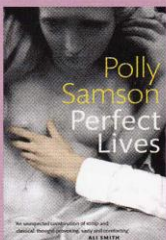
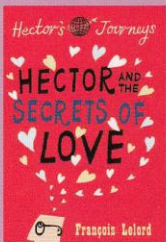
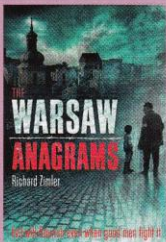
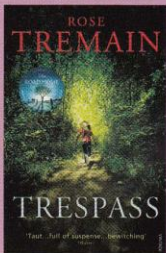


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Issue 61

# How 'The Egg' Was Hatched

Featured author Polly Samson looks back on the origin of *The Egg*...

It's a strange sensation to return to 'The Egg' and try to pick out the little bits of truth that inspired the fiction. As Daphne du Maurier once said about short stories, 'something observed would sink into the hidden places of my mind and later a story would form,' and for me too these shards are often deeply buried for a long time before they work their way back to the surface.

Many years ago I was returning with two friends from a twenty-first birthday party. Our heads were muzzy from the previous evening's celebrations and the six a.m. alarm call of the morning sun streaming through the thin orange canvas of our tent hadn't helped much either. We'd planned to cook our breakfast over a campfire and had brought bacon and eggs and a frying pan, but by then the thought of fried food made us nauseous.

We trundled along in my old Mini, washing down Emergen-C's with warm, flat Aqua-Libra. Stopping at a service station for coffee and the Sunday papers, one of us remembered that it was Father's Day and two out of the three of us bought silly, over-sentimental cards to present to our fathers later that day. The friend who had not bought a card had been brought up by her mother and had not seen her father since she was a baby. She was unusually quiet on the journey and when we reached the old tin-mining town of — she asked if we could take a detour up the hill to an area known locally

as 'The Peak'.

'It's not because you want to admire the view, is it?' we asked, knowing something of her history, and she shook her head. There was no need to question her so we just drove. She was very quiet as we wound our way up the steep incline with rows of grim brick cottages lining the way. Eventually she asked us to pull over. 'I have a pen but do you have any paper?' she asked. My other friend and I scabbled around. 'Oh, it doesn't matter,' she said impatiently, taking an egg from the box we'd brought with us. In large black letters she scribbled 'Happy Father's Day' on its shell and then ducked out of the mini and dropped it through the letterbox of No. 8. 'Quick,' she said, diving back in. 'Drive!'

This episode came back to me when I started to think about the character of Celia Idlewild. I first wrote about Celia in the story 'Barcarolle' and I knew when I bequeathed to her in that story a lovely house with sea views and fancy cornicing, a 1922 Bösendorfer piano, a handsome husband and a brace of healthy children (one of each, naturally) that everything was not as perfect as it might have appeared. I sensed that she was uptight about something, that she was brittle and trying to keep everything in. I kept thinking about the perfectly smooth shell of an egg, about what it contains.

Around that time there were many stories flying around of straying men fathering children. I was struck by

the wives who took these men back, appearing to all the world to both love and forgive them, but how cruel they often were regarding the offspring they saw as living proof of their husband's infidelity.

Shortly after my friend threw the egg through the letterbox of No. 8 The Peak she decided to write a letter to her father. I remember her mortification when she looked up his address to find that he didn't live at No.8 but at No.11. I kept imagining the possible repercussions of an egg landing through a letterbox with the words 'Happy Father's Day' written on it. I saw a woman coming down the stairs on a sunny morning to make coffee for a husband innocently still asleep upstairs. I begged my friend to write to whoever lived at No. 8 The Peak but I'm not sure that she ever did. I think it was her mistake, more than the episode itself, that made it lodge in my head. ■

