

# SMALL TALK

By Debra A. Cole

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**SYNOPSIS:** Three small-town locals find themselves sharing small talk about funeral potatoes, junk food, weak coffee, and the nearby fields burning. These everyday concerns soon seem minor when an abduction of a child in a nearby town breaks on the local news. *Small Talk* exposes the mundane, gossip, familiarity, and sensibilities of small-town life.

## CAST OF CHARAACTERS

*(1 female, 2 males, 0-1 either)*

MAN (m) ..... 70s; average in looks, quiet, man of few words, not very many emotions. *(48 lines)*

CLERK (m)..... 50s; haggard looking, loves to talk, clearly lonely. *(39 lines)*

WOMAN (f)..... 30s; pregnant, no makeup, hair pulled back, wearing pajama bottoms and concert t-shirt stretched to its limit, friendly, offers advice readily. *(27 lines)*

RADIO NEWS ANNOUNCER (m/f)..... Professional radio voice. Offstage or pre-recorded voice. *(1 line)*

**SETTING:** Small-town, Midwest, convenience store/gas station.

**TIME:** Modern day.

**AT START:** *Lights come up in a small-town convenience store. CLERK is mindlessly going about his business at the register while WOMAN is walking up and down the aisles. A car door closing and being locked is heard just before the doorbell rings signaling a customer entering the shop. MAN enters. CLERK nods his head at MAN as MAN walks around the store. Classic country music song plays overhead.*

**CLERK:** Hey, Marvin.

**MAN:** *(Without enthusiasm.)* Hey, Frank.

*MAN takes his time walking up and down the aisles. Looking for snacks.*

**CLERK:** Been awhile since we've seen ya.

**MAN:** Been busy.

**CLERK:** I bet. I see people in and out of here all day. Seems like the world is in a hurry. Did Goodwill come and pick up Bonnie's clothes?

**MAN:** Yep.

**CLERK:** She was a good woman.

**MAN:** *(Not making eye contact.)* Yep.

**CLERK:** I sure am gonna miss her funeral potatoes at BINGO.

**MAN:** Yep.

**CLERK:** *(Catching himself awkwardly.)* Oh, sorry, Marvin. I guess funeral potatoes isn't the right word now, but heck, your Bonnie always added cornflakes that made them extra crispy.

**MAN:** Yep.

*MAN picks up coffee, and assorted junk food. He is slow and methodical about his choices.*

**WOMAN:** *(Calling out from the aisle.)* Frank, you still have those tiny pouches of pickles?

**CLERK:** The Mini Dilly Bags?

**WOMAN:** Yep.

**CLERK:** Check by the string cheese in the cooler. Last I checked, we had regular and extra garlic.

*WOMAN heads toward the cooler. CLERK continues to eye MAN throughout the store. He is clearly waiting for him to approach the register. After some time and collection of items, MAN heads to the counter to check out.*

**CLERK:** Fields still burning this mornin' out on the main road?

**MAN:** Yep.

**WOMAN:** *(Inserting herself into the conversation from two aisles away.)* My allergies could have told you that, Frank, and the worst part is that I can't take anything these days. *(Touching stomach.)* Wrong time of year to be pregnant. I told Mark that, but here we are.

**CLERK:** *(Slowing turns all the junk food one way and another trying to find the bar codes.)* Love it when the fields turn green again. Healthy soil—my dad always said that was the key. Burn the ground, and the next crop comes up even stronger.

*Clerk begins to slowly swipe each item over the scanner, the stops to address WOMAN.*

**CLERK:** The wife's allergies were pretty bad last night too with all the smoke, Abby. You should close your windows at home and in your car.

**WOMAN:** *(Calling out.)* It's horrible right now. My ears are plugged. My sinuses are killing me, and Mark says I'm snoring like a freight train. *(Laughs.)* I hope I stay married long enough to have this baby!

**CLERK:** *(Moves head to call out to WOMAN.)* I told the wife to close the windows, but she wants the fresh air. She said being all "stuffed up" in a house makes her sick. She doesn't trust air conditioning, never had it as a kid.

