

# THE LAST GLADIOLUS

## 最後的劍蘭

*The Last Gladiolus is a literary celebration of the quiet acceptance, sacrifice, and dedication to family that characterize life in a floricultural community in southern Taiwan.*

Set against the backdrop of a local Farmers Association, the eight interconnected stories of *The Last Gladiolus* are a microcosm of life on the family farms and nurseries that form the backbone of Taiwan's floriculture industry. The story titles incorporate the stocking codes of various plant varieties, supplying symbolic representations of the fates of the characters in each story.

Faced with an election campaign at the Farmers Association, the protagonist of <FY004 Hearts and Minds> must make compromises for the sake of his son's future. In <FY057 B-Grade Goods>, a son leaves university and returns to the countryside after his father falls ill, becoming a "vegetative branch" by quietly sacrificing himself to support the family nursery. A blight strikes split-leaf philodendrons in <FY009 Rust>, reflecting the growing "splits" in a fracturing family. Oppressed by a domineering mother-in-law, the female protagonist of <FH293 Twilight> is no better off than the sunflowers the family grows, constrained by wires that maintain their form.

<FR408 Damaged Rose> dissects the joys and challenges of marriage, as inseparable as the thorns and blossoms of a rose bush. <FH230 Fragrant-by-Night> releases its fragrance at night, a metaphor for the connection the protagonist feels to his close relations. Horticultural techniques such as topping and the use of grow lights represent human intervention in the natural growth process; in <FC301 Sun in Darkness> these techniques become a metaphor for the rules of society that regulate the growth of the individual. The eponymous flower appears throughout <FG118 The Last Gladiolus>, serving as the livelihood of the protagonist, and symbolizing the tireless sacrifices he makes for his family.



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Born into a floricultural family, author Chen Erh-Yuan took over the family nursery from his ailing father immediately after graduating from university. In addition to inspiring *The Last Gladiolus*, his experiences lend this entire collection a real-world setting and rich emotional palette that ring true to the realities faced by farming families. Linked by common characters and interconnected plots, these eight stories weave a vivid and intricate tapestry of rural life in southern Taiwan.

## Chen Erh-Yuan 陳二源

Born in 1991 in Pingtung County, Chen Erh-Yuan studied technology and engineering at National Taiwan Normal University. Raised in a floricultural community, he eventually returned home to take over the family nursery. His writing is rooted in the soil of southern Taiwan, and drawn from real-life experience. His accolades include the Lin Rong-San Literature Prize, the China Times Literature Prize, and the Kaohsiung Youth Literature Award.

# THE LAST GLADIOLUS

By Chen Erh-Yuan

Translated by Jim Weldon

## FY004 Hearts and Minds

It was nine at night when I got the call from Hsiang, just as I was up at the shrine on our third floor. Soon as I saw his name on the screen, I knew what he was calling to say; I hit mute and put the phone in my pocket.

“I pray to You, keep us in peace and safety, let life go well.” I spoke the words to the house Lord of the Earth, then I said them again to the spirit tablets of the ancestors of the Chen family arrayed beside Him.

I turned out the light by the shrine then went upstairs and opened the steel door that led out to the rooftop: a summer night, the touch of cool brought by the thunderstorms earlier that afternoon not enough to dissipate the season’s heat. I could feel the sweat begin to prickle on my forehead. I took my phone out and called Hsiang back.

“Kun lad, I’m hoping you’ll pitch in and help me this year.” He got straight down to it, this man who had been in the year above me at middle school.

He was talking about the Farmers’ Association elections which came round every four years; he was planning to stand for chair of the board. He wanted me to stand for committee rep.

“It would be a good thing for all of us; you know that,” he said before he hung up. I had a feeling like someone was squeezing me tight around the ribs.

The rooftop of our farmhouse had a corrugated iron roof with open sides. Looking out towards the front of the house, in the farthest distance were the lights of the Provincial Highway 88 expressway. Following it from the Kaohsiung section heading west, you hit a point where the lights went out; I knew that started by Exit 13 and stayed that way right up to just before the Wandan interchange where the lights came on again, which I knew was Exit 15. All these years driving down that road, I had it all memorized; there were no street lights along that stretch in the middle.

I stared at the section in darkness, thinking about how I’d go along that stretch every time I was coming back from a trip up north and only after you’d hit the part where the lights came back on would you get to the interchange that took you home; and at the same time, the other thing running through my mind was what Hsiang had said.

