

CAVEAT EMPTOR

by Fred Coppersmith
(with a little help from Sharon Cichelli)

A company office. ROGER is seated behind the desk. Enter PAUL.

ROGER

Ah, Paul -- come in, come in. Have a seat. You wanted to see me?

PAUL

Yeah, Roger, I did. It's -- it's about this new ad campaign you wanted me to write.

ROGER

Yeah, how's that going? I know these things can be tricky sometimes, but -- well, like I told myself, if anyone can do it, Paul can do it. You're the best ad man in the business, kid.

PAUL

Well, thanks, Roger, that's nice of you, but -- well the truth is, I'm not sure I feel entirely *comfortable* with this one.

ROGER

Really? Hmm. Well, have you tried maybe asking one of the others for help? You know, Peters, Bromley -- try and maybe put together a focus group or something? Throw some ideas back and forth? Maybe jazz things up a little?

PAUL

No, no, it's not that. It's just -- well the product, Roger, it's --

ROGER

What?

PAUL

Well, Roger, it's the bubonic plague.

ROGER

Yeah.

PAUL

You don't really want us to *sell* the bubonic plague, do you?

ROGER

Is there something wrong with that?

PAUL

Well of course there's something wrong with that, Roger. It's the plague.

ROGER

Well...yeah, there is that. It *is* the plague, Paul, I'll grant you that much. I mean, obviously. But - - well, don't be so nearsighted. It's not just the bubonic plague. It's "Bubonic Plague...in a Box." Boxes are in this year. They're very popular. Last year it was tin cans, next year they're thinking crates, but this year it's still plain, good old-fashioned, dependable boxes.

PAUL

But it's still the plague. Nobody's going to buy just because you put it in a box.

ROGER

I don't know about that, Paul. I've got a stack of market research in the other room that says otherwise. I think you'd be surprised what people will buy if you put it in a neat little box for them. This idea could revolutionize the entire plague market.

PAUL

Roger, there is no plague market.

Pause

ROGER

Well...no. No, you're right, I guess there really isn't. Not yet anyway. But you see, Paul, that's why we need a real zinger of an ad campaign. Something that'll really knock peoples' socks off, make their eyes bug out and their hair stand on end.

PAUL

And kill them?

ROGER

What?

PAUL

The bubonic plague, Roger -- it's a deadly disease. You do know that, don't you? I mean, it killed millions. They called it the Black Death.

ROGER

Oh. Well I wouldn't go using *that* in the ad campaign, Paul. That's not really the sort of thing you can work into a jingle, now is it?

PAUL

Roger, I'm not going to sell the plague!

ROGER

Well not with that attitude, you're not. Frankly, Paul, I think you're making this out to be much worse than it really is.

PAUL

Much worse? How could I make it worse, Roger? For god's sake, it's the plague! It wiped out about a quarter of Europe in the fourteenth century!

ROGER

Well there you go then! There's your selling point!

PAUL

What?

ROGER

Three whole quarters survived! Those are betting odds if I ever heard them.

PAUL

This is insane.

ROGER

Look, Paul. I don't know about this whole "fourteenth century" business, okay? Maybe it's true. All I know about is now. Live in the moment, Paul. Carpe diem. We have a client, and that client wants us to sell the plague. Therefore, we need an ad campaign. You see how uncomplicated it all is?

PAUL

Roger, you still haven't mentioned the client's name yet. It -- it isn't by any chance Anderson Enterprises, is it?

ROGER

What if it is?

PAUL sighs.

PAUL

The same people who last year tried to sell spray-on syphilis? And the year before that it was what? Bottled diarrhea?

ROGER

An idea that I still say could have worked if you hadn't shot it down. You know, Paul, sometimes you can be so negative.

PAUL

Roger, they wanted to sell a Do-It-Yourself Surgical Kit that was nothing but a large steak knife and a bottle of bad gin. I can't believe we're still taking their business.

ROGER

Well the *checks* are always good.

PAUL

Every time they come up with a new product I worry that I'm going to be arrested if I try to write copy for it. Because of them, we've become the laughing stock of the entire advertising community.

ROGER

All right, all right. Look, Paul. You don't have to do the whole plague campaign if you've got cold feet about it, okay? The last thing I want is make you uncomfortable. I'll give it to someone else, all right? Good? Besides, I think I've got something even better for you.

PAUL eyes ROGER suspiciously.

PAUL

Really? What?

ROGER

Get this: portable kangaroo.

PAUL

Portable what?

ROGER

Kangaroo. "For the marsupial lover on the go." Hey, that's pretty good. We could use that...

ROGER looks around for pen and paper.

PAUL

But -- but Roger, kangaroos are already portable. They bounce. I mean, that's what they *do*.

ROGER

Oh.

(beat)

Well that ought to make production a snap then, right? So...let's say by Thursday lunch we'll have some ideas to run by the client, maybe bounce around ourselves?

PAUL

No. No, look, Roger, when I came to work for this agency I expected to work on some real ad campaigns. Not to be writing slogans for the disease of the week, or thinking up one hundred and one ways to sell a fucking kangaroo!

ROGER

I'm sensing some tension here, Paul. Maybe we should discuss this another time, after we've both had a chance to calm down a little. Maybe take a walk, stretch our legs, so to speak.

PAUL

No, I don't want to calm down, Roger. I don't want to take a walk. I want to work on something that's real, something normal for a change!

ROGER

Oh. I see. You know, the thing is, Paul, I've always found reality to be sort of...overrated. There's not a lot of use for it in advertising.

PAUL

Well I'm sorry, Roger, but then I'm afraid I have no choice but to quit. You'll have my formal letter of resignation on your desk by the end of the day.

PAUL stands, starts to exit.

ROGER

I'm sorry to hear that, Paul. It'll be a shame to lose you. I -- I guess I'll just have to give that big new flea collar account to Bromley then.

Pause. PAUL stops.

PAUL

Wait. Flea collars? Hmm.

(reconsidering)

Well, let's not be hasty, Roger. I mean, I could do flea collars, I suppose. It's a perfectly normal product, right? No plagues, no kangaroos. That would probably be all right.

ROGER

Wonderful. I knew you'd come around, Paul. Now, our market is, of course, mainly housewives, and -

-

PAUL exits.