

## THROUGH THE BORDERLAND

~excerpt~

(complete work: 84,000 words)

### CHAPTER ONE [NORTHLAND]

The day of the party was sunny but appeared intermittently overcast with the near-constant spraying of the neutralizers. The three women, three generations, were alternately chatty and quiet as they drove through one descending cloud after another.

Without thinking, Clere, eighteen, rolled down her window from the backseat and just as quickly rolled it back up. "Sorry."

The women grunted as the stench blowing in off Frame IV hit them. With the violent season in full swing most were at capacity.

The miasma, like a madeleine, transported Adileen and soon she was thinking of her husband, long dead. "Not today," she said, under her breath, fighting the riptide of memory. "Not today."

"What's that dear?" Lilia said, from the passenger seat.

"Nothing, ma." Adileen hit the wipers again.

As they came over a rise the sky cleared, blue and bright. The asphalt was dappled with leaf cutouts from the concrete forest that lined the road—such level of detail was expensive but worth it.

On an impossible-to-miss billboard was the image of a wild-eyed woman dressed in sportswear, hair in a high pony with sweatband, mid-leap above a checkerboard of four alternating hot plates serving out her sentence. Next to the Four-Square, a digital sign indicated the woman's energy output which fed into the grid. *Turn Bad Energy into Good*, read the headline and at the bottom, *Comportment, Inc. Your Behavior Management Resource* and below that, *In partnership with the Bureau for a Better Northland*.

Clere gasped. It was the photo she had taken.

"What is it?" Lilia turned.

"Nothing. No," Clere said, hand to chest, willing the horses to calm.

Adileen turned on the radio and hearing the snippet, *by Comport*, just as quickly turned it off. "I can't believe—"

"Not now," Lilia said.

Several minutes later, Adileen rounded another curve fast, saw red lights and braked behind a line of crawling cars. "Must be the place."

The women passed through a tall iron gate and drove to the top of a paved incline. Valets opened car doors as guests bloomed like bouquets. Greeters bestowed shot glasses on lanyards, feathered masks and thumbscrew keychains before directing the newly arrived to the Southeast Garden, a lush oasis of grass islands bordered by

beds of pink and orange lantana. Beeps occasionally punctuated the air as the occasional guest tried to pass through the body scanner with banned paraphernalia.

Just inside the garden gate, wedged into the bough of a large oak, the corpse of a convict, outfitted in a tux with bow tie and glitter-dusted party hat served to welcome the new arrivals, dress shirt drying to a yellowing brown in the late afternoon sun. Guests exclaimed, clapped, pointed—the nagging realization they could be next a mere thought bubble that popped as soon as it formed.

Crime destabilized society, on that citizens of Northland could agree. Punishment, swift and excessive, served as a public amend, a resetting of the balance. To witness this temporary return to order was not only a duty and an honor but a reminder that the whole was indeed better when rid of its malevolent parts. In this way, Northland pruned.

Hors d'oeuvres and drinks circulated under a lattice of brightly-colored streamers and balloons. Shots, once emptied, were filled again and it wasn't long before thumbscrews dangled from fingers, lips, lobes and hair, surreptitiously attached to skirt hems, jacket lapels. Partygoers hooted and hollered upon finding they'd been 'screwed.' Someone had the bright idea to shimmy the tree and hang one on the corpse till that same person lost his footing and became the night's first casualty.

Guests appeared lit from within, eyes glowing, energy passing between them like a virus—the air electric, festive, movement and laughter contagious. Individuals were

in attendance, yes, but really there was just one guest: the Crowd. It fed off itself with a hot intensity that all could identify, but for which no one person could claim responsibility. It had become a robust and lively expression of the individuals who composed it.

Guests dashed about the garden searching for hidden trinkets redeemable for prizes—proxy certificates, box seat tickets for Edgefest, a private Compartment tour. Men rolled pant legs and women hiked skirt hems to wade into the pond to search under rocks and lily pads. Others crawled under bushes, looked in pots. Some popped balloons convinced they would find something hidden within.

“Look over there,” someone said, snatching one from under foot.

Small fights broke out as several attendees spotted the same trinket tucked into a bird feeder or a tree branch. Guards quelled skirmishes either by generously providing all parties with trinkets as consolation or simply tasing all who had the misfortune to have gathered round. The anticipation of punishment or reward made people mad with excitement. Some scattered as the guard approached while others stood their ground laughing hysterically as they anticipated their fate.

So far, all agreed, it was a great party.

Just when it seemed the frenzy couldn't climb a note higher, a tinkling of bells sounded accompanied by a gentle announcement to please move inside.

Lilia, Adileen and Clere, in descending generational order, shuffled toward the entrance as a unit, the back of a sweater in one hand, a glass of champagne in the other.

Once inside the mansion, the force of the crowd spun the three on a circuitous route which they rode like a rip tide until spit out onto the periphery of The Grand Hall where they picked up place cards, circumnavigated the room to their table and sat.

