



Stories of my life

Polly Samson can't believe her luck. She's happily married to a super-rich rock star, they live in Aga-heaven with their children in Sussex, and this week she publishes her first book. So why is she so nervy? Is it her Communist parents, her miserable schooldays, her unhappy affair with a poet? **Lucy Cavendish** finds out



Polly Samson and David Gilmour on their wedding day, 29 July 1994

There is something rather nervous about Polly Samson. Like a skittish horse, eyeing things warily before carrying on anyway. It's because she's known pain, she tells me. She hangs back because her heart is not as robust as it was. Her whole take on life seems to be coloured by the strange events she has been overtaken by during her 36 years: the Communist weirdness that was her family life, her failed relationship with author-performer-poet Heathcote Williams, the fact that she nearly died when she had her second son, Joe. 'So,' she tells me, eyes darting this way and that, 'I don't ever really trust all this.'

What a shame! There seems to be so much to trust: two little blond mop-top boys, both clutching jam tarts; a rather exuberant mop-top dog called Tilly who, even though female, tries to shag my leg; ten or so similarly skittish event horses; a beautifully buxom and capable nanny called Jas, currently cutting us slices of tiffin before picking up Polly's eldest son Charlie (by Williams) from school; and a huge rambling farmhouse in Sussex, complete with comforting Aga and a pot of Twinings on the hob. It's all straight out of *Country Life*. You can imagine it: Mr and Mrs David Gilmour relaxing at home with their children and horses, and there would be Mr David Gilmour – guitarist for Pink Floyd – looking like a country squire, and beside him would be this tall, slim, dark elfish woman, pretty Polly Samson in a long sheath dress with a faraway look in her eyes.

What is there not to enjoy in this achingly English environment? Polly Samson's tanned (she's just back from a winter break in the Seychelles), slightly freckled face darkens a little. 'It's just me,' she says. 'I want to enjoy every minute of what I have but I'm always thinking, "What if it doesn't last? What if something happened to the children? What if one of them was in a crash and died? What if David died? What if something went terribly wrong?"'

If I hadn't read *Lying in Bed*, her book of short stories which is published by Virago on Thursday, I would be rather taken aback by this. For most people – well, for me anyway – Polly Samson inhabits a life one can only dream of. I didn't meet David Gilmour (he was off recording with Sir Paul McCartney), but he is by all accounts a lovely man, a wonderful father, a particularly good cook and very much in love with his wife. He is also extremely rich – hence the palatial pad and expensive horses and Range Rovers on the gravel driveway. I remember seeing a picture of their wedding in *Tatler* – they both looked immensely glamorous and immensely happy, and so did all their amassed children (he has four by his previous marriage) crammed into the back of a departing open-top Sixties Merc. The only cloud on

this otherwise dreamy horizon is the fact that David has been stalked in the past – Polly is concerned that I do not say exactly where they live. With her healthy children, whom she obviously adores and who adore her, plus her healthy children's nanny, one would assume she would be a relaxed mother and lady of leisure. Yet her book is all about messed-up relationships and messed-up children and mothers who throw crockery at fathers and women with children by goodness-know-whom and men who have affairs and eight-year-old girls who bury dead jackdaws in children's graveyards. Her stories have twists and turns and a strange remote quality to them. Ed Victor, her agent, says she writes like 'the Roald Dahl of the emotions'. 'Where do they come from?' she asks, lighting a cigarette and bending forward on her comfortable chair to scoop her knees up in one arm like a little girl. 'Very much from me. There isn't one story that is autobiographical but I use my emotions and experiences. I always wrote as a child, I have written for ever. I drew and wrote and that's how I worked things out. I have always found it very therapeutic.' She says it has given her great pleasure that her mother likes her book.

We talk a lot about mothers, sitting in her study tucked away in the back of the house, hiding from the children, merrily making our way through a packet of Silk Cut. It's not that she's obsessed (she said she was worried that it sounded that way, but it seemed perfectly natural to me), more that her mother has had a particularly diverse life – so has her father for that matter. In fact, Polly Samson is one of those people who has genuinely interesting parents.