**WOMAN:** *(Heading to another aisle.)* I would DIE without air these days. Mark has to sleep with three blankets. My hormones are out of control. Last night, I cranked it down to 65 degrees.

**CLERK:** *(Turns to MAN.)* Lottery ticket? Powerball is up pretty big now.

**MAN:** Nope. Got all the luck I need.

**CLERK:** *(Looking out at MAN'S car.)* I guess so. Got that old Pontiac working again, Marvin?

**MAN:** Yep. New fuel line and fresh coat of paint, and she's like new. (*Big breath.*) Bonnie never liked that car. (*Big breath.*) Bonnie didn't like a lot of things that I liked.

**CLERK:** (*Looking a car outside of window.*) Always wished I had the guts to buy a red car.

**WOMAN:** (*Calling out.*) Red? Cops love to pull red cars over for speeding. Trust me. Mark's a cop. (*Walks over to man and leans into MAN.*) Mark's my husband. (*Continues to shop.*)

**CLERK:** Let the man have his red. He deserves a little happiness. It's been a tough year for him.

**WOMAN:** (*Calling out from further away.*) Well, good luck. Hope you don't run into my husband on the way home.

**MAN:** (*Without emotion.*) Don't need luck.

**CLERK:** Wish I was you. I need lots of luck these days. Doc says I'm gonna have to lay off the red meat. Gout is back.

**WOMAN:** (*From the aisle.*) Quit eating these horrible hot dogs, Frank. These can't be good for you. You know what they put into these things, right?

**CLERK:** (*To WOMAN.*) YOU eat more of them than I do, Abby. (*Teasing.*) Does your husband know how much you snack in here? I at least have a reason. The wife sends me with a healthy lunch, you know, carrots, celery, and wheat bread with tuna, but I just get busy, and there they are, spinning on the grill and calling me.

*MAN starts to look toward his car, around the clerk, and out the window.*

**CLERK:** Marvin, did you know that gout—

**MAN:** (*Interrupting.*) Listen, Frank, I'd love to chat, but I've got a kid in the car.

**CLERK:** How are your grandkids doing? Still live in Wichita with their Mama?

**MAN:** (*Without emotion.*) Yep.

**WOMAN:** (*Judging and looking out the window.*) You left a kid in the car? Are you crazy?

**CLERK:** *(Trying to distract from WOMAN.)* No worries, Marvin. Best be on your way. *(Whispering.)* It's never smart to leave kids unattended in a car. *(Nodding toward WOMAN.)* That sort of thing will get you arrested these days with all the snowflake parenting we got around here.

**WOMAN:** *(Irritated.)* Snowflake parenting? Are you kidding me? *(Walks up to register and laughs.)* This is my third. I'll let my 6 year old drive her to kindergarten if they will let me.

**CLERK:** You know what I mean. Kids aren't hearty like they used to be. Neither are parents.

**WOMAN:** *(Leaning in.)* Speaking of parents, did you hear about that young boy from Mulvane who's gone missing? That poor mother is beside herself.

**CLERK:** I try not to listen to the news. The world is an awful place. Plus, bad things happen in Mulvane all the time. It's why the wife and I live here in Derby.

**WOMAN:** You should listen to the news so that you can help, Frank. Mulvane just 10 miles away. Someone like you, working here, may see something that could make all the difference. *(Leaning in.)* Supposedly, this young boy was just out playing in his front yard, when someone just grabbed him. POOF. He was gone. *(Shaking her head.)* It makes me just sick.

**CLERK:** We live in dark times.

**MAN:** *(Without emotion.)* It's just awful. *(Pointing to car.)* Hey, I gotta...

**WOMAN:** *(Interrupts.)* What kind of monster takes a child from his own front yard? Do you know how hard it is to let my kids outside after hearing about that kid?

**CLERK:** Kids needs to play outside, Abby.

**WOMAN:** *(Defensive.)* I know. In my day, we played out on our own until the streetlights came on. We got into a lot of trouble, but we learned how to handle ourselves. But these days, with perverts everywhere, it's just not safe.