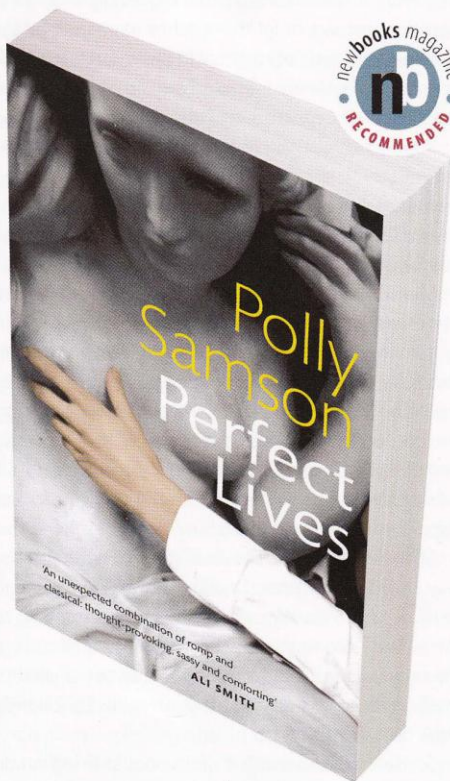
Find out more about Polly Samson at [www.pollysamson.com](http://www.pollysamson.com)

'The Egg' is one of the stories in *Perfect Lives* by Polly Samson which is one of this issue's featured books and you can sample it on the facing page.

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# Perfect Lives

Polly Samson



In an English seaside town, lovers and children, young men and middle-aged women weave in and out of each other's lives and stories.

A mother is tormented by her daughter's tattoo; another only pretends to love her baby. A wife stalks her husband and his new lover; a broken egg through a letterbox tells a story that will not go away; the cat thinks he knows best. Threaded throughout are longings for love and poignant disappointments, surprising pleasures and temptations.

This is a collection of stories that are rueful, knowing, witty, poignant, bashful, bold. Here we showcase an excerpt from one of them . . .

## An excerpt from *The Egg*

Sometimes she woke to find her wedding ring on the wrong hand, but usually not. Celia Idlewild in her long chocolate dressing gown, stepping lightly down the stairs, belt tightly wound several times at the waist in the Japanese style. The coolness of stone slabs beneath her feet and faded rose damask parting with a satisfying swish on both landings, the wooden curve of the banister like silk. In the kitchen everything as it should be: black lacquer tray, two white porcelain cups, ginger thins, the Sunday morning worship just starting on the radio; gathering cereal boxes and setting them out for Ed and Laura while celestial voices soared.

Breakfast: an act of faith, for Ed and Laura rarely got up before lunch at weekends. She couldn't remember needing that much sleep when she was a teenager. She never wanted to waste the time. Fallow fields grow weeds, she says, and sets the table for them, regardless.

Bowls. Jam. Italian coffee pot on to a sputtering flame, herself on to her mat with one of her cold rosewater flannels fresh from the fridge, sliding it out of its polythene, unrolling it, lying with it

cooling her eyes, fading the bruises of her dreams, and precisely twenty-five abdominal crunches, the same every day, remembering to pull up her pelvic floor with each one, taut as elastic, before her coffee percolated.

She heard the rattle of the letter box. Checked her watch. Too early for the newspaper. Glanced to the window but didn't see anyone; through the slats of the blind only great waves of grey sea reaching for the sky, curling over, collapsing, still a while to go before high tide, patches of sand still visible beyond the shingle. An empty promenade, not many gulls. She tightened the belt on her dressing gown and added the coffee pot to the tray.

Espresso coffee, ginger thins and upstairs Graham asleep beneath the eiderdown, oblivious to the sea's comings and goings, curled into his pillow, contented as the biggest brown bear should be. His back smooth, speckled across the shoulders from a summer at home, working right there at the beach with the aid of a dongle and his computer on a board across his lap, an old straw hat with a faded air-force blue band to keep the sun from giving him headaches.

Graham had done nothing to offend her from

“Breakfast: an act of faith, for Ed and Laura rarely got up before lunch at weekends.”



one sunny day to the next: he hadn't taken calls in another room on his mobile late at night, hadn't been to London even once – it was so much easier for him to stay in touch with his office since she'd bought him the dongle. And he'd only worn the straw hat she liked while his panama grew dusty in the cloakroom. Celia thought the blue hatband a perfect match for his eyes. With a happy sigh she added a quilted pot warmer to the tray.

Up she'd go with the tray, lose the gown, slip herself beneath that eiderdown, tuck her knees into the back of his and lie with her face to his back, arms wrapped around him, her cheek fitting along his shoulder blade like a ball in a cup, like warm clay. Just for a while she'd mould herself to his brand of warmth, to his smell: buttered toast, walnuts and bread, and the coffee in its pot hot for a while yet.

