

Doubt Is Our Product
(a radio play by Joe Graceffo)

Public relations agency conference room, circa 1964. A meeting of the RJ Reynolds team is about to commence. A report by the Surgeon General's office has just been released linking cigarette smoking and lung cancer. The meeting agenda contains just one item, boldly underlined on the blackboard, brainstorming arguments to counter that report.

Sam, early-30s and Joe, late-20s, PR execs assigned to the RJ account are in the room. Sam is the account lead and has more tenure with the agency.

Sam: I knew this was coming, but really...smoking and lung cancer?

Joe: I dunno, it's in the Surgeon General's report.

Sam: Yeah baby, but who's the Surgeon General?

Joe: The top medical authority in America.

Sam: *(dismissive)* I know who he is.

Joe: Very big deal. *(beat)* Big Boss is gonna want ideas.

Sam: Ideas? I got an idea. The report is bull crap.

(Sam lights a cigarette.)

Would I still be smoking if I knew these things gave me cancer?

(Joe and Sam both laugh. Sam begins to cough.)

Joe: Careful Sam, you're gonna cough up a lung.

Sam: Heh-heh, just stop cracking wise, okay.

Joe: Sure Sam, I gotcha.

Sam: So Joe, seriously, we gotta come up with ideas.

Joe: Yeah, I know, I know.

Sam: It's on us baby.

Joe: I'm not comfortable with that sort of Beatnik language Sam.

Sam: Oh come on, we're PR guys. You gotta be with it baby.

Joe: Please stop calling me baby.

Sam: Fine Joe, fine. You wanna get ahead, you gotta get hep.

Joe: I don't want to get ahead, I just want to do my job.

Sam: Move and shake baby, move and shake.

Joe: Sam, seriously, no more baby. Please. *(beat)* I hate these morning meetings, Big Boss is always late.

Sam: Ah well, what can you do?

(He stubs out his cigarette.)

Joe: There's another guy who's always late. You know Rob, our media buyer?

Sam: Yeah, I've heard rumors.

Joe: *(exaggerates)* Always busy during lunch.

Sam: That's still going on, huh...with the steno pool gal.

Joe: Donna.

Sam: You got it baby.

Joe: Geez Louise, will you quit that? *(beat)* I'm shocked.

Sam: And a family man besides.

Joe: He got kids?

Sam: No.

Joe: Not that that makes it right.

Sam: Catch him alone after work and he's always talking about him and Laura, can't wait to start their family.

Joe: All bull crap then, isn't it Sam?

Sam: Can't say for sure Joe. Maybe one's true and so's the other.

Joe: Two things equally true?

Sam: Doesn't sound possible, does it.

Joe: I gotta take notes again this time?

Sam: Nah, you're off the hook on this one. Big Boss is bringing in a steno.

Joe: Geez, this IS important.

Sam: Big Tobacco baby! This house rides on Reynolds.

Joe: I've heard that rumor.

Sam: RJ is 35% of our billing! We lose Big Tobacco and we might as well just close up shop.

Joe: 35%?

Sam: And it's going to go up, we're going to get a lot busier around here.

(The sound of people entering the conference room. Chairs shuffle as Sam and Joe rise to greet Big Boss, Frank an outside agency legal counsel, and Donna the stenographer.)

Big Boss: Sam, you know our outside counsel Frank Frankwater? Frank's here to make sure our messaging stays within the realm of legal plausibility.

Sam: We can't go off half-cocked, now can we Big Boss?

Big Boss: No-sir-ee Bob. *(beat, to Joe)* You're Bob?

Joe: No, I'm Joe, Joe Colombo.

Big Boss: I-talian huh? You know it's a damn good thing we're hiring I-talians, we're starting to pick up some of the food and beverage companies they got over there.

Joe: I'm not actually from there.

Big Boss: *(clearly not listening)* That's fantastic! You smoke Joe?

Joe: No.

Big Boss: What??

(He's listening now. Pulls Sam aside for a private conversation.)

Big Boss: Sam, what the hell, I don't mind telling you that I'm more than a little uncomfortable around Europeans in general, and Germans and I-talians in particular.

Sam: Big Boss, Joe is true red, white and blue.

Big Boss: He just said he's an I-talian.

Sam: His grandparents, or some crap like that.

