

Preview for Enjoyment Purposes Only

THE BURNING GROUND

One Woman's Journey to Reclaim Her
Soul and Ignite Her Inner Fire

CELINNE DA COSTA

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To my grandmother, Celina,
the matriarch who prays for me every night.
Thank you for loving with an open heart,
for passing on your name,
and for paving the way.

To the women of my bloodline
whose strength I've inherited,
and whose chains I now break.

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Nature loves courage. You make the commitment and nature will respond to that commitment by removing impossible obstacles. Dream the impossible dream and the world will not grind you under, it will lift you up. This is the trick. This is what all these teachers and philosophers who really counted, who really touched the alchemical gold, this is what they understood. This is the shamanic dance in the waterfall. This is how magic is done. By hurling yourself into the abyss and discovering it's a feather bed.

—Terence McKenna

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HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

This is not a book to rush through. It's an offering—part memoir, part mirror, part medicine—designed to walk beside you through whatever threshold or transformation you may be facing in your life.

While the story traces my journey across the world, it was written for *yours*.

There are four parts to this story, each one closing with Soul Inquiry prompts: reflection questions designed to be contemplated rather than crossed off. They're invitations into your own wisdom—the very questions I asked myself then, and still ask now, to deepen into my own knowing. You can read straight through and return to them later or let them guide you as you go.

If there's an area in your life that feels like it's unraveling, reconfiguring, or asking for more truth... may these pages meet you there. Let the words stir what they must, and the story guide you where it will.

A gentle note before you begin

This book includes references to complex family dynamics, personal trauma, and emotionally intense experiences that may feel triggering. These moments are shared with care and discernment, not to dramatize or assign blame, but to offer my lived experience. Please listen to your body. Skip, pause, or return as needed.

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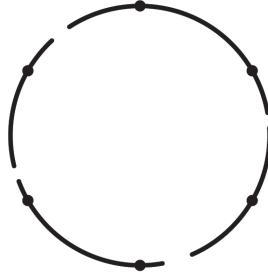
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THE JOURNEY



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PART I
SOMETHING'S OFF

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PROLOGUE

Pedaling Through the Unknown

Night was beginning to fall, casting a soft glow over the ancient plains of Bagan. I lingered at one of its most remote temples, reluctant to leave. The stillness in the air, the sheer expanse of history stretching out in every direction felt like stepping through a crack in time. It was 2016, and Myanmar had only recently reopened its doors to tourism after years of isolation caused by civil war. I stayed until the last light faded, unwilling to break the spell just yet.

I had been warned not to bike alone in the dark. The path back to my homestay was unpaved, a long stretch of dirt road with many twists and turns. Even so, I couldn't tear myself away from the view: thousands of ancient temples rising endlessly across the plains, their silhouettes sharp against the dimming sky. The moment felt suspended, otherworldly. *It's worth it*, I'd convinced myself.

Now, straining to push the pedals through the loose dirt, I questioned my star-struck decision. Propelling the bike forward required serious upper thigh strength, balance, and perseverance. I had wedged my phone into

my bra, the flashlight's beam barely enough to light the path ahead. Cars passed occasionally, their drivers unable to see me until the last second—some swerved just in time.

Eventually, a car approached and slowed behind me. The driver dimmed the headlights but kept pace.

My heart raced, and I braced myself for the worst. *Why is he following me? What does he want?* I kept pedaling, breath ragged and muscles burning, not daring to stop. I felt totally exposed and vulnerable, a 25-year-old wanderer on the backroads of Southeast Asia, asking myself if I had just taken one risk too many.

Only a few months prior, I had quit my prestigious job in New York City to travel the world on a mission. Now here I was, alone and panicking in the dark, my former life a distant memory. I prayed that today's irrational leap of faith wouldn't turn out to be a deadly mistake. I continued pedaling as fast as I could, which wasn't fast at all. *Just keep pedaling, just keep pedaling, just keep pedaling,* I told myself over and over like a mantra.

At last, the faint glow of traffic lights appeared in the distance. As I got closer to the main road, I began to relax. *It's all going to be fine. Nothing is going to happen to me.*

Only then did it dawn on me. The car behind me hadn't been following me so that its driver could kidnap or harm me in one of the dark ways that I was imagining. In fact, the driver had been keeping his headlights on the path so I could see. By fearing the worst, I had misread what was happening.

