



*Driving through
the desert in
search of solace*

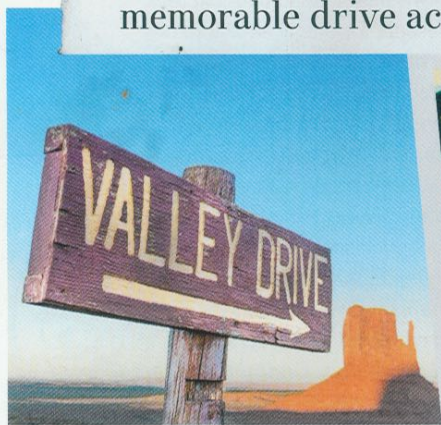
GRIEVING FOR MY FRIEND IN ARIZONA

Bella Pollen, 55, makes peace with the loss of a dear friend on a memorable drive across the desert

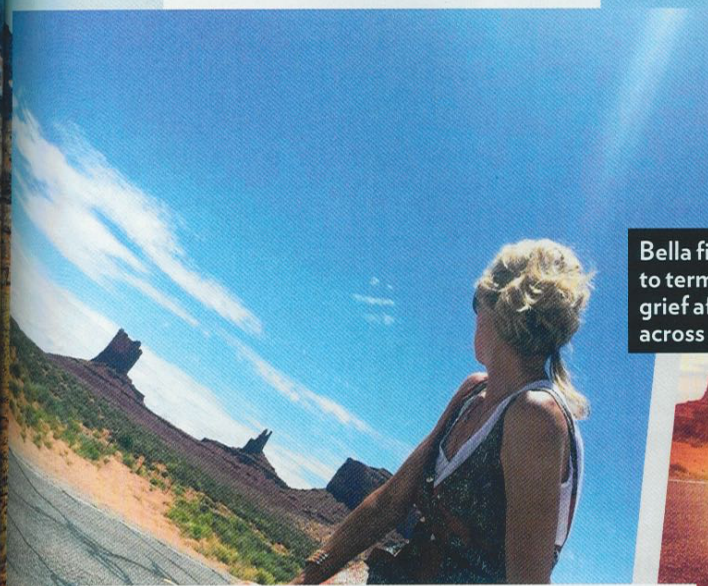


After my friend and colleague Gerry died of AIDS, I couldn't cry for him. I'd always prided myself on being an epic crier but breaking down in public is a dangerous thing to do. I was raised on superhero culture and everyone knows you don't drop a bomb on a crowded city, you fly it over the bay and detonate it somewhere safe.

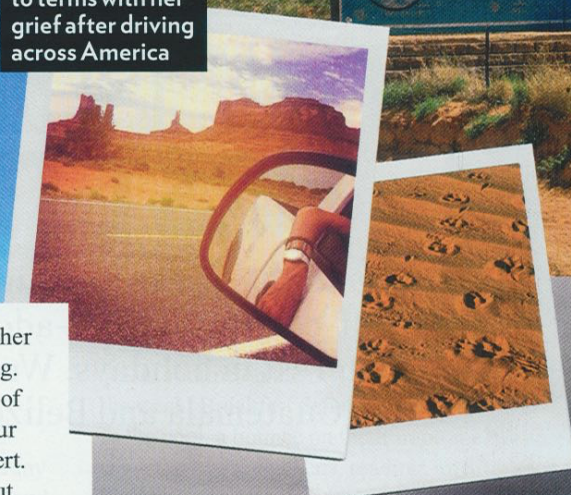
For some reason I fixated on Monument Valley, on the Utah-Arizona border, as that one safe place. It wasn't only Gerry I'd lost that year. My marriage and business had both failed as well. I was 30, a single mother of two small boys and I felt scared and vulnerable. Those great Monument Valley monoliths had been burnt and ice-aged. They were survivors and I needed to be one too, so I left my babies with my mother, packed my self-pity into a suitcase, and drove east to west across America in a rented Cadillac with two girlfriends.