Maybe it was the only thing to do.

Heading downstairs, I noticed the light was on in the bedroom on the second floor, Yung-jen’s room; when I got up close, I could see the wife was in there, and I could hear she was dialing a

number. Then a short pause until the call got through and she started chatting away about this and that; are you eating properly? Having any problems? He's twenty-two now, I thought, why are you carrying on as if he's only just left home?

The call ended at last; the bedroom door creaked as I pushed it gently open and went in.

To the right of the door, on the wall by the desk, were all of Yung-jen's merit and exam certificates. The wife and I had hung them all up there; even though the room had stood empty since Yung-jen went off to Taipei for university, we still had a habit of coming in to look at them.

"Anything up?" I asked.

"Yung-jen just called, wanted to know if we are doing all right. Said everything's going fine with him and he expects to graduate no problem."

"Uh-huh, that's all good then," I said, and left it at that.

"You should give a thought to the boy from time to time too, eh."

"Not having anything I need to tell him is a good thing in itself. There's no need for you to be worrying too much about him; he might not be all that clever, but then neither of us were up to much when it came to schooling..." I was looking at the sparse collection of merit awards on the wall.

"Maybe the Lord of Heaven hasn't been all that good to him, never been much of a one for passing exams, that boy; but then maybe the Lord of Heaven hasn't treated him so bad, look at these, that's not something just anyone could do." She pointed at the wall, where Yung-jen's certificate for attaining Grade Five in mental arithmetic hung; that was the highest grade he'd achieved, although he hadn't taken part in any more certification tests after that one.

He'd started studying mental arithmetic in his last year of preschool, showing a natural aptitude for it; right from when he started, when he came back from school he'd tell me what he'd learned that day and I'd copy what he said by rote, starting off using his fingers flicking at the beads of an invisible abacus, carrying the number every time you got to ten, then later getting to a higher level, able to quickly add, subtract and multiply all in the head. I'd accompany him every time he went to take a grading test, and even though I never took one myself, I ended up getting the hang of it, to some degree at least.

Each time you carried a number, from the tens to the hundreds and then to the thousands, the figures would pile up ever higher and that's when your real ability was put to the test. Starting from early in the lower rankings where you only had addition and subtraction, each time you advanced higher, getting in the upper rankings, multiplying three- or four-digit numbers, stacking the results, you were getting further into the really tricky part.

"Look, actually I can do it too you know; if I went and took one of the tests, not sure what grade I'd get, but wouldn't be too bad, I'd say?" I waved my fingers about doing a bit of counting mid-air.

The wife laughed. She picked up her phone and began to recite, "Twenty-one plus one hundred and thirty-four plus one hundred and fifty-one plus seventy-eight plus one hundred and ninety, what's that come to?"

I was a little slow to react but soon started totting it up in my head. "Four hundred and seventy-four," I said.

"Five hundred and seventy-four. Hah, you really can do it a bit, though if it was your son I'm sure he'd have got it right." We both laughed.

The feeling was not entirely clear, but it seemed to me that every time we came into this room it brought us a certain peace of mind; we might have let the boy choose a path in life that suited him but I would still get a pang of guilt every now and then. I knew he didn't take the tests anymore, because he realized he'd reached the upper limit of his mental skills, and perhaps that had taken away from him the thing he was most proud of. I very much regretted letting him take part in that last competition.

"Has Li Chi-hsiang been calling you again?" my wife asked.

"Uh-huh."

"You shouldn't fret about him too much, 'the younger generations will find their own luck,' like they say."

"I know."

Thinking about what had been said in that call, and about that competition I'd taken Yung-jen to all those years ago, I didn't sleep particularly well that night.

The following day was Sunday, when all the flower markets were closed. It was our day of rest, but because plants sent to market in Taipei only got there the following day, I boxed up the bamboo palms we'd cut ready for the Monday auction and took them over to the dispatch depot at the Farmers' Association.

The Association headquarters was largely empty, apart from the cardboard boxes stacked high in the section of the depot where plants to be sent to the market in Taipei were stored.

I took my full boxes off the back of the little flatbed and placed them in the loading bay. There was a red pickup parked next to me and I recognized the owner as Lin Yueh-oh from the next village over. I gave her a polite nod.

