

Promised Land

by

M.A. Laborde

DEDICATION

To family:

To Mayo and Sam, for the love you inspired in me.

To Ashley, Joan, and Ron, for all that we've shared.

To Ernie and Ethel, for all that you've done for my family and me.

To Octavia, for helping to make this book possible.

To my global family, for the many wonders we have yet to experience and accomplish right here on planet Earth, through love and humility and selflessness.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: Genesis	1
CHAPTER 1: Trailblazing (USA)	3
CHAPTER 2: Communion (Peru)	18
CHAPTER 3: Redemption (Africa)	36
CHAPTER 4: Restoration (Brazil)	51
CHAPTER 5: Transformation (Ireland)	57
CHAPTER 6: Homecoming (India)	74
CHAPTER 7: Reunion (Vietnam)	88
CHAPTER 8: Exodus	105
EPILOGUE: Revelation	117

PROLOGUE

Genesis

In the earliest days of humankind, the urge to explore one's physical environment was usually motivated by the survival instinct or by simple curiosity. As the millennia rolled on and humans began to venture beyond their immediate surroundings, and as they discovered their neighbors—and their neighbors' possessions—curiosity and the survival instinct soon were overtaken by another motivator: the urge to dominate and ultimately to conquer other people and places.

By 1500 AD the inhabitants of planet Earth routinely traveled in search of new worlds in the hemispheres beyond their own. First they overcame the natural barriers of the mountains and the elements, and then the vast expanses of water, which for eons had separated them from unimaginable terrors—and unimaginable treasures. And the lure of the treasures invariably succeeded in subduing the power of the terrors, at least for those daring or reckless or covetous enough to venture beyond the physical boundaries of their own more familiar world. And once again they sought to dominate and conquer.

And so it was too by the mid-twentieth century, when outer space and its myriad mysteries became a similar lure for previously Earthbound humans. The vast expanses of darkness could not keep them from seeking to explore distant stars in the universe beyond Earth's atmosphere, any more than the water had kept earlier adventurers from setting out for distant lands beyond Earth's horizon.

With space probes and spaceships, first unmanned and finally guided by human hands on-board the ships themselves, the first tentative journeys into space began. Until, by the year 2025, regularly scheduled flights had begun carrying immigrants by the hundreds, then thousands, from Earth to Mars and neighboring destinations.

And just as throughout the eons there have been those who feel compelled to seek out the new and the different, so too have there been those who are content with the old and the familiar. And so it was in 2025. These are the stories of some who left Earth in those days and some who stayed behind.

CHAPTER 1

Trailblazing

(USA)

January 1, 2025, dawned quietly, peacefully, around the globe. Almost three full years had now passed with no disasters of consequence, no significant reported loss of life or other calamities. After more than a generation of cataclysmic events, natural and man-made, the planet finally seemed to be experiencing a period of tranquility. Even the usual forecasters of doom had been uncharacteristically silent lately; there had been no recent predictions of any apocalyptic happenings or other signs of Earth's imminent demise.

As I looked back over the previous two or three decades, especially since the beginning of the twenty-first century, science and technology had conjured up so many astounding developments. And there had been so many equally astounding natural disasters. But I had managed to be among the survivors. A miracle? Perhaps. If I believed in miracles. Then again, perhaps if I had been living in another country, rather than in the US, I might not have been so fortunate, since the most dramatic results had occurred outside of the US.

Nonetheless, I have to admit that the event I remember most vividly is not one that caused the most deaths or even received that much attention, but it did happen here in the US and, especially, it's one that I witnessed personally. So I'll start there.

"Did you really see cars and trucks frozen on the highways for five miles, with people dead inside?" As Cal asked Jake the question, he hoped he sounded skeptical enough, even though he was pretty thoroughly convinced this time. Like most of the other patrons in *Moose's*, he had seen Jake reel in many an unsuspecting first-time listener (and even a few regulars) as he spun his tales of history witnessed firsthand. Skepticism seemed as much in order now as ever.

"Actually, five miles is a conservative estimate," Jake declared in his distinctive drawl, which was usually tinged with more than a hint of mockery, even when he was telling the unvarnished truth. Only one person could usually tell the difference—I, his partner, Sydney. And even I could be fooled every now and then.

