

Sam's Garage

Tucked away at the end of a street in Mercer Island's Roanoke neighborhood, Sam's house had a more Frank Lloyd Wright vibe than the rest. The garage on the east side of the house was filled with shelves and workbenches—a monument to organization that he enjoyed maintaining. The morning's project was taking a look at the transmission of his Ford Ranger, which had been buzzing and emanating a burnt-rubber smell.

Holding a six-pack of India Pale Ale, he walked toward the garage door and pushed the controller mounted on the wall. As the door began to chug open, he pulled a rolling stool toward the front end of the Ranger, crawled inside the cab, and tugged the lever that popped the hood. As midday breezes wafted into the space, bottle of ale open and bubbling, he leaned over the guts of the engine and was immersed in machinery.

Half an hour later, a light knock pulled him out of his thoughts. He looked up from the engine to see Marco standing in the driveway. Droplets of rain on his jacket and sweatpants hinted that he'd been out for a run. Smiling, he stepped inside. "Hey there, Sam."

"Marco, hi, bud. Nice to see you. What brings you to this neck of the woods?"

"Ah, the usual Saturday stuff. Just wanted to drop by to see how you're doing."

"I'm glad you did. How are you today?"

"Pretty good. You know." Marco moved closer to the truck, tipping his head to get a clearer view. "Working on the beast, huh? What's happening with it?"

Sam stepped back, wiping his forehead. "Once again I've got issues with the transmission. I'm not sure if it needs a new clutch." He shook his head, crossing his arms. "The damn thing is aggravating, and I was already feeling down today."

Marco's eyes signaled empathy. "Sorry to hear that. Want to tell me what's up? I've got time for a conversation."

Sam leaned back against the side panel. "Thanks, I appreciate that. That's one of the things that I like about you. You're interested in conversation."

Marco chuckled, then nodded toward the six-pack on the workbench. "Can I grab one of those?"

Sam smiled. "Sure. Get a cold one and sit down, because I think this might take a while." He pointed to the red rolling stools near the west corner of the garage, and they walked toward them.

Marco popped open a beer, took a sip, and sat. "That's better. So go ahead—what's on your mind?"

Sam lowered his bulk onto the larger stool and took a quiet moment to collect his thoughts. "Lying in bed this morning, I noticed a real feeling of sadness. Stuff coming up because of some old mistakes, old regrets. Like the things I did that ultimately led to a divorce. I realized I spend a lot of time looking back, thinking, *What was I doing? Where was I? Why did this happen? How did I not see this? Why did I have everything and throw it away?*"

Marco shook his head. "Wow, bro, sorry to hear about that." He took a quick sip. "Do you think you've made any progress in dealing with that or coming to understand what the regret is all about?"

Sam said, "Some. As you know, I have a laypersons interest in science. The stuff I mentioned on our hiking in Snohomish when we talked about free will." Sam entwined his fingers and propped both fists on his forehead. "I'm on the horns of a dilemma."

"Yeah? What kind of dilemma?"

"Well, from all the reading I've done, I've come to recognize that I don't have even a shred of free will. I hate to bring up the topic, because every time I do, I get blowback. I think you and I talked about that."

"I think we did."

Sam continued, "I still notice the conditioning that operates to this day and will till the end of my life. It causes me to be reluctant. I'm reluctant to bring up the fact that I betrayed my wife. I cheated on her, had an affair at work, and hurt her terribly. I feel like shit for having done that, but the dilemma is that at the same time, I look at the science, and if I don't have free will, I'm not responsible for what I did. I'll have to pay the price, I'll have to bear the consequences, but at the same time, I'm not responsible in the sense that I could have done anything different in the moment. It's my belief that I couldn't have done any different. So it's not like I made a free choice to do what I did.'

He looked down at the concrete floor, taking in a long breath. "I did make a choice. We're always making choices. The thermostat on my wall makes choices twenty times a day—turn on the furnace or not, turn on the air conditioning or not, but don't tell me my thermostat has free will. If I make a decision one way or the other, it's not free will."

Marco took another sip, frowning.

Sam picked at the label on his bottle. "My real dilemma is the feelings of regret when I know, logically, that they don't have a basis. I'm still working through this issue, and from time to time, it makes me sad."

Marco said, "Okay, so I hear you talking about responsibility and choices. And I think that's a very valuable way to start to unpack some of the feelings or take a look at them or even

admit that they're there. That's showing a level of vulnerability, which I have to give you credit for. I'm curious about the blowback from the choices. Your family, your wife. Is there a way to come back from that? Make amends for what happened?"