"How have you been lately?" she asked.

"All good; hope the same is true for you, Yueh-oh?"

"Not so bad, though got all the running about to do with the elections starting up. Don't forget to vote for your neighbor Chuan!"

"Okay," I said.

After I'd finished filling out the shipping manifest in the Production and Marketing Team offices, I popped next door.

The only other place in the Association with a bit of life to it today was the little table out front of the fertilizer stores.

Production and Marketing Team staff with no work to do would sit here to shoot the breeze and knock back a few glasses of fifty-eight proof Kinmen Kaoliang.

Everyone knew that if they were drinking here, it meant riding drunk to get home, but they'd take the back lane that ran along the Wandan Drainage Ditch next to the Association compound. You wouldn't get any police down there.

"Chi-hsiang says he's going to stand for Chair of the Board this year, and isn't he wanting you to stand as well?" I'd only just started chatting when this question from Tien-ting had me sobering up sharpish.

The Chair was elected by members of the Board of Directors; the directors were chosen by the Farmers' Association representatives, and the basis on which those reps were chosen was the elections that took place every four years. The thirty villages in our township returned forty-five representatives, with both candidates and voters all being farmers.

"We'll see," I replied.

"You've got that Dairy Chuan in your village, he's Yueh-oh's man; if you're up against him you'll have your work cut out," said Tien-ting. Lin Hsiang-chuan had picked up the nickname over the years because he kept a herd of milk cows.

The population of our village wasn't especially large so we only voted for one rep. Dairy Chuan had already said he was going to stand some months back, and he'd been the rep for the village for ten years and more already.

"What do you want to go standing for election for? Best leave all that business to them lot; I mean, it's not like it makes much difference whoever gets in. It's good for them, yes, but not like it's bad for us." That was Tien-tzu speaking, who was already a bit drunk.

"Feel like I owe him, isn't it; I'm in a bit of a bind with it," I said.

"Fuck owing; and your man has got Yueh-oh behind him and Yueh-oh has the Legislative Yuan member behind her, you standing won't mean shit," Tien-ting chimed in.

"Don't go looking for bother you don't need, boss," said Tien-tzu as he filled my glass. I was the third person to be team leader of our association's Number One Production and Sales team.

"If Chi-hsiang gets in, I can go to him if our team has any problems," I said.

"Nothing's a problem if you have the connections, eh?" Tien-ting raised his brim-full little glass.

"Fuck it; down in one!"

Behind Dairy Chuan stood the East Side Faction, Lin Yueh-oh being their local representative; I knew that, of course. The thought ran through my head as I rode along the lane that follows Wandan Drainage Ditch.

A police car passed, bringing me out in a cold sweat, but they only drove by and didn't stop, and I didn't slow down either.

Behind Lin Yueh-oh there was a certain member of the Legislative Yuan who was her backer; I knew that too, of course. All these past few years, the Farmers' Association had been the private fief of the East Side Faction; Li Chi-hsiang coming forward to stand was a rare and unexpected turn, one that let the West Side Faction hope they might make a fight of it this year.

“Have we seen any sort of progress with the Association these past few years? However bad a fist we make it will only be the same as it is now; might as well try a change of leadership and see how things go.” That day when Hsiang brought it up with me again, even as he spoke, I could sense that I’d made my mind up. Who exactly was behind them, I couldn’t tell you; behind me, there was just the Number One Production and Sales Team, a wife, and a son.

You might have principles to pursue, but you still have to get on with your day-to-day life.

First thing the following day, I was down in the fields by six o’clock.

Bamboo palm is also known as the golden cane palm, and like the name suggests it resembles a long leaf growing straight up out the ground. When a cutting you have planted starts to grow, it will produce new shoots around its base. The whole plant can reach as tall as two meters, with leaves a hundred and fifty centimeters long. When it’s flourishing and swaying about in the breeze, the look of it is very jungle-like. Bamboo palms grow taller than a person, so when you stand under them, it’s like being in a tropical rain forest; of course, it is originally a tropical rainforest plant.

I squat down at this end of the field and begin slowly working my way inwards, cutting off any leaves grown long enough from the base of the stem; this is how you harvest a leaf. Shifting slowly forwards, cutting one swatch off deep green and then the next, then piling them up on the field banks. This is my work.

