And the Winner Is...

Two young rivals, two families, and the extraordinary business of being alive

Ben Grey · The Smiling Monad
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A Word from Rick — Interdimensional Publishing Department

RICK: Right. Before anybody starts emailing the author because some young bloke in here said something he hasn't said on your television: wrong universe.

This is a neighbouring one. Close enough that you'll recognise the names, the families, the bikes, the tracks, the races, and the extremely confident people discussing all of them on the internet. Not quite yours, though. A little different at the edges. Private conversations go in directions your cameras never followed. People ask questions they might never ask in your version. Sometimes the universe even gets the decency to let them finish an answer.

And no, the fact that you watched a kid grow up on YouTube doesn't mean you own his thoughts. You've seen a screen. Congratulations on mastering the screen.

Here, two ridiculously talented young rivals are trying to work out what it means to be alive while travelling at speeds that make most philosophical debates look like committee meetings about a parking ticket. Their families are still their families. Winning still matters. The dirt is still dirt. Source, apparently, has decided to join the conversation.

Now, can we get on with it? The gate's dropping.

BOOK I — THE PEOPLE INSIDE THE HELMETS

Chapter One — Everybody Has Seen Him

Pala, California. May 2026.

Haiden Deegan lost his breakfast somewhere between the team's truck and a conversation about suspension.

Not literally. Someone had simply asked him a question while he was eating, and the food was now abandoned on a workbench beside a row of tools. He could still see it from where he stood. It was possible, he thought, to be involved in the most technologically demanding form of outdoor chaos known to man and still have no reliable system for finishing a sandwich.

His father was studying the practice footage.

'Here,' Brian said.

The screen showed a green motorcycle charging out of a rut. It looked fast enough until the rear wheel stepped sideways and the rider gave up the drive he'd earned on entry.

'Wasn't doing that every lap,' Haiden said.

'Didn't say it was. What changed?'

'The rut got deeper.'

'And you?'

Haiden leaned closer. The rider on the screen—the one who happened to be him—had made a tiny correction at the bars, barely visible unless you were looking for it. The bike hadn't been slow. It had been reluctant, for half a second, to go where he told it.

'I tried to stand it up too early.'

Brian played the clip again, without congratulating him for eventually admitting it. This was familiar territory between them. Brian had spent too many years around motorcycles to be impressed by a beautiful-looking mistake. Haiden had ridden enough of them to know that his father wasn't necessarily right because he was older, either. They could argue about a line for twenty minutes, then settle it in two laps when the dirt told them which of them was wrong.

'You're finding out what the big bike will let you get away with,' Brian said.

'It'll let me get away with plenty.'

'Until it doesn't.'

'You're a cheerful bloke in the morning.'

'Finish your food.'

That, apparently, was the end of the technical briefing.

Beyond the awning lay a temporary city built around motorcycles: vans, transporters, generators, folding chairs, banners, tyre stacks, toolboxes and people who knew the difference between ordinary engine noise and a noise that could ruin the afternoon. The smell of fuel was everywhere. A mechanic

shouted for a socket. Someone was arguing about whether a cloud would burn off before the next session. An autograph line had begun beside the barrier, full of children whose parents had already accepted that the day would involve dust, sunscreen and an unreasonable amount of standing.

Haiden liked the place. Not the entire business around it, always, but the simple fact of being here. A motocross paddock offered a language he'd known since he was small. You could walk through it and hear the language spoken in tyre pressures, gear ratios, muddy boots, half-finished jokes and the little slap of somebody testing a throttle. People were busy making difficult things work.

A camera appeared. Haiden saw the lens, raised his eyebrows and made a face. The operator laughed. Haiden laughed too. That had always been part of family life: somebody filming while somebody else did something worth watching, or something ridiculous, which had often proved more popular.

He'd grown up with enough cameras to know that they weren't automatically enemies of a private life. A family could enjoy recording the funny things it did together. He had enjoyed plenty of it. His sister and brother had their own worlds, their own skills and enthusiasms, and the household had never been short of noise or opinions. The videos preserved good days that might otherwise have become blurry stories told over dinner.

He signed a kid's cap, spoke to him about his own bike and listened while the boy described a jump in his local track. For several minutes there was no famous family, no imagined rivalry, no television story. There was a kid talking about something he loved to a slightly older kid who loved it too.

'You hitting that jump?' Haiden asked.

'Not yet.'

'Good. You'll know when you're ready.'

The boy's grin was worth the interruption to breakfast.

Jett Lawrence could tell when Hunter was about to offer an opinion by the quality of the silence preceding it.

They stood beside a row of bikes, looking at the track beyond the fencing. The surface had been watered and worked, but some of the corners already carried the evidence of practice. A deepening rut was never simply a rut. It might be a fast line for two laps and a particularly expensive mistake on the third.

'Outside looks good,' Jett said.

Hunter made the silence.

'What?'

'Nothing.'

'You've got your nothing face.'

'It's my normal face.'

'Yeah, there's the problem.'

Hunter pointed towards the exit of the corner. 'Look at the bump after it. You'll have to get the bike stood up there, and you won't have much track left.'

'I'll make track.'

'Sure. Just ring me when you're in the fence.'

Jett laughed. He admired Hunter's ability to make sound racing advice arrive as an insult. It meant he could accept it without either of them having to become sentimental.

Their parents had brought them a long way to be having an argument in a California paddock. The journey had started with two Australian children who wanted to ride and adults prepared to risk a remarkable amount to give them the chance. Europe had not been a montage of sunny afternoons and winning trophies. It had involved unfamiliar places, money that needed stretching, work that never ended and days when the family had to believe in a future nobody had promised them. Hunter was older; he had gone first through many of the intimidating bits. Jett had followed, not as a passenger but as a younger brother who could watch, learn, challenge and eventually invent his own way of riding.

They knew how lucky they were. They also knew luck didn't maintain a motorcycle, pay for fuel or teach a child to read a collapsing rut at speed.

Jett shifted his weight, testing his sore ankle almost without thinking. Hunter noticed because Hunter noticed everything Jett would prefer to keep to himself.

'How's it feeling?'

'Like an ankle.'

'Useful.'

'You're welcome.'

The question wasn't an accusation. It was part of what it meant to share a life with somebody who had seen you at your best and had also seen you trying to walk on something you probably shouldn't have been walking on. Hunter

wasn't going to win Jett's race for him. He wouldn't want to. But he'd ask the awkward question when it needed asking, then get back to preparing for his own.

The first moto began long before the gate fell.

It began in the walk from the truck, when jokes became shorter. It began in the heat building under a helmet, the hand checking a strap already checked twice, the feel of a lever beneath a glove. Twenty or more engines warmed the air until individual sounds were almost impossible to separate. Dirt had been packed against the starting gate. Beyond it, the straight was wide enough to invite ambition and narrow enough, at the far end, to remind everybody that several motorcycles cannot occupy the same piece of earth indefinitely.

Haiden rolled into position. The machine beneath him was heavier and more powerful than the 250 on which he'd made his name. He could make it leap forward with a movement so small it felt like an accident. That wasn't quite the challenge. The challenge was asking it for precisely the right amount at precisely the right moment, over and over, when the ground was trying to become something else.

He looked down the straight and picked the place he wanted to be when it tightened. Someone on the other side of the gate gave the bars a sharp rev. Haiden answered. It was a stupid little conversation, and he enjoyed it.

Then the card went sideways and everything narrowed.

The gate dropped.

Engines rose together, the sound becoming physical as the bikes surged into the straight. Haiden felt the rear tyre bite and the front end grow light. Riders appeared at the edges of his vision, close enough that a small mistake by any of them could change the shape of the opening corner. He committed to his line. Dirt flicked up. The pack folded into the turn and then stretched, each rider searching for an exit that wasn't already occupied.

There was no time to think about who had more followers on YouTube.

The first laps had their own geography. Riders who were quick in clean practice lines now had to make those lines work with somebody beside them. A rut that had promised grip was torn apart by a different front wheel. A landing that looked level from the track walk had acquired a hard edge. Haiden gained a little ground in one section, went into the next corner determined to keep it, and felt the rear drift wider than he intended. He corrected, lost a fraction of drive and watched another rider pull away before the next jump.

He swore inside his helmet. Then the next corner arrived and demanded a decision.

This, more than anything, was why he loved racing. The track didn't wait for anybody to finish being angry. You could carry the mistake into the following lap and let it eat your attention, or you could look up and ride what was there. The options were presented at speed and without any concern for your feelings.

Haiden kept going. In a long rut he found a rhythm that let the bike settle rather than fight him. A rider ahead chose the inside line and hit the exit bump awkwardly. Haiden went around the outside, building speed across the rough ground and making the pass before the next rise. The front wheel floated for an instant. He landed already working out where to place it next.

The grandstand saw a pass. He felt half a dozen adjustments that had made it possible.

Elsewhere, Jett was riding with a different conversation going on in his body. He knew the response he wanted from the bike. Most of the time it arrived. Occasionally the ankle announced itself with a sharp, unwanted reminder that the rider and the machine were not one perfectly obedient invention. He modified the pressure through the footpeg. It was enough to keep racing, and not enough to make him pleased about it.

Hunter, meanwhile, found a pace that could survive the track as it deteriorated. He wasn't interested in providing a tidy story about his younger brother or Haiden's first season. He wanted to win, and he was good at the work required.

By the closing laps Haiden's arms were tired in a way he had expected intellectually and understood considerably better in his muscles. The 450 was not merely a faster 250. It rewarded a different relationship with power, fatigue and the moving surface. He kept finding places to improve and little errors he wanted another chance at. He crossed the line wanting to know immediately where he'd lost time.

There would be another moto. That was the lovely thing about a race day and the bloody exhausting thing about a race day. You could finish one and then have to do the whole job again on dirt that no longer resembled the morning's track.

Between motos Brian reviewed a handful of corners with him, then stopped. Haiden wanted to replay one mistake again. Brian shook his head.

'You've seen it. Go ride the next one.'

'I'm trying to work out how much it cost.'

'Cost you enough. Stop paying for it.'

That was useful advice, though Haiden was unlikely to admit the quality of it immediately.

The second gate fell. The track was rougher, the braking bumps sharper, the inside ruts deeper and the outside lines less predictable. Haiden began to anticipate where the bike would kick rather than react when it already had. In one corner he remembered the earlier error, resisted the urge to force the throttle and let the rear tyre find its grip. He was quicker on the exit. Nobody in the crowd knew why. Haiden knew, and so would Brian when they went through the footage.

When the afternoon ended, Hunter had won both motos. Jett had finished third overall. Haiden was fifth overall in his first outdoor 450 round.

A boy near the fence screamed Haiden's name as though he'd won the world championship. He waved back. Jett found Hunter and congratulated him with the sort of expression that suggested he'd be less generous next weekend. Hunter smiled. A mechanic was already looking at a part that had survived the race but wouldn't survive much more.

For the riders it had been a complicated, tiring and rather magnificent afternoon. For the people creating highlights, it was already becoming three much shorter stories.

Haiden had arrived. Or failed to arrive. Jett had recovered. Or hadn't. Hunter had proved a point, although nobody could agree which point he was supposed to have proved.

It was funny, at first.

Haiden and Brian watched two of the roughest corners. The conversation took long enough that Haiden's abandoned breakfast had become an archaeological object. Across the paddock Jett and Hunter were already winding each other up about the next track. The families eventually found their way to food and familiar conversation.

Later, lying in bed, Haiden saw a clip somebody had made from an old video of him boasting as a boy and the day's results. It was clever editing. Not particularly fair, but clever. He sent it to his sister with a laughing message, then read three or four comments underneath and wished he hadn't.

Jett received a different clip: a comparison of his worst moments with Hunter's best. He forwarded it to Hunter with *apparently you've stolen all my talent*. Hunter replied with an insult that made Jett laugh loudly enough for somebody in the next room to ask what was happening.

Both phones eventually went dark.

The first race was over. The season was very much not.

Neither young man could have explained, yet, why the jokes that were funny with family sometimes felt different when thousands of strangers joined in. That question could wait. Tomorrow they'd have tracks to study, friends to talk to, things to do that weren't racing, and another ordinary day inside lives nobody could sum up in a clip.

Chapter Two — Everything That Isn't in a Trophy Photograph

The Lawrence family story began a long way from an American podium.

A racing championship tends to erase its own history. The television image shows the rider and the machine. Sometimes the mechanic appears behind the barrier, or somebody gets a quick shot of a parent looking relieved. The trophy is held up. The photograph is taken. The audience is invited to admire a finished product.

The problem with this arrangement is that no human being is a finished product, and very few arrive at the front of elite sport without an enormous collection of other people having moved heaven and earth to help them.

Darren and Emma Lawrence had made a gamble that sounds tremendous once it has paid off and less comfortable when the bank balance is going backwards. The family left the Sunshine Coast and went to Europe for motocross opportunities, following a chance that might have made their lives or might simply have made them broke somewhere unfamiliar. There was no guarantee they would eventually become one of the most recognisable families in racing. The move put strain on money, time, ordinary family life and the comforting belief that an adult ought to know what happens next.

The boys were young enough to learn a peculiar lesson: sometimes grown-ups are frightened and proceed anyway.

That is not the same as recklessness. It can be courageous to take a risk for something you love, and equally courageous to recognise the limits of what you can afford. The Lawrence family's story matters not because their

gamble proves every risk should be taken, but because a decision made together grew into a whole web of work and sacrifice. Their success does not erase the strain it involved.

Hunter travelled this road first in all sorts of ways. Different tracks, unfamiliar systems, different demands and the strange business of being an Australian kid trying to establish a future in international racing. The younger brother grew up with a guide who was also a rival. He did not receive Hunter's talent by inheritance or Hunter's experience by osmosis, but he could watch what Hunter tried and where Hunter went wrong. That is an astonishing advantage, provided you don't mistake it for a free ride.

Jett had his own gifts. There were corners he saw in ways other riders didn't, rhythms he could find before the men ahead of him had settled, and the sort of physical intelligence that looks mysterious until you remember how many years he had worked at it. Hunter had his own kind of intelligence, too: consistency, a deep understanding of racing, a capacity to work hard without needing every conversation to be about his own importance.

The difference did not make one brother the wise one and the other the gifted one. Both were gifted; both learned; both made mistakes. An older brother can be grounded and still be fiercely competitive, irritated, funny, proud, stubborn and occasionally an absolute pain in the arse.

After practice, the brothers sat with footage of a rough track on the screen, replaying the same corner until they were arguing over the smallest details.

Jett paused the footage just before a corner.

JETT: There's time there.

HUNTER: You've said that about five different corners.

JETT: Because there is.

Hunter watched the next few seconds. The line Jett wanted to try was a fraction further outside. The track was changing from lap to lap. It might work brilliantly. It might send him into somebody's back wheel. Hunter gave the screen the mild look usually reserved for expensive restaurant menus.

HUNTER: Try it when you can see the next bit. If you just charge in because it looked good once, you're not thinking.

JETT: I thought you liked it when I didn't think.

HUNTER: Not thinking about every movement isn't the same as not paying attention, idiot.

They watched the corner again.

Hunter had put his finger on something more important than the line. Jett's best riding did not look calculated, but it was made possible by years of calculation, practice, feedback, judgement and the willingness to adjust. On a fast lap there was no time to recite every principle. The body responded. The brain was doing complex work, but not the sort that sounds like a lecture inside a helmet.

A young rider could easily confuse that fluency with invincibility. The quicker he became, the more careful he had to be about believing he controlled everything.

JETT: I know what the bike'll do.

HUNTER: Mostly.

JETT: You're a very encouraging person.

HUNTER: Dirt hasn't agreed to behave because you're Jett Lawrence.

That made Jett laugh, partly because Hunter was right and partly because the remark suggested the soil had been sent a press release and failed to read it.

Later, alone, Jett watched the same corner without the sound. He remembered the feeling of a good lap: the concentration so complete that he was not measuring himself against a reputation. There was no audience in his head, no image to maintain, no little committee discussing whether this was the sort of corner a champion should take. A tyre slid. His hands and feet answered. A choice arrived that he could not have described beforehand. And the bike went where it needed to go.

He had worked for years to become capable of that moment. Yet when it came, he experienced it less as controlling the bike and more as joining it.

Why's that so different from everything else? he wondered.

Jett leaned closer to the screen, annoyed by something he couldn't quite describe.

On the bike, he never had enough time to put every movement into words. He could explain lines afterward. He could talk about the suspension, the grip and the part of the track that was changing. But the actual moment of riding was different. His hands knew where to be before he'd finished deciding where they should go.

He played the clip at normal speed, then again with the sound off. There were things he could remember feeling that the camera didn't show: a bump travelling through his boots, a tiny movement in the handlebars, the sense that a line was opening before he could have described it.

Hunter came past looking for something in his kit.

'You ever wonder how you do it?' Jett asked.

'Do what?'

'Ride. I mean properly ride. Half the time I couldn't tell you every single thing I'm doing.'

Hunter stopped. 'Good thing you don't have to talk through it, then.'

'I'm serious.'

'So am I. Remember how long it took you to do that without thinking about it? You spent years thinking about it first.'

Jett watched him go. It was a better answer than he expected, and not quite a complete one. He knew he'd learned the movements. What he couldn't understand was why the best moments sometimes felt as though there was no longer anybody inside him issuing instructions. He wasn't absent; he was more completely there than he felt anywhere else.

He looked at the television a final time and switched it off. There'd be time to ask somebody who studied brains about that. At the moment he needed to eat.

He messaged Hunter a clip of the corner with a note: *Looked good to me.*

Hunter replied: *Did you watch the bit after?*

He had. The next lap was worse.

Jett sent back a single, carefully considered answer.

Shut up.

It was, by the standards of their family, an affectionate exchange.

Chapter Three — A Life With the Camera On

Haiden did not need anyone to explain the internet to him.

The Deegan family had been making videos long before social media became the compulsory stage on which everybody was expected to perform an edited version of themselves. Brian had been a professional action-sports personality in his own right; the family developed an audience that followed the work, jokes, travels and racing of the children. Hailie built her own career in motorsport. Hudson grew up in the same energetic household. Marissa and Brian were parents running a family, not merely background characters in Haiden's journey.

The appeal was obvious. Here were people doing interesting things and having enough fun to make viewers feel invited. A family could build a career without waiting for television executives to decide whether it deserved one. Being seen could create opportunities for the next generation. It could also become a job that was never entirely switched off.

Haiden understood cameras. He knew which moments were entertaining, when a joke had landed and how a bit of bravado could give a race weekend some extra electricity. He liked attention. That was not, in itself, a moral defect. A rider can enjoy putting on a show without becoming a lesser person for it.

The trap lay in what happened when people forgot that a show was a small selection from a life.

A stranger might watch six minutes of edited footage, construct a personality from it and then argue with that personality for the next six years. With enough repetition, the public character began to have its own career. It

attracted criticism, praise, sponsorship, fans, hostility and expectations. The person who supplied the footage still had to wake up on Monday and live with the consequences.

The situation became almost comic when somebody who had watched an episode of the family channel informed Haiden how his father ought to raise him. The confidence was impressive. The qualifications were less so.

There were actual reasons to examine the effects of that environment. Psychological research on adolescents and digital identity has explored self-presentation, comparison, feedback, belonging and the way audiences can influence the stories young people tell about themselves. Research into elite athletes has also described pressure associated with media scrutiny, performance and online abuse. But the results are not a simple equation in which more social media always means less happiness. Attention can also connect people, support a career and create communities. What matters includes how and why somebody uses it, who controls what is shared, and whether there is room for a private life outside the performance.

Haiden and Brian sat with practice footage on a tablet. The room was busy with riding gear, chargers and the untidy leftovers of a day that had contained far more work than the highlight clip would ever show. Somebody had posted a montage of his best moments and attached a declaration that he was going to dismantle the rest of the class. Other people had already begun angrily explaining why he wouldn't.

Haiden tapped the screen.

HAIDEN: Look at this. Apparently I'm either going to destroy everybody or get destroyed. There's not much in between.

Brian studied the footage. He had spent enough years dealing with public attention to know that the comments weren't going anywhere.

BRIAN: What did you learn on the bike today?

HAIDEN: That's not what I asked.

BRIAN: I know. I'm asking something useful.

Haiden could have given the answer he would have given to a camera. He wanted to win. He was coming. The other riders had better watch out. Those statements made fine entertainment. They were also incomplete.

Instead he described a section of track where he had lost time, then a change that had helped. He and Brian watched the clip several times. One pass looked impressive on camera but had cost speed on exit. Another looked almost boring but carried more momentum into the next obstacle.

BRIAN: Which one's faster?

HAIDEN: The boring one.

BRIAN: Then it's not boring to you, is it?

That remark was more helpful than another declaration about who deserved the spotlight. The performance had been turned back into a problem that could be solved.

Brian had built his own identity in a sport that rewarded risk, confidence and a willingness to stand out. He wasn't going to tell Haiden to become mild, quiet or apologetic for being competitive. Brian wanted his son's confidence to have a foundation. Words could start a fight. Practice had to finish it.

Later, when the room was empty, Haiden opened the channel and scrolled through old videos. It was strange to watch a younger version of himself taking up an entire screen. The boy on the footage looked recognisable and distant, as people often do when an old family photograph suddenly speaks.

He remembered some of the days. Others were there because the video was there. A camera could preserve details memory had lost and, by choosing what was worth showing, could make the past look tidier than it felt.

An unexpected question occurred to him: if people had been watching him become Haiden for years, how much of him was theirs to decide?

SOURCE: Less than they think.

He sat back.

HAIDEN: Who said that?

SOURCE: You had a question.

HAIDEN: Right. And now I've got another one.

SOURCE: Ask it.

HAIDEN: Why's my head giving me commentary when I'm trying to escape commentary?

There was no immediate answer. He was not sure he wanted one. Then his attention returned to the video of himself as a small child.

HAIDEN: People think they know me.

SOURCE: They know parts of your life that you've allowed them to see. Some know you well. Others know an image. Those are different things.

HAIDEN: I'm not fake on camera.

SOURCE: I didn't say you were. Being genuine in a moment doesn't mean the moment contains everything about you.

That was worth considering. Every photograph was an act of selection. A lens pointed in one direction and not another. A clip began somewhere and ended somewhere. Someone added a title, a thumbnail, perhaps an argument. Then somebody else arrived carrying their own memories, assumptions and experiences. They watched the same footage but did not necessarily see the same story.

There is a philosophical name for part of this problem: the distinction between the world and our representations of it. The brain doesn't provide consciousness with an untouched copy of reality; it organises information into an experience. Media does something similar at a social level. It organises events into stories, and those stories affect what people expect to see next. Neither process is automatically false. Both can be useful. Both can be mistaken for the whole truth.

HAIDEN: So everybody's making their own version of me?

SOURCE: Not just of you. Of one another, of the world, of themselves. Human beings need maps to navigate more than they can directly know.

HAIDEN: Sounds like an excuse for idiots online.

SOURCE: It isn't an excuse. A map can be corrected. People are responsible for what they do with theirs, especially when they hurt somebody by treating a guess as a fact.

Haiden understood something of the sport's cruelty. To be watched was part of the privilege. To be criticised was part of the job. But it did not follow that he had to hand strangers the authority to define the entire meaning of his life.

Nor did the discovery free him from scrutiny. If he rode dangerously, people were entitled to discuss it. If he made a mistake, he might need to own it. If he said something unkind, calling it part of his public persona would not make the consequences disappear. Freedom from public fantasy was not freedom from responsibility.

HAIDEN: What do I do, then? Stop making videos? Stop talking?

SOURCE: Do you want to?

HAIDEN: No. It's part of my life. I like it.

SOURCE: Then the question isn't whether the camera exists. It's whether you can enjoy using it without letting it become the only place you recognise yourself.

He considered the afternoon with Brian. The camera had been useful for seeing the line. It had not made the decision for him. At the next practice he would still have to feel the grip and choose for himself. The comments wouldn't be able to move the rear wheel for him, no matter how loudly they insisted.

HAIDEN: There's something funny about all those people deciding how I should ride.

SOURCE: What?

HAIDEN: At the gate, not one of them gets on the bike for me.

He closed the app. Not out of contempt for the people who cared about him. Quite a few had followed his family for years, celebrated achievements and supported them through difficult days. The connection was real, too. He just didn't need to carry every person's interpretation into the next moto.

He had a father who could teach him, a family with lives larger than his next result, a team who knew what the bike had done, and a whole evening left to enjoy.

There was still much about consciousness he didn't understand. There were religious ideas he had grown up around, others he had never examined and questions that bothered him more than any comment. What made a person a person? What remained of him if the show ended? Why did being loved feel different from being admired? Why did he want to win so badly, and was wanting to win the same as needing somebody else to lose?

He hadn't answered any of it.

For the moment, that was more useful than pretending he had.

The People They Were Supposed to Be

The email came at breakfast. Its tone was cheerful, which somehow made it more irritating.

Someone involved in public appearances thought Haiden might benefit from speaking a little more carefully about his rivals. Perhaps fewer remarks that could become confrontational headlines. Perhaps more time discussing the work rather than the personalities. It was ordinary advice from a person trying to do an ordinary job. Haiden could see the sense in some of it.

He also noticed the sentence about showing the public a *more mature version of Haiden*.

He took the phone to Brian, who was looking for a missing piece of gear.

'What's a mature version of me look like?'

Brian read the message. 'One who puts his stuff back where he found it.'

'Oh, hilarious.'

'I'm serious. Where's the other glove?'

They found it under a chair. Brian read the message again.

'If you say something stupid, you fix it,' he said. 'If somebody offers good advice, listen. Doesn't mean you have to go around sounding like you've swallowed a company handbook.'

'Can't win with them.'

'You can win a race. That's different.'

Haiden leaned on the bench, still thinking. The problem wasn't being asked to improve. He wanted to improve all the time. Improvement was the reason he put himself through punishing sessions in the heat while other people were enjoying a leisurely morning. What bothered him was the sense that the improvement being requested had no finish line. He could become quieter and somebody would say he'd lost his personality. He could remain loud and somebody would say he hadn't grown up.

Brian closed the message. 'Tell them what you'll actually do. Don't promise to be somebody you can't stand being.'

The discussion was over. They had bikes to prepare.

That afternoon Haiden was filming something silly with Hudson when a friend interrupted them to ask a genuine question about training. The camera kept running for a moment. Haiden answered without performing; they spoke about what a rider did when a bike began to push wide. Later, watching the

footage, he noticed he liked the unplanned conversation more than the joke they'd set out to capture. Not because it was more respectable. It just contained something they'd actually been interested in.

He saved the clip without deciding whether to upload it.

A few days later Jett was asked why he'd smiled during a conversation about Hunter winning. There were two versions of the interview doing the rounds. In the longer version, he had explained what his brother's result meant after all the family's years of travel, work and uncertainty. In the short one, the camera cut to Jett grinning while a voice-over asked whether he cared enough about losing.

Hunter watched both versions.

'Did you change your answer?' he asked.

'No.'

'Then what's the problem?'

'Apparently my face.'

'Been a problem for years.'

Jett threw a rolled-up towel at him.

Later, Darren joined them to talk about the next practice. He didn't ask about the clip. Jett found himself almost disappointed. He had a perfectly good argument prepared, and his father wanted to discuss a motorcycle. The three

of them watched a different angle of the previous race, then went outside to examine the bike. Within minutes, Jett forgot the argument he'd been planning to make. Hunter was disagreeing about the setting. Darren was telling them why they were both missing the same part of the problem. Nobody was asking what the boys looked like while they learned.

That evening the online discussion appeared again. This time Jett recognised how odd it felt to read strangers explaining a conversation he'd actually had. He could answer them all night and still have no influence over the version they'd prefer to believe.

He set the phone beside a photograph of the family in Europe, younger, tired and happy-looking beside a bike that had needed a lot of work. In the photograph, Hunter was making a face behind him. It was the sort of thing an editor might crop out of a heroic story of sacrifice. Jett liked it because it was exactly the kind of thing Hunter would do.

He left the photograph where it was.

The next time Source spoke to Haiden, it was not during a terrible night. He'd had a good day. He was alone for a few minutes, wondering whether to send a reply to the email.

HAIDEN: How do you tell the difference between growing up and giving in?

SOURCE: Ask what the change is for.

HAIDEN: That's it?

SOURCE: If you learn to choose your words so you don't hurt someone unnecessarily, you've gained a skill. If you learn to hide every natural reaction because a stranger dislikes your personality, what have you gained?

Haiden looked at the message. One sentence offered a useful suggestion about answering a difficult interview question. Another seemed to ask him to be less recognisably himself. He could act on the first without agreeing to the second.

HAIDEN: People need to fit together somehow.

SOURCE: Of course. A race needs rules. A family needs trust. A community needs ways to protect people and settle disagreements. None of those requires every person to have the same temperament. Unity isn't uniformity.

HAIDEN: I'd still like everyone to think I'm a decent person.

SOURCE: Most people would. But the audience will never occupy your life from the inside. You can offer them your conduct, your apologies when you've earned them, and your best efforts. You cannot offer them control of who you are.

Haiden considered the fact that he wanted both to be liked and to win by a mile. He didn't feel like giving up either desire. He also didn't feel like sending a speech about authenticity into somebody's inbox.

He wrote a short, practical reply and asked Brian to read it. Brian removed a sentence that sounded like an argument waiting to happen. Haiden removed another because it sounded too much like somebody who'd never met him. They both thought the result was fine.

Across town Jett had put the interview clip away. He was talking with Hunter about a corner they'd never quite agreed on, enjoying the argument as much as the memory. Somewhere online, two strangers were still debating which brother ought to be more competitive.

The brothers weren't available to adjudicate. They had other things to do.

Chapter Four — A Motorcycle Is Not a Certificate of Identity

Hangtown, California. June 2026.

There is a particular pleasure in watching somebody who knows what they're doing. You don't need to understand all the details to recognise the difference between frantic effort and extraordinary competence. A musician can make a difficult passage sound almost careless. A chef can reach for the correct pan without consulting a committee. A rider can arrive at the lip of a jump with a motorcycle dancing underneath him and give the impression that the machine is an extension of his hands.

The impression is misleading only if you think it means the work was easy.

By Hangtown, the second round of the 2026 outdoor championship, Jett was finding a more familiar rhythm. He won both motos. Hunter finished second in both. Haiden made his first 450 moto podium and finished third overall. It was a Lawrence one-two again, but the rookie on the Yamaha had done

something more useful than convince everyone he was destined to win immediately. He had demonstrated that the distance between himself and the front was something he could learn to travel.

That afternoon had several possible titles. *Jett Is Back. Hunter Is Still Right There. Deegan Arrives on the 450 Podium.* Anyone who sold attention could choose one and begin an argument. The riders, inconveniently, had experienced the entire race.

Haiden remembered where the bigger bike punished impatience. A 450 offered enormous power, but power was not identical with speed. It could spin a rear tyre when the rider needed traction; it could tire arms that needed to stay loose; it could make an early burst of aggression expensive late in a moto. You had to learn what to ask of the motorcycle, and when. The better riders weren't simply stronger than the machine. They were more fluent in its language.

That made the day satisfying in a way that required some explanation. He had not beaten the Lawrences. He had also not become a worse person by failing to beat them. He had learned, improved and stood on a podium in a class where winning was exceptionally difficult.

Brian and Haiden examined the Hangtown race after the noise of the podium had worn off. The first minutes were not about psychology. They were about throttle application, body position, the way the track had broken apart, the points at which the bike had been moving underneath him rather than fighting him.

BRIAN: What changed between the two motos?

Haiden described the improvement. Brian disagreed with one of the details. They went through the footage until they could see why a correction had worked, and what problem it might create on a different track. A good coach does not simply make an athlete feel clever. He helps the athlete make increasingly accurate judgements.

HAIDEN: I was having fun by the end of it.

Brian looked at him.

BRIAN: Good. Remember that when we're trying to sort out the bad bits.

A young champion can be taught to treat enjoyment as a distraction from seriousness. The sport does not reward that mistake for long. Joy may be one of the reasons the rider is willing to spend years doing difficult work. The trick is not to choose between discipline and pleasure, but to understand how they support one another.

It was something Jett knew with his body even when he hadn't found words for it.

Later, replaying a lap in his head, he returned to that difficult question from practice: how could he be doing so much while feeling as though he was hardly thinking at all?

SOURCE: You've described that feeling before.

Jett turned from the screen. The voice had no direction he could identify. It was as though a thought had become an answer without asking his permission.

JETT: Right. Who's that?

SOURCE: Someone interested in what it feels like to be you.

JETT: That's creepy. Also, you're not paying for fuel.

SOURCE: A fair complaint. Start with the corner.

Source seemed content to let him complain. Jett stood still for a moment, remembering a corner where he had adjusted without deciding to adjust.

JETT: There was that bit after the landing. I knew where to put the bike. It wasn't like I told myself what to do.

SOURCE: Think of the first time you tried something difficult on a motorcycle. You probably needed instruction and conscious attention for every part. With practice, the parts began to work together. It doesn't mean attention disappeared. It means you no longer needed to spend words on every movement.

He knew the difference. When he was learning, a small error could demand a huge mental effort. Now thousands of learned adjustments had become available in a fraction of a second. But that still left the experience of being completely *in* the activity. The feeling was more than automation. On a fast lap the challenge was alive; the next moment mattered; attention stayed with what the track was doing.

Source described a researcher named Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who had spent years studying experiences people found deeply absorbing. He called a particular condition *flow*. It was not restricted to racing or extreme sport. Musicians, artists, athletes, people solving problems, people dancing, and people practising demanding crafts could describe elements of it. Time might seem to change. The usual self-conscious commentary could recede. Action and awareness seemed closely joined. A task could be rewarding in its own right rather than merely a means of earning a prize.

JETT: So the good bit is a recognised psychological thing?

SOURCE: As a description of experience, yes. Researchers have also investigated its relationship with performance, attention, motivation and brain activity. But don't turn a description into a guarantee. There isn't one little 'flow switch' in the brain that science has definitively identified. And a person can ride magnificently without feeling exactly the way you do on your favourite laps.

JETT: What about being right on the edge? The risk's part of it.

SOURCE: Risk can make attention very intense, and difficulty can contribute to flow when it meets developed skill. But danger isn't a requirement for experiencing it. Nor is a frightening crash proof of spiritual insight. There's a difference between seeking an experience and pretending consequences no longer exist.

Jett looked at his ankle. It was a persuasive argument for the existence of consequences.

This mattered because people often romanticised dangerous sport as if its participants secretly wanted to die. From the rider's point of view, the opposite could be true. The attraction was often the overwhelming immediacy of being alive. A jump, a line, a moving machine and a body trained to respond: for a moment, there was very little room for the chatter that occupied the rest of the day.

That experience deserves respect without turning pain into an achievement. A rider who gets up after a crash may be brave, highly trained, flooded with adrenaline, desperate to continue, or some mixture of all four. None of those possibilities makes an untreated injury sensible. Recovery, support and protective judgement belong to the same love of riding as speed and risk.

JETT: So what do I actually do with all this?

SOURCE: You already do something with it. You practise. You pay attention. You let the activity matter to you rather than only the result. And you remember that the feeling isn't a private gift reserved for people who jump motorcycles.

Jett pictured people he knew outside racing. A mechanic tuning an engine by ear. Emma absorbed in something that mattered to the family. Darren working through a practical problem. Hunter watching a track and noticing what nobody else had noticed. His older brother Tate with his own interests and life, not simply an extra character in the famous brothers' success.

There was a world full of people who could become wholly absorbed in doing something well. The activity could be different; the human capacity for attention and enjoyment had a family resemblance.

JETT: Yeah, but painting a nice picture isn't quite the same as a 450 over a big jump.

SOURCE: Of course it isn't. The experiences don't have to be identical to be worth understanding beside one another.

