

Small Talk

by

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Setting

A therapist's office.

Time

Now and then.

Cast

RACHEL - A woman in her late 20s-30s.

ANTHONY - A man in his late 20s-30s.

DR. COOPER - A woman in her 30s-50s.

MATT - A delivery man in his late 20s-30s.

NOTE: There are four instances in the script in which the director and/or actors will need to fill in a blank space with, respectively, the name of a currently popular TV show, a celebrity, a popular news show, and a celebrity couple.

RACHEL and ANTHONY sit in chairs across from an empty desk. RACHEL is ill at ease as ANTHONY tries to calm her down.

ANTHONY

Will you relax? It's going to be fine!

RACHEL

I'm just not comfortable with this...discussing our personal lives with a complete stranger.

ANTHONY

Dr. Cooper is a trained professional. This is what she does. And believe me, plenty of people go to couples counseling these days.

RACHEL

But this...it just seems weird. It's going to make me seem weird because I can't--

DR. COOPER enters briskly. She shakes hands with ANTHONY and RACHEL.

DR. COOPER

Rachel? Anthony? I'm Dr. Cooper. It's very nice to meet both of you!

DR. COOPER sits down behind the desk, clasps her hands, and smiles.

DR. COOPER

So, what is it I can help you with?

(as RACHEL and ANTHONY
hesitate)

And there's no need to be shy. Trust me, I have heard just about everything a human being can possibly hear. I don't judge, I don't preach, and I don't call the authorities...

(she holds up her hands)

Kidding! I'm kidding. That's just an old therapist joke. The relationship between a therapist and her clients is inviolate, like between a priest and a penitent.

(as RACHEL and ANTHONY
hesitate)

Is it communication between you, finances, in-laws--?

ANTHONY

We're not actually married yet.

DR. COOPER

Okay. Is it sexual? Issues with intimacy of some kind?

ANTHONY

It's...Rachel has this issue when it comes to...she can't seem to...God, this is embarrassing.

RACHEL

Then can we just go? We don't have to do this!

ANTHONY

Yes, we do! Pretending it's not a problem is not going to solve anything!

DR. COOPER

Go on with what you were saying, Anthony.

ANTHONY

It's...small talk. Rachel can't make small talk.

DR. COOPER

I see.

ANTHONY

And I'm a lawyer...hoping to be made partner in the next year or so, which means a lot of social functions and whatnot. My firm is very big on spouses and families being part of our gatherings and...Rachel, did you want to say something?

RACHEL shakes her head.

DR. COOPER

It's okay. We're all friends here and nothing leaves this room.

RACHEL

It's not that I don't...I mean, I try! I do, I really do!

ANTHONY

But she just can't! And what I do in my profession...the people we'll be with socially...you have to make small talk! That's just the way it is!

DR. COOPER

Okay then. I understand where we're at. And let me assure both of you, this is not uncommon. I've dealt with many cases like this.

ANTHONY

You have?

DR. COOPER

Absolutely. Now, let's do a quick little assessment, shall we? Because just as with most conditions, there is the issue of degree. There are mild cases, severe cases, and everything in between. So, Rachel, let's you and I engage in a little small talk.

DR. COOPER gets up and helps RACHEL out of her chair.

RACHEL

Do we have to? Maybe we could try this next week?

DR. COOPER

Just relax. Everything is going to be fine. Now, let's pretend we're at a cocktail party and we've just met.

RACHEL

Oh my God.

ANTHONY

You see what I mean?

DR. COOPER

Come on now. You can do this. Deep breath...good, and here we go. Nice weather we're having.

RACHEL

Okay.

DR. COOPER

Did you happen to catch the last episode of [insanely popular show]?

RACHEL

I don't really watch TV.

DR. COOPER

Oh, me neither! Who has the time? But can you believe those photos of [insanely popular celebrity] on the Internet?

RACHEL

I don't know who that it is.

Shaken, DR. COOPER forces a smile as ANTHONY buries his face in his hands.