Lance and Esther Samson were Communists – more than that, they were north London, send-your-children-to-Woodcraft Folk, intellectual, high-profile Communists. Lance was a political correspondent for the *Morning Star* and Esther, who is half-Chinese and was brought up in a Dr Barnardos home, had been a lieutenant in the Red Army (it's a very complicated story which involves to-ing and fro-ing between China and Britain). She had been married before, to Alan Winnington, another *Morning Star* reporter. Esther's running off with Lance created quite a stir among their friends, which wasn't helped when Lance went on to denounce Communism after the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968. The upshot of the ensuing hoo-ha was that the family moved from London to Cornwall, where Lance became editor of a set of local newspapers known as the Packets: 'The Falmouth Packet, Dartington Packet. I had to lie at school and say he worked for *The Times*. If anyone had found out that their true-blue publications were being edited by a Commie, well, you can imagine!' Her mother became

Right: Polly Samson, at home.
Below: dancing with David Gilmour's daughters at his 50th birthday party in 1996



a teacher. Although they were poor – her parents insisted on giving everything away to needy causes – Polly seems not to have resented their spartan way of life. In fact, she seems never even to have disagreed with them. She says her parents were ‘the most intelligent people I know. When you’d come home from school and say, “Why is the sky blue?”, they’d actually have the answer.’ They must have been an impressive couple – so impressive one wonders how she managed to be a child around them. It’s one thing living with political parents, but it must be quite another to sit down to dinner with two revolutionaries whose supper chat consisted of such topics such as ‘The role of cultural imperialism in society today’, while weekends away were spent rattling the gates of the airbase at Greenham Common. And although she says she very much enjoyed rattling those gates, she does seem to have spent a tremendous amount of her childhood by herself.

Polly was bullied at school – and she is not sure whether she wanted to be alone because she was bullied, or she was bullied because she was alone. She does know that she had a completely miserable time at her secondary school. ‘I was horribly bullied there. I was very small, I was a shrimp, and my skin would go very dark in the sun. They used to call me Black Sambo.’ She then tells a toe-curling story of how the older girls would surround her and push her back and forth on to some nastily pointed coat pegs. ‘I’d have terrible dreams that the coat peg would go in my eye and I’d be blinded. It was a very upsetting time, and I was thoroughly miserable.’

So she did what most teenagers do – she had her own private rebellion. She became ‘unmanageable and obstreperous’. In the end, halfway through her A-levels,

Polly is terrified of a grilling over her book. ‘I am sure some people may think, “Who is this dilettante rock-star wife dabbling in fiction?”’

she was expelled. But she didn’t just rebel against her teachers: she also, finally, tried to rebel against her parents. She got a job working as a telex operator in the local town and became engaged to a sports-car driving, permed-haired, ear-ringed, good-looking but terribly dense local boy. She even put down an offer on a house with him. Still her parents didn’t react. ‘My mother actually helped me look for a house. Looking back on it now, I know I was doing it all to get them finally to say, “No, you are not doing that,” but they never did. I think I became confused. At school, when I did something naughty and a letter would come home, I felt my parents secretly approved, that I, like them, was a rebel. They didn’t seem to mind that I was expelled. So I did the one thing I thought would drive them mad – I became an ordinary, run-of-the-mill local girl. But they even accepted that. I don’t believe that now, though. I think they were deeply worried.’

Polly Samson had a dilemma. Should she be Mrs Boy Next Door, or should she bolt? She bolted and, at 19, went to London to stay with her father’s mother, Ilsa Robineaux, who lived a sophisticated, literary life. ‘Mutti’, as Polly called her grandmother, suggested Polly might like to ‘work in publishing’. There must have been something about Polly Samson that made people want to help her. Part of it was probably to do with the



fact she was (and still is) pretty and was (but isn’t now) flirtatious. But she was also bright and, thanks to her parents, well-read. She found a job promoting academic books for Jonathan Cape, but soon the publisher, Tom Maschler – a man she very much admires – made her publicity director. She was just 24. The job shaped the rest of her life; she met Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, Doris Lessing, Bruce Chatwin, Tom Wolfe – and Heathcote Williams. She doesn’t want to talk about her relationship with Williams; she will only say that he is incredibly talented and that *Whale Nation* was an amazing book. Instead she tells me a story about Tom Wolfe. ‘He was the most painful man,’ she says. ‘We were doing a tour to publicise *Bonfire of the Vanities*, and I had to meet him off the aeroplane, and he was wearing one of his trademark white suits. For want of anything better to say, I stumbled, “Gosh, they must get very dirty,” and he looked at me as if I was an idiot. When we got to his hotel, Claridges, he went into the bedroom and then called me in. I thought, “Oh no, he’s going to make a pass at me.” He kept making me come further and further into the bedroom, and I couldn’t see him because he was standing in the closet. When I finally reached him, he showed me his eight white suits. “I don’t just have one Polly,” he said very scathingly. It was a power thing, a childish trick to play.’

