

Shamus the Squirrel

By

Jennifer J. Clark, Esq.

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Shamus is a red squirrel with a white belly and a long and fluffy tail. He lives in a huge redwood tree with lots of other squirrels.

Shamus and his friends spend their days playing together and gathering lots of food to take back to their tree. They gather seeds, acorns and even mushrooms. They each have their own special home inside the redwood tree — a nice, soft nest made of twigs and leaves on which to sleep with plenty of room to store their food.

One day, two new squirrels moved into the huge redwood, and they were not very nice. The new squirrels liked to bully Shamus and his friends, which made them very sad.

The new squirrels took the food that Shamus and his friends worked so hard to find. The new squirrels even moved into their special sleeping nests, and would push and shove Shamus and his friends.

Shamus and his friends were very unhappy about this, but they did not know what to do.

Every morning, Shamus would make a special trip into the woods to find an acorn or seed to eat for breakfast. Today, one of the new big squirrels took Shamus' acorn without asking. Shamus was very hungry and very angry with him for taking his breakfast.

With no breakfast in his tummy, Shamus went to the Baker's house, which was not too far from the huge redwood tree. Little Katie Baker sometimes would share her favorite breakfast cereal with Shamus.

Katie woke up so excited! Today her class was going to have a celebration, and, she knew that a celebration meant a party! Katie jumped out of bed, brushed her teeth, washed her face and put on her favorite dress — the one with the red and white stripes and blue stars — and hurried downstairs for breakfast.

Shamus was sitting on the Baker's kitchen windowsill as Katie hopped into her seat at the table. Katie's mom put a cup of juice and her favorite cereal on the table. Shamus loved that cereal, too! Hoping that Katie would share some pieces of cereal with him today, Shamus listened to the Bakers talk at the table.

"Wow, don't you look beautiful in your favorite dress!" her mom said.

"It's my flag dress! I'm wearing it for our Constitution party in school today," Katie explained. As Katie hopped down from her chair and twirled around the kitchen in her dress, her baby brother Andrew giggled from his high chair.

Katie's mom smiled and said, "You're right! It does look like the American flag, doesn't it? And what a perfect dress to wear for Constitution Day."

Just then, Katie's older brother, Nick, came down the stairs and sat at the table. "Why do you look like the American flag?" he asked. "It isn't Halloween, you know."

Katie snapped back, "I know it is not Halloween, silly. We are having a Constitution party in school. Mrs. Brown said that the flag is a symbol for America and the Constitution."

"Oh. Well, you sure look like a flag," Nick chuckled. "What do you know about the Constitution, anyway?"

"The Constitution is a set of rules that tells us how our country should be run. Kind of like rules on the playground — take turns on the swings, listen to the teacher," Katie proudly explained. "And, the Constitution says that our rules should be made by people in three different branches of government. It's like a tree with three branches."

Just then, Katie noticed Shamus sitting outside the window and asked her mom if she could give him some cereal. Her mom agreed, so Katie slid open the window just a little and put three pieces of cereal outside for Shamus. "One, two, three," counted Katie.

Shamus was very happy! As Shamus ate his cereal, he listened to Nick and Katie talk with their mom about the tree with three branches. He and the other squirrels loved trees and branches.

"Hey mom, we learned about the branches of government in school," Nick said. "There is the executive branch that has the President who is in charge. The legislative branch has the people who write the laws. The judicial branch has the judges who decide whether someone broke a law."

"That's right," said Katie's mom. "And, we all have to follow the laws, or rules. For example, there's a law that says you can't take something that does not belong to you. There is another law that says that you have to respect other people's things."

Shamus listened very carefully. He wondered if these laws might help the squirrels to get along better.

Nick added, "And there's a law that says you can't hurt other people. If you do, then you could get in big trouble and have to go to court where there is a judge and other folks who decide whether you broke the law."

Katie was a little puzzled. "But who will know if someone broke a law?"

"Well, the police would know," her mom explained. "The police are like the leaves on the executive branch of the government tree. It's their job to make sure everyone follows the laws."