You can cut more leaves than you can count and the stand of bamboo palm won’t appear to have changed at all. I am like an explorer heading deep into a rainforest, though I am a flower farmer rather than a scientific observer, and here to do damage, too.

When I’d worked my way to the center of the plot, it would have been around nine o’clock, I could hear some calling out from beyond.

I walked out of the thicket to see a man in a white shirt and suit trousers stood tall by the field boundary. It was Hsu Hsien, who ran one of the departments at the township government.

“Hsien, what’s brought you up here?” I asked.

“Nothing special, just a disaster compensation case not far from here after that last typhoon; been out to take a look.”

With no concern about maybe getting his white shirt dirty, Hsien sat down at the edge of the field.

I sat down beside him. He handed me a bottle of sports drink wrapped up in newspaper. He’d wrapped it to keep it cool; he’d always been a man who showed he cared.

“Heard tell you’re going to stand for Association rep?”

“I’ve not decided yet.”

“Lin Hsiang-chuan from your village, he’s going to be standing too; you know that?”

“One of Yueh-oh’s people.”

“You’ll be hard put,” he said.

“Owe it to Hsiang, isn’t it; I’ll do my best and see how we go.”

Hsien said no more. He took a few draughts from his water bottle, then stood up and wandered back and forth taking a good look around.

"Areca's growing really well," he said.

Areca was the Japanese name for the bamboo palm and we were all in the habit of calling it that too.

"It'll do."

"Only what you might expect from the first man to plant areca under netting. Back then, way I heard it, folk would laugh at you for putting netting up over your areca; said there was no need," Hsien said.

People would just plant areca in open fields in those days; I was one of the first farmers in the whole of Taiwan to start growing it under netting. Under the netting, the areca is protected from the sun, which addresses the problem of the tips of the leaves getting burned in strong sunlight. Afterwards, the price these leaves fetched at auction answered any doubts as to whether it was worth it.

A few years later, growing areca under netting had become the standard practice.

"I just got lucky," I said.

"Heard it was you taught Yueh-oh how to grow areca."

"Oh, that was nothing; just gave her the numbers of some suppliers."

"But you do know she's going for chair of the board this year, don't you?"

"Uh-huh. Are you here to tell me best not get involved?"

Hsien said nothing, he just smiled and sighed, the final sound long and drawn out.

"Chi-hsiang's an old schoolmate; he's asked me several times already."

"I've been round to see Yueh-oh a few times as well."

Hsien told me that on his most recent visit, Yueh-oh had pulled him into her bedroom, acting all cloak and dagger; his instinct had been to refuse flat out but, in the end, he reluctantly went in with her.

"Her bed can be opened up, you know; underneath it was absolutely ram-packed with cash, great bundles of thousand-dollar bills stuffed in there."

I waited for Hsien to go on.

"She's hoping I can persuade you not to stand," he said.

"Hsien mate, I know my chances are poor, but I have to stand; I have to put myself forward, for the good of the production and sales team."

"OK, hearing you put it like that is good enough for me." Hsien stood up and made to say goodbye.

Only after I'd waved farewell and he'd walked out from the netting enclosure did I see him stop to light a cigarette. I knew he was a smoker, but he was always the type not to want to put anyone else out; that's just the sort of man he is, I thought.

I'd got to know him because of a typhoon some years back; I had a whole field of gladioli waterlogged. He was still just a caseworker back then; when he came to inspect the damage, he

told me I could apply for disaster relief funds and that he'd sort it for me, said while it wouldn't be a lot, it'd be some help at least for us.

That was him all over; afterwards, I helped several of the other members of the production and sales team apply for relief funds. Some of the cases were a bit sketchy and looked like they might not necessarily qualify, but with his help they all got approved without any hitches.

"The compensation is such a small sum, afraid it's all I can do," he said.

The man was a real breath of straight, honest fresh air; that's how he always struck me.

I recalled the last thing he said to me before he walked out of the netting, "To be honest with you, I'd much rather a man like you, who really wants to get things done, got elected."

After I'd confirmed with Hsiang that I would stand, the project soon got started in earnest.

I cut back on my work a bit and we mostly went out in the afternoons; Hsiang would come with me as I went door to door round the village canvassing for votes.

