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### “Phoenix Tree 2”

“Phoenix Tree 2” was a young man’s name. Phoenix Tree 2’s original name was “Bucket 2.” Bucket 2’s elder sister’s name was “Water 1.” Bucket 2’s parents followed the meaning of “water” and named him Bucket 2 when he was born. Bucket 2’s parents belonged to the Black Yi tribe (the poorest people who lived in the area near Shangri-La, Yunnan, China). Black Yi were the people who lived in the mountains. When the mountain people named their child, they simply named the child whatever they saw the moment after he/she was born. They believed that no matter what kind of job a child could do, it was simply for living. A child with a cheap name would be satisfied with his/her life easily. Bucket 2 lived well in the mountain for twenty years, and then he became the village teacher. After receiving his education, he changed his old name and made himself a nicer name: Phoenix Tree 2. He taught peacefully for eight years in the village. Every year, he got about ten students, all of them the children from Black Yi’s families. Every year, after the 6<sup>th</sup> graders graduated, the 1<sup>st</sup> graders came in. The “school” that the village people built for him was, in fact, a very small house with only one classroom, located on a slight mountain slope. Phoenix Tree 2’s students came in and went out year by year. Phoenix Tree 2 never felt that the classroom was too empty or too packed during the eight years. But the willow tree on which Phoenix Tree 2 hung a bell was growing up rapidly during these years. When the summer came, millions of green leaves, like many soft little tongues, licked the wet summer breezes, sweet morning dew, and welcomed the endless days.

In this ordinary morning, children asked Phoenix Tree 2, “what will happen after all the days are gone?” Phoenix Tree 2 said, “Nothing will change. Children will still go to school and feed the sheep afterwards, and adults will still do farming and cook their dinners.” The children cried out, “That is not true. If things are like that, then that would mean all the days haven’t been lived off yet.” Phoenix Tree 2 replied, “Then, you guys say what it should be like after all the days are lived off?” all children cried aloud, “After all the days are lived off, each day will be like New Years day! Adults gnaw ribs, and children wear new clothes.” Phoenix Tree 2 said, “Now, I understand why your guys want to live all the days off. You want to have the New Year Festival everyday.” The children all laughed and all ran out of classroom for recess.

A second later, two boys rushed back. They said nothing but wore a shy smile on each of their faces. Following them, all the children ran back in. Some wore the same shy smile, while others hid themselves in the back of Phoenix Tree 2. “What is going on?” Phoenix Tree 2 asked, “why are all of you acting weird today? Do you really believe all the days have been lived off?” A brave boy pointed outside and said, “Some people are coming up!” Phoenix Tree 2 raised his head and saw about ten foreigners, each of them with blue eyes and blond hair. Phoenix Tree 2 was shocked. He grasped his Yi-style kerchief, put it on his head, and quickly stretched one of the boys’ shirts out trying to cover the boy’s bare stomach. But the shirt was too short. This was the first time that “Phoenix Tree 2” and his students saw real westerners in their life.

The unexpected visitors were American college students from Creighton University, Nebraska. They were on the way to Shangri-La, and came up the hill as it happened. Looking at Phoenix Tree 2 and his students with smiling faces, the college students were also excited. A pretty girl walked into the classroom and wanted to greet Phoenix Tree 2. Her eyes were so blue, like two blue morning glories that shined like sweet smiles. Phoenix Tree 2 was so nervous that he did not know what he should do. The pretty girl's smile became even brighter. Her blue eyes curved into two little crescent moons. The two little crescent moons seemed to be able to talk. The language of the little crescent moons, just like how the wind-bells talk, could only be understood by the wind. Phoenix Tree 2 felt that he had himself transformed into the wind and his chest was bursting with air. Suddenly the pretty girl spoke in Chinese. She asked Phoenix Tree 2 whether they could use the restroom in the school. Phoenix Tree 2 said, "We do not have a restroom. Children always pee in the bushes. When I pee, I also pee in the bushes." The pretty girl translated Phoenix Tree 2's sentences to her friends. They laughed and gave up the idea of using a restroom. Instead, they all squashed in the classroom. They wanted to watch how Phoenix Tree 2 taught the first through sixth graders at the same time. So, Phoenix Tree 2 gave these assignments: the 1<sup>st</sup> graders copied the Chinese characters on their notebooks; the 2<sup>nd</sup> graders read the text aloud; the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders wrote the sentences on the chalkboard; the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders took tests; the 6<sup>th</sup> graders talked with their honor guests. The little classroom was, suddenly, full of energy and the sparkling with signs of lives.

After a little while, Phoenix Tree 2 said, "Stop here. We have guests today. We should sing a song for them." At first, the kids were still shy, but soon they sang a song called "A little Bird", though with unequal tones, to the American students. The American students also sang. They sang "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" twice. The second time they asked the kids to make the noises of the pigs, cows and horses on the farm. All the kids were extremely excited. Phoenix Tree 2 was happy too.

Before the American students left, the pretty girl who could speak Chinese said something to her friends. These American students started to put money in her cap. The pretty girl collected all the money and counted. It was a little over \$100, equal to about 1000 Chinese *yuan*. She passed the money to "Phoenix Tree 2" and said, "It is the money that we want to give to these kids for their education. Please accept it."

When "Phoenix Tree 2" received the money, his hands were shaking. He said, "O, too much! This big amount of money is equal to our three year education fund that we receive from the county Education office." This made the girl so sad that she started to cry. She translated what "Phoenix Tree 2" said to other American students. Before you knew it, they were all crying. All the kids also started to cry. They cried out, "Please stop by again after you visited Shangri-La on your way back home." "Phoenix Tree 2" also said, "Please stop by again, please."

The day when the American students were supposed to pass by, "Phoenix Tree 2" and his students began to wait for them on the slope in early morning. All had put their best clothes on. The village people also wore new clothes that they only wore at the New Year Festivals and waited for their honored guests to come. As the sun was setting, American students appeared! The village people lit the camping fire. The American students held the kids' hands and danced around the fire singing happy songs. They also

drank a lot of home made wine that the village people had saved for the New Year Festival. It was a happy evening for everyone.

Half a year later, Phoenix Tree 2 wrote a letter to the pretty American girl. It took three months for the letter to arrive in the US. In the letter, Phoenix Tree 2 said, "After you left, I felt that my children changed. They had many new beautiful dreams. Except for waiting for the New Year Festival, they are waiting for your coming again, and waiting to grow up, so that they can visit you too. With the money that you gave to us, I bought pencils and notebooks for every student. I also bought shirts for them. Everyday, when the children saw these gifts, they were so happy, just as if they would be in an everlasting New Year's Festival. I thank you deeply for making my students feel that way."

A few months later, Phoenix Tree 2 received a big box of beautiful American cartoons, and also a letter from that pretty American girl. In her letter, she said, "We also thank you. You and your children taught us that the little things like pencils and notebooks could be the sources of such great happiness. We can get many pencils and notebooks, but when we own all these little things, we never understood the happy feeling that your children had. We admire your understanding of happiness."

After he read the pretty girl's letter, Phoenix Tree 2 suddenly understood why the child with a cheap name could be satisfied so easily!