She checked the front door as she passed with the tray to see if by some happy miracle the newspapers had arrived and almost dropped it, hot coffee and all, on to the floor when she saw what was waiting for her there. She had to put the tray on the hall table and take a closer look: it was disgusting what some people would do.

She could see at once what it was, spreading itself over the stones like a stain, split yolk spilling a gob of a sunset, a nacreous sea, oh God, and someone had written something on the shell. Celia could see a few letters still intact. Someone had posted this egg through the letter box with a message. So, not mindless hooliganism then. For a few soft and carefree moments, Celia could not imagine who would do such a thing. Then, as the swan's down blew away and it dawned on her who might, she had to turn around and check that there was no one coming down the stairs to witness her outrage.

For once she was glad that her children were happy to sleep their lives away and she was the lone early riser; even Graham slept the sleep of the blameless and never stirred before coffee.

For a moment she was puzzled by what was written on the egg. HAPPY FAT. But not for long. She felt suddenly quite shaken and had to sit down on the stairs.

What a revolting thing to do! She stood again and bent closer to the broken egg. Its shell was pale brown. A full half remained capsized in a sea of gloop. Celia's stomach turned at the sight of it. There were capital letters in what appeared to be black pen. HAPPY FAT. The rest of the message was lost in smitherens of shell that smattered in the slime.

Celia hated eggs almost as much as she hated eggshell. She hadn't eaten anything eggy, not even meringues, since she was forced to as a child, though she sometimes, very kindly in her opinion, boiled them for Graham and the children: stripy blue and white egg cups, buttered toast cut into soldiers, nicely done and set before them without a word. Yolks burst as they plunged in, dribbled over jagged shells, bits of gritty salt sticking to slippery blind whites. Graham insisting they smash the shells with their spoons: an Idlewild family tradition, he said, to stop the witches using them as boats in which to sail

out to sea and sink ships. Then came the crunch of the spoons on the shells. The wooden stools at the breakfast counter ranged so they all faced straight out to sea. From every window the Idlewilds could watch the waves that would bear the witches along; the sound of the weather came to them first and the ancient sashes rattled with rumours.

The wanton devastation of those eggshells among the surviving soldiers and crusts made Celia gag every time and she wished her family would eat porridge instead, or let the witches have their boats. There were shards of eggshell in her mouth, stuck for ever in the careless scrambled eggs that her mother made, the unexpected crunch of it and it sticking against her throat and lodging in the bite surfaces of her molars so she'd keep finding its grittiness along with buttery scrambled egg as she was made to chew: 'Oh don't make such a fuss Celia, just swallow', but Celia couldn't swallow.

She looked back up the stairs quickly to check there was still no one coming. She thought she heard a door opening, so shot to the kitchen for a cloth. Normally she would wear rubber gloves for anything involving a dishcloth but on the occasion of the egg she couldn't wait to get the mess off the floor and out of sight. Away into a carrier bag, cloth and all, knotted in the way people do when disposing of nappies, and deep into the bin.

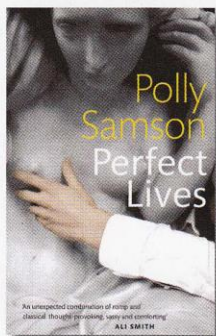
She sat at the table and started working her way through the pot of coffee alone. The egg had reduced the crystalline possibility of her morning to slime. The domed shell of it in that smear of sunset; the crispy sound of it crushing inside the dishcloth as she closed her fist. Slime and shell. Egg bomb. Stink bomb. Bombshell.

Sometimes too much caffeine could bring on an annoying twitch, just the outer corner of her right eye. Look quick. Outside the sea rose in foam and dashed itself on to the shore. In a dark grey sky white gulls battled the wind. Not, then, the sort of day that should bring a visitor to the coast.

Celia used to watch her twitch in the mirror. Graham claimed he couldn't see it when she tried to get him to notice. He wasn't quick enough: blink and you miss it. Tickety tic. His eyes slid away, back beneath the brim of his hat. Not nervy like her. Steady and kind so he'd hate to think that he'd been the one to put the tic in there. She'd always been quick to flinch, like a horse that was easily spooked. She gulped the last of the coffee, feeling it hit her insides. Shut her eyes.