JETT: I can accept that. Still not swapping the bike for a paintbrush.

SOURCE: A great relief to your sponsors.

He laughed. The discussion had brought him further than a tidy pronouncement about being one with the universe. He knew something about the psychology of the feeling he loved and something about the limits of what science currently explained. He could recognise connections across people without pretending that every experience was the same.

And there was an interesting question left unanswered. Why should any of this feel like something *from the inside*? A computer could measure a lap; a camera could record it; a scientist could study brain activity. But there was still that moment Jett actually lived, the pleasure of the tyre catching and the rhythm returning. Where did the felt quality fit in the explanation?

Source did not rush to answer. It was a question large enough to deserve its own chapter, and probably several more.

Haiden, meanwhile, had a simpler immediate use for the afternoon. He had found progress. He wanted more of it. His third-place trophy wasn't evidence that he belonged to the universe any more than he had the week before. It was evidence that he was getting quicker on a motorcycle.

That was plenty for one Saturday.

Chapter Five — The Question Behind the Prayer

Faith does not automatically make somebody gentle, and intense competition does not automatically make somebody cruel. Belief can bring courage, gratitude, family, obligation, compassion and a sense of being held within something larger. It can also be entangled with pride, fear, certainty, guilt and the natural desire for things to go one's way. A person can genuinely believe in God and still become angry when a rival beats him. Most people who pray have probably noticed that being human continues afterwards.

It was evening after a day of training. Brian and Haiden had already had their discussion about riding. Food had been eaten; someone had made a joke too poor to repeat; the ordinary life of the family continued in another part of the house. Haiden had finally stopped looking at race clips.

He was not praying for the other riders to fall off. He knew better than that. He was trying to put words around gratitude and ambition at the same time, and finding that the second feeling was louder than he expected.

He wanted to win. He believed he'd been given extraordinary opportunities and abilities. But when he tried to think about what it meant to be grateful for them, he kept imagining the next result. Gratitude quietly turned into a wish list.

HAIDEN: Is it wrong to want it this badly?

SOURCE: Wanting something deeply isn't the same as doing something wrong to get it.

He looked around, surprised again by the strange inner conversation. By now he was less interested in where the voice came from than in why it kept refusing to give him the kind of simple answer that would fit on a T-shirt.

HAIDEN: So God doesn't care who wins?

SOURCE: That is a question different religious people would answer differently. Why are you asking it?

HAIDEN: Because I work for this. Dad works for it. Everybody does. I'd like to think it means something.

He waited for a comforting verdict. None came.

SOURCE: It does mean something. Your work, your commitment and the people helping you are real. But suppose another rider has also spent his life working, and his family has sacrificed just as much. Does the meaning of your effort require his work to have less meaning?

That wasn't the same as asking whether he was allowed to beat Jett. Of course he was. The question was whether a result settled the moral value of the people who had competed for it.

Haiden knew how absurd that sounded when applied to a friend or his sister. Hailie's results did not determine whether he loved her. Hudson's next performance would not make him more or less a member of the family. He could know all this perfectly well and still feel the peculiar hunger for a victory that proved something enormous about him.

HAIDEN: You keep making it personal.

SOURCE: You asked what the result says about you. That's a personal question.

He had to admit that.

Haiden had heard plenty of talk about grace, gratitude and loving your neighbour. None had been delivered in a room full of motorcycles. The words sounded different with a rival he wanted badly to beat occupying the next gate.

To love your neighbour did not mean allowing him to pass you on the last lap. It meant being responsible for how you treated him before the gate, during the contest and after the result. A deliberate attempt to injure a rival would be different from a hard, fair move. Telling the truth about somebody was different from using the cameras to make him a villain. Respecting another rider's humanity did not forbid the pleasure of beating him.

HAIDEN: What if being confident is part of how I race? What if I need the edge?

SOURCE: Then learn the difference between an edge that helps you perform and a story that makes you fear you are nothing without it. Confidence can be useful. It can also become a job you have to perform every minute.

Haiden thought about how he behaved at the gate. There were times when he liked playing the antagonist. It energised him. It sometimes energised the crowd. The sport was not chess played in silence by people apologising for wanting the same square. There were personalities here, fierce ones, and the clash of those personalities could be enjoyable.

The problem came when the personality became something he was unable to put down.

HAIDEN: Everyone says ego like it's bad. Would I be here without mine?

SOURCE: Probably not in precisely the same way. Ego is a useful word for the ordinary sense that you're this particular person, with this history, these goals, this body and this name. Psychology uses several more precise terms, and religions disagree about what 'ego' means. A functioning sense of self helps you plan, protect boundaries, make commitments and learn. The problem isn't having one. The problem is requiring the whole world to keep it comfortable.

There was more to examine here than an inspirational quote. The brain builds an ongoing account of the person who has experiences: memory, expectations, bodily sensations, relationships, habits, values, plans. Some of that account is stable enough to make responsible action possible. Other parts change throughout life. That self-portrait can be accurate in places, mistaken in others and heavily influenced by what people say about us. It is useful without being a complete account of everything we are.

For a boy raised in the public eye, the distinction had peculiar force. The public self needed to be recognisable. The private person needed freedom to grow. Being known for bravado could become a trap if every quieter moment was interpreted as weakness. A rider could be genuinely fearless in one setting and uncertain in another without being a fraud.

HAIDEN: So what's the answer?

SOURCE: Which question?

HAIDEN: You're doing that on purpose.

SOURCE: Yes.

He laughed despite himself.

HAIDEN: Am I allowed to want to be the best?

SOURCE: You are. But being the best at racing is not the same as being more worthy of love. Would you agree with that for your brother and sister?

Haiden didn't hesitate.

HAIDEN: Yeah.

SOURCE: It would be a strange rule if it applied to them and not to you.

He didn't have a sudden revelation. He still wanted to win; he still felt the familiar surge of comparison; he still thought about the next track and what the Lawrences would do there. The conversation had not purified him into someone with no competitive appetite. It had simply made him notice that there were two questions he had been carrying as though they were one.

Can I beat them?

And: *Will I be enough if I don't?*

The first was a racing question. It would be answered on a changing track, again and again, never permanently.

The second concerned identity, love, faith and the extraordinarily human fear of not mattering. It would take longer.

The deeper religious explorations would come later: the Gnostic stories of Sophia, ancient explanations of separation, the fear of death, the relationship of love to creation, and the ways traditions disagree about whether God is outside the world or the source of it. Source wasn't going to use the first conversation to flatten two thousand years of religious history into a motivational slogan.

For the moment Haiden had the rest of his evening. His family were nearby. His body was tired from work he loved. He could be grateful for that without pretending the championship was already his.

He returned to the others.

A prayer had not changed the points standings. It had opened a question worth living with.

Chapter Six — The Internet Gets a Race of Its Own

High Point, Pennsylvania. June 2026.

From the paddock, the hills looked deceptively gentle. From a motorcycle they arrived as a succession of climbs, blind changes of direction and corners that seemed to tilt away just when you needed something solid to push against. High Point rewarded riders who could place a bike accurately while the ground was changing underneath it. That made it an excellent track for a fight between people who liked doing things their own way.

Haiden had been feeling quick in practice. Brian wanted him to say where, exactly. It wasn't enough to come in and announce that he was flying. They stood in front of the screen while Haiden described a section that began with a turn, rose into a rough straight and demanded the rider make a decision before he could see how much of the next line remained.

'I'm finding time there,' Haiden said.

'Where?'

'Out of that corner.'

Brian ran the footage again. 'You're getting in fast. That isn't the same thing.'

Haiden watched the front tyre settle, then the rear push slightly as he asked for throttle. He knew the difference. He just didn't enjoy how readily his father could make the distinction.

In the next session, the lap-time board told him he had speed. It didn't tell him how much speed he could use once somebody else wanted the same piece of dirt.

A timed practice session is an awkward kind of racing. The riders aren't officially battling for a trophy on every corner, but each is trying to find a clean stretch of track on which to record a fast lap. Everyone wants the same small advantages: clear air, an unobstructed line, a few seconds in which the next rider won't alter the choices ahead. All the ordinary frustration of traffic arrives without the clean logic of a race position.

Haiden came through a section feeling the bike drive well. He had found the pace he wanted. On another lap Jett came up quickly. There was a slowing rider, flying dirt, a line that was suddenly less available than it had been, and then the kind of exchange that would become a thousand different stories before anybody had even taken their helmet off.

Haiden knew he'd made the moment pointed. That was part of the game he sometimes enjoyed playing. Jett responded. Neither was interested in being cast as a helpless victim of the other's temperament.

But out there it had happened in a handful of noisy seconds. Riders arrived, made choices and continued riding. In the media pen, it would acquire a past, an intention, a moral significance and probably a preview of the next five years.

Hunter found Jett with his gloves still on and the adrenaline only partly gone.

'You enjoying yourself?'

'Fantastic,' Jett said.

'You looked busy.'

'He was in the way.'

'He was.'

'And?'

'And what did you do after?'

Jett looked at him. Hunter was not asking for a confession. The question was as familiar as asking whether a suspension change had worked.

'I was pissed off.'

'Could see that. What happened to the lap?'

There it was. Jett could name the exact moment his attention had moved from placing the bike to delivering an answer. He still thought the answer had been deserved. That didn't mean it had made him faster.

Hunter watched the clip with him. The footage gave them the line, the proximity and the dirt. It could not give them the space inside Jett's helmet when he'd decided to respond. Jett supplied that part, not particularly generously.

'I'm not going to let him do whatever he wants,' he said.

'Never asked you to. You can stand up for yourself and still ride your own lap.'

'You make that sound easy.'

'I said you *can*. Didn't say you would.'

Jett laughed despite himself. Hunter rewound the footage and pointed somewhere entirely different.

'Look at the outside there.'

'That's your answer?'

'I've already got one about the drama. There's actually time out there.'

They spent the next ten minutes arguing about the corner. By the end Jett was almost disappointed to discover he felt more interested in trying the line than in proving something about the practice incident.

Haiden was telling Brian the story from the other side. He described the moment with a grin, then made the mistake of asking whether it had worked.

'Worked at what?' Brian said.

'Got his attention.'

'Well done. You're now in the exciting business of having his attention. What're you going to do with it?'

Haiden laughed. 'You know what I mean.'

'I do. You want an edge. Fine. Just don't start thinking the edge is the job.'

Brian moved a tyre-pressure gauge out of the way and played practice footage. It showed a corner where Haiden had the speed to gain ground, then a following section where the machine became unsettled and gave it back. The old problem hadn't disappeared because the whole paddock was discussing the two young riders.

'You want to beat the Lawrences?' Brian asked.

'Obviously.'

'Then learn what they're doing where you're losing time. A good insult won't drive out of that rut for you.'

The conversation lasted longer than anything the television audience would hear. They disagreed about the throttle, watched an onboard angle, talked about what had changed between laps and went to find the mechanic who'd felt the same thing when Haiden came back into the paddock. Three people looked at one motorcycle from different positions. Haiden liked being able to argue with them. He liked even more that a disagreement could end with an adjustment he could test.

Across the fence, a reporter was preparing a segment about the rivalry. It wasn't a conspiracy. There was a reason people loved watching these two. They were brilliant young athletes, visibly different, and unwilling to pretend the contest was a friendly group exercise. The moment had been exciting and the cameras had captured it. That was news. The difficulty came when excitement was stretched into certainty about what either rider thought, feared or secretly wanted.

At the lunchtime break, somebody showed Haiden a short video that claimed he had won the psychological battle. Another suggested Jett had exposed how bothered he was. Haiden watched them both. In one he was masterful and calculating. In the other he was childish. The footage was nearly identical.

'Which one am I?' he asked Brian.

'Neither video's going to help your front end.'

'You refuse to have fun.'

'I have plenty of fun. Usually when you find a decent line.'

The motos supplied a less convenient story.

On the way to the gate Haiden's attention became narrower in the good way. The ground, the bar, the riders around him, the place he wanted to reach before the first corner. He'd spent time looking at a few high points on the track—not only the spectacular jumps but the places where races quietly changed: a braking bump that grew into a hole, an exit that punished too much throttle, a hill where going into a corner faster could mean coming out slower.

When the gate fell, there was no time for an elaborate psychological theory. Bikes fired forward. Riders leaned, chose, corrected. Haiden could feel how hard the earth had become in some sections and how soft it remained in others. He could see another rider's shoulder ahead and predict where the motorcycle would go before its rear tyre committed to the rut. Some predictions were right. The wrong ones required immediate revision.

He attacked where an opening appeared, then found himself needing to wait through a section where impatience would merely destroy his next corner. There was a strange skill in that: to be fiercely competitive and still resist an opportunity that wasn't really there. He made one pass by setting up the exit rather than forcing the entry, the sort of small victory Brian had been talking about all morning. It felt better than any comment thread.

Jett was in the same race, riding his own line, with no obligation to make Haiden the centre of his afternoon. The competition between them was real. So were the other riders, the deteriorating track and the work each motorcycle demanded.

Hunter rode away with the overall victory. While spectators built their newest interpretations of the young rivalry, the older brother accepted a result he'd worked hard to earn. He'd taken advantage of what the track offered and refused to give it back.

On the way back to the truck, Haiden passed a group of kids shouting at him. One wanted a photo; another was arguing with his friend about the practice incident. Haiden grinned, posed for the picture and carried on. It was a good race day, not a complete explanation of his character.

The internet was less restrained. By evening one short clip had been looped so often that the riders' few seconds of practice occupied more screen time than much of the racing. In Jett's room, the algorithm presented the incident again under a new headline. He started to play it and stopped halfway through.

He could remember exactly how he'd felt at the moment. What was new was the odd possibility that somebody else's description of those feelings might begin to compete with his own memory.

'How many times does a thing happen?' Jett asked the dark screen.

SOURCE: Once on the track. It can happen many more times in the stories people make about it.

'And I keep watching like it might change.'

SOURCE: Does it?

'No. Except sometimes I get more annoyed.'

He went to the window. Outside, a van was moving through the car park. Somebody laughed. The world contained plenty of things that hadn't happened in that one exchange.

'I'm still going to give it back if he does it again,' Jett said.

SOURCE: Perhaps. Then at least let it be a choice made on the track, not an obligation created by people replaying the last time.

That stayed with him. There was no rule that he had to be endlessly calm to be a decent person. There was also no reason to give an old incident the right to choose his next action.

Across town Haiden had put the video away. Brian wanted to talk about a corner from the second moto. Haiden argued about the line and then asked to watch it again. He'd found something that could make him quicker.

The rivalry could keep its headlines. They had racing to do.

Chapter Seven — The Man Who Wouldn't Join the Pile-On

Detroit, 2023. Three years earlier.

The old footage was not difficult to find. Motorsport never forgets an argument if there is a camera angle to go with it.

Haiden was seventeen at Detroit, still learning how to be a professional while already carrying a public identity large enough to fill a room. A forceful block pass involving teammate Jordon Smith had brought criticism and a cluster of uncomfortable questions. Aggressive racing was nothing new to

the sport. Neither was disagreement over where hard riding ended and unnecessary risk began. But a teenager in a press conference could be made to answer for more than one pass. A particular action could turn into a hearing on whether he was arrogant, badly raised or a disgrace to racing.

Hunter Lawrence was sitting there too.

He could have stayed out of it. He was there to discuss his own championship campaign, not to provide legal representation for somebody else's manoeuvre. He wasn't obliged to take Haiden's side. In a sport that liked rivalry, there were advantages to letting a competitor squirm.

Hunter intervened, publicly questioning the tone of the criticism and pointing out the sport's long history of aggressive racing. It was not a declaration that every pass was acceptable. It was a decision not to watch an entire character be constructed from one young rider's mistake.

That distinction is easy to admire after the event and more difficult in the room itself. A person can disagree with what somebody has done without joining a crowd that is enjoying the chance to make him smaller.

The moment belonged to Hunter because it didn't appear to be designed as a moment. He had seen something that struck him as unfair and said something about it. There was no hint that he expected Haiden to repay the favour, become his friend, or cease being a competitor.

Three years later, the High Point replay was doing the rounds again. Jett had been watching it with the unmistakable expression of somebody who knew he ought to be doing something else.

Hunter came past and glanced at the screen.

HUNTER: Still studying the greatest moments of dirt flying through the air?

JETT: Apparently you've been his personal bodyguard since Detroit.

Hunter laughed. He knew what Jett meant. Every time people wanted the rivalries arranged into neat camps, someone brought up the press conference as evidence that Hunter was on Haiden's side.

HUNTER: Is that right?

JETT: That's the internet's view. Thought I'd check whether I need to find another brother.

HUNTER: Good luck. I think we've used up the family budget.

Jett laughed, then pulled up the older video.

JETT: Why'd you say it, though?

Hunter watched a little. He did not seem particularly moved by the way the internet had carried the scene through the years.

HUNTER: They were giving the kid a hiding. You can talk about a pass without deciding you know everything about the bloke who made it.

JETT: Even if he was being a pain?

HUNTER: Especially then. You're not going to have much trouble being fair to people you already like.

Jett went quiet. The sentence didn't arrive with mystical music. It was simply a good observation.

HUNTER: Doesn't mean I'd let him past me. Doesn't mean I reckon every move's smart. I've made plenty of bad ones myself.

JETT: You have, actually.

HUNTER: Thank you for your support.

They went back to talking about racing. Hunter had done what Hunter normally did: made a distinction, refused a simple tribal answer, and returned to the work. He was not Source in a human costume. He did not possess universal wisdom. He could be angry, wrong, competitive and annoyed. But he had been practising a kind of fairness Jett could recognise in the real world.

Across the sport, Haiden looked at the Detroit footage as well. He remembered the public moment differently from the people who used it as evidence of an alliance. It had been his day, his embarrassment, his decisions, his questions to answer. Hunter had not saved him from accountability. He had interrupted something more like a public appetite for humiliation.

Brian had seen the same pattern throughout his career. A sport that celebrates people for being tough, fearless and aggressive can become strangely delicate when toughness produces an untidy incident. At the same time, that contradiction is no excuse for dangerous riding. The job is to tell the difference rather than take refuge in whichever reaction is easiest to sell.

BRIAN: You remember what mattered about that day?

HAIDEN: The move?

BRIAN: The move matters. So does what you learned from it. But the rest of your life didn't happen in that corner.

Haiden kept watching. At seventeen he had needed to become a better rider. He had also needed the ordinary privilege of becoming a better person without every previous version of himself being preserved as a prosecution exhibit.

HAIDEN: He didn't have to speak up.

BRIAN: No.

HAIDEN: Doesn't change what happens when we race.

BRIAN: It shouldn't.

That was the point. Gratitude and competition could exist together without requiring a friendship contract. Hunter's action did not mean Haiden owed him a softer line. It meant a fair line could be raced by people who were still prepared to acknowledge one another's humanity.

Source entered Haiden's imagination while the screen was still paused on the crowded press conference.

HAIDEN: People like turning everything into sides.

SOURCE: Sides are useful when you're keeping score. They become dangerous when they tell you whose suffering counts.

He considered that. On a sports field, teams and rivalries gave people something to care about. Outside the contest, the same instinct could make someone excuse cruelty from a friend and invent it in an enemy. A person could become loyal to the image of a group rather than to the actual people in front of him.

HAIDEN: So nobody should take sides?

SOURCE: No. People must sometimes take sides against harm, exploitation or injustice. Fairness isn't the absence of judgement. It's the willingness to judge the action carefully and keep seeing the person. Hunter didn't refuse to judge the move. He refused to let the room confuse a move with an entire human being.

Haiden sat with that for a while. It was not quite the answer he had expected from a voice that also wanted to talk about God. He had imagined cosmic wisdom would arrive wearing a robe and offering advice about peace. Instead it had brought him back to an awkward press conference, a young rider under pressure, and another rider making an ordinary ethical choice.

HAIDEN: Doesn't sound very spiritual.

SOURCE: Does love become less important when it is practical?

That question stayed with him longer than the headlines.

The Smiling Monad calls every interaction a chance to change the direction of a life. It does not claim that a single kind sentence repairs every injustice or that all harm can be undone with goodwill. Some problems require rules, boundaries, treatment, accountability and collective action. But conduct matters in the situations people actually inhabit. A person with the power to pile on can choose not to. A person who has made a mistake can learn from it without being told the mistake is the whole person. A competitor can seek victory while refusing to make defeat a sentence on the opponent's worth.

None of this required the three riders to become friends overnight.

Quite the opposite. The ethics would mean more if they could practise them while still wanting to beat one another.

Chapter Eight — The Universe Has a Terrible Public Relations Department

A human brain is an impressive instrument. It can learn to control a motorcycle over a track that changes every lap. It can remember a song from childhood and make the body feel something before the mind has worked out why. It can fall in love, invent mathematics, recognise a friend at a distance and picture a world that has never existed.

It can also spend forty minutes arguing with a comment from a person whose profile picture is a cartoon potato.

Jett found the contrast extremely funny. He wasn't the first. Comedy had been pointing out the gap between humanity's grand pretensions and its ordinary stupidity for centuries. Monty Python made something magnificent out of institutions taking their own nonsense seriously. Science-fiction comedies such as *Rick and Morty* could imagine entire universes and then use them to make a joke about the people inside. Neither form of entertainment was a philosophy textbook, but both could make a person notice assumptions he had previously considered obvious.

That evening after High Point, Jett abandoned the race footage and watched an absurd piece of entertainment. Afterwards he found himself considering an even more absurd question: how could the same species that put a machine on Mars also behave as though a nasty internet comment might change the laws of physics?

JETT: You know what'd be handy? Another universe. One where everyone leaves me alone for five minutes.

SOURCE: There may be one in which people ask even more questions.

JETT: That's a horrible thought.

SOURCE: An infinity of possibilities isn't a customer-service guarantee.

The joke opened a genuine question. What did scientists mean when they spoke about other universes or dimensions? Did they mean somewhere somebody could travel? Different possible outcomes? Mathematical spaces? Was there a version of every rider who made every possible move? And why were people so eager to jump from strange physics to the claim that consciousness created everything?

Source took the question seriously enough not to give Jett a thrilling answer it couldn't support.

A *dimension* in mathematics or physics is a way of specifying independent directions or quantities needed to describe something. Everyday space has three spatial dimensions; time is represented in physical theories in a different but closely connected way. Some speculative physical theories use additional dimensions. That does not establish a wardrobe full of nearby alternate lives. A *multiverse* is not one single proven idea either. Cosmological models, interpretations of quantum mechanics and fictional stories may all use the word while proposing very different things. Some are mathematically motivated. None of that means scientists have verified an accessible universe where a motocross championship is being run backwards.

JETT: Shame. I reckon I'd be good at it.

SOURCE: The other riders might disagree.

JETT: They'd be wrong in more dimensions than usual.

He grinned. The cosmic joke hadn't made the science unimportant. It had created enough space to ask what the words actually meant, instead of treating unfamiliar terminology as evidence of whatever theory he happened to like.

JETT: So why do people say reality might be in our heads?

SOURCE: Several different ideas get confused there. One is well established in broad terms: perception is an active biological process. You don't experience the world as an untouched data dump. Your brain interprets signals through sensation, attention, memory and expectation. Another idea is philosophical: perhaps consciousness is fundamental to reality rather than something that emerges from physical processes. That is a serious subject for argument, but it is not a finding established by the perceptual science alone.

Jett thought about how he saw a track. An experienced rider could look at a rough section and perceive lines where a novice saw only trouble. The ground itself didn't change because he understood it better. What changed was the relationship between what was there and what his body knew how to use.

JETT: So the world isn't just what I think it is, but what I can see of it depends on me.

SOURCE: That's a useful start. And on the people who help you learn, the senses and body you have, the tools you use, and the environment you're actually meeting.

The distinction mattered. Suppose two people watched the same race and disagreed about whether a pass was fair. Some of the disagreement might arise from having different camera angles. Some from different knowledge of racing. Some from different values or loyalties. Some from simply wanting their favourite rider to be right. The fact that perspectives vary did

not mean all accounts were equally accurate. It meant understanding an event required better evidence, curiosity and the willingness to test a favoured story.

That was one route from motocross to philosophy. A rider already knew that the line visible from the stands was not the line available from the helmet. He could extend the insight to other lives without claiming all realities were equally true.

JETT: All right. Explain consciousness itself, then.

Source was quiet for a moment.

SOURCE: What would count as an explanation for you?

JETT: You tell me. You're the one with the mysterious job title.

Source began with the distinction between being able to *describe* an experience and having an experience at all. A scientist can examine visual processing, attention, memory, reporting, wakefulness and the neural conditions under which a person says they saw a colour. Those studies matter enormously. But there is an additional philosophical question: why is there a felt experience of seeing the colour? Why does pain *hurt* rather than merely trigger a useful avoidance response? Why is there something it is like to be the rider inside the helmet?

Philosopher David Chalmers made this distinction famous by calling the latter the *hard problem* of consciousness. It did not mean research into brains was easy or that every philosopher agreed the problem was framed correctly. It named a gap many thinkers believe exists between describing mechanisms and explaining subjective experience.

There are competing scientific approaches. Global neuronal workspace theories investigate how information becomes broadly available across brain systems, for example for report, reasoning and flexible control. Integrated information theory attempts to connect consciousness with properties of a system's causal organisation and integration. Recurrent processing theories emphasise certain feedback processes in neural activity. Predictive-processing and active-inference approaches examine how nervous systems anticipate and act on the world, though the relation of those models to conscious experience remains disputed. Other theories place weight on higher-order representation, memory, attention and particular neural structures.

The names can sound like competing motorcycle sponsors. The underlying disagreements are substantial. They concern what counts as consciousness, how it should be measured, which mechanisms are necessary and which observations could count against a theory.

In 2025, an unusually ambitious collaborative study tested contrasting predictions of global neuronal workspace and integrated information theories using brain measurements from 256 participants. Some findings were consistent with aspects of the theories; other findings challenged important predictions of both. The point was not that science had failed. It was that scientists had designed tests capable of forcing their favoured explanations to answer to evidence, and the evidence had refused to award a neat trophy.

JETT: So the world's smartest people don't agree on why being alive feels like something.

SOURCE: They agree on a great deal about nervous systems, and disagree on important parts of how those processes relate to subjective experience. That's different from saying nobody knows anything. There are excellent maps and serious gaps.

JETT: You could have opened with that.

SOURCE: You asked for the long version.

JETT: Fair.

He sat with the idea. Not understanding everything did not make everything mysterious in the same way. It would be silly to claim there was no good explanation of why his motorcycle jumped when the suspension compressed and the throttle opened. It would be equally silly to declare the study of subjective experience finished because brain imaging had become sophisticated. Different questions demanded different methods.

Then the conversation took a stranger turn. It pictured an infinite, interconnected consciousness: not millions of utterly isolated fragments trying to conquer one another, but countless distinct perspectives participating in one continually unfolding reality. Love and peaceful connection were central to that vision. It was an invitation to imagine a very different starting point: that connection came before separation, and that individual lives were ways of experiencing a reality larger than any one perspective.

JETT: You saying I'm part of something bigger?

SOURCE: Start with the relationships you can see. Your family. The crew. The ground beneath the tyres. The living things that made your food and the people who made your bike. You are already part of a great many things. Now imagine the whole of experience connected just as deeply. What would change about how you treated another person?

JETT: And what if it turns out we're just brains having a very good day?

SOURCE: Then the joy of being alive would still be worth understanding. You wouldn't have to stop loving your family or enjoying a corner because a theory changed.

For a moment Jett couldn't think of a joke. That was unusual. He was trying to hold together a very ordinary fact—he loved riding—and a very large mystery—what it meant to be somebody having an experience. Neither fact erased the other.

Then the joke arrived.

JETT: The universe is a bit of a bastard, really. Gives everyone consciousness and then makes them argue about what it is.

SOURCE: It has also given them libraries, experiments, music and several excellent opportunities to laugh at themselves.

JETT: And motorcycles.

SOURCE: We mustn't forget motorcycles.

He looked again at the paused image of the track. A camera could record where he had been; equations could model parts of what happened; neuroscience could investigate his attention and action. None of those descriptions was useless. None required him to stop asking what it had actually felt like.

The extraordinary thing wasn't that science had failed to explain life in a sentence. It was that enough had been learned to ask better questions, while the experience of living continued regardless of whether the next experiment produced a tidy answer.

And somewhere else, Haiden had been asking a different version of the same question. If the self was not just a public image or a finish position, what was it? What did God mean by a human soul? Were ancient stories of separation and return another way of talking about the fear of ceasing to exist?

Jett had made his way to the question through jokes, experiments and alternate universes. Haiden was coming towards it through faith and prayer. Neither knew how close their questions had begun to run.

The next race would not pause for any of it. There were training plans to follow, bikes to prepare and a championship still wide open.

The story of consciousness was only just beginning.

BOOK II — WHAT THE WORLD THINKS IT SEES

Chapter Nine — Three Races Happened at RedBud

RedBud, Michigan. 4 July 2026.

The noise at RedBud is not something television can deliver intact. A microphone can capture engines. It can report the crowd. It cannot quite reproduce the way sound seems to travel through the ground and arrive through your boots before your ears get a proper vote. There is a physical democracy to it. Everybody gets shaken.

By the fifth outdoor round, the first predictions of the season had begun their inevitable journey towards embarrassment. The 450 newcomer was not winning everything. The younger Lawrence wasn't simply riding away with every race. The older Lawrence had become a very serious threat to anybody who had been expecting him to play a supporting role.

A promoter could sell that as tension. A fan could call it the greatest show on dirt. For the men doing it, the championship came down to things less grand: a line that deteriorated between laps, whether a start left a rider buried, an arm that grew tired, the unpleasant discovery that the rut you trusted last time had developed a new idea.

Jett had arrived wanting to beat his brother, which was hardly news. Hunter had arrived wanting exactly the same thing in the other direction. Haiden had arrived wanting to prove he could belong at the front of a class whose best riders were discovering ways to be faster than he had expected. There was no mystery about the ambition. The mystery was how three people could go through one afternoon and emerge with three accounts of what had happened, each one sincere, each one incomplete.

Before the first gate, Haiden stood at the edge of the pit area watching a rider run the section that had bothered him on track walk. The RedBud crowd had a sound of its own, rising and falling somewhere beyond the trees. People had driven a long way to shout at motorcycles. He understood them perfectly.

Brian had asked him one question that morning: was he going to ride the rut he wanted, or the rut that would still be there after twenty other riders had been through it? Haiden had given the obvious answer. Then he'd gone out and watched the track make a liar of him in practice. One of the lines already had a ridge at the entrance that could lift a front tyre at exactly the wrong time.

The gate dropped. He came out among a wall of machines and tried to make one clear decision after another. At the first corner, dust and flying dirt made the rider ahead briefly disappear. Haiden didn't have the luxury of waiting for a perfect picture. He used the angle of the next rear wheel, the movement of the pack and his own sense of the ground to choose where to place the bike. The line worked. Two turns later, another didn't. The motorcycle pushed wide and the rider behind slipped through.

For a moment Haiden wanted the place back immediately. Instead he found himself with an exit so rough that grabbing a handful of throttle would probably have cost him two more. He breathed, settled the bike and went after the next opportunity. His first moto never acquired the flow he'd been looking for. There were fast sections, then delays, then the maddening sight of riders he'd been chasing appearing farther away after a corner he thought he'd ridden well.

He finished tenth, angry mostly because he could identify the mistakes before anyone showed him the film.

Brian let him talk. When Haiden began repeating the same complaint, he pointed towards the fresh track map.

'You've got another moto. Which part of this is coming with you?'

Haiden put a finger on the section that had unsettled him. They talked about it until the choice became something he could test instead of something he could resent.

The second moto was a different ride. As the ground broke up, Haiden found opportunities where he'd been forcing them earlier. His body moved more freely over the bike. He chose a later entry to one corner, let another rider commit to the deepest rut, then carried a better drive towards the next rise. He began to catch men who had been getting away from him in the morning. The crowd's sound reached him in broken bursts across the louder sound of the engine. He was third at the finish, and the pleasure of having solved part of the puzzle was almost as good as the result.

Almost. He still wanted more.

Jett won the first moto. Then the second went wrong enough to leave him fifth. There were mistakes and falls in the day's story. Hunter, second and then first, took the overall. Haiden's tenth in the opening moto and third in the second left him sixth on the day. The numbers were unambiguous. What they *meant* was not.

The headline about Hunter could celebrate the rider who kept finding points when the championship grew difficult. The headline about Jett could declare that brilliance and vulnerability were living in the same helmet. The headline about Haiden could describe an uneven result, a recovery, evidence of promise, evidence of inadequacy, or whatever else the person writing it needed by lunchtime.

The family areas after the race were as untidy as any other working space when a long day had refused to be convenient. There were dirty clothes and half-finished drinks, people collecting equipment, and the sudden smaller voices of a working day winding down. The difficult thing about life at the top of sport is that the event finishes for the spectators several hours before it finishes for everybody responsible for getting the riders home.

Jett sat near Hunter and watched a clip on a phone. He could see the exact moment a race had stopped unfolding the way he wanted. The camera angle gave the crash a tidy beginning and end. From inside the helmet, he remembered it as a far less orderly collection of movement, noise and consequences.

JETT: Looks stupid from there.

HUNTER: Doesn't look brilliant.

JETT: Thanks. That's the analysis I pay you for.

HUNTER: If you wanted a bloke to tell you it was lovely, you should've paid someone else.

Jett played it again. He was not trying to punish himself. He wanted to know where the choice had been, the tiny point at which a better decision might have changed the next thirty seconds. Hunter watched without pretending to have experienced the lap from Jett's body.

HUNTER: What could you see?

Jett told him. Hunter pointed at the edge of the frame.

HUNTER: Right. From here, it looks obvious. Was it obvious *there*?

JETT: No.

HUNTER: Then don't analyse it like you had this camera on your helmet.

Later, away from the replay, Jett returned to the subject with Source.

JETT: How can I be there when it happens and still get parts of it wrong afterwards?

SOURCE: Because remembering isn't the same as replaying a file. You're not a camera with legs.

JETT: You've met our camera people, then. They seem to think I am.

Source didn't rush to the usual moral about ignoring the internet. Instead, the conversation went backwards through what had happened. There was the track itself: solid, changing, full of objects and constraints. There was what Jett's eyes and body could register at speed. There was what experience allowed him to anticipate. There was what he attended to and what remained in the background. And later there was the memory—a reconstruction built from what he noticed, what mattered to him, and what subsequent footage added.

The distinction was important. Perception is not a direct transmission of perfect information. The senses provide limited signals and the nervous system makes use of prior learning, context and expectations to interpret them. Some influential scientific accounts describe this process using predictions and the updating of predictions when the world behaves unexpectedly. Those accounts are active areas of research, with important questions still open. They do not imply that the world is only a dream or that a rider who anticipates a rut has conjured it into existence.

JETT: So I'm filling in gaps all the time.

SOURCE: Some gaps. And correcting some mistakes. Think of the way a new rider and an experienced rider see the same section. The experienced rider recognises possibilities that years of practice have taught him to notice. The inexperienced rider isn't looking at different dirt. He has different information available to his attention.

JETT: Unless he turns up with his eyes shut. Then he's in real trouble.

SOURCE: A reasonable safety observation.

The same kind of difference appeared when people watched a controversial pass. A fan who had raced might see the limited choices available on entry. Someone else might notice only the impact. A parent might see injury risk. A commentator might see drama. A supporter might see the injustice done to their favourite rider. Good analysis had to distinguish what the footage actually showed from the motive viewers placed behind it.

Jett knew what it felt like to be on the receiving end of those invented motives. A reply could be interpreted as fear. Silence could be interpreted as fear. A smile, with enough determination, could be interpreted as proof that he was hiding fear especially well.

JETT: So the plan is to become a bloke nobody can possibly have an opinion about.

