



Alex Macnaughton

In her tiny flat trying to pay the mortgage she couldn't know she would become the wife of a pop icon and millionaire...

POLLY Samson's story has about it the elements of myth. As a child, she was the ugly duckling who grew into a swan. Born with a terrible squint, she was known at school as Clarence the cross-eyed lion, and in an album she still keeps photos of this sad-eyed little girl, aged around five, face rapt in concentration, part-obscured by her enormous glasses and partly by the thick mane of hair that she allows to fall forward to hide how awful she feels. You never get over feeling ugly, she says. "If that's your early condition, it stays with you."

In her teens, she was the rebellious kid, the one who couldn't fit the mould — the one who flunked out just before A-levels to go and live with the local heart-throb, "a sports car and a diamond stud in his ear", in a one-up, one-down in Devon — before realising just in time that she was throwing her life away aged 17, and escaping on a train to London.

There was a time in the late Eighties when she was the publishing moll about town — then publicity director at Cape, still only 25, she was at all the glamorous parties, much admired, much desired. Until she became the abandoned lover and mother, when her three-year affair with the poet Heathcote Williams ended suddenly, leaving her and eight-month-old son Charlie penniless and with nowhere to live.

Today, I guess, at 36 she has become, in part, the beautiful woman who "lucked out" — luck being a word she uses often. She is married to David Gilmour, singer and songwriter with Pink

Life dealt novelist Polly Samson a hard hand when she was left penniless with a small child, but then fortune smiled, she tells **SUZIE MACKENZIE**

Floyd, they live in a variety of beautiful homes with their three children: Charlie, whom Gilmour adopted, and "the little ones", Joe and Gabriel.

Life is serene. At their Sussex farmhouse, on a glorious Saturday afternoon, horses neigh in the fields, dogs frolic on lawns that stretch as far as the eye can see, and Gilmour cooks lunch, tagliatelle with rocket pesto. In one short step, Samson made the shift from hard subsistence to the luxury of untold wealth. "Except, it doesn't feel like that," she says.

It's funny when you look at someone else's life how inevitable it all seems, instead of the way we know we all live our lives, chaos redeemed by moments of order. In Highgate, in her small flat, turning out five articles a week for whoever would have her, trying to pay the mortgage for herself and Charlie, she couldn't possibly know that a few years hence she would be the wife of a pop icon and millionaire.

Then, she couldn't even afford to go out: "I was so desperate." There was one occasion, she recalls, "very untypical of me", ringing her parents and ranting down the phone: "Why can't you be like normal parents? Why can't you help to bail me out? Are your principles more important than your daughter?"

Her parents' background is unusual. Both were communists who met in East Berlin just before

the Wall went up. Her Chinese-English mother had fought in Mao's Red Army. Her father is a German Jew who escaped to England from the Nazis when he was 10. They brought her up to believe that she was responsible for herself. So if she got into trouble, they never remonstrated with her. "They just let me get on with making mistakes. And so I'd push it, wanting them to say 'No' and shake me."

Which they never did. So she floundered, she says, and then picked herself up. "In a way, it worked. It just wasn't very nice at the time."

Her devotion to her parents is extreme. They are wonderful people she says, "I would rather spend an evening with them than with any of my friends."

EVEN as an adult she appears to feel inadequate to these perverse ideologues who seem to have frequently put their ideals before their daughter. At 16, Samson's boyfriend, who was regularly beaten up by his own father, was taken in by her parents. "When we split up my mother said, 'I'm not throwing him out just because you are fed up with him.' So I had to go."

Maybe it is because she is so used to having people to look up to that the two men she has loved have both been famous. She sees

this as a coincidence, to do with the milieu in which she was mixing. She met Gilmour through mutual friends who would invite them both to dinner parties and sit them next to each other. This went on for a couple of years and then one day she met him by chance. "Three days later he rang me and we haven't spent a day apart since. It just clicked."

It took her another two years to decide to marry him. "David laid his cards on the table early and said: 'I love you. Will you marry me?' But after the break-up with Heathcote, I was very cautious. I had a small child, I didn't want to make another mistake."

There was also the money factor. "It would have been easy to say, 'I am so in love with him and he's incredibly rich.' I had to be sure it wasn't just that I wanted someone to look after me, to take me out of my problems."

She talked to her family who said, "The money is irrelevant. If you love him, marry him." Still she prevaricated. It was Gilmour who broke the deadlock. "David got me to write some songs for Pink Floyd which was his very clever way of giving me my self-respect, because I earned a lot of money and so I was able to go into the marriage well-off."

She doesn't find that people are envious of her. You excite envy she says. "And the way we live our lives is pretty normal. We don't jet around the world. I

don't put my feet up in designer frocks and play Cinderella. I still work."

Their friends tend to be her friends, the people who were loyal to her when she was "on my uppers". "David has always had to be careful with friendships. That's one of the downsides of fame. It can be hard to trust people." And though, as she says, "In some circles, I am just the wife of David Gilmour, he doesn't see it like that. He gets angry on my behalf when that happens." She is not much liked in rock circles. "Probably because I work and that's quite destabilising to the rich wives who don't."

She has recently published a collection of short stories, *Lying In Bed*, and just completed her first novel, *Picture This*. The stories are curious, macabre tales about relationships, told in a variety of voices — child, adult, male, female — all haunted and lonely people trapped by their circumstances, pessimistic, with one exception.

I asked David which he liked most. "That's easy," he said, "the last one, Lucky. If you've read it, you'll know why."

It is the story of a couple, told by a woman deeply in love, who finds it hard to articulate her love. A tough woman — and largely tough on herself. The couple are playing cards. He deals. She writes: "I can't believe my luck, I get ace, king, queen and jack of hearts, and hearts are trumps." But then, in life you could say, what matters is not so much the cards you get dealt as the way you play your hand.

● *Lying In Bed* is published by Virago, £14.99.