Shamus was convinced that if the squirrels had to follow laws like people, they would not be so unhappy. Laws would tell the squirrels how to behave so that everyone would get along!

"Who makes the laws?" asked Katie. Shamus wanted to know, too.

"The legislative branch of the government tree. The men and women in that branch, also called the Congress, write the laws that keep us safe," Nick explained.

Shamus thought and thought. Maybe the squirrels can have a Congress to write laws, too? Then all the squirrels would have to follow the rules.

Their mom beamed. "Absolutely right, Nick! But you know, the Constitution not only tells us about the government tree, it also gives us, as Americans, certain rights and freedoms."

"What are freedoms?" asked Katie.

"Freedom means having choices," her mom continued. "We have the freedom of speech. That means that we can talk about what we want and share our opinions with others. You can talk to your friends about things that you think are important."

"And we can talk with anyone we want, too. We also can go to church or temple," said Nick as he tried to remember other freedoms.

Katie asked, "Is reading a freedom?"

"Well," her mom answered, "reading a newspaper sure is! It's called freedom of the press."

Mom noticed the clock on the wall. "Oh! If you two don't hurry, you'll be late for school and your Constitution Day celebration!"

Shamus grabbed his last piece of cereal and jumped down from the windowsill. He scurried back to his huge redwood tree and climbed up to the tallest branch. He called a meeting of all the squirrels in the biggest hole in the tree to tell them about what he learned at the Baker's house.

After Shamus explained the Constitution and the branches of government that helped people, most of the squirrels were very excited and wanted to have laws to make sure that everyone was treated with respect. No more taking acorns that do not belong to you! And, no more hurting other squirrels when you get mad!

The two new squirrels were not as happy with Shamus' plan. They did not want to obey the laws. "If you aren't going to obey the laws, then you will have to find a new tree," Shamus told them. "Every squirrel in this huge redwood tree has to obey the laws."

That was the thing about laws — every squirrel was going to have to obey the laws for the laws to work and protect all the squirrels.

The new squirrels thought about leaving the huge redwood tree instead of obeying the new laws. But, they decided that obeying the laws was far better than living alone, so they agreed that they would obey the laws, too.

At the meeting, all the squirrels worked together to help make the new laws. After a short time, the laws were made, and every squirrel agreed to follow the laws.

With the new laws in place, the squirrels were very happy. Although it took some getting used to, every squirrel knew the laws and followed them. There were no squirrels taking food that didn't belong to them. No squirrels were barging in to take another squirrel's special sleeping place. Best of all, there were not any squirrels pushing or shoving each other when they got angry. The laws were working!

The squirrels were so glad that Shamus went to the Baker's for his favorite cereal that day. Now, life in the huge redwood tree was peaceful for all the squirrels who lived there.

Discussion Questions

- 1) What are laws? What are some laws/rules that you have to follow every day at home? At school?
- 2) What did the new squirrels do that made Shamus and his friends sad and unhappy? (bullying)
- 3) What did Shamus learn about while sitting on the Baker's windowsill? (The Constitution)
- 4) What is the Constitution? (It's a document that explains how our government works)
- 5) In the story, Katie and Nick explained that the Constitution is like a tree with three branches because there are three parts to our government. What does each of the three parts do? (The president/executive; the lawmakers/legislature/congress; and the judges who decide if someone has broken the law.)
- 6) Katie and Nick's mom said that the Constitution also gives us freedoms and rights. What are rights? (choices/things we are allowed to do)
- 7) What freedoms did Katie and Nick's mom told them about? (Speech). What does freedom of speech mean? When do you have freedom of speech? (example — right to go to church of your choice, draw pictures you want to draw without getting in trouble by the government).
- 8) When do you not have freedom of speech? (maybe rules at home or school)
- 9) Why did Shamus think that writing their own constitution might help the squirrels get along better?
- 10) Which branch on the tree would write the constitution for the squirrels? (the Congress)
- 11) If one of the squirrels was accused of breaking one of the laws in the squirrel's constitution, which branch on the tree would decide if a law had been broken? (The judges)
- 12) Do you think that a constitution was a good idea to solve the squirrels' problems?