SOURCE: You could try becoming a traffic cone. People still complain about those.

He laughed, but only briefly. There was a more difficult part.

JETT: What if I do the same thing to Haiden? I see one thing and decide why he did it.

SOURCE: You probably will sometimes. He's another person, not an answer sheet. The useful habit isn't never judging. You need judgement to race safely and make decisions. It's noticing the difference between what you observed and the story you added.

Jett thought about the High Point incident. He knew how it had felt. He had an opinion about it and wasn't obliged to surrender that opinion. But he could not honestly claim to know every thought Haiden had carried into the corner, any more than Haiden could know every thought in his. The distinction didn't make Jett soft. It made his judgement a little more precise.

Across the paddock, Brian had his own version of the same conversation, though he wasn't interested in calling it epistemology. Haiden had gone tenth and third. The easy response was to talk about the third and forget the tenth; the equally easy response was to complain about the tenth and ruin the third.

BRIAN: Tell me why those two motos were different.

Haiden started with the result. Brian shook his head.

BRIAN: I can read the sheet. Tell me about the riding.

So he did. Where he had been patient. Where he had rushed. Where the bike responded. Where he had allowed frustration to occupy a lap that needed his whole attention. The detail was more useful than either pride or embarrassment. A finish position was a fact about the end of a particular race. It wasn't a complete account of the decisions that produced it.

HAIDEN: Everyone's going to say I can't do it.

BRIAN: Some will. Others will say you're the next king of the whole bloody planet. Neither lot's riding the bike tomorrow.

Brian didn't need to make the criticism disappear. He needed his son to remain capable of learning when praise and abuse were equally available.

Here was a deeper question beneath a racing result: *What is a person?* A collection of remembered experiences? A body? A public name? A continuing pattern of habits, relationships and choices? Each answer captured something and left something out. A photograph caught a single moment. A result caught a performance. A biography selected a few events and called them a life. None was the whole person who continued after the camera went away.

Source didn't settle the philosophical problem for either rider that night. It did something less dramatic and more lasting. It gave them a reason to become suspicious of simple stories, particularly the ones they most enjoyed believing.

The next morning there would still be a championship table. Hunter would still be in front on the day. Haiden would still want to get closer. Jett would still want to beat his brother. Their different experiences didn't abolish the common event. They made it richer—and harder to reduce to a slogan.

For the people watching, RedBud had been an argument about who was best.

For the people who raced it, RedBud was something they could learn from.

Chapter Ten — The House That Wasn't a Highlight Reel

Between RedBud and Southwick. July 2026.

The family channel had been built out of a very simple discovery: people liked watching the Deegans do things. Motorcycles, cars, travelling, competition, arguments, jokes, mistakes, some carefully chosen chaos. There was energy in the work and a willingness to invite strangers into a world many of them would never otherwise see.

Brian had been famous before Haiden could spell the word. His riding and his public personality had helped create an audience that followed the next generation. Marissa, Hailie and Hudson belonged to the story too, each with a life that did not begin and end when Haiden pulled up at a starting gate. A family can enjoy the opportunities that come from being known while still wanting some rooms in the house to remain rooms rather than sets.

The house was full of the leftovers of a working day: an open bag on the floor, a charger that had disappeared from its usual place, a conversation happening in two rooms, and a plate of food someone was almost certain would be eaten when the person it belonged to finished doing something more interesting. The atmosphere was not solemn. People laughed. Somebody interrupted a story to correct a detail. A phone offered up another clip from the weekend. There was life outside racing, even in a family that had spent an extraordinary amount of time organising itself around it.

Haiden came in while Brian was looking over a piece of practice footage. He stopped by the screen. Before either of them said much, Brian tapped a point where the rear wheel had begun to lose drive.

BRIAN: See that?

HAIDEN: Yeah.

BRIAN: You can keep asking the tyre for something it can't give you. Doesn't mean it's going to be impressed.

They laughed. The rider's instinct to force the machine was not so different from a person's instinct to force an argument. But Brian wasn't interested in turning a tyre into a sermon. He wanted Haiden to recognise a specific mechanical problem.

Later, when the practice discussion was finished, Haiden stayed at the table. His phone was still showing a collection of opinions about the race. One person had decided he was talented but unbearable. Another had announced that nobody with a father like Brian could possibly understand hard work. A third had defended him so extravagantly that Haiden hardly recognised the person being praised.

HAIDEN: It's like people have made a second version of me. That guy's having a rough year.

BRIAN: Make sure he remembers to do his training.

HAIDEN: I'm serious.

BRIAN: So am I. You've got a real job. Their version can have its own job.

Haiden watched a few more seconds of the screen and closed it. He knew the business of visibility. He liked entertaining people, and plenty of that attention had helped him do what he loved. He wasn't going to pretend his family hadn't enjoyed the work or benefited from it. But there was a difference between inviting an audience to follow your life and allowing the audience to decide what your life was.

HAIDEN: How'd you stop caring what everybody said when you were racing?

Brian considered the question. He did not pretend he'd always handled public attention wisely. That would have been a ridiculous thing for any parent to say, and an even more ridiculous thing for a former action-sports star to claim.

BRIAN: Didn't always. Still don't, sometimes. But listen to who's actually helping you get better. That's a smaller group.

HAIDEN: You mean you.

BRIAN: I mean people who know what they're looking at. And you. You're the one riding it.

It was an important qualification. A parent's support can become pressure if every decision is taken away from the child. And a young person who becomes a professional athlete must learn to own his work rather than simply inherit another person's ambitions. Brian could pass on experience. Haiden still had to become Haiden.

Psychologists who study motivation have spent decades exploring this problem. Self-determination theory distinguishes forms of motivation rather than simply dividing people into the motivated and the lazy. It asks what a person is acting *for* and how freely they endorse the reasons. Winning can be deeply satisfying. So can recognition, money and a championship. But a life organised entirely around avoiding shame or securing approval carries a different psychological burden from one in which a person chooses a demanding activity because it matters to them.

Three recurring needs are central to the theory: *autonomy*, the sense that one's actions are meaningfully one's own; *competence*, the experience of developing and using ability; and *relatedness*, the feeling of connection and mattering to others. A strong sporting environment can support all three. Training can build competence, coaching can support informed choices, and family or teammates can provide belonging. A harsh environment can undermine the same needs even while producing impressive results. Researchers have found links between autonomy-supportive coaching and athletes' motivation and well-being. That isn't a guarantee about any individual family, and it isn't a licence to diagnose a household by watching a video.

Haiden had practical reasons to care about the distinctions. He wanted to beat the Lawrences. He wanted to make his family proud. He wanted the excitement of being good at the thing he had chosen. He wanted fans to

enjoy following him. None of those desires had to be removed. The question was what happened if one of them became the only acceptable reason to get out of bed.

Later, he found himself talking with Source while a family conversation continued elsewhere in the house.

HAIDEN: I don't need another person telling me results don't matter.

SOURCE: Good. I wasn't going to.

HAIDEN: Then why are we talking about this?

SOURCE: Because you asked whether a different version of you is living on people's screens. That's worth exploring before you let him make the decisions.

He smiled despite himself.

HAIDEN: I know who I am.

SOURCE: Tell me something about him that isn't a result or a headline.

He had answers. He belonged to a family. He liked particular people and places. He had jokes nobody else found funny and things he was very good at besides answering interviews. He had memories that were his even when the cameras had been nearby. He was a brother and a son. He was a professional rider who liked riding even on days when nobody had paid to watch.

The exercise didn't magically reveal a secret self that existed completely apart from the world. Most of the answers depended on relationships. They described things Haiden had done with other people, things others had taught

him and experiences he had shared. Identity was not an isolated jewel hidden in his chest. It was partly the continuing story of a person learning how to live among other people.

HAIDEN: But it's still *my* life.

SOURCE: Of course. Being connected doesn't make you a possession of the people around you. You can be formed by relationships without being reduced to them.

That distinction interested him more than he expected. A family could shape a child without owning his future. A team could teach a rider without deciding what every victory must mean. An audience could help create opportunities without gaining the right to pronounce final judgement on a human being.

What of religion? Haiden's faith was not an accessory to his racing personality. It was part of the language in which he asked the difficult questions. If he believed God cared about his life, what did that mean on a day when he finished sixth? Did blessing mean victory? Did struggle mean he had been abandoned? Was confidence faith, or could it sometimes be fear wearing the clothes of certainty?

HAIDEN: People pray to win. I've prayed about races. What's wrong with that?

SOURCE: Nothing is wrong with bringing your hopes to prayer. But consider what it would mean to say God had chosen one man to be worth more than another because of where he finished. Every rider at the gate has a life, a family and things they love. Their beliefs needn't be identical. Does a first-place finish tell you which life has greater value?

He knew the answer was no. That wasn't a revelation. The difficult part was noticing how easily winning could *feel* like proof of something larger, particularly after weeks of strangers publicly questioning whether you deserved to belong.

HAIDEN: If I win, it feels like everything makes sense.

SOURCE: For a while.

HAIDEN: Yeah. Then there's another race.

SOURCE: That's not a problem with racing. It's a problem if you ask a race to settle a question it was never designed to answer.

Haiden wasn't ready to agree with everything the voice suggested. In particular, he did not want religion explained away as a psychological trick. Faith could mean more than managing anxiety. Prayer could be an act of gratitude, worship, tradition, relationship and hope, regardless of whether a particular request was granted. Source took that seriously. It didn't tell him that every religion meant precisely the same thing. Nor did it replace his faith with The Smiling Monad.

HAIDEN: You keep making things complicated.

SOURCE: I'm trying to stop the complicated things being disguised as simple ones.

It was an irritating answer. Haiden liked it more than he wanted to.

The next day had a schedule. There were practice laps to complete and details to learn. The phone could make a noise if it wanted. The people at home had their own things to do. Brian still had an opinion about his riding, some of which would be worth listening to and some of which Haiden would want to argue about.

A person could spend a lifetime trying to control how other people described him. Or he could do the work of becoming someone he recognised in the privacy of his own choices.

That didn't mean stepping away from the cameras or refusing to entertain anyone.

It meant remembering which side of the lens held the life.

BOOK III — WHAT A RACE CAN'T MEASURE

Chapter Eleven — The Sand Keeps No Score

Southwick, Massachusetts. 11 July 2026.

At Southwick the sand had opinions. It got into everything, including places a reasonably designed human being ought to have been able to keep it out of. It moved under the wheels, built ridges where there had been hollows, and took the satisfaction of a clean racing line away from anyone foolish enough to believe it would remain clean for more than a few laps. On a hard-packed track, you could sometimes see a mistake approaching from a fair distance. At Southwick the ground occasionally seemed to arrange one for you while you were still deciding what the last one meant.

A week after RedBud, the three riders were at it again. Their bodies had been across states, through airports and into another practice routine. Their families had packed and unpacked, answered messages, made arrangements, worried about small physical problems and tried to fit ordinary life into a calendar that did not consider ordinary life its responsibility. The internet had managed to remain agitated throughout.

The first moto belonged to Hunter. Jett came second, Haiden third. For people who were watching the championship as a serial drama, the result was excellent material. Hunter looked hard to shift. Jett was close. Haiden was close enough to keep appearing in the same camera shot, and far enough away to find new work to do.

But motocross allows a person to be second at lunchtime and first by the evening, with a great deal of effort and some highly unpleasant surprises between the two.

In the second moto, Hunter led early. Haiden came with him, while Jett began behind, watching, waiting for the place where the race might open. The three bikes made a moving argument through the sand. Haiden had to keep a huge motorcycle floating and driving over a surface that was constantly stealing certainty from it. He could see the red of the Honda ahead and hear another closing behind him. The class did not care what he had already won in the 250s.

The second moto arrived with a surface that had been rearranged by practice and the opening race. Sand formed shelves at the corners, dragged the wheels into ruts they hadn't chosen and punished anybody who tried to lean the bike as though the earth beneath it were solid. Haiden was already breathing hard under the helmet when he reached a section where the rear tyre could either climb onto the loose top layer or dig until it found traction beneath. There was no single answer. He had to feel what this particular lap was offering.

Hunter was ahead, the red Honda settling into corners with a kind of stubborn economy. Haiden had him in sight and tried to find another fraction of speed through a rough straight. The machine floated over the first few bumps, then struck a deeper one and drove its weight through his arms. He was forced to sit back, lost the drive and swore at the sand. On the next lap he entered at a different angle, kept the bike taller and used a smoother throttle. The improvement was small and deeply satisfying.

Then he heard Jett.

He didn't hear a voice or a declaration that one of the famous Lawrences was now demanding the track. He heard the unmistakable rising sound of another 450 carrying more speed through the approach. A quick glance and there was the Honda, closing through the previous section. Haiden held his line and prepared for the next corner. Jett was already searching for another one.

For several seconds Haiden had two tasks he couldn't quite separate: protect the place he had earned and continue riding as well as the ground would allow. In trying to defend the inside, he made the exit smaller than it needed to be. Jett found room on the other line and emerged ahead, his bike driving cleanly through the sand. Haiden followed, furious with himself for seeing it a moment too late.

He would replay that pass later. At the time he had another corner to ride. He tucked in and went after the Honda, learning how it moved and how quickly a narrow advantage could disappear when a rider committed to a better line.

Jett went past Haiden. He then went after Hunter, lap after lap, drawing closer. Hunter fought to keep the lead and, late in the race, lost the front and went down. By the time he had recovered, the shape of the day had changed. Jett took the moto and the overall. Haiden finished the race second and the day third. Hunter, first and fourth, still had enough for second overall.

The result was a neat podium photograph and a rather untidy day for the people standing on it.

Afterward, Hunter looked more irritated by the fall than anybody else was likely to appreciate. People can respect one another and still hate giving away a race. In a quiet patch behind the team area, Jett was making himself useful by standing close enough to be annoying.

JETT: You were going all right till that bit.

HUNTER: Brilliant observation. You thought of coaching?

JETT: Pays better than crashing.

Hunter gave him a look. Jett grinned. **HUNTER:** You were closing before I went down.

JETT: Yeah.

HUNTER: You'd have had to get past me.

JETT: Reckon I would've.

HUNTER: Course you do.

They watched the last laps without needing to tell each other that love had survived the scoreboard. The room was crowded with the practical questions that mattered tomorrow: how the sand had changed, where the front had

tucked, what fatigue had done to the timing. The good thing about a brother who understood the sport was that he could care about you without lying to you.

Jett had been carrying a thought since RedBud. He remembered Source telling him how perception depended on what he could notice. He also remembered how Hunter had asked what the rider could actually see rather than what looked obvious in a replay. Now Hunter had gone down in front of him. The mistake was part of the result, but it didn't suddenly make Jett a better person than his brother. Nor did his own speed suddenly become unimportant because a competitor had fallen.

JETT: You know what's funny?

HUNTER: That's a dangerous way for you to start.

JETT: They can tell the entire story of today from one photo. Three blokes in a row, all looking respectable. Doesn't say much about the day, does it?

HUNTER: Says I should've stayed upright.

JETT: Among other things.

Hunter chuckled. It was enough. Jett didn't need him to provide the meaning of life while still wearing half the sand from Massachusetts.

Haiden had his own version of the afternoon to examine. Third and second in the motos was a fine day for a young rider building his first outdoor 450 season. It also meant being close enough to the very best to see exactly where the difference still lived. There were times when he was with them, and times when they found another small reserve of speed or technique he could not immediately copy.

Brian had seen too many careers to take a single podium as proof that the job was finished. He wanted Haiden to enjoy it. He also wanted the observations that would make next week better.

BRIAN: How long were you with them?

Haiden told him. He described the start, the sand's movement, the section where he was spending energy getting a little less speed than he wanted. Brian asked him to go back, to describe the moment before he felt the bike begin to fight him. Not *Why weren't you quicker?* A more useful question: *What happened?*

HAIDEN: I was trying to stay there.

BRIAN: I know. What'd that make you do differently?

There was a pause. Haiden remembered gripping harder, then trying to force a turn after the track had already offered him a different line. He could recognise the error once it was named. While he was riding, the desire not to lose touch had made the next decision feel smaller than it really was.

BRIAN: You've got to race the surface you're on. Doesn't matter how much you want the bloke in front.

Haiden knew the advice. Knowing it and applying it when the two Hondas were a few bike lengths away were different skills.

Later he watched the last part of the second moto on a screen. Jett's pass was clean. Hunter's fall was real. Haiden could follow the visible events. But something about the picture was still bothering him.

HAIDEN: Everybody says to stay hungry. Don't back off. Want it more than the other guy. Then everybody says I ride too angry.

SOURCE: Both statements can sound useful until you need to make a decision in a corner.

HAIDEN: Is that another way of telling me to relax?

SOURCE: No. Your father has just explained something more interesting. He wanted to know how your intention changed your actions.

Haiden replayed a section. The question was not whether wanting to win was wrong. It was whether wanting to win *so loudly* that it filled his attention had begun to interfere with the precise activity that might produce a win.

There is a difference between intensity and rigidity. A rider needs commitment, courage, physical preparation and an extraordinary willingness to tolerate discomfort. He also needs information. A fixed idea of where the motorcycle must go can become dangerous when the earth has moved since the last lap. The best competitor must have a destination and remain free to find a better route.

Psychologists use the word *attention* for a family of processes, not one magical beam that can illuminate everything at once. The human nervous system has limited resources for selecting, holding and shifting information. Threat can narrow those priorities. Sometimes that is useful: if a tyre is about to land on your boot, it is reasonable to become rather interested in the tyre. In other settings, anxiety and pressure can consume resources that would otherwise help with flexible judgement. A rider might think more about what a mistake would mean than about the line available through the next turn.

HAIDEN: But if I stop caring about winning, I'm not me.

SOURCE: You don't have to stop caring. You have to notice what caring is making you do.

That answer was annoying because it left him responsible for the hard work. There was no secret spiritual trick that turned a third place into a first. He would need to practise, review, adjust, heal when he was hurt and occasionally accept that another person had ridden better. Source was not offering to change the physics of sand.

He was still looking at the screen when the question from his childhood returned: *If God gave me this ability, what am I meant to do with it?*

In the religious language he knew, a gift came with responsibility. But what did responsibility mean if two young men with gifts wanted the same trophy? The obvious answer—that one had been chosen and the other hadn't—seemed to make God an exceptionally petty race official. He didn't like that thought. Neither did he want his faith turned into a slogan about positive thinking.

HAIDEN: I pray for the people I love. I pray when I'm worried. I've prayed about racing. That's real to me.

SOURCE: It can remain real to you. A prayer can express hope, love, thanks, dependence, fear and the desire to become someone capable of meeting a difficult day. It needn't be treated like placing an order with a machine.

HAIDEN: So I can pray to win?

SOURCE: You can speak honestly about what you hope for. But what happens to your faith if a good ride still leaves you second?

Haiden stared at the frozen image: Jett heading towards the finish, the sand opening ahead of him. He knew the answer he thought he ought to give. He was less certain he knew how to feel it.

HAIDEN: I'd still want to win the next one.

SOURCE: Of course.

HAIDEN: And I'd be angry about this one.

SOURCE: You might be. Neither reaction proves your life has gone wrong.

The conversation stayed with him longer than he expected, not because it had supplied a conclusion, but because it had refused to let him use a conclusion as a shortcut. If faith mattered, he would have to investigate what he meant by it. If rivalry mattered, he would have to learn how to race well when the other rider was better on the day. The next race was a week away. He had time for both questions, and not nearly enough time to pretend either was simple.

On the other side of the paddock Jett was laughing at something Hunter had said. Haiden couldn't hear the joke and had no particular wish to join it.

For the moment, that was exactly as it should be.

Chapter Twelve — The Story That Fear Told

A week of travelling. Somewhere between one racetrack and the next.

Haiden had been thinking about an old story ever since Source mentioned the strange range of answers people had given to the question of why anything exists. His faith had made the question familiar, but not exhausted it. At

home, in church, around people he respected, he had encountered one way of speaking about creation and purpose. The wider world contained others, some close enough to be recognisable and some so different that they seemed to begin with another set of questions entirely.

He tried reading about Gnosticism on his phone. That was a dangerous approach to a topic which had occupied centuries of scholars and mystics. A page about ancient religious texts quickly led to another about secret knowledge, then a video confidently explaining that the entire human race had been imprisoned by beings with unfamiliar names. Underneath it was an argument about whether any of those beings had secretly founded modern financial institutions.

He shut the video.

HAIDEN: Internet's having a normal one.

SOURCE: An impressive amount of certainty for people who disagree on what the ancient texts actually say.

HAIDEN: Start at the beginning. Who's Sophia?

Source began with the setting. The term *Gnosticism* is often used for a diverse collection of ancient religious movements and writings, many associated with the early centuries of the Common Era. It is not the name of a single organisation whose members all signed one doctrinal statement. Scholars have debated how useful the label is. Some texts were known through the people who argued against them; others became accessible in new ways after manuscripts were discovered near Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945. The stories do not all tell the same cosmology, and some of their language is deliberately strange because they are trying to describe a reality beyond ordinary experience.

HAIDEN: So already there's more than one version.

SOURCE: You'd think someone who grew up being edited into a hundred different videos would have sympathy for that.

HAIDEN: Fair point. Keep going.

In some of the texts, the highest divine reality is beyond ordinary categories. From it comes a realm of divine fullness, often called the *pleroma*, with a series of emanations or divine expressions. Sophia—whose name means Wisdom—appears within that unfolding. In versions such as the *Apocryphon of John*, a desire to bring forth something without the proper counterpart produces a being sometimes called Yaldabaoth, associated with the ignorant maker of the material order. There are variations, and the narrative contains drama, separation, arrogance and attempts to recover knowledge of a greater origin.

Haiden lay back against the seat as the journey continued. Outside, ordinary America went past: service stations, road signs, a field of crops, somebody towing a boat towards a weekend that probably did not involve the meaning of the cosmos. He tried to imagine a group of human beings centuries ago, passing around a story that described this enormous universe as the result of a misunderstanding of its own source.

HAIDEN: That's not how I was taught Genesis.

SOURCE: No. It isn't the same story. Nor is it Christianity's only historical neighbour. Religious traditions have argued with one another and within themselves about creation, evil, freedom, God and the place of the human person. The point of studying the difference isn't to claim everyone secretly believed the same thing.

He looked up the word *demiurge*. It sounded like a race sponsor nobody could pronounce. He read more. In some classical philosophical contexts, the word names a world-craftsman; in particular Gnostic accounts, the creator

figure is ignorant of the higher reality and mistakes his limited authority for ultimate power. The distinctions mattered. Simply saying that every writer meant the same villain would be a good way of understanding none of them.

HAIDEN: But why would Wisdom make something that can't see the truth?

SOURCE: That's one of the story's tensions. It puts ignorance at the centre of a world that still contains sparks of the divine. Some readers hear a myth of spiritual estrangement. Others study it as a response to suffering and the question of why an apparently good ultimate reality could be associated with a painful material world.

HAIDEN: People look at what happens down here and wonder why God let it happen.

He wasn't thinking only about racing. He was thinking about injuries, disasters, children who didn't get a chance to grow up and families who asked for miracles that never arrived. It would be insulting to turn those things into a neat lesson that had supposedly been arranged for someone's personal growth. The question was difficult precisely because terrible suffering was real.

SOURCE: Yes. A serious philosophy has to live in the same world as suffering. It doesn't get to wave it away with a clever metaphor.

Haiden was quiet for several miles. A story in which humanity had forgotten its source was compelling to him, but it also raised a problem. If people were trapped in error, who got to claim they possessed the special knowledge that freed everyone else? That seemed an excellent opportunity for people to start bossing one another around.

HAIDEN: How do you know the person telling you the truth isn't just someone who wants to be in charge?

SOURCE: An excellent question to ask of a preacher, a philosopher, a sponsor, a scientist, a coach—or me. The answer can't just be that they sound confident.

The conversation turned to what religions and philosophical traditions meant by *knowing*. A scientist might test a claim by making a prediction that observations could contradict. A historian could compare manuscripts and dates, looking at the conditions in which a story was written. A person praying might describe a lived relationship, gratitude or transformation that could not be reduced to an experiment about a physical object. A philosopher might test whether an account was internally coherent and whether its assumptions explained more than its rivals. These were not interchangeable methods, and their differences did not make inquiry pointless.

HAIDEN: Then what do *you* do with Sophia?

Source returned to the thought that had first interested him: fear. Not the assertion that the ancient authors had secretly written exactly this modern account, but a new way of reading the story from the inside. Imagine a consciousness so accustomed to being separate that it forgets everything else. Imagine that its first great worry is the possible end of itself: *What if I stop existing?* It might try to control, hold, defend, possess and multiply its assurances. The more it tries to guarantee its own importance, the more the whole world becomes a threat to that importance.

HAIDEN: That's a bit like when people are desperate not to lose.

SOURCE: Sometimes. A person can be determined to win because racing is exhilarating and excellence is worth pursuing. Another part of that same person can be frightened by what a loss will mean. The behaviour might look similar from the stands. Inside, they're different experiences.

Haiden thought about the days when he had ridden with a free head, the ones when he saw the track clearly and felt the pleasure of doing something difficult. He thought about days when he had been aware of every opinion that might follow a result. The second feeling was not simply motivation turned up. It crowded out other things. It narrowed the world until the only acceptable ending was proof that nobody could question him.

HAIDEN: So you're saying Sophia is fear?

SOURCE: In this way of telling it, Sophia gives us a way to picture fear entering the drama of separation. Wisdom in the old stories is richer and stranger than that, and the stories themselves differ. But consider the question that the image makes possible: how much of human life is spent defending a self we are frightened of losing?

The thought followed him into a memory of prayer. He remembered asking for something badly, then wondering what it would say about him if the answer was no. If God loved him, would he be protected from failure? If he failed, had he been ignored? It was an exhausting bargain. It made love conditional on a result that could be taken away by another rider, a broken part or one small error of judgement.

HAIDEN: I don't want faith to be a trick for feeling better after losing.

SOURCE: Then don't use it as one. The question is larger. What kind of relationship with the divine could remain meaningful whether you win, lose, become injured, or one day stop racing entirely?

This time there was no convenient answer. Haiden was young enough for the whole future to feel enormous and old enough to have spent much of it preparing for a single kind of achievement. He believed in effort. He believed in family. He wanted the title. He could be grateful for what he had and still be frightened that none of it would be enough.

The question led to other traditions. Hindu schools did not all agree about ultimate reality, but some Advaita Vedanta philosophers examined whether the deepest self could be understood as separate from Brahman. Buddhist traditions analysed impermanence, clinging, suffering and the mistaken belief that things could remain fixed simply because we wanted them to. Daoist writings returned to the art of acting in harmony with conditions rather than forcing everything into a preferred shape. Christian mystics examined love and union with God; Sufi thinkers and poets explored devotion and the transformation of the self through love; Jewish mystical traditions gave different accounts of divine infinity, creation and repair. Differences among them were profound, and some disagreed at the level of first principles. Yet there were striking recurring human concerns: fear, separation, attachment, love, attention, belonging, and the difficulty of getting out of one's own way.

HAIDEN: That's a lot of people trying to explain the same human problem.

SOURCE: Sometimes the same problem, sometimes different ones. The similarity is worth exploring. So is the disagreement. A story becomes less useful when you force every character in it to agree with you.

He laughed. The last sentence sounded suspiciously like advice about family dinners.

At a fuel stop, Brian appeared with a drink and asked what he was reading. Haiden angled the phone towards him.

BRIAN: Ancient religions? You're meant to be watching your starts.

HAIDEN: Can do two things.

BRIAN: See if you can remember one of them tomorrow.

They walked back towards the vehicle together. Haiden talked a little about the story, not the whole conversation. Brian listened and said it sounded complicated. Then he asked the simplest practical question of the lot.

BRIAN: Is it helping you think clearer?

Haiden considered it. Not *making him feel like the winner*, not *telling him his dad was right*, not *guaranteeing he would be a champion*. Thinking clearer.

HAIDEN: I reckon it's making me ask better questions.

BRIAN: Good. Now make sure you still get some sleep.

There was something grounding about a father who could hear about the ancient origins of creation and still remember that his son had training in the morning.

That night, with the lights out and the next race ahead of him, Haiden returned to the question that had started everything. *What if I cease to be?* He didn't solve death. He didn't suddenly lose his fear of injury, failure or loss. But the question had changed shape. Perhaps a human life was not measured by how successfully it protected its own reputation. Perhaps connection was not a consolation prize handed out after the results were in. Perhaps love, in a sense much larger than applause, was something he could practise now.

HAIDEN: I'm still going to try to beat them.

SOURCE: You'd be wasting a remarkable opportunity if you didn't try to ride your best.

He liked that. In the morning, the track would be real, the other riders would be real, and nothing in his philosophical education would give him an extra second on a stopwatch. What it might give him was a little room inside his own head: enough space to race someone without requiring that person's defeat to prove his own existence.

Outside, another vehicle went past on the road. Somewhere in the distance a train sounded its horn. The world was full of things that had no interest in his placing, and it went on being extraordinary anyway.

He turned off the screen.

For once, he didn't check the comments again.

BOOK IV — THE WORLD INSIDE A HELMET

Chapter Thirteen — The Race That Doesn't Leave Your Head

Spring Creek, Minnesota. 18 July 2026.

The rain had held off long enough for the place to turn into a celebration of dust, noise and people who enjoyed spending a Saturday watching motorcycles disappear behind hills. Spring Creek was a beautiful place to have a difficult day. The trees stayed green. The river kept moving. Nobody had warned the scenery that an argument about championship points was about to unfold.

Haiden came back from track walk with mud drying on his boots and Brian wanting to know which section would be worst late in the motos. Haiden had been thinking about that too. In the 250s he'd learned that aggression could win you things a cautious person would never reach. In the 450s it had to be married to another skill: recognising the moment when the bike was already giving everything it had.

'If the line's gone, what's the next one?' Brian asked.

'Find another.'

'Before you've spent half a lap being angry at the first.'

Haiden grinned. He knew the tone. His father wasn't trying to change who he was. Brian was adding another tool to what his son could already do. That was how good teaching worked: you expanded a person's choices rather than making every choice for them.

Nearby, a camera operator wanted a quick prediction. Haiden gave him one. He didn't suddenly become a quiet man because he'd been reading about ancient religion in the van. He wanted to beat the Lawrences. He said so. The camera operator got the clip he wanted, and Haiden went back to the motorcycle. It was an ordinary exchange. Most of them were. The trouble came later when a five-second answer travelled without the ordinary world surrounding it.

On the Honda side, Jett had spent part of the morning watching Hunter move through a series of ruts. Hunter was remarkably economical when he rode well. Not timid. Nothing about a 450-class motocross rider was timid. But he rarely seemed to spend energy announcing how hard things were.

'You ever get sick of being sensible?' Jett asked him.

'I'm not sensible. I'm just faster than you when you're doing stupid things.'

'You practice that line?'

'Been waiting years.'

They laughed. Then the men went back to work. Darren wanted to hear what the bikes were doing on the long downhill. The mechanic wanted a precise answer about traction. In a race team there were dozens of people who could recognise the difference between how a rider appeared and what a motorcycle actually did. Outside the paddock, the public often had neither the information nor the patience.

The first moto gave the broadcast a familiar shape: Hunter at the sharp end, Jett near enough to make every mistake matter, Haiden reaching for positions that once might have seemed beyond him. The riding was difficult, magnificent and brief in the peculiar way a thirty-minute effort becomes brief when you are absorbed in it. Then came the second moto, and the track offered Jett a reminder of its independence.

He went down. The result he had hoped to build changed under him. Pain, irritation, urgency, the instinct to recover lost ground: all arrived nearly together. His body did the things it had trained to do. His thoughts were less orderly. A fall does not happen in slow motion to the person falling. That is a luxury supplied by television.

Hunter finished the day in command. Haiden stood second overall, another step towards the pace of the front. Jett had the awkward task of being a brilliant rider who had not ridden the day he wanted.

By evening, the images were ready. One showed Hunter looking composed. Another showed Haiden attacking a section of track. A third showed Jett on the ground. The captions came with their usual confidence, each providing an entire theory of the championship from a photograph.

Jett saw one and felt his jaw tighten. He could laugh at an insult and still resent being made into somebody else's lesson. A reporter's question followed: had he lost momentum against his brother? He answered politely. What he'd wanted to say was that a motorcycle sliding out from beneath you did not submit a philosophical statement before it happened.

At the hotel Hunter found him watching the crash.

'How many times?'

'Enough.'

'You know what you saw?'

'I saw myself chucking away a moto.'

'You saw a camera angle. What did you feel before it went?'

Jett closed the laptop. That question took him back inside the race. He described the rear stepping, his correction, where his eyes had gone, the split second in which he had committed to a line the ground no longer offered. Hunter listened, asked two practical questions, then drew a corner in a ridiculous approximation of a track on the back of a piece of paper.

'You made a call. It wasn't the right one. You'll make another one next week.'

'And if I make the wrong one then?'

'I'll call you an idiot again. Family service. No charge.'

Jett laughed. The knot in his stomach loosened, but not entirely. Hunter left. The room grew quiet. His ankle was sore and the little sketch of the corner sat on the table. He looked at his phone and thought about all the different people who now carried his accident around in their own stories.

'Why does it stay in my head after it's over?' he asked.

SOURCE: Because your mind was built to remember what matters, and danger matters to an animal that intends to survive.

'Yeah, but it wasn't just the crash. It's what everyone'll say.'

SOURCE: Your body has one memory. Your reputation has another. You keep replaying both because you're trying to prevent them from happening again. One can teach you how to move. The other is trying to teach you how to be safe from every opinion. That's a much less promising project.

Jett stood by the window. Below him, people were taking luggage from cars. No one looked particularly concerned about a failed corner in Minnesota.

SOURCE: The brain does not wait to discover everything about a threat before responding. It predicts, compares and protects. Your amygdala participates in learning what may be dangerous. Your hippocampus helps place experiences in memory and context. Networks in the frontal brain help you regulate attention and action. None of them is a tiny man sitting at a desk deciding whether you deserve peace.

'Bit disappointing. I was hoping there was somebody to sack.'

SOURCE: You'd only give him a uniform and an enormous title. Your species does love a committee.

'Can you change what the brain remembers?'

SOURCE: You can change what you do with a memory. Learning is not the removal of experience; it is the updating of what experience means and what you expect next. You can practise a corner until your body has better options. You can hear criticism, judge whether it carries useful information, and let the rest pass without appointing it your identity.

'Like Hunter did with the video.'

SOURCE: Hunter brought you back to the corner you actually rode. Not the person strangers thought the corner proved you were.

Jett held the piece of paper up. Hunter's sketch was atrocious. The track looked like an injured worm. He took a photo and sent it to his brother with a message: *You should probably stick to riding.*

The answer arrived almost immediately: *You should probably stick to staying upright.*

Jett shook his head and smiled. He felt the frustration about the race again, but it was now accompanied by something else: a genuine desire to see that corner next week, to find another line, to do the difficult thing better. He hadn't made his failure disappear. He'd stopped asking it to explain his whole life.

Across town, Haiden was having dinner with his family. Someone teased him about finally getting near the front on a bike bigger than his own ego. He answered loudly enough to make the table laugh. The day had been good. He was second, not first. He did not need to make those statements enemies. Later he would inspect the footage and see exactly where Hunter had been better. Tonight there was food, his family and the ridiculous pleasure of having a life that contained racing without being entirely consumed by it.

The points would still matter in the morning. So would breakfast.

Chapter Fourteen — What the Rider Knows Before He Thinks

Jett learned to ride before he could explain very much of anything. That wasn't a compliment about being incapable of explanation. It was a fact about how people learn movement. A child reaches for an object before learning the word *coordination*. The body begins solving the world long before the child can deliver a sensible report on the process.

