

西西：海棠

Begonia

By Xi Xi

Translated by Hannah Cheung

THEY SAW the Dumb Boy's begonia—a wax-leaved begonia. Dozens of densely packed upright round leaves with clusters of lotus-red flowers spread among the jade-green and dark brown leaves; the unopened buds looked like seashells all in a row, the blooming flowers resembled peonies, and at the core of every blossom, there were also three or four new rose-like buds emerging over the tops of the overlapping, crowded petals. They were surprised: Dumb Boy, so you like flowers too! On all their desks and on the window-sills beside their desks were arranged rich displays of the plants they had grown: delicate but sturdy “living rocks”, soft but prickly white-web balls; but most of them were African violets. The mottled leaves, ruffled petals and curving edges of their leaves were recurrent topics of conversation. All the time they thought that whatever the dirty-faced Dumb Boy carried in his hand would either be a pail or a mop. But after lunch, they saw that he was actually holding a potted plant with a firm, strong stem and soft fluffy leaves. The Dumb Boy crossed the lobby and walked all the way to the storeroom and placed that plant under a wooden chair behind the door. So they went over to remove the plant from that dark corner, and put it in a place where there was lots of light. They said: Dumb Boy, plants need light, it's too dark under the chair. The Dumb Boy blinked and said: Ah-ah.

They said: Dumb Boy, this is a pretty begonia, you should take good care of it. Loose soft sandy soil is good for it, so that its roots can breathe easily. This plastic

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pot doesn't let any air in; you should get an earthenware one. The Dumb Boy just blinked and said: Ah-ah. They said: Dumb Boy, begonias love sunshine. They need plenty of sunshine to keep their leaves green and fresh, but not too much; too much sunshine will age the leaves and turn them crispy like biscuits. The Dumb Boy blinked and said: Ah-ah. They said: Dumb Boy, all plants need to be fertilized; you should do it once every ten days or every fortnight. Begonias have flowers, so choose a fertilizer suitable for flowering plants. Begonias need a lot of phosphate too. The Dumb Boy blinked and said: Ah-ah. They said: Dumb Boy, when begonias are flourishing, a lot of small shoots will start growing out from the sides of the main stem; you can make cuttings, just cut under the node, pick off the old leaves, stick them in the soil, and soon you'll have a new begonia. Before long, you will have so many begonias it'll be like a carpet. The Dumb Boy blinked and said: Ah-ah.

Suddenly they saw a tiny white butterfly resting for an instant on a fishtail fern, then it flapped its wings and flew away. The butterfly alighted on the densely blossoming gloxinia, and on the cherry shell which seemed to have long ears like a rabbit. Finally it struck the window with a tiny thud. They did not know how this little creature had flown in, as all the doors and windows were closed. They said: Maybe the white butterfly flew in from the garden across the street. They said: Maybe it came in during the power-cut this morning to visit the hyacinth. So they opened a window and let the butterfly out.

At noon, they decided to go out and have lunch together. Because of this change in plans, one of them gave the Dumb Boy the lunch box he had ordered by phone. The weather was still warm, and the Dumb Boy had a dish of rice at a stall in a side alley, then carrying the lunch box, he went inside the cool arcade. Strolling down the long corridor, munching on a hotdog, he sought out a spot where it was not crowded. He met many people coming towards him holding their noses, but the Dumb Boy kept on going. It turned out that there was a flower shop at the end of the long corridor. The Dumb Boy stood there, at the very spot from which all the people had turned away. And it was at that spot, through the glass pane, that the Dumb Boy saw that his own nose was pointing right at a very good-looking caterpillar. Like himself, the caterpillar was having its lunch silently, on its own. The caterpillar had glittering black and white patches all over its body, which was so soft, with fine hair like velvet, it looked as if it was wrapped up in a piece of fine embroidery. For a long long time, the Dumb Boy did not move. Only the flower shop owner moved about, with small steps.

