

# The dilemma

by Matt Barninger

“I’m gonna catch a crawdad or die trying,” said ten-year-old Scotty Green.

“Don’t be so dramatic,” said his mother. “Don’t go into those woods.”

She handed him an empty peanut butter jar. “I poked holes in the lid for anything you catch.”

“Thanks, Mom,” said Scotty, taking the glass jar and placing it in the pocket of a jacket that was two sizes too big. The jacket slumped to the side. He quickly straightened it.

Scotty hugged his mom. Then he sprung out the back door crossing the yard. A light rain pelted his face as he entered the alley behind their house. After a few minutes of running down the alley he came to a large farmer’s field. To his right flowed a modest creek.

The creek was an overflow for the surrounding irrigation canals, which supplied water to the region’s farmers. Most of the year the creek was dry but during the growing season it flowed like a raging river.

The field where the creek snaked through the neighborhood was nestled behind a large church. Scotty crossed through its parking lot passing a brick sign that read Lighthouse Church. Scotty’s family didn’t go there. Momma said those people spoke in tongues. Scotty didn’t know what that meant. He tried talking with only his tongue once. He felt silly.

Scotty bounded through the creek kicking up mud as he went. Splish splashing around bends. The back of his legs and jacket were covered in clumps of grass and mud. It slumped to one side and the sleeves fell down past his hands again. He pushed them back up one at a time looking up when he finished.

Behind the field Scotty and the creek continued into a large wooded area. The rain grew heavier. The creek had risen steadily since the rain had started. He noticed now. He noticed that

the field behind him was turning into a pond. The excessive rains had been too much for the irrigation canals. One by one they began to top off, overflowing into the creek before flooding the surrounding areas. He'd better hurry if he wanted to find crawdads.

A few feet into the woods the creek widened and curved. On the right the creek bank sloped up into an alcove that rested about three feet above the water. A massive holly tree perched on top of the alcove. The roots had long since grown out of the bank to drink from the creek. The left side of the creek fed into a beach of sandy loam. Scattered debris of twigs and leaves covered the tiny beach. An old faded Pepsi can was lodged between two branches, a pair of water beetles had made it a home. Hunting one of the beetles was a crawdad.

A loud growl pierced the rain. Scotty turned, coming face to face with a brown Doberman Pinscher. It stood on top of the alcove. The dog growled again. Scotty backed away from the bank. He ambled a few steps awkwardly, his spider-man shoes submerged in the creek. "Get on. Go," he screamed. He mimicked throwing the empty peanut butter jar.

The dog flinched. It growled and barked like a mad hound. It sounded guttural and unnatural like a dragon trying to gurgle water on a cold day.

Scotty threw the jar as hard as he could hitting the dog on its head. It turned and ran away.

Scotty sloshed across the creek, careful not to spook the crawdad. He wasn't interested in killing it. He didn't want to eat them like his dad and buddies. He wanted to watch them grow. He pulled the jar out of his pocket, unscrewing it as he crept closer. Catching crawdads was a serious business for a boy.

He slowly approached it on his knees. Careful not to spook it. He missed it the first three tries. The crawdad was quick and nimble underneath the water's surface. The fourth time he changed his tactics. With his free hand he herded the crawdad into a shallow pool. Scotty snapped the

open jar down into the water trapping the crustacean. He pulled the jar and its contents up as quick as he had thrust it in. Peering at it as he did. A beautiful rust colored crawdad jerked itself around the jar.

Scotty climbed out of the creek. He walked along the bank out of the woods. What had been a field now looked like a giant whack a mole set. Tufts of high grass stuck up through the flooded field. He dashed across it. He held his hand on the jar within the pocket as he dashed home.

He heard the growl. The dog rose up from behind a nearby tuft. It growled again. Disgusting strings of drool hung from its mouth. It barked as it lunged for him.

Ready, Scotty threw the jar. This time it shattered upon finding its mark. The dog yelped and scurried away.

Carefully glancing for the dog. He ambled over to the remnants of the jar. It had shattered into a dozen pieces. He dropped to his knees looking for his pet. Crying, he almost gave up.

Finally, he spotted it.

Grasping to a dandelion stem was his rust colored crawdad. Scotty carefully picked it up.

Placing it gingerly in his arm. "Sorry little guy. How about I take you home."

Scotty ran back to the little beach with the Pepsi can. He kneeled down on the sandy loam carefully avoiding the scuttlebutt from the flooding. He placed the crawdad back where he caught it. "I think you're supposed to be with your family little guy." He watched it swim away before going home.

He shut the door behind him. "I'm home, Mom."

"Well did you catch one?"

"Yes. But I let it go," he said. He hugged his mother.