"I think there is." Sam looked up.

Marco said, "Do you feel the affection or trust or some connection was lost because of your actions?"

Sam's eyes started to glisten. "Oh yeah. My actions destroyed the life that I had. I would say that I pretty much lost everything that I valued. And it's been hard, because I have been conditioned to believe that it could have been different, but then I look back on how I destroyed everything that I loved. That causes a lot of regret. I suffer from that. At the same time, I don't think it could have been different. If it could have, I'm looking for the person who can rebut the argument that we don't have free will." He stood, walking toward the south wall that was lined with metal shelving and hand tools. "I don't like talking about this, because most people have an adverse reaction, and I don't like adverse reactions."

Marco looked puzzled. "What do you think it would be? Say we're at our men's group and you bring up the idea that we don't have free will. What do you think the reaction might be from the men who are there to do their work?"

Sam shook his head. "First of all, those men are a sample of the larger population that's conditioned to believe that they have free will and that they could have done things differently. It's an interesting thing to explore, because half of the men there have probably done similar things. They're not there with clean consciences—they're there because they fucked up in one way or another."

Marco nodded. "I don't doubt it."

Sam said, "Marco, it's rare for somebody in our society to reject the idea of agency. Everybody thinks, I have agency. No, you don't—that's my view. I could be wrong, but somebody would have to bring me some serious proof."

Marco frowned. "Well, what would you say in the men's group? That one guy—what's name? The tattooed guy from Indiana?"

Sam grinned ruefully. "Corey?"

"Yeah, him. He's gets in your face sometimes, spouting some of the shitty stuff that people use as armor. What would you say to him about feeling regret?"

Sam shook his head. "Corey was in my face a few months ago. It got very tense. I thought the other guys would have to intervene."

"Do you mean you'd be fighting? Physically?"

Sam nodded. "We nearly ended up brawling. I thought he was going to try to take me out, the little shit."

Marco scoffed. "Right."

Sam rubbed his neck. "Today, I don't think people could push my buttons to that extent. If I was defending someone other than myself—the people that I love, my family, my children, my friends—then there would be no stops. If *I'm* being attacked, I know, at some level, there's nothing I have to protect. There's no self that can be injured by somebody else's thoughts and perceptions of me."

Marco glanced toward the tall pines that lined the street. "That would be a tough one for Corey or Frank or Shel or any of the other guys, tough for them to get their heads wrapped around. I mean, we get into some interesting personal discussions. The guys talk about their family or their health issues, or money, or this or that, but it doesn't kind of go into the philosophical side."

Sam nodded, sipped from his bottle.

Marco said, "Back to your family, your situation with your wife and maybe with your kids—what do you think happens now that you have some better information about your own free will or agency? How can you talk to your loved ones then?"

A cold wind whistled through the garage, and Sam pulled his jacket closed. "I'm glad you mention information, because that's really what it is. We change when we get new information. Sometimes we get new information because we made the worst mistakes we've ever made. Sadly, or ironically, those are the experiences that bring us new information that helps us become better. In my case, all the suffering—and there was years of it—brought me new information about who I am. I started to look into that question 'who am I?' It's a question I take seriously, and I think people should really look at it, because there's not an obvious answer."

Marco nodded energetically. "You mentioned that during our hike and kept pressing me with that question. Who am I? Who or what is the 'I' that asks the question? Do you have some more thoughts about it that will help me understand?"

Sam sat again. "I do, but I'm not going there right now. I do want to talk about that with you, because I care about you and I want the best for you, but right now, I'm struggling with other stuff. It feels more important to press on with the idea of suffering. You asked me how I interact now with my family."

"Yeah."

"I've asked myself how somebody recovers from a grave mistake. They do discover that there are different ways to respond, and they learn—as I learned—there is no separate self. I

realize I can't be hurt by the things that have happened, even the mistakes that I've made. I can hold my head up. I can respond differently. I interact with the people in my family, and I do try to make amends, but I don't accept the idea that I could have done something differently than I did in the past."

Marco said, "Here's the question. I just heard you say you're learning that you can't be hurt, but what about when other people are hurt because of something that you have done? What do you do then?"

"Good question. I try to make amends. I go to them and I say. 'Look, I see what happened, and I see that I hurt you. I wish I had done something different. I'm sorry, and I will try to make amends, if you're open to that. I understand you may not be, and that's okay, too.'"

