

The Best Way to Water Orchids is With Ice Cubes

By Olivia Smith

Our houses share the same bones. Unremarkable and sturdy, with windows that creak in unison whenever a truck neared too close to the edge of Nicholson Street. Grand spaces with cracks that seem to multiply some days and disperse the next. Black and white tiles span hallways, either retro or traditional depending on the fleeting eye of their respective owners. Uniform layouts, packed with the same charmingly outdated fittings and fixtures that weaken with every use.

They back onto the same evergreen trees, big enough to cast shade across both courtyards, while the local deciduous trees fill in pavement gaps with pollen when the wind blows or seasons shed in preparation for rebirth. A process hurried by Melbourne's damp winters, leaving grit and foliage mounting in all corners. Foliage becomes mud. Mud imprints its permanence, rendering the sweeping process redundant.

Connected by a central wall, each side unfamiliar to the other, resembling opposite ends of life, one nearing the finish line, the other faulting the start line. One side resembles simpler, harder times, packed with pristine antiques, unfamiliar to dust and peacefully dormant. A neat hoard of porcelain. An impressive assemblage of graduation photos. Classical paintings, evenly spaced, sombre and unliberated. Formalities slowed down somewhere in the sixties before hitting the brakes entirely in the seventies. Through the wall lies redeemed roadside pieces. Expressive artwork made by friends of friends. Crude mugs that rest on unread coffee table books. Empty cans and bottles that cascade over neglected garbage bins. A sign reads, 'recycling is THURSDAY arseholes'; the cusp of a broken and battered share house. A pair of estranged siblings; one and the same, yet completely different.

I didn't know that my first encounter with Patricia would mimic the many to come. I'd ring the doorbell. She would peer out through the fly screen before opening with a smile and nod to enter. Musty silence. Shoes off. The same adjacent setting positions. A kind offer of sugary tea and decadent Italian biscuits. A reluctant yes before breakfast.

She was delicate, face and stature alike. As immaculate and put together as her home. Neatly dressed with no intentions of going further than the front gate. Comfortable in her space. A home she cared for graciously, with a hostess nature willing to share it with anyone who wished to be welcomed inside.

Her age, no idea. I do know that she met her husband during the second world war, as he and her brother fought together, so my loose understanding of history makes me think around eighty. I've never asked that question directly. Conversational capacity only varied slightly between encounters. Comfortable silences were broken up by irrelevant phrases. Bin rotation, Fran Kelly on ABC radio nation, and midsummer murders repeated.

Whenever a silence grew past the point of comfort, I'd bring up the orchids, blossoming in the corners, skinny and well-kept like Patricia herself.

"The orchids are looking beautiful," I'd say, pointing to the corner of the room for clarity.

"Did you know," she'd pause to collect her thoughts.

"The best way to water Orchids is with ice cubes, so every day, I put one or two on top."

"That's so interesting," I'd reply. Neither of us knew why.

We weren't quite friends. Not in the sense, I had known any friendship before. But we were more than strangers. Every Tuesday I'd hear her vacuum. Every Friday I'd hear her bringing in our bins, and then hers, if I didn't beat her there before seven. A friendship built on proximity. Fulfilled guilt for not spending enough time with my grandparents when I could. Sustained by comfort; peaceful silences between words. Closeness. Side by side, we existed, crossing paths for a mere rent cycle.

Her home was a time machine just twelve feet away—a small tale in the novel of Fitzroy's origins. Our whole block, now gentrified, is landlocked by history, tightly held together by concrete fences. Corner shops still reminiscent of the old world, early colonial builds to cater to the growing population of factory workers and their families. An old, leather-skinned local told me this area was part of 'the great period of bluestone construction,' eventually forming into an eyesore to Melbourne, slum territory riddled with prostitution and crime.

Weakened brick establishments rest below modern apartments, quietly withholding years like 1860 in their facades. Drunken pub goers stumble down slim alleyways, too small for cars but too interlocked to rebuild. Nona's who became homeowners in their youth water their pristine front gardens, as they have for half-centuries. Decrepit warehouses disguised by spray-painted murals, now filled with market stalls selling candle holders and honey.

What would Patricia's have been like in these places? In these times? I've only seen one picture of her in her youth. It rests on a small table stacked neatly with bills and mail. She and her infant daughter are held together by what looks to be a hand-made purple frame. She's lifting her by her armpits, hunched over a couch, caught off guard by the camera with an ashtray of cigarettes resting in the foreground. A beautiful young mother, sultry and bright feature. She looks carefree, unphased, and glorious.

The woman in this picture could have travelled the country in a van with a baby on her hip, leading a new world where women have agency over their lives. Or been a dancer, skipping town with her teenage sweetheart after the war, disapproving conservative parents. Maybe, a young woman breaking the boundaries of her time, leaving home with just fifty dollars and a passport to embark on a solo world tour full of intermittent friendships and worldly lovers. Kind, but ruthless. Shy but thrilling. A woman who crewed the bone and ate the marrow, sucking up all the world has to offer.

But I never knew any of that to be true, and I never asked; fantasy left to the bounds of my imagination. The Patricia I knew was alone with her belongings, flagging a life that was, as the memories they possess begin to dissipate, soon to be forgotten entirely. A thought that should make growing old scarier, but it doesn't. There is an air of peacefulness around Patricia. Backed against one of Melbourne's busiest roads, within her world of belongings and faded pictures, noise becomes silence, a product of contentment, I hope.

I did, however, ask about her daughter, Kimberly, who lives with a new puppy in Brunswick West, and pops in for weekly dinners. She studied law at Melbourne University. Patricia showed me the framed degree hanging in the study.

One Thursday night as I was taking the bins out, I saw Kimberly where our front gates meet. She was unlike how I had imagined. Older and more bohemian. She already knew my name and she seemed happy to put a face to it. She told me she was preparing her mother to be moved into a nursing home. Dementia. No remaining sense of time or place, she said. Still existing in the Fitzroy that once was. Like the dust that turns to grime, occasionally leaving outlines of fallen leaves, trapped in time.

I saw Patricia for the last time this week. A smile and nod to enter. Shoes off. Tea and biscuits over surface chatter that all of a sudden I felt important enough to memorize.

“The orchids look really beautiful today, Patricia,” I said, looking directly at her this time.

She smiled.

“Did you know the best way to water orchids is with ice cubes?”

I smiled back, tears clinging below the surface.

“Really?”

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