CHAPTER 2

Communion

(Peru)

The lilting sound of the *antara* cut through the crisp winter air, like sunlight through sparkling, just-cleaned glass. The air itself seemed energized by the joyful noise that it was transporting, from the garden, through the open window, into the living room, where I sat listening. The melody was at once playful and reverent. It was Clara. She was happy again. She sounded like Pan himself piping a lively tune for the merriment of the animals in a mythical meadow somewhere. Tina's surprise visit had been a total success!

I could see that the sound had caught my mother's attention as well, as she sat at a nearby table creating a delicate floral arrangement. She commented, "I haven't heard Clara play the *antara* in such a long time. All these years she seemed to prefer making those mournful sounds on the *quena* instead, first when her parents died, and then Silvio and the children."

The tragedies had seemed more than one person should ever have to endure. I could only hope that Clara's choice of instrument now meant that our prayers for her were at last being answered.

Clara had been an integral part of my family since before I was born in 1987. My father, Luis Sato, was the second generation of his Japanese immigrant family to be born in Peru. A younger brother, Miguel, had moved to Japan in 1985 to live. He began using his Japanese middle name, Kenji, then. Their eldest brother, Carlos, lived in Huacho, north of Peru's capital city Lima, with his wife and their two sons. My mother, Yuki, was the first Peruvian-born member of her family. Her mother had died when she was nine; her father had remarried. She had two younger half sisters. My family and theirs weren't very close, but we kept in touch from time to time.

When my parents married in 1982, Dad was an executive with a bank in Juliaca. In a nearby community not too far from Lake Titicaca, they bought a house. It was fairly large, and my father's job sometimes required that he invite business associates to our home for dinner and other social occasions. Although my mother did not work outside of the home and was an accomplished cook, it was not uncommon for families of their financial means to have a housekeeper also. They hired Clara's mother, Isabel. Clara was the eldest of five children; when my brother Juan was born in 1985, she sometimes would accompany her mother to work. She was in her early teens then and was

CHAPTER 3

Redemption

(Africa)

Finally, I was beginning to accept the reality that the twenty-first century wasn't going to be "Africa's Century" either, after all. The last decade or two of the twentieth century had brought so many hopeful signs: the release of Nelson Mandela; the end of apartheid in South Africa; the election of Ghana's Kofi Annan as Secretary-General of the United Nations. And so many other encouraging events. They all seemed to offer promise that my homeland at last might be experiencing a renewal, after centuries of devastation, self-inflicted and otherwise.

Now, here we were, the first quarter of the century behind us. The superpowers of the world were poised to begin their migration to yet another New World—space. And more than five hundred years after migration to the previous New World had begun, Africa was still being referred to as the Dark Continent. And not without cause, some might argue. For in my own country, as throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa, freedom from European colonization had not automatically meant freedom from oppression. Even when freedom was ours for the taking, we so often seemed more comfortable with the old world order, and invariably reimposed it on ourselves.

At fifteen years of age I had made my decision to become a teacher. Now, at almost seventy, I was still as convinced as ever that education was our best weapon in defeating oppression. But I had also come to realize that education means little, if you simply let others tell you how to think and what to believe. That might have happened to me if I had had only Mother Superior as my teacher. But I had not, at least not until I was fourteen years old. And by then, I trusted my own perception of reality sufficiently to keep searching for the facts until I was satisfied that I had enough to rely on. Or until I had to accept that some facts were beyond my reach and might always be. And when I became a teacher myself, I tried faithfully to instill that same always-questioning attitude in those whose education was entrusted to me.

Mother Superior was one of three nuns who had taught at the convent school I attended when I was young, in a small village in what was once called the Belgian Congo. After its independence in 1960, my country's name would be changed with almost every new leader, who usually gained power by wresting it violently from his predecessor. Since that time, it has been known variously as the Congo, Congo Free State, Zaire, and, as it is known today, the

CHAPTER 4

Restoration

(Brazil)

It was hard to believe that we could once again navigate these waters without dodging islands of debris every few yards. And navigate so quietly that birds perched on a log a few feet away onshore had not soared toward the safety of the treetops even before we rounded the bend in the Ituxi. For there was no noisy motor to disturb their annual nesting rituals, no sound of shotguns being fired in their direction seeking a trophy to impress friends and family back home in the “civilized” world.

