

Lisette May Monroe **Heritage Brands**

My mother lives near a military testing site where they have never done black ops.

Recently I got a call as there had been a crack in the sky over the nameless village where she lives, the village where black ops have never been conducted.

Her familiar voice on the line, jangly like a string bean.

This is it, she said. It's happening now.

One Christmas she got me a rape alarm, a set of universally sexy knickers, a knife - used - which she had hid inside of a cushion and a space in the council's secret nuclear bunker.

She had acquired the space for me as she had put herself forward to volunteer there in the event of a nuclear attack. At the time she worked for the local government and before the holidays an email had been circulated asking staff to enlist themselves for positions in the bunker. She had applied for the role of showering people off when they came in. Through the architecture of her own logic she thought this would be the way to keep the cleanest and therefore the safest. For doing this job - hours unknown - you also got spaces in the bunker for your family - available spaces unknown.

The secret bunker is absolutely not under the town hall.

It wasn't much of a visual present, but you could sense the gesture reaching from the depths of her. Lurching its way out of her lagoon. Water cleanses all sins, even chemical warfare. A mother, my mother, bathing her children, an endless torrent of children. As they arrive at the bunker in muddled stages of bedraggled she swells them into the domestic - a gang of friends getting home after a big night out, knives and rape alarms in pockets. A city full of my new siblings all being blasted with a power hose.

Last night a friend told me one year her mum themed all the families Christmas gifts around power cuts.

I hear her again, her voice, like loose change sliding around in a washing machine. It's happening now, she said.

Since last Christmas I have wanted to write about the UK High Street store NEXT. Talk of this store often dominates our family festive conversations. NEXT is an aspirational multi-level composite. It is a bog. A suburban hetero wetland. Each floor a sandy-tiled marsh to be skipped through leading to the pastel coloured retro-invoking toaster or the mass produced tailored trouser. Something stylishly non-descriptive at a quality-reflective price point.

Every Boxing Day, customers - 90% of whom are middle-aged white women, queue through the night to acquire a past-season candle set or a pair of leather upper office shoes, with 50% off. This is not out of need or poverty but because smashing together the want for these things with the option to be seen winning these bargains is a particular kind of kink for them.

Sharing the queue is their dogging.

NEXT is the matriarch in the family. The cursive of Live, Laugh, Love proliferates as giant hogweed, a relentless chemically tinged perennial, scorching the hands that try to pull it from its invasive roots. The shop assistant's hands become rife and ripe with blisters as the poisonous sales sap is heaved through the till.

Now in March 2020, queues feel different. I wonder about these wholesome overnight kinkers and if they can ever be reunited with their fetishes or if now queuing will always be infected with icky virus. Defiling the candle set and compromising the leather uppers, tipping these things into the forever contaminated. It's hard for them to brag about it now - 'oh it's from NEXT', they would declare the words trailing behind them like a regal cape. Now, they drop like boulders from their arse, thudding into a bunker of nowhere.

My mother, the patron saint of the NEXT sale, will commit to a pilgrimage to this holy place every 26th of December, consulting local oracles for the best time to arrive. 11am is the celestial hour, after the first restock and before the lazy after-lunchers. Ritually she ascends through the automatic doors at 11.30 with at least one formal dress, for cruises unbooked. In the past month she has phoned me three times a week, to warn me not to touch giant hogweed. A familial exercise in protective consumerism.

11 days after Christmas is my Birthday. One year, my 7th, we drove to meet my dad from work, parking outside the factory convulsing with noise. Our red Vauxhall becoming the breakwater between the local domestic and a global violence.

My mum focused in the driving seat, waiting to do the handover - to pass me over like a drug deal - in a Marks and Spencers shirt and NEXT black trousers, her best battle regalia. Both of these things passed down to me 10 years later for my first day of work at the local government. Heritage Brands.

She sat, hands tight to the wheel, staring through the abyss of the 2 mile long factory. A completely volatile landscape. The struts and beams of steel venting out loose ammunition and showering excess weld under the shutters.

She was still, watching the fiery dandruff disperse along the forecourt while the grumble of an engine much bigger than the one we were sat with began to bear on us from behind.

Fumbling up slowly the shadow of the war vehicle consumed us - an ingot cloud rolling over. Its density cast over the car as the light was rapidly compromised. The essence of the Vauxhall so flattened it could be slotted neatly into an eclipse.

Fear in a carpark is silent.

Cold, mute, unsound.

We sat suspended in a sight line unheard and gagging. They kept us there, in view and in shadow for a maze of time.

After its own logic had been worked through and its own decisions made, the tank cleared us, releasing us from its murk. Tracks spinning perfect soft ovals. The armament now firmly forward, confidently leading the way.

From the side my dad appeared, 10 minutes late which in retrospect seems purposeful, offering no hello on his approach.

Why do you let them do that? she said, her voice startled as a car alarm - it was the first time they had spoken in person in 10 months. They know we are in here.

Target practice, he said

He opened my door and I got out and stood on the tarmac holding hands with the giant hogweed while she drove away.

It's happening now, she said from the back of her head. Hands jangling on the steering wheel. Her voice quivering out of the exhaust.

Her cape trapped in the car door,

dragging through the dirt.

Lisette is an artist and writer based in Glasgow.