Big Boss: He been working here long?

Sam: Three years, maybe.

Big Boss: And on RJ?

Sam: Over a year ago when we were staffing up the Camel team.

Big Boss: So, why the hell... *(beat, turns to Joe)* Why the hell don't you smoke Joe?

Joe: Uh...because I don't like it.

(Donna, the steno, speaks up.)

Donna: I don't like it either. It's stinky.

Big Boss: *(alarmed)* What? Donna, I thought you were one of those Beatniks. Free love and all that.

Donna: Well, yeah, but it doesn't mean you have to smoke.

Big Boss: Sam smokes. Frank, dammit, break the tie.

Frank: I smoke Big Boss.

Big Boss: Thank god!

Sam: All right, I think we can get started. Will everyone please take a seat.

(Sounds of shuffling as people take their seats at the table.)

Sam: Ok, RJ is on the firing line and the Surgeon General just shot a volley into his solar plexus. He's not dead, but he's been wounded.

Joe: Ow!

Sam: *(his speech is suddenly stilted)* Ow, is right Joe. Big Tobacco may be on his knees, but He's, Not, Dead, Yet!

Donna: Do you want me to write that down?

Sam: Uh, no honey, wait till we get into the actual brainstorm. This is just the preamble.

Joe: Sam, maybe just let Frank identify the problem, then we can noodle the solution.

Sam: Thanks, good thought.

Big Boss: Noodles, love 'em. I got lunch in just over an hour with some spaghetti people. *(beat)* No offense Joe.

Joe: None taken Big Boss. *(beat)* Frank?

Frank: Ok, here's what we're dealing with. The Surgeon General unequivocally linked smoking cigarettes to lung cancer. That means no more messaging suggesting smoking may have health benefits, cause the highest authority in the country just said it can kill you.

Big Boss: Damn it to hell!

Sam: I'm with ya Big Boss.

Donna: Me too! *(beat)* Can we take five?

Big Boss: What for, we just started.

Donna: Ladies Room.

Big Boss: Oh, for Pete's sake.

Joe: I'll go too.

Big Boss: You can't go to the Ladies Room.

Joe: Coffee, Big Boss. Can I get you a cup?

Big Boss: No, just get about your business and get back here.

Donna: Sure, Big Boss.

Joe: Sure thing, Big Boss.

(The sound of the conference room door opening and closing.)

Big Boss: Great jumping Jesus Sam, this is your account. You'd better grab it by the balls.

Sam: I'm so sorry Big Boss, Joe has always been crackerjack.

Big Boss: *(shouts)* Frank, light a butt for me!

(The sound of footsteps scurrying down a linoleum hallway.)

Joe: *(urgently)* In here, in here.

(The sound of a door pushed open, then closed tight.)

Joe: I'm going bonkers.

Donna: It's just for a little.

Joe: But how much longer can I keep this up?

Donna: You filed for divorce; can't be too much longer, right?

Joe: Yes, yes, I filed for divorce.

Donna: You did file, didn't you?

Joe: Yes.

Donna: So, cheer up buttercup. We'll be together soon.

(Donna kisses him quick and hard on the lips.)

Joe: Donna dearest, people are talking.

Donna: Not possible. The only time we smooch is in the supply closet.

Joe: You're right, it's not like we're obvious about it.

Donna: So, turn that frown upside-down.

Joe: Dammit Donna, you have a way of turning gray skies blue.

Donna: Ah Joe, you're swell.

Joe: Donna-Donna-Donna, I'm in love with you kiddo.

Donna: Joe...you're nothing but a kid yourself.

Joe: *(putting on a voice)* Joe and Donna, Donna and Joe, two kids, crazy in love, trapped in a supply closet somewhere on the edge of time...

Donna: Joe, stop. I don't like your movie trailer announcer guy.

Joe: Sorry babe.

Donna: Kiss me quick and make it right.

(They kiss.)

Donna: Now...who is talking about us?

Joe: Not us, about you...and Rob.

Donna: Rob? In media sales? That guy? He's married.

Joe: I'm married.

Donna: But Rob, come on?

Joe: He takes long lunches, and not with the fellas.

Donna: He likes to read. He always has a book tucked under his arm.

Joe: Yeah well, like I said, he's not with the fellas.

Donna: *(cautiously)* What'd you do Joe?

