

The Forgotten

By Simone Adams

This is one man's story. Remember him.



He is wary of me, rightfully so. I've come to his home unannounced, uninvited. I introduce myself while handing over a bag of groceries as a gift. He remains suspicious. I reach out to shake his hand, to break the tension that is building. He tells me his name is Luther and offers a fist bump instead, ashamed of his dirty hands. I tell Luther that I'm a writer—a storyteller—and if he's willing, I would love to hear his story. He eyes me with a leery scowl, as if he expects me to reveal the whole thing is a joke. Finally, but not as reluctantly as I had anticipated, Luther agrees to share his story.

There are two tree logs in front of us and I ask Luther if we can sit. He's still nervous about my presence but he nods and takes a seat. I sit on the log, adjusting to make myself comfortable, and suddenly Luther hops up realizing that he's forgotten his manners and announcing that he is going to get a cushion for my seat. I beg him not to worry about me, insisting I'm fine without the cushion. Luther sits back down and apologizes that he hasn't tidied up the place.

Luther's home is a crudely built hut in a patch of woods nestled between a bustling thoroughfare and new developments in West Atlanta. His hut has three walls of rotted wood, a roof of rusted corrugated scrap metal, a blue plastic tarp for a front door, and it stands about four feet tall. Luther is at least six feet tall. His "front yard" is littered with trash, discarded over the many years he's lived here. There are other huts, some occupied and others dismantled. The huts were originally built for the homeless by a church group but they were demolished by city officials who came through years ago in preparation for new developments. The City offered job training to the individuals living there and relocated them to a shelter, however, the developments never made it through that section of town. Luther, who is 63 years old, and a friend of his stumbled upon the remains of the previous shanty-town eight years ago. They pieced together new huts from the debris of the old huts and settled into what has become *home*.

Home

hōm/

noun

1. the place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household.

Luther is tall, with a thin frame and a kind smile. Only his eyes betray the sorrow of his life. His eyes are sad even when he smiles. It is his smile that will haunt me long after this interview. His smile speaks of hope.

Luther's story pours out slowly. His voice is deep, like a radio announcer. He speaks clearly and candidly. He's from Mississippi where his boyhood home sat on the banks of the mighty Mississippi River. However, he skips over his childhood and begins his story at a place that sets the tone for where he is today. His story begins at the Mississippi State Penitentiary, also known as Parchman Farm. He spent time in and out of jail and prison, mostly for theft and burglaries. The man in front of me is gentle and kind with impeccable manners, but his actions as a young man had lifelong repercussions. With no education, a prison record, and no "marketable skill"—he says this with a tinge of regret as he rubs his calloused palms together—Luther was unable to find steady work in Mississippi.

Eventually, he found an opportunity to take a test to operate heavy equipment, a skill that would serve useful in finding gainful employment. Luther studied for months and boarded a plane headed to Florida where he would take the test. The flight had a short layover in Atlanta where he had a few friends. His two-and-a-half-hour layover lasted for eight months.

"How sweet it was in Atlanta, especially for a black man." Luther chuckles as he tells this part of the story, perhaps remembering a carefree time in his life.

His smile is broad, but fades as he continues his story. His hands are folded neatly in his lap, and his thumbs begin to twirl around each other anxiously. I want to assure him that I won't judge him, but I don't think it will help. His head is hung low—I am certain that he has already judged himself.

Luther's sweet times in Atlanta turned sour following a brawl that left him with multiple stab wounds. He was rushed to Grady Hospital where he fell into a coma for two days and woke up surrounded by nuns who didn't expect him to survive. There was a phone by his bed and he called his mother.

His mother begged him to continue to Florida or come home. He chose Florida.

As I sat listening to Luther's story, I couldn't help but hope the story would have an upturn at this juncture even though I already knew the ending of the story.

In Florida, he lived in a seedy motel that was rampant with drug use and other criminal activity. Luther was in his mid to late thirties, old enough to know better but young enough to feel like he was missing out on the best parts of his life. He was fresh out of the hospital and his injuries wouldn't allow him to operate the heavy equipment he had counted on to turn his life around. He escaped disappointment by indulging in women and crack. He'd always enjoyed the former but it was his first time using the latter. He became a day laborer, taking on farm work wherever he could, only the supervisors didn't pay a minimum wage or even a stipend—they paid laborers in drugs and cheap alcohol.

Eventually, Luther found himself back in Atlanta. He was in a deplorable condition. He had wanted to leave the lifestyle he was living in Florida but he wasn't ready to face his family. It

took several years before Luther was back on track. He landed a string of good jobs and by 2005 he was working both a part-time job as a dishwasher and a full-time job with a construction crew.