When I reached the intersection, the car pulled up beside me. The driver gave me a warm nod, smiled, and drove off.

I coasted the rest of the way to my homestay, my pounding heart giving way to a giddy mix of relief and wonder. I laughed out loud into the night. What I had feared to be true... wasn't true at all.

I had no idea where my journey around the world would take me—or who I would become on the other side. I could only continue forward, blindly in the dark, lit by flashes of insight and intuition.

But one thing was certain, solid in my bones: I was being guided.

The Universe—or Source, or God, or whatever name you give to that mysterious force that moves through us all—had stepped in. And all it asked of me in return was simple:

Trust.

And keep moving forward.

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CHAPTER 1

Death and Dreams

It all started with an image of waffles on fine china.

I was sitting in a freezing conference room at the advertising agency where I worked, watching the pitch unfold. “Wait, wait, stop right there,” the account guy interrupted, his voice cutting through the creative guy’s pitch as visuals flashed on the projector screen. “Isn’t it weird to be putting a waffle on fine china, considering we’re targeting a low-income audience?”

The account team, clean-cut and client-facing, was led by a white Ivy League guy straight out of central casting: slicked-back hair, crisp shirt, Italian leather belt. The creative fired back, exasperated, “We already blew five grand on this shoot—*now* you tell me the plate is the problem?” He was a caricature of his role, with a hoodie, well-kept beard, and hipster beanie included.

I sat there watching them argue about the optics of a plate, a strange detachment settling in my chest.

What on earth was I doing here? Just days earlier, I’d returned from a volunteer trip in Cambodia that cracked something in me wide open. Now

I was expected to care about whether waffles on porcelain would alienate people from using a tax-preparation service.

If not for that trip, I probably could have tolerated the absurdity a while longer, maybe even a lifetime. I'd grown accustomed to the polished corporate machine—tens of thousands of dollars spent for presentations that got shelved, massaging data to prove a point, and endless unspoken politics to navigate.

The people around me were talented. Many had dreams of being artists, entrepreneurs, or change-makers before getting derailed by the “reality check” that it wasn't as easy to pursue their dreams as they had wanted to believe. So instead, they had settled for a safer version of their vision. I sensed the quiet ache in their frustrated venting about clients, the drug-fueled small talk at office parties, their “maybe someday” tone when discussing their creative projects.

I knew that ache because I felt it, too. It seemed easier not to name it, to convince myself that I was fine, so I could stay comfortable.

But Cambodia... Cambodia shook something loose.

Whatever had been keeping me numb—the illusion of control, of success—was dissolving.

Just a few weeks earlier, I'd used my two-week vacation to teach English at an orphanage in the slums of Phnom Penh. After nearly three years in advertising, I was desperate for something more... Something real, that gave instead of sold.

I had landed in Cambodia's capital city after a 24-hour journey from New York, jetlagged, alone, and exhausted. The trip was made possible by an author who had found one of my travel blog posts online and, after a

phone call to get to know me better, invited me to write about my experience for his nonprofit project. The initiative sent volunteers to underserved communities to foster human connection across cultures. In exchange, he offered to sponsor the trip. His generosity rerouted my life.

I arrived at a shared dormitory and collapsed onto an empty bunk, grateful for silence. Everyone else had left for weekend travel. I exhaled into the stillness... until my phone buzzed.

It was a message from my father in Italy. My grandfather had recently been hospitalized for a fall, but last time I'd spoken to him, he seemed to be recovering well. At ninety, *Nonno Ugo* was still biking around town and sipping red wine like a man with decades left to live.

I opened the message and froze.

Nonno Ugo left the planet this morning. Arrangements will be made for the funeral in September. Hope you had a safe landing in Cambodia.

My father and I had always had a strained relationship. I was born in Rome, Italy, and raised by my mother, Rosa, and my stepfather, Vittorio. My mother married him when I was three, and when I was nine, we moved to the United States, landing in Connecticut. I didn't meet my biological father until I was fourteen, and even over a decade later, our conversations still felt brittle and clumsy. We both struggled with opening up emotionally, with him withdrawing and shutting down in moments that required vulnerability, especially with me.

And now, he had dropped this text like a matter-of-fact Post-it note. My grandfather, whom I was close to, was gone. I sat there stunned, the glow of the screen fading to dark.

The grief came hot and fast. Then the guilt. Why hadn't I called more often or flown to see him? What kind of granddaughter goes on a trip instead of visiting him in the hospital?