Graham upstairs in bed. She'd take up coffee. The tray on the floor, him turning on to his back. Through the window, despite the bad weather, three kitesurfers galloping over the waves, powerful backs and legs hinging up and down like well-oiled machinery and Graham's strong hands keeping her steady, sails billowing, rising and falling, crashing and skimming.

But the egg. Her fingers tapped the work surface as a sermon on the radio reached its happy conclusion. It was, as these things so often are, about forgiveness and she hadn't listened to a word



of it. No point crying over a broken egg, she told herself. The whole family together and people for lunch later. A good leg of lamb and white peaches for Bellinis beforehand.

She thought about starting again: a fresh pot of coffee, maybe squeezing some oranges. She summoned up a picture, one of her favourites: Graham, from the early days. The fading light of the Idlewilds' garden, running away from him between dark green hedges of clipped box, a summer's night.

'Come here and let me kiss you,' and skitting away across the lawn, laughing. Allowing him to catch her, and pretending to struggle as he kissed her. Holding hands, she in the loveliest yellow cotton dress, the belt was like a daisy chain. Him pulling her to an octagon of lawn in the furthest reach of the Idlewilds' jewel-box garden, a scented paradise wrought even lovelier by time. The setting sun gilding their limbs and flowers overflowing like baubles, glowing hypnotically against the green of the hedges. Impossibly tall hollyhocks, shimmerystemmed, silver leaves of artemesia and roses, roses, roses, geraniums and lilies, rubies, garnets and pearls.

'Kiss me back or I'll bite you,' he said, growling into her ear, backing her against the only tree, a golden russet with rusty leaves and fruit as hard and round as little brass knobs. She let him bite her neck.

'Kiss me and I'll tell you a secret.'

'Never,' she said, turning her face away.

'Something I've never told anyone before.'

'We never eat the fruit from this tree, by the way,' he said, looking up into its branches, keeping his knee pressing her against its trunk. He held her arms above her head: 'I think you'd better promise me you won't,' he said as sternly as he could muster. He could make her promise him anything just by kissing her.

She could feel the bark against the backs of her hands and through the leaves two marble statues, their heads turned towards the tree: Adam and Eve, garlands falling from their hair, blind eyes beseeching.

'OK.' She laughed. 'I won't eat the fruit if you tell me your secret,' and he blew a little warm air into her ear.

'Do you think we'll get a chance to you-know-what while we're here?' she said. 'Will they really make me sleep in the tower room on my own?' He kissed her.

'OK, a secret,' he said when the kissing was done, though his knee stayed where it made her ache. 'It's about Eve.' He nodded to the statue. Eve stared reproachfully back at them from her pedestal.

'Something I've never told anyone before.' The serpent had been carved winding up Eve's leg, its head reached rather suggestively beyond her knee. She was four feet tall, five with her pedestal, naked but for a fig leaf, an apple in the upturned marble fingers of her right hand.

'It's such pure white stone,' Celia said, trying not to let it show that she could barely speak as he brushed his lips along her neck. No one had ever had this

effect on her before.

'Is it English?' she managed to squeak. She had a vague recall of something from her art history course in Florence. Didn't all the best marble come from Italy in the eighteenth century?

Graham let go of her and sprang away. He stood, grinning at her from behind Eve. His hands covered the statue's breasts and Celia felt a spiteful jolt that took her by surprise.

'I used to love her bare bosoms when I was a boy,' he said, laughing, pretending to tenderly caress them until she felt that she would like to kick the statue over. 'Sometimes, in the holidays, she was the first thing I'd think of when I got home.'

Celia stuck her tongue out at him. 'Well, I rather fancy Adam,' she retorted. And then, wildly for her because she rarely let down her guard, she threw herself at the hideously veined feet of the Adam statue and knelt, kissed his knees, then his bulging thighs and finally aimed her mouth at his well-placed marble fig leaf.

'Mmmmm, mmmmm, mmmmm,' she mimed, with her lips to the cold stone.

'Celia!'

'Mmmmmmm,' as though her mouth was full.

'Celia!' said Graham again, but with greater urgency.

She moaned louder still, pretending to pull Adam closer, her hands running up and down the cold ridges of his stomach.

'Celia! Stop!' Graham hissed, but still it took her far too long to register that standing there, along with the elderly local doctor and his wife, were Graham's parents, all four affecting coughs. 'Ah, yes, musk roses,' his mother was saying, fluttering her hand at her chest.