“To think I used to live here. Seems bigger. Maybe he added on?” Lilia took a long drink. “Did you hear me?” She tapped Adileen on the arm.

“I heard you, yes,” she said. “Too bad you did.”

“Positive please,” Clere said.

“I was young and alone and he was so...” Lilia closed her eyes and recalled a tall, handsome man formally dressed, walking stick tapping greeting her in a manner both commanding and charmingly apologetic as if preparing the way for his ensuing behavior. At thirty-six, twice her age.

[NORTHLAND]

“*Good day,*” he had said, with an uneven smile, as if one corner of his mouth weighed more than the other, showcasing stone-white teeth. Even in the hot sun he wore a long day coat with vest and tie. He wiped his neck with a kerchief pulled from his breast pocket and handed her his card.

Lilia, weeding the small garden in her front yard, ran a sleeve across her forehead, set down her clippers and stood. “Hamish of The Atkin Family?” she said.

"The very same although there is no family now. Just me."

Lilia ran her fingers over the card's raised lettering. "My parents passed, too. Car accident, three months ago." The scenery went soft as her eyes filled.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Never easy," he said, tapping his stick twice.

"No," Lilia said, and turned from the garden to see a lively curtain billow out from the upstairs window of her childhood home. She imagined her mother watching over her.

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"There he is!" Clere said, absently tracing a scab on the back of her hand then pointed into the crowd. "Let's go over."

"I'm going to be sick." Adileen put a hand to her stomach.

"Nothing was ever proven," Lilia said, leaning in, catching herself on the table's edge. "Remember that."

"Keep drinking." Adileen closed her eyes and saw her husband's body rising high up over the side of the bridge, arms windmilling as if to gain purchase on a cloud.

"We get through this and take Clere home. That's the plan," she whispered.

"Yes, and in the meantime," Lilia added, "let's try and have some—"

"Come on," Clere said, and pushed back her chair. "You have to say, hi."

"Does she?" Adileen said.

“Why I’d like to. After all these years, but look at him, surrounded. I don’t want to interrupt.” Lilia smoothed her dress, pinched her cheeks, emptied her glass and grabbed two others as a waiter passed by. “Okay, monkey, let’s go.”

Clere dragged her grandmother through the dense, buzzing crowd. When they neared their destination they stopped as if about to cross a busy road. Lilia focused on the shoes—high heels, sporty lace-ups, staid pumps. She followed a set of tasseled loafers up the pant leg, over the belt and onto the shirt to find Hamish as their owner. Their eyes met and, without missing a beat, he winked.

Lilia blushed, bowed her head. Seeing him in this setting after all this time well, it was as if the past had dried up and blown away, the intervening decades now cinched together as if time had been a mere accordion fold. She looked to Hamish as he conversed, face animated, eyes tired but clear, hair still full but gray. And those teeth, displayed as if bestowing a gift, to which everyone, in their own way, said thank you.

Forty years ago Lilia had woken alone as Mrs. Hamish Atkin under a canopy of purple satin. On the pillow next to her, a beautifully-wrapped box. Inside, exquisite lingerie, perfume and a card, an invitation detailing where in the house and at what time she should present herself. To this day the sight of a festive box topped with a bow made her stomach knot.

Clere anticipated the end of Hamish’s latest exchange and pulled Lilia in from the outer ring of admirers as if birthing her.

“Grandpa,” Clere said, “look who’s here.”

The room hushed, guests vanished. Lilia took a step forward.

“Why Lilia,” Hamish said, hand extended.

Caught between memory and the present moment Lilia couldn’t quite decipher the meaning of that hand and looked at him curiously. He touched her arm and leaned forward, breath hot in her ear, “Don’t you look lovely. Thank you for coming,” after which sound returned and everything started up again.

As if in greeting, Lilia held up both flutes. “Nice to see you Hamish dear,” she said. Was that the best she could do? Nice to see you? And ‘Hamish dear?’ What was that? “Quite a gathering. Congratulations,” she added, waving the champagne and loosing a lively ribbon of bubbly.

Clere snared Lilia’s hands and set both glasses on a passing tray. “Thank you for inviting us Grandpa.” She wrapped an arm around Lilia. “We’re thrilled to be here.”

“And I’m thrilled you’ve come,” he said, turning as someone from the stage at the front of the room waved. He gave a thumbs up. “If you’ll both excuse me.”

Lilia and Clere returned to their table as Hamish, with the swagger of an emcee, crossed the room, climbed the stage stairs and, microphone in hand, shouted, “Comportment, Incorporated welcomes you!” The audience responded with foot stomps and hollers amidst vigorous applause. Hamish basked in the wall of sound,



turning from left to right, allowing everyone, regardless of where they stood, the opportunity to see him, to be smiled upon, to receive his welcome.

