



Sharon Finds the Environment

One morning Sharon woke up, and she wanted to find the environment. Miss Clark, her teacher, had told her that people need to keep the environment clean. But to keep it clean, Sharon had to find it first. Since it was Saturday, she had plenty of time to look.

When she got out of bed, she decided to look under the bed. It was dusty under there. But where was the environment?

Sharon went to the window. She looked out at the trees in the neighbors' yard. She smelled something a little smokey and funny in the air through the window screen. Maybe it was from the factory in town. It didn't smell good.

Then she went into the hall. Ugh, the smell of her dad's cigarette. But if she was going to find the environment, she'd better hurry up.

She washed her face and combed her hair. She brushed her teeth and watched the water rush from the faucet and swirl down the drain. Where did it all come from? Where did it go?

Then she went to the kitchen. Her mom was washing off strawberries for breakfast. Weren't they clean enough to eat? Mom was always telling her to wash her hands.

When she had eaten, she went outside to really look hard. She hadn't walked far when she met Herman, a talking squirrel, who asked her what she was looking for.

"I'm looking for the environment. Have you seen it out here?"

Herman looked confused. "I was going to ask you if you'd seen it inside your house. I seem to have misplaced it just now myself."

Herman winked at Sharon, but she couldn't think why.

"Well, where do you usually look?" Sharon asked.

"Oh, I don't," Herman said.

"Well then how do you ever find it? And if you don't find it, how do you keep it clean?"

"I don't look because the environment seems to be almost everywhere we are," Herman said.

Sharon looked to the right and the left. She looked up. She looked down. She looked right at her feet. "Where?" she said. "Where is it now?"

"You're working way too hard. You've got to sit down," Herman said.

She sat down. "Where is it right now?" Sharon said, whispering, as if it might sneak away.

"Begin by taking a deep breath," Herman said quietly.

She took a deep breath and said, "There, now tell me where the environment is."

"Well, the air that you just breathed is part of it."

Sharon sat up straight. "Do you mean I've been breathing the environment all my life?"

Herman flicked his bushy tail. "Oh, yes. And did you drink a glass of water before you came outside? That's more of it. And the

food you ate for breakfast."

"That my mom washed!" Sharon said.

"And the dust under the bed!"

"The environment is just about everywhere you look," Herman said, as he nosed for acorns under a nearby tree. "These acorns are part of it, and I must say, they taste pretty good. The environment is the air, the water, the soil, and food we eat. In fact, it's everything around us."

Sharon thought and thought. "I bet the sun isn't part of the environment!"

"Oh, yes it is," Herman said. "And you can get too much. You can get sunburn. Or even get sick from too much. That's why we squirrels build nice deep, shady nests. And though you don't have anything as nice as a nest, at least you have a house."

For more information about sun safety, download the Sunwise Activity Book, the Sunwise Storybook, and all the other Sunwise School publications created by the Environmental Protection Agency to promote sun-safe behavior at any age.

"So," Sharon said, standing up and slowly turning around and around. "The environment is everywhere. In the sky and in the ground. In the water and under the bed."

"And we can all help by remembering that," Herman said.

"By being careful about what we throw out and where we put trash, and what we pour down the drain."

"And by washing our hands before we eat, and by recycling newspapers and plastic bags," Sharon said.

"That would be good," Herman said. "And by taking really yucky things like old cans of cleaners and paint to a special place, so they won't make the environment dirty and make us sick, squirrels and people both."

"Gosh, that's an awfully big job to clean the whole environment," Sharon said.

"That's why it takes nearly everyone, everywhere, all the time," Herman said.

"I'd better get busy then," Sharon said. "I'll see you later."

Herman made a chattering sound to say goodbye and scrambled up a tree. Sharon walked along feeling the breeze against her skin, thinking that the environment was nearly everywhere. She didn't have to look anymore. But the environment was huge. It was the whole sky, the oceans, the mountains, and all of the towns, all around the world. So keeping it clean seemed like such a big job.

Sharon thought it might take all morning ... or all day ... or even all week.

By Tom Hawkins. Reprinted courtesy of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. www.niehs.nih.gov/kids

