

FIRST PERSON

THE ORCHID I KILLED



ILLUSTRATION BY MARY KIRKPATRICK

My sister left her prized phalaenopsis with me during a vacation, but my best efforts couldn't save the fragile flower, **Emma Inglis** writes

The orchid was in my care whilst my sister-in-law took off on her holidays. She'd printed out a set of instructions that read less like a laundry list, more like a shouty memo from the uptight boss. Top and underlined in red was a note that I shouldn't overwater it, else I would kill it. It needed feeding once a week, a little spritz of mist now and again, and it wouldn't behave well if I placed it on the mantelpiece above the fireplace. It really did need to be near an east-facing window, not a south-facing one where it might get sunburnt. The orchid arrived with her spaniel, which came with no instructions since "he wouldn't be any bother" and "besides, you know about dogs."

She was right, dogs are one thing, orchids an entirely different matter. She stalked around the house looking for the right windowsill and eventually found something suitable upstairs with a gauzy blind that looked pretty but was useless at keeping out the light when you wanted it to. South, west or east-facing, I've no idea. She placed a container for misting next to the plant and left in a rush. The dog whined but the orchid did nothing.

It was a pretty thing. You couldn't help but marvel at its tumbling yellow blossoms splashed with crimson and its thick, lush green leaves. "It's a *phalaenopsis*, commonly known as a moth orchid," I told my husband later. "Fairly ubiquitous. If I kill it, it should be pretty easy to swap it out with another."

He was less convinced. "She'll know," he said. And it did seem that she had gone and got herself a rather unusual one. There was nothing like it on the supermarket shelves around my way.

It seemed happy enough. "Stick your finger in the potting mix and if it feels dry, water it," I'd been instructed. I poked my finger in the mix (mainly bark chips) and poked around. It didn't feel that dry, nor that moist. Was it dry? Bark always feels a bit dry. There was some moss in there too, which felt a teeny bit damp. It was a difficult call. I figured best to leave it for a day or two and stick my finger in again when it gave me the nod. Surely the flower would droop when it wanted a drink like any other self-respecting plant.

On the fifth day, she phoned. She asked about the orchid first, then the dog.

"I think it's fine," I said. "It's not lost any flowers! It seems happy doing its own thing. I was going to water it tomorrow."

"Whatever you do, don't put any ice cubes on it!" she exclaimed.

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Oh, I don't know, I thought you might have picked it up somewhere."

Funnily enough, I had, along with the tip that a very fine mist of diluted washing-up liquid would kill any pests. "Bertie's doing fine," I said. "He is easy just like you said he would be." On the floor, Bertie rolled onto his back and stared up at me with his Paddington Bear eyes.

That evening I took the *phalaenopsis* to the sink and, as per her instructions, gently ran it under the tap. There was a good chunky paragraph as to how to water it: The most important take-away (underlined and in red) was there was to be "no soggy bottom."

The water streamed out of the holes in the plastic pot, so I figured there was no chance of that happening. Back it went on the shelf by the window with the light that was just right, light that was now slowly inching toward dusk.

A few days passed. Bertie had a playdate with the neighbour's greyhound, and something kicked off at work. I forgot to check on the moth orchid. It had done well so far; I didn't think it needed me popping in endlessly to check on it.

But holy crap, the next time I entered the room, all was amok. The flowers had dropped off and the flower stalk had curled over – much like a movie star taking a bullet – it was all I could do not to sob. I texted my sister-in-law – "Your orchid is suffering from homesickness!" – and sent a picture. The reply was immediate. "Never mind. It's probably just coming to the end of its flowering cycle... Unless of course, you overwatered it?" The next day, I started looking for its replacement. I'd find its identical twin. That would cheer her up.

The orchid breeder I called wasn't that helpful. "You know there are thousands of *phalaenopsis* hybrids, most of them unnamed. Was there anything particular about it? What sort of size was it? What did its flowers look like? Were they large or small? Did they smell?" I told him I had chucked the blooming evidence down the toilet. "They were spotty, blotchy, sort of yellow and pink," I mumbled.

"You mustn't worry if you've killed it," my sister-in-law wrote. "They can be tricky."

Too right. A pause. "It's a bit of a shame," she typed, "as I've had it for years. Let's hope it perks up given time."

I'm not sure I thought there was much chance of that. The orchid was in an appalling sulk. Its leaves were losing their glossiness and now looking more limp than lush. I placed it in the dryer room downstairs. My thinking was that if I'd overwatered it, it'd need to dry out. If only it were so simple.

The next day the orchid breeder e-mailed me: "Scroll through the *phal* images on the website and see if there is anything similar." There were hundreds of them. It was the longest and most psychologically demanding floral lineup ever. There were a couple it could have been, so I bought them both, had them boxed up and delivered. It cost me an arm and a leg, but my sister-in-law was happy when I handed them to her on her return.