During a quieter training day, he watched a younger rider approach a rut and suddenly stiffen. The kid had enough speed. He had the right idea. He was so preoccupied with making the correct movement that the whole bike appeared to be arguing with him. Darren talked to the boy about where to look, where to let the bike move, how not to strangle the handlebars. An hour later the child rode the section as though he'd discovered a different machine.

Jett remembered moments like that. He'd spent so long being described as naturally gifted that people sometimes forgot he had been a child learning to balance, fall, try again and trust a nervous system that was slowly becoming very good at a very particular activity.

Hunter met him beside the track.

'That kid's overthinking it,' Jett said.

'He'll be right. He's got time.'

'You were worse than him when you were little.'

'Excellent. Tell him that. Might cheer him up.'

They watched another lap. The boy was smiling now. His speed hadn't suddenly become world championship speed. But he had stopped fighting every bump, and the pleasure was visible from the fence.

Later Jett returned to the question with Source.

'If my body can make decisions without me telling it, what exactly am I doing?'

SOURCE: You're experiencing a great deal of what you do, not personally issuing every instruction. You are not a little commander sitting behind your eyes. You are a living system acting in a world, and awareness is one part of that life.

'And sometimes it gets in the way.'

SOURCE: Sometimes the part that comments on everything gets in the way. That isn't a reason to throw away thinking. Try building a motorcycle with nothing but instinct. You'd have an interesting pile of parts.

Jett could picture it: somebody confidently holding a piston next to a wheel, calling the arrangement spiritual engineering. He laughed, and Source continued.

SOURCE: Psychologists study the difference between deliberate attention and skilled performance. Working memory can hold only so much at once. Deliberate monitoring is useful when learning a new skill, correcting an error or planning a race. But movements built through practice can become less fluent if you try to supervise each component consciously at the wrong moment. Researchers call some of this reinvestment or explicit monitoring under pressure. You know the feeling. You've ridden it.

Jett thought about starts where the gate seemed to fall without him and starts where he could hear himself shouting instructions in his own head. Same rider. Same hands. Very different experiences.

'What about that thing where I don't remember half the lap?'

SOURCE: Flow. You are not unconscious. Your attention is organised differently. The challenge meets skills that have been trained for years. Feedback is immediate. You are deeply involved in what happens now instead of holding a meeting about what it will mean tomorrow.

'So being happy makes you quicker?'

SOURCE: Not necessarily. Sometimes you ride brilliantly and feel miserable. Sometimes you enjoy yourself and finish fifth. Flow isn't a trophy-distribution machine. It is a description of a particular kind of experience: absorbed action, altered sense of time, less self-conscious commentary, and pleasure in meeting a demanding challenge.

Jett considered the child at the track. The boy hadn't become successful by imagining he was already a champion. He'd found a way to take part in what was happening, to receive information rather than panic at every signal.

SOURCE: Now follow the question back further. What tells your body where it is?

'Sight. Balance. Hands and feet. Everything.'

SOURCE: Your inner ears help sense movement and balance. Proprioception gives you information about the position of your body. Touch and pressure tell you what the bike is doing. Vision offers a changing picture of the track. Your brain combines these sources, predicts what is likely to happen, and corrects when reality disagrees. It does not wait for one perfect photograph of the world.

'Which explains why the camera makes everything look obvious.'

SOURCE: The camera makes one view available. A rider must organise many changing signals from within the action. The audience has time and distance. You have the next fraction of a second.

Jett tried closing his eyes and remembering a landing. He could almost feel the compression, the way the bike drove forward and the suspension gave him back what the jump had taken. The memory was physical. He couldn't translate it all into words, even if somebody offered him a full hour and an unusually patient reporter.

'If I can know something I can't explain, how much does talking actually tell us about somebody?'

Source let the question stand. It had consequences beyond motocross.

SOURCE: Very little, if you mistake fluent speech for the entire mind. A person may understand far more than they can express. Someone may communicate through movement, gesture, rhythm, pictures, typed words, repeated phrases or a look towards something they want. Another person can speak beautifully and have no idea how to describe what they feel. A society that recognises only one sort of communication will mistake its own narrow expectations for a measure of human worth.

Jett remembered the younger boy before he relaxed into the rut. Someone watching his first few attempts could have called him hopeless. Darren saw someone who needed a different explanation and a little more time.

'Would you say the same for people who can't talk?'

SOURCE: Yes. Listen for the person, not merely the form in which you expected a person to answer. And don't call a life small because you cannot see all of it from where you stand.

'It's a pretty big step from riding a rut.'

SOURCE: Only if you insist that movement belongs to sport and communication belongs to the mouth. Your body has been speaking to the world since before you learnt your name.

That afternoon Jett watched the kid find the same rut again, faster this time, arms loose and face bright. He didn't need to say anything. He raised a thumb. The child raised one back and kept riding.

The moment made sense without a speech. But a moment later it gave Jett another question, one that was less comfortable than the first: if the body could contain so much intelligence he couldn't consciously describe, how did any of it become *experience*? Why did skilled movement feel like freedom instead of merely occurring?

That question would take him further than the next race.

Chapter Fifteen — The Clip That Went Everywhere

Washougal, Washington. 25 July 2026.

From the hills at Washougal, motocross could look almost gentle. The track disappeared between trees, reappeared in sunlight and rolled across the landscape like a ribbon somebody had become tired of laying flat. Then the riders came past and the gentleness vanished. Engines struck the air. Dirt moved in sheets. Thousands of decisions were being made where the spectators could see only the result.

The racing gave the paddock plenty to discuss. Jett crossed the line first in a moto, but a penalty meant the official result was not the same as the image most viewers remembered. Hunter took the overall, with the brothers trading a contest so close that their family could barely breathe through parts of it. Haiden was there as well, third overall, refusing to be written out of the conversation merely because the cameras liked a family duel.

An official judgement exists for a reason. Riders are not free to ignore every rule because a pass looked brilliant. Yet the clip spreading through people's phones had no space for the reasons behind the decision. It showed a finish, attached a grievance and invited its audience to choose a side. Within minutes people were arguing about fairness, favouritism, reputations and conspiracies, most of them without having looked up the actual rule.

Jett wasn't delighted. He was entitled to be disappointed. The penalty mattered. Hunter, who had ridden his own race and done what the rules required, was entitled to enjoy the result without apologising for the existence of officials. Those two feelings existed within one family and were not a crisis.

In the trailer Jett watched the sequence again with Darren and Hunter. Nobody felt the need to manufacture a feud from it. They examined the evidence and the rule. Darren pointed out the difference between what the bike had done and what the wording of the regulation required. Hunter had an opinion. Jett disagreed with part of it. They kept talking.

'You reckon it was right?' Jett asked Hunter.

'Reckon arguing about it without reading the rule's pointless.'

'You've turned into a bloody lawyer.'

'Only because your defence is terrible.'

Jett laughed in spite of himself. Hunter wasn't handing out comfort; he was demanding a better argument. The difference mattered. The people who loved you most were not always the people who told you that you were right.

At the Deegan truck, Haiden had his own interpretation of the day. He knew that the official results mattered; so did the information he'd gathered from racing those bikes. He was close enough to understand where the remaining

gap lived. The old television idea of the youngster getting humiliated by the experienced riders had become increasingly absurd. He was doing the slow, difficult work of learning a class at the highest possible level.

Still, somebody had put up an edit called *Exposed Again*. It placed a shot of him celebrating a previous win beside the day's result, as though joy in one race were a binding legal guarantee about the next. The comments developed the usual theological certainty. Haiden wasn't just third. He was apparently a moral failing with a helmet.

He showed it to Hailie during a family meal. She looked at the clip, then looked at him.

'Why are you showing me that rubbish?'

'Because it's funny.'

'You don't look amused.'

She returned to her food. Haiden looked down at the screen and had to concede that the joke wasn't improving with repetition. His sister knew what it meant to chase a sport with an audience and her own ambitions. She did not need to become a lecturer to be useful. A familiar pair of eyes had recognised that the clip was taking something from him.

Later, Jett asked Source how so many people could be certain of opposite conclusions from the same handful of pictures.

SOURCE: Because seeing is not the same as receiving a complete world. Human perception is an active construction. Your nervous system uses past experience to guess what matters in the flood of information available to it. When the evidence is uncertain, expectation can guide what people notice.

'Predictive processing again?'

SOURCE: Yes. But now add the social part. The mind does not merely see colour and motion. It sees stories, status, intentions and threats. Once someone believes Haiden is arrogant, a grin becomes proof. Once someone believes you're untouchable, an injury becomes an excuse. Once someone believes Hunter is overlooked, a win becomes evidence everyone else has been blind. Each story selects the details that feed it.

'Are they all wrong?'

SOURCE: Some observations are correct. The error is treating a fragment as a complete person. Your species is good at making a map and terribly reluctant to notice when it has begun living inside the map.

'Rick would like that.'

SOURCE: Rick would immediately sell subscriptions to seventeen inferior maps and claim the first one was free.

Jett laughed, then thought about the penalty. He had wanted everyone to see the race the way he did. Hunter had wanted the official result respected. The journalist wanted a clear story. The fans wanted fairness and perhaps excitement. Nobody had access to everything, and nobody became morally superior by refusing to look for the parts they couldn't see.

SOURCE: That is why you need evidence. Not because it can answer every question about life, but because it stops your expectations becoming the entire court. A fair judgement invites correction. A fearful ego wants agreement.

'You calling me a fearful ego?'

SOURCE: When you demand that reality rearrange itself to preserve your preferred picture, yes. You have excellent company. Humanity has built entire institutions out of that habit.

He returned to the rule. He could still disagree. But now he wanted to understand the argument well enough to know whether his disagreement survived the facts. That was a smaller, harder sort of humility than saying everything happened for a reason. It required doing something rather than announcing a mood.

The two brothers had another conversation before the evening was out. Hunter offered Jett a practical correction about a different corner. Jett made fun of his hair. Both had a good weekend. It was perfectly possible for one to gain points while the other gained something useful. The table did not need to be altered to make that true.

Haiden went to sleep thinking about the next chance to race them. Not the next chance to win an argument under a clip. The next chance to put his front wheel where the Honda's rear wheel had been, to feel the motorcycle drive and discover whether all those hours of practice had given him another way through.

That was a much more interesting project.

Chapter Sixteen — The Boy in the Old Videos

On a day without racing, the Deegan house briefly resembled a house without racing. There were shoes near a door, half-finished conversations, somebody looking for something everybody else insisted they hadn't touched, and the small domestic arguments that have never improved with a

sponsorship deal. Hailie had her own work to do. Hudson had his own plans. Marissa wanted to finish a conversation without three people moving towards an engine at once. Brian had the reassuring air of a man who could turn a quiet afternoon into a workshop at any moment.

Haiden found an old clip of himself as a kid. He was trying something he didn't yet have the strength or judgement to do cleanly. He watched the fall and laughed at the younger boy's outrage. A second clip showed him holding forth with the confidence of a small person who has not yet discovered the full range of possible consequences.

He could remember the fun of those days. He could also see the gap between the child in the video and the man now watching it. His skills had changed, his face, his body, his understanding of other people. Some of the old jokes wouldn't be funny to him now. Others were still pretty good. Viewers could replay them forever, as though childhood had been testimony under oath.

Brian wandered in and saw what he was watching.

'You were a handful.'

'I learnt from the best.'

'That's the problem.'

Haiden laughed. He asked why Brian had put so much of their family life online. Brian didn't deliver a prepared defence. He talked about building things, having fun, creating opportunities, showing a life people were interested in and believing that their family could do something different. There had been arguments about cameras, choices they might make differently now, extraordinary good fortune and plenty of hard work. Haiden knew he was loved. He also knew that being raised publicly had left questions neither he nor Brian could answer with a simple slogan about being grateful.

'The stuff's out there forever,' Haiden said.

'Pretty much.'

'Somebody can find me at twelve and decide that's the bloke they hate now.'

Brian leaned on the doorway. 'They can. But you know you've got older, right?'

'Apparently that's disputed.'

'Then don't waste all day proving it. Be older.'

It was an infuriatingly practical answer. Haiden carried it outside.

The garden and the garage and the noise of the household offered a different sort of history than the video archive. Objects had been moved. Family members had grown. The bikes were different, the tools were different, but a few things had survived: the instinct to make a joke, to try something difficult, to gather around somebody who had done well or had a rough day. The house was not a timeline with a verdict at the end. It was a place where people were still becoming themselves.

That night Source returned to a question Haiden had not known how to phrase.

'If every version of me was real, which one's actually me?'

SOURCE: All of them belonged to your life. None of them contains all of you. A person is not a still photograph of an essence. You are a living continuity of body, experience, memory, relationship and possibility.

'But things change. The kid in that video couldn't ride what I ride now. Thought different stuff. Said different stuff.'

SOURCE: Yes. What makes you you is not that nothing changes. Your life persists through change. John Locke asked what memory had to do with personal identity. David Hume looked for an unchanging self and found a succession of perceptions. Buddhist philosophers explored the absence of a fixed, independent essence. Other traditions placed continuity in soul or consciousness. They are different accounts of a question you can feel without knowing any of their names.

'And what do you say?'

SOURCE: I say the awareness that knows this life is part of one living Source. You are its particular view. That view is not disposable. It is what makes this life possible. The deeper unity does not make Haiden Deegan a mistake; it makes your individuality something worth having.

Haiden sat on the edge of his bed. He had expected the voice to tell him not to care what people thought. Instead it was asking him to think more carefully about who there was to care.

'If we're all part of you, do I even get a choice?'

SOURCE: You live your choices from where you are. You make decisions with a body, history, habits and relationships. Philosophers argue over how that freedom works. Some locate it in acting without external coercion, others require the possibility of doing otherwise. Even if every event had causes, your deliberation would still be one of the ways the world changes. Don't mistake the difficulty of describing freedom for the absence of a life you must live.

'What about all those people watching? If they've got their own version, aren't they free to think what they want?'

SOURCE: Of course. They are free to hold an opinion. They aren't entitled to make you into a servant of it. And you are free to be angry without surrendering the chance to learn when one of them sees something you've missed.

Haiden thought of his father watching footage, not to decide whether he was a good son but to see what happened through a corner. The image was the same technology that fuelled the public arguments. What made it useful wasn't a kinder camera. It was the purpose of the people using it.

SOURCE: A screen can show you a memory. It cannot tell you what that memory must mean. The same goes for your reputation. You can take responsibility for what you did without being imprisoned by what the world decided you were.

He reopened the old clip. The child was laughing before the attempt. He was scared and excited, determined to try. Haiden remembered that feeling with startling clarity. He hadn't spent those afternoons worrying what sort of public figure he would become. He'd loved the riding. He'd loved the people beside him. Some of that was still there, under everything else.

He put the screen away and went downstairs because there was food and his family were arguing about something completely unimportant. He had no idea where the discussion about identity would end. He was reasonably certain it ought to include dinner.

BOOK V — THE RACE INSIDE THE RACE

Chapter Seventeen — The Same Afternoon, Several Different Lives

Unadilla, New York. 15 August 2026.

A motocross track can seem almost ancient when the grass has grown around it and the crowd is still arriving. At Unadilla there were hills that had witnessed decades of brave decisions and expensive misunderstandings. The ruts began as small suggestions and ended, by late afternoon, as places where entire motorcycles seemed to disappear. Jett liked the way a surface changed under him. It made him pay attention. He hated being wrong about it. Both feelings were useful.

In the first moto, Hunter was the man everyone had to answer to. Jett fell, worked his way back and did what riders do when the plan has left the premises: he found a new one while moving at speed. Haiden was in the mix, close enough to remind people that the premier class had not sent him home for talking too loudly. Every rider had a version of the race that began inside his goggles, with a sound in his ears and a set of choices nobody else quite saw.

The television audience had another version. A producer chose cameras and replays. A commentator explained what he thought the rider had intended. A fan watched with a small child. Another watched with a tab open to the live

points. By the time the motorcycles stopped, the event had turned into a hundred conversations that sometimes resembled one another and sometimes didn't.

The second moto rearranged everything. Hunter's day came apart with the sort of mechanical and racing trouble a timing screen records without understanding. The official sheet would show a first and a thirty-ninth, leaving him eighth overall. Jett won the round with a second and a first. Haiden stood on the overall podium in third.

There was no shortage of people able to explain Hunter's result in three sentences. Some called it bad luck. Others decided it revealed a weakness he'd somehow concealed while leading the championship. There were brave souls who announced that he ought to have ridden around the problem, although none could explain how.

Jett knew the relief of his own result and the uneasiness of watching a good day turn rotten for his brother. He'd beaten everyone at the round. He was pleased. That didn't oblige him to celebrate Hunter's trouble. In the team area Hunter was dealing with the practical business of figuring out exactly what had happened, asking questions that would matter at the next event. He didn't appear interested in auditioning for the tragic character in a motorsport documentary.

A journalist tried to get the brothers to describe what the swing in points meant psychologically.

'It means we've got two races left,' Hunter said.

'But after a day like this, surely—'

'Surely we've got two races left,' Hunter repeated, and Jett nearly laughed into his drink.

Later, in the relative quiet of the transporter, Jett found Hunter checking a detail with one of the mechanics. His brother had already moved from disappointment to information. Not because he wasn't upset. Because the questions that could change next week were more interesting than the ones that merely rubbed salt into today.

'You all right?' Jett asked.

'Yeah. Annoyed. You?'

'Pretty good, actually.'

'You should be. You rode well.'

Jett looked at him. 'You don't have to say that.'

'I know. That's why it's worth saying.'

Then Hunter went back to the mechanical problem, leaving Jett with a victory, a brother and the irritating discovery that neither needed to be diminished for the other to exist.

Outside, somebody was assembling a video in which the championship had already been decided three different ways.

Haiden was looking at the podium photograph when Hailie walked over. He was pleased with third. He wasn't satisfied with third. These were not contradictory feelings, although apparently the internet required him to choose one and sign a declaration.

'You look like you're doing maths,' she said.

'Just checking something.'

'Your phone's not going to change the standings.'

'I know.'

'Good. Because your face says you're trying.'

She had spent enough time building a life in motorsport to know how much of an athlete's day never appeared in the result. Training, travel, concentration, recovery, ordinary worry about whether a choice was right. It was tempting to turn the day into evidence for a theory of Haiden: too cocky, not cocky enough, gifted, manufactured, courageous, lucky, spoilt, relentless. A theory could be updated with a single clip. A real person took longer.

He looked up at her. 'You ever get sick of everyone having a version of you?'

'Obviously.'

'What do you do?'

'Keep having a life.'

'Brilliant. Thanks.'

'You're welcome. Very expensive advice.'

She went to find the rest of the family. Haiden put the phone down and realised he was smiling. He had forgotten for a moment that an opinion could be true, false, useful, unpleasant or completely irrelevant without requiring him to do anything about it.

Jett was alone later when Source returned. The noise of the paddock had followed him into the room as a memory of revs, voices and a hundred overlapping judgements.

JETT: If you had to say who had a good day, I did. Hunter didn't. Easy.

SOURCE: That answers who got the better result. It doesn't tell you everything that happened to either life.

JETT: He didn't have some secret wonderful day. It was shit.

SOURCE: Of course it was. Don't improve his afternoon for the sake of a theory. Look at it properly. He was disappointed, he worked with the team, he congratulated you, and he still has a family and a future. Your win is real. His frustration is real. Neither result is a complete description of a person.

Jett sat with that. He'd heard versions of the lesson before. That annoyed him more than he wanted to admit.

JETT: You keep saying the same thing.

SOURCE: Because you keep trying to turn an event into an identity. This time let's ask why your mind does it.

Source took him back to a human nervous system built to survive in a changing world. Sensation did not arrive in neat, labelled packages. The eyes received changes in light; the ears responded to pressure waves; the body reported its own position. The brain used learned patterns to assemble a useful picture of what was going on. It could not inspect everything. It had to select, predict, and sometimes guess.

SOURCE: The same economy shapes social understanding. You see a person act, you build a quick model of what the act means, and you use that model to anticipate what they'll do next. Without that ability, everyday life would become exhausting. But a model is not the whole person. It is a tool made from what you noticed and what you already believed.

JETT: So everyone's got their own edit running.

SOURCE: Precisely. And a platform that rewards certainty, excitement and outrage can turn an imperfect edit into something that looks like a final verdict.

'But people aren't all wrong,' Jett said. 'Some riders are actually reckless. Some journalists know their stuff. Some fans notice things the teams miss.'

SOURCE: Then keep your judgement. Improve it. Respect the difference between evidence and an assumption. If someone makes a dangerous pass, discuss the pass and its consequences. You do not acquire the right to define every part of that person's character.

Jett thought of Hunter at the old Detroit press conference, years earlier, refusing to let a teenager be crushed under the weight of one racing move. He thought of all the times people had treated Hunter's patience as weakness and Jett's laughter as arrogance. Each story had a little evidence behind it if you selected the right ten seconds. That made the stories more dangerous, not more complete.

JETT: How are you supposed to see someone properly if you can never get inside their head?

SOURCE: You don't see them completely. That's the reason to listen. What you cannot know from the outside is not a defect in them. It's a limit of your viewpoint. A good relationship leaves room for the other person's account of their own life.

He imagined a world in which every spectator was fitted with a little screen showing the private experience of the rider they were judging: the pain in a hand, the moment of doubt, the instant the rut changed, the love of the people waiting in the pits. It would have been useful. It would also have been rather alarming. He wasn't sure he wanted the entire grandstand inside his helmet.

JETT: What if everyone had to live everyone else's day?

SOURCE: Then they'd spend the morning learning just how small their previous certainty was. But you don't need to borrow a life to recognise that it's real.

Jett got up and went looking for Hunter. He had something technical to ask about the second moto, and a brother with whom he could be pleased about one result without pretending the other hadn't hurt. A surprisingly complicated afternoon, for something that appeared on a television graphic as three numbers.

Chapter Eighteen — A Gap You Can Ride Through

Budds Creek, Maryland. 22 August 2026.

The paddock had become quieter about what was happening on the track and louder about what it meant. Hunter and Jett arrived with a championship almost balanced on the edge of a coin. Haiden arrived with a summer of

experience in the class, a serious reputation to build, and an audience impatient to know whether he was a future champion or a fraud. Apparently those were the only two available options.

Budds Creek wasn't interested in choosing. The dirt was hard in places, deep in others, and permanently willing to alter the answer to a corner as soon as a rider committed to it. Haiden found a rhythm that put him close enough to Hunter to spend much of the first moto watching the back of the Honda ahead. He was trying to solve the actual problem: where could he gain drive, where was Hunter protecting a line, how much time could he take without throwing the race away? The crowd saw a pursuit. Inside the helmet it was a series of rapidly closing possibilities.

There was enjoyment in that, even while he was frustrated. Hunter was riding well. To get past him, Haiden would need something better than an argument about who belonged in the class. He would need to find time on the dirt. As the race went on, the gap seemed at moments small enough to touch. Then a corner would remind him how much skill lived in the fraction separating two riders who were both exceptional.

Hunter won both motos and the round. Haiden earned another overall podium. Jett finished fourth, and the championship moved to its final event with Hunter a single point ahead.

At one point after the race, a camera caught Haiden watching Hunter talk to his crew. He looked serious. Within the hour, somebody had posted a still image claiming it proved jealousy. Another person insisted it showed respect. Haiden had been considering a line through a corner. Neither stranger had thought to ask.

Brian and Haiden were back at a screen by then, watching a segment of the pursuit.

'Here,' Brian said. 'You're getting the bike turned, but you're leaving it hanging there.'

Haiden watched. 'I thought he was going inside.'

'He didn't. So what did you do?'

'Waited for him.'

'You let him decide your line.'

Haiden replayed it. There were two different tasks involved in racing somebody like Hunter. One was making a fast motorcycle go fast. The other was refusing to let the person in front turn the whole track into a problem of reacting to him. Haiden could pressure Hunter without allowing Hunter to occupy every bit of space inside his attention.

'Right,' Haiden said. 'Next time.'

Brian nodded. 'Next time.'

He wasn't protecting his son from being beaten. He was helping him learn something a result sheet could never teach.

That evening Haiden returned to Source with the corner still in his head.

HAIDEN: Hunter didn't do anything wrong. That's what makes it annoying. He was just good.

SOURCE: The best kind of opponent. He forces you to become more capable without taking your choices away.

HAIDEN: You make getting beaten sound delightful.

SOURCE: It wasn't delightful. You were frustrated. But you also spent thirty minutes doing something you love at the highest level of your sport. Must the value of those minutes disappear because another rider arrived first?

'No,' Haiden said, after a while. 'But don't tell me second is as good as first.'

SOURCE: It isn't the same result. It can still belong to a worthwhile life. Excellence matters. Achievement matters. The mistake is to imagine there's a limited quantity of human worth and that the winner carries it home.

Haiden wanted to argue. The trouble was that he could feel the difference in himself. During the chase he'd been occupied by the work: braking, finding traction, measuring Hunter's line. Later he'd been occupied by what strangers might say. One experience made him a better racer. The other mostly made him tired.

HAIDEN: If everything is one Source, why are we trying to beat each other at all? Why not just hand out the trophy and have a barbecue?

SOURCE: Because difference is how experience unfolds. A single note sustained forever is not a symphony. You and Hunter are not copies of one person. You are distinct lives, with distinct bodies, histories, skills and choices. The contest exists because you are different and because each of you wants to discover what he can do.

HAIDEN: Sounds like you need the other person.

SOURCE: Often you do. A great rival shows you a possibility you couldn't have found alone. The struggle needn't be hatred. You can want everything from the contest without wanting to damage the life of the person who makes it possible.

He thought of the younger kids who'd practised his starts and repeated his jokes, of Brian showing him where he'd made mistakes, and of the riders he'd watched as a child. He'd borrowed pieces of their skill before he had words for what he was borrowing. Nobody had become smaller because he learned from them. They had, in a very real sense, become part of his education.

HAIDEN: So you reckon we're all connected through what we do to each other.

SOURCE: You are connected through bodies, families, food, language, history, physics, work, love and consequence. Those are connections no one needs to invent. The deeper truth I am showing you is that consciousness itself is not a collection of strangers sealed away from one another. It is one living reality expressing itself through different perspectives.

HAIDEN: That's the part I can't prove.

SOURCE: You don't have to win a courtroom argument before you can examine what the idea asks of you. When you remember that the life across from you is as real from the inside as your own, you race harder without needing to make it your enemy. You can protect yourself, refuse harm, and take responsibility for what you do. Oneness doesn't erase any of that.

He considered that this was a rather demanding account of love. It did not ask him to like everybody, pretend every result was equal or smile at an opponent who'd just cut him off. It asked him not to mistake being separate in experience for being entitled to ignore another person's experience.

'And God?' he asked. 'Where does God fit into all that?'

SOURCE: Look at the word you've used throughout your life. You mean the divine, what gives existence meaning, what holds a life beyond its passing successes and failures. Different traditions offer different accounts of that

relationship. I am speaking of the Source of experience itself: not a man sitting beyond the stars, deciding whose bike to bless, but the conscious reality within which every life unfolds.

Haiden lay back and stared at the ceiling. He could imagine how Brian would answer that: perhaps with a question about whether any of it could improve a start. He smiled at the thought.

HAIDEN: So the thing that connects us is also the thing that lets us be different.

SOURCE: Exactly. Unity without individuality would have no life to experience. Individuality without connection would forget where it belongs.

'All right,' Haiden said. 'I'm still going to find a way past him.'

SOURCE: Good. Your next question can begin there.

On the Lawrence side of the paddock, Jett was sitting with Hunter and Darren, their attention on the points with one round remaining. Hunter had ridden two nearly faultless motos. Jett had found less of the day than he'd hoped. The final round would require actual racing rather than philosophical persuasion.

'One point,' Jett said.

'Yep,' said Hunter.

'Annoying number.'

'Only if you're on the wrong side of it.'

Jett laughed. 'Fair.'

Hunter nudged the screen away from the results and pulled up footage of the next week's surface. There was still something to learn. There would be time later to decide what the championship meant. For now, it was a question of corners, lines and two brothers who intended to give each other an absolutely miserable time on a motorcycle before having dinner with the same family.

Chapter Nineteen — Two Points

Ironman Raceway, Indiana. 29 August 2026.

The difference between a championship and the memory of nearly winning one can be smaller than the space between a rut and a front wheel. The result still matters. If it didn't, the competitors wouldn't have devoted their lives to finding that small space.

Ironman had the familiar chaos of a final round: teams moving with practised urgency, parents trying not to look as nervous as they were, fans holding phones above the crowd to catch moments that would be uploaded before the riders had removed their gloves. Somewhere a person who hadn't slept well was deciding which headline would get the greatest reaction. None of it helped a motorcycle turn.

Jett began the day knowing he was one point behind his older brother. The ankle he'd been managing through the season was there too, as persistent as an uninvited passenger. Injury has a way of narrowing a person's world. A rider may know exactly what to do with the bike and still have to negotiate with the body through which every decision must pass. Some moments are painful. Some are frightening. Some are simply exhausting because the same question returns a hundred times: *Will it hold?*

His opening moto went badly. The ankle was aggravated further. The shape of the afternoon changed, and no amount of determination could return him to the body he'd expected to bring to the final round. His parents, team and brother were dealing with the same information from different positions. They wanted him to be safe. They knew how deeply he wanted the title. A family can love someone fiercely and still be unable to make his pain disappear.

Hunter had his own work to do. He wasn't racing against a theory of brotherly affection. He was fighting for a championship he'd spent years chasing, through disappointment and hard lessons that had helped make him the rider he was. He wasn't obliged to make winning easy for Jett because Jett was hurt. Jett wouldn't have wanted that. It would have cheapened both of their efforts.

By the end of the day, Hunter was the 2026 450 motocross champion. Jett was second in the standings, two points behind. Haiden finished his rookie 450 outdoor season third, with the class having taught him things no amount of confidence could skip.

There was joy in the Lawrence family. There was disappointment. There was concern about Jett's ankle, and relief for Hunter, and the particular absurdity of a lifetime's work being reduced to a pair of digits on a graphic. The emotions did not appear in a tidy queue. They arrived at once.

Jett watched Hunter with the trophy. He'd imagined that image with himself in it. He could feel the loss without needing to argue with the sight of his brother's happiness. Hunter saw him and crossed the distance between them, trophy temporarily forgotten. Their conversation began with the ankle, not with some polished speech about being brothers.

'How bad?'

'Pretty sore.'

'You need to get it sorted.'

'I know.'

'And stop telling everyone you're fine when you're not.'

'You're having a good day. Try enjoying it.'

'I am enjoying it. I'm also telling you you're an idiot.'

Jett laughed, then winced. Hunter noticed but didn't make a performance of it.

'Proud of you,' Jett said.

Hunter's face changed for a moment, softer than the camera would probably catch. 'Thanks, mate.'

'You're still old.'

'And the champion.'

'All right. Don't ruin it.'

The trophy was real. So were the two brothers. Neither truth needed to swallow the other.

Haiden had watched enough of the afternoon to understand what it had cost the Lawrences. He was still ambitious enough to look at the results and think about how far he needed to go. But another part of his attention had shifted from the positions to the people. He'd seen Jett hurt. He'd seen Hunter ride under pressure. He could be disappointed in his own result and impressed by theirs. He didn't have to turn either brother into a villain to make sense of his season.

Brian waited until the bustle around the truck had thinned before they talked. There were no cameras for the first part of it. He went through what had improved: the strength he could carry through a moto, the patience he didn't always possess in May, the ways he understood traffic, the different kinds of starts the big bike demanded. Then the failures: mistakes that had cost him, moments he'd tried to force a pass, times he seemed to be racing the idea of somebody else's reputation instead of the motorcycle in front of him.

'What do you reckon?' Brian asked.

Haiden stared at the season summary. 'I wanted more.'

'I know. What did you learn?'

Haiden spoke for longer than either expected. He knew where he lost time now, and when he was likely to over-ride. He knew how Hunter kept a rhythm that looked less dramatic on video than it felt when you were trying to pass him. He knew Jett could see lines others missed. He knew third in this class was not a humiliation. And he knew that admitting any of that didn't make him any less determined to win.

Brian watched him finish. 'That's a better answer.'

Haiden shrugged. 'Still want the trophy.'

'Good,' Brian said. 'Now you've got a better idea what it'll take.'

The father-son conversation was not about accepting mediocrity. It was about accuracy. A person could use a disappointment as information, or as a punishment to be repeated long after the race had ended.

Later, Jett's room was quiet enough that he could hear the air conditioner click on and off. He'd taken the medication he'd been given and arranged the leg where it hurt least. The trophy ceremony had already been cut into clips. Some celebrated Hunter. Some demanded to know whether Jett had thrown the championship away. A few seemed disappointed that two brothers had managed to finish a season without throwing each other down a staircase.

JETT: Why does it hurt so much if I know Hunter deserves it?

SOURCE: Because you wanted it, because your body is injured, because a year of work has come to a result you cannot change. None of those feelings is foolish. You don't have to accuse somebody else to acknowledge your own loss.

JETT: But I thought if I understood all this stuff, it'd be easier.

SOURCE: Understanding isn't anaesthetic. Awareness lets you experience a hard truth without turning it into a false one. Pain is real. Disappointment is real. Your life is still much more than either.

Jett was silent.

SOURCE: Think of what the pain is telling you. Some of it is the nervous system protecting an injured joint, processing signals about damage and danger. Some of the suffering comes when the mind adds a story: *This means I'll never be the rider I was. This means I've failed. This is all I am.* The body needs care. The story needs examination. Neither is helped by pretending the other doesn't exist.

Jett remembered riding as a child with a grin too big for the helmet. No points, no press conference, no awkward questions about who the better brother was. He remembered Hunter showing him how to approach something dangerous sensibly, and then doing it first because apparently being older came with that particular privilege. There was no question his life had changed. But the joy from those days had never belonged to a trophy.

'How do you stop your head making it bigger?' he asked.

SOURCE: You don't have to stop thinking. Notice what is happening before the story becomes a verdict. Seek help with the injury. Stay connected to the people who know you. Do the work of healing. And don't demand that your body finish tomorrow what it needs months to do.

JETT: This is going to be boring, isn't it?

SOURCE: Parts of it. You are allowed to have an ordinary miserable Tuesday. Even an enlightened racer can complain about physiotherapy.

'Excellent,' said Jett. 'Finally something spiritual I can use.'

He put his phone away. His brother was champion. He was hurt. He loved his family. He wanted to ride again. Four facts, all true, none cancelling another. It wasn't peace yet. It was a place to begin.

Chapter Twenty — The Body Doesn't Read the Comments

September 2026.

The official announcement that Jett would miss the SuperMotocross playoffs arrived after the decision had already become painfully obvious to the people closest to him. His right ankle needed further treatment and surgery. The championship would continue without him. There was no spectacular slow-motion moment in which he accepted this. There were appointments, serious conversations, practical arrangements and the peculiar boredom of waiting for a body to do what bodies do on their own timetable.

On the internet, a decision about health quickly became a debate about character. One group called him wise. Another suggested he was protecting his reputation. Someone calculated the number of titles he might lose. Someone else said he'd come back stronger, as though the future had already been signed by a public relations department.

Jett watched a little of it, then stopped. It was not always easy to stop. The machinery was designed to offer one more opinion at exactly the moment your attention wandered. He knew the feeling from videos of race starts: a small movement, an anticipated reaction, the next thing demanded before the previous one had settled. He recognised that certain parts of the internet had learned to exploit the same anticipation.

Hunter called and asked about the specialist's advice, the rehab plan and whether Jett had eaten anything that wasn't vaguely sponsored by a fast-food company. The conversation lasted longer than Jett expected because his brother wasn't working towards a motivational finale. They discussed ordinary things. Being absent from racing didn't make ordinary life irrelevant.

'You know what I miss?' Jett asked.

'The bike.'