Perhaps this is what it feels like to stand for parliament, I wondered. Although I knew most of the farmers in the village, as I was shaking hands and saying how I hoped I could count on their support, I felt like I was some other person altogether; not the Chen Kun I knew, and not the Chen Kun they knew either.

"Here, try one of these, they're Japanese." I'd be cracking the seal of the cigarette packet as I said that, pulling at the strip in the cellophane, then I'd take a cigarette out and once they had it in their mouth, I'd light it for them with a flick of my lighter. I'd light one for myself too, even though I'd given up smoking twenty years ago. I'd not smoked again since Yung-jen was born.

"How have things been? Were you affected at all by that last typhoon?" That was talking to the men. Sometimes there'd be women too, and you'd just chat idly about this and that until the cigarettes had been smoked. It was all about working on feelings; nothing more important than the human touch round these parts, that was what Hsiang would say.

If we came across anyone with yellow teeth, Hsiang would be straight in there handing out a pack of the greenest betel nuts, and he chewed along with them for a bit.

The last bit was the same every time, Hsiang would pass the opened packet, be it betel nuts or cigarettes, over to our interlocutor, along with a fresh unopened pack, adding the words, "I'm hoping you will support our Kun lad."

"Would this count as an election bribe?" I asked him. Hsiang said of course not, it was what you might call a little token of appreciation.

We'd sometimes pass by Dairy Chuan doing his rounds, then for some reason the farmers would seem a little embarrassed, a touch guilty even, when you handed them the cigarettes or as they chewed their nuts, then mumbled vague agreement when we made our plea to them.

Dairy Chuan, by contrast, would always call out a warm greeting. It was as if in his eyes I was just another voter.

"Do you think I have a real chance of getting elected?" I asked Hsiang.

"We have to give it a good go; you won't know if we don't try our hardest, will you?"

It was Hsiang who provided all the cigarettes and betel nuts.

I could never really get used to any of this, even though I had to keep doing it.

What I was used to was being up bright and early, squatting down amongst the plants beside my wife, cutting the areca one leaf at a time. As the leaves piled up one after another, I felt at peace. Although the plantation never seemed to change, I knew we had in fact cut a lot of leaves.

Working all the way up one row cutting leaves usually took until after nine o'clock. If I'd been a bit quicker, I'd go back and help my wife with her row; if she'd gone faster, it would be the other way, she'd come to help me.

Once we had all the leaves cut, we'd start gathering them, I'd lay one pile after another crisscross fashion on my wife's shoulders, keeping on until they were higher than her head. She'd set off back while I started piling leaves on my own shoulders before heading back too, to put the leaves onto the back of our truck.

A single leaf was plainly such a light thing, but after you'd gathered them in piles then stacked those up again on your shoulders, they were so very heavy. I would watch my wife, buried almost entirely under leaves; it must have been very heavy for a woman not quite a meter and a half tall, surely? Not that you ever once heard a word of complaint out of her.

Sometimes I'd find myself thinking, harvesting the leaves like this, piling them up then finishing up our work; if life could just keep going on like this with no end, it felt like everything would just carry on fine. Particularly in the afternoons when I was doing the canvassing rounds with Hsiang, I always feel really out of place; where I should be is in the hot, muggy fields and ditches, but all I can do was make an effort to talk myself round. It was hard, very hard, but you had to stick at it.

Once we'd finished gathering the leaves, it was time for our midday rest. My wife would heat up leftovers from the night before, or I'd go out and get bento boxes; then when we'd eaten, we'd nap until two, then it was up and back to work.

The first job was sorting the leaves out by grade, which was done on the workbench I'd had made specially, my wife taking on the task, separating out the leaves on the worktop by five different lengths. Although all these leaves were Grade A, I'd still dispatch them according to length, each box of leaves in a length range of give-or-take twenty centimeters, so the wholesalers at the auctions could see what they were getting; that was my strategy. At least, that was how I'd kept the business going for a good ten years and more now.

Different lengths fetched different prices, that was something I'd learned.

Not only could you fit fewer of the bigger and longer leaves in one box, they also didn't necessarily command the highest price. No, it was the middling types, our second or third length-grade, that really appealed to the wholesalers.

You get leaves of every length at every cutting, mind; there'll always be some very long ones, over a meter, and short ones too, seventy or eighty centimeters. That's all normal, how they grow is all down to Nature's plan; it's up to us to learn to accept whatever comes.