Joe: Nothing much. May have said a few things when you weren't at your desk and he was taking one of those long lunches.

Donna: Oh Joe, why?

Joe: 'Cause people were talking, that's why.

Donna: But lying, why you gotta lie?

Joe: Hon-ey, I got a career.

Donna: Ain't Rob got a career, ain't I got a career?

Joe: I don't even know Rob, I mean really know him. And you're in the steno pool.

Donna: What's that supposed to mean?!

Joe: It means that after we get married you don't have to work. Right?

Donna: I suppose.

Joe: Ah Donna, I knew you'd understand.

Donna: I suppose.

Joe: You do, you understand don't you?

Donna: I suppose.

Joe: That'a girl. Now listen, we gotta get outta here and back to the meeting before someone suspects that you've got a thing going on with me too. *(chuckles)* Then you'd really have a reputation.

Donna: *(mock girlish delight)* Oh, Joe.

Joe: I'll go first, then you. *(beat)* Oh, and honey, Big Boss wants a cup of coffee. Can you grab that on your way back?

Donna: *(matter of fact)* Of course Joe.

Joe: Swell. And one for me too.

(The sound of the supply closet door opening and closing.)

(The sound of mixed voices from outside the conference room as that door opens.)

Big Boss: Where's my coffee?!

Joe: Donna's getting it.

Big Boss: Where's your coffee?

Joe: She's getting that too.

Big Boss: I thought she was going to the Ladies.

Joe: She was. She did.

Big Boss: So, what the hell were you doing?

Joe: I was making the coffee.

Big Boss: We got secretaries to do that.

Sam: Big Boss, I think Joe was just trying to do his part. You know ever since President Johnson started talking about the Great Society, people have gotten hip to a new way of thinking.

Big Boss: *(incredulous)* Wha-a-a-t??

Joe: Sure Big Boss, can't just leave making coffee to the gals anymore.

Big Boss: Oh, for Pete's sake.

(Sound of the conference room door opening and closing as Donna enters.)

Sam: *(to Joe, sotto voce)* Big Boss is steamed baby.

Joe: *(sotto voce)* I was making coffee.

Sam: *(sotto voce)* Like hell you were.

Big Boss: Sam, get us back on track. *(to Donna)* Thank you honey, just the way I like it.

(Big Boss takes a long slurp of his coffee.)

Joe: *(to Donna)* Thank you very...

(Joe immediately begins to groan in agony as Donna "accidentally" spills coffee into his lap.)

Joe: Ah-ah-ah-oh-oh-oh-my-y-y-god-d-d!!!

Donna: *(slight mocking tone)* Oh, I am so-o-o sorry.

Big Boss: *(exasperated)* Sam?! Take charge.

Sam: Joe, go get cleaned up! Donna, you're sitting in for Joe.

Joe: What, no, *(groans, still smarting from the coffee)* she's a girl.

Sam: She'll be fine.

Joe: She doesn't smoke.

Big Boss: Neither do you. Now scram. And you're going to take notes when you get back, so be quick.

Joe: Ah geez.

(Sound of the conference door opening and closing.)

Big Boss: *(to Donna)* Welcome to the team...what's your name?

Donna: Donna Big Boss, my name is Donna.

Big Boss: Frank, you're our legal eagle. Anything wrong with a girl contributing...ideas?

Frank: No sir, not in any regulatory sense. Though Big Boss, you might want to refer to her as a woman.

Big Boss: No, I don't want to do that.

Frank: That's fine, that's fine.

Big Boss: Ok, let's get on with it gentlemen...and la-dy.

Sam: Welcome to the Great Society Big Boss!

Big Boss: Ok, ok.

(Big Boss slurps more coffee.)

Big Boss: Can we talk about goddamn smoking now?

Frank: Ok, Surgeon General's report...bad. Bad for Reynolds, bad for us.

Sam: Bad news baby.

Donna: So Sam, if the report says smoking causes lung cancer, how do we say it doesn't?

Big Boss: We can't.

Frank: We can't call the Surgeon General a liar.

Sam: That kinda puts us up a creek, doesn't it?

(The conference room door opens and closes as Joe returns.)

(Big Boss slurps his coffee.)

Big Boss: *(to Joe)* Everything ok?

Joe: Yeah-yeah, fine.

