

The Scholarship

by Minfong Ho

Now listen," the teacher said in a deep solemn voice. "We don't have much time left, and I have an important announcement to make. You all know that I received the results of the government examination early this morning. The best student among you will get free schooling away in the big city school."

An excited murmur swelled up from the class. The scholarship! He was talking about the scholarship at last! Dawan stole a quick glance at her brother, but he was staring at the teacher, his whole body filled with suspense.

"Getting the scholarship isn't just winning a prize," the teacher continued sternly. "It also means the student will be bearing heavy responsibilities. What kind of attitude should that student have toward continuing school?"

Kwai raised his hand hesitantly. "He should learn what is useful to his people, and come back to help the village after he has finished learning."

"But how will the student know what will be useful and what will not?" the teacher challenged. "First, that student must learn how to think, to grasp what is wrong with the society, to understand the rules which create these injustices, and . . ." He stopped suddenly and demanded, "And what?"

"And change it for fairer rules," Dawan whispered softly.

The teacher caught her soft answer. "Yes, and change it for a fairer system," he repeated in a low, solemn voice.

Then, peering down at her, he asked, "Well, Dawan, do you think you could do all that?"

"Me?" Dawan asked faintly. Behind her a classmate **snickered** loudly, and there was a general round of giggling in the small classroom.

"Well, child?" the teacher continued. His tone was stern but still kind.

Dawan looked up at him in confusion. Why was he deliberately picking on her like this? She glanced around her quickly, and felt as if she was swimming in a sea of wide, teasing eyes.

"Please, sir, never mind me," Dawan said. "Just tell us who won the scholarship."

There was a long pause. Distant sounds of a dog barking, of villagers singing in the rice fields, of the rustling of palms floated in the open windows. Streaks of sunlight darted between the desk and chair legs, forming patterns of light and shadow.

"But, child," the teacher finally said, his voice sounding far away, "you did."

After the last bell rang, Dawan was surrounded by a crowd of curious and chattering classmates. They fired so many questions at her that Dawan, shy and reserved as she was, felt panicky. Gripping the edge of her wooden desk, she looked around desperately for Kwai.

But her brother was not among the crowd. She searched the whole room with quick, frightened eyes until she saw him. He was standing alone in the doorway, clutching his pile of schoolbooks and his loneliness, silently watching her in the midst of her admirers.

She called out to him, but he only turned away and stalked out abruptly.

With a knotted feeling in her stomach, Dawan forced her way through the crowd after her brother. But in the schoolyard she was again surrounded, this time by the monks that lived in the small temple around the corner.

As she elbowed her way through them as politely as she could, someone called cheerfully after her, "Don't forget to tell your whole family the good news!"

That cheerful voice seemed to ring in her ears now, as her bare feet trailed along the path, toward home. "Kwai already knows 'the good news,' " she thought to herself uneasily, "and he hates me for it."

As she approached the house, she heard the familiar sounds of her mother singing to the baby, and of chickens clucking as they pecked the dirt

underneath the stilts of the house. Her grandmother was sitting on a tree stump, tired and dignified looking, sprinkling feed for the chickens and watching Dawan's father repair the chicken coop.

"Has Kwai come home yet, Grandmama?" Dawan asked, carefully putting her schoolbooks on a low workbench.

The old woman was about to answer when Dawan's mother walked out onto the veranda above them. She called down to her daughter, "That brother of yours! I don't know what he's up to now! He was here just a few minutes ago, but rushed away again. And he promised me he'd cut me some bamboo shoots for dinner tonight, too! Dawan, will you help me to . . ."

But Dawan was not listening anymore. She gazed toward the fields, then dropped her eyes with a soft sigh.

"Child, is there anything wrong?" her old grandmother asked sharply. She had a way of sensing things, this old woman, and when she spoke like that people usually listened and waited.

Dawan pulled at her earlobes, scratched her knee, shifted her weight from one foot to the other, refusing all the while to look at anybody.

Her father became impatient first and grunted, "Well, Dawan, what is it?"

Dawan glanced over at him and suddenly noticed that the big pile of rice sacks was gone. So the landlord's man had taken everything away already. Her heart sank. Her father would be in an even worse mood than usual, making her news that much harder to break. She tried to speak, but the fear in her heart held back her words.

There were only the sounds of the lazy afternoon breeze and of the chickens clucking thoughtfully to themselves. Dawan's eyes flickered over her mother, at her stern father, and her quiet grandmother. But they finally focused on a shiny puddle by the big brown rain barrel.

