



My life in fashion: a short story

Personal history | Writing a memoir prompted *Bella Pollen* to revisit the highs and lows of a decade as a leading London designer



Left as seen in *Elle*, *Vogue*, *Marie Claire*... editorial features from the 15-year fashion career of *Bella Pollen* (centre, in black and white; and below left)

Once upon a time, I was a young Brit designer, punching out snappy suits for working girls from my studio in Acton...

My fashion story? It feels like a lifetime ago, an intense and turbulent stop-over on a journey that has taken some fairly random turns. Today, I write books, fiction mostly, and those 13 years in the fashion industry are a place I rarely visit. It was only when I began working on a memoir, *Meet Me in the In-Between*, that I found myself, with no small trepidation, walking back to a world that was so right and yet so completely wrong for me at the same time.

Such ambivalence came later. Growing up in 1970s Manhattan, how could anyone not be enamoured by fashion? There it was, sashaying along the streets in technicolour and defiantly bold. This was Tom Wolfe's *Mauve Gloves and Tangerine-Flake "Me"* decade, the era of flares and shirts slashed to the waist, but it was also Watergate, civil rights and the Black is Beautiful movement. Change was crackling in the air and New Yorkers were out marching for it in the best hair and funkier pantsuits ever. Even as a child, I admired the way clothes created an identity and told a story.

When I left London's Queens College girls' school a decade later, fashion as a career never occurred to me. A mild flirtation with drugs hadn't exactly augmented my grades, so instead of university it was the ignominy of the typing pool and a shitty first job in an advertising firm run by testosterone men who wore Kickers. After six months of being patronised and groped, often simultaneously, I quit to exact my revenge by writing and filming a satire on the industry. Safe to say it was never destined to win the Palme d'Or. Chastened and broke, I resorted to tie-dying job-lots of painters' overalls and selling them door to door.

The joy of turning the ordinary into the beautiful switched on a light inside me. I'd always loved fabrics and had collected yards of the stuff, from Hebridean tweeds to scraps of silk and suede. Appropriating the kitchen table of the flat I shared with my sister, I set about learning the art of cut and sew.

I was propelled up the next few rungs of the ladder by the kindness of others. A friend who liked a dress I'd made alerted another friend who'd begun working at *Vogue*. The *Vogue* feature attracted a backer who funded a collection that elicited an invitation to show at London Fashion Week. By close of play, I had a clutch of shop orders and a limited liability company. I was 19. Green doesn't begin to cover it. Still, ignorant of the pitfalls, I couldn't be intimidated by them. It was 1980 and Thatcher was in power, boom time for women. I was a

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'Our company looked good on paper but not the kind of paper that featured a queen's head'

part-time feminist at best, but here was something I could do for the cause — dress up the sisterhood to take down inequality — and I went at it with gusto. Arabella Pollen, as the label was called, would come to be known for its sharply tailored, colourful suits with the sort of detailing that could take a woman out of her board meeting straight into a bar. The clothes were classy, sexy, and witty, but above all they were strong.

Before any of this, however, there was a terrifying, exhilarating period of catch-up, working all night, and by day scouring the East End for factories to fulfil those early dockets. I caught a break. A friend wore my press samples out on the razzle in New York. Studio 54 offered a free show and I flew over with seven trunks. Strangers pitched in to help. I still occasionally bump into some highfalutin American businesswoman who'll say, "Remember me? I was the one with punk hair who did the ironing." The show itself was mayhem. It didn't

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features from the 13-year fashion career of Bella Pollen (centre, in black and white; and below left)

Montage by Charlie Sibby

matter. Afterwards I slow-danced with Pelé, still, unarguably, one of the high points of my life.

The "burn the old, buy the new" paradigm of fashion is a paradox and an anomaly. What other business radically redesigns its product twice a year while hoping to retain the same customer base? Success requires innovation, business savvy and dollops of luck. Greater talents than me fell on the battlefield.

