

Southern Hum

Southern Literature



***Butterflies are Free* / Lockie Hunter**

Sugie figured anyone could be an uncle if they'd seen her in her pajamas. Uncle Grayson was no exception. When Sugie asked Mother to explain Uncle Grayson's lineage to their family, Mother had replied, "Why Grayson may not be blood relative, but neither is cousin Madison due to her adoption." Mother whispered the last word. "There are many folks who are uncles and aunts to you who have done this family a might service at one time or another, and those needing to define family in a narrow view can just kiss my foot." Sugie was not trying to narrow her family. She just wanted to know where everyone stood. Who belonged to her grandmother, Pearl through proper blood channels such as herself and Mother and who was just a friend. Cousin Madison did not tan like her and the other

family, but burned up like a lobster and always spent a few miserable days inside when at the beach. Grayson was even whiter than Madison, and his bald head seemed to glow in the sun so much so that Sugie could barely look at him full in the face when out of doors. Sugie just wanted to know how a man *that* white could be her uncle. That's all. She figured that the folks still around after supper, those that Mother allowed to stay after the girls had bathed and brushed and were in their houserobes, those were family. All other guests were escorted to the door proper and goodnights were said all around with promises to see them soon.

Those leftover people, those must be the family. So Sugie supposed that Grayson, who seemed to forever be leftover, must be family.

This morning, Uncle Grayson was sitting on the couch watching the Vols game, so Sugie decided to be a turtle. She was sitting in the living room with the olive green (her Mother called the color loden) beanbag on her back secretly sucking at her bright orange thumb. Her mother had coated her thumb with Tabasco trying to dissuade Sugie from sucking. "After all darling, a girl your age, all of seven and a half, still a thumb sucker, why I would have thought you'd be embarrassed by now. Don't the other girls poke fun? Lawsy Mercy, Sugie if that isn't the behavior of a big ol' baby."

As it turns out Sugie had developed a taste for the spicy liquid and happily accepted it when Mother applied it to her thumb. Now Mother had found some new orange substance that wouldn't wash off. Mother had bumped into Doctor Thorn at the Food Lion and he had recommend some foul amber liquid that make Sugie dizzy when she sucked it. Sugie always suspected ol Doctor Thorn of witchraftery and now she was quite certain that he was in league with the dark forces.

"What you doin' under there, Sug?" The voice was that of her cousin Madison.

"Can't you see I'm a turtle? You've eyes."

"I thought we were butterflies today," said Madison. "Mama mended my gown so now we can all resume our butterfly status."

The two girls were given matching gowns and housecoats for Christmas from their grandmother, Pearl. Sugie's was her signature color of blue while Madison's was yellow. The two girls had spent hours pouring through the Official Tennessee Field Guide to Birds, Butterflies, and Moths until they found their respective types. Yellow-robed Madison was to be a regal Monarch, but Sugie had a hard time finding a blue butterfly that she was fond of, so she chose the Giant Amazonian moth.

"You sure you want to be a stinky old moth?" Madison had said. "Mother says the pantry moths are eating all her cereal right up. She's awful mad and has set out

traps with female-mother moth smell to get all the male moths confused. Then when the male moths arrive, whammo, they get stuck in some gluey thing."

"How awful,"

"Well they are just ol' pantry moths."

Sugie's belief was that Grayson and Mother had been plotting something fierce. Sugie had heard whispering for days.

"I think those two are up to something real funny," Sugie told Madison. "Perhaps they want to plumb stop our butterfly transformation."

"I wouldn't put anything past ol' Grayson," Madison replied. "He gets those beads of sweat when he's plotting real hard. They break from his head-top all the way clear to his neck where they just sort of bead up. If I've seen it once, I've seen it a dozen. Creeps me right out."

"Imagine you talking like that about your blood."

"What makes you think I'm related to Grayson?"

"You're both so white."

Madison grabbed Sugie's arm hard and then thought better of her actions. "You're nothing but an ol' thumb sucking moth anyway," she said and walked away.

For supper Sugie refused the asparagus casserole and baked rice.

"I'm a pantry moth. We prefer cereal," she had said. Mother finally agreed and poured her a bowl of frosted flakes.

"NOOOOO" Sugie said. "We moths only eat the freakies cereal."

As Mother tried to pour the frosted flakes back into the box Sugie sang, "we are the freakies. We are the freakies and this is our freaky tree. We never miss a meal, 'cause we love our cereal."