DR. COOPER

Boy, can you believe the price of gas these days?

RACHEL

I don't pay any attention to the price of gas.

DR. COOPER

Okay, this is more serious than I thought.

DR. COOPER guides RACHEL back to her chair, then leans against the desk, thinking.

ANTHONY

You see what I mean? It's hopeless!

RACHEL

I'm sorry! I don't know what to say when people talk about meaningless things I don't care about! Why is this such a big deal?

ANTHONY

It's a big deal because, say we're at some museum fundraiser, all right? Everybody's dressed up, people have had a few drinks, they get to talking, and...and this happens.

DR. COOPER

It will embarrass you and make you look bad with your law firm.

ANTHONY

Exactly! I'll be lucky to get a job as office janitor.

DR. COOPER

Anthony, we'll work through this. And Rachel, I don't want you to panic or feel overwhelmed. I feel very confident that you can do this. You just need to familiarize yourself with The Four Noble Paths of Small Talk: weather, TV shows, mating habits of celebrities, and the price of gas.

RACHEL

What about whether or not left-handed people will disappear thanks to genetic engineering?

DR. COOPER

No.

RACHEL

Or whether or not Jesus really existed?

DR. COOPER

Absolutely not.

RACHEL

Should our government be chosen by lottery?

DR. COOPER

No, no, no, no, no. Weather, TV shows, mating habits of celebrities, and the price of gas. Here, Anthony, let's you and I demonstrate.

ANTHONY stands up.

DR. COOPER

Ready?

ANTHONY

Give me a second.

ANTHONY does some neck rolls and shakes his arms out.

ANTHONY

Okay, let's do this.

DR. COOPER

How about this weather we're having?

ANTHONY

I know, right? Still, it's not too bad. I heard it was thirty below in North Dakota this morning.

DR. COOPER

Oh my God. I mean, seriously, why does anybody live there?

ANTHONY

Because they have to, I suppose. The good thing is, gas is insanely cheap in the Dakotas.

DR. COOPER

Is it really? I can't believe how much I'm paying these days.

DR. COOPER touches ANTHONY's arm.

ANTHONY

I know, right? And did you see that (insanely popular TV news show) piece on solar-powered cars?

DR. COOPER

I did! In fact, I heard that [insanely popular celebrity couple] ordered one and those cars don't even exist yet!

ANTHONY

Hey, with their money, why not?

DR. COOPER and ANTHONY share a good laugh, then stare at one another, genuinely charmed. DR. COOPER snaps out of it and turns to RACHEL.

DR. COOPER

There. You see? That wasn't too hard, was it?

RACHEL

You guys are so good. You make it look so easy.

DR. COOPER

Now, did you notice what I did there, because it's very important. On the third part of the conversational exchange, reach out and touch the other person's arm. It's a reassuring, physical gesture that communicates comfort and intimacy.

RACHEL

Okay, Four Noble Paths...arm touch...third part of the conversational exchange. Got it.

DR. COOPER

Now, you need to try.

(she picks up the phone on her desk and punches a button)

Danielle, are you busy at the moment?...Okay, is anybody else out there?...No, that should be fine! In fact, that's perfect! Tell him it's just for a minute or two.

DR. COOPER hangs up the phone as MATT, a delivery man enters, carrying a package.

MATT

Did you want to see me?

DR. COOPER

Yes! Come in, come in, come in! You're a delivery man, yes?

MATT

Right.

DR. COOPER

What's your name?

MATT

Matt.

DR. COOPER

Matt! What a wonderful name. So, Matt, as a delivery man, you must make small talk with people on your rounds.

MATT

Not really.

DR. COOPER

Oh, come on now. You go into an office, you hand a package to a secretary or a receptionist. What do you usually say?

MATT

Sign here.

DR. COOPER

No, I mean besides that.

MATT

That's about it. I'm a delivery guy. People don't usually want to talk to me very much.

RACHEL

Really? Why not?