Marco nodded. "Is that a conversation you might have with your ex-wife?"

Sam smiled a bit. "We actually have had conversations like that, and it helps. We have a better relationship because of it."

"Good to hear. So you were able to express regret with her and say I'm sorry?"

"Yes. She's accepted my apology, she understands. Both of us are terribly sad about what happened and how it unfolded. Neither of us expected to be divorced at this point in life, but here we are. I never saw it coming. That's the nature of life—things happen to us, and eventually you learn there are things that will happen to you that you never, ever saw coming."

Sam took a deep breath, scratched his chin. "Some of the perceptions I had when I was a young man were that bad things were not going to happen to me. I always said, 'I'm going to be fine.' In a blink of an eye, shit you never planned for plays out. Over time, maybe you come to understand the unpredictable nature of life. Like I've said many times, life just unfolds. I mean that."

Marco nodded. "You mentioned that on the hiking trip. I still have that planted in the back of my head, and I'm considering what that actually means." He stood. "I want to ask one last question. You said you were kind of feeling down, and it had to do with past actions. If I understand right, you were ruminating a bit about your actions and how they could have been different in the past and then also, how they could not have been any different. They were what they were, right?"

Sam said, "Yeah, it's a good question. For me, the path was open. There was no sort of external physical obstacle that kept me from going a particular direction. I could have *not* cheated on her. That path was open physically, but it wasn't open mentally. Did it happen the way it did given the conditions and causes that existed at that very moment? Maybe a month later, it could have been different. Probably would have been."

Marco murmured, "Mm-hmm."

"I don't know if I answered your question very well."

"Well—I think so. I'm kind of wrestling with a lot of these ideas, but I think there's a glimmer of understanding. I'm just starting to try to take some steps about regret myself. What do you want to do at this point in terms of those past events? Is there any action you want to take?"

Sam sighed, then his face brightened. "Yeah, I want to continue with what I've *been* doing. I am working to make amends in a way that's loving and honest and open. That's all I think I can do at this point. It may sound trite, but I want to show up as love. Don't blame people. Accept people for what they are, where there are, and understand that they're just as helpless as you are. They're every bit as much a function of what's happened to them as you are. So what room is there in our society for anger? What room is there for praise? Why should I praise someone who does something if they weren't responsible, if they didn't choose to do that noble action?"

He paused. "I do think there is room. When you praise somebody, it has an effect on them. It matters whether the praise is legitimate or not. They might see it as legitimate, even if you don't. If you praise them, they may do more of that action, so I think it's good to just show up as kind and loving and compassionate. That's really what I'm trying to do with the rest of my life. That's why I'm in the men's group, because I want to show up as a kind and good. It's not easy in our society."

Marco rubbed his hands against the tops of his thighs. "And it seems like there's contradiction everywhere. There may be value in making amends. There may be value in praising someone for something. There may be value in showing up as kindness or as love. At the same time, you talked about this idea of no self, and not having choice over what happened in the past, no choice in what's happening right now in the present. Life just is what it is." He frowned. "It sounds like a whole lot of contradictory ideas going on there."

Sam chuckled. "You're right. We live in the conceptual realm. When we try to figure things out, we're going to be led to contradictions, because the conceptual realm is not all of reality. Maybe it's a big illusion. I don't have more to say about that, because I think there are things that are beyond words and letters."

They both smiled, listening to a dog barking a few houses away.

Sam continued, "So why should we be surprised that we see contradictions? Who guaranteed us the ability to sit here and reason with our primate brains and not wind up with a bunch of contradictions?"

Marco finished his beer and sat the bottle on the floor with a *clink*. “That was my thought. We are primates with big brains, and we’ve evolved to that point where we have both emotions and logic, and we have feelings and thoughts, and we have choice, but no choice. And we have reality but non-reality. We can consider these lofty words and concepts, but at the same time, it’s very hard to understand what they are or have an experiential feeling of what they mean. I think that’s the part I still struggle with—the experiential part outside of thought.”

Sam nodded. “Yep. I’m often stuck in that place.”

“That happens to you as well? Seriously?”

Sam leaned back against the truck. “Marco, I don’t want you to have the idea that I have everything figured out or that I’ve arrived, whatever that means. I think I’m better off than I was twenty years ago, but I still have questions from time to time.”

Marco reached out toward the six pack and chuckled. “Given enough time, we’ll figure it out.”