The awed look on my father’s face told me everything I had hoped for: This section of the Amazon’s tributary had been restored to the same pristine condition that had existed more than thirty years earlier in the 1980s, when he would bring me here along with my three brothers, to practice the ancient fishing and hunting techniques of our Amerindian ancestors.

With his next words, my father confirmed the profound effect the experience was having on him, for when he whispered, “Beautiful, so beautiful,” he did not speak in the Portuguese of his brief formal education and limited contact with the modern world, which we had used on most of our journey to this point; he spoke instead in the language of our native ancestors. He had indeed been transported back to an earlier time, a time of harmonious coexistence with Nature, unquestioned respect for her wondrous but fragile beauty, and the utmost gratitude for her generous but not inexhaustible bounty.

In the past decade or so there had been other triumphs, but for me none could surpass this one, in no small part because it had been the most elusive. By no means could I take sole credit for all or even most of this dramatic turnabout, for it had in fact been accomplished in concert with others who shared my vision. Like-minded souls who, witnessing the savage wounds that already had been inflicted on the land for centuries in the name of progress, wanted to contribute what they could to its healing, so that future generations might yet have an opportunity to choose a different—hopefully less self-serving—path than many of our own and previous generations had.

Some goals eluded us yet: the Trans-Amazon Highway still afforded unimpeded passage through the rain forest to countless vehicles, forcing all living things within the forest to choose between mutation and survival—evolution, some call it—or resistance and extinction. And so far we had been

CHAPTER 5

Transformation

(Ireland)

“Yoo-hoo. Anyone home?”

I hurried to the door to greet Emma, removing the dirty gloves from my hands and placing them on the countertop as I exited the kitchen. She was early. Today my husband, Mel, and I were celebrating our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Our children, Shannon, Liam, and Rebecca, and the few other guests we had invited would not begin arriving for another two hours or so. Mel had driven to the store to buy a few items that we had overlooked for the evening’s festivities. I was spending a few minutes cleaning the kitchen before I would begin the next round of cooking.

“Hullo, luv. Am I the first to arrive as usual?” Emma asked chuckling, as I opened the front door and hugged her. “Just making sure my favorite foods aren’t gone before I have a chance to sample them,” she explained. “But you already know that all foods are my favorites!” she added, punctuating her not-inaccurate self-appraisal with her trademark robust laugh.

It was true that Emma enjoyed a hearty meal. And she usually tried to make sure that visitors to her home partook just as heartily—no one ever left her home hungry if she could help it. More often than not they were carrying a container of leftovers for good measure as they departed. “Here,” she said, handing me a package of what was no doubt something edible. “Mel’s favorite.” She didn’t have to tell me what was in the package. She almost never came to visit us without bringing him one of her tasty shepherd’s pies.

But food was not Emma’s real reason for arriving early, I knew. She just wanted to give me a hand with the preparations for the celebration. That, and to unburden some of her lingering grief over the death of her husband, Edward, before too many other guests had arrived. It was about one year since he had died. Although Emma made a good show of being her normally jolly self when others were around, with me she was more willing to let her guard down and share her true feelings, even allow a tear or two to make an appearance if she was in an especially blue mood at the time.

Though I was young enough to be Emma’s daughter, that had never been an obstacle to the friendship that had developed between us almost as soon as

CHAPTER 6

Homecoming

(India)

It didn't happen often, but sometimes I wondered how things might have been different for me if I had stayed in the US and established my medical practice there. Or if I had pursued my interest in DNA research; who knows, I might even have been one of the scientists on the team that, in 2023, had succeeded in producing oxygen-independent human embryos, by altering their DNA.

In 2025 I might even have joined some of those very scientists on one of the flights that had carried settlers to Mars. There the team would test the ability of such embryos to survive in that planet's virtually oxygen-free environment. Instead, I had returned to India, and to the town of Bhor, rather than to one of the major cities like Kolkata, or Mumbai, or Delhi.

Once Brian and I had divorced in 2016, with no children of our own there was little to keep me in the US, except perhaps the money I might have made and the far greater access I could have had to the most current equipment and facilities, as a member of a medical team with some prestigious hospital or clinic. But with the Internet only a mouse-click or two away, keeping up with the latest scientific advances and knowledge did not seem that problematic.