But what seemed to be the dream job went badly wrong. Jonathan Cape was sold to Random House, and David Godwin became the new managing director. He and Polly didn’t get on and he fired her, days after she told him she was pregnant. (‘He is a little creep,’ she says. ‘The one person in the world I have absolutely no time for.’) Her three-year relationship with Williams ended

soon after their son was born, and by 1990 she was unemployed, homeless and almost penniless. ‘It was a very difficult time,’ she says. ‘I couldn’t see any way out of my situation. I honestly didn’t know how I was going to survive. I had let my flat in London and the people renting it refused to get out. I had nowhere to go.’ To make money she decided to write again, this time as a journalist. ‘I had to work very hard. I would do anything – go off and learn to juggle, report from the Hay-on-Wye Literary Festival with my small son playing at my feet. I said yes to everything. I don’t think I was a brilliant journalist.’ She and her son were taken in by Cassandra Jardine, a *Daily Telegraph* journalist. She calls her ‘my fairy godmother’.

It may be because she was helped by strangers that Polly Samson is kind to other people. While I am with her she insists I smoke her cigarettes, asks me if I want to ride her horses, and offers me the use of her flat in London. It’s probably her background again – this I’ve-got-all-this-and-I’m-not-quite-sure-if-I-deserve-it-so-please-share-some-of-it-with-me attitude. This is partly, she thinks, why David Gilmour fell in love with her – her lack of interest in his wealth and the fact that she was not fazed by his fame. They met at a dinner party two years after her split with Williams, and married two years later. David Gilmour has been

a good thing for Polly Samson. All seven children get on, something which gives Polly great pleasure. She tells me how wonderful the summers are when friends plus children come to the house and her husband cooks over the open fire and everyone stays in tents. ‘David is a wonderful man – a great father, great husband, great host,’ says Polly. ‘He is also an amazing optimist. When I was giving birth to Joe, I haemorrhaged very badly on the bedroom floor and had to be rushed to hospital. I thought I was going to die. But when I ask David about it he says, “Oh, I was never worried.” He is very calm, incredibly optimistic. I’m not. It irritates him, but I can’t help it.’

There we are again, with these terrible doubts and nagging worries. For a long time she was terrified of anyone reading her stories. Not even David was allowed to. She can’t bear criticism. She refuses to believe anyone who says they don’t read their reviews, and she is currently terrified of a grilling over her book. ‘I am sure some people may think, “Who is this dilettante rock-star wife dabbling in fiction?”’ I got a letter from the Edinburgh Festival asking if I would like to go up there and do a reading. There were five flattering paragraphs about how marvellous my book was, and my feathers were very puffed up, then at the end it said, “We hear your husband is a musician. Perhaps he would like to accompany you.” I was so furious. Deeply insulting – you can come if your famous husband comes too. That’s what I’m up against.’

She has just finished a novel called *Picture This*, about a young woman looking for the father she has never met. It has taken her 16 months to write. ‘I love writing but I am an obsessive. I locked myself away day after day, night after night.’ She became grumpy, and refused to socialise. ‘I remember David cooking a marvellous meal and begging me to come and eat, and I was so bad tempered.’ Charlie, who is now nine, has forbidden her from writing again. She is going to ignore his command.

As Polly walks me to my car, and we feed apples to her sweet-smelling horses and little Joe is tearing around in a hay cart and little Gabriel is sitting in a puddle, I ask her if she ever wants to pinch herself to make sure this is all real. ‘Not really,’ she says, looking out over their acres of farmland. ‘Life is like a card game. You get a run of good hands, a run of bad hands. I’ve had a good run recently. I can’t help but think that the bad hand is coming. I can’t relax into my happiness. I was happy before and then had gothic unhappiness. I just think everything has to crash in the end.’ ■