

The Busy Signal

by Gerald Neils Pearson

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Dave Elkins is returning from the Vietnam War. His Idaho farm family are busy anticipating his arrival. He calls from Hawaii to ask if he can bring home with him a friend who lost the use of his legs and has nowhere to go. The family considers, but overwhelmed by the business and busyness of life on the farm, along with civic and church duties, they tell Dave that a farm is no place for someone who can't pull his own weight. Dave emerges from the phone booth, reaches for his crutches and tells his friend that yes, he will go home with him and share life with the friend's family who said he'd be more than welcome.

About 25 minutes.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4 m, 2 w, 1 phone voice.)

- DAVID ELKINS: Vietnam veteran returning home, about 23.
- JEANNIE ELKINS: A pert, pretty and ego-centric 16 year old girl, David's sister.
- MILDRED ELKINS: Their mother, at times confounded, amazed and sometimes not surprised by her antics, longing for David's return.
- VOICE OF PHONE OPERATOR: Could be done by another character from offstage or be taped.
- KEITH ELKINS: David's younger brother, about 18, eager and most times upset by Jeannie's machinations.
- BUD ELKINS: A stalwart, brusque man, definitely in control of his family and their ranch.
- FRIEND OF DAVID'S: A buddy from Vietnam.

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PLACE

The living room of the Elkin's Family home in Idaho and a phone booth in San Francisco.

TIME

Fall of any year in the early 1970s.

THE BUSY SIGNAL

(AT RISE: SR on DAVID, sitting in a phone booth. He dials, gets a busy signal and hangs up. LIGHTS go down and come up on the front room of the Elkins family home.)

JEANNIE: *(On phone.)* It was the crummiest date I ever had. All Frank talked about was some stupid story he read, something that James Thurber wrote about a family that kept falling out of their beds. I couldn't believe it. He honestly thought it was funny. Then to top it off, he just had to tell it to somebody between every dance. That's the truth. Every dance. Well, as soon as I got a chance I asked John Able to trade one with us. Of course I asked. Annette, don't be so dumb. You don't think I wanted to hear that story over and over again all night, do you? Well, I didn't. I didn't see him again until the last dance. By that time somebody had told him a story he liked better and he was telling that one to everyone.

(MILDRED enters.)

MILDRED: Jeannie Elkins, are you still talking on that phone?

JEANNIE: No, Mother. I'm just listening to the dial tone.

MILDRED: Don't talk to me that way. I just asked you a simple question.

JEANNIE: I was just kidding. I'll be off in a minute. Annette, did you see Roger there last night. He's gorgeous huh? I know who he was with, but he's still cute. Marilyn said he's working down at Deckers' now. Boy, if I could just figure out a way to get down there. I know it's expensive. But I don't have to buy any thing. You go there to sit around and get noticed. Of course I can get the truck - sometimes. But Dad won't let me go any further than Cracker's Place. Deckers' is another three miles. Why don't you ask for the station wagon sometime? Oh, I know. Well, don't worry about it. Dave will be home and he can take us down. Yeah. Didn't I tell ya?

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JEANNIE: (*Cont'd.*) We got a letter from Hawaii on Friday. He ought to be home by tomorrow. Sure. Sure, now don't go getting all stupid over it. I'll just tell him he has to take you out.

MILDRED: Jeannie, you'd better hang up and get ready for Church.

JEANNIE: Oh, Mother! Please!

MILDRED: You'll make us all late.

JEANNIE: Oh, all right. Annette, I've got to hang up. Look, are you going to church, tonight? Good. We're going too. I'll meet you by the door and we can sit in the back and talk. Okay. Bye. (*She hangs up.*)

MILDRED: You won't sit in the back and talk.

JEANNIE: Oh, Mom, we'll just whisper.

MILDRED: For heaven's sakes. I don't know what to do with you sometimes. You seem to think that the whole world is some big Saturday Night Dance. When are you going to open your eyes?

JEANNIE: Mom, can't I have more than just five dollars to take with me to the girl's camp in Brighton this week.

MILDRED: We've already decided that five is enough.

JEANNIE: But Mom, Annette gets fifteen. I'll be out of it.

MILDRED: Maybe Annette's parents can afford it, but we can't. What would you do with that much money just for spending? Everything is paid for.

JEANNIE: It's for movies and souvenirs and things.

MILDRED: Good grief. You girls go to the movies every night of the week at home. This is your big chance to do some of the things that money can't buy - build campfires, sing, take hikes and have a good time. I can't see why you need fifteen dollars just to have a good time.

JEANNIE: But what if I get burned building one of those campfires and I don't have enough money to buy bandages and stuff? I'll look really stupid.

MILDRED: Not as stupid as you look now.

JEANNIE: Oh, Mom!

MILDRED: You'd better hurry and go change your clothes. Your father will be back from Johanson's soon and he'll be wanting to leave right away.

End of Freeview

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