I felt helpless. This felt like the cherry on top of so much in my life that I was unhappy with. I buried my face in my hands and whispered aloud, “What can I do?”

The answer came like a whisper from some place deep inside, *Make his death worth it.*

“What do you mean?” I asked back, not knowing who or what I was talking to.

He’s gone, and there’s nothing you can do about that now. But you can decide what you’ll do with this trip. Make it something he would be proud of. You’re here for a reason.

I paused to let it sink in. My heart was shattering, but what else *could* I do, except channel that pain into something purposeful? Wasn’t this what I had longed for—to *feel* something deeply? It dawned on me that perhaps one of the most meaningful things I could do now was to be fully present with my grief, to let it crack me open.

Was I ready for this?

I made a commitment, at that moment, to give that trip my all. For myself, to honor my grandfather’s life, and to show up—wholeheartedly—for the children I was there to support.

I wiped my tears, got dressed, and walked downstairs for breakfast. When the staff asked how I was, I smiled and said I was fine. I told myself the same.

Inside, I felt like a ghost—drifting, dissociating. I didn’t have the language for it then, but I had spent my whole life outrunning pain. Burying it and pretending I did not need what I so deeply craved. I didn’t realize then what an unhealthy way it was to deal with my emotions.

Maybe I wasn’t so different from my father after all.

For the following two weeks, I powered through, set my grief aside, and threw myself into the experience. I hadn't done much volunteering before, certainly nothing like this—and I wasn't sure how I'd connect with children who had known nothing but orphanage life.

What surprised me most was the joy. Once we got past the initial shyness, the children aged three to sixteen opened up with pure-hearted enthusiasm. Every morning when the volunteers pulled up in our tuk-tuk, they ran to the gates, swarmed us with hugs, holding our hands and tugging at our waists as they chattered to us in Cambodian, even though we didn't understand a word.

In class, they were patient, engaged, and eager to learn. I'd never taught before, but I doubted many kids in school were this well-behaved.

Opening my heart to these children awakened something in me. Amid the chaos, I found a deep clarity: I wasn't okay with the life I was living back home... I wanted to experience more meaning. I had spent half of my life convincing myself that a prestigious corporate career would lead to fulfillment. But after everything I'd seen and felt here, that story no longer held.

On our last night in Cambodia, the volunteer crew and I went out for drinks. Despite my best efforts to stay engaged, I felt emotionally spent. My friend and I left early and walked home in silence.

Phnom Penh's nightlife was jarring. Scantily clad preteen girls lingered on street corners, initiating conversations with men, clearly being groomed for sex work. Homeless children slept on the sidewalks, on top of flattened cardboard boxes. Western tourists stumbled past them, laughing, drunkenly oblivious, or maybe just indifferent.

A rage built in me as we walked. How could a world like this exist? And how could so many people live so far removed, so *apathetic*, from it?

The injustice cut me deeply. These children did not lack intelligence or spirit. They lacked a system that believed in them. I wasn't naïve enough to think two weeks of volunteering could undo generations of trauma, but it had stripped away the illusion that I could stay comfortable with how I was living my life. Doing good for a handful of days while numbing myself for the rest of the year was no way to live.

I also knew that going back to my Manhattan office and pretending nothing had changed would be a betrayal of everything I had witnessed, things I couldn't unsee.

Something had been set in motion.

Back in New York, my then-boyfriend took me for a walk in Washington Square Park.

“Let's get you back to normal society, shall we?” he said cheerily.

It was a perfect September day. People sprawled on picnic blankets, practiced yoga on the grass, threw Frisbees, and laughed with their kids. But I couldn't feel the joy. I moved through the park like a ghost, unable to connect to the scene unfolding around me.

Do they have any idea what's happening on the other side of the world? I wondered as I looked at people's faces. Do they realize what a privilege it is to feel safe enough to spend a lazy afternoon in a public park?

Despair engulfed me. Pretending everything was good and right in the world felt like a lie—because it wasn't.

Beneath the judgment of others, I could feel the deeper truth: I was judging myself. For years, I had lived on autopilot—chasing productivity, status, stimulation, promotions, dating apps, and the newest cocktail bars. I was constantly looking for a better job, bigger apartment, and a dreamier

man. Yet this game had no end; unlocking a new level just left me hungry for more.