Luther smiles again, “I really thought I was gonna make it.”

When I ask him what happened, he laughs before answering, “I’m not gonna blame it on her...”

He evades the direct question and instead tells me that he holds himself accountable for all that’s happened in his life but adds, almost convincingly, “I have high hopes.”

“I don’t hold anyone responsible. I’m here on my own accord. I’d like to do better but sometimes you get frustrated applying for jobs. All I have to offer is my labor.” He looks at his hands, turning them over in his lap before adding, “With God’s help, I will get out of this.”

This is the third place Luther has lived since being homeless in Atlanta. Luther rebuilt his abandoned hut just before President Obama took office. In the mornings, he heads out with a grocery cart—there are several parked nearby—to pick up cans and scrap metal that he sells to earn his keep. “It’s better than begging or robbing,” he proclaims.

The tone has turned somber so I ask him about his childhood, which immediately earns me one of his smiles that I have already come to adore. He calls Mississippi “beautiful” and his smile grows wider as he recalls his boyhood.

“My parents didn’t have much. But you know what they say, ‘we were poor, but had a lotta love’. Oh man, I loved to fish. I loved the Southern life. Even in the cotton field. I chopped cotton alongside my mama and grandmama. I got 50 cents a day. That was big money when I was eight or nine years old.” There’s a youthful boyishness to his weathered face as he reminisces.

He grew up in a typical southern town where the extended family all lived in the same neighborhood. The neighbors looked out for each other’s children and everyone knew everyone. On the weekends all the kids and adults would head over the hill to fish in the Mississippi River.

“That period...that time period...was beautiful,” his voice fades on the last words and he pauses, reflecting. I wonder if he is talking about that time in history when family was strong or that time in his life when he was with his family.

The silence is long and sad. I hesitate before asking the next question, “Do you still keep in touch with any of your family?”

He looks down and answers with a husky longing in his voice, “no.”

“You miss them.” I say it as a statement, there’s no question. His eyes water and he begins to talk again, telling a part of his story that he skipped earlier.

His voice quivers as he tells me about the last time he saw his mother. It was 2001. His mother and his baby brother had gotten word that he was in Atlanta through some old family friends

who had seen him around the city. They tracked him down and persuaded him to come home. The first words out of his mother's mouth was, "That ain't my child." She couldn't reconcile that the emaciated, worn down man in her home was the vibrant son she sent off to find his way in the world so many years ago.

Luther's mother was entered in a care home shortly after his return and before long she was on her death bed. Luther was helpless to do anything for his dying mother.

"That's the main reason I don't go home anymore," there's a heavy longing in his words that causes his voice to grow deeper, "I know she's gone now."

I watch—with a lump in my own throat—as Luther breaks down, barely able to get the words out. He apologizes and excuses himself. Luther walks a few feet away and stands for a moment with his back to me. He pulls a dirty handkerchief from his pocket and blows his nose. He doesn't return immediately but when he does, we sit quietly and I resist the urge to hug him.

"Just the idea that you are out here and we're talking. You're showing interest and concern... that's enough to motivate me. I know I can do better. I need that inspiration that you have given me. It's been a while since I could sit down to share. The guys out here just want to talk about getting high. I don't get a chance to really talk to anyone."

When we part ways I do hug him. As I wrap my arms around him and squeeze his thin body through his thick coveralls, I ask his permission to check on him every once in a while. He agrees, surely skeptical that he will ever see me again.

Luther walks me to the edge of the camp, waving as I continue along the path out of the woods. I look back once and I know that this cannot be the last time he sees me.

I am faithful to my word and I find Luther again a few months later. He greets me like an old friend and my heart is warmed by his genuine smile. He is the gentleman I remember, offering me a seat and taking care to make sure I am comfortable. Then I learn that he has just been released from the hospital after suffering a stroke.

Luther looks at me in earnest, "I'm going to get help. This time I really am. I don't wanna die out here."

Luther is faithful to his word as well. The last time I checked on him, Luther was sixty days sober and a resident at an addiction recovery home where he is allowed to live for up to two years. Luther is healthy and he's getting stronger. The recovery home will help him find a job and eventually, an apartment. Soon, Luther will be able to tell his story without the shame that slumped his shoulders when I first met him. And when his high hopes are realized, I will be there to listen to that story as well.



The homeless are the forgotten citizens, the ones we ignore when we walk down the street.
I will not forget Luther.