Staring at the puddle, she finally spoke, "You know that prize that the government gives out after the big examination?" Even without looking up she could sense her father grow tense. This meant so much to him, too. "Well, the best student," she glanced quickly at her father's unsmiling face and stumbled on, "or, or at least the one who happens to get the best marks, well, wins the prize and gets to go to the city and continue to . . ."

"I know all that!" Dawan's father snapped. "What about it?"

In the pause that followed, a tiny green frog hopped out of the puddle onto the dust, its bright eyes blinking at Dawan. The little frog looked so determined and eager that Dawan found strength in it and continued haltingly, "I won the prize. I can go to the city and study more now." She stole another glance at her father. "Can't I?"

The frog hopped away from the puddle, then stood very still, blinking at the vast world about him. Dawan addressed the puddle again. "Please, can I? . . ."

"And Kwai? What about Kwai? He won nothing?" Her father's voice was rough and tinged with a hard wonder. Dawan sensed the pain in her father, and did not dare to look directly into his eyes.

"There is only one prize," she whispered.

Dawan looked timidly at her father and this time their eyes met. There was a long pause, then he said angrily, "You took your own brother's chance away from him!" He flung down the hammer he had been holding, and stalked away to the rice fields.

The grandmother, mother, and daughter all watched him stride away. Dawan kept quiet, for she was afraid of angering her elders. For a while no one stirred. Then the grandmother slowly straightened up from the tree stump, and walked with slow careful steps over to Dawan.

"Child," she said, touching her granddaughter's hand lightly, "I'm proud of you."

"You should not encourage her so!" Dawan's mother called from the veranda. "You know her father won't let her go. She'll be even more disappointed if you praise her now. At least spare her that."

Dawan felt her heart sinking. How was it her mother could be so loving and full of laughter one moment, and so biting and sour the next—and sometimes, like now, even both at once?

The grandmother looked directly at her own daughter. In a voice quiet with conviction, she stated, "I do what I think is right."

They continued to glare at each other. Suddenly the baby whimpered, and the mother had to shift her attention to it. The grandmother gave a short grunt of satisfaction, and walked slowly back to the shade beneath the house.



Dawan picked up her schoolbooks. Her grandmother suddenly called her over.

"Child, never mind those books for now. We're going to Noi's house," she ordered.

"Wait, what are you trying to do?" Dawan's mother asked sharply. "Why do you want to take Dawan to Noi's house?"

The old woman answered calmly, "Noi and her husband have both lived in the city before. They know its ways better than any of us, and can tell us what it is like for a young girl to go to school there. Besides," she added innocently, "they like Dawan a lot."

"I see what you're up to!" Dawan's mother shouted to the grandmother. "You're going to try and talk Noi into arguing for Dawan in front of her father, aren't you? You think that Noi will trot on over and, just like that, convince my husband to let Dawan go off to the city school? There's no hope in that! He'll never think it right for Kwai's sister to go in his place."

"Mother, would *you* let me go?" Dawan asked. Her mother did not answer. Dawan repeated her question. "You would let me go, wouldn't you?"

Still there was only a stubborn silence.

Finally her mother sighed heavily and muttered, "It is not my place to say anything." She turned her gaze away, avoiding Dawan's eyes.

"That," replied the grandmother, "is what you happen to think! And that is why Dawan and I will have to walk three kilometers to Noi's home to ask her to speak in your place." She beckoned to Dawan and said crisply, "Come, child, let us go."

Dawan looked helplessly at the notebooks still in her hands. Then she walked over to her mother, and standing on tiptoe, stretched her arm upward to hand the books to her mother on the veranda. Her mother automatically reached down for them.

"Mother, I am going now," Dawan said, her voice small but determined. To her surprise there was no scolding or protest. So Dawan turned and joined her grandmother.

The old woman had already started off on her own—a bent figure **hobbling** step by step along the narrow dirt path toward Noi's house. Dawan **sprinted** the short distance to catch up with her grandmother.

They had taken less than twenty steps when they heard someone calling. Turning around, they saw Dawan's mother running after them in short, quick steps.

"Wait!" she called.

They paused until Dawan's mother caught up with them. Standing close together in a little triangle, the three of them looked warily at each other.

The grandmother finally broke the silence. "Three kilometers is a long way," she murmured.

"Especially under this hot sun," Dawan's mother added quickly.

"And I am getting old," said the grandmother.