She had several cups of tea and Bertie sat on her knee and licked her face whilst she told me about her holiday. It looked like she wasn't going to mention the orchid I'd killed. But at the door, putting on her coat, she asked, "Oh, my orchid! Do you still have it?" I scurried off to retrieve it from on top of the dryer.

I handed it back – never has a plant looked so naked, afraid or disembodied. No blossoms, no stalk, a few limp leaves. It was a pitiful sight. She peered at it and inhaled deeply. "As I thought. There, see the roots, all black and spongy, and here – evidence of a soggy crown. Never mind. I might still be able to save it." She placed it in the box with her new orchids, and with a kiss and wave went on her way, Bertie running behind.

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Murder, mayhem, art and other Irish TV at your fingertips

JOHN DOYLE

OPINION



TELEVISION

Here we are again: St. Patrick's Day with no hooley on the streets or in the bars. It's a shocking deprivation, so it is. We're stuck with marking the day via TV or online. That's not so bad. Let me be your guide.

Bloodlands (streams Acorn TV) is a new Irish-noir drama, made by the BBC, created by newcomer actor/writer Chris Brandon and produced by Jed Mercurio (*Line of Duty*, *Bodyguard*). Set in the wintry and jittery Northern Ireland of today, it's a fast-paced mystery-thriller steeped in paranoia about the past.

James Nesbitt stars as central character Tom Brannick, a police officer and widower who wears all those years of sectarian conflict in his lined, pained face. When he's called into the case of a missing man whose car was dumped in a river, he's pulled back into the darkness. The submerged car contains a signal that a notorious killer from the pre-Good Friday Agreement days is back. There are hints – so much hovers in the air here – that the killer, known as Goliath, might have been approved by the authorities, or might have been a sadistic monster using the Troubles as cover. But for Brannick, it's all deeply personal.

The four-part series (arriving weekly) is sometimes rich in texture and at times alarmingly contrived. The backstory is complex and during the four hours there is far too much exposition while some scenes are simply too brief. The story needs six hours of telling, not four. What it does brilliantly is give a sense, tonally and physically, of Northern Ireland as it is now. Much of the action is set in Strangford Lough and the bleak, windswept beauty of the place is spectacular. (One is reminded immediately that parts of *Game of Thrones* were filmed in the region.) That chilling, rugged panorama helps establish a strong sense of a community and place both scarred and on edge.

Former IRA and Loyalists paramilitary leaders are now successful businessmen but it doesn't take much to reignite the mayhem of petrol bombs thrown at the police and angry complaints of prejudice against Catholics. The wife of the missing man (played by Kathy Keira Clarke from *Derry Girls*) gives Brannick a ferocious rant about that. And, always, there's an inkling of the macabre infecting this place, these people. There are fine scenes of high tension and then convoluted twists that are more incongruous than hair-raising. Throughout, mind you, there's the compelling, whispering intimacy, an apprehension that the evil of the past isn't dead and buried; it's just hanging in the air.

Nesbitt, who is from the area, is excellent as Brannick, this coiled figure trying to be positive and forward-looking but highly aware that his daughter, a university student, has grown up in a place where the peace is very fragile. A ratings hit in Britain and Ireland, the series has been renewed for a second season so don't expect everything to be wrapped up in four episodes. We're talking Irish history here, you know. Everything is continuing.

On other streaming services, you'll find two very different Irish series. *Derry Girls* (two seasons on Netflix) is already considered a classic. Original, imaginative, hilarious and offering a very different perspective on the period of The Troubles – from the point of view of teenage girls – it's unmissable if you haven't watched it before now. *London Irish* (Amazon Prime Video) is best ignored. A cringe-comedy about a group of twentysomethings from Northern Ireland living in London, it aims to amuse with dollops of sick humour, and it fails. Unspeakably atrocious.

In honour of the day and in the broadest spirit, it is highly recommended that you find TG4 online, the tiny Irish-language channel (www.tg4.ie). It's so teeny it makes TVOntario or Knowledge Network look like Warner Bros. But it is formidably innovative and nimble. At times, I've been awed by its ingenuity. While most of what can be watched online or through the TG4 Player is in the Irish language, there are English subtitles available for everything.

Look for *Samhlu 2020*, an unforgettable celebration of the performing arts in Ireland that was created late last year. Structured as a traditional, mythical tale of a wandering stranger (Tommy Tiernan) looking for magic and fun on a long winter night in a small village, it acknowledges the COVID-19 year by framing the performances – dance, music, song and every darn thing – as hidden, otherworldly, ecstatic events taking place in doorways or windowsills, or in dreams. Funny, charming and loopy, it is one very special hooley with universal appeal.

TODAY'S SUDOKU SOLUTION

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TODAY'S KENKEN SOLUTION

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