Sam: Big Boss, couldn't we advise RJ just to ignore the report?

Joe: Sam, they can't ignore it if everybody's gonna be talking about it. Am I right Frank?

Frank: Ignore it? Not a good idea.

(Big Boss lights a cigarette and takes a big drag.)

Big Boss: What about all the good things you get from smoking, couldn't we just stick to talking about that?

Donna: Sounds like you're trying to ignore the report.

(Silence, then the sound of Big Boss draining his coffee.)

Big Boss: Ok Smarty, what have you got against smoking anyway?

Joe: Big Boss, Donna was just..

Donna: Giving my opinion. That's what you want, right?

Big Boss: That's exactly what I want young lady. Thank you.

Sam: That's a Great Society way of thinking Big Boss.

Joe: *(tired of his brown nosing)* Oh Sam, come on.

Big Boss: Ok Donna, point, counter-point. *(to Joe)* You taking notes?

Joe: Yeah, Big Boss.

Big Boss: I'll throw something out and you bat it back. Don't be afraid to swing and miss honey.

Donna: Ok, Big Boss.

Big Boss: Smoking is relaxing.

Donna: Smokers don't look relaxed, they look kinda jumpy.

Big Boss: Smoking is sophisticated.

Donna: It's stinky.

Big Boss: Movie stars like it.

Donna: How do you know?

Big Boss: Because they're smoking...IN the movies.

Donna: Maybe people tell 'em to smoke.

Big Boss: That's ridiculous!

Joe: Big Boss, Donna...

Donna: *(cuts him off)* I got this. I got a friend at Leo Burnett. She says Phillip Morris pays movie stars to smoke.

Big Boss: Rumor. Pure speculation.

Donna: She's my friend. How dare you.

Big Boss: Huh?

Frank: Product placement Big Boss.

Big Boss: I know all about product placement. Phelps Johnston practically created the concept for Burnett. We lunch all the time. (*musings*) Lunch, I love lunch. I'm getting hungry dammit and we're getting nothing done.

Frank: Maybe we ought to table this brainstorm Big Boss.

Big Boss: Table this my ass. (*beat*) Donna, fire some negatives at Sam and Joe.

Frank: Whoa Big Boss, shouldn't one of the boys do that?

Big Boss: She can think on her feet. And she's got moxie!

Donna: Gee Big Boss, thanks!

Big Boss: You're like a man in a girl's figure.

Donna: Huh??

Big Boss: Frank, did I say that right?

Frank: No, Big Boss.

Joe: Big Boss, Donna is not a man!

Sam: Joe, Big Boss is cool with whatever.

Joe: Sam, I happen to know for a fact that Donna is absolutely, positively not a man!

Donna: Can we get back to the brainstorm?

Big Boss: I like this kid, man or no man!!

Donna: Thank you Big Boss.

Frank: (*sotto voce, to Big Boss*) And for the record, she's a she.

Big Boss: (*sotto voce*) I know Frank. I'm just a little on edge. Light a butt for me, will you?

(Sound of Frank lighting a cigarette, passing it to Big Boss.)

Big Boss: Thanks buddy-boy. Donna, whatcha waiting for? Give me negatives, go!

Donna: Smoking makes your car smell funny.

Sam: So, open a window man.

Donna: What if it's winter, and it's snowing?

Joe: Come off it Donna, that's once a year.

Donna: For three months! Ok, smoking makes curtains smell funny.

Joe: Curtains?

Donna: Yeah, curtains.

Sam: You smell curtains?

Donna: I do. And clothes, smoking makes clothes smell really funny.

Big Boss: My clothes smell fine and I smoke like a chimney.

Frank: Yeah Donna, where are you going with this?

Donna: Smoking makes everything stink.

Joe: *(sotto voce)* You're getting a little personal there, aren't you honey?

Donna: Big Boss, think about it, what are you really holding in your hand?

Big Boss: My cig?

Donna: You just said you smoke like a chimney. Smoke goes up a chimney.

Big Boss: That's romantic, like a cabin in the woods.

Donna: Not if you're on top of that chimney sucking it in.

Big Boss: *(sotto voce)* Frank, did she just proposition me?

Frank: No, Big Boss.

Sam: Donna, I love how you think. Clearly, so does Big Boss. I'm gonna suggest though that we cut right to the heart of the matter.

