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“There,” I said to myself as I looked at the sign I had just made. *“That’ll work perfect.”*

Here’s what the sign said:

**JIM’S NIGHTCRAWLERS
BIGGEST IN TOWN
1 DOZ. = \$1.00**

As you’ve probably guessed, that’s me: Jim Newkirk. I live near the village of Denton, which is a small town just outside Lincoln, Nebraska. Lincoln is the state capitol, and it’s also where I was born. I don’t know where *you* are, but where I live, we’re surrounded by fields and farms. There’s only one

other house nearby, and it's across the street. That's where my best friend, Brittany Olson lives.

And you're probably thinking that I make a little extra money selling nightcrawlers.

Not true.

I make a *lot* of extra money selling nightcrawlers. I hunt for them at night, and I sell them to fishermen. This is my third summer selling nightcrawlers. Last year, I made over two hundred dollars! Not bad for a ten-year-old kid in Nebraska. One day, I'd like to open a shop in our garage and sell more than just nightcrawlers. I'd like to sell different fishing lures, and maybe even fishing poles, too.

But right now, nightcrawlers are a big business. The reason? I always seem to find the biggest nightcrawlers, and I have a lot of customers that come back just for that reason. In fact, one of my customers caught the biggest catfish of his life with one of my nightcrawlers!

I picked up the sign, carried it to the front yard, and stood it up in the grass. Then I stepped back.

That will work just fine, I said. And it will last a lot longer than my old one.

The last sign had been made out of cardboard. Which worked fine—until it rained. Then it got ruined, and I had to make another one. I found a big

piece of wood in the field behind our house, painted it orange, and used black paint for the letters.

Hunting nightcrawlers is actually kind of fun. It's not always easy, either. It's best to hunt after a heavy rainstorm, because the ground gets soaked and the nightcrawlers come to the surface to breathe. You have to walk through the grass quietly and look for them. And you have to be careful not to shine your light right on them, because they'll get scared and go back into their holes. Plus, once you grab them, you have to be careful not to pull too hard.

All in all, I think I'm pretty good at hunting nightcrawlers.

But things were about to change.

This summer, I was going to discover that while I was hunting for nightcrawlers, nightcrawlers were hunting for me!



It rained all day Friday. Actually, it started drizzling Thursday night, and the rain soaked everything. By Friday evening there were puddles everywhere, and I knew that it was going to be a great night for hunting crawlers. There would be more than I could catch myself, so I put on my raincoat and walked across the street to the Olson's house. Brittany Olson is my age, and she sometimes helps me catch nightcrawlers. I don't know many girls who like to catch crawlers, but I pay Brittany four cents for every one she catches. And I still make a profit when I sell them to fishermen.

I knocked on the door, and Mrs. Olson let me inside. Brittany came out of her bedroom. She was smiling. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

“I knew you’d be over,” she said with a smirk. “It’s been raining all day.”

I smiled. “Want to make some money?” I asked.

“You bet!” she said. “What time?”

“Meet me in our garage just before dark. And get ready to catch a lot of crawlers!”

Our parents are pretty cool about us staying out after dark when they know we’re catching nightcrawlers. After all, it *is* the best time to catch them, so they allow us to stay out really late sometimes . . . as long as we don’t go far.

“All right,” Brittany said. “See you tonight!”

I turned and left. I was really lucky to have someone like Brittany to help me catch crawlers. She’s gotten really good at it, too. She knows how to walk softly, and to be careful with her flashlight so she doesn’t scare them. A lot of girls at school can’t stand touching nightcrawlers, but Brittany doesn’t care.

Besides, she’s making money. Together, we catch twice as many nightcrawlers as I do alone.

Back in the garage, I checked on my inventory of crawlers. I have a special styrofoam box where I keep the crawlers. I make a special bedding for them that keeps them alive for a long time. Actually, the bedding is just old newspapers that I run through my dad’s paper shredder. I get it damp and then clump it

up. It's not the best bedding, but it's free. I put a little dirt in as well, and I make sure that the inside of the container stays moist.

My nightcrawlers were doing good. I guessed that I probably had a few dozen, but I would need more really soon. Saturdays and Sundays are my busiest days, because those are the days that lots of people go fishing. Sometimes I have a line of fishermen at my garage waiting to buy my crawlers.

Just before dark, Brittany met me in the garage. It had stopped raining, and the evening air was warm and damp.

"Hey," she said, as she walked up to the garage. She was carrying her flashlight, but it wasn't on.

"Ready for a night of crawler hunting?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said, turning to look at the soaked grass. "It's going to be a great night for it! I saw your new sign, too. It looks good."

"It'll last longer than those cardboard ones," I said. "What I'd really like is to get one of those blinking signs, but they cost a lot of money."