**MAN:** Nope. Not safe at all. *(Points to car.)* Hey...

**CLERK:** Don't work yourself up, Abby. The mother probably did it.

**WOMAN:** What?

**CLERK:** You know. She probably killed the kid, or her boyfriend did, and now is trying to act like he was abducted. It happens all the time.

**WOMAN:** (*Confused.*) I didn't hear she had a boyfriend.

**CLERK:** Mark my word.

**WOMAN:** You really think so? She looks so devastated on the news.  
How could she fake that?

**CLERK:** I'd put money on it.

**MAN:** (*Without emotion.*) He's right. It's always the family.

**WOMAN:** (*Touches stomach.*) It's just awful. I suppose that little boy is in a better place now.

*After a pause, MAN clears throat.*

**CLERK:** Oh, sorry, Marvin. Your total is \$11.62.

*MAN takes a twenty dollar bill out of his wallet and pays CLERK.*

**CLERK:** Out of \$20.00...

*CLERK pushes buttons and register is frozen. Keeps pounding.*

**CLERK:** Darn new register.

**MAN:** It's no problem. Keep the change, Frank.

**CLERK:** No, Marvin. I'm going to get you your change. (*Keeps pounding.*) It just may take a minute.

**WOMAN:** Did you try unplugging it? It works with computers.

**CLERK:** I've tried everything. Darn thing just doesn't want to cooperate. I think it has something to do with my Wi-Fi.

**MAN:** (*Slightly anxious.*) Seriously, keep it.

**CLERK:** (*Keeps pounding.*) No, I'm going to get this.

**WOMAN:** (*To MAN.*) Boy or girl?

**MAN:** (*Confused.*) What?

**WOMAN:** Your grandchild. The one in the car. Boy or girl? (*Points to stomach.*) This one's a girl.

**MAN:** Oh... boy.

*CLERK looks concerned.*

**WOMAN:** Is he into cars?

**MAN:** (*Irritated.*) Uh, I don't know. I guess he is now.

**WOMAN:** My son, he's four. He's into cars. Race cars... fire trucks... police cars... ambulances... anything with wheels and a motor. How old's your boy?

**MAN:** Ten.

**WOMAN:** Fun age. Always finding ways to get into trouble. *(To CLERK.)* You better find a way to give the man his change or his grandson is going to tear that beautifully renovated car up looking for something to do because Grandpa has been in here too long. Trust me. They do that.

*Cash register pops open.*

**CLERK:** *(Nervously.)* There she goes! *(Grabs change and starts to hand change to MAN with concern in his eyes.)* Here you go, Marvin. Sorry it took so long. *(Looks concerned.)* I know you're busy.

*MAN grabs change quickly and heads out the door without saying anything. Beep of car door is heard and car sounds like it is speeding off can be heard inside. WOMAN looks offended with MAN'S quick departure.*

**CLERK:** *(Cautiously apologetic.)* He's usually much nicer. Since his wife died. He's just a little... odd with people these days.

**WOMAN:** It's okay. Grief is hard. I get it. It was hard when my Daddy died.

**CLERK:** *(Looks outside again with concern and then back to WOMAN.)* So, *(Looking at WOMAN'S purchases.)* Pickles and ice cream, huh?

**WOMAN:** I know. I am a walking cliché. Mark has gained more than I have with this pregnancy. His uniform is going to need altering soon. *(Big breath.)* Just ring me up, Frank. Easy on the judgement.

*CLERK begins punching in WOMAN'S purchases as the country song that has been playing ends. Radio News Announcer begins to speak.*



**RADIO NEW ANNOUNCER:** *(Through radio.)* This is a special news bulletin KHJK listeners. Authorities are asking listeners to be on the lookout for a red Pontiac Le Mans without tags. The driver is wanted for questioning in the abduction of 10-year-old Jeremy Bailly of Mulvane. If spotted, please do not approach the driver, but alert the police immediately with any information.

*New country song begins and CLERK and WOMAN stand in shock. WOMAN grabs her stomach and begins to rub.*

**WOMAN:** *(Cautiously.)* How well do you know, Marvin?

**CLERK:** *(Looks outside and then back at WOMAN, grabs the telephone and starts to dial while speaking.)* Well enough to know he doesn't have a grandson.

*Lights out.*

**THE END**