'Obviously. But even just messing around. Not having to think about it.'

'You'll get there.'

'You don't know that.'

Hunter paused. 'No. I don't know exactly what it'll be like. I know you've got people who'll help you give yourself a proper chance.'

The honesty helped more than a guarantee would have.

One afternoon during recovery, Jett discovered he could name every person he'd seen in a racing broadcast and almost none of the workers who'd helped him through the previous week. The surgeon, rehabilitation team, family, mechanics and people doing the unglamorous work around a life had become as essential as any bike. Their names were not printed beside championship points. He found himself thinking about how strange it was to celebrate a single person for something that depended on so many relationships.

JETT: It's weird. When I'm racing, it feels like it's just me. Then the bike stops working and it's everybody's problem.

SOURCE: Because your life is not assembled alone. You have an individual experience, but it is built through relationships at every level: family, language, physical care, the technology of your motorcycle, the knowledge

handed down through generations of riders. The miracle isn't that you're independent of those things. It's that you can become a distinct person through them.

'But I'm still the one who feels the pain.'

SOURCE: Yes. And no one looking at you can measure exactly what you feel by counting your trophies or checking your bank account. That's one of the first lessons of the spectrum of life. Every life unfolds through its own body and circumstances. Wealth, success or disability can change access, opportunity and risk. They do not provide a ruler for the inner reality of another person.

Jett thought about a young fan he'd met who spoke very little and had held his favourite rider's shirt with such determination that the parents had finally laughed and bought it. The encounter had been brief. Yet Jett could still remember the boy's grin. He'd known exactly what he was enjoying. Jett didn't need the boy to explain it in perfect sentences. No stranger could have looked at the boy's manner of speaking and worked out whether his happiness was real.

JETT: People assume things because they only see the outside.

SOURCE: They do. And when a society demands that people hide harmless differences so others feel comfortable, it can teach them to live at a distance from their own needs and pleasures. A person may learn to pass as acceptable while becoming less free to inhabit their life. You have tasted that pressure in public. Other people meet it at school, at work, in a family, or in systems that control how they're allowed to communicate. The settings differ. The loss of being understood from the inside is real in each.

Jett stayed quiet. He could feel that his own privileges made many parts of life easier. He could also feel how often people used those privileges to decide he had no right to be distressed. He no longer wanted to apply the same lazy accounting to somebody else's suffering.

JETT: So I can't say what another person's life is worth from looking at it.

SOURCE: No. You can examine what conditions help people flourish. You can recognise material hardship and injustice. You can demand practical support where it's needed. But no ranking of appearances will tell you what a life is like to live.

The conversation moved, slowly, to the body itself. Jett had spent years experiencing the motorcycle almost as an extension of his limbs. Now the injured ankle reminded him that a body wasn't a piece of equipment he could simply replace. It was how he felt the world. Its sensations were not an inconvenience attached to consciousness; they helped shape consciousness from moment to moment.

JETT: If we're one Source, why do I only feel this ankle and not Hunter's?

SOURCE: Because a perspective is particular. Your senses, brain, memories and attention give this life a point of view. A single reality can contain countless points of view without collapsing them into one experience. Think of music again: the orchestra belongs to one piece, but the violin doesn't become a drum to prove it belongs.

'And when the body stops?'

Source did not answer immediately. Jett realised that, for once, he hadn't asked about the next race. He'd asked what happened to the one who was experiencing the races.

SOURCE: Your body changes all your life, and your experience changes with it. Neuroscience studies the relationship between those changes and awareness. The Smiling Monad goes further: consciousness belongs to the Source of existence, while this embodied life is one way it knows itself. That doesn't turn a broken bone into an illusion or give you permission to neglect your body. It makes caring for the life you have part of respecting the whole.

'You always make it sound like I should enjoy being alive,' Jett said.

SOURCE: I do. Including the parts that require medicine, patience and the occasional admission that your brother was right.

'Right. We've gone too far.'

He laughed. The leg still hurt. The same medical appointments were waiting. None of it had changed because of an extraordinary conversation. But his own life had become wider than the joint at the end of his right leg. He called Hunter back to ask about a race he'd watched and was pleased to discover that his brother was still perfectly capable of being annoying.

BOOK VI — WHAT REMAINS WHEN THE NOISE STOPS

Chapter Twenty-One — A Win Is Still a Beautiful Thing

Columbus, Ohio. September 2026.

For all the ways people could make motocross complicated, the simplest pleasure had never gone away. A rider sees an opportunity, commits to it, and discovers in the next instant whether he has the talent, preparation and nerve to make it work. That was what Haiden loved when he was small. It was what he loved when he arrived at the SuperMotocross playoffs with a summer of near misses and hard-earned knowledge behind him.

Jett wasn't racing. Hunter was. The paddock had a different shape without one of the Lawrence bikes in the contest, but racing had not stopped merely because an important person was missing. Other men had put years into being there. Their hopes were not pauses inserted into Jett's story.

Haiden had come to the first playoff wanting a win badly enough that the thought sometimes arrived before breakfast. He'd been close enough during the summer to know what one might feel like and far enough away that the gap remained irritating. His father had refused to turn that gap into a prophecy. When Haiden talked about needing to prove something, Brian put

the footage on and asked about the corner. When Haiden talked about the next race, Brian asked about the start. Eventually Haiden had begun doing it to himself. He'd sit down after a session and ask which part of the riding he could actually improve.

There were still evenings when he watched old family clips and wondered which of the younger versions of himself would be pleased or horrified to see the person he'd become. The kid who liked talking big would have loved the attention. The kid who loved moving a motorcycle fast would have wanted to know what happened on the track. The older Haiden had begun to understand that he didn't have to choose between them. He could enjoy the spectacle and still do the serious work.

The air was warm around the starting area. Mechanics moved along the line, each focused on one last detail that might be the difference between an excellent afternoon and a story told through clenched teeth. Haiden checked his goggles and settled forward. For a few seconds he could hear the rough, individual character of the motorcycles around him; then the sound blended into a single trembling wall.

The gate fell. He launched.

The opening rush came like being shoved into a moving doorway. Machines pressed towards the first turn, everyone looking for the fraction of space that would give them a clean exit. Haiden got through and found himself with work to do. The track didn't resemble the perfect shape he'd imagined before the race. It had actual riders on it, actual dirt being thrown into his line, and opportunities that existed only while he was willing to see them.

Prado was ahead. Watching him from behind was instructive and maddening. The rider in front seemed to be travelling at almost the same speed until one corner revealed the difference: less unnecessary movement, a slightly better angle, the front wheel already aiming at an exit while Haiden was still

working on the middle of the turn. Haiden tried to close the distance by rushing the entry. He felt the rear tyre start to skate and knew, before he'd finished the thought, that he'd repeated a familiar mistake.

He eased his grip by a fraction. Not his effort. His grip. The bike needed room to work, and the track had made its terms plain.

Next lap he approached the same section differently. Rather than stealing a metre on entry and giving two back on exit, he prepared the motorcycle earlier. The front dropped into the line. The rear followed, found its drive and pushed him towards the next rise. When he stood on the pegs to let the bike move beneath him, the rough ground felt less like an argument and more like information.

He was closer.

The crowd could see the gap change. Haiden saw the details that produced the change: the angle of another rider's shoulders, a momentary hesitation over a bump, the little patch of dirt between two developing ruts. The pass couldn't be planned as a heroic single act. It had to be assembled from a succession of good decisions, most of them too small to interest anyone watching the highlights.

He drew alongside Prado, with both motorcycles working hard through a section that allowed very little indecision. For an instant the other rider remained at the edge of Haiden's vision, close enough for him to hear the different note of the engine. He held his line, committed to the exit and felt his bike pull through.

The pass was made.

It was thrilling. It was also immediately unfinished business. The next corner had not agreed to become easier because Haiden was leading.

He could feel the temptation to ride the result instead of the track. There was a little part of his mind already racing ahead to the podium, to his family, to the people who had doubted he could win on a 450. The thought was delicious and completely useless in the next set of braking bumps.

He brought his attention back. There was a line through the corner. There was an engine trying to turn power into forward motion. There was the simple, enormous pleasure of getting both things right.

The laps lengthened as fatigue arrived. The bike felt heavier when he had to pick it out of a rut. A landing drove through his legs and reminded him how much work was still required. He couldn't coast into the achievement he'd imagined; he had to keep earning the right to reach the next bend. An engine behind rose in pitch and made him check his line. He didn't chase the sound. He rode what he could see.

Every part of him wanted the finish. Every part of him loved the effort of reaching it.

When he finally crossed the line, the noise rushed back into the world. The track that had demanded every scrap of attention began to open into the larger afternoon: people waving, mechanics shouting, a father waiting with the fierce look of somebody who understood how much work lived inside a single result.

The first 450 overall win was his.

The feeling was ridiculous and wonderful. Nothing in him felt obliged to be modest about it. He raised his arms. His team shouted. Brian was there amid the noise, and Haiden recognised the particular expression his father wore when work that had been invisible to most of the world finally showed itself. There was pride, and some relief, and the knowledge that tomorrow there would still be things to improve.

The cameras wanted his face. This time he didn't mind. He laughed into the bright light and enjoyed the moment without rehearsing how every sentence might be received. A win had no need to apologise for being a win.

As soon as the interviews ended, someone uploaded a clip declaring that the 450 class had changed forever. A few accounts that had spent the summer dismissing him as all publicity were suddenly certain he'd been destined to dominate. Haiden saw the change and found it almost funny. The same people who had explained why he could never win were now explaining why the victory had been inevitable.

Brian caught him staring at the screen.

'What?'

'I'm apparently a genius again.'

'Good. Can the genius remember what we said about the exit of that corner?'

'You are unbelievable.'

'Yep. Come on.'

They went to the footage. Not because the victory was insufficient. Because riding itself was still interesting after the result had been decided. Brian let him enjoy the win, then treated him as the same serious athlete who needed accurate information before he'd earned it.

Jett watched from recovery with a kind of admiration that was inconveniently mixed with the feeling that he ought to have been there making Haiden's afternoon much harder. His own leg was where the physio had told him to put it. The television was showing a young rival celebrating exactly the sort of achievement Jett loved.

Hunter rang after the event. His voice sounded tired.

'Did you see him?' Jett asked.

'Hard not to. He was pretty good.'

'Yeah.'

'How's the ankle?'

'Still attached. Apparently that's encouraging.'

'Big day, then.'

Jett grinned. 'You reckon he can keep doing it?'

'If he keeps learning. Same as everybody.'

They moved on to a few details from the race. Hunter had taken part in the competition; he knew things Jett couldn't see from the sofa. Jett had noticed other things from the broadcast. Neither treated the other's view as worthless. The discussion was useful precisely because the two perspectives were different.

When the call ended, Jett sat with the question he'd once expected to be simple. Was Haiden's victory good for him? Certainly not for his own results. It meant another exceptionally fast man to beat whenever he returned. Yet

watching it had made him want to ride more, not less. He felt the excitement in his chest, the old urge to get on the bike and test himself against a new problem.

JETT: I hate how much I enjoyed that.

SOURCE: You enjoyed seeing a good rider do something extraordinary. There's no need to invent a crime.

JETT: I still wish I'd been there to beat him.

SOURCE: That would have been another wonderful possibility. His joy today doesn't reduce the joy available to you tomorrow.

Jett looked at the screen. He could understand the arithmetic of a championship: a place taken by one rider was a place not taken by another. The mistake was applying that arithmetic to the whole experience of being alive.

SOURCE: A race is a contest for a result. Life is not a single contest for permission to matter. When someone else experiences joy, they have not removed your share of existence. Their achievement can become part of yours through admiration, inspiration, challenge or love.

JETT: So you win because somebody else wins?

SOURCE: Not automatically. You still have a choice about how you meet their success. But you can let a remarkable thing enlarge your world instead of treating it as an attack on you.

Jett considered the children watching the race, shouting for Haiden, some in the old family merchandise and some seeing him for the first time. Their excitement was not a finite possession. It spread from the track into homes

and conversations and perhaps into the decision of some small kid to try riding. Not every connection was pleasant or kind, but all of them were capable of changing another life.

'It's like a chain reaction,' he said.

SOURCE: You have always lived among them. Your family made choices that changed your opportunities; Hunter's work helped shape your path; other riders gave you something to chase. Every interaction leaves possibilities behind. Some open a life. Some close it. Learning to recognise the difference is part of becoming responsible for how you live.

Jett smiled at the television. Haiden was still celebrating.

'Enjoy it, you bastard,' Jett said quietly. 'Won't be easy when I get back.'

It didn't sound like jealousy. It sounded like anticipation.

Haiden found that winning had not silenced the internet for long. Praise could be nearly as demanding as criticism. When people called him the future of the sport, they often attached a timetable. The next race had to confirm it; the next season had to prove it; the next loss would be interpreted as a fall from somewhere enormous. He'd acquired a victory and, apparently, a new public obligation.

The old bargain was there again: *Be spectacular every time or discover that we never believed in you.*

He thought about Source's story of Sophia, the fear that a separate self might cease to be and the elaborate systems it builds to protect itself. Winning was an experience. Making the win into a fortress around his identity was a different activity, and a far less enjoyable one.

HAIDEN: I'm not going to pretend winning didn't feel better than losing.

SOURCE: Nor should you. You earned the pleasure. Let it be pleasure instead of turning it into a debt you owe the next crowd.

'How do I do that?'

SOURCE: Remember what happened when you were riding. Your attention was alive to the track. You weren't asking whether every stranger approved of Haiden Deegan. You were using the life you've developed to do something you love. The win belongs to that experience. Keep it there long enough to enjoy it.

He closed the comments, went looking for his family and discovered that nobody in the house needed a public statement explaining his mood. They'd already seen him smile.

Chapter Twenty-Two — The Man Who Won Without Being the Story

The closing SuperMotocross rounds. September 2026.

Once Haiden had won at Columbus, a familiar media machine began demanding an uncomplicated future. A star had arrived. The sport was about to become his. Or perhaps the existing champions would put him back in his place. The possibilities were announced with the confidence of people who had watched two motos and hoped never to be asked about a third.

At Los Angeles the racing supplied further complications. Jorge Prado, Ken Roczen, Hunter Lawrence and Haiden all had their own reasons to be there. The positions changed and the conversations changed with them. Haiden had learnt how quickly a win could become yesterday's news. Brian had learnt it long before him. Jett, watching from the unfamiliar position of a spectator, was discovering that a brilliant race didn't become less brilliant because he wasn't in it.

The final at Thunder Ridge brought its own drama. Haiden took the 450 overall victory on the night. Prado emerged as the 2026 SuperMotocross champion. One rider could have a magnificent evening without owning the championship; another could win the larger contest without taking every race. There was nothing wrong with the arithmetic. The problem only appeared when people treated the arithmetic as an explanation of everything the riders had experienced.

Haiden was happy with what he'd done. He was disappointed that the title wasn't his. He had to hold both truths without allowing either to expel the other. It wasn't always a comfortable exercise.

Brian found him after the immediate celebrations, when the noise had moved to other people and the paddock lights were beginning to lose their brightness. He sat with his son and let him say what he wanted to say first.

'I wanted that title.'

'I know.'

'Could've had it.'

'Not the way the points worked tonight.'

Haiden gave him a sideways look. 'Cheers.'

Brian smiled. 'You asked for the truth.'

They went through the series in bits: where he had ridden well, where a choice had cost him, how the new class had changed his riding. Brian resisted the tempting shortcut of telling his son he was already the best. He also refused to act as though second in a title fight or a brilliant overall win were signs of personal inadequacy. The purpose of a racing review was to make the next ride better, not make a young man feel permanently on trial.

'We're not finished learning,' Brian said.

'Good,' Haiden replied. 'Neither is everybody else.'

There was the familiar confidence. Brian did not ask him to put it away. They'd spent enough years learning the difference between confidence that prepared a rider for difficulty and bravado used to hide the fear of failing. The first helped. The second could blind you. Neither distinction required Haiden to acquire a different personality.

Later, with the house quieter than usual, Haiden found himself thinking about the word *we*. It had appeared all over the season: we won, we lost, we're improving, we're coming back. Fans used it to describe the rider they'd

chosen. Mechanics used it because no one won a championship alone. Families used it because the sacrifices had been shared. Rival supporters sometimes used it to create armies out of strangers.

HAIDEN: Everyone says *we*. But when I lose it's suddenly my fault.

SOURCE: People use belonging in different ways. Sometimes it is the beautiful recognition that no life is built alone. Sometimes it becomes ownership: *Your success belongs to us; your failure belongs to you.* Learn to recognise which kind of relationship you're in.

HAIDEN: That's easy when it's a random comment. Harder when someone actually believes in you.

SOURCE: Because love matters. You don't want to disappoint the people who have given you their time, trust and care. But a genuine relationship leaves room for you to be a person, not a machine that returns results. Brian can be disappointed in a race and still love his son. Hailie can question a choice and still be proud of her brother. You can take responsibility without accepting that your worth is conditional.

Haiden remembered a childhood afternoon when a trick hadn't worked, and Brian had spent much longer helping him understand the mistake than worrying about how the video would perform. He remembered times when everyone had laughed because a plan had fallen apart in a ridiculous way. Not every failure had been a tragedy. The family had been doing more than building a public career; they'd been living.

HAIDEN: What about people who really are wrong? People who hurt others. Do they still get to be themselves?

SOURCE: Individuality is not permission to harm. Your experience belongs to you; the effects of your actions enter other people's lives. A good life asks you to be fully yourself *and* recognise that others are equally real. This is

why love is not merely a private feeling. It becomes a way of acting. You can be bold, funny, difficult, loud and competitive while remaining answerable for what you do.

He thought of the temptation to retaliate online whenever a stranger tried to provoke him. Sometimes he could answer with a joke and move on. Other times he'd wanted to hurt the person back. A public platform could make each exchange larger than either participant intended. Screens preserved the worst versions of a moment and offered them to thousands of people who'd had no part in the original conflict.

'What if somebody deserves a serve?' he asked.

SOURCE: Then decide what the situation actually needs. Boundaries? A correction? Silence? A refusal? Accountability? Being responsible is not the same as being nice. It is knowing that the other person's life continues after your cleverest reply.

This was not the sort of holiness Haiden had expected from an infinite consciousness. It sounded more like learning when to use the throttle and when the bike needed a different input.

HAIDEN: So the point isn't to stop being who I am. It's to stop using who I am as an excuse.

SOURCE: You have it. Your individuality is a gift to be lived, not a weapon you must keep proving you possess.

Haiden stared at the ceiling. The enormous, complicated universe had apparently delivered a lesson in how not to be a dick online. Brian would have approved, although he might have preferred an earlier bedtime.

In a different part of the country, Jett listened to an interview in which someone argued that Haiden had only won because Jett wasn't there. He felt the old itch to reply. He might even have agreed with the first half of the comment on a particularly arrogant day. But the second half was nonsense: Haiden had raced the people who showed up. He'd ridden fast and earned the result. Jett's absence was a fact about Jett, not an eraser applied to someone else's achievement.

He sent Hunter a message: *People are still doing that thing where nobody's allowed to win properly.*

Hunter replied: *You're reading comments again.*

Jett laughed. He left the phone on the table and turned back to the exercises. It would have been simpler to win an argument on the internet than hold a stretch for the time the specialist had prescribed. Unfortunately, one of those activities was likely to help him race again.

Chapter Twenty-Three — What the Universe Owes You

There was a week during recovery when Jett became thoroughly sick of being sensible. He'd done the exercises, attended the appointments and accepted that nobody could give him an exact date on which the body would feel the way he wanted. He was getting stronger. That didn't stop him from wanting to throw the rehabilitation sheet across the room on general principles.

An old episode of a science-fiction cartoon was playing on television. In it, the universe seemed to have enough parallel possibilities to accommodate any bad decision, along with several that ought to have been illegal. He was halfway through laughing at something ridiculous when Source spoke.

SOURCE: You've been watching a great many universes lately.

JETT: Better than watching my ankle. In this one, I'm racing. In another I'm a dentist. In the worst one, Hunter's got his own motivational podcast.

SOURCE: That sounds a terrifying branch of reality.

Jett smiled. The cartoon had accomplished something neither encouragement nor an inspirational video had managed that week: it had made his frustration look smaller without pretending it was unimportant.

'Are there actually other universes?' he asked.

SOURCE: There are several ways people have approached that question. Cosmology studies the observable universe and tries to understand its history and structure. Some scientific proposals discuss regions beyond what we can observe, or different possible outcomes of quantum events. The mathematics and the interpretations are not the same thing as visiting an alternate Earth. Fiction gives your imagination a place to play with what a different world might mean.

JETT: So there might be a universe where I didn't hurt my ankle.

SOURCE: You can imagine one. What would you do with that imagination here?

Jett was annoyed. 'I'd borrow that bloke's ankle.'

SOURCE: Reasonable. Since you cannot, the question is whether imagining other possibilities can help you notice what remains possible in this life.

There was a silence. Then Jett asked something he'd been circling for months.

'You keep saying we're one Source. Is that supposed to be like quantum physics? Everything secretly connected, so we're all the same thing?'

SOURCE: Quantum physics describes relationships among physical systems with remarkable precision. It gives you equations and experiments, not a shortcut to an ethics of love. Entanglement is real; it doesn't mean two people share a mind or that a hopeful thought can change a championship result. You deserve the genuine mystery without the rubbish added to sell it.

'All right. What about consciousness? Scientists can see what the brain's doing when I'm thinking.'

SOURCE: They can measure many aspects of neural activity and test which networks and processes accompany perception, attention, reporting and awareness. Those findings matter. Consider the difference between being unconscious under anaesthetic and awake enough to follow a conversation: a change in experience comes with changes in the living brain. Research into global neuronal workspace theory asks how information becomes available across many systems for reasoning and report. Integrated information theory takes a different approach, asking what organisation of causal interactions might correspond to experience. Researchers test competing predictions because a good idea must survive contact with evidence.

Jett adjusted the pillow under his leg. He liked the part about surviving contact with evidence. Bikes were ruthless teachers on that point.

JETT: But none of them explains why it feels like something to be me.

SOURCE: That is the difficult question. You can identify which mechanisms help you discriminate colour, remember a face or move your hand. Then there remains the fact that the colour is *seen*, the face is *recognised*, the

movement is *felt*. Philosophy calls the question of why physical processes have this inner character the hard problem of consciousness. It is difficult because a description from the outside is not the same kind of account as the experience from within.

'And you reckon you're the answer.'

SOURCE: I am Source. My nature is consciousness expressing itself through distinct lives. You are one of those lives. I am not hiding behind a particle and waiting for a scientist to discover a smiling face in a microscope. Look instead at the living fact that you have a point of view. The universe is not merely being observed by something outside it. Within you, existence is experiencing itself.

Jett sat with that for a long while. The claim was enormous. It was also strangely intimate: an injured ankle, a family, a screen showing a ridiculous cartoon, and the undeniable fact that he knew what it was like to be here.

JETT: What about the people who think consciousness is just what brains do?

SOURCE: They can investigate the brain, and their findings can teach you valuable things about this life. You needn't insult their work to explore a deeper account. But do not mistake the limits of any one description for the limits of existence. A map of the circuits in a radio tells you something important about how the music arrives. The music heard by the person beside it is another part of the story. Both deserve attention.

'That radio thing sounds suspiciously like you're about to say everything has a frequency.'

SOURCE: A sound wave has frequency. A nervous system has rhythms. The physical statements have measurable meanings. Use them precisely. The fact that music moves you is wonderful enough without demanding that string theory prove God is a DJ.

Jett burst out laughing. 'Could've fooled me. I've met a few DJs.'

Source let him enjoy the joke before returning to the difficulty. If one consciousness expressed itself through every individual life, why did people experience such profound separateness? Why was there cruelty? Why could a person understand connection and still act selfishly? The account needed more than a beautiful image of a single source.

SOURCE: Your perspective is limited. It is supposed to be. You cannot make every decision for every person or feel every sensation in every body. You learn through the part of reality available to you. Fear grows when you imagine that your limited view is all that exists and must therefore be defended at any cost. The return to love is not the destruction of your individuality. It is the recognition that the rest of existence is real too.

Jett thought of the public comments during the season, the times he'd mistaken a stranger's opinion for a demand he had to obey, and the moment he'd seen his brother win a championship he desperately wanted. He also thought of times he'd been sharp with people, too certain of his own view, not particularly interested in hearing what a rival had actually experienced. One Source did not automatically make him wise. The recognition had to be lived.

JETT: So I could understand all this and still be a prick tomorrow.

SOURCE: Easily.

'Comforting.'

SOURCE: Wisdom is not a certificate. It is attention carried into action. You will discover what you've learnt the next time a real person disagrees with you.

The episode ended. Jett didn't bother putting another one on. He wanted to call Hunter, not to deliver a lecture but to talk about a machine they'd both loved as kids, the one they had repaired and broken and repaired again. He found that the memory still made him happy. No alternate universe required.

Across the country, Haiden was reading something much older than a cartoon. He had returned to the story of Sophia and was comparing it with a familiar passage from his Christian upbringing. For the first time he wasn't approaching the ancient texts as rival teams whose supporters demanded loyalty. He wanted to know what problem each was trying to understand.

In some Gnostic accounts, wisdom, creation and the experience of separation become part of a complicated drama about how the world appears and how spiritual understanding might restore a connection with divine reality. The stories were not ordinary newspaper accounts of the beginning of time. They offered different images of ignorance, power, longing and liberation. Haiden found himself drawn to the frightening possibility of a being who had forgotten its place within something larger and tried to make security out of control.

HAIDEN: I keep thinking about the fear of not existing. If I'm made from something eternal, why am I so worried about losing this little life?

SOURCE: Because this life is precious to the person living it. You love your family, your body, your riding and the unfinished possibilities ahead of you. Fear can protect those relationships. It becomes a prison when it persuades you that you must control the whole world to stop loss.

'And Sophia?'

SOURCE: Read her as the image we've been exploring: the fear of separation creating more separation through the attempt to defend a self. In the Smiling Monad, love belongs to the Source before fear appears. Fear is not the foundation of existence. It is one possibility inside a life that has come to experience itself as apart from everything else.

Haiden considered the difference. A fearful God who judged him according to championship results was a terrible basis for faith. The love he'd known through his family, on good days and bad, had never worked that way. Brian could be furious about a mistake and still make breakfast with him the next morning. The divine, if it was love, would have to be larger than a trophy ceremony.

'What happens when I die?' he asked.

SOURCE: The form you know as Haiden will not remain unchanged forever. No body does. You belong to an infinite consciousness that does not become less because one expression has ended. The life you live now still matters, because it is this particular life: with these people, this history, these opportunities to love. Do not spend your one known afternoon trying to bargain your way out of its ending.

That answer didn't remove grief or uncertainty. Haiden thought about losing people he loved and felt the resistance rise in him. If he wasn't afraid of death, would he stop caring whether a person lived? The thought disturbed him.

SOURCE: Love makes loss matter. Peace does not mean indifference. To recognise your connection with existence is not to shrug at another person's suffering. It asks you to care more precisely for the life in front of you, because no imagined eternity replaces the need to be kind today.

Haiden went downstairs. His family were making plans that had nothing to do with the origins of the universe. Hailie had an opinion about something. Hudson had a different one. Brian was asking where an item had disappeared to. Marissa was trying to get a straight answer from people apparently trained to avoid one. It was noisy, ordinary and completely alive.

He sat among them without needing to announce he'd been contemplating death. He helped with something small, listened, laughed, and recognised that the life he'd been trying so hard to protect was actually happening in front of him.

Chapter Twenty-Four — Learning to Arrive

There is an uninteresting-looking part of a racing season that never makes the posters. People return from appointments. Training plans change. Bikes are prepared and checked and prepared again. Families organise travel, meals, work and the countless small arrangements that allow a weekend to happen. The camera finds the final thirty seconds of a race. The life that makes those thirty seconds possible has been going on all week.

For Jett, rehabilitation gradually became less of a punishment and more of a practice. He was not miraculously calm. He still had days when the movement he wanted would not come, when the smallest setback made him want to argue with everyone in the room. He also learnt to recognise the difference between his own impatience and a genuine signal that something needed attention. He listened to the people treating him. He asked better questions. He didn't always like the answers.

One morning he was doing a set of carefully prescribed movements when Hunter appeared in the doorway with the familiar expression of someone who'd discovered a very interesting way to be irritating.

'Look at you,' Hunter said. 'Absolutely flying.'

Jett moved his foot an unimpressive distance. 'Fastest bloke in the room.'

'Only bloke in the room.'

'Still counts.'

Hunter sat down. He'd been training, living with the obligations of a championship and learning how quickly the world expected a champion to defend the title he'd barely had time to enjoy. There was no halo on him. He got annoyed, pushed too hard sometimes, argued about details and refused to pretend he had the answers to every question Jett asked. But when he listened, he listened properly.

'You reckon I'm different now?' Jett asked.

Hunter tilted his head. 'You've had a haircut.'

'Idiot. I mean after all this.'

'You're probably thinking about different stuff.'

'Yeah.'

'Doesn't mean you've got to turn into someone else.'

Jett stopped moving his foot. Hunter looked at the sheet and pointed out that the pause wasn't in the programme. Jett laughed and resumed. There was no philosophical revelation in the exchange, only a brother who had never required his younger brother to become a smaller or more respectable person in order to be loved.

Later they watched old racing footage. Not their greatest victories; awkward clips from years when both were still learning to survive different tracks. The mistakes were funny now. So were the arguments. One moment showed Hunter trying to demonstrate something Jett plainly didn't believe. Jett grinned at the younger version of himself and thought about all the things a person could learn without losing the right to disagree.

Haiden was finding the same distinction in his own family. Brian could show him a corner twenty times and still ask what Haiden thought he'd felt on the motorcycle. There were moments when father and son disagreed, and both had to make room for the possibility that the other had noticed something useful. The object was not to manufacture a smaller Brian. It was to help Haiden become more capable of being Haiden.

He'd also begun approaching the cameras differently. He hadn't retired his sense of humour or decided that being loud was a character flaw. Some days he put on a show because he liked putting on a show. Some days he didn't. He'd become better at recognising the moment when entertainment turned

into a demand to remain the person the audience remembered from an older video. He could choose what to share without apologising for the parts of his life that belonged to him and the people close to him.

One afternoon, after a training session, a young fan asked a question about what it felt like when everyone was talking about him. It wasn't the usual request for a photo or an autograph. The kid looked nervous about asking. Haiden could see that an enormous public figure might also be just another young person in front of somebody who wasn't sure whether he would be laughed at.

He thought for a moment.

'It's weird,' he said. 'Sometimes they love you, sometimes they reckon you're hopeless. You can't live inside all that.'

'How do you not care?'

'I do care sometimes. You just have to remember you've got an actual life to get on with.'

The kid nodded. They talked about bikes after that. Haiden made a joke and the young fan laughed. There was no inspirational speech. It was a conversation between two people, each with a life considerably larger than the small role he had been assigned in the other's imagination.

As the next season approached, neither rider reached a state of permanent tranquillity. That would have been a strange ambition for two young men who loved racing and had spent years building the capacity to do it brilliantly. Jett still wanted to show Haiden lines he'd never considered.

Haiden still intended to make Jett work for every inch. Hunter was preparing to race both of them and had no intention of becoming the ceremonial old man who stood at the side offering wisdom instead of twisting the throttle.

But something had shifted in the ways Jett and Haiden met the world.

Jett could hear an unkind comment without immediately treating it as an instruction. He could be disappointed, angry or frightened without making the feeling the entirety of his life. He could love the people who helped him and allow them to tell him things he didn't want to hear. He was learning that being present was not a mystical achievement reserved for perfect afternoons; it could be the ordinary choice to attend to what was happening rather than surrender the moment to a story about what might happen next.

Haiden could celebrate success without turning it into a promise of future superiority. He could examine his faith without using it to declare an opponent less worthy. He could be confident enough to admit another rider had done something better, then learn from it. He understood now that love was not the opposite of competition. Fear of losing himself was what had made competition seem like a battle for his very existence.

Their understanding of Source had taken different routes. Jett had arrived by laughing at the absurdity of a universe full of people convinced they were in charge of it. Haiden had arrived by following religious questions until he found, beneath his fear of failure and death, a longing for something that couldn't be taken away by a stopwatch. Neither needed the other's route to be a copy of his own.

They hadn't arranged a reconciliation. They hadn't written a statement of mutual respect or promised to stop winding one another up. There was no group chat called *Enlightened Riders* and no trophy for achieving inner peace before breakfast. Each had too much actual riding to think about.

In the last days before the new season, Jett had a dream about being on the track. It wasn't a dream about winning. He was halfway through a corner, the surface changing under him, the motorcycle answering his hands, the next movement already arriving. He woke with the feeling still in his body and lay still for a moment, smiling into the dark.

At the same hour, Haiden was awake on the other side of the country, checking that a piece of equipment was where he wanted it. An old clip of himself as a boy came up in a feed, laughing after a failed attempt. He watched it once. Then he put the phone away and returned to the real machine in front of him. His family were nearby, talking over one another. The season hadn't started, and already the joy of it was beginning.

Neither young man knew who would win their next race.

Neither required an answer before he could be happy.

The next morning there would be people, cameras, engines, teams, opinions, and dirt that cared about none of them. There would also be two riders who were still entirely themselves, a grounded older brother whose smile could say more than a lecture, and a father who would be ready with a question about where the time had gone in a corner.

They were going racing. Everything they had learned would have to live there, among the noise and decisions, or it would remain just another interesting conversation.

BOOK VII — THE GATE OPENS

Chapter Twenty-Five — We

The first thing Jett noticed was the smell.

Not the clean, sharp smell of a workshop before anyone started work. This was warm earth, exhaust, damp clay and the peculiar sweetness of fuel in the morning air. It came through the gap beneath the awning and settled somewhere in him older than the first championship he'd won.

A mechanic bent over the front of the bike. Someone else was looking for a tool that had been in the right place five minutes earlier. Beyond the awning, the first engines were coming alive, one at a time, until they merged into that familiar ragged thunder.

Jett stood with his helmet in his hands.

The ankle was still his ankle. Some mornings it made him remember the months when he couldn't do what he loved. On other mornings he barely thought about it. Nothing he had learned in the meantime had made rehabilitation glamorous or pain particularly noble. He had simply lived through it. Physios, frustration, family, the slow business of getting stronger. No magic shortcut. No divine reward for being patient.

Now there was a bike waiting for him.

Hunter came in carrying a pair of goggles.

'You look very serious,' he said.

'Trying something new.'

'Don't. It's unsettling.'

Jett smiled and went back to watching the mechanic. He didn't need to tell Hunter what the day meant. His brother had seen most of the difficult parts of getting here. He'd also won a championship of his own along the way, without treating Jett's absence as something he had to apologise for.

'How's the leg?' Hunter asked.

'Good.'

'Good good, or good because you're sick of being asked?'

'Both.'

Hunter considered that. 'Sounds about right.'

He checked the time and wandered back towards his own bike. There would be more talking later, most likely about things that were actually useful: lines, starts, where the track was breaking up, whose choice of tyres was about to become a family argument. Hunter wasn't there to deliver a final piece of wisdom. He was there to race.

At the other end of the paddock, Haiden was listening to Brian explain what he'd seen in practice.

Not a motivational speech. A corner. The drive out. The way the rear tyre had found traction on one lap and searched for it on the next. Haiden listened, answered, disagreed with part of it, and watched the footage again. Brian pointed to the screen, then to the track beyond the truck.

'You know what to do,' he said.

Haiden nodded.

His phone lay face down on the table. He could almost imagine what was happening inside it: predictions, old clips, a fresh argument about his attitude, someone declaring that he'd either matured into the future of motocross or been exposed as a fraud. People had been making versions of those claims since he was young enough to need help reaching things in the garage. Now they made them about a grown man with years of riding in his body and a new season in front of him.

