

# When the tide turns by the sea

by **Marianne Bruce**



## PERFECT LIVES

by Polly Samson

Virago, £15.99, 223pp  
£14.39 from the Independent  
Bookshop: 08430 600 030

**P**eople with perfect lives - don't you just hate them? But maybe we shouldn't. Even for those whose wardrobes are stuffed with Jimmy Choos and whose houses enjoy uninterrupted sea views, there's always something ready to scratch the blemish-free surface. In the stories of *Perfect Lives* these irritants range from the inconsequential (a 17-year-old daughter's lovely ankle made unlovely by a butterfly tattoo) to the momentous (a stranger's comment exposing a husband's hidden infidelity). Sometimes what's cast is no more than a shadow (a woman remembers a chance encounter with a man who - it turns out - murdered a girl her age). Others are like bombs waiting to explode (a mother must deliver bad news to an adult daughter about her DNA).

Polly Samson's short stories have a light touch. They are funny, too. In "Remote Control", a talking cat (echoes of Saki's Tobermory here) provides intelligent conversation to an owner being driven mad by her husband's endless TV-fest. When the husband points the remote at her, she can't help feeling he's trying to switch her off. Marooned on a farm with her take-no-prisoners mother-in-law, Tilda in "A Regular Cherub" feels guilty that she doesn't love her baby. When he was born he looked to her like "a Christmas gammon, boiled and ready for studding with cloves".

Living in the same seaside town, Samson's characters interconnect without necessarily realising that they do. They are linked not just by location but by an understanding of what it means to compromise. Happiness is absorption, or perhaps, as Tilda thinks, "being focused on something simply distracted you from being sad."

A teenager visiting Poland with her estranged father wishes he would stop talking at her like a tourist brochure and instead explain why he had cut

and run. Meanwhile, a piano-tuner - no stranger to failure and disappointment - finds it painful to tell his new client that her mahogany piano with its "nicotined joke of a keyboard" is rubbish and not worth tuning.

Pianos guest-star throughout these stories: exquisite and majestic, looming like elephants or dangerous with "teeth rather than keys and a lid just right for trapping little fingers." Samson's stories are packed with such sharp observations. A gangly man behind the wheel in a Mini looks "cramped like something about to hatch"; handwriting slopes backwards as though the letters "were all trying to jam on the brakes." A smashed egg shoved through a letter-box on Father's Day fills a woman with such nausea we can't help but share her disgust.

But the real gem here is the tender "Ivan Knows". A small boy in love with his kind, fun babysitter believes the golden-haired teenager to be the gravity-defying trapeze artist he has seen at the circus. For the child, full of wonder and imagination, that's exactly what she would be in a perfect life.