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Mama Linda and the Indian Techie: *A Modern Tale from Louisiana*

Once, a young techie from India who had graduated with an engineering degree from a university in the Northeast found a job in the Deep South. The job was a high-tech one, requiring knowledge of robotics. It was with a start-up that had set up shop in the very heart of Louisiana—rural Central Louisiana. The design and product development workshop of this new company, although close to town, was literally out in the country, surrounded by beautiful green fields. This was rice country. They also grew plenty of sugarcane, cotton, and corn in the area. In many ways, the landscape was reminiscent of the techie's original homeland—India. The techie felt happy when he arrived in Louisiana.

Before coming to the small southern town that was to be his new home, the techie had contacted a friend whom he had successfully located thanks to his Internet skills. The friend, who was himself somewhat of a recent transplant to the area, had hospitably offered to lodge him until suitable accommodation could be arranged. For many days, the techie stayed with the friend. During this time, it became clear to him that finding a place of one's own—the right kind of place—was not that easy. It called for patience, and probably lots of research—on the Internet! Thankfully, there was no need to hurry. Getting acclimated to the new job was the first priority. The folks in the office were really friendly. G, as the friend called him, immediately felt at home even though the work was grueling. Days passed.

The techie, in the meantime, took to his new life the way a fish takes to water. He especially enjoyed cruising along the relatively empty rural highways and country roads. In contrast to the super-chilly hyper-busy ultra-urban Northeast, he found the lush environs and the gentle rhythms of small town Louisiana life different and pleasantly appealing. He also found the local people very friendly and likeable, including the cop who ticketed him one morning for speeding on the country highway he took to work every day.

Once things had settled at work, the hunt for an apartment began in earnest. The friend, bothered by his own allergies, had very thoughtfully advised him to be on the lookout for signs of mold. And also to be careful of the spiders of the South that could bite real nasty. These spiders often hid in corners, between the wall and the carpeting. Every day, either before or after work, the techie would visit an apartment complex in the

hope of finding something “nice.” Most of the time he went alone, but sometimes the friend would accompany him. There weren’t that many apartment complexes in the town to begin with, at least not that many modern-looking ones, but they searched hard. They checked out a good number of places. The town had apparently not grown much in the past 50 years. Finding an apartment—the right kind of apartment—was more difficult than the techie had imagined. It was late fall, and vacancies were few. He did not like what was available. More days passed. The ever-cheerful techie began to feel discouraged.

One evening, he returned from work later than usual and jubilantly announced to the friend that he had found the perfect apartment. In fact, he had even put down a deposit. It was in a complex that he had accidentally found while driving in an unfamiliar part of town... they were closing up for the day when he had arrived ... he had made it just in time ... the vacancy had occurred the same day ... the buildings looked nice and modern though he had not been able to see too much because it was already getting dark ... it had been a real stroke of luck! The friend, relieved at the prospect of such a long-drawn project ending—and rejoicing over the possibility of recovering full sovereignty over his living space—enthusiastically decided he would accompany the techie the following morning to this exciting apartment complex that had miraculously materialized like manna in the wilderness.

Morning arrived, and the friend found himself being driven by the techie to a strange part of town. They were soon passing through the open gates of a housing community. The development comprised about ten or twelve buildings that lazily lay scattered in an open field. It was a pretty picture. The property looked open and spacious from the car. As they parked, the friend, with his keen eye, noticed that the buildings, although not exactly run down, had definitely seen better days. The complex, although neat in appearance, exuded an almost unnoticeable aura of neglect, perhaps because the concrete sidewalk was uneven or broken in some places. The friend also spied a couple of rusty tin cans and shreds of what must have once been plastic grocery bags dotting the open grassy field that spread beyond the office building. And oh, the grass had quite a few weeds too!