The room quieted.

“Forty years ago this company came into being with the revisioning of a simple product.” He presented his hand like a downturned claw revealing a gold thumbscrew dangling from his index finger.

The room exploded as guests cheered, banged tables. With a dramatic flare, Hamish wound up and hurled the item out into the crowd. People geysered into the air, arms and fingers splayed, then back down they fell into the pool of bodies below. Within seconds a drone appeared overhead and, after one long *zzp!*, calm was restored increasing the night’s casualty tally to two.

“And from those humble beginnings,” Hamish continued, “Comportment was born. This celebration marks the 40th anniversary of a company that’s grown and thrived because of you, the Comportment family. Without the dedication of the men and women assembled here this enterprise would simply not exist. To all of you and the loves ones you’ve brought to join in the celebration I say, thank you.”

Hamish opened his arms to receive the room, rotating like a jewel on display then clasped his hands, mic to chest and bowed his head. He held the pose, tapping a toe inside his loafer for a count of seven before continuing.

“To celebrate the occasion, as many of you know, I have commissioned a very special device. The first of its kind. Truly magnificent. The next generation in Behavior Management Entertainment! Conceived and designed by my head engineer, Garrold Reeves and his spectacular team, there is no doubt in my mind you will be transported. Hamish scanned the crowd, hand to forehead like a seaman. “There he is,” Hamish said.

Like a school of fish, the crowd turned.

“Stand up, stand up,” Hamish implored. “Will everyone please join me in giving this man a well deserved and heartfelt round of applause.”

Garrold stood, felt the outside of his pocket for reassurance and, arms raised, redirected the attention back to Hamish who, grinning broadly, cupped a hand to his ear. The room exploded with more yipping, hoots and hollers. Even the ceiling balloons appeared to take part, knocking joyously against one another.

Lilia clapped as if a finalist in a contest.

Hamish retook the mic, “Please take your seats and enjoy the wonderful meal coming to your table,” and left the stage.

Whether from the champagne or the festive atmosphere, Lilia looked around and wondered what she had been so afraid of? Hamish was a powerful man, yes, but a man like all the rest. She emptied her glass and thought back to their first intimate moments in the solarium. She, in feathered heels and matching teddy, invitation in hand, he

naked in a high back chair. *Four, three, two*, she recalled him counting down, until he reached the number one and released.

A cork popped. Lilia jumped. "Oh," she said, and found herself in the middle of a crowded room.

"Grammie," Clere laid, laying a hand on her shoulder, "I'm off to find the bathroom."

The earlier shot and subsequent champagne had a funny way of collapsing time and seemingly out of nowhere a voice was calling her name.

"Miss Prester? Sorry to disturb you, but Mr. Atkin requests your presence."

An excited dread gripped from the inside. "Just a moment," she said, washed her hands and opened the door to a uniformed staff member.

"Please, follow me," a stone-faced attendant said and escorted Clere down a hall covered in intricately designed carpets laid head to foot. They arrived at a room adjacent to the Grand Hall, created by a temporary dividing wall installed for the night's festivities.

The attendant knocked. Clere poked her head in. "Grandpa, you wanted to see me?"

"Why Clere," Hamish said, striding across the room, "so good of you to come."

A large red drape at the far back of the room caught her eye. "Is that?" she asked, "Can I?"

“A little preview?” Hamish said. “Oh, why not?” And raised then lowered his arm as if signaling the start of a race. “Be my guest.”

Clere ran to the back of the room and tugged on the edge of the drape which billowed then floated to the floor revealing a life-sized Bull rendered in polished steel on a raised platform sitting on a track. “Oh, my,” she gasped. “It’s beautiful. What is it exactly?”

“A fancy room heater of sorts,” Hamish laughed. “Look here.” He fished for the remote inside his pocket. With the tap of a button, *Ploof!*, the sound of gas catching. A blue flame danced beneath the belly. With the tap of another, a near invisible seam revealed itself and a door on the side opened. It was hollow inside.

Hamish extinguished the flame, handed Clere the remote and with surprising agility slipped inside. “Roomier than you think,” he said, his words elongating, echoing as they traveled through twenty feet of tympanic coil out the Bull’s mouth.

Clere clapped her hands. “Say something else!”

“Helloooo!” Hamish boomed.

Hands on thighs, Clere jumped up and down like a child.

With some effort Hamish scooted down, spun round till both legs dangled over the door’s edge. With a grunt he grasped the exterior and pushed himself back onto the platform. “Want to try?”

Clere handed him the remote, ran up and stuck her head inside. "Hey ho," she yelled, and pulled her head out in time to hear the reverberations. "Cool," she said. With her back to the Bull she slipped down the edge and swung her legs inside where she lay back, knees bent, arms long by her side.

"Pretty roomy," she laughed, voice echoing, and with the tap of a button the door seamed and ate the light.