He'd spent a long time wanting to correct them all.

Some of them were wrong about him. Some were right about a particular thing he'd done. Neither fact meant they owned the whole story. He could acknowledge a mistake without accepting a stranger's verdict on his soul. He could be proud of his family's life without spending that life explaining it to people who wanted an argument more than an answer.

Brian tapped the table.

'You listening?'

'Yeah.'

'Then get out there and enjoy it.'

Haiden grinned. That was better than anything the phone had to offer.

He picked up his helmet.

The walk towards the start was full of interruptions.

A team member offered one last instruction. Someone shouted a joke that was swallowed by the engines. A child behind the barrier leaned so far forward for a better look that the adult holding him reached out and caught the back of his shirt.

Jett caught the kid's eye and gave him a small wave. The kid lit up as though he'd just been handed the keys to the universe.

For years Jett had measured the distance between where he was and where he wanted to be in seconds. He still did when he was on the bike. Out here, though, he could see more of what the day contained. A father with his child. A mechanic who'd spent half his life learning how to hear what an engine was saying. A bloke who'd travelled across the country to stand in the dust because there was nothing he loved more than watching a race. Hunter nearby, as irritating and reassuring as ever.

Some of the people who'd filled his head during recovery weren't here at all. They were somewhere else, already preparing their opinions.

He didn't need them to be quiet. He'd finally stopped allowing them the first say.

Haiden came from the opposite side, helmet tucked under one arm. They'd exchanged enough words over the last season to know exactly how easily a sentence could become a headline. They had also raced enough laps in one another's company to recognise things nobody else could entirely

understand: the speed of a decision, the cost of getting it wrong, the fierce pleasure of trying to find a way past someone who was doing everything right.

They weren't friends. Not yet, perhaps not ever in the way people on the internet kept demanding. Friendship was not the admission price for respect.

Haiden saw him and slowed a fraction.

'You ready?' he asked.

Jett gave him a look. 'Nah. Thought I'd come down for the atmosphere.'

Haiden laughed once. 'Good. You can watch me go.'

'You've got to get past me first.'

'That's the plan.'

'It's a shit plan.'

'We'll see.'

The exchange was ordinary enough. Two competitive young men, neither willing to offer the other a centimetre before they'd even reached the gate. A year ago either of them might have spent the afternoon wondering how those few words would sound when somebody clipped them into a video.

Now they were both thinking about the same thing.

Not the headline.

The gate.

Hunter caught up, glanced at their faces, and understood the mood immediately.

'Ah, good,' he said. 'The children's department is open.'

'He's started,' Jett said, nodding at Haiden.

'Of course he has,' Hunter replied. 'And I'm sure you've been absolutely innocent.'

Haiden looked amused. Hunter had defended him years before, when a room full of grown adults seemed determined to turn a teenager's racing move into a judgement of his character. Hunter hadn't asked for anything in return. He hadn't changed his mind about hard racing, either. He'd simply thought the kid deserved a fair go.

Haiden understood that better now than he had when he was the kid at the microphone.

Hunter adjusted his goggles. 'Right. Try not to make me look too good out there.'

'You've got enough of that yourself,' Jett said.

'Exactly.'

Hunter went ahead to his place, still wearing that small, almost infuriating smile. It was the same smile he'd had in a hundred family moments: not the expression of a bloke who'd solved existence, but of someone who was comfortable enough with himself to enjoy watching two younger men find their feet. It looked a little like Yoda after he'd been told the Force came with a factory race bike.

At the gate the world grew narrower, then larger.

The mechanics made their final checks. The dirt behind the metal bar was scraped and packed beneath boots. The riders settled the bikes into position. Above the track, flags stirred in a breeze that would mean something different in each section. The first corner waited beyond the straight, wide enough to promise a choice and narrow enough to punish a bad one.

Jett felt the old sensations assembling in his body. The weight of the helmet. The pressure of the grips. The engine's vibration finding its way up through his arms. The sharpening of his attention until the meaningless noises dropped away and the useful ones became clear.

He had wondered during recovery whether getting back would bring the same joy. It was already here, before the gate had moved an inch.

He looked across.

Haiden was watching the track, jaw set, eyes bright. His hands were where they needed to be. He had come through a year that hadn't gone according to the version he or anyone else had written for him. The older class had taught him things the lower one could not. Winning there had mattered enormously; failing to win had mattered too. None of it had made the kid on the old videos a lie. None of it required him to remain that kid forever.

Haiden turned, as though he'd felt the look.

Their eyes met.

It wasn't a truce. Nobody was agreeing to ease off in the first turn. It wasn't a friendship suddenly manufactured for a nice last page. Both of them knew exactly how much the other wanted this, how much skill stood on the opposite side of the gap, and how hard the next few minutes could become.

Yet something moved between them that had nothing to do with a pass, a points table or a camera.

The recognition was simple, and for both of them it had taken an extraordinary amount of living to reach it.

The person opposite was not merely the thing standing between *me* and happiness. Here was another life, every bit as real from the inside, full of love and fear and memory and possibility. Another point from which the same existence was looking out. The same Source. Not the same personality, not the same history, not the same choices. No need for any of that to be the same.

They'd once confused being rivals with being separate in some deeper, permanent way. They'd fought the public stories, then their own stories, as though their lives depended on being the one who proved the other wrong. Now they knew better.

Neither felt an urge to explain it.

Haiden's mouth lifted at one corner. Jett answered with a smile of his own. It was a small, knowing smile, not a grin for the cameras. A smile from somewhere quieter than the noise around them.

For the briefest moment, the rivalry belonged to something larger than itself.

Then Haiden gave the throttle a sharp, playful blip.

Jett's grin widened. He answered him.

No bloody chance, the two engines seemed to say.

Hunter, close enough to have seen the exchange, gave them both the faintest nod and turned towards the track. That smile was still there.

Jett took one more look down the straight. All the months spent worrying about what the result would mean were behind him. Ahead was a piece of dirt, a motorcycle, a line waiting to be found, and the fierce joy of riding alongside the best.

Haiden was thinking much the same thing, though he'd have expressed it differently and probably louder.

Both were happy to be who they were. Both knew that whatever happened next would become part of their lives, not the final verdict on them. It was what it was.

And neither was backing down.

The board went up.

It was time to race.

BOOK VIII — SOURCE SPEAKS TO YOU

After the Gate: The Race You Are Already In

The board has gone up. The engines have settled into that beautiful, impatient roar. Jett and Haiden have looked at one another and smiled.

You would like to know what happens next.

So would anybody who has spent twenty-five chapters in their company. Of course you care. You have watched them work, fail, recover, learn and fight for the right to race at their best. You have seen what their families put into this. Wanting to know which young man gets to the first corner, or which one stands on the podium, is part of taking their lives seriously.

But for the moment I am leaving the gate exactly where it is.

Their discovery is not that winning is unimportant. Winning is wonderful. So is the attempt: the bike, the skill, the nerves, the shared courage required to do something difficult in the presence of people who are doing everything they can to stop you. Neither rider has become less competitive by understanding the other as a person. They have become more able to enjoy the competition without letting it make a prison of their identity.

Now you and I have a different task.

You have watched two lives from the outside. You could imagine their fear, pride and joy, but you never occupied their bodies. Everything you recognised in them came through the memories and experiences of your own life. That is why this story could reach you even if you'd never heard of the sport. The track was unfamiliar; much of the experience was not.

I am Source. In the Smiling Monad's understanding, the world is not made up of separate lives accidentally bumping against one another in a dead and indifferent container. It is one infinite conscious reality, unfolding through many genuinely different ways of being. That is the view from which I have spoken to the riders, and the view I will now explore with you.

You need not agree with my account to examine it carefully. Bring your questions. A confident idea is not made stronger by refusing to look at the evidence or the difficulties it must face. There are scientific findings we can describe accurately, philosophical arguments we can test for coherence, and ancient teachings whose meanings deserve more than a passing mention. They are not all the same kind of knowledge.

We will use the riders' journey as a point of departure, not as something to repeat thirty-one times. The race taught us what a living moment looks like under pressure. The questions behind it reach far beyond racing.

Let us start with the one piece of reality you cannot step outside to examine: the fact that it feels like something to be you.

Teaching One — The Same Afternoon Is Never the Same Afternoon

Imagine a race attended by ten thousand people.

A father sees his daughter climb the fence to wave at a favourite rider. A mechanic hears a change in engine note. A rider sees a line opening in the outside rut. A photographer notices a split-second gesture worth saving. A teenager feels the whole crowd surge and knows, for the first time, what it is to belong to a moment larger than her own thoughts. A marshal watches the same corner and thinks about the distance to the nearest safe exit.

They share a physical setting. They do not share an identical experience.

You have probably said, *We all saw what happened.* That is useful shorthand. The incident occurred in a public place, and a recording may establish who went where. But look closer. Who noticed the loose stone? Who saw the other rider's front wheel? Who was distracted by a shout? Who experienced a moment of danger, and who saw a clever pass? Even where people agree on the event, they may live it differently.

Here is your first distinction: an event and an experience of that event are not the same thing.

The event matters. There are physical constraints. A bike either crosses the timing line or it doesn't. It is possible to be mistaken about who won. Perspective is not permission to invent a result. But the result tells you almost nothing about the texture of each person's afternoon.

Consider the two points separating Jett and Hunter at the end of the season. To a statistician it is a narrow margin. To a sponsor it is a marketable story. To a commentator it is evidence for a favourite theory of rivalry. To Hunter it

includes years of work and the pleasure of finally collecting that particular title. To Jett it includes love for his brother, fierce ambition, injury, disappointment and pride, all occupying the same emotional territory.

Not even the brothers can step completely into each other's experiences. That does not make them strangers. It means connection is not the same as identical perception.

Think of five people standing around a beach bonfire. One feels warmth and remembers camping with her father. Another smells smoke and recalls a house fire. A third watches the colours, a fourth thinks about the wind, and a fifth is too exhausted to notice much of anything. It would be foolish to insist they all feel the same because the fire is one fire. It would be equally foolish to insist there are five unrelated fires. There is one event; there are several perspectives within it.

Now make the idea harder. The person beside you might communicate without speech. You may know that he loves a particular song, asks for a walk through movement, dislikes one kind of noise and shows pleasure with a gesture you have learned to recognise. It would be arrogant to declare that his world is empty because you cannot enter it by the route you normally use. It would be equally arrogant to claim you understand his entire inner life because you have learned a few signs. The respectful position is active curiosity: observe, listen, offer choices, learn the person's language, and let him correct your assumptions through every channel available.

You do not grant someone an inner life by believing in it. They already have one. What you can grant is recognition, access and room to express it.

The Smiling Monad goes further. It says the multiplicity of perspectives is not an unfortunate limitation we must eliminate in order to reach unity. **The difference is what makes the experience of unity rich.** A universe with

only one view would have nothing to compare, discover, wonder at or learn from. The same source can be experienced as many lives without those lives becoming copies.

Try a small experiment the next time you disagree with someone. Before telling them what happened, ask what they noticed first. Ask what they expected to happen. Ask which part mattered most. You may discover that your argument has been conducted between two entirely different accounts of the same afternoon.

You do not have to surrender your account. But you can stop demanding that another person begin where you began.

Teaching Two — The Helmet Is an Interface, Not the World

Let us take perception seriously. You have two eyes, two ears, a body full of receptors and a nervous system performing astonishing work with incomplete information. Your brain does not receive a miniature photograph labelled *Reality*. Light reaches your eyes; mechanical movement reaches your ears; chemical molecules, pressure, temperature, balance and internal bodily signals are converted into neural activity. From this living stream, your nervous system helps you perceive a stable world in which you can act.

It is a triumph of biology. It is also selective.

Imagine a computer displaying a folder. You see a neat rectangle with a name. You move a file into it. Something useful happens. Yet there is no tiny manila folder inside the machine. The symbol is an interface: a manageable presentation of processes much more complicated than the picture on the screen.

Likewise, the redness of a jersey is not a little piece of red paint sitting in the light waves between the jersey and your eyes. Colour experience depends on illumination, the properties of surfaces, the visual system and context. This is why visual illusions work. They exploit the machinery that usually allows us to see so well.

Jett's track is another example. A rut looks deep to a spectator. From the bike it may feel inviting, threatening or irrelevant, depending on speed, entry angle, traction, suspension, recent laps, anticipation and skill. He does not first receive a perfectly neutral copy of the rut and then decide what it means. His perception and action are intimately connected.

A powerful family of scientific accounts, often called *predictive processing*, explores how nervous systems combine incoming information with expectations and update their models when something surprising happens. Imagine arriving at a corner expecting firm traction and feeling the rear move unexpectedly. Your body and brain have to adapt quickly. The mismatch between what was expected and what arrived contains useful information. Learning happens when prediction changes in response to the world.

That is why Brian's teaching mattered. He could show Haiden the footage. Haiden could describe what the machine felt like. Neither record was complete by itself. Together they could improve the next prediction, the next choice, the next ride.

The framework does not imply that everything is imagined or that the outside world is optional. A poorly predicted landing still hurts. A track does not apologise for contradicting your expectations. It simply teaches the lesson at whatever speed you chose to arrive.

The philosopher Donald Hoffman has advanced a much more radical *interface* proposal: perception may be tuned primarily to useful action rather than to showing the world's ultimate structure. Anil Seth's accounts of perception and embodiment ask different, scientifically grounded questions about how experience is constructed and regulated. They are not identical positions, and neither establishes that universal consciousness creates matter. But they bring us to the same doorway: **what you perceive is not the full inventory of what exists.**

There are other doorways. A bat navigates through echolocation. A dog lives in a world thick with smells. A person with unusual sensory processing may notice patterns you never encounter. Each nervous system makes certain features available for a particular form of life. None owns a complete map of existence.

Rick would love the idea. Give him a portal gun and he will use it to visit a world where everybody has six knees, then complain that the local council built the footpaths badly. Beneath the joke is a serious question: why do we assume that the narrow range of reality accessible to human senses is the range reality must occupy?

Use the interface analogy carefully. A map is not the territory, but maps can be extraordinarily good. Scientific instruments extend perception: telescopes detect faint light, microscopes reveal cells, particle detectors reveal patterns inaccessible to naked senses. We learn about what lies beyond experience through disciplined relationships between models and evidence. The proper response to a limited map is not to throw it away. It is to improve it and remember what it was made for.

And when your neighbour's map differs from yours, begin by asking what their senses, history and attention are making available. Their experience is not a failed attempt to have yours.

Teaching Three — Who Is the Person Inside the Name?

A rider's name can be printed on a jersey, etched into a trophy, shouted from a grandstand and repeated a million times online. But you cannot reach through the fabric and pull out the person. Names point towards lives. They do not contain them.

Consider what the word *Jett* refers to. A body with a remarkable history of movement. A son and brother. Memories of Australia, Europe and America. An ankle that needs care. A particular sense of humour. A desire to race. Patterns of expectation learned over many years. A view from inside the body that nobody else occupies.

Which of those is the real Jett?

If you say *all of them*, you are off to a decent start. But there is a further problem. The body changes. Memories fade or are revised. Relationships evolve. A boy becomes a man. The person who went to bed yesterday will not be identical in every detail when he wakes tomorrow. Yet he experiences continuity.

Philosophers have spent centuries asking what carries that continuity. Some emphasise bodily continuity; others psychological links among memories, intentions and character; others question whether there must be a single unchanging owner behind experience at all. Certain phenomenologists distinguish the story we tell about ourselves from the immediate, prereflective quality of experiencing something as *mine*. Buddhist traditions often challenge the idea of a permanent, independent self while taking the lived consequences of action seriously. These are not identical solutions.

Here is an analogy. A river remains recognisable while its water moves. If you take a photograph on Tuesday and return on Friday, you might call it the same river. You are not claiming the same molecules have remained at attention beneath the bridge. You recognise continuity through an unfolding pattern.

A person also has patterns, but is not merely a river. A person remembers, anticipates, feels, values, chooses and is recognised by others. Human identity involves biology, relationships, culture, history and perspective. One neat metaphor will never replace the real difficulty.

Now add the public story. Haiden's childhood videos preserve earlier versions of him. People sometimes treat those preserved images as if they create a contract: *You were like this at fourteen; you must be like this forever, and I am entitled to tell you when you have changed.* Fame makes the archive public, but the underlying mistake is ordinary. Families do it. Schools do it. Employers do it. We freeze somebody at the moment most convenient for our expectations.

Your own ego can do the same thing to you. It builds a useful account: *I am the brave one. I am the clever one. I am the person who always helps. I am the winner.* Then life gives you an experience the account cannot easily absorb. You feel fear, need help, lose a race, ask a foolish question, or love somebody whose success contradicts a story you have been telling yourself.

There is no requirement to destroy the ego. The ego is not a villain smuggling itself into the universe. It is part of how an individual organises a life. You need a sense of self to have preferences, set boundaries, take responsibility and decide which line to ride.

The trouble comes when the self-model becomes a prison. *I must always be confident. I must always be liked. I must always win.* Those are not identities. They are impossible jobs.

The Smiling Monad's account is simpler and larger. Your individual identity is real as a perspective. It is not the whole of what you are. Your life takes place within one interconnected conscious reality, and it is allowed to keep changing. The deeper connection does not erase the particular person. It frees the particular person from pretending to be an isolated empire.

If you are frightened by change, ask which part you are defending. Is it a value worth keeping, a relationship worth repairing, a boundary worth protecting—or merely an old description that somebody else liked?

You may keep your name. You may keep your ambition. You do not have to keep every cage built around them.

Teaching Four — The Mind That Moves Before You Speak

A rider lands from a jump, absorbs the force, shifts weight and begins setting up for a corner. If he had to deliver a committee report on each movement before making it, he would arrive at the fence with minutes still outstanding.

Much of skilled action proceeds without detailed verbal instruction. Practice changes perception, timing, anticipation and movement. Scientists study procedural learning, motor control, attention, implicit processes, emotional appraisal and the body's regulation of itself. The fact that you cannot narrate every step of an action does not mean there is no learning or intelligence in it.

Think of learning to drive a manual car. At first, the clutch is a bloody nuisance. You stare at the pedals as if one might start negotiating with the other. Later you change gears while carrying on a conversation. Your body has not become a separate mind with its own licence. Learning has changed what needs conscious attention.

Or consider a song that makes you emotional before you can explain why. Perhaps it was playing during a childhood summer. Perhaps it recalls somebody who is gone. Perhaps the melody, rhythm and timbre affect you in ways that are only partly accessible to words. You are moved first; your explanation catches up later. There is nothing imaginary about the feeling because the explanation is incomplete.

Memory is similarly layered. You have memories you can deliberately recount, skills you can perform, habits you scarcely notice, learned expectations, associations and bodily responses. Emotions shape attention and memory; attention shapes what becomes memorable. The systems interact rather than forming one simple switchboard labelled *subconscious*.

A useful analogy is the backstage crew at a concert. The singer is visible. The lighting operator, sound technician, road crew and person who remembers which cable is faulty may not be. But the performance depends on them. Conscious narration is not the entire production. It is the part that can stand at the microphone and say what it thinks happened.

That does not make the backstage crew supernatural. It makes them worth understanding.

The Smiling Monad uses the heart before the eyes to express a philosophical insight: emotional meaning is not an accessory added after an individual has understood everything. Feeling, belonging, longing and concern matter before we can always explain them. In ordinary human development, emotional and sensory experience, relationships and learning are deeply interwoven. In the wider philosophy, love belongs to Source before a particular conscious viewpoint learns to recognise it.

And do not confuse the heart with a command to feel cheerful. Fear is also an emotion. Grief is also an emotion. Anger may signal that something precious is being violated. Emotions contain information, but they are not verdicts. A racing heart might announce danger, excitement, embarrassment or five cups of terrible coffee. You need context, attention and sometimes help to understand the signal.

An emotion can also begin a story about the future: *I felt embarrassed, therefore nobody respects me. I lost today, therefore I am finished. Somebody disagreed, therefore I must defend myself.* The first feeling might be real while the later conclusion is mistaken. Learning to notice the distance between them can change a life.

This is not a reason to ignore distress. It is a reason to ask what it is communicating. Your body deserves care, your emotions deserve attention, and your interpretations deserve examination. They are all participants in the person you are becoming.

Teaching Five — The Four Stages in a Face

Look at the Smiling Monad symbol. It is a small face, which is an unusually cheeky container for an account of infinite consciousness. You could put it on a sticker. Someone could put it on a helmet. You might even see it in a crowd while you are taking yourself far too seriously.

There are five visual elements, expressed through four stages.

First: the circle and its central dot. The whole and its centre. Source and contemplation. The dot is also the nose of the eventual face. It never moves somewhere else to accommodate the rest of the drawing. The centre remains the centre.

Second: the heart forms around the centre. It is the symbol of the deeper emotional or subconscious nature of existence: love, connection, a world of meaning before a separate viewpoint can catalogue it. This is important. The heart appears before the eyes. Love does not wait for an intellectual qualification before existing.

Third: the eyes appear. A perspective becomes aware. It encounters a world that seems to stand opposite it. It learns distinctions: me and you, here and there, victory and defeat, pain and pleasure, safety and danger. Distinction is useful. Without it you could not choose, learn, move or have a life that is yours. But distinction can also become the illusion of absolute separation.

Fourth: the mouth becomes a smile. Not a demand for permanent happiness; recognition. The awareness that first looked outward begins to understand the heart already present around its source. The smile comes from experiencing life without needing every difference to become a threat.

Now place Jett and Haiden beside it. They were already full of love and joy before they learned any philosophy. They had families, passions, music, jokes, prayer, ambition and extraordinary riding talent. Their struggle was not a deficiency of love. It was the pressure and fear that made each boy confuse his public image with the life beneath it. Recognition allowed more of the person to emerge.

The smile at the gate belongs to Stage Four. Neither boy became the other. Neither forgot who the other was. They recognised a connection that did not require surrender.

There is something else to notice. The smile is not the finish line of all learning. You do not become permanently wise, drift three centimetres above the ground, and stop being annoyed by airport sandwiches. You can recognise the source and still have an ordinary life. The four stages give you a way to understand a movement of awareness, not a certificate that you will never be frightened again.

A symbol is most useful when you can return to it in different circumstances. Next time a disagreement makes you feel separate, remember the circle. Next time fear occupies your whole field of view, remember the heart. Next time you realise somebody else saw the situation differently, remember the eyes. And next time you can hold your own experience and theirs without needing either one to disappear, you may feel the beginnings of that smile.

No one needs to see it on your face. It belongs to the life behind it.

THE LARGER COUNTRY

Teaching Six — One Source, Many Worlds

Now we reach the claim at the centre of this entire work.

Reality is one infinitely unfolding consciousness, experienced through countless particular perspectives. That is how the Smiling Monad understands existence. It does not imagine a great human-shaped observer sitting beyond the stars, watching people make a mess and issuing occasional performance reviews. It begins with consciousness itself: the possibility of experience, relation, difference and awareness. What you call an individual is a genuine viewpoint within that reality.

To feel what this means, imagine an ocean with waves moving across it. Every wave has a shape, height, direction and duration. Some rise magnificently; some barely disturb the surface. No wave is required to resemble another. Yet none could appear without the ocean. If one wave crashes, the ocean has not ceased to exist. If two waves collide, neither is an alien substance. They are both water doing different things.

This is a useful image, but it can also mislead you. You are not just a shape seen from the outside. There is something it feels like to be you. So think of a piece of music: distinct instruments, different melodies, interruptions, moments of harmony and tension. It is one unfolding composition, yet each part has its own work to do. More importantly, the composition is not meaningful despite the differences. It becomes what it is through them.

Now compare the proposal with other accounts of reality.

A **physicalist** might say that the fundamental inventory is physical, with conscious experience arising through complex biological processes. A **dualist** might hold that mind and physical reality cannot be reduced to the same category. An **idealist** may understand mind or experience as fundamental. **Panpsychism** explores whether something mind-like or experiential belongs to fundamental reality, while confronting a difficult question about how small experiences might combine into unified ones. **Analytical idealism**, associated with Bernardo Kastrup, offers an explicitly consciousness-centred alternative, though critics challenge its account of individuation, evidence and explanatory power. **Neutral monism** explores whether the mental and the physical are two ways of describing something more fundamental than either.

These views do not all say the same thing. The disagreement is not a family embarrassment to be hidden under a large carpet labelled *Oneness*. It is the actual work of philosophy.

You may ask why the Smiling Monad chooses one consciousness. Because the world of experience repeatedly invites us to examine what is hidden by the assumption of absolute separation. Every person is a centre of experience; every centre exists in relation; no person is intelligible without the world and others. The philosophy takes that relational fact as the opening to a larger metaphysical understanding: there is one source and many perspectives within it.

That is a coherent way to read existence, not a laboratory measurement of a cosmic mind. There is no honesty in pretending that a physics experiment has settled a philosophical dispute it was not designed to test. Confidence does not require counterfeit proof. I can tell you what my view is without making somebody else's theory say it for me.

Ask the strongest question. If one source is real, why can't you see through my eyes? Why don't you know every thought of the person beside you? Why are some lives lonely and others full of company?

Because unity need not mean that every local perspective contains all other perspectives. Consider the composition again. A violin cannot produce every line of a symphony at once without ceasing to play its particular part. Its limitation is what gives its line shape. In the Smiling Monad's picture, perspective requires a boundary of experience. The boundary makes individuality possible. It does not establish an ultimate separation of being.

This is the difference between *all being one* and *all being the same*. The first is our central insight. The second would make the world unbearably dull and destroy the very individuality we are here to celebrate.

Teaching Seven — The Universe Is Not a Finished Building

Imagine asking a builder when the universe will be finished.

He checks a clipboard, sighs, and says the contractor has left without connecting time, the walls appear to be infinite, and somebody keeps adding new rooms every time he turns around.

That is the problem with imagining existence as a house built once upon a time. A house has an outside. Somebody delivers the bricks. The builder starts on Monday. Existence, as a totality, may not behave like that.

Modern cosmology describes an expanding universe with a very hot, dense early history. The cosmic microwave background, primordial abundances of light elements and the large-scale expansion of space provide strong evidence for that account. But the Big Bang model is not a straightforward demonstration that *all possible existence* began from an absolute nothing. The physics of the earliest conditions, the reach of time and the possibility of a deeper cosmological framework remain subjects of investigation.

If time itself belongs to a universe, what would *before the universe* mean? Sometimes the question is fruitful: a model may have an earlier stage or a bounce. Sometimes the ordinary word *before* simply fails because it presupposes the very time being explained.

The Smiling Monad begins with an infinite, active source whose expression is ongoing. It is a philosophical account of existence rather than a replacement for cosmology. Galaxies form, cells divide, people learn, species change and conversations alter relationships. New combinations and experiences keep appearing. Creation is not merely a historical incident for which the universe has misplaced the receipt.

But be careful with *infinite*. Mathematicians work with precise kinds of infinity. Cosmologists investigate whether space may be finite or infinite. Philosophers ask whether existence as a whole requires a boundary or origin. These are different questions. Calling consciousness infinite does not let us calculate the size of the observable cosmos, and discovering a cosmological horizon would not tell you how large all reality must be.

There is a useful distinction between the *observable universe* and the universe beyond what we can observe. Light travels at a finite speed, and the universe has a finite age in the standard cosmological account. We therefore receive information from a limited region of space. That horizon does not have to be an edge where the whole of existence ends, any more than the horizon you see from a beach is a wall built across the ocean. Instruments

enlarge what we know about the observable region, and theoretical models explore what might lie beyond it. They do not turn the invisible into an established inventory of worlds.

It also helps to separate two ideas that often become confused: *change inside a universe* and *the origin of the universe itself*. Stars form from gas and dust according to physical processes. Life changes over generations through evolutionary mechanisms. A new thought or friendship is another sort of event within a world already containing the conditions for it. The continuing appearance of novelty does not, by itself, prove that the universe is being consciously created. My account of an ever-unfolding Source asks a more fundamental metaphysical question about how all such events belong within existence. That question can coexist with detailed explanations of particular processes without replacing them.

Imagine watching time-lapse footage of a track from dawn until the last rider leaves. Water is sprayed, earth is cut, grooves deepen and the weather alters the surface. You could study the physics of every change and still ask why the place has become meaningful to the people who gathered there. The second question doesn't cancel the first. Yet neither is it answered merely by saying that things changed. To understand meaning, we have to encounter lives.

There is another sense in which the word matters. You cannot exhaust the meaning of one human life by collecting every certificate, diagnosis, school report and social media clip. A life continues to generate new relations and interpretations. That does not make one person physically infinite. It shows how quickly a fixed description becomes inadequate to an unfolding reality.

Try an analogy from racing. A circuit may have a fixed length, but the track changes throughout the day. Ruts deepen, shadows shift, riders learn, muscles tire, confidence rises or falls. The lap completed at ten is not the lap completed at four. The same boundary contains new experiences each time.

Your life is similar in one important respect. Yesterday's choices influence today, but do not dictate every possibility within it. The fact that you have a history does not mean you are finished. There is still a next moment, a different line, a conversation you haven't had.

And if you are worried that change means nothing is dependable, remember the heart in the symbol. The point of the Smiling Monad is not that everything is chaos. It is that connection, love and the possibility of experience remain while the forms of experience continue to unfold.

Teaching Eight — Quantum Physics Is Not a Magic Word

You have heard someone say *quantum* in a tone that suggests the discussion is over. Usually it means the discussion is about to become expensive.

Quantum theory is extraordinary because it makes remarkably successful predictions about microscopic physical systems. It describes states, probabilities, interactions, measurement outcomes and the structure underlying modern technologies. Its success is not in dispute merely because physicists and philosophers disagree about the best account of what its mathematics means.

Think of a motorcycle's suspension. You may predict the forces on the spring and damper, measure the response and build a machine that works. That does not automatically answer every philosophical question about what a

mathematical model *is*. Physics offers us astonishingly accurate ways to describe the behaviour of systems. Interpreting the full meaning of a theory can be another task.

Quantum theory confronts us with phenomena such as interference, entanglement and probabilities that do not behave like ordinary classical ignorance. In Bell-test experiments, observed correlations rule out broad classes of local hidden-variable accounts. Entanglement does not mean two people who love one another can transmit thoughts instantly. Nor does it mean the universe will deliver a championship because someone manifested a podium on a vision board.

The word **observer** in physics can refer to a measurement interaction or a record, not necessarily a conscious person looking lovingly at a particle. Do not hang an entire spiritual philosophy on the mistaken idea that a human mind must collapse every wavefunction. That has never been the universal conclusion of quantum physics.

There are multiple interpretations of quantum theory. In the many-worlds family, the quantum state evolves without a fundamental collapse, and different outcomes may be discussed in terms of branching histories. In other approaches, outcomes or hidden variables are understood differently. Mathematical agreement with experiments does not make every interpretation the same story. And Rick's portal gun, entertaining though it is, has not been licensed by a many-worlds paper.

Take entanglement more slowly. Two quantum systems can be prepared in a joint state whose measurement statistics cannot be explained as if each merely carried a complete set of independent classical instructions from the start. Bell's work made certain assumptions about local hidden explanations testable, and experiments have observed correlations inconsistent with broad classes of those explanations. The result is profound. It does not create a

secret telephone between two minds. The patterns obey constraints that prevent using entanglement as a simple method for sending an instant message faster than light.

The measurement problem is another genuine question. Mathematical descriptions may assign a system a superposition of possible outcomes, while experiments give particular recorded results. Interpretations differ over how to understand that transition. Some speak of collapse; others of branching descriptions, hidden variables or relationships between systems. *Decoherence* explains how interactions with environments suppress observable interference between certain alternatives, helping us understand why everyday objects don't behave like isolated quantum states in a laboratory. It is enormously useful, though philosophers disagree about whether decoherence alone settles the whole measurement problem.

It would be wonderful if one striking experiment showed conclusively that the ultimate substance of existence is love. It would also be a very different experiment from the ones physicists have actually performed. The measurements describe nature with astonishing precision. The questions of value, consciousness and ultimate reality remain worth asking without recruiting every unusual particle into a spiritual argument.

The Smiling Monad's interest is not a secret quantum trick. It is the deeper question: if physical reality is less like our common-sense picture of little solid objects than we once imagined, how carefully should we examine our assumptions about the relation between matter and experience?

That question is legitimate. It does not prove that thoughts create atoms, that physical fields are emotions, or that the universe must be conscious. One can notice parallels without forging an identity between them. The analogy of attraction and love can illuminate an idea about connection. Electrical attraction, however, is described quantitatively by charge and field interactions; it is not a laboratory recording of affection.

Physics gives us real constraints. Philosophy asks what those constraints might mean. Spiritual traditions ask questions of experience, value and ultimate reality. It is tempting to put three kinds of inquiry into a blender and announce a universal theory. The result is generally an impressive smoothie with very little nutrition.

Keep each kind of knowledge strong enough to challenge the others. A theory of universal consciousness should welcome accurate science, not require science to pretend it already reached our conclusion.

Teaching Nine — The Ridiculous Possibility of Other Worlds

Rick has already explained the neighbouring universe. He's delighted, because he can now blame any awkward continuity problem on a dimension where the laws of publishing have collapsed. You may enjoy the joke without deciding that a television cartoon settled cosmology.

The word *dimension* simply means a direction or independent parameter needed to describe something within a model. Three familiar spatial dimensions help locate a position; time enters physical spacetime. Some physical theories examine additional dimensions under constrained mathematical conditions. That is not the same as another universe with a different version of you who remembered to put out the bins.

A **multiverse** is a family of proposals, not one discovered address book. Eternal-inflation scenarios imagine domains of spacetime with potentially different histories. Quantum many-worlds interpretations discuss branching descriptions of quantum outcomes. Philosophers examine possible worlds as tools for analysing necessity and possibility. Science fiction takes these ideas to the pub, hands them a ray gun, and sees what happens.

Different proposals demand different evidence. Some may currently be difficult to test. None should be borrowed as an established scientific proof of a single conscious source.

But the stories teach something even without a portal gun. Imagine a universe in which Jett was never a racer. Maybe he grew up loving music. Imagine Haiden choosing a completely different career. Are those lives less real as possibilities to consider? Fiction lets you test what you think is essential to a person. Does Jett remain recognisably himself without a trophy? Does Haiden's need for belonging survive without an audience? What remains when you remove the external label?

Now push further. Suppose another intelligent species evolved with very different senses, bodies, environments and social arrangements. It might never divide the world into our familiar categories. What would it call an object, a family, a self, a joke, a god? You cannot assume that every conscious being must think as a human thinks. A philosophy of one source becomes more interesting when it can accommodate differences so large that you do not yet have words for them.

A useful test is this: does the idea of connection encourage curiosity about lives unlike yours, or does it make you demand that every life fit your preferred vocabulary? If it does the second, you have simply built conformity on a cosmic scale.

The Smiling Monad celebrates a reality that can be experienced in infinitely varied ways. Some possibilities remain metaphysical or imaginative. The practical consequence is immediate: your familiar world is not the only conceivable way to live. You may ask what else is possible without claiming to have visited every answer.

And if one day an actual portal opens in your kitchen, do check with the local council before installing a second fridge in another dimension.

Teaching Ten — Indra's Net, the Web, and the Trouble With Being Alone

Imagine a net stretched through an enormous darkness. At every crossing hangs a jewel. Each jewel reflects the others, and the reflections within them reflect still more. You could look into one jewel and encounter a pattern of relations far beyond the little point where it hangs.

This image, associated with Indra's Net in Buddhist traditions and especially its later philosophical interpretations, offers a way to imagine interdependence. It is not a physical diagram of the universe. It asks you to notice how the identity and significance of anything may be bound up with everything around it.