The office was still closed. The staff had not yet arrived. Actually, not a soul was in sight anywhere around them. It seemed like the whole complex was still asleep. It was still quite early for a Saturday morning. Only a nonchalant sun had come out, piercing a dissipating morning mist with its light. The fall morning air was cool. As they waited in front of the single-story office building, the friend caught sight of a board on one side of the lawn. It was probably where they posted notices and announcements. He walked over to see what it said. The techie, in the meantime, had strayed some distance away over to the other side. The friend spent a few seconds perusing the announcements stuck on the board. Suddenly, from the corner of his eye, he caught sight of G talking to a swarthy and lanky stranger. Or was it the stranger who was talking to

G? The man was dressed in shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt which in local parlance they called a “wife-beater.” He was also wearing a faded baseball cap back to front. A few seconds later, the friend saw G digging into his pocket and pulling out his wallet. He extracted some dollar bills which he handed over to the stranger who then hurriedly walked away over the grassy field towards the main road after having stuffed the money into his pocket. A few moments later, G rejoined his friend.

“Huh, what happened? Who was that?” the friend asked in astonishment.

“Just someone who wanted money ... who lives here. He ran out of gas over there on the main road. He said he needed money to get gas for his car.”

The friend could not believe what he was hearing. To him, it had looked more like a hold-up. Recovering from his surprise, his first reaction was concern for G. Many questions raced through his mind. What did this augur for G’s future in terms of safety and security? Was this place safe to live? Was G capable of looking after himself? But more than anything, the friend was indignant with the techie for encouraging what he considered an American “social ill”—panhandling!

He chided him. “Why did you do it? You should not have given him any money. It’s only encourages such people.”

The techie had a very convincing answer. “In Connecticut, if someone approaches you and asks you for money, you give it to them! What if he had a gun?”

That did make sense. The man could have been armed and dangerous.

Their debate was interrupted just then as a petite bespectacled woman in a flowing white gown with large printed flowers floated up towards them from the other direction, materializing as if out of nowhere.

“Good morniiiiing. Looks like you’ve been waiting for me,” she chirped. “My husband said you would come today to sign the lease. He met you yesterday. He’s the manager. I help him run this place.”

She was all smiles. Her twinkling eyes behind her big round glasses seemed to smile as well. How old was she? The friend wondered. Fifty-fiveish? Her thick smooth gray hair came straight down to her shoulders. Maybe she was sixty? *Non, pas possible*. Not that old. She had approached them with such brisk and light steps, almost like a child. Was she Native American? Or Cajun? Maybe she was Creole! The friend had heard these names and knew these were some of the groups that made up the melting pot that was Louisiana. Good at figuring people out, or so he thought, he could not quite decipher her unknown yet familiar features. And what was that imperceptible accent? He was aware that Louisiana, as a “gumbo of cultures,” had its own variety of accents. This definitely was not Cajun. Or was it?

“I am Miss Linda, but everyone around here calls me Mama Linda. You can also call me Mama Linda.” She beamed as they shook hands.

Unlocking the door to her office, Mama Linda led them inside. She sat down behind her desk, and invited them to sit across from her. The

friend gazed at the floral patterns on the blue wallpaper. The office felt so cozy. The phrase *ladies' parlor* popped up in his mind.

Mama Linda spoke first. "You look Indian. You must be from India." The techie nodded vigorously.

"And I am Filipino. I met my husband when he was stationed in the Philippines many years ago. He was in the military. I came to America after I married him." She gave another big smile. Mama Linda proceeded to tell them about her four children who were now all grown up and had moved away to other towns. But they all lived in Louisiana. Mama Linda was glad that none of them were too far away.

After they had chatted for a few minutes, the friend brought to Mama Linda's attention what had occurred just a few minutes earlier. *They had been accosted for money! On the complex property! By a resident!* Mama Linda listened sympathetically. She asked for a description of the culprit. As the techie described the man, Mama Linda shook her head. She knew everybody in the complex. Each and every resident! The description did not match anybody that she knew. This was certainly not one of her people.

"It must have been somebody from outside," she concluded with a definitive tone.

The friend decided to enquire if the area was considered a safe part of town.

"This is a very safe neighborhood, but sometimes we have people who wander in from outside," clarified Mama Linda.

