

Coal Miner's Bargain

Joe finds himself trapped below ground in a coal mine with no way out until he makes a bargain for his freedom.

FADE IN

EXT. MINE ENTRANCE - AFTERNOON

A group of miners exit the coal mine. They remove their safety glasses, and their eyes gleam white in their coal-blackened faces. One of the miners stops and heads back to the shaft.

MINER ONE

(shouts)

Where ya goin', Joe?

JOE

I left my lunch box down in the shaft. Meg will bitch me up one end and down the other if I forget to bring it home again. With the two week shutdown startin' that box will smell like your ass if I leave it. I'll be right back. You go on without me.

MINER ONE

Better my ass than your mama's. Alright. Catch you at the cookout tomorrow?

JOE

Yup.

JOE gives a short wave and heads back into the mine.

INT. COAL MINE - MOMENTS LATER

JOE takes the elevator down into the shaft. When the elevator reaches the bottom, JOE yanks the metal grate door open and steps out into the mine. It is eerily quiet with the mine equipment shut down and the area lit only with the glow of the light on his safety helmet.

JOE

Damn. It's creepy as shit down here by myself. Damn Meg better appreciate me bringin' shit home.

JOE walks quickly to a loader. He climbs into the cab to look for his lunch box. Spotting it next to the seat, JOE grabs it and begins to climb down. As he does, the lights inside the elevator shut off. JOE runs to the elevator and punches the red button that will start the elevator's journey to the surface. Nothing happens.

JOE

Son of a-

JOE pulls his cell phone out of his pocket. No signal this far below ground. He walks to the radio mounted on the wall and keys the mic on the handset.

JOE

This is Joe Meadows. Is anybody there in the office?

There is no response but static.

JOE

Angie? Sara? Y'all still there?
It's Joe. I'm down in shaft number five and there's no power. Hello?

Joe hears nothing but static. He throws down the handset in disgust. It hits the rock wall, bounces and the plastic handset shatters.

JOE

Hell's bells. How the fuck am I gonna get outta here?

JOE punches the elevator button again and again in the vain hope that it will work. He kicks at the elevator with his steel-toed boots, denting the metal on the door.

VOICE

Aren't we the bright one kicking them to get them to work?

JOE whirls around to see who is in the shaft with him. He sees nothing but a small mouse sitting in the corner. The mouse's dark eyes gleam brightly in the light from JOE's safety helmet. It does not appear to be afraid.

JOE

(nervously)

Hello? Who's there? Hey! We're stuck down here. Come help me pull this elevator open.

VOICE

I'm really not strong enough. You go ahead though. I'll cheer you on. Tally ho and all that.

JOE

(Squinting into the darkness of the coal

mine)
 Is that you, Ralph? Is this some
 kind of joke you and Jeremiah
 dreamed up to mess with me? Where
 are you? C'mon out here. You're
 pissing me off.

The mouse suddenly darts forward and stands in front of JOE. He stands on his hind paws and looks up at him. Up close, JOE can see the mouse has on a small tweed jacket with a red handkerchief in the breast pocket. JOE shakes his head and rubs his eyes.

JOE
 Damn. They must have cut off the
 air supply, too. I'm hallucinatin'
 or somethin' already. Better find a
 way to get outta here quick.

MOUSE
 My dear sir, I can assure you that
 you are not hallucinating. My name
 is Percival--Percy to my friends.
 You, my bumbling buffoon, are in my
 home.

JOE crouches down and peers closely at the mouse. The mouse throws up a tiny paw to shield its eyes from the beam of the helmet light. JOE pushes his safety hat back on his head so that the light no longer shines directly at the mouse.

JOE
 Holy crap! Are you for real?

JOE reaches out a finger and pokes at PERCIVAL. PERCIVAL swats at his finger and then reaches over and nips JOE's finger.

JOE
 Ouch! What did you do that for?

PERCIVAL
 I was simply lowering myself to
 your bestial level. Do you poke
 your friends like that? Perhaps
 that's why they left you.
 (Gives a disdainful
 sniff)

JOE
 Sorry! I just never seen me a
 talking mouse before. Even if I'm
 (MORE)

JOE (CONT'D)

hallucinatin', I'm glad of the company. I guess I'm destined to die down here in shaft number five.

PERCIVAL

(aghast)

Die? In my home? Oh dear me, no! This will never do. My dear sir, I will get you out of here.

JOE

How are you gonna get me outta here? You're just a little mouse. That elevator don't run on hamster power, you know.

PERCIVAL

(indignant)

Hamsters are rodents. I am descended from a long line of mice who can trace their lineage to King John of Cheddar himself. Hamster indeed! Guess you don't want my help after all.

PERCIVAL turns to go.

JOE

I'm sorry. I could definitely use your help to get out of here.

PERCIVAL

It will cost you. How will you pay for your passage to the outside?

JOE walks over to where he left his lunch box by the elevator and opens it up.

JOE

I got an apple in here because Meg says I don't eat enough fiber, a packet of peanut butter crackers and a few crumbs. That do?

PERCIVAL

It's a start, but my people and I trade only in things of true value. Surely, your life is worth more than an old apple and some crackers.

JOE thinks for a moment, then he reluctantly reaches into

his pants pocket and pulls out a pocket watch.

JOE

I got this here pocket watch from my daddy. It's real gold, too. I planned on givin' it to my boy one day, but if I ain't alive, I guess it don't matter no how.

PERCIVAL snatches the gold watch from JOE's hand and runs it quickly over to a small hole in the wall of the mine. After placing the watch into the hole, he scurries back to JOE.

PERCIVAL

Stay right there. I'll have you out of here in a jiffy.

PERCIVAL runs across the mine floor, through the elevator's metal grating and disappears from view. JOE paces anxiously and mutters under his breath.

JOE

I must be crazy. Talkin' mouse. Damn ridiculous. I gotta figure out how to get outta here. Meg'll call somebody when I don't come home.

Suddenly, there is a whirring and the lights in the elevator flicker to life. JOE dashes over to the elevator and pushes the button. To his amazement, the door opens. He begins to step in, stops, and opens his lunch box. He pulls out his apple and the peanut butter crackers and places them on the ground.

JOE

Just in case...

JOE gets into the elevator and rides it to the surface.

INT. MINE SHAFT - TWO WEEKS LATER

JOE steps off the elevator with several other miners. He walks over to his loader and climbs in. As he settles in his seat, he notices something glinting amongst the control knobs. He reaches down and his hand closes around something smooth and round. He lifts up his gold pocket watch. JOE looks around. In the corner, he sees a small mouse watching him. JOE smiles and puts two fingers to his safety hat in a salute. The mouse nods his small head and salutes back.

FADE OUT