I was saved by my brother Marcus, three years my junior, who turned down a coveted place at Insead to take over lawyers, buyers and factory owners, leaving me to pull together collections, haul my dyspeptic tailor out of his bed in north London twice a week and fulfil my new role as agony aunt to a growing team of employees. Marcus and I muddled through, navigating a Japanese licensing deal worth millions to design the inaugural uniforms for Virgin Atlantic. The label acquired some high-profile fans — Margaux Hemingway, Princess

Diana, Marianne Faithfull. There were more shows, bigger docket and the stakes grew ever higher. China, the US, Canada, Germany — in the adrenalin-fuelled *Sturm und Drang* of the industry, we found ourselves an unlikely hit.

Fashion is the ultimate game of smoke and mirrors. Somewhere between the perception of glamour and the realisation of profit and loss, a chasm opens. Our company looked good on paper but not the kind of paper that featured a queen's head and a pound sign. We were perpetually cash-strapped and over-extended. The domestic market is small, manufacturing is expensive and foreign sales are fiercely competitive.

Everything changes when you're responsible for people's pay cheques — everything changes when you become a parent, too. I was married now, to an art dealer, Giacomo. Having taken my morning sickness on a tour of textile fairs and overseas hotels, Jesse was born. Three years later, as the press were being seated for our AW87 show, I went into labour with Sam. A second, lonelier chasm opened. Everyone my age was having fun instead of children and a career. I kept reminding myself, "You wanted this", but I was exhausted from a bottleneck of work and breastfeeding and racing home to overcook tagliatelle for an exacting Italian. My camera smile hid a desperate fight to stay married, to stay solvent, to stay sane.

When Corporate PLC came knocking, a merger between maths and magical thinking seemed the answer. After the deal was signed, my beloved brother moved on. Katharine Hamnett's managing director took his place. Gerry Beeby was a creative genius and a despotic control freak. I adored him. He wasn't just my managing director, he was my managing everything. The industry, however, is littered with the spent needles of the cash injection.

The corporate "one size fits all" strategy smothers the intuitiveness of small business. Boardroom rows followed and all that before the big yellow clamp of the late 1980s recession. Our chief executive, wielding his controlling interest

like an axe, fired half my employees by fax and merged our business into his company's French subsidiary — rivals of ours. For a year, while Gerry stayed in London to sweep up our splintered remains, I rented a bedsit in Paris. It was business, not personal, the chief executive assured us. But newly divorced, alone in Paris, commuting back to my babies and missing my team, I felt I'd pricked my finger on the spindle of corporate nastiness and fallen into a hundred-year sleep. When our chief executive announced he was closing us down, Gerry confessed he'd been hiding his HIV status. His sickness broke my heart. After he died, I knew I was done.

I've been asked why I touched so lightly on fashion in *Meet Me in the In-Between*. I suppose because for the longest time I remembered only the sad. I felt that by closing, in failing, I'd let down my team, all those who showed me such incredible loyalty. But over the years, I started bumping into them. In a coffee shop, my assistant — now number two at Giorgio Armani. My Polish machinist, on the escalator in Fenwick's, head of alterations. As I stopped worrying about them, the good stuff started coming back: what an extraordinary adventure we'd had. The brilliant collaborative insanity of those late nights, cold pizzas and terrible jokes. I remembered the happiness of dreaming up beautiful things. I remembered too what a great and important story fashion is. How empowering. What a boost to pride and morale, how it expressed the identity not just of an individual but of a culture.

A couple of years ago, I was stopped on a jetty in Bodrum by an elderly Turk, smoking a thin cheroot. He'd owned a factory in Shoreditch, he reminded me, and the business I'd put his way had stopped him going bankrupt. These days he was a rich man and wished to buy me a drink. "You should feel proud," he said, over a few generous slugs of ouzo. And I thought, you know what? After all this time, I think I do.

Bella Pollen's *'Meet Me in the In-Between'* is published this week by Pan Macmillan



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