It was now time for a formal tour of the complex. The techie was particularly interested in showing the friend the apartment from the inside. Mama Linda pulled out a huge ring of keys from her drawer and they all trooped out. The trio began walking towards a cluster of buildings where the apartment for the techie had been reserved. The light was now much brighter, the sun much stronger. As they headed towards the apartment buildings, they passed the spot where the stranger had accosted G.

"This is the place," the techie said, pointing to the spot emphatically. "Right here."

"It's very unusual. We've never had such an incident before. This is a very safe neighborhood. You have nothing to worry about," Mama Linda responded in a tone meant to be reassuring. She paused for a second and added, "The only violence we have around here is domestic violence."

There was silence as they walked. A few moments later, they made a turn and were at the building where the apartment had fallen vacant. Across from it, a good distance away, was another building. That one had a large group of people relaxing on chairs in front of it. Most of them were still in their pajamas. There were children of all ages running around. A big man with a big belly, clad in sweatpants and a sleeveless T-shirt, was standing in front of a barbecue and poking something into it. A few women with small children were sitting on the stairway leading up to the second floor. The sound of a radio playing, mixed with the sound of

people chattering, drifted into the air. They seemed to be enjoying their weekend morning.

“As you can see, this is a family neighborhood but there are some residents who make a lot of noise, especially at night. We are trying to get them evicted,” Mama Linda announced unexpectedly, without looking anywhere in particular.

As they climbed up the stairs, the techie and the friend had to make an effort to keep up with the fleet-footed Mama Linda. She unlocked a door and they entered the apartment. A faint musty smell greeted them. The interior seemed rather gloomy in spite of the brightness of the morning outside. The dark brown carpet felt like a thick uneven layer of padding under their feet. Mama Linda showed them the fridge, the microwave, the cable for TV, and the closets. Finally, she pointed out to a little peephole in the front door.

“It’s quite safe here, but if anybody knocks on the door, and you do not recognize them, you should not open it,” she advised good-naturedly.

“I see. Okay,” the techie mumbled.

Traversing the same spot on the way back to the office, Mama Linda had one more recommendation for the young techie. “Our complex is safe, but if a stranger comes up to you when you are walking outside, don’t make eye contact. Just keep walking.”

As they reached the front of Mama Linda’s office, the friend glanced at the techie who had a concerned look on his face, turned to Mama Linda and said, “Actually, we still have a few more places on our list. We want to check them out before we make our final decision.”

“No problem, but just so you know, we cannot keep the apartment empty for too long. There is a lot of demand for these apartments. You will have to let us know soon,” Mama Linda replied with a twinkle in her eye.

“We will let you know very soon. It was good meeting you. Thank you for the tour,” said the friend.

Polite sentiments and handshakes were exchanged. Mama Linda gave them both a hug. The techie and his friend got into their car and waved back at Mama Linda as they drove off.

As their vehicle turned onto the main road, the friend said to the techie, “Not to worry. You can stay with me till you can find a place of your own,” just as he had done three weeks earlier, on the phone.

The techie nodded appreciatively and his enthusiasm returned. “Great! Where should we go now? It’s such a beautiful day. Let’s look for more apartments. Too bad I can’t stay here ... although I must say I really liked Mama Linda ....”

The techie ended up forfeiting his deposit. But for a long time afterwards, he would enjoy telling everyone the story of what had happened that day, especially the part about Mama Linda and all the advice that she had shared. Ultimately, he found an apartment in town that was to his liking and not too far from the friend’s house. However, that is not the end of the techie’s story. Two years later, there was a recession

and the high-tech company that had set up shop in rural Central Louisiana ran out of funds and was forced to lay off several employees. The techie was one of them. Luckily, only a few weeks later, he landed a job in Dallas. His friend was glad for him but regretted his departure because his presence in Central Louisiana had made it seem a little bit more like home. As for the techie who was moving on, the quest for an apartment, for friends, and for home was starting anew. Under a new sky. In a very big city this time.