I handed her a coffee can with a little bedding at the bottom. Then I took off my sneakers and put on my old, grubby work shoes. I've learned not to wear my good shoes when I hunt for nightcrawlers. They

get wrecked pretty fast when they're getting wet all the time.

I grabbed a coffee can for myself, and we headed out. We started in our front yard, then moved to the back yard.

Just as we suspected, there were lots of nightcrawlers all over the place. The rain had really saturated the ground, and a lot of worms had come up to get air. In no time at all, Brittany and I each had caught a couple dozen.

Darkness set in, and crickets chirped like a symphony. We turned on our flashlights, making our way into a big field that is behind our house. The field isn't mowed, and there are lots of burrs to watch out for.

But it's the best place for nightcrawler hunting!

Brittany was a couple hundred feet from me. All I could see was her flashlight beam.

"I can't believe how many there are!" she called out to me.

"I'm finding a bunch, too!" I hollered back, just as I spotted another big, fat crawler in the grass. I reached out slowly, grabbed it snugly, and pulled gently. It twisted and squirmed, but it came out of its hole. I dropped it into my coffee can and set out to get the next one.

“I think I’ve got—” Brittany started to say.

But she didn’t finish her sentence. Instead, she started *screaming*.

I had no idea what had happened, but I knew she was in trouble, and I needed to get there . . . and fast. The only thing I could do was run as fast as I could to help her—and hope that I wouldn’t be too late.



“Brittany!” I shouted. *“I’m coming!”*

In the distance, I could see her flashlight beam pointed at something. Beyond her, I could see the dark shapes of our houses. Lights glowed in the windows.

I kept running. My shoes slogged through the wet grass. My pant legs beneath my knees were soaked.

“Brittany!” I shouted again. *“Are you all right?!?”*

“I’m fine!” she shouted back. She sounded angry. *“But my brother’s not! He’s going to be in a lot of trouble!”*

I heard snickering and laughter. I slowed as I approached the glowing flashlight beam. She had the light trained on two figures in front of her. I recognized one of the faces right away. It was Brittany’s brother, Bradley. He was wearing his bicycle

helmet, grinning from ear to ear. In the glow of the light, I could see that he had mud caked all over his face. In one hand he was steadying his mountain bike. As I got closer, I recognized Kevin Miller, a friend of Bradley's. He, too, was wearing his helmet and had a mountain bike. Like Bradley, Kevin had mud all over himself.

"That was funny!" Bradley was saying. "We were just riding our bikes across the field, and I saw your flashlight. I thought it might be you, so we turned our headlights off and snuck up and scared you!"

"You're a goofball!" Brittany snapped.

"And you're a chicken," Bradley replied sharply.

"Hey, Bradley," Kevin said. "I've got to go. I'll see you tomorrow."

"See ya," Bradley said. Kevin hopped on his bike, turned on the headlight, and rode his mountain bike through the dark field.

"Are you all right?" I asked Brittany again.

"Yeah," she replied. "Bradley and Kevin just scared me, that's all."

"You're afraid of your own shadow," Bradley sneered.

Which really wasn't true at all. I've known Brittany for a long time, and she's not afraid of many things.

“Come on,” I said to Brittany. “We’ve got work to do.”

“Hey, I was just leaving, anyway,” Bradley said, and he hopped onto his bike, clicked on the headlight, and rode off.

Brittany shook her head. “He’s such a dork,” she said. “He’s always doing things like that.”

“Forget about it,” I said. “How many nightcrawlers have you caught?”

“I lost count at fifty.”

“Wow! We’re going to have a ton of them before the night is over! Let’s keep going!”

But our hunting was interrupted only minutes after we’d started again.

Someone was screaming, and we both knew exactly who it was.

Bradley.

And we could tell by his terrible shrieks that he wasn’t playing a prank this time.

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In the darkness, we couldn't see where Bradley was. The only thing we could do was head in the direction of his screams.

And he was yelling something, too. Saying something about a creature coming after him. But he was in such a panic that we couldn't understand him.

"That way!" I shouted as we sloshed through the wet grass. I aimed the flashlight in front of me. As I ran, I wondered what could possibly have scared Bradley so badly. He's fourteen . . . four years older than Brittany and me.

We came across his bike, laying sideways in the grass.

But there was no sign of Bradley.

"Bradley!" Brittany shouted. "Where are you?!?!"

“Over here!” Bradley called out, but his voice echoed strangely, like he was up in the air.

How could that be?

In the next moment, we found out. In the middle of the field is a big maple tree, and I shined my light toward it.

“Up here!” Bradley gasped. “But watch out! It’ll come after you, too!”