Donna: The Surgeon General's report.

Sam: That's it kiddo.

Donna: Smoking causes lung cancer.

Sam: Exactly.

Joe: What do we do about that?

Sam: Not what do we do...

Donna: What do we say?

Frank: Since we can't counter that claim...

Joe: Can we...

Frank: Take some of the certainty out of it.

Sam: *(excited)* Frank baby, Frank ba-by!

Frank: Please, my name is Frank Frankwater.

Sam: Frankwater baby!

Frank: Dammit Sam, you just derailed my train of thought.

Big Boss: May I?

Joe/Sam/Donna: *(in unison)* Please!

Big Boss: We challenge the claim.

Joe: Challenge the Surgeon General?

Big Boss: No Joe, we challenge the science behind the claim.

Joe: Challenge science?

Big Boss: Is there a freaking echo?

Frank: Joe, science is just hypothesis, followed by inquiry and conclusion.

Joe: Science is more than just guessing.

Frank: Right, not guessing, it's supposition. Followed by inquiry, the scientific method of determining whether that supposition is right, or not.

Donna: Oh my god, oh my god!

Joe: *(sotto voce)* Donna honey, are you ok?

Donna: *(ignoring Joe)* We challenge the Surgeon General's method, it's the weak point.

Frank: Exactly.

Sam: *(in unison)* Donna-freaking-baby.

Joe: *(in unison)* Give me a freaking break.

Big Boss: The girl is a freaking genius!

Joe: Big Boss, the girl, I mean Donna didn't come up with that on her own.

Donna: I never said I did.

Joe: *(sotto voce, to Donna)* I need to talk to you.

Donna: *(sotto voce)* I don't want to talk to you.

Big Boss: Joe, you wrote down those pearls of wisdom?

Joe: Yes Big Boss, pearls, I got 'em.

Big Boss: Good. Now go get us more coffee. Ideas are percolating, so we're working through lunch!

Joe: What about your lunch with the spaghetti people?

Big Boss: Screw the spaghetti people, this little filly just took us to the home stretch and I'm gonna ride her till she collapses!

Frank: *(sotto voce)* Err, Big Boss, no. *(to Joe and Donna)* Joe, take Donna, grab coffee.

(Sound of the conference room door opening and closing.)

Big Boss: *(exasperated)* Now what??

Frank: You can't "ride" Donna.

Big Boss: Why the hell not?

Frank: It sounds like you want to have sex with her.

Big Boss: Why the hell not?

Frank: Because, relations between employees runs counter to agency policies determined at the last board of directors meeting.

Big Boss: Hell with that.

Sam: Frankwater baby, you're bringing Big Boss down.

Frank: *(to Sam)* Stop it.

Sam: What?

Big Boss: God, I need a smoke.

(Sound of Big Boss lighting up.)

Joe: *(to Donna)* What, are you trying to look smart in there?

Donna: I am smart.

Joe: Well, just don't make me look like an idiot.

Donna: You are an idiot.

Joe: I am not an idiot.

Donna: Well, you act like one. *(softening)* Sometimes. Why did you have to lie about Rob and me? That was stupid...and cruel.

Joe: You're not going to say anything?

Donna: I really should you know. *(beat)* All you had to do was tell the truth.

Joe: About what?

Donna: To me. And about us. If you didn't want to divorce your wife and marry me, you should have said so. Then I could have made my mind up about us. Instead you lied to me. *(beat)* Let's go back, they're waiting.

Joe: Donna, wait.

Donna: What?

Joe: Lying. *(beat)* It gets easier. Too easy really, once you start. You'll see.

(Sounds of their footsteps approaching the conference room. The door opens and closes behind them. Both are shocked by the sight and sound of Big Boss weeping.)

Big Boss: Oh-oh-oh-oh, aa-aa-aa-ah!!

Joe: Big Boss, what's wrong??

Big Boss: *(continues to moan)* Oh-oh-oh-oh, aa-aa-aa-ah!!

Donna: Oh Big Boss, what happened, where does it hurt?

Big Boss: My brain, my brain hurts.

Donna: Quick, drink this coffee. *(sotto voce)* Frank, does this happen often?

Frank: Only when his illusions are shattered.

Donna: Oh dear, that sounds serious.