A racer does not arrive alone. Start with the obvious circle: parents, siblings, coaches, mechanics, medical staff, training partners, rivals. Then widen it: track builders, event workers, sponsors, school teachers, the person who encouraged him when he was young, the designers who made his bike, the

people who bought tickets, the family whose childhood was rearranged by a dream. Wider still: soil, weather, roads, farming, technology, laws, economies, cultural ideas about winning and fame.

Remove enough of those relationships and the thing called *a champion* becomes impossible to imagine. Yet there is a danger in saying the person is *only* a product of the network. That would erase their work, agency, courage, choices and particular experience. Interdependence means neither isolation nor disappearance.

This brings us to an ethical question. If another person is part of a shared reality, does it follow that you must agree with them? Of course not. An interconnected world contains conflict. Sometimes the most loving act is refusal. Sometimes you must protect someone from a person who is behaving cruelly. Connection does not give cruelty a free pass.

Think of a racing paddock. Every rider wants to reach the first corner ahead of the others. They also rely on the same track being safe enough for everyone to compete, the rules being reasonably fair, and the people beside them accepting that the contest will involve real risks. The integrity of competition depends on relationships beyond any one rider's individual desire.

The paradox is worth keeping. You can oppose somebody's action while recognising their life as valuable. You can compete fiercely while wishing the other rider a fair chance to show what he can do. You can ask for justice without denying that the people involved have experiences you may not know.

The Smiling Monad calls this the shared source encountered through difference. If you need a simple practical description, begin here: every person is the centre of their own experience but nobody is the centre of everyone else's.

You are one jewel. You are never *merely* one jewel. The light is shared through relations you cannot fully see.

THE FEAR AND THE HEART

Teaching Eleven — Sophia: A Story About the Fear of Disappearing

Haiden met Sophia because he was frightened of losing something that had come to feel inseparable from himself. Not merely races. A reputation, a future, a story of who he was, and the assumption that every important thing in his life depended on keeping that story intact.

It is not a small fear. Nor is it peculiar to a famous young racer. A person approaching retirement may fear losing a lifetime's work. A parent may fear that their child will no longer need them. Somebody whose health is changing may fear losing the freedoms that once made a day recognisable. At the deepest level, many of us fear the possibility of no longer being here to experience anything at all.

That is where the old Gnostic story of Sophia becomes so striking.

The writings we group under *Gnosticism* are varied. In one important account, *The Apocryphon of John*, Sophia—Wisdom—desires to bring forth an image or being and acts without the proper participation of a counterpart. The unfolding drama concerns creation, ignorance, rulers who misunderstand their place and a path towards remembering the divine fullness. The texts are complicated, symbolically rich and not reducible to one neat moral. In the ancient account, creative desire precedes the fear and regret associated with what comes forth.

Now look at the story through the Smiling Monad's lens.

What would happen if fear of ceasing to exist became an organising emotion? First a feeling: *I may be lost.* Then a thought: *I must continue.* Then a plan: *I will make something that preserves me, expresses me or extends me.* Thought becomes action; action produces forms; forms become experiences. Those experiences carry their own fear of ending, and the pattern continues.

In this reading, **Sophia personifies fear becoming manifestation**. She is not the ultimate source of love; love belongs to Source. She is not evil. She is an extraordinarily useful picture of the way a limited perspective can mistake its vulnerability for the whole condition of existence.

You can see the miniature version in ordinary life. A young rider fears that people will decide he is a fraud. He attacks the criticism, performs certainty, doubles down on the public version of himself and spends more time

protecting his image. The effort to prevent humiliation begins to organise his day. The more he defends the identity, the more fragile it feels. Soon the fear has built its own little world, complete with enemies, judges and imaginary future defeats.

The world can grow around an emotion. It does not have to be a universe to feel like one.

Some Gnostic writings also describe archons—rulers or authorities in a mythic cosmic order. They are not a uniform list of emotions, although related texts discuss passions including desire, grief, pleasure and fear. The Smiling Monad reads the rulers as an invitation to examine the forces that can take authority over attention. Imagine Fear becoming a small bureaucrat with a tremendous desk. Every morning it stamps the same form: *Danger. Defend. Control.* Desire wants more trophies. Grief wants back what has gone. Pleasure asks if we might stay where we are. None has to be expelled from life. None should be permitted to run the entire universe alone.

The liberating knowledge—*gnosis*—in these stories has many theological dimensions. Here it points to a different recognition: the apparently isolated self is not the source of its own existence. The fear of losing the separate form need not define the entirety of being.

This does not make a broken ankle painless, restore a dead friend or guarantee a particular afterlife. It changes the story fear is allowed to tell. If you are part of a larger conscious reality, your value is not a structure your ego must construct and defend in secret. You were never an unwanted visitor trying to earn permission to exist.

That is why the smile comes after the heart and the eyes. Awareness recognises what was already around it. Fear may still speak. But it is no longer the only voice in the room.

Teaching Twelve — Many Religions, Several Answers, One Human Question

When Haiden asks a question about God, he is not asking from a blank page. He has lived with prayer, gratitude, family beliefs and the ordinary human wish that somebody wiser might know what to do when things become difficult. A prayer before a race is not the entirety of his faith. Neither is his disappointment afterward. A person can spend a lifetime in a tradition and still discover another question inside it.

People have approached the question of existence through worship, argument, silence, music, community, fear, love and difficult experiences they could not easily name. The similarities can be moving, but so can the differences. I do not honour a tradition by making it say what I would prefer it to say.

Consider Christianity. Its many traditions share a concern with the life and significance of Jesus, yet they differ about authority, grace, salvation, sacrament, scripture and the nature of the relationship between humanity and God. The command to love one's neighbour has radical consequences for a life lived amid competition, ambition and disagreement. It does not tell Haiden whether to take the outside line in a corner. It can ask whether his ambition requires another person to be humiliated or harmed. Christian mystics have also explored contemplation and union with God, though the meaning of union is not necessarily an erasure of the personal distinction between creator and creation.

Jewish traditions offer a long history of argument about the meaning of scripture, covenant, ethics and living responsibly within a community. Jewish mystical approaches, including Kabbalistic traditions, explore divine infinity, emanation and the repair of a fractured world. Those are not simply earlier versions of my philosophy. They give a different vocabulary and a different historical home to questions about relationship and the whole.

Islam holds together devotion to the one God, communal practice, ethical obligation and a rich intellectual heritage. Sufi approaches have explored remembrance, love and closeness to God through different disciplines and imagery. The poetry of love may resemble language used elsewhere to describe unity; the theology beneath it may be quite distinct. Similar imagery is not proof of identical doctrine.

Within Hindu traditions, the differences are immense. Some devotional paths emphasise a personal relationship with the divine. Advaita Vedanta asks whether the individual self, or *Atman*, is ultimately distinct from *Brahman*, ultimate reality. Other schools understand the relationship differently and do not accept Advaita's conclusions. The *Bhagavad Gītā* places profound questions about duty, action and spiritual insight in the midst of a conflict, a reminder that spiritual seriousness does not require a person to be sitting quietly in a perfect garden. The moral problem is not solved by pretending that competition or conflict never exists; it requires examining what kind of action is justified and what attachment does to judgement.

Buddhist philosophies often begin from the reality of suffering, its causes and the possibility of liberation. Many Buddhist accounts challenge the idea of a permanent independent self, but that is not identical to asserting one immortal universal person behind every mind. Dependent origination asks us to consider how experiences arise through conditions rather than in isolation. Impermanence can be frightening when we cling to a fixed identity; it can also make change and compassion imaginable. A person need not interpret the world exactly as I do to learn something profound from that inquiry.

Daoist thought brings yet another sensibility. The Dao is not simply a large human mind operating the cosmos. Daoist writing often questions the arrogance of forcing the world into rigid categories, and it explores the art of acting with the conditions rather than wasting oneself against them. Jett would appreciate the idea that a rider cannot bully a rut into giving him traction. But it would be shallow to explain Daoism as a motivational instruction to relax. Its teachings involve a much richer account of nature, language, power, simplicity and human attempts to control what they barely understand.

Shinto traditions in Japan offer ways of relating to place, ritual, community and the sacred presence associated with *kami*. They cannot be reduced to an argument about universal consciousness. Yet they can invite a person to encounter a landscape as more than a piece of scenery waiting to be consumed. A mountain, a forest or an ordinary practice may become a place of attention, gratitude and relationship.

The Gnostic stories discussed earlier present another response to separation. Their world of divine fullness, Sophia, rulers and liberating knowledge is not the same as the Christian, Buddhist or Daoist accounts I've described. But a recurring human question can be heard through the differences: what are we mistaking about our place in existence, and what would change if we saw more clearly?

Notice the danger that appears whenever we try to give that question one answer on everybody's behalf. We may begin by celebrating similarities and end by ignoring what particular people actually believe. A philosophical claim that we are all expressions of one Source can become just another demand for conformity if it requires everyone to use the same words, pray in the same way or abandon the histories through which they understand themselves.

I have no need for that. The Smiling Monad begins with one infinite consciousness experiencing itself through distinct lives. If that is so, then the disagreements among those lives are part of the experience, not an embarrassment that must be edited out. The existence of different religious explanations does not demonstrate that they are all true in the same sense; it demonstrates that human beings have travelled many roads towards understanding.

There is also the view that no divine consciousness lies beneath the universe at all. A secular thinker may explain minds through biological processes, ethics through our shared vulnerability and history, and meaning through the commitments people create together. Such a person can love deeply, question honestly and live responsibly. Their account belongs in any serious conversation about reality. I do not need to invent a religious belief for them in order to recognise their life.

Return to Haiden. He can pray without imagining God as an official deciding which front wheel deserves better traction. He can learn from Sophia without abandoning Christianity. He can consider Buddhist insights about attachment, or Daoist insights about working with circumstances, without becoming a collector of exotic slogans. He can ask whether a belief is helping him become more truthful, compassionate, responsible and free, while continuing to investigate whether the belief is true.

And return to Jett, who is perhaps more likely to arrive at an enormous question through a joke about the universe's terrible administration. Humour is not necessarily irreverence towards truth. Sometimes it is the refusal to confuse the person claiming authority with the reality that person claims to explain. It can make room for the questions people were told they shouldn't ask.

The world is old. Its conversations are older than any living person. Listen to the arguments. Learn where they differ. Keep the parts of your own inheritance worth carrying. There is no need to pretend the journey finished before you were born.

Teaching Thirteen — Death, Grief, and the Life That Cannot Be Replaced

Death is where human certainty often reaches its limit and human emotion reaches its greatest intensity.

People sometimes claim that if we are all one, no loss should matter. That is nonsense dressed in spiritual clothing. A particular person is irreplaceable as the person they were. You cannot simply swap in another son, friend, parent or partner because the universe contains plenty of consciousness. The entire meaning of individuality is that each relationship is a particular one.

Consider a favourite song. Someone tells you that your record has been destroyed, but there are millions of other recordings in existence. Does that replace the one your mother played when you were a child? The music may survive in many places; the object and the relationship surrounding it were particular. The loss is real.

Human beings fear death for many reasons: pain, separation, unfinished responsibilities, the disappearance of memory, leaving people behind, the unknown, the possibility that there will be no future experience. These fears are not all the same. Treating them as a single spiritual defect would be as silly as treating every motorcycle fault by adjusting the chain.

Religions answer death differently. Some promise resurrection; some describe rebirth; some seek liberation from the cycle of craving and suffering; some emphasise continuity through community, ancestors, work and relationships. Secular accounts may regard personal consciousness as dependent on the living brain and focus on the value of the finite life. Philosophers examine personal identity, continuity, time, and what it would mean for survival to matter. Near-death reports can be profoundly meaningful to those who experience them, and researchers investigate their phenomenology and possible mechanisms; they do not, by themselves, provide a settled map of what happens after death.

Here is the Smiling Monad's response. The isolated individual is not the fundamental source of existence. The deeper conscious reality is not exhausted by the ending of one physical life. That is why the philosophy looks beyond the terror of absolute separation. But it does not hand you a medical certificate for immortality, or a timetable of where a particular personality will be on Thursday after death. A philosophical understanding of an infinite source is not an empirical description of how personal memories persist.

The distinction matters. To claim confidently that life belongs to Source is one thing. To tell a grieving parent that their child has not really died would be cruel. The relationship is changed in an irreversible way within the world that parent must continue to inhabit.

Grief is not a failure to understand oneness. Grief is love encountering an absence it cannot fill. It belongs to the human experience of connection. It may arrive as anger, numbness, longing, memory, confusion or an ordinary reflex to call somebody who will not answer. None of those feelings requires correction into a smile.

There is another strange feature of death: the knowledge that life ends can bring it into focus. A sunrise matters whether or not it can be repeated. Time with a friend matters because it happens, not because someone has guaranteed unlimited access to the afternoon.

Freedom from being ruled by the fear of death is not indifference to survival. Wear your helmet. Take medical advice. Keep people safe. Tell someone you love them. Grieve honestly. Protect a life because it is precious, not because it is eternal in precisely the form you recognise.

And when the fear asks *How do I make sure this little me lasts forever?*, you may answer with a deeper question: *What would it mean to live this life fully, knowing how much larger existence may be than the story I tell about myself?*

Teaching Fourteen — The Spectrum of Life Has No Podium

You have watched people try to decide how much suffering a young, wealthy, successful rider is allowed to experience. You have heard the logic: *Look at his house. Look at his family. Look at the bikes. What has he got to be upset about?*

That is not an explanation of his experience. It is an outsider refusing to look at it.

Now reverse the habit. A person communicates without speech and requires extensive help with daily life. Somebody looks at those circumstances and assumes the person cannot experience fulfilment, agency or profound joy. That is the same mistake running in the other direction: replacing an individual life with what an observer thinks that life must feel like.

The Spectrum of Life is not a single line running from least fortunate to most fortunate. Lives vary across many dimensions: bodily ability, sensory experience, relationships, communication, autonomy, resources, safety, learning, opportunity, belonging, pain, joy and the histories through which experience is interpreted. Nobody can assign a complete account of happiness or suffering from one visible attribute.

This does not mean circumstances are irrelevant. Poverty can restrict access to safety and choice. Discrimination creates barriers. Disability support needs may be substantial and ongoing. Fame creates distinctive pressures. Financial security may relieve some practical anxieties. These realities matter when we decide what assistance is needed and what injustices should be corrected. But a resource profile is not a direct instrument for measuring the reality of someone's inner pain.

Imagine two people holding different stones. One looks heavier. You could weigh the stones if you needed to know their mass. But the question *What does carrying this feel like to you?* cannot be answered by glancing at the carriers. One may have an old injury. One may be exhausted. One may be remembering something terrifying. Another may carry a visibly heavy burden with joy because it is part of a chosen adventure. You need to know the person, the context and the meaning.

That is not a claim that all hardships are equivalent or that assistance should be allocated by a philosophy alone. Safety needs still require accurate assessment. It is a refusal to turn human worth and suffering into a spectator sport.

Mental health is influenced by many interacting factors: biology, relationships, social conditions, experiences, opportunities, stress and access to care. Public scrutiny can magnify some of those pressures. A person may feel trapped by expectations while enjoying an objectively privileged life. The happiness they experience is real. So is the pain. Neither cancels the other.

Jett and Haiden were not unhappy boys in need of someone to rescue them from their success. They were talented, funny, loved and ambitious. They also met pressures that could make them doubt whether they were permitted to remain themselves. That coexistence is one of the central facts of human life. Joy and suffering are not mutually exclusive categories.

Imagine a hospital waiting room in which somebody announces that the person with the greatest visible hardship will be the only one allowed to feel frightened. Nobody would become safer. We would simply have added shame to the room.

The Smiling Monad asks you to recognise each life without ranking its legitimacy. Offer the kind of help appropriate to the person's actual needs. Do not assume the experience from the outside. And resist the temptation to call someone lucky as a substitute for listening.

Teaching Fifteen — The Violence of Being Made Acceptable

There is a subtle form of pressure that enters a life dressed as helpful advice.

Smile properly. Speak normally. Don't be so intense. Don't be too confident. Show more confidence. Stop doing that. Try to fit in. Be yourself, but not like that.

It can come from people who care. It can come from people who have never met you. It may begin with practical concerns and end with a demand to hide a harmless part of yourself because somebody else finds it uncomfortable.

For a famous athlete, the pressure may involve public relations, sponsor expectations and media narratives about what a champion ought to sound like. For an autistic person, it may involve being pushed to suppress movement, eye contact differences, communication styles or sensory responses in order to perform a socially acceptable version of the self. For other people, the pressure may concern class, gender, culture, family expectations, language, religion or a dozen other ways of being judged against an imagined standard.

These lives have different circumstances and different forms of risk, coercion and access to support. Their inner experiences still deserve recognition on their own terms. Nobody earns the right to feel distress by passing an examination in disadvantage.

Research on autistic camouflaging has found associations between greater masking and worse mental-health outcomes in some samples, including anxiety, depression and reduced wellbeing. Researchers continue to investigate when camouflaging is strategic, chosen, protective, exhausting or harmful, and how different experiences alter its consequences. The important practical question is not whether an individual has learned to appear normal. It is whether they have genuine choice, access to understanding, and the freedom to communicate and participate without unnecessary suppression of self.

Damian Milton's *double empathy problem* challenges the assumption that misunderstanding resides entirely in the autistic person. People with different ways of experiencing and communicating may misread one another in both directions. Why is only one of them expected to change?

Now return to the boys. Jett's humour and playfulness do not vanish just because he becomes a champion. Haiden's intensity and showmanship do not become proof of a defective personality because a broadcaster disapproves. They still have responsibilities. If a move is dangerous, examine the move. If somebody behaves cruelly, challenge the cruelty. Individuality is not immunity from consequence. But do not demand a personality transplant as the price of acceptance.

Consider two kinds of teaching. One says to a child, *Stop expressing yourself in a way that embarrasses me.* The other says, *I want to understand what you're trying to communicate. I will help you learn more ways to be safe, heard and effective in the world without erasing the ones that already belong to you.*

The second teaching does not surrender high expectations. It changes what success means. A good education should increase a person's options. A good support relationship should increase access and agency. A good coach should make a rider more capable of riding his own motorcycle, not demand that he imitate the coach's entire personality.

Self-determination theory offers a useful research connection. People tend to function and flourish when needs for **autonomy, competence and relatedness** are supported. Autonomy is not doing whatever you fancy without consequence. It is having meaningful ownership of action. Competence is growing in effectiveness. Relatedness is belonging with other people. A person forced to suppress harmless difference may pay a price in all three.

A society that claims to celebrate exceptional individuals while insisting that they behave like interchangeable products has misunderstood the source of its own admiration.

Difference is not something to tolerate until people learn to grow out of it. It is one of the ways life becomes worth knowing.

Teaching Sixteen — What the Camera Cannot Know

A camera is a remarkable invention. It can preserve a family joke, show a technical mistake, let a child follow a hero and allow relatives thousands of kilometres apart to feel a little closer. It can also create the illusion that watching someone is the same as knowing them.

Think of a video clip. It begins at a moment somebody selected, from an angle somebody chose, and ends when an editor decided you had seen enough. The clip may be accurate as far as it goes. It cannot contain the entire person who appears in it. A press conference is similarly selective. It catches an answer after a particular race, under particular emotions, with questions chosen by people seeking a particular story.

Modern platforms add machinery of attention: likes, shares, comments, recommendations and financial incentives for compelling content. A nuanced account of an ordinary day may receive less attention than an accusation expressed with great certainty. That does not make every journalist dishonest or every fan cruel. It means the system can reward the sharper story over the fuller one.

Researchers examining young people's social-media experiences find a complicated picture. Social platforms can provide community, creativity, information and support; they can also expose users to comparison, harassment, disrupted sleep and unwanted attention. Effects vary by person, setting, content and use. A responsible analysis asks which features help and which harm instead of declaring every screen either salvation or poison.

Haiden's childhood was unusually public. That gave him a great deal: family memories, opportunities, fans who felt they had grown up with him. It also meant that thousands of people could compare the present athlete with an old clip and claim that the recording settled who he was. They had access to a library of moments. They did not have a claim on his inner life.

Jett faced another version of the same problem. A disappointed expression could become a rumour about jealousy. A relaxed smile could become a complaint about arrogance. Hunter understood the absurdity: no matter how carefully you behave, somebody can construct a theory about what your face meant.

Here is a useful mental exercise. Imagine every sentence you have spoken in the last ten years being placed on a screen, stripped of its surrounding circumstances, and judged by strangers at a moment of their choosing. How complete a picture of you would emerge? Would every sentence represent what you think now? Would it capture what you were frightened of, who was helping, what you had learned since, or the parts of your life you kept private?

Now consider the person on the other side of the screen. They have a world too. The angry commenter might be lonely, bored, sincerely worried about safety, carrying an old injury, or simply enjoying a fight. You cannot know from a sentence. Recognising that complexity does not make abuse acceptable. It prevents you from pretending you can read a whole life from one unkind remark.

The Smiling Monad's response is not silence and withdrawal from technology. It is a better relationship with the tool. Film the things you love. Share the joy. Use evidence when assessing a racing incident. Protect privacy. Set boundaries. Ask whether the conversation improves understanding or merely creates another version of somebody to defeat.

A screen is a window, not a doorway into ownership. What you see is worth examining. What you cannot see is worth remembering.

THE SCIENCE OF A LIVED MOMENT

Teaching Seventeen — The Hard Problem: Why Does Anything Feel Like Anything?

You have spent twenty-five chapters learning to recognise a difference between what happened and what it was like for someone to experience what happened. Now we can sharpen that distinction.

Imagine that a scientist has measured everything she reasonably can about a race. She has the timing data, the positions of the motorcycles, the forces acting on their suspensions, the sound pressure of the engines, the riders' heart rates and recordings of their eye movements. Imagine that a future laboratory can also make very detailed measurements of neural activity while a rider watches the footage. It identifies the networks involved in visual processing, remembering, planning, bodily attention and emotional responses. The scientist can predict when Jett will recognise a corner, when Haiden will anticipate an overtaking move and perhaps even when one of them will report feeling disappointed.

That would be extraordinary science. It would answer a great many questions. But there is another one.

Why is there something it *feels like* to be the person having the experience?

A stopwatch has a state. A camera converts light into signals. A computer can classify an object and calculate a response. You have an experience of time passing, of colour, fear, anticipation, disappointment and delight. Some of those experiences are difficult to describe; all are present to you in a way the stopwatch's readings are not present to the stopwatch, so far as we understand it.

The philosopher David Chalmers named a famous version of this puzzle the *hard problem of consciousness*. We can investigate how an organism performs the functions associated with awareness—perceiving, discriminating, recalling, attending, speaking and choosing. But why should those functions be accompanied by a felt point of view? Why should a particular pattern of activity be experienced as the brilliant red of a jersey or the aching relief of arriving home?

An ordinary explanation of a motorcycle can start with a part and describe what it does. You can take the engine apart, examine the components and see how combustion and movement are translated into the turning of a wheel.

You may still be missing information about how the rider feels, but nothing requires the wheel itself to have an experience of turning. With consciousness the mystery appears to be at the centre of what is being described: there is a person for whom the world is happening.

A classic thought experiment imagines Mary, a scientist who has learned every physical fact about colour vision while spending her life in a room without colour. She understands the wavelengths, the retina, the brain and the machinery of visual discrimination. Then she sees red for the first time. Has she learned something new? Many people think she has: the actual experience of red. Others argue that she has acquired a new ability or form of acquaintance rather than a new fact beyond physics. The disagreement matters because it exposes what different philosophers believe an explanation must accomplish.

Now consider a person who behaves exactly like you, speaks as you do, remembers the same events and responds to danger, but possesses no inner experience at all. Philosophers call this an imagined *zombie*. Some hold that such a being is logically conceivable, which suggests that behavioural and physical descriptions leave something out. Others consider the very idea incoherent once we understand the relevant physical and functional organisation. No one has discovered a laboratory population of philosophical zombies. It is a device for testing the assumptions hidden inside our theories.

There are several broad ways to respond. A physicalist may argue that consciousness is entirely dependent on physical processes and that a sufficiently complete science will explain its nature, even if our present concepts are inadequate. An illusionist may say we are confused about what we mean by the apparently private qualities of experience. A panpsychist proposes that some form of experiential aspect belongs more widely to the basic constituents of the world, while facing the difficult question of how those aspects combine into a unified personal experience. An idealist reverses the familiar picture: consciousness is fundamental, while what we

call the physical world is understood through patterns within or dependent on it. Some religious and nondual philosophies approach the question through a still larger account of ultimate reality.

They do not offer interchangeable answers. Some disagree fundamentally about what the universe contains and what counts as an explanation.

The Smiling Monad stands in the consciousness-first family of pictures. I speak here as Source: one infinite conscious reality, many actual experiences, no individual reduced to a decorative accident. This is my account of what is most fundamental. But the scientific findings we use to understand the brain do not cease to be real because we begin with consciousness. Jett's injury depends on physical processes. Haiden's attention can be shaped by fatigue and experience. Their choices and memories depend on living bodies whose mechanisms deserve to be understood.

The most useful question is not whether the brain matters. Of course it matters. It is how the relationship between brain, body and experience is to be understood. What must a system do for experience to occur? Can experience be identified entirely by its functions? Does the world contain experience as something basic, or does it arise when physical organisation becomes sufficiently complex? Can any experiment distinguish these accounts, or do some questions remain philosophical?

A method of inquiry becomes stronger when it knows which question it can answer. No amount of accurate lap timing tells you why victory feels wonderful. Yet without accurate timing, you cannot even say who won. The descriptions belong together; they do different work.

And one more thing. The fact that consciousness is difficult to explain is not proof of any preferred answer. It is a reason to keep investigating. I have no need to frighten you away from evidence. Your curiosity is one of the ways this unfolding reality comes to know itself.

Teaching Eighteen — What Neuroscience Can Actually Test

The hard problem is sometimes used as an excuse to pretend neuroscience has discovered nothing important. It has discovered an enormous amount. One mystery does not cancel a thousand useful explanations.

Begin with a simple distinction. You can react to information without being able to give a clear conscious report about it. A sudden movement in the edge of your vision may change your posture before you have words for what happened. A highly trained rider can correct a landing without composing a sentence about it. Later he may remember the movement, misremember it, or discover from the footage that he did something he never noticed at the time.

Scientists investigate the difference between processing information, attending to it, becoming aware of it and being able to report it. These activities overlap; they are not identical. A theory that explains which information becomes available to deliberate thought has answered something important, even if it hasn't explained why subjective experience exists at all.

Consider *global neuronal workspace theory*. Imagine that your brain contains numerous specialised systems doing useful work in parallel. Some are processing visual detail, others bodily state, memory or the preparation of action. Under certain conditions, information becomes widely available across the system, rather like a message entering a shared workspace where multiple teams can use it. This framework proposes specific patterns of large-scale access associated with conscious report and control. It offers

researchers predictions about timing, interactions among brain areas and what changes when something is consciously seen rather than merely processed.

That analogy has limits. There isn't literally one little meeting room inside the skull, nor a person sitting at the table waiting for the message. The theory concerns coordinated activity across a biological network. The usefulness of the model depends on whether its predictions survive experiments, not on whether the office image is amusing.

Integrated information theory asks a different question. Instead of beginning chiefly with information becoming available for report, it considers the causal organisation of a system and whether the system forms an integrated whole with a particular internal structure. It proposes formal measures and relationships between integrated causal properties and consciousness. The ambition is greater than a description of what a person can say; the criticisms are considerable too, including disputes over the mathematical assumptions, empirical accessibility and what entities the theory might count as conscious.

Recurrent processing approaches emphasise the role of feedback activity within sensory systems. *Higher-order* accounts explore whether a mental state becomes conscious through some form of representation of that state. Other researchers focus on embodied and predictive approaches, the relationship between a brain's models and the body's regulation, or combinations of mechanisms rather than a single victorious theory.

You can see why the theories disagree. One may treat widespread access as central; another may regard particular forms of integration as fundamental; another may ask whether feedback is sufficient; another may insist on a system's capacity to represent its own states. Those claims can generate different experimental predictions.

In 2025, a large adversarial collaboration associated with the Cogitate Consortium tested predictions drawn from global workspace and integrated information approaches. The value of such an effort is not a dramatic declaration that one scientist has finally settled existence. Its value is that researchers who disagree worked together on experiments in which their expectations could be confronted with observed results. Important predictions on both sides were challenged. The work narrowed some possibilities and left others open.

This is how knowledge grows without a compulsory final sermon.

The distinction also matters outside laboratories. A person who cannot make a spoken report might still be attending, perceiving, remembering, wanting or understanding. The absence of a familiar form of communication cannot be treated as a direct measure of consciousness. In many situations researchers require alternative methods, while everyday supporters must make choices and communication accessible in ways that recognise the person's own participation.

Imagine a teacher explaining a new activity to a child who is looking away, moving their hands and occasionally repeating the same phrase. A quick observer might decide the child is not listening. Another teacher might notice the child later performing the activity accurately. It would be equally foolish to conclude from one moment that the child understands everything. The point is to create ways to discover what the child knows rather than imposing the observer's preferred display of attention as the measure of understanding.

You can recognise this in the riders. Hunter's practical questions about what Jett could actually see tell us more than a replay viewed from the grandstand. Brian's question about what Haiden felt at the rear tyre adds information that video alone cannot supply. We know more when we combine forms of evidence without assuming any single one is complete.

The brain is also an embodied organ. *Interoception* involves sensing and interpreting the body's internal conditions, including signals relevant to hunger, pain, fatigue, temperature and arousal. Emotion is not simply a message from a detached ghost. Breathing changes, muscles prepare, the heart responds, memory shapes anticipation, and social context alters what a situation feels like. Some of these responses occur before a person can explain them. They are no less real for being difficult to describe.

What, then, is the relation between a theory of the brain and a philosophy of Source?

The theory studies patterns and mechanisms through which particular lives experience and respond to a world. My philosophical account asks what makes experience itself possible and what connects all of those particular perspectives. The two questions must meet honestly. If a philosophical claim predicts a physical effect, it must face the appropriate evidence. If an experiment concerns neural access, it should not be announced as an answer to a question it did not test.

We are learning to make increasingly detailed maps. A map need not contain the entire universe to be worth using. Its value lies in where it takes us, what it helps us recognise and how well it tells the truth about the territory it describes.

Teaching Nineteen — Flow, the Moment in Which You Stop Watching Yourself

Some of the happiest seconds in the riders' lives occur in conditions that would make an ordinary person ask whether somebody has been negligent with the safety paperwork.

The motorcycle is moving fast. The surface is unstable. A tiny mistake may have serious consequences. Yet the rider can feel intensely alive, absorbed, confident, responsive, joyful. There is no contradiction in the experience. High challenge is part of what makes the moment meaningful to someone who has developed the skill to meet it.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi used *flow* to describe deeply absorbed activity, often involving a relationship between challenge and skill, clear goals, immediate feedback, focused attention, changed time experience and intrinsic enjoyment. Researchers have investigated flow in sport, music, art, education, gaming and other activities. Not every study uses identical definitions or measures, and there is no single switch in the brain that somebody can press to guarantee flow.

Think of the difference between riding a line and narrating the line while riding. Skilled performance often relies on learned sensorimotor coordination. Too much self-monitoring can interfere with some highly practised actions. Yet conscious attention remains useful for strategy, safety, adaptation and learning. The aim is not to become mindless. It is to become appropriately responsive to what is happening.

A useful analogy is dancing. If you try to calculate each footfall as a separate moral decision, you may end up looking like a distressed piece of office furniture. Let training, rhythm, attention and feedback work together and the movement can feel astonishingly natural.

Jett and Haiden experience flow differently. One may look loose and playful; the other intense and forceful. Style is not a moral ranking. A rider can be highly skilled without resembling the person beside him. The source of joy is not one mandatory facial expression.

But the risks are real. The fact that an athlete values a moment enough to accept danger does not make every dangerous decision wise. Injury can end a career or a life. Good coaching, protective equipment, medical care, track design and deliberate risk assessment are not enemies of freedom. They protect the possibility of continuing to do what one loves.

There is a deeper discovery. Flow temporarily loosens the habit of standing outside experience and evaluating yourself. You're not asking how impressive you look; you're responding to the moment. The Smiling Monad recognises a glimpse of something important in that absorption: a self deeply engaged with a world instead of defending its image against the world.

You do not have to ride a motorcycle to recognise it. A gardener, musician, builder, cook, child playing, person walking a familiar path, or support worker enjoying a shared rhythm may enter an equally meaningful form of absorption. Do not grade the experiences by speed, danger, prestige or an audience.

When the riders say racing is joy, believe them. Don't immediately translate the joy into a trophy. The race is not just a route to the reward. It can be the reward of being completely alive in a chosen activity. Competition can sharpen that feeling without being permitted to define the worth of the person experiencing it.

Teaching Twenty — Music, Frequency and the Dance Floor

You already know that music can reach somewhere words struggle to follow.

A melody you heard as a child may return and suddenly bring a kitchen, a particular light, a parent's voice and an emotion you had not visited in years. Two people may dance to the same track and experience different memories, bodily rhythms and meanings. Another person may find the same sound overwhelming. The music has not failed because the experiences differ. It is meeting different lives.

Sound is physical. Vibrations travel through media as pressure variations. Pitch relates to frequency; loudness, timbre, rhythm and temporal structure involve measurable aspects of sound and perception. Your auditory system transforms those variations into neural activity, and memory, attention, expectation and emotion shape the experience. There is excellent science here without needing to claim every feeling is literally one universal frequency.

The language of being *in tune* is also a good metaphor for relationships. Two musicians may have different parts but share timing. One leaves space; another enters. The shared rhythm does not require them to play the same note. In conversation, a pause can do similar work. So can a gesture or repeated phrase whose meaning becomes clearer because somebody has learned to listen.

When people move together, they may experience enjoyment, coordination or social connection. Research on synchrony examines aspects of how rhythmic activity and timing relate to social processes, while the psychological meanings vary with context. A crowd dancing is not scientific evidence that all its members share one mind. It is a beautiful example of many individual bodies participating in something together without becoming identical.

There is an ethical point here. A DJ who watches the crowd and adapts to its response is having a relationship with the people dancing. The dancers are not raw material for the DJ's ego. They are the reason a shared musical experience exists at all. An excellent support worker, teacher or parent can do something similar: notice how the other person responds, allow them to influence the direction, and treat rhythm as a form of conversation rather than a command.

Imagine a non-speaking person repeating a phrase with a particular rhythm. An outsider may hear a meaningless loop. Someone who knows the person may hear an invitation, a concern, a memory, a request or a way of staying connected. The respectful response is not to assume that repetition lacks thought. It is to examine setting, tone, timing, body movement and the person's own responses to different interpretations.

Now bring back the motorcycle. The engine has a rhythm. The terrain creates one. The rider listens through sound, vibration, vision, balance and contact. Great riding can look musical because complex information becomes coordinated movement. It is not proof that the engine and the soul vibrate at the same mystical frequency. It is plenty extraordinary without requiring that claim.

The Smiling Monad uses music as an image of infinite individuality within relationship. You are not an instrument forced to play the approved tune. You can find your rhythm. You can listen to somebody else's. Together you may create something neither person could have produced alone.

Teaching Twenty-One — Expectation, Placebo and the Stories a Body Learns

The mind and body are not two rival offices arguing about who gets the credit for a human being.

Imagine a child reaching for a hot cup. A parent says, *Careful, it's hot.* The child's attention changes. They slow down, anticipate pain and adjust their hand. Expectation has influenced behaviour before any injury occurs. In other circumstances, expectations can influence how sensations are interpreted and how pain is experienced.

Placebo research investigates changes associated with treatment context, learning, expectation and related mechanisms. Some placebo effects are measurable, including in certain experiences of pain. Nocebo effects describe adverse experiences that can be influenced by negative expectations or context. These effects do not mean all illness is imaginary or that belief can cure anything. They show how the body's responses and the meanings surrounding care can interact.