I shined my flashlight up. Sure enough, Bradley was sitting on a branch, high in the tree.

“*What* is going to come after us?” I asked nervously, shining my light around.

“That . . . that . . . *thing!*” he shrieked. “It came after me!”

“What came after you?” I asked again.

“Yeah,” Brittany said. “And why are you in that tree?”

“It was a nightcrawler!” Bradley screeched.

I almost started laughing.

“A . . . *what?*” I replied.

“It was a nightcrawler! Honest, it was! It was as big around as a car!”

Now I *did* laugh. That was just too funny!

“How about that?” I chuckled. “Your brother is afraid of worms!”

“It’s not just any worm!” Bradley protested.
“Honest! It was gigantic! And it came after me!”

Brittany and I shined our lights around the dark field. The only thing we could see was wet grass.

“I think you’re imagining things,” Brittany said.
“There isn’t any such thing as giant nightcrawlers. Now . . . come down out of that tree before you fall and break your neck.”

It took a few minutes, but Bradley finally came down. He glanced around quickly, his eyes darting everywhere.

“I’m telling you, the thing was a monster!” he said.
“It was huge!” I thought he was going to cry.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” Brittany said. “You’re acting like a baby!”

“Where’s my bike?” Bradley asked.

“It’s over there,” I said, aiming my flashlight beam so he could see his mountain bike laying in the grass. He jogged over to it and stood it up. When he had dropped it, the light had gone out. He turned on the headlight and swung his leg over the crossbar.

“I’m getting out of here,” he said. “And you guys should, too! That giant worm is still out here somewhere!”

And he took off, pedaling like crazy.

I laughed again.

“Can you believe that?!?!” I exclaimed. “A giant nightcrawler!”

“As big around as a car!” Brittany chortled, and we laughed for nearly a minute. We couldn’t believe that her older brother had been chased off by a worm.

Soon, however, we wouldn’t be laughing.

We wouldn’t be laughing at all.



The batteries in Brittany’s flashlight began to weaken, so we teamed up. I would hold my light for a while and Brittany would catch the nightcrawlers. Then we would trade, and she would be in charge of the flashlight while I snapped up the crawlers.

And man . . . did we score! It turned out to be one of the best nights of crawler hunting ever!

It was getting late, and I was getting tired. Water had soaked through my shoes, and my feet were cold and wet.

“Well, it’s been a great night,” I said. “I think we caught over ten dozen nightcrawlers!”

“That’s awesome!” Brittany said. She was carrying the flashlight. I had just caught my last nightcrawler, and we were going to go home.

“I’ll have a busy day tomorrow,” I said. “It’s supposed to be a nice day. I bet I’ll have a lot of customers.”

“I ought to set up a lemonade stand across the street,” Brittany mused. “You could sell nightcrawlers to the fishermen, and I could sell them lemonade. We’d make a fortune!”

“That’s a great idea!” I said. “You should try it.”

“I might. I think I’ll—”

Brittany stopped speaking. She had her flashlight trained on something up ahead of us.

“What’s . . . what’s *that*?” she asked quietly.

I peered into the darkness, but I didn’t see anything.

“What?” I asked. “What did you see?”

Brittany took a couple steps forward, then stopped. “There,” she said quietly. “Right there.”

Ahead of us was a low sloping hill. Not a steep hill at all. Most of the area where we live is pretty flat.

But in the side of the berm ahead of us was a cave-like hole. It was big, too . . . big enough that if I wanted to go inside, I probably could. Oh, I’d have to bend over, but I could go inside.

“That’s weird,” I said. “It looks like a cave. I’ve never seen it before.”

We watched for a minute.

“Let’s go see what it is,” Brittany said, and we walked closer. When we were only a few feet in front of it, we stopped.

It was a cave, all right. Or a hole of some sort, dug into the side of the berm. Brittany shined the light into it, and the cave appeared to angle down into the ground and keep going.

“That’s really strange,” I said. “I’ve been all over this field, and I’ve never noticed this before.”

“Me neither,” Brittany said.

“Want to go exploring?” I asked.

Brittany shook her head. “No,” she said. “It doesn’t look safe. The last thing we want to happen is for the whole thing to cave in on us.”

Brittany was right. It probably isn’t a good idea to go exploring giant holes in the earth.

“Let’s go home,” I said. “We’ll come back sometime when it’s daylight.”

We turned to go . . . but we didn’t get far.

“Wait!” I whispered. “*Did you hear that?*”

We stopped and turned.

“Yeah,” Brittany replied. “*I heard . . . something. From that hole.*”

Then we heard it again.

A noise, coming from inside the hole in the berm.

But it was already too late when we discovered
that whatever was in the hole—
Was coming out!

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