Madison joined in a second round of the song.

"I swanee, you girls are just plain simpy," said Mother.

"Hey, let's do a tub transform tonight," said Madison.

"You sure you want to bathe with a thumb sucking moth?" said Sugie.

"I'm sure."

That night the girls soaked in the tub in their "puppa" stage.

"Ooh I can feel it working," Sugie said as the water rushed over her back. She let the water drip from the top of her head onto her long hair and then placed a wet strand in her mouth and sucked the water tricking down. Madison was at the head of the tub, in charge of water control and Sugie was huddled in the tub's rear part. Both girls were in a fetal position.

"Ow Maddie, you like to scald me. Add some cold water now."

"Baby," Madison said.

After the bath the girls ran around the living room flapping their gowns like wings and chanting, "butterflies are free. Butterflies are free." Their gowns were stuck to various parts of their body where the girls had not dried themselves completely from their bath.

"Look at these here sticky girls," Grayson said as he tried to tackle himself a butterfly. "They sure are putting on the dog tonight."

There were a dozen other folks in the room of the usual assortment. Sugie noticed that the adults had taking up all the seating places. Some were just lounging on the floor. Ms. Pitts from next door was running her fingers through the thick shag of the carpet. The girls wove in and out of the guests, gowns fluttering.

"Butterflies are free," they said.

"Madison dear, why don't you think about getting on to bed," said Mother.

"But Sugie don't have to..."

"Never you mind about Sugie, you get your hiney in that bed now, lickety split," said Mother. "And don't forget to say your prayers, brush up, and keep the thing shiny."

"yes'm," said Madison.

Grayson grabbed Sugie around the waist and forced her to the ground. "If you're free how come I caught you so easy?" All the guests laughed.

"Mother make him let me go! Grayson your breath stinks."

"Well dear, Grayson has something he needs to show you, hear now," said Mother who nodded at Grayson.

"Sit down ri'cheer," said Grayson. Wouldn't you do pertneer anything to please

Mother?"

Sugie was silent. Where was this leading?

"Thing of it is, Sug, you got yourself a might large problem there with your thumb. Girl your age, sucking away like some babe on the titty," said Grayson. "I had that problem once, you know, and looka what happened to me."

Grayson balanced his highball on his left thigh and with both hands reached into his mouth. Sugie thought he seemed to be digging for something. The whole of his left hand was stuck up inside his mouth. Finally he removed his hand and with his hand came his actual teeth.

Sugie screamed. All the adults just laughed. Sugie couldn't understand. What on earth could make a man's teeth remove like that? Her blue gown quivered.

"Ya shee Shu," Grayson was talking now but not talking so well due to the lack of teeth. Sugie wasn't listening. She had decided never to listen to any of them again. Madison had come running from the bedroom when she heard Sugie scream. Mother met Madison in the hallway and told her to get on back to bed. Sugie ran after her.

"Ol Grayson's not a whole person!" Sugie was excitedly shaking Madison. "He comes in parts. I think he disassembles all together. I know for a true fact that his teeth come out his head all the way."

"You crazy baby moth," said Madison. "You smell like ol' Grayson. You drunk?"

"But Maddie."

"Leave us alone," said Madison. "I'm trying to be normal here."

"And Mother told me if I'm not careful I will have the exact same result if I suck my thumb, but I'm not scared. I'm no kin to him. I know that sort of thing is just make-believe. Or witchcraft. I bet he's in league with ol' Thorn."

"Sugie, you have lost your last nut. Get some sleep, you. Sleep off that drunk."

"Maddie!"

"Sug, I'm warning you, you leave us alone now. Crazy!"

Late that same night Sugie consulted the book and found her a new type. The Colorado Hairstreak. Bright blue. Through no one's help it's blue and it can't become glaring white by mistake one day and it can't fall to pieces like ol' Grayson. The other great thing of it is that the Official Tennessee Field Guide to Birds, Butterflies, and Moths says the range for the Hairstreak is "Utah, Colorado,

Arizona, and New Mexico; north into southern Wyoming, west into eastern Nevada." Smack dab in the middle of nowhere with not a family member in sight.

Bio:

Lockie Hunter is from the hills of Tennessee . She is currently an MFA student in creative writing at Boston 's Emerson College . She notices a distinct lack of dogwoods in Boston and plans to relocate to Asheville upon graduation in Spring of 2007.

You can find her work in the pages of *The Emerson Review* and in *Ralph Magazine*.