

## FICTION OF THE WEEK

# Life in pieces

### Perfect Lives

*Polly Samson*

VIRAGO, 240PP, £15.99

■ *Tablet Bookshop price £14.40*

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Into Celia Idlewild's perfect world an egg drops. There she is, preparing a perfect breakfast tray for her husband – “everything as it should be: black lacquer tray, two white porcelain cups, ginger thins, the Sunday worship on the radio” – when the egg plops through the letterbox and cracks on the mat. On the shell is written in thick pen: “HAPPY FAT ...” For a moment she is puzzled, but not for long. The full message, obliterated in the smashed egg, would have been “happy Father's Day”.

The egg opens a crack on to another life that Celia has sought to close off, when inadvertently alerted to the existence of a child her husband has with another woman. Celia told him: “I will stay with you if you promise to never see that child again.” And now comes the egg: “Egg bomb. Stink bomb. Bombshell.”

Celia's is just one of the inevitably imperfect lives presented in this collection of loosely connected short stories: snapshots in which the lives of half a dozen assorted, seaside-dwelling artistic types overlap. There is Richard, a brilliant pianist reduced

to tuning old pianos turned tinny by the sea air. The highlight of his day is Celia's perfect piano, “a Bosendorfer that had once apparently belonged to a high-ranking SS officer – whose fingerprints stained the ivory keys?” It is the piano of his dreams.

Tarnished dreams are a recurring theme. Tilda, the picture restorer, has been winkled out of Hackney to take on her husband's family farm and formidable mother, drawn there with tales of the fine strain of cattle bred there for generations, the fact that she is pregnant, and an article about how to be happy in *The Times*. But she can't love the baby she bears: “She's tried, it's like willing a dream.” Another woman carries on a curious kind of illicit relationship, cuckolding her husband not with another man but with a Leica camera that she fritters money on, as she might a secret lover.

Several characters bear the inheritance of profound suffering: as Catholics in officially godless, Communist-era Poland, or as the Jewish victims of Kristallnacht. Yet, in the end, the cracks in these lives are often healed. Estranged parents and children are reconciled. A potential tragedy ignites Tilda's love for her baby and “a warmth like candlelight ran through her”.

The stories have a leisurely pace that belies a sharpness of observation and a depth of emotion. They are snatches that blend and develop like the short tracks on side two of the Beatles' *Abbey Road*, each a significant and distinct part of a greater whole.

**Andy Bull**