I told myself I was building a dream, but it was a dream that left me exhausted, isolated, and spiritually bankrupt. Outwardly, I looked accomplished. Privately, I felt numb, cynical, utterly disconnected from others, and from myself.

I knew I could not carry on this way. The numbness followed me everywhere—into the park, into the office. My trip had stripped away my ability to tolerate hypocrisy, whether in strangers or in my boss's passive aggressiveness.

That truth crystallized the week after the “waffle meeting,” when I asked my manager if I could work remotely to attend my grandfather's funeral in Italy. He pursed his lips.

“Yeah, of course,” he said, voice strained with performative empathy. “Just... keep in mind that you just took time off. This kind of absence might affect your performance review.”

In that moment, I realized this wasn't just about him or this job—the whole system was designed for people willing to trade their lives for it, and I no longer was.

His words barely registered, but the aftertaste did. It was another reminder of the performance I'd been trapped in. At work, at home, even with myself. By this point, I was done with veiled threats and fake niceties.

I had spent years acting strong: being the fighter, the outspoken one when no one else had the guts to speak up, the girl who stood up for her friends and could handle anything. But the truth was, I was exhausted from the act.

Underneath my fiery persona and the many defense mechanisms I had built over the years to protect myself from being hurt or taken advantage of was a deep tenderness I had never learned to hold.

I believed that if I projected enough strength and self-sufficiency, I'd be untouchable. No one would dare mess with me. It wasn't until my grandfather's death that I began to see just how much it was costing me.

After the funeral in Italy, I returned to New York with a heavy heart and a fractured sense of reality. I couldn't ignore how deeply unhappy I was—not just with my job, but with the life I had built around it. I knew I needed to change my life completely, though I didn't yet know what that would look like.

For weeks, I circled the same questions: Where would I go? What would I do? How do I even begin to dismantle a life I've worked so hard to create? Slowly, a conclusion began to form—one that had been lingering at the edges of my mind for years. I had never truly felt at home here. If I wanted to change everything, I would have to start somewhere new.

Once I let that idea take root, my mind leapt from the big, existential questions to the smallest, most mundane ones. Even small, silly questions overwhelmed me. What will I do with all my shoes? How many suitcases can I bring? Where will I store my things? Should I close my bank account?

Ironically, those logistics felt easier than confronting the emotional fear beneath them: What will people think? What will my parents say? Will they laugh at me, disapprove, or try to talk me out of it?

Even in adulthood, I was still seeking their approval, hoping they might finally understand me.

Then came my performance review.

My manager began with praise, and for a moment I let myself hope for the promotion I'd been chasing for almost a year. I had done everything they asked.

He shifted in his seat.

“We just don’t feel comfortable promoting you yet,” he said. “There are still things I need to see before I can say you’re operating at a senior strategist’s level.”

I felt my chest tighten. “But... I did everything you asked. I delivered.”

“Yeah, but... you’ve been asking to work remotely a lot. And taking time off. We’re struggling to see your full commitment to growth.”

Translation: We don’t trust you because you don’t comply.

I stared at the motivational poster behind his head—*“Think Different”*—and felt the irony settle like ash in my mouth.

I left with another list of tasks to prove myself. But something had shifted: I wasn’t angry or surprised this time. I was just done.

Next came my 25th birthday. My boyfriend Jason broke up with me the night before, over text.

Jason was a tall, successful, and handsome all-American startup executive who women would fawn over. Together, we were the typical young New York “power couple.” But we had been drifting since I returned from Cambodia. Jason wanted everything to go back to the way it was, but I couldn’t pretend.

“You haven’t been the same since you got back,” he protested one night.

He was right. I could not properly engage with the dinner dates, the performative sex, the curated Instagram life. I wanted something real.

Although the breakup stung, it also felt inevitable. I could see how our relationship was one of many things in my life that had been built on smoke and mirrors.

The next morning, I was a jumbled mess. I felt like a total loser for getting dumped right before my birthday, especially one that I considered to be a big milestone and marker of adulthood.

I texted my best friend, Natalie. *I know this sounds really pathetic, and you’re busy, but can you please hang out with me tonight so I’m not alone?*

She replied, *No prob! Be at mine at 7.*

I spent the rest of my day in a daze, glad that I would at least have a friend to commiserate with that night.

When I arrived, the smell of apple pie greeted me. Natalie stood in the doorway in an apron—a rare sight as she was a self-proclaimed New Yorker who would *never* cook. She sported a plastic birthday crown on her head, which she transferred to mine. “Surprise!”