'Commissioned by my grandfather . . .' Graham's father told her, completely deadpan, 'because he thought this place was like Eden.' While she smoothed down her skirt: 'Well, it is like Paradise,' she said, chattering, holding out her hand to be shaken, 'all the flowers and the lovely grass and the view, and yes, hello, it's very nice to meet you, too.'

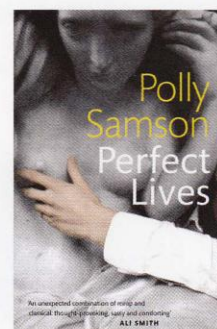
'They're going to love you! I can tell,' Graham said after they'd been left alone, tactfully but not without tangible reproach, together in Adam and Eve's garden, but Celia knew that she would never be lovely in their eyes. Despite becoming the provider of two unimpeachably marvellous grandchildren, she was always a little bit the slattern in the yellow dress who came up for the weekend from London, shocked the natives, fellated their statue and won their only son.

*In my perfect life:* a song on the car radio, a dark brown voice that they both liked. The roof peeled back, her headscarf tied like Grace Kelly, or so she thought at the time.

'In my perfect life my son won't go to boarding school. When we have a son I want him home by the fire.' Another trip later that summer, her in the same yellow dress, Graham at the wheel of his beloved MG Midget.

*'In my perfect life I don't mind playing the fool. . .'*

“The serpent had been carved winding up Eve's leg, its head reached rather suggestively beyond her knee.”



They sang along to the chorus, they could both sing in tune, her voice slotted naturally a perfect octave above his: *'In my perfect life there's you, you, you. And no matter what you do I will always love you. In my perfect life ...'* and then Graham changing the words and looking straight at her, singing over whatever it was in the song, *'... and my daughters will all look like you.'*

Celia remembered the directness of his smile, the shape of it: lips almost like a handle hanging from a deep dimple in each cheek. Nowadays those dimples were lost to a pair of creases running all the way from the corners of his eyes. In brackets was how she thought of his smile now. And those air-force blue eyes! How delicious it'd been when he'd turned them on her that day to sing to her, as she hugged herself beneath the car blanket, legs tucked up and radiating warmth and happiness like a broody hen.

She hugged herself through her dressing gown as she remembered. That lovely yellow dress. Standing together for a while in the octagonal garden, the black darts of swallows and house martins ticking across a sky that was streaked in silvery layers of pearl and mauve, like the inside of a shell. The dress undone. Nuzzling the crook of his arm.

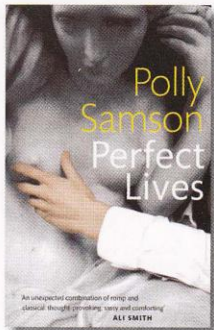
Celia rose from the table and slid her hand inside her gown where the warmth of her left breast was a comfort. At the window she peered through the slats of the blinds. Already there were more people about. Men crouched Neanderthally over their metal detectors along the shore. Early birds to the worm. The first joggers and the dogs brought to shit

on the beach.

Every morning Celia began her day the same way.

Called to attention by the window, its sashes shaken by the onshore wind, usually more than a breeze. She gazed out at the beach as she invariably did, trying to hook her eyes to the sea all the way to the horizon and not to let them fall on the litter blowing about across the shingle, the scavengers, the shitting dogs. Three men in wheelchairs often stopped for a while in front of the house, not through any choice of their own; stargazers brought for the air, catching her attention. Always one man in particular, when he was there. Neck twisting like a corkscrew, head tipped back, a full head of dark hair and a clean padded black anorak. Long arms and legs; lips, shiny red and wet as sea anemones, open. Once, out on the pavement, she heard the sounds that he made, the baby-cry and yodel of it all and when she passed she saw the wedding ring, loose on his pale finger, and started to weep. Him with his head turned to the sky but looking elsewhere, maybe having a dream, hair being blown about, hard to say if he liked the sea air or not. Too awful if he didn't. Never his wife. Always one of the men in green care-home uniforms pushing his chair to a standstill, like a barrow of fruit, in front of her window. ■

**Perfect Lives** by **Polly Samson** is published in hardback by Virago, price £15.99. To claim your **FREE\* copy**, see **page 43**.



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