Of course, I would miss all of my relatives who remained in the US, as well as my friends and professional colleagues there. More important, however, I felt that I could make the most meaningful contribution in India. I couldn't help thinking of Doctors Kumar and Singh. If they had not come to Gujarat to lend a hand after the earthquake in 2001, if they had not stayed and established their clinic in Bhor, I might never have met them and been inspired to become a doctor myself. Instead, I might have gone to England and studied to become a *veddy British* lawyer, as my mother's father had been, or a computer engineer. That is what my father had wanted. But there were already enough lawyers and computer engineers in India. Helping to eliminate or reduce the needless suffering of others appealed to me far more, and being a doctor seemed a much likelier way to accomplish that.

In 2001 Dr. Singh, a pediatrician, and Dr. Kumar, an internist, had purchased the property next to my paternal grandparents' home, converting

CHAPTER 7

Reunion (Vietnam)

January 2026. Things were finally returning to normal. For the past year, most of the planet had been preoccupied with the regular flights that had just begun to Mars and other locations in space. Unlike previous flights, which were usually for the purpose of scientific research and had carried mostly astronauts or laboratory animals, the flights now were carrying immigrants, who would actually inhabit colonies that were being developed in space.

The earliest travelers had already completed the four-month-plus journey, and subsequent waves of immigrants were well on the way to joining them in their exotic new homeland. Here in Vietnam, at least, the novelty seemed to be wearing off somewhat now; everyone was once again preoccupied with the old. We were busy making preparations to celebrate Tet, the lunar New Year. It was just a few days away. Our youngest grandchildren especially were very excited. They were old enough now to know what to expect: parades and decorations, firecrackers and cherry bombs, *banh chung* and other goodies to eat. And small red envelopes with money inside.

I thought back to another lunar New Year, this one almost sixty years earlier, in 1968, when I was eleven years old. Only then, instead of firecrackers and cherry bombs, the noise was from real fighter jets and real bombs being dropped. The North Vietnamese were staging a major attack on South Vietnam and on the US troops who were helping them. Here, in what was then called Saigon, on January 31 the US embassy was under siege. Bases at Khe Sanh and other locations were already being bombarded mercilessly.

But that was another time. A time I didn't want to dwell on any longer than I had to. Instead, I turned my thoughts to January 2003, and my reunion with three of those American GI's here in what was now called Ho Chi Minh City. In 1968 they had been stationed miles away, in a village where I lived with my family at the time. There, they had befriended me.

All three had been in South Vietnam to fight against a regime led by the man in whose honor the city was now named. Unless one of them brought the subject up, I had no plans to do so myself. We were getting together to celebrate our friendship, not to lament what none of us had had the power to

CHAPTER 8

Exodus

My own aeronautic business! Who would believe it? Certainly not my wife, Joyce. When I broke the news to her, she responded sarcastically, “And I just bought my own spaceship. Where would you get that kind of money?”

Definitely not from her. Every penny of the millions she had made was hers, as she usually was only too eager to remind me.

“It cost me just one dollar,” I told her, trying not to feel too smug.

“What nonsense are you talking about?” she snapped. “Don’t be wasting my time with games, MacDonald Johnson,” she warned, storming out the front door to keep her 8:00 p.m. business appointment.

That conversation back in 2020 was typical of the way most of my conversations with Joyce had gone for much of the previous ten years. On our wedding day back in 1989, as the church choir sent us on our way as husband and wife with a rousing medley, I never would have imagined that our relationship could ever reach such a sad state. We had been so happy that day, two high school sweethearts, vowing to love and honor each other “until death do us part.” I meant it then, and I believed in trying to keep my word. If one of us asked for a divorce, it wasn’t going to be me. And so far Joyce hadn’t either. At least not in so many words.

When our son Donny was younger, I had wondered if Joyce was staying around just for his sake, at least long enough for him to graduate from high school. But Donny had graduated in 2012, had gone on to university, and in 2020 was almost through with graduate school. The summer of 2018, he had gotten married himself. And Joyce and I were still together then.

Not that she and I saw much of each other. Maybe that had been the key. Joyce was a successful—very successful—commercial real estate broker in Atlanta, Georgia, where we lived. Because of her job, she was often out at night and on weekends. I was a moderately successful helicopter pilot; my job wasn’t nearly as hectic. When Donny was growing up, we tried to make sure that at least one of us—usually I—was at home with him at all times. Otherwise, he would stay with Joyce’s parents or with one of my relatives or sometimes with his best friend, Tino, and his family.

At least once every other month or so business usually took Joyce or me