Inside, her tiny living room was filled with several of our closest friends, whom she pulled together for the evening. Four pumpkins were neatly arranged on her coffee table, surrounded by carving knives and snacks. I had recently joked to her that I had never carved a pumpkin and didn’t get the point. Clearly, she had taken that as a challenge.

We all spent the evening gorging on freshly baked apple pie, carving pumpkins, and cracking jokes about New York girls’ obsession with pumpkin-spiced lattes and wannabe social media influencers trying to get the perfect autumn shot.

That night reminded me of what I was really looking for: human connection, presence, joy, laughter. I walked home with my heart full, more certain than ever... whatever came next had to include more moments like this.

A few weeks later, my landlord raised my rent by almost a thousand dollars, effective May, six months away. That became my deadline. There was no way I would stay in the city just to keep bleeding financially, and moving back in with my mother wasn’t an option.

The fire was lit. Everything seemed to be falling apart, and as upsetting and unsettling as it felt, I couldn’t help but wonder... *What if this is exactly the push I had unknowingly been calling for?*

Perhaps these events weren't happening *to* me, but rather *for* me. This was not just about work, or love, or rent any more. It felt like a sign to step up and reclaim my life. That night I journaled, writing through tears until my hand cramped.

What is life trying to tell me?

What am I not listening to?

What do I need to let go of, so something better can take its place?

Then, in a moment of silent contemplation, I made a decision, *there is another way, and I will find it.*

For the first time, I was awakening to the possibility that I wasn't a victim of life. I was in charge of my own destiny.

The next morning, I woke up differently. No more self-pity, no more waiting. I didn't need a perfect plan, just a next step. My focus was clear. As long as I kept moving with the intention of changing my life for the better, good things would happen sooner or later.

I went to work, hit the gym, applied for jobs on my breaks, researched countries I was considering moving to, and networked with people who inspired me. I took on an additional freelance project with a consulting company, which quickly added a few extra thousand dollars to my savings account.

I reached out to people who were doing fascinating things, the weirder, the better—creatives, strategists, consultants, musicians. Anyone whose life felt alive, and who might give me a clue as to what I was here for.

I began traveling on weekends to escape the city and clear my head. Since hotels were out of my budget, I got creative and reached out to friends, asking if they knew anyone I could stay with. A friend of a friend offered a couch in San Diego.

That trip changed everything.

My host picked me up from the airport like we were old friends. She showed me around the city, cooked meals with me, and opened up about a recent heartbreak. We were the same age, both navigating the grief of love lost, trying to piece together who we were in the aftermath. Over the course of a few days, we laughed, cried, swapped stories, and unknowingly began to stitch each other back together.

I left with a new friend, a full heart, and a new question. *What if I could travel this way around the world?*

Not just to see sights, but to *connect...* to stay with real people, to trade stories, and to glimpse other lives from the inside out, the way I had just done with this woman. I brushed it off at first. It felt impractical and idealistic. Still, the seed was planted.

One February night after flying back from an interview in Dublin, Ireland, I met Natalie for a drink in the West Village. She was sitting elegantly at a high table, wrapped in a brown faux fur jacket, wearing burgundy lipstick and high-heeled boots despite the snow that coated the slippery asphalt outside. She had taken the liberty of ordering us two glasses of red wine.

I vented about the offers I had just turned down—positions at big tech companies that looked perfect on paper but felt like soul-death.

“So,” she asked, sipping her wine, “what’s your plan?”

“Honestly, Nat, I can’t help but feel that I keep circling change but not actually getting to the point. They’re great companies, but I’d be walking into the same problem. Working for a big corporation without feeling I’m contributing to the world in a meaningful way.

“Still, I have to keep looking. I can’t just sit on my ass hoping that something will present itself to me.

“So, I guess my Plan A is to keep applying to jobs I don’t really want and hope something that feels right shows up, it’s bound to if I look long enough,” I said, defeated.

I paused, interrupted by a wild idea that I hadn’t yet spoken aloud. It was my go-to fantasy whenever I found myself getting frustrated with the job hunt and randomly Googling images of different countries.

