

LIFE & BETH by Alan Ayckbourn

Synopsis

Christmas Eve and Beth's family descend on her, as usual. Her needy sister-in-law who drinks all the wine and flirts with the vicar; her ebullient son, determined to be the man of the house, barking orders at his new girlfriend. The only difference between this and the last thirty three years is that Beth's husband has recently died and is no longer with us ... Or is he?

The play begins with Beth and Connie sitting watching carols on television. Connie, in a one-sided conversation, gives praises for her late brother, Gordon. She does not seem to mind she spent childhood in the shadow of her brother, blatantly the family favourite and given all the support she never had. Although Beth quietly agrees with Connie's idea of her idyllic marriage to Gordon, she expresses subtle annoyance with Connie's idea that the whole family will have to look after her this first Christmas alone, and Connie's hints of self-pity don't help either. Beth is more concerned about the disappearance of her cat, Wagstaff, who disappeared on the day of the funeral.

The local vicar who took the funeral, David, comes to supposedly give his condolences to Beth, and they discuss his death. Gordon was the Health and Safety officer for his company before he fell off a ladder trying to remove a man scared of heights. Gordon's injuries forced his early retirement and he later died from them. Once David starts talking about the death of his own wife, however, it transpires he has an obvious crush on Beth. Connie, at first interested in David herself (to the point of turning up to all his services), becomes more interested in matchmaking him to Beth when she mistakenly believes she is flirting back – giving the game away when Beth catches her eavesdropping at the hatchway. David persuades Beth, under duress, to let him say a prayer for her. After being interrupted by the arrival of Beth's son, Martin, and his new chef girlfriend, Ella, he says a prayer, commemorating Gordon, and then asking for help for Beth now Gordon has gone (his unsubtle way of suggesting they get together).

With David gone, Martin sets to work decorating the house with things Beth doesn't really want, such as an SUV-load of presents and a light-up reindeer on the front of the house, all in the name of idolising his father and his idea of Christmas. Meanwhile, he suffocates Ella with over-the-top affection, doing the talking for both of them. Ella remains morose and cringes whenever Martin

embraces her. Whilst Ella nervously prepares dinner, Beth tries to keep Connie away from the wine. The dinner is a carefully arranged yet dubious salad that no-one really wants to eat. Martin tries to switch on the Christmas tree lights but ends up blowing a fuse. When the candle is lit, Gordon is setting at his place on the table, and Beth faints.

In Act Two, Beth is preparing a sofa bed (having given her own room over to Martin and Ella.) She has also fixed the electrics herself. Martin comes down, requesting entry to the room by saying "Knock knock", something Beth informs him is an annoying habit (to no avail – he is doing it again later). He mentions he had a row with Ella, and Beth talks about her marriage to Gordon, but the key difference seems to be that is that whilst it took thirty year for Beth's marriage to become crushing, Martin seems to unwittingly do the same for all his girlfriends in a matter of days. The Police then arrive returning Connie, whom Beth failed to keep sober. Instead of returning from David's midnight mass, she was arrested by the Police trying to climb a statue of [Oliver Cromwell](#) (the previous year's incident being her attempt to ride the reindeer lights).

Finally left alone, Beth turns out the lights only to be kept awake by the glow of the reindeer lights. She then hears a scratching which is not, as she hoped, Wagstaff, but her late husband, entering with his own rendition of "Knock knock". Gordon, now holding an equally bureaucratic desk job in heaven, has returned to look after Beth forever – an unintended consequence, it transpires, of David's prayer asking Beth for help. It becomes clear that, before his death, Gordon micromanaged every part of Beth's life. Flatly refusing to consider Beth's suggestion not all of his help was wanted or that not all of their marriage was happy, he leaves, promising to come back tomorrow. Martin then returns with the news that Connie has been sick on the landing.

In the final scene, on Christmas morning, Martin and Ella are packing to leave, supposedly because Ella received an unexpected order for a large buffet. Before they go, Martin tells Ella to say goodbye, and for a moment it looks like Ella might speak, but instead she runs away crying. Connie, after returning from Mass, apologises with an annoying amount of worthlessness until Beth snaps and tells her, in the politest way, to shut up.

David arrives, called by Beth, and she asks if it is possible to reverse a prayer. A sceptical David agree to say goodbye to Gordon, and during the prayer Gordon

appears and challenges Beth to think if she can really manage without him. Beth shouts "Yes!" and a surprised Gordon vanishes. After David goes, Beth hears scratching from the hatch. Opening it, there is miaowing, half the items in the living room get knocked over, and the cushion in the cat basket is pressed down. Wagstaff, it seems, has returned.

Description of characters

Beth

Recently bereaved widow, very much subservient to her husband during their marriage but now living her own life

Gordon

Beth's late overbearing and pedantic husband, formerly a [Health and Safety](#) officer; *Beth's husband*.

Connie

Gordon's alcoholic sister, marginalised by her family in favour of her brother

Martin

Gordon and Beth's son, well-meaning but inheriting all of the wrong attributes of Gordon

David

The local vicar, with a badly-concealed longing for Beth

Ella

Martin's new chef girlfriend, overpowered by Martin's misplaced affection, silent (bar one exception) throughout the play

Extras: Man/Woman

Policeman and woman – no age restriction