WHERE'S JOE? by Michael Edwards.

[This text is read aloud at the beginning of this video:]
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It was January 1950. At the steam laundry in a small market town, the annual boiler maintenance was underway. Two labourers were hard at work scrubbing and checking the inside of the huge steam chamber through which ran the fire-tubes. The steam chamber was normally clamped shut with a heavy pressure-proof cover rather like a manhole cover. Bob and his apprentice, Joe, had opened the cover so that Joe could climb down into the chamber with a bucket and brushes to scrub it out. Meanwhile, Bob busied himself with other tasks around the boiler house.

By midday they had almost finished, except for sealing up the steam chamber. They felt ready for their sandwiches and, as the job was more or less complete, decided to wash them down with a bottle or three of the local stout. No longer hungry but feeling sleepy, they settled down on some sacks in the coal bunker, for a short snooze.

Bob woke up with a start and realised that a couple of hours had passed by. Joe was nowhere to be seen. 'Hey, Joe!' he called out, but got no reply. 'The lazy devil,' he grumbled. 'He's cleared off home and not bothered to close up the chamber or remove the ladder! I'll give him what for when I see him!'

Still grumbling to himself, he managed to hoist the heavy cover into place using the block and tackle. He tightened up the bolts to secure it. Then he put the ladder away, gathered up his tools and stomped home, rehearsing the talking-to he would give Joe on Monday.

When Bob returned on Monday morning to collect his payment for the job, he walked in to find the boiler had already been lit. The fire was roaring and the steam pressure was rising. Geoff, the resident boiler-man, saw Bob in the doorway.

'Morning, Bob,' he said. 'I saw you maintenance blokes had finished so I thought I might as well get steamed up ready for the day's work. If you go to the office they'll pay you. But before you go, have a quick look at this…' He peered up at the sight-glasses showing the level of the water which was now fully up to pressure. 'What do you think could be making the water a bit cloudy? I was going to ask Joe but he hasn't been in yet this morning. Do you know where he is?'

'Joe?' said Bob, stepping forward to take a closer look. 'I haven't seen him since Saturday.' Then suddenly, peering at the cloudy sight-glasses, he had a terrible thought. 'My God! Joe! He must be in…'

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Just then the boiler house door swung open and the two men turned to see Joe standing sheepishly in the doorway, clutching his cap in his hands. 'Sorry I'm late, Bob,' he said. 'And sorry I knocked off early on Saturday without clearing up. I didn't feel too good when I woke up. You were still sleeping and I didn't want to wake you up. And I think I might have left a load of rubbish in the boiler, too.'

Joe paused, bracing himself, ready to be on the receiving end of Bob's rage. So he was surprised when Bob broke into a broad grin and said,

'Never mind, lad. I'm just happy to see you!'