

## MY OWN CELESTINE PROPHECY

BY KATHRYN MCCANN



The new millennium didn't begin the way I had planned. A relationship I had counted on lasting a lifetime suddenly dissolved, leaving me feeling bereft.

The pain didn't seem to abate over time. For months I dragged through my days with no energy, no zest for life and tears just a thought away. I knew I had to do something to lift myself out of my gloom, but what?

Then something occurred to me. For as long as I could remember, visiting a rainforest had been my biggest ambition in life. Peru held particular appeal to me with its still vibrant ancient culture and the ruins of Machu Picchu, a picture of which I had cut out from a magazine and framed a few years earlier, promising myself I would visit it one day.

What better way to start enjoying an independent life?

The idea was scary, but I knew I had to go. I booked a three-week trip for July including five nights in the rainforest and the trek to Machu Picchu. I paid my deposit, then began saving up the thousands needed, buying all the items on my extensive equipment list, having inoculations, learning Spanish and immersing myself in books about Peru. Now I had something to look forward to I began to feel more positive.

One day at work I was asked to search for something on the Internet. To my surprise one of the first things that came up was entitled "El Camino Inca". It was a beautifully-written account by a guy called Vince Stevenson about his personal experience of trekking to Machu Picchu. I e-mailed him to say how much I enjoyed reading his story and we got into an e-mail conversation over a few weeks.

Then came another blow. My trip was cancelled.

I was determined I wasn't going to be beaten and soon discovered another company offering a very similar itinerary. There were places left on their October trip – things were back on track.

Although I was feeling much more hopeful now I had a goal, memories of my relationship continued to drag me down. I decided to seek counselling. I still have my answers to a questionnaire the counsellor asked me to fill in. I wrote "I hope Peru will inspire me. I'll have to see what happens but I'm definitely going out there with a hopeful view." She warned me not to get my hopes up too high.

Things had not been going well at work. A month before I was due to leave for Peru I was told that they wanted to make my role more admin-based and if I wasn't happy with that I should start looking elsewhere. I agreed to leave by the end of the year.

In another attempt to improve my emotional state I rashly began stripping the dowdy cream paper off the study walls, much to my parents' horror, and painted it a sunny yellow colour. I hoped it would inspire me in my search for more rewarding work.

At the end of the last session before I flew off, my counsellor told me "you're not quite done yet", and insisted I booked in to continue after my trip.

A few days before my departure I e-mailed Vince Stevenson, writer of El Camino Inca, and told him I was finally about to go and discover Peru for myself. He wrote back telling me to say hello to his friend Ruth Skipsey who trekked the trail with him and now worked for "Journey South America". He said she had red hair and a very distinctive laugh. How silly, I thought. What were the odds of me bumping into her, however red her hair or distinctive her laugh?



It wasn't until the night before I left that nerves hit me. Suddenly fear pressed down on me and I began to question what I was doing, going off alone, so far away. In the middle of frantically trying to stuff all my acquisitions into the rucksack I had borrowed from my sister I realised I had better check through my documentation. I took down the folder containing all the information from Journey Latin America. The first letter I came across was signed by Ruth Skipsey.

Due to bad weather conditions I arrived at Amsterdam with only minutes to spare before my connecting flight. As I ran through the airport I noticed a couple also running in a panic. They also stopped at the check-in to Lima. We got chatting and I began to relax. When we reached the desk I was amazed to realise that Chris, Dee and I would be sitting in adjacent seats. We had many hours to cement our friendship, banishing the feelings of loneliness I'd set out with.

I went with them to collect our baggage and change US dollars into Peruvian *Soles*. I felt safe in their company and was reluctant to leave them behind. Dusk had fallen by the time we emerged from the airport building but my eye immediately lighted on a sign reading MCCANN. I hugged Chris and Dee goodbye and heaved across towards the sign, with my ridiculously heavy rucksack on one shoulder, using my newly learnt "no, gracias" to fend off hordes of taxi drivers.

I was met by a smiling Andean face and immediately felt comfortable again. This was Bernie who would be my guide. I was led to a minibus, where my tourmates were already waiting. As we battled our way through the fume, constantly beeping traffic of Lima I asked Bernie if he knew someone called Ruth Skipsey. He told me I'd just missed her – she'd left for England the previous week.

The rainforest was truly amazing. After lunch on the last day there we set out into the trees for a final walk. The rain had held off for three days and the heat and humidity were intense. On all sides were different shades of green and standing still for a moment would reveal hundreds of tiny creatures everywhere. After a few minutes walking rain began pattering on the treetops before suddenly pouring through the canopy in a torrential downpour, soaking us but providing blessed relief from the heat. The rain sent monkeys scurrying, screeching through the branches overhead and beautiful, iridescent Blue Morpho butterflies flitting between the trees seeking shelter. It was all so magical and so like I had always dreamed it would be. At one point Bernie stopped and stooped to the ground. Turning he handed me a beautiful blue and yellow macaw feather.