LIFE-CHANGING TRAVEL



Bella finally came to terms with her grief after driving across America

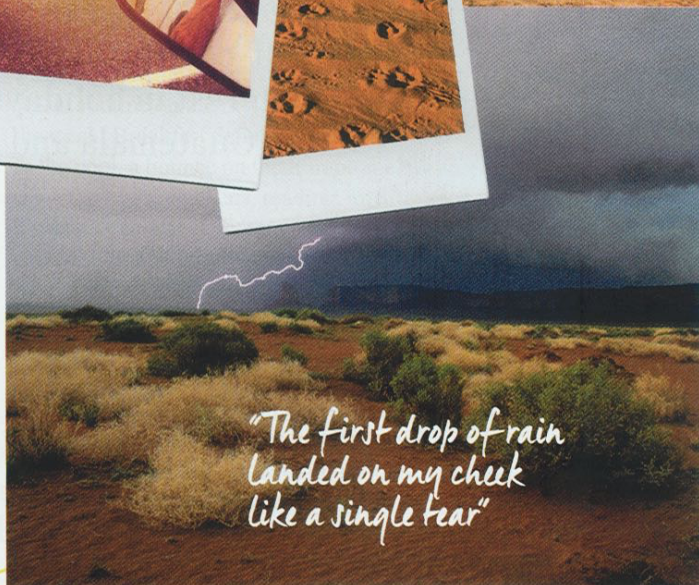


I'd known one of these girls for many years, the other hardly at all, but by Arizona we were barely speaking. It was my fault. Unable to confide, I'd let silent waves of anger and sadness crash over them, and on reaching our motel, I stole the car and abandoned them for the desert. I knew it was mean. I knew they'd be worried sick, but I'd been waiting for this moment for months and nothing was going to stop me.

Reaching Monument Valley an hour later, I found that it was closed. Shattered, I just sat there, feeling like an idiot. Then, pulling myself together, I revved the engine and drove around the fence. It was dusk and I freewheeled through the valley as the sun set, eventually stopping under an impressive stalagmite. This is it, I congratulated myself. I climbed onto the bonnet, cracked a Budweiser, lit a cigarette and ordered myself to weep. Nothing.

Twenty cigarettes later, I admitted defeat. By then it was pitch dark. No cat's eyes in the desert, and, after 500 yards, I grounded the car in soft sand. I was alone, lost, and now, mortifyingly, broken down. The sky began flashing with the electric capillaries of a dry storm. Just like me, I thought as a long night unfolded ahead of me – so used to being a coper, so used to bottling up my feelings, I'd turned brittle and dry. No wonder I couldn't cry.

EVENTUALLY I FELL ASLEEP, ONLY WAKING WHEN TWO NAVAJO BOYS CAME OUT OF THE DARKNESS. Gentle giants, they offered to fix the car and lead me out. While they tinkered under the bonnet, I lay on the ground and watched the sky. The air was sweet with sage. A jackrabbit skittered across the sand, twitching curious satellite ears. The vastness of the desert swept over me and



"The first drop of rain landed on my cheek like a single tear"

Grief was not a single MOMENT in the desert – it was a JOURNEY and one too lonely to navigate SOLO

suddenly the world felt full of possibilities. As the boys finished up, smirking and teasing me for my mechanical ineptitude, I felt my heart click onto a softer setting. I'd forgotten how good it felt to ask for help. I'd forgotten about the power of friendship. Grief was not a single moment in the desert – it was a journey and one too lonely to navigate solo. The girls had always been there for me, I should have known that. It was time to go back to them. It was time to go home.

Another flash of lightning. Sensing a change in the air, I stood up. The first drop of rain landed on my cheek like a single tear. The boys were nonplussed. "I never seen this before," one said, but I smiled and kept quiet as the floodgates opened. I knew I'd only sound silly if I told them the rain was for me. ■

Meet Me In The In-Between by Bella Pollen (Mantle, £15.99)