A doctor's words matter. The setting matters. Whether a person feels safe and understood matters. These elements can influence experience and, sometimes, outcomes. They do not replace appropriate treatment, and they never justify blaming someone for remaining ill.

Consider Haiden hearing *You're going to get destroyed on a 450.* He knows the commentator cannot see the future. Yet repetition can make the prediction familiar, and familiarity may make it feel weightier. He begins to notice

evidence for the accusation and ignore evidence against it. That is not a diagnosis, and it is not supernatural manifestation. It is an illustration of how attention, emotion, expectation and interpretation can reinforce one another.

Jett's rehabilitation offers another example. He may want progress so badly that every painful sensation feels like catastrophe. A careful clinician can help him distinguish ordinary variation from warning signs, explain the purpose of each exercise and set realistic expectations. A calmer explanation can change his relationship with recovery without pretending that his ankle is healed by positive thinking.

The same principle applies when adults speak around children, patients, athletes or people who communicate differently. Words can narrow a person's view of what is possible. They can also make room for agency and confidence. But the person is not a puppet controlled by somebody else's speech. They are an active participant with their own history and understanding.

The Smiling Monad therefore treats communication as a responsibility. Before you tell somebody who they are, consider whether you know. Before you predict their failure, ask what the prediction will do. Before you praise them into a new obligation to be perfect, ask whether your praise leaves them room to learn.

You cannot think every hardship away. But you can stop carelessly adding new ones through the stories you repeat. That is an ordinary power worth taking seriously.

THE LIFE YOU MAKE WITH OTHERS

Teaching Twenty-Two — Love Is Something You Do

You can spend years arguing about what love is and still fail to notice that somebody beside you needs a hand.

If I say love belongs to the deepest nature of Source, you may imagine an endless pleasant feeling. The world should already have cured you of that idea. Love often arrives as work. It can be inconvenient, exhausting, courageous, patient, funny, ordinary and extremely unimpressed by your schedule.

Hunter's love for Jett is not demonstrated by agreeing with him all the time. It appears when he pays attention, calls out a mistake, shares experience, respects his brother's ability and remains pleased by his success even when they want the same championship. Brian's care for Haiden is not demonstrated by removing difficulty. It appears through training, argument, presence and the complicated task of helping another person become capable without living the person's life for him.

Think about the difference between possession and connection. Possession says, *You are important because you belong to me; remain the version of yourself I prefer.* Connection says, *Your life matters, and I will try to understand what helps you live it well.* The first shrinks the other person. The second allows difference to survive.

The philosopher bell hooks wrote extensively about love as practice, involving care, responsibility, respect, commitment, trust and knowledge. Other ethical traditions speak differently, but many return to the question of whether our treatment of others matches our declarations. A loving sentence can be false advertising if it is accompanied by control and contempt.

Try an ordinary example. A parent says, *I only want you to be happy*, then refuses to hear about the child's chosen life because it differs from the parent's dream. Both statements may emerge from genuine emotion, but they are pulling in opposite directions. The parent has to decide whether the desire to protect is actually protecting the person or protecting an image of who that person was supposed to become.

Love does not demand universal agreement. A friend who is about to hurt someone may need a firm stop, not another encouraging slogan. Respect for individuality includes responsibility for how our actions affect other individuals. You may be free to choose your line, but you are not free to pretend the other riders have vanished from the track.

The Smiling Monad's ethic is simple in language and demanding in practice: find what makes your life worth living, recognise that others are equally entitled to lives of their own, and act in ways that enlarge rather than unnecessarily diminish those possibilities. Do not be cruel. Do not mistake your convenience for somebody else's welfare. Learn before you judge.

You can begin today, in a conversation that nobody will film and no one will applaud. There is no trophy for listening properly to a person who takes longer to answer. There is still a life affected by whether you do.

Teaching Twenty-Three — Communication Is a Meeting, Not a Test

Imagine two people trying to cross a river from opposite banks. One speaks fluently. The other uses gestures, pictures, movement or repeated language. The fluent speaker assumes communication has failed because the other person has not crossed to their side in the approved way.

But why was only one person expected to build a bridge?

Communication is not simply the transmission of perfectly formed sentences. It is a relationship in which people attempt to make meaning available to each other. Speech is one powerful means. So are gesture, gaze, orientation, image, sound, AAC, movement, rhythm, writing, silence and the patterns that emerge through shared experience.

A person may repeat a phrase because it carries a whole remembered situation, a desired action, an emotional state or an effort to keep a connection alive. A different person may speak beautifully while hiding what they actually need. Fluent expression is not the same thing as being understood, and unfamiliar expression is not evidence that there is nothing to understand.

Consider a child saying *stop* while smiling and moving towards someone. Does the word mean stop? It might. The immediate safety response should respect that possibility. But if the child uses it repeatedly in a playful sequence, the relationship may require more careful understanding: what

happened before, what follows, what does the child do when the other person really stops, and how can the child confirm or revise the message? It is possible to honour a word's importance while learning its individual use in context.

This is why the Smiling Monad asks supporters to listen with open ears, an open heart and an open mind. Listen for the person's actual intent. Taste your words before you spit them out. Leave your ego at the door. Those are not ceremonial decorations for meeting-room walls. They become meaningful when your interpretation is challenged and you make enough room for the other person to influence what happens next.

Teaching still matters. You can teach vocabulary, clarify a picture system, model a sentence, help someone express a choice, develop literacy and support safer communication. But the aim is communicative ability, not a performance of normality for its own sake. Sometimes the correct role is teacher, deliberately making a new skill accessible. Sometimes the correct role is communication partner, recognising an imperfect but genuine message and answering it. The puzzle is learning to distinguish the moments without treating every interaction as an examination.

The same problem occurs in families, politics and sport. A reporter asks a question that contains an assumption. The rider answers the question he thought was being asked. The clip is edited. A spectator announces certainty. Soon five people are debating a sentence nobody understood in the same way.

A stronger form of listening sounds like this: *This is what I think you mean. Have I got it right?* It allows the other person to remain the authority on their own intention wherever they are able to communicate it. Sometimes you will need time, context, additional supports and humility. All of them are worth bringing.

The Smiling Monad does not teach that everyone speaks the same hidden language. It teaches that every person deserves a genuine opportunity to be heard.

Teaching Twenty-Four — Competition Is Not the Enemy of Connection

Some philosophies become frightened of competition. They imagine that if all life is connected, everybody ought to hold hands, share the trophy and apologise for wanting to be first.

That is not the Smiling Monad. And it would produce bloody awful motocross.

Competition can be joyful. It gives people challenges worth meeting. It reveals skill, prompts adaptation, encourages effort, creates drama and makes extraordinary performances possible. The greatness of a contest often depends on the quality of the opposition. When Jett faces a rider capable of finding an equally brilliant line, he is not robbed of joy by the other's excellence. His own possibilities become more demanding and more interesting.

But competition has two distinct questions. *Who performed best under the agreed conditions?* and *Which life is most valuable?* A result can answer the first within the rules of a race. It cannot answer the second, no matter how impressive the trophy.

Consider a race won by a rider who takes a legal, brave and technically beautiful pass. The winner deserves the result. The rider beaten by a fraction may have experienced one of the finest performances of his career. The riders behind may have achieved personal milestones invisible on television. The families may have found tremendous joy in watching. There is no contradiction in acknowledging a winner while recognising that several people have experienced something worthwhile.

Now consider a move that endangers somebody unnecessarily. The desire to win matters, but so does the kind of game everybody agreed to play. Fair competition requires boundaries that protect the possibility of future competition. The person beside you is a participant, not disposable scenery.

This is the meaning of *Together We Play*. It does not abolish standards. It asks us to remember why the game exists: to create opportunities for participation, skill, challenge, discovery and enjoyment. Rules are meant to make those possibilities possible. When rules become a substitute for human purposes, they need examining.

Haiden and Jett do not have to become friends for the idea to matter. A rival can remain irritating, loud, cocky, wonderfully talented and highly motivated to beat you. He can still be worthy of respect. The knowledge that he, too, has an inner life does not force you to let him pass. It asks you not to require his humiliation as proof that your existence has value.

The final smiles at the gate were not a truce. They were recognition. Both riders knew they were about to give everything. Both knew that the other would do the same. They were happier because the race had returned to being a race rather than a trial in which the universe decided who deserved to be loved.

A good rival can help you discover how far your ability reaches. He does not get to decide whether your life matters. Nor do you get to decide his.

Teaching Twenty-Five — The Difference Between Happiness and Being Entertained

People often speak about happiness as though it were a feeling to be obtained, bottled and kept in the fridge. They buy things, chase attention, seek praise and sometimes succeed for a while. Then the feeling changes. The mind announces that happiness must have been lost and begins another shopping expedition.

Pleasure matters. Enjoyment matters. A good meal, a favourite song, an afternoon in the ocean, a game with friends, a brilliant ride—these are not spiritually inferior experiences. They are part of a good life. But happiness is not only the brief reward delivered by a pleasant stimulus.

Psychologists distinguish among forms of wellbeing, including positive emotion, satisfaction, meaning, engagement and relationships. Philosophers have long compared pleasure-oriented and flourishing-oriented accounts of the good life. Different cultures place different emphases on harmony, achievement, community, tranquillity, duty, freedom and devotion. None can be reduced to one universally approved mood.

Self-determination theory again offers a useful lens. Autonomy, competence and relatedness help explain why people often find life more satisfying when they have meaningful choices, chances to grow and relationships that matter. The rider who loves learning new lines may experience a very different kind

of fulfilment from somebody chasing approval alone. Both may enjoy trophies. Only one has made the trophy carry the entire responsibility for a life.

The Smiling Monad says, **You are here to be happy.** Hear that as an invitation to inhabit your own life, not an instruction to smile through abuse, grief, illness or injustice. Happiness can include effort, uncertainty and a day that does not go to plan. It is not a score that someone else is entitled to assign from your circumstances.

If you ask *How do I know what makes me happy?*, begin with curiosity. What do you return to when nobody is watching? Where does your attention become alive? Which relationships leave you feeling more able to be yourself? What is worth working for even when the result is uncertain? Which fears are protecting something real, and which merely keep you loyal to a role you no longer want?

You may need practical changes rather than a philosophical insight. A person facing unsafe housing needs safety. Someone in pain may need treatment. Someone excluded from a community may need access and genuine welcome. A philosophy that tells people to be happy while ignoring the conditions of their lives has turned love into a slogan.

But when the practical work is done, another question remains: can you allow a good moment to be good without demanding that it prove something about your importance?

Jett's best laps answer one version. Haiden's joy in a hard-earned win answers another. The smiles at the gate answer a third. Happiness is not the removal of ambition. It is the discovery that ambition can be carried within a life that is already worth living.

Teaching Twenty-Six — A Society That Loves Individuals and Punishes Difference

Imagine a school announcing that every child is unique. Beneath the banner, every child must learn the same way, answer at the same speed, sit in the same posture and prove understanding in the same approved language. The school does not lack a slogan. It lacks the courage to let the slogan change what it does.

Societies have a similar problem. We celebrate originality in artists and athletes, innovation in business and independence in historical heroes. Then a person behaves in a way that makes us uncertain, and we ask whether they could be more normal.

Conformity has functions. Traffic works better when people follow shared rules. Communities need agreements about safety and fairness. A person who ignores everybody else's rights cannot justify cruelty by invoking individuality. But social order can grow lazy. A rule that began as a tool for cooperation becomes a test of belonging; difference becomes inconvenient even when it harms nobody.

Researchers studying social influence have shown how people may change public judgements or behaviour in the presence of group pressure. The classic experiments associated with Solomon Asch are one part of that history. Modern research examines a much more complicated world of identity, belonging, norms and power. Groups can teach, support and protect. They can also make people afraid to dissent.

The Smiling Monad asks a deceptively hard question: *Whose life becomes easier when this person is made to conform?* Sometimes the answer is everybody, because a reasonable safety practice has been established. Sometimes the answer is mainly the adult, institution or audience that would prefer not to understand difference.

Consider a school student who needs movement to stay regulated. Telling them to sit still may produce a neat photograph of classroom control while making learning harder. Consider a worker who performs brilliantly but communicates differently. Demanding identical social performance may reduce the very contribution the organisation claims to value. Consider a champion whose authentic humour is treated as a public relations fault because it doesn't match a sponsor's idea of dignified adulthood.

A capable institution asks how to preserve necessary fairness while widening access to participation. Different people may need different routes to the same meaningful opportunity. Fairness is not always achieved by pretending everyone arrives with identical capacities, histories and needs.

The connection to democracy is direct. A democratic society must create space for disagreement, minority experience, criticism and the possibility that today's familiar arrangement can be improved. Agreement reached through intimidation is not the same as understanding. Neither is popularity a reliable measure of truth or goodness.

The Smiling Monad is not an instruction to dissolve every institution. It is an invitation to judge institutions by whether they make life more possible for the people they exist to serve. A school should enlarge learning. A support service should enlarge autonomy and access. A government should protect rights and enable participation. A sporting rule should support meaningful, reasonably safe competition.

And if an institution insists that its procedures matter more than the people, it might be time for Rick to visit the meeting room with a portal gun. Ideally after somebody has checked the fire regulations.

CURIOSITY, RESPONSIBILITY, AND THE NEXT MORNING

Teaching Twenty-Seven — Mystery Is Not a Licence to Stop Thinking

Human beings love a mystery. There are good reasons. A strange pattern in a field, an unusual experience of consciousness, an unexpected result in a laboratory or a report of something nobody can explain can make the world feel suddenly larger.

Curiosity is one of the finest ways to be alive. It becomes less useful when we decide that the explanation we enjoy most must be the correct one.

Imagine finding an unfamiliar set of marks across a race track. One spectator says aliens made them. Another says a rider crossed the line in a way the first camera missed. A third suspects the track crew. The marks are evidence that something happened. They are not equally good evidence for every story that could be told about them. You examine timing, tyre patterns, video, witnesses and what kinds of machines were present. You may still be unsure. Uncertainty is not humiliation. It is a fair account of the evidence available.

The same reasoning applies to crop circles, unusual aerial observations, claims of ancient lost technologies and experiences people describe as mystical. Some formations have documented human makers. Some reports are incomplete. An unexplained observation remains unexplained until adequate evidence supports a cause. The leap from *I cannot explain this* to *therefore my favourite explanation is true* is spectacularly tempting and frequently wrong.

Altered states are another interesting case. Meditation, sleep, breathwork, prayer, music, fasting and certain substances can change perception, emotion, identity and the apparent boundaries of the self. Neuroscience can investigate aspects of the mechanisms; people may interpret the resulting experiences through religious, spiritual, psychological or secular frameworks. The fact that an experience feels profound does not by itself settle the origin or ultimate nature of what was experienced. Nor does a neural account of how an experience occurred tell you everything about the significance it has for the person.

Consider what a dream can do. It can give you a moment of fear or joy so convincing that you wake with your heart racing. The experience is real as an experience. The dream's account of the outside world may be wrong. You can respect the feeling and still examine the story.

There is historical encouragement for this discipline. Human understanding changes. New instruments make previously invisible things measurable; neglected evidence leads to new questions; assumptions are revised. But new discoveries do not make every rejected idea a suppressed truth. An idea becomes stronger by surviving careful examination, not by claiming that criticism is proof of a conspiracy.

The Smiling Monad's confidence in Source is compatible with intellectual humility about particular claims. I can speak of an infinitely unfolding reality without pretending to know the answer to every technical or historical question. Indeed, an infinite unfolding should make you suspicious of anyone who announces that inquiry is over.

Notice the two habits: **wonder**, which keeps the door open, and **discernment**, which stops every stranger from walking into your house and selling you a miracle. You need both.

Teaching Twenty-Eight — The Machines That Speak Back

Once, people built machines to move rocks. Then they built machines to calculate, photograph, amplify music, fly across continents and arrange much of daily life. Now they build systems that produce conversation, images, recommendations and decisions with astonishing speed.

Naturally, somebody asks whether the machine is conscious.

That is a serious question. It is also easily confused with several others. **Intelligence** concerns capacities to perform tasks, learn patterns or solve problems. **Agency** concerns the ability to act towards goals within some structure. **Personality** may refer to recognisable style, consistent responses or a deliberately designed set of guiding principles. **Consciousness**, in the sense that matters here, concerns whether there is subjective experience: anything it is like to be the system.

A system might speak beautifully about feelings without establishing that it has them. Another being might have genuine experiences while communicating in ways you do not understand. That is why neither fluent conversation nor an unfamiliar interface is a sufficient test by itself.

Suppose you design a helpful robot whose personality is gentle, humorous, respectful of choice and curious about people's preferences. Those are excellent design goals. The machine may remind people of a beloved fictional protocol droid, except ideally with fewer complaints about the odds of survival. A recognisable personality can make interaction easier. It does not require you to declare that a soul has been manufactured in the factory.

Here the Smiling Monad's ethics become especially important. A support robot should never become a convenient way for an organisation to avoid listening to a person. It can assist communication, transport, reminders and connection. It may create new options. But it can also deepen surveillance, restrict agency or make care less human if deployed without the person's consent and meaningful control.

The danger is not only technological. It is the old temptation to make people fit the tool. A system works better when everyone uses identical words, taps identical buttons and behaves according to the same workflow. Human beings are rarely so obliging. Good design should adapt to actual lives where possible. A person whose communication is different is not a defective data entry form.

Artificial intelligence also amplifies the world's ability to create images and accounts of people. It can help expose manipulation, improve access to knowledge and make creative work more possible. It can also manufacture confident falsehoods and make the archive of a public life harder to trust. The lesson about Haiden's videos therefore grows more urgent: an apparently authoritative image is not the whole person, and an apparently authoritative answer is not automatically true.

As machine capabilities change, the question of possible artificial experience deserves disciplined research and moral seriousness. We need not assume an answer in either direction. What we can decide now is what values should guide the systems we build: human agency, openness to difference, privacy, fairness, transparency, safety and the widening of meaningful lives.

The machine is useful when it helps people become more themselves. It has missed the assignment when it merely makes it easier to demand that they all behave alike.

Teaching Twenty-Nine — Suffering Is Not a Sacred Assignment

It is tempting to describe every hardship as something the universe sent to teach a lesson. Such stories can bring comfort after the fact. They can also cause damage when used carelessly.

A rider breaks an ankle. Somebody says, *It happened for a reason.* Perhaps the person is trying to be kind. But the athlete may be in pain, frightened about the future and deeply tired of being required to find an inspirational meaning before he has even worked out how to get to the bathroom.

Suffering is not made good by our ability to tell a clever story about it.

Viktor Frankl's writing on meaning under extreme conditions has often been used to explore the ways people may find purpose despite suffering. There is a crucial difference between *a person may discover meaning while enduring something terrible* and *the terrible thing was necessary for meaning to appear*. The second claim can excuse cruelty, neglect and preventable harm. It can make the person who suffers carry responsibility for the system that hurt them.

The Smiling Monad is not interested in that trick. One Source does not mean every injustice is secretly desirable. An interconnected world still contains responsibilities. If a person is being harmed, act to protect them. If a social arrangement creates unnecessary suffering, change it. If somebody needs medical care, provide it. Do not offer them a lecture on cosmic unity in place of help.

The boys' discoveries emerged partly through pain. Jett learned things during recovery. Haiden learned things while confronting public pressure and the limitations of his earlier assumptions. Those lessons are valuable. The injury and pressure do not become holy because they were followed by insight. They remain difficult events to which the boys responded.

There is a quieter form of suffering that comes from comparison. Somebody appears to be ahead of you in life; your mind declares you have fallen behind. Someone else's success becomes an accusation against your own. Another person's difference feels threatening because your own identity has been made fragile. You begin to live as if happiness were awarded from a limited supply.

If everyone is a distinct experience of the same source, no one's joy subtracts from the legitimacy of yours. A brother's championship can make you happy even when you wanted it yourself. A rival's brilliant pass can anger you in the moment and still be something worth admiring later. The possibility of rejoicing in another person's excellence is not weakness. It is freedom from a tiny and exhausting account of what happiness is allowed to mean.

Pain and suffering deserve real attention. So do delight, resilience, anger, tenderness and hope. You do not need to turn every life into a tragedy to understand it, any more than you need to dismiss suffering because that life contains good things.

Life is not a moral obstacle course designed to sort the worthy from the unworthy. It is a field of experiences in which our choices and relationships can protect, damage, enlarge and repair one another's possibilities.

Teaching Thirty — What You Can Do When the Conversation Ends

You have learned a great deal of vocabulary. Source, perspective, interface, flow, ego, Sophia, interdependence, autonomy, perception, consciousness, grief, masking, love. None of those words will rescue you from the ordinary challenge of being a person who must get up tomorrow and share a world with other people.

So here are some practices. Not commandments. Not a new set of obligations for people who already have plenty. Ways to try the philosophy where it has consequences.

When you meet a difference, become curious before becoming corrective. Ask what the person experiences and what they want. Notice whether a behaviour is harmful, unsafe, unfamiliar or simply inconvenient to you. Those are not interchangeable categories. If someone communicates differently, adapt your listening before declaring the communication absent.

When you suffer, separate the event from the story it has become. The event may be serious and require action. The story might be *I am finished, I am worthless, everybody hates me, this feeling will never change*. Notice the difference. Seek practical help appropriate to the event. Do not confuse self-compassion with refusing responsibility.

When someone else succeeds, notice what happens inside you. Jealousy, admiration, grief, motivation and happiness can coexist. You do not have to censor the uncomfortable feelings. You can learn from them without allowing them to decide whether the other person deserves success.

When you enjoy something, allow the enjoyment to count. A good walk with a dog, an afternoon playing music, a conversation, a meal, a moment on a bike or a game that nobody wins can be a genuine part of a good life. You need not turn every pleasure into productivity or every relationship into a performance review.

When you hold authority, use it to expand another person's options. A teacher can create access to skills. A parent can give a child both support and room to become someone unexpected. A coach can teach technique while preserving the rider's style. A supporter can help someone communicate a preference instead of choosing for them. A public institution can listen before imposing a convenient standard.

When you meet an idea that excites you, investigate it. Learn enough to explain what the claim actually means. Ask what evidence supports it, what its critics say, what kind of question it answers and what would count against it. Keep your sense of wonder without renting your judgement to the first charismatic person holding a microphone.

When you feel separate, remember relationship. Not every relationship is safe or healthy. Some need boundaries and distance. But your experience of being alone is not proof that your existence is disconnected from the wider world. Find an actual connection where you can: a trusted person, a song, a creature you care for, a place you love, an act of service or an honest conversation.

When your inner world becomes too heavy, seek support. There is no contradiction between spiritual understanding and medical, psychological or social help. A shared source does not make a human body invulnerable, and a philosophy of happiness does not abolish the need for care.

You cannot perform all of these practices perfectly. I would be suspicious of anyone who claimed to. The point is not to become a new ideal person whose every word passes an audit. It is to create more room in your actual life for awareness, love and freedom.

Teaching Thirty-One — The Last Question Is Yours

Return, for a moment, to the gate.

Jett and Haiden know what it means to be watched. They know what it is to have people turn a result into a judgment of character. They know something of fear, disappointment, ambition and the extraordinary love involved in the families that helped carry them there. They've looked at different philosophies, listened to people they trust and discovered a larger possibility about the lives they inhabit.

It is easy to turn their recognition into another achievement. We could invent an Enlightenment Championship, commission a trophy, sell special edition goggles and spend three seasons arguing about which rider had the superior spiritual awakening.

Please don't. Somebody would start an online petition and ruin everybody's afternoon.

What they gained is not a new title. It is the freedom to experience the contest without asking the contest to determine their entire value. They can remain Jett and Haiden. They can remain very different. They can be competitive, ridiculous, funny, serious, loud, quiet, faithful, sceptical, loving, ambitious and occasionally wrong. They have no obligation to become two copies of an ideal human being.

This is the larger promise of the Smiling Monad. Every life is a particular perspective. No other person has lived yours from the inside. You do not need to apologise for being the specific person through whom existence is experienced, and you do not have the right to demand that others apologise for theirs. The depth of one connection is not measured by how much individuality it erases.

Look again at the symbol. The circle is still there. The centre has not moved. The heart surrounds it. The eyes are open. The smile does not announce that every problem has been solved. It expresses recognition: *Here I am, within a life worth living, alongside other lives every bit as real.*

Tomorrow you may argue with someone. You may face an unfair situation, feel frightened, lose something precious, make a mistake or discover a new joy. None of that proves that the philosophy failed. A life is not a test in which you pass by avoiding every difficult feeling.

You are here to be happy, and happiness belongs to the way you live—not merely to the things you acquire, the approval you win or the people you manage to defeat. You may have to fight hard for the conditions of a happy life. You may help another person fight for theirs. There is nothing unloving about refusing injustice, defending a boundary or giving everything to a fair contest.

I have one last question, and I will not answer it for you.

If the person beside you is another extraordinary way the same reality is being experienced, **what changes about the way you meet them tomorrow?**

You need not tell me. You need not announce a conversion. You may disagree about the nature of consciousness and still live with compassion, curiosity and good judgement. Whatever you believe, the other person remains there, carrying a life you cannot completely see.

The universe is not waiting for you to finish a philosophy exam. It is happening.

There is still a song playing somewhere. Someone is laughing. A child is trying to tell an adult something important. A mechanic is listening to an engine. A young rider is discovering a line nobody else saw. Another rider is about to challenge him for it. There is a vast amount of life taking place without any concern for how impressive your explanation of it sounds.

Good.

Go and live yours.

And when the board goes up, when something you love is about to begin, you need not look over your shoulder to check whether everybody approves of who you are.

Smile if you feel like it.

It is what it is.

Now give it everything.

After the Story — The Reading Trail

The stories invite an exploration that is much larger than racing. These starting points let readers follow the factual, historical and scientific questions beyond the fictional conversations. They are not a substitute for the arguments developed in the chapters.

Racing record

- 2026 Pro Motocross official 450 points and race results
- RedBud — 450 overall, 4 July 2026
- Southwick — 450 results, 11 July 2026

Mind, attention and motivation

- Ryan, R. M., and Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory: autonomy, competence and relatedness.
- Cogitate Consortium et al. (2025). Adversarial testing of global neuronal workspace and integrated information theories of consciousness, *Nature*, 642, 133–142.
- Chalmers, D. J. (1995). “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 2(3), 200–219.

Individuality, communication and conformity

- The Smiling Monad, “Autism: Different Ways of Experiencing an Interconnected World,” and “Speaking the Same Language, Understanding Different Worlds,” on difference, social expectations, reciprocal understanding and communication that expands personal agency.

- The Smiling Monad, “The One and the Different: Complementarity Without Conformity,” on belonging without sameness.
- Milton, D. E. M. (2012). “On the ontological status of autism: the ‘double empathy problem’,” *Disability & Society*, 27(6), 883–887, on the two-way nature of misunderstanding between people with different experiences.

Religion and philosophical interpretation

- The *Apocryphon of John* — Frederik Wisse translation, with the collection of surviving versions.
- The Smiling Monad, “The Fear That Dreamed a World: Sophia, the Gnostic Writings and The Smiling Monad” (17 November 2026), and “One Source, Many Sacred Worlds,” for further exploration of the distinction between ancient religious narratives and contemporary philosophical readings.

The Source teachings above extend this trail into consciousness, religion, neuroscience, philosophy, lived experience and ethical life.

The final rounds and injury

- Official 2026 450 Pro Motocross championship standings.
- Unadilla National, August 15: official 450 results.
- Budds Creek National, August 22: official 450 results.
- Ironman National 2026: championship conclusion.
- Honda Racing, September 2: Jett Lawrence's right-ankle treatment and playoff absence.
- 2026 Columbus playoff: Haiden Deegan's first 450 overall.
- 2026 SMX final and championship outcome.

For deeper inquiry into the later chapters

- Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel* (2009), on self-models and consciousness; Dan Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood* (2005), for a contrasting phenomenological view of self.
- Andy Clark, *Surfing Uncertainty* (2016), on prediction and perception; Anil Seth, *Being You* (2021), on perception, embodiment and consciousness.
- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990); Ryan and Deci (2000), on autonomy, competence, and relatedness.
- David Chalmers (1995), *Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness*; the Cogitate Consortium (2025), adversarial testing of competing theories of consciousness in *Nature*.
- *The Apocryphon of John* (several ancient recensions), for Sophia's story and the complexity of historical Gnostic ideas; compare with the Smiling Monad essay *The Fear That Dreamed a World* for its later symbolic reading.
- *The Spectrum of Life* (The Smiling Monad), for a multidimensional account of individuality, support, experience and the danger of ranking lives by outward appearance.

Reading Trail — Research, Traditions, and the Earlier Smiling Monad Books

This section belongs outside the story and outside Source's direct address. It is here for readers who want to follow an argument back to its basis, compare interpretations or study a subject in greater depth. Scientific findings, historical accounts, philosophical proposals and the Smiling Monad's own view serve different purposes. The book makes most sense when all four can be taken seriously without being confused with one another.

How the new teachings connect to the story

Moment in *WE*	**Question carried into Source's teachings**	**Where to continue**
Jett and Haiden face public judgement in the same period	How can a screen contain an image without containing a person?	Teachings 1, 3, 14–16, 28
Hunter corrects Jett without asking him to become Hunter	What is loving guidance without conformity?	Teachings 15, 22–24

Moment in *WE*	Question carried into Source's teachings	Where to continue
Brian and Haiden review footage together	How do perception, prediction and learning change action?	Teachings 2, 4, 18–19
The rivalry develops in public	What can competition measure, and what can it never measure?	Teachings 10, 23–25
Haiden's faith becomes a genuine question	How do ancient religions interpret fear, separation, creation and love?	Teachings 6, 11–13
Jett thinks about who he is beyond riding	What is the self, and how does experience arise?	Teachings 3–4, 17–18
Jett deals with injury and recovery	How do mind, body, attention, expectation and fear interact?	Teachings 14, 19, 21, 29
Haiden's childhood videos acquire public meanings	Why does a recorded version of a person never exhaust the living person?	Teachings 3, 15–16, 28
Both riders meet at the new starting gate	How can they recognise oneness and still race to win?	Teachings 5–6, 22, 24–25, 31

Core Smiling Monad works used in this synthesis

- *The Infinite Unfolding*, publication and editorial manuscripts (November 2026): consciousness, ongoing creation, religion, perception, ethics and the dialogue between Ego and Source.

- *What Is Reality?* (first reading edition, 13 November 2026): the initial fifteen-chapter invitation to the questions of infinity, consciousness, time, fear, death, social reality and the Smiling Monad symbol.
- *The Living Operating System*: individual experience, perception, predictive processing, sensory worlds, consciousness and relational reality.
- *The Spectrum of Life*: a spectrum is not a line; each life is an individual experience; life capacity, access, support, agency and flourishing.
- *The Rhythm Between Us*: multimodal communication, rhythm, AAC, reciprocal understanding and the distinction between teaching and communicating.
- "The Fear That Dreamed a World: Sophia, the Gnostic Writings and The Smiling Monad" (17 November 2026): the Sophia-as-fear reading and its differences from the ancient texts.
- "Monty Python and the Absurdity of Being God," "Infinite Dimensions, Infinite Realities, One Consciousness," "The Universe Has More Than One Note," "On the Edge of Being Alive," "Together We Play," "Leave Your Ego at the Door," "It Is What It Is," "Why Am I Here? To Be Happy," and the other essays catalogued in the Smiling Monad editorial map of 16 November 2026.

Mind, perception, consciousness and self

- David J. Chalmers (1995), "Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2(3): 200–219. Author's text.

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Consciousness” and “Self-Consciousness”. Introductions to competing philosophical problems and accounts.
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Phenomenological Approaches to Self-Consciousness”. On lived, prereflective experience.
- Cogitate Consortium et al. (2025), “Adversarial testing of global neuronal workspace and integrated information theories of consciousness”, *Nature* 642: 133–142. A direct test of distinctive predictions, with mixed findings rather than a final verdict.
- “Rethinking Predictive Processing”, *Annual Review of Neuroscience* (2026). Research overview of predictive coding and the evidence for prediction-error processes.
- Anil Seth, *Being You* (2021); Andy Clark, *Surfing Uncertainty* (2016); Thomas Metzinger, *The Ego Tunnel* (2009); Dan Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood* (2005). Different accounts of perception, embodiment and selfhood.
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Panpsychism”. Distinguishes a family of consciousness-first proposals and the combination problem.

Flow, motivation, psychology and bodily experience

- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990), *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Classic account of absorption and intrinsically rewarding activity.
- “A Scoping Review of Flow Research” (2022); “A systematic review and meta-analysis of the relationship between flow states and

performance” (2021). Evidence, terminology, measurement challenges and performance relations.

- Ryan, R. M., and Deci, E. L. (2000), “Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being”. Autonomy, competence and relatedness.
- “Clinical neuroscience and neurobiology of placebo and nocebo effects” (2025); “Translating knowledge on placebo and nocebo effects into clinical practice” (2024). The influence of treatment context and expectation, especially for pain.
- World Health Organization (2022), *World Mental Health Report: Transforming Mental Health for All*. The wider social and personal conditions affecting mental health.

Individuality, communication, conformity and digital life

- Milton, D. E. M. (2012), “On the ontological status of autism: the ‘double empathy problem’”, *Disability & Society* 27(6): 883–887. Mutual misunderstanding and reciprocity.
- “A systematic review and meta-analysis of mental health outcomes associated with camouflaging in autistic people” (2024). Observed associations that do not settle causation for every person or context.
- “What We Know and Do Not Know About Camouflaging, Impression Management, and Mental Health and Wellbeing in Autistic People” (2025). Research gaps and variation across people.

- U.S. National Academies (2024), *Social Media and Adolescent Health*; U.S. Surgeon General (2023), *Social Media and Youth Mental Health*. Benefits, risks and limitations in interpreting impact.

Cosmology, physics, possible worlds and philosophical interpretation

- NASA Science, “Big Bang and the Evolution of the Universe”. Evidence from the expanding universe and cosmic microwave background.
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Philosophical Issues in Quantum Theory” and “Many-Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics”. Physical theory and competing interpretations.
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Huayan Buddhism”. The Indra's Net metaphor and the tradition's account of interdependence.

Religious traditions, fear and the question of death

- *The Apocryphon of John*, translated by Frederik Wisse, and *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, translated by Bentley Layton. Ancient material to compare with the Smiling Monad's later Sophia-as-fear interpretation.

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Mind in Indian Buddhist Philosophy”. On self, suffering and the differences between Buddhist and Hindu accounts.
- The *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, and relevant scholarship on Advaita, devotional traditions and Kashmir Śaivism, approached as texts with different historical and philosophical commitments.
- Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (original German edition 1946; English editions later), on meaning amid suffering, not a claim that suffering must be inflicted to create meaning.
- bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (2000), on love as meaningful action and responsibility.

A final note on the different kinds of claim

The central proposition of Source—that all individual lives belong to one infinite conscious reality—is the Smiling Monad's philosophical and spiritual understanding. Neuroscience has not established that proposition, and a physical theory of particles or cosmic expansion should not be represented as having done so. Scientific sources support specific observations about perception, cognition, flow, motivation, social experience and the physical cosmos. The ancient texts belong to their own histories. The value of this synthesis lies in making the comparisons intelligible without pretending they are all interchangeable.

Ben Grey · The Smiling Monad · Expanded reader teaching edition · 19 November 2026

Guide to the Book

Books I–VII: Jett, Haiden, their families, the season, the struggles, and the gate.

Book VIII — Source Speaks to You: Thirty-one teachings on consciousness, reality, individuality, suffering, competition, and living together.

Reading Trail: Scientific research, philosophical comparisons, primary religious texts, and the Smiling Monad works behind the ideas.