Then Dawan's mother said, "I will walk the three kilometers with Dawan for you."

"It is kind of you to do that," said the grandmother, "for the way is long and hot."

Then turning away, she began to walk slowly back home.

SELECTING DETAILS FROM THE STORY.

Each of the following sentences helps you understand the story. Complete each sentence below by putting an x in the box next to the correct answer.

1. The teacher stated that the student who won the scholarship would
 - a. receive a large cash prize.
 - b. be given an excellent job.
 - c. get free schooling in the big city school.
2. Dawan's father thought that the scholarship should go to
 - a. Dawan.
 - b. Kwai.
 - c. one of Noi's children.
3. When Dawan's grandmother learned that Dawan had won the scholarship, she
 - a. was proud of Dawan and encouraged her.
 - b. felt very sorry for Dawan.
 - c. thought that Dawan would be wise to refuse it.
4. At the end of the story, Dawan's mother decided to
 - a. punish Dawan.
 - b. stay home with the baby.
 - c. walk with Dawan to Noi's house.

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NUMBER CORRECT		YOUR SCORE

HANDLING STORY ELEMENTS. Each of the following questions reviews your understanding of story elements. Put an x in the box next to the correct answer to each question.

1. "The Scholarship" is *set* in a
 - a. large city in the United States.
 - b. village in Asia.
 - c. thriving factory town.
2. What happened first in the *plot* of the story?
 - a. Dawan and her grandmother started off to Noi's house.
 - b. The teacher announced who won the scholarship.
 - c. Dawan's father flung down his hammer and stalked away.
3. "You took your own brother's chance away from him!" This line of *dialogue* was spoken by Dawan's
 - a. father.
 - b. mother.
 - c. grandmother.
4. What is the *mood* of "The Scholarship"?
 - a. humorous
 - b. mysterious
 - c. serious

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OBSERVING NEW VOCABULARY WORDS. Answer the following vocabulary questions by putting an *x* in the box next to the correct answer. The vocabulary words are printed in **boldface** in the story. If you wish, look back at the words before you answer the questions.

1. A classmate snickered loudly at Dawan, and there was giggling in the classroom. The word *snickered* means
 - a. laughed.
 - b. praised.
 - c. fought.
2. The old woman started off—a bent figure hobbling step by step along the narrow dirt path. What is the meaning of the word *hobbling*?
 - a. dashing madly
 - b. skipping briskly
 - c. walking awkwardly
3. Dawan sprinted the short distance to catch up with her grandmother. The word *sprinted* means
 - a. shouted loudly.
 - b. ran at full speed.
 - c. measured carefully.
4. "I do what I think is right," the grandmother said with conviction. As used here, the word *conviction* means a
 - a. feeling of doubt.
 - b. strong belief in something.
 - c. sense of amazement.

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COMPLETING A CLOZE PASSAGE. Complete the following paragraph by filling in each blank with one of the words listed in the box below. Each of the words appears in the story. Since there are five words and four blanks, one word in the group will not be used.

If you enjoyed "The Scholarship," we _____ you to read *Sing to the Dawn* by Minfong Ho. The story takes place in a _____ in southeast Asia. Among the characters are Dawan and her parents and _____. If this seems _____, that is not surprising. "The Scholarship" is taken from the novel, *Sing to the Dawn*.

familiar	encourage
grandmother	
surrounded	village

× 5 =
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KNOWING HOW TO READ CRITICALLY. Each of the following questions will help you to think critically about the selection. Put an x in the box next to the correct answer.

1. When Dawan heard that she had won the scholarship, she probably felt
 a. angry.
 b. surprised.
 c. upset.
2. Kwai's actions after his sister won the scholarship showed that he
 a. was proud of her.
 b. was hurt and disappointed.
 c. expected her to win it all along.
3. We may infer (figure out) that Dawan's family was
 a. poor.
 b. wealthy.
 c. extremely well educated.
4. The character who changed most during the course of the story was Kwai's
 a. mother.
 b. father.
 c. grandmother.

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Questions for Writing and Discussion

- When Dawan won the scholarship, her father was not pleased. Why? Suppose you were a friend of the family. What might you say to him to change his point of view?
- In some ways, Dawan's grandmother was more modern than her own daughter. Do you agree with that statement? Explain.
- What, do you think, is likely to happen as a result of the meeting at Noi's house? Give reasons for your answer.

Use the boxes below to total your scores for the exercises. Then write your score on pages 150 and 151.

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