratch, deftly cracking the raw egg and starting to add the anchovies. The girl asked the formally dressed waiter to please put the anchovies on the side. He saw the waiter smile and not give away any of his inner thoughts.

Did the waiter hate this girl for ruining the ceremony of his table side salad by asking for the anchovies on the side? Was he thinking of spitting in their food? Did he fantasize about throwing the salad at her? Telling her to make it herself? Caldwell desperately wanted to know how this well-mannered professional dealt with customers who annoyed him?

Instead, he turned to his daughter. "Sarah you must be taking some good classes this year. I remember when I was in eighth grade, we took some terrific courses like Algebra."

He watched her dip her shrimp cocktail into the baked ziti sauce. Kids will eat anything, just like pregnant women. He recalled, with the fondness of a distant memory, when Nancy was pregnant with Sarah the on-demand midnight runs for Butter Crunch Ice Cream and Fritos.

"Daddy. For your information, I'm in the advanced math track. We're taking Pre-Calculus this year. I'm also taking Biology, Social Studies, English, Health, and Gym. But, I hate

gym class."

Nancy asked, "Why honey? Don't you like to exercise?"

Sarah's white teeth were spotted with red sauce when she answered. "Not in school, Mom. What's the matter with you? Do you think I want to get undressed and get all sweaty for the rest of the day. Gross!"

James said, "Nancy, we've come a long way from there, haven't we?"

"Ummm. I guess so. No, seriously, it's been so many years. Well actually only about 10, right James?"

"Sure, Nancy. Whatever you say." He winked at Sarah, who knew of her mother's common denial of the aging process. Forty was a dirty word in their house.

"So Mom, what color did you decide to do the upstairs bathroom in?" Sarah asked, wielding her fork like a pointer. She put it back down on the plate at her father's reproachful glare.

"I think taupe. What do you think?"

James interrupted, "What the hell kind of color is taupe?"

Sarah and Nancy looked at each other and laughed at his ignorance.

Sarah answered condescendingly. "Daddy, everyone knows what taupe is." Turning to her mother, she continued. "I think taupe

is a great idea. Then you could use the same towels to match what we have now."

Nancy smiled, her hazel eyes twinkling. "That's what I was thinking..."

Annoyed by their talk of nonsense, James looked back to the young couple in the front. They were sharing what looked like chicken parm and spaghetti. He noticed that she barely ate. She was thin with heavily teased black hair. She probably chain smoked and only ate frozen yogurt once a day in some misguided hope for acceptance. James felt sorry for her lack of confidence.

He turned his attention back to the shriveled grandma at the other table. She was lighting another cigarette. James wondered if lung cancer was killing her slowly. Did she care? He doubted she could understand the connection between her actions and their consequences. She seemed oblivious to her coughing fits which stopped just long enough to try to choke down another piece of fish. When would she die? Today, choking on a fish bone? Next year, from lung cancer or pneumonia? Tomorrow from a drunk driver? Should he care either way?

He smiled back and Nancy and Sarah, still chatting about bathroom colors, and he drew comfort from his family. They gave him the strength to fight back the demons.

He knew they would keep coming for him. Every night his dreams were haunted, and the strength of his family as a talisman was waning.