“I guess that if everything goes to shit, my Plan B is to say, ‘fuck it’ and go travel. I mean, I think about it sometimes. What if I did the couch-surfing thing I’ve been doing while traveling on the weekends, but all around the world? Finding people in different countries to host me through my connections, and then documenting the whole thing through my writing? It would be so *amazing*. Can you imagine ... just scrapping everything and starting over without a plan, even for a little while? I know, it’s crazy, I’m way too Type A for that.” I laughed, dismissing the thought.

Natalie looked at me, a mischievous glint in her bright blue eyes. “Celine,” she said, “I think your Plan B *is* your Plan A.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused.

She leaned in. “When you talk to me about your Plan A, you look like you want to die. You’re miserable, your energy is low, and you’re dragging all of this as if it’s a chore, which kind of defeats the point of what you are looking to do, doesn’t it?”

“But when you talk about Plan B? Your energy completely changes. You *light up*; I’ve never seen you so excited about anything before. You need to pay attention to that. Plan B is the direction you want to go in.”

I looked at her, speechless. She continued, “You’re not doing this for the raise, or the location change, or the new job title. All this is what you want to *get away* from. But you keep trying to talk yourself into chasing it again, because fully breaking away from that world feels terrifying.”

“Plan A is a comfortable way to achieve a *degree* of change. But honestly, the thing you really want to do won’t be found in your comfort zone. You’ve got to let go of looking for safety. You need to go where you’ve never gone before.

“When you sit here joking about how your backup plan is to travel the world and create a new life for yourself, what I hear is that you are trying to make your *real* Plan A your Plan B because you don’t want to admit how badly you actually want it.”

She wasn’t wrong. She saw through me—straight into the part I was trying to ignore. The part that had been whispering to me since Cambodia. The one I kept silencing because it didn’t sound safe or smart or adult.

But now there was no denying it.

She leaned back, took a sip of wine, and smiled as her words landed.

Once the vision took hold, I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I became *obsessed*.

Whereas before, I had been doing the things I was “supposed” to do—applying for jobs on LinkedIn, networking, polishing applications—now everything had shifted. Every spare moment was spent searching for solutions, guided as much by intuition as my effort.

I had no manual on how to quit your corporate life and build your dream. Today, there are courses and coaching programs for that. Back then, it was the very beginning of the digital nomad era, and I didn’t know a single person living that lifestyle. I would have to invent the path myself.

The clarity I had gained from Natalie’s reflection gave me a new kind of fuel. I began reaching out to people around the world—friends, acquaintances, even strangers living in places I wanted to visit. Networking had always come naturally to me, but this time, my intention was different.

I wasn't angling for a job or pitching my resume. I was sharing the vision for what I wanted to create for my life and inviting others to be part of it.

To my surprise, people lit up. Conversations followed a familiar arc. *"That sounds incredible" ... "Wait, you're actually doing this?" ... "Let me connect you with someone who might help."*

Soon, my inbox was overflowing. Within weeks, I had a spreadsheet with over 200 names. I tracked where each person lived, how we were connected, and little details that made them interesting. The more I shared, the more real it became. I hit the point of no return. Even if I wanted to turn back, I knew I couldn't—not with so many people already rooting for me.

I started printing out maps, circling countries I'd always longed to visit: Austria, Greece, Myanmar, Nepal, New Zealand, Australia. I played connect-the-dots, sketching a route that would allow me to travel overland and minimize the expensive long-haul flights.

To my delight, a trajectory emerged: Depart the U.S., wind through Europe into Asia, down through Oceania, and Hawaii on the way back.

Plan A was finally becoming what it was always meant to be: To travel the world. To build a life that lit me up. To discover my soul's true calling—while laughing, learning, storytelling, and meeting extraordinary people along the way.

By April, my plan was in place: I would give my two-week notice in early June, right before leaving for Italy, my first stop. But once again life stepped in with its own agenda.

Late one afternoon, my manager called me into his office, where one of the department directors was waiting, his expression unreadable. The moment I saw them together, I knew something was up. What followed was a carefully worded conversation about my "slipping performance,"

peppered with vague comments about needing to see more commitment, more engagement, more of the old me.

They offered me a 30-day probation period to prove myself. It was a chance to get back in their good graces. Part of me wanted to accept—there were still a few more paychecks I could use before my departure—but I also knew that I was already halfway out the door. I asked for a few days to think it over.

When I sat down with the director later that week, I chose to be honest. I told him my heart wasn't in it anymore, that the work didn't feel meaningful, and I couldn't pretend otherwise. I offered to stay the month to wrap up my projects and ease the transition.