Shortly before flying home I confided in Bernie that I was worried that I hadn't spent time during my trip thinking about what I was going to do with my life. He told me earnestly that he could tell that I *knew things* and advised me, "Listen to the life – it will tell you what to do".

On our last day, back in the mad bustle of Lima, we visited a museum. I was stopped in my tracks in front of a case of Inca silverwork. There was an engraved goblet, almost identical to a pen-pot I had decorated at home a few weeks earlier to go in my newly-painted study, wrapping it in silver embossing foil with what I imagined were Inca patterns etched into it. I knew I had never seen a picture of such an object – how could I have created such a close facsimile?

The night I arrived home I sat on the living-room floor unpacking my rucksack with BBC News 24 on in the background. Something made me look up at the television just in time to see an auburn-haired woman on the screen. The caption at the bottom read "Ruth Skipsey – Journey Latin America".

I drove to the office a couple of days later regretting not having made any decisions about my future. Here I was, going back to work as if nothing had changed, but with less than two months of job left! I found another girl sitting at my desk. It turned out she was a temp who had been looking after my role, and was there for another day to hand the job back to me. I was interested to discover that she had a degree in Biology and a Masters in Environmental Science and was just temping between jobs.

I bemoaned my choices in life, telling her after my experience of the rainforest I really wished I had studied something environmental. She told me about a charity-funded Environmental Protection course at a local

college, available free to unemployed people under 25, culminating in a two-week environmental survey in the Canary Islands.

It sounded fantastic, but I was already 26 and not unemployed as yet. However, following Bernie's advice of listening to the life, I decided to apply anyway. To my amazement they still had a place available on the course starting in two weeks' time and were delighted to consider my late application. I was overjoyed to receive a phone call the following week saying I had been accepted!

The course was a wonderful challenge. I felt stimulated and excited learning about something that really interested me and enjoyed spending time with my classmates, a great group of people all passionate about the natural world. As part of the course I had to hold a seminar on a topic of my choice. I opted for rainforest protection. During my research I began an e-mail conversation with a guy based at the University of York who had studied the effects of ecotourism on mammals in the Peruvian rainforest. Describing my own experience of Peru I mentioned in passing the name of my guide. I was amazed to discover that Bernie had also been the person who introduced *him* to the rainforest five years earlier.

On the field trip to La Gomera, a beautiful forested island in the Canaries, I got to know an assistant who, a year later, would become my boyfriend. The course also helped me begin a new career as a freelance writer specialising in environmental and ethical issues.

My time in Peru allowed me to take a step back from life and come back here with a different angle on things. If I hadn't taken the trip I did, when I did, I would not have met Bernie who taught me to listen to the life, or the temp who told me about the course, or the ecologist who is now one of my best friends, or the assistant who might just turn out to be my true life partner, and I may never have found a satisfying career path.

The sunny yellow study is now my office. On the shelf next to me are my picture of Machu Picchu and my silver foil Inca goblet. Instead of pens it holds a collection of feathers, fronted by the dazzling Amazonian macaw feather.

And the counselling? Feeling happier and generally stronger, I postponed my appointment, thinking there was no point paying for therapy when I felt so good! I was told to go in the next week so my counsellor could see whether I was ready to go on my own way.

I told her how my time in Peru had allowed me to really live for a while and be me, not worrying about what I was going to do with my life. How I had panicked when I was about to come home that I had not reassessed things, but that now things seemed to be happening without me even trying. She smiled beatifically and said that I'd finally learnt to recognise my essence - my essential self.

Strangely she asked me whether I still felt as positive about my yellow study now I was back. I told her how I had seen walls painted that colour so many times in Peru that it evoked happy memories. I also mentioned the pen-pot and how the rainforest had seemed so familiar to me that I almost felt I'd been there before. I was astonished when she replied, "well, I think it's quite possible that you have".

Shortly after my return from Peru I was telling someone about the many coincidences surrounding my trip and she asked if I'd read James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy*. I remembered I had the book at home and had stopped reading it half way through when a colleague had remarked "you know it's not a true story, don't you?". I had naively believed it was a factual account and, feeling cheated, had put it on my shelf and not picked it up since.

I went home and looked out the book. After a few pages I found myself unable to read on. It gave me a very uncomfortable feeling, almost as if it resonated with me too strongly. The book still remains on my shelf unread, a reminder to me that my trip to Peru was more than just a physical journey - it was part of my own Celestine Prophecy.