MATT

I don't know. I guess I'm not somebody you can network with or whatever. Which I'm fine with. I'm in and I'm out.

ANTHONY

And I'm guessing your job probably doesn't require you to go to museum fund-raisers and award dinners.

MATT

That's a good guess.

DR. COOPER

Well, never mind. We're just doing a little exercise here in small talk. So, let's pretend you and Rachel have just met.

DR. COOPER takes RACHEL's elbow and urges her out of her chair.

MATT

But we did just meet. Why do we have to pretend?

DR. COOPER

Even better! You've just met. Now, engage one another in a little small talk.

RACHEL and MATT stand awkwardly as DR. COOPER and ANTHONY huddle together and look on. As he witnesses the following exchange, ANTHONY's agony steadily increases, with DR. COOPER doing her best to soothe him and calm him down.

MATT

Should I start?

DR. COOPER

Absolutely! You start.

MATT

I don't know what to say.

DR. COOPER

Just say the first thing that comes into your head.

Long pause as MATT thinks and false-starts a couple of times.

MATT

Do you like cheese?

RACHEL

I love cheese!

MATT

I've been reading this book about cheese.

RACHEL

What made you want to read about cheese?

MATT

I'm not too sure, really. Probably because when I think of, you know, being rich and being able to do buy anything I want, I never think about a big mansion or a Rolls Royce or anything, I usually think about some kind of food with a fancy cheese sauce. It's like, that's the ultimate in decadence or something. I mean, I know it isn't. That would probably be caviar or black truffles or something. I can't say I've ever thought the matter through real clearly, but it's not like I'm ever going to be rich, anyway. I just like cheese. Gruyère especially. That's a really nice melting cheese.

RACHEL

It really is! Have you ever--

DR. COOPER

Okay, I'm just going to stop you two right there for a moment. Matt, the question, "Do you like cheese?" is not a typical conversation opener. It seems abrupt and random and it will make people feel uncomfortable. They'll think that you're mentally ill.

MATT

Oh. I'm sorry.

DR. COOPER

So, let's try again. Rachel, why don't you start this time?

RACHEL hesitates for a moment, then...

RACHEL

Why is it called Gruyère cheese? I love that word, by the way. Gruyère. It makes me feel French just saying it.

MATT

No, it's actually Swiss! Gruyères is a small town in Switzerland. What you're probably thinking is that it's used in French onion soup.

RACHEL

You know what? I am! How it gets baked on top and gets a little brown and caramelized?

MATT

Oh, I love that! The weird thing is that the cheese holds the heat in on the soup, so the soup is almost impossible to eat when you get it.

RACHEL

I know! I always start nibbling around the edges of the cheese and I end up with no cheese and all soup!

A thought strikes RACHEL and she grabs MATT's forearm with a death grip. A beat, and the volcano that's been building inside ANTHONY explodes.

ANTHONY

STOP!!! Just...for the love of God, please...do you actually hear yourselves? Do you hear the words that--you know what? I can't do this anymore. I just...I can't. I'm sorry, Rachel. This...it's just not working out between us. We're too different. It's like we're different species or something. I'm sorry.

ANTHONY exits.

DR. COOPER

Anthony! Oh no, the poor man, he's absolutely traumatized. I'll just...I'm going to check on him. Anthony!

DR. COOPER exits at speed. RACHEL still has her hand on MATT's arm. She realizes this and slowly releases her grip.

RACHEL

I'm not mentally ill, if that's what you're thinking.

MATT

Oh. No, I wasn't thinking that...I'm not mentally ill either, in case you were wondering.

RACHEL

So, we've got that in common.

MATT

Yeah.

RACHEL

Maybe...maybe we have other things in common?

MATT

Maybe.

RACHEL reaches out and gently takes MATT's arm.

RACHEL

Gruyère?

*MATT uses his free hand to hold
RACHEL's other arm. They look into one
another's eyes.*

MATT

Gruyère.

They smile as the lights fade.

END OF PLAY.