To my surprise, he nodded compassionately and said, "You know what? Let's close this out now. We'll pay you for the next 30 days."

I was astonished—not just by the generosity, but by the grace. I packed up that afternoon, feeling freer than I had in months.

When I left the office that day shortly before sunset, the world looked different. I became acutely aware of my surroundings. It was a beautiful spring day, and the sky was warm and streaked with shades of pastel pink, turquoise, and periwinkle. The afternoon sun's rays kissed my cheeks.

With every step, I felt lighter. My time working in corporate New York could now be filed into the cabinets of my past. It was really happening... My new life was beginning.

A few weeks before departure, I called a woman I'd freelanced for months earlier—a director at a consulting firm. I told her what I was planning: I'd couch-surf around the world, relying entirely on the kindness of people connected to me through someone I'd met.

“It’s crazy, I know... but I want to prove to myself not only that it’s possible, but that humanity is good, and that if I stay true to my dreams, I will be supported. What do you think?” I paused, that tender moment of wondering if yet another person would think I was crazy.

Silence. And then, she burst out, “Oh my *God*, Celinne, that is *amazing!* Holy wow, that is brave. You have to write about this in our column!”

“You mean, your company blog?” I asked.

“No, I mean on *Forbes*.”

“Uh... what?” Now I was really confused.

She laughed. “Oh, I haven’t told you, have I? I just left to spearhead their *ForbesWomen* department. I would *love* to invite you to document your journey as one of our founding contributors!”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Less than a month ago, I’d been pulling my hair out trying to figure out how to make this work. Now one of the world’s most respected publications wanted to feature my story. This wasn’t random, this was the seeds I’d planted coming to life.

Within days, my *Forbes* column was live. I published my first piece, sharing my intention for the journey and why I was doing it.

The synchronicities kept rolling in—as if the moment I fully committed, the Universe co-conspired in inexplicable ways. I would randomly meet someone who just happened to know someone in a city I was visiting. Soon, I had confirmed hosts in over half of my planned stops. The rest, I trusted, would unfold along the way.

That final month, I wandered the city slowly. I’d pass stressed commuters and feel a strange compassion—I had been one of them not long ago.

Outwardly, nothing about me had changed. But inwardly, everything had.

On my last night in New York, I sat on my bare mattress watching the sunset paint my silhouette against the wall. The room was empty—the furniture sold, my belongings in boxes in storage at my mom’s house. Everything I was taking with me fit into a carry-on and a backpack by the door.

I wondered if I should feel sadder. I had built a life here, after all. Yet as I walked out of my apartment, all I felt was relief. I’d stopped trying to prove myself as a New Yorker. The city had been squeezing the life out of me, and now I could breathe.

It was time.

PART I: SOUL INQUIRY PROMPTS

1. What parts of your life feel “successful” on the outside but leave you feeling empty or disconnected on the inside?

What might that discomfort be trying to tell you?

2. Recall a moment when loss or hardship cracked you open.

What did it awaken in you that you hadn't been able to feel before?

3. If you're radically honest with yourself... What masks are you still wearing to meet others' expectations?

Who might you become if you stopped performing and simply allowed yourself to be?

4. Where in your life are you settling for a “Plan A” when your soul is calling you toward something else?

What might change if you allowed yourself to take that longing seriously?

5. What synchronicities or chance encounters have guided you lately?

Could they be nudging you toward a path that your rational mind hasn't fully accepted yet?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Celinne Da Costa is an author, speaker, and master coach who guides visionary leaders to live, lead, and express themselves in full alignment with their soul's truth.

Raised between Italy, Brazil, and the United States, she is a woman of many worlds. At twenty-five, she left behind a promising corporate career to follow a deeper call—one that led her to travel across more than seventy countries, couch surf with strangers around the globe, and explore the depths of the human spirit.

Today, Celinne blends subconscious reprogramming, communication, storytelling, intuition training, and emotional mastery to help high-achieving professionals embody their most authentic and magnetic leadership. Her work has supported Fortune 150 executives, entrepreneurs, and change-makers in over sixty countries, and her insights have been featured in *Forbes*, *Entrepreneur*, *Business Insider*, and her TEDx talk on the power of human connection.

She now divides her time between the Mediterranean and South America, where she continues to write, coach, and explore what it means to come home to oneself. The journey doesn't end here.

Visit celinnedacosta.com for ways to keep going.



END OF PREVIEW