The flower shop owner asked: What kind of potted plants do you like? Is it for a present or for yourself? Please come in and have a look around. The Dumb Boy blinked. The shop owner said: Do you like begonias? This is a diamond begonia, a new species, it's always in bloom, and it's especially beautiful in the autumn. Begonias are easy to take care of, just give them plenty of water and some sunshine and they will grow very well. The Dumb Boy blinked. The shop owner said: My shop's badly located, right opposite the toilet. We're going out of business, so we are holding a clearance sale now. Buy two plants and I'll give you a third one free. If you only want one, you can have it at half price. It's a real bargain. The Dumb Boy blinked. He saw the caterpillar. It was very fat and had chewed a big hole in

the middle of a thick leaf. From the reflection in the glass, the Dumb Boy saw that he was also very fat himself, and noticed the big hole in the hotdog he was holding. The shop owner said: There are only three days left. Everything has to go. We'll sell it to you at the lowest possible price. This is really quite a fine begonia. The Dumb Boy blinked.

The Dumb Boy sat down on the stone bench in the shade in the garden. He took the plant out of its vest-shaped plastic bag, tore off the old newspaper wrapped around the pot, turned the pot around slowly and saw the caterpillar again. The caterpillar had eaten its fill and was taking a walk. The caterpillar had lots of legs, and walked very slowly. Having so many legs and yet walking so slowly, it must be taking a leisurely stroll. Only when the caterpillar moved could the Dumb Boy tell its head from its tail. When the Dumb Boy finished his hotdog, he started to eat the potato chips in the bag. He held out a potato chip to the caterpillar; it panicked, withdrew to the leaf, and froze. It was a long while before it continued its walk. When the caterpillar rolled itself up on the leaf, the Dumb Boy could not tell its head from its tail. When the Dumb Boy finished the potato chips, he picked up the begonia with both hands and took it back to the office. He put the caterpillar under the chair he sat on when he took a break.

The butterfly glided out of the window, and disappeared instantly in the strong white sunlight, as if no white butterfly had ever flapped its wings by the window pane; as if the butterfly was just an illusion of their own making. But they still said: Soon this place will be a garden, won't it? The Dumb Boy picked up his pail and went to fill it in preparation for mopping the steps outside the door. They said: The butterfly is really an illusory creature. They also sat down and started working: they typed, they edited things, they looked up words in the dictionary, they took a pile of papers from one wooden drawer and put it in another wooden drawer.

When the Dumb Boy went to draw fresh water, he passed by the flower pot and stopped there quietly, searching carefully for something. The caterpillar had gone to sleep. So caterpillars like to take afternoon naps. The Dumb Boy did not take afternoon naps. They gave him a stack of letters to mail. Soon the Dumb Boy came back with a small cup. He carefully poured the water from the cup onto the soil of the begonia. He watered it carefully, so that water came up as far as the edge of the pot but did not spill onto the caterpillar. The caterpillar wasn't wearing a raincoat anyway. At half past three, they said: It's time for afternoon tea. They suddenly remembered that one of them was supposed to treat everyone to ice-cream as a punishment for something he had done, so they wrote down what they wanted and asked the Dumb Boy to go out and get it and bring it back packed in dry ice. Soon the Dumb Boy returned, bringing with him a bag of "Magic Soil". They each took their ice-cream and went off to eat it. The Dumb Boy opened the box of fertilizer and piled the little white balls around the roots of the begonia. The caterpillar should be taking its afternoon tea now, but perhaps it was busy weaving. The Dumb Boy turned the pot round several times, but he could not see the caterpillar. They said: Dumb Boy, your begonia was being attacked by insects. What a horrible caterpillar, it was so fat it would soon have gobbled up the whole plant. The Magic Soil spilled out of the Dumb Boy's hand and rolled all over

the floor. They said: There are holes in seven or eight of the leaves. You're lucky we found it early. We were very brave, and got rid of that worm for you. The Dumb Boy eagerly searched through the waste-paper basket. They said: It was such a horrible, fat caterpillar. Don't look for it now, it's all squashed. The Dumb Boy turned around and opened his mouth wide.

July 1980