Frank: A man his age, thinking the entire steno pool is at his beck and call...

Donna: Does he need me to take a memo?

Frank: No.

Big Boss: *(bellows)* Stop the world, I want to get off!

Sam: I can dig it Big Boss.

Big Boss: Sam?

Sam: Yes?

Big Boss: Stop it. *(clears his throat, announcing)* Donna was on the verge of a breakthrough!

Joe: Way too much credit Big Boss.

Sam: Gotta concur with Joe baby, really is a team thing. Dig it?

Big Boss: I do not! Donna, you're lead dog, kick this sled into high gear. Sam, take notes.

Sam: Big Boss baby? Come on?

Big Boss: Come on nothing, I've seen the light! And Frank, drop a note to our employment department, Donna is to get a raise and vacation perks commensurate with her new account supervisor's title.

Sam/Joe: *(in unison)* What??

Donna: Oh Big Boss, I could just kiss you!

(Sound of Donna planting a big, sloppy kiss on Big Boss.)

Frank: Oh, crap.

Joe: Huh, so that's how it is. I have half a mind to quit.

Big Boss: *(dizzy from Donna's kiss)* Wow, isn't that something!

Donna: And now, let's attack the Surgeon General's science!

Big Boss: *(musing)* A big brain AND righteous lips. I feel like my head is about to explode.

Donna: *(putting the puzzle together)* The way to attack their science...is with our science.

Joe: That's ridiculous, we haven't got any science.

Donna: Then Joe, we go and get some.

Big Boss: This is incredible...

Donna: Right, Big Boss?

Big Boss: I feel light, I feel dizzy...I gotta go take a nap.

Frank: *(concerned)* Lemme help you to your office. Donna, you can bring this in, right?

Donna: Sure thing Frank.

Big Boss: One last thing. Joe, you're off RJ.

Joe: Huh??

Big Boss: You're not Big Tobacco. Plus, I see what's been going on between you and Donna. She's gotta keep a clear head and you're a distraction.

Joe: *(incredulous)* You're firing me??

Big Boss: No, you boob. I'm moving you to Food & Beverage. You can start by taking the meeting I had with the I-talians.

Joe: Uh, ok.

Big Boss: You're already late, so go! Confirm the location with my secretary.

Joe: Sure, sure thing. Thanks for your trust Big Boss!

Big Boss: Are you kidding? I had to watch out for guys like you when I was coming up.

Joe: I won't let you down. *(beat)* Sam, Donna, guess I'll see you around the water cooler.

Big Boss: Frank, why is he still here?

(Sound of the conference room door opening and closing as Joe leaves.)

Frank: Come on Big Boss, your sofa awaits.

(Sound of the conference room door opening.)

Big Boss: Any Secondal laying around?

Frank: Maybe. Though how about I fix you a nice, dry martini?

Big Boss: Make it a double.

(Sound of the conference room door closing.)

Donna: Wow, it's suddenly so quiet.

Sam: That's cool.

Donna: We still haven't figured out the science that's going to attack the Surgeon General's science.

Sam: That's for scientists to figure out. Doubt is our product.

Donna: I don't follow.

Sam: Sure, you do. It was your idea, pure genius. All we need to do is get enough scientists to create studies that call the SG's conclusions into doubt. We don't have to refute those conclusions, just muddy them up.

Donna: Confuse people.

Sam: Create doubt. You dig?

Donna: I do Sam, I dig.

Sam: *(laughs)* And it'll be so freaking profitable for the agency 'cause Big Tobacco will do the research for us. All we gotta do is float their white papers to friendly reporters as fast as they crank them out.

Donna: Wow, you're pretty sharp Sam.

Sam: You're the rising star Donna.

Donna: Man oh man, I still have a lot to learn.

Sam: I'll draft the campaign proposal and have it for your review say, by end of day tomorrow.

Donna: Shouldn't I do that?

Sam: Wow, baby...I mean Donna, that's my job now. You're the account lead.

Donna: Things are moving so fast!

Sam: It's the Great Society!

Donna: I need a drink.

Sam: I'll buy.

Donna: Want to stay on the Loop?

Sam: Nah, let's grab a cab and head over to Febo. It's the haps.

Donna: *(laughs)* You're on.

(Sound of the conference room door opening and closing.)

THE END