

Member of the Club

by Davis P. Heard

The loud clanging bell of East End School let out a whoop, scream and holler of children. They were the entire spectrum of a chocolate rainbow: caramel, coffee water, butter pecan, vanilla chocolate, all the colors of brown that anyone could imagine, tumbling and running and falling and jumping to get to the swings, merry-go-round whatever, because wasting time at recess was unthinkable.

But another group of girls, 3rd graders all herded over to the concrete covered swimming pool. The pool had been covered over for as long as anyone could remember, probably from the days of when it was a white Catholic school. According to Sticleg, the neighborhood wino tramp, "Soon as dey [the school board] 'cided they was gon let colored chirren have dis here ol school after they bought it from dem nuns they come in and full it up with concrete."

I told Mrs. King what Sticleg said and she said, "Terry, don't listen to Mr. Augustus." (That was his real name; Mrs. King never called anybody by a nickname.) "I have told you children over and over again that these neighborhood legends, stories and fables are not grounded in truth." I decided that I would ask Miss Thomas on Sunday cause Mrs. King didn't grow up in Haines.

Anyway, my 3rd grade friends were all excited about my newest idea for our latest club. I had passed a note to my best friend Joanne Gibson during reading. "I got a idea for a new club." She turned her head just a little and whispered, "What?"

Mrs. King was bent over our latest spelling test. She never looked up but said in her stern southern voice, "I know two people in this room if they don't close their mouth and get to their work they will be feeling the end of my strap when that recess bell rings." So we shut up with a quickness. Details would have to wait.

"OK, what's the name of this club?" Delores Jefferson was always the one who tried to be the boss of our class. She was tall and skinny with really long legs. Everybody always got caught when she was the runner in duck, duck, goose. The other girls that showed up was Ruthie, Mattie, Precious, Joanne, Diana, and Estherine.

Ruthie Coles was sitting on the edge of the pool looking at her leg. I knew what she was getting ready to do. Ruthie's legs were the nastiest things you ever wanted to see. She stayed outside late in the evening in the summer playing with her brothers so they were the main course for the Mississippi river birds (mosquitoes). She would scratch those mosquito bites until they bled. Then they would get these hard, black scabs that had a dot of red in the middle. Then she would pick at them until they bled. They would almost heal and then she would start picking at them all over again. She was intently picking at one of her bites and talking a mile a minute.

"Yeah, is we gon let Miss Mitchell girls in our club this time? I thank we oughta jus let it be us. They don ever come up with nuthin on they own. They always copying offa us. Las time when we had a party they didn't bring nothing to eat but two bags of 10 cent tater chips and dem old hard two for a penny cookies from Mr. Chan's."

"Hush, Ruthie," I said, "we only got a few minutes and I wanna get started. The name of the club is the Long Hair Club." Everybody was silent for a split second and then we all started talking at the same time.

"Oooh, that's a good name!" Mattie said. "Well, that takes out a lot of people." We all bust out laughing and looked at Diana Turner at the same time. Diana had hair so short you could smell her brains.

"I got long hair," she said as she turned her nose up and rolled her big eyes.

"Yeah, on the days yo Mama pin that horse tail on the back of yo scalp," Mattie said. She had stood up to adjust her slip. It was always hanging. We were falling over each other laughing.

Diana stood up to face Mattie. When she got mad, nervous, or scared she would sweat like she was a leaking faucet, and she was gushing like Old Faithful right about now.

"Well, at least it don't look like no kukaburr patch like yours." Mattie lunged for Diana and Delores jumped up and stood between them.

"Y'all stop!! We gon waste all our time with y'all talking bout each other. Terry, what's the rules for our club since you got the idea?"

I didn't have any rules. I never thought Diana would want to be in our club. She was in Miss Stone's room and the only reason she came over was because she saw a group of us huddled together. She always was nosy like that.

Estherine Reynolds hadn't said much the whole time we were sitting and talking. She was a really nice girl but not many people played with her a lot cause she stuttered. Not all the time but just enough to make some people who are impatient not want to stand and take the time to wait for her to get out what she had to say. She had the softest hair I had ever saw or felt on anyone. It had this light wispy texture that gave way to fat thick braids that would bounce when you put a barrette on the end. Because of her stutter she wouldn't always play with everybody else. Lots of times she would just get in a swing, stand up and pump way up high all by herself until recess was over. A few times, in between all the club making up that I would do, I would swing with Estherine and tell her how I wished I could go as high as she would. She would smile her big toothy smile and shout, "All you gotta do is just pump your legs!!"

All eyes were on Estherine. They really didn't want her in the club because then it would mean that we would have to wait and be patient and listen to her when she had a stuttering fit, but I knew if I said it was OK they would say it was OK.

The funny thing about this whole situation was that I could not stand Diana Turner. None of us could, but because she was rich and her mother always gave really nice gifts to everybody at Christmas and bought the most food whenever we had class parties, we knew that we could count on having a feast even though she would brag about how much her mother paid for everything she bought. I liked Estherine, but just not enough to let her be in our club and have all my other friends mad at me. Besides she wasn't as popular as the rest of us. We were all known for something we did really well. Joanne was good at arithmetic. Delores, of course, was the runner. Precious had the best handwriting. Diana wore the prettiest clothes, Mattie could sing and always led devotion at the beginning of class in weekly assembly, and Ruthie's mama did laundry for Miss Stone in exchange for piano lessons. Her and Ruthie were always going to churches singing and playing at programs and the 5th Sunday singing unions.

Estherine said, her voice beginning to hesitate, "But I gggggot long hair."

Diana spoke up taking control of the situation. She wanted to be in this group and she decided to help me out by saying, "Estherine, you ain't as popular as the rest of us. Everybody at school know us but don't nobody know you." The others nodded in agreement with Diana.

"Bbbbut Terry said it was the Lllllong Hair Club and I ggggot long hair."

Diana's brash, take-charge personality gave me the courage to speak up: "Estherine we gon be doing a awful lot of talking in this club, and you talk too slow. Maybe you can be in our next club." Everyone agreed with my coldly blunt statement.

Estherine made one last effort to get me to change my mind. "Well, you said this was the Lllllong Hair Club. Diana ain't got no lllllong hair."

Her truthful statement seared my mind and pricked at the walls of my usually tender heart. But because I knew they really did not want Estherine in the club also, I ignored what I knew was right and instead said, "Well, we just decided that we only want six girls from Miz King's class."

Estherine had a bewildered look on her face. I could not look her in the eye because I knew that she knew that we just didn't want her in our club. I saw her look deep into my eyes and say to my soul, "Remember the fun on the swings, how I helped you, how I included you. Didn't I show you how to go higher? Wasn't I your friend that day?"

She walked away, but it wasn't a sad departure. It was a "what a bunch of silly girls I really don't care if you don't want me in your dumb old club" departure. She went to the swings and did what she was best at, swinging higher than anyone else on the playground and not being afraid to do it.

The rest of the girls immediately began to chatter and make plans about things we would do, like wear red socks on Friday, two ponytails on Wednesdays, that kind of stuff. Their voices seemed far away, a backdrop to the painful truth of Estherine's statement rattling around in my empty, immature childish mind.

The Long Hair Club lasted about three weeks, give or take a few fights with Diana, the Thanksgiving program, after-school practices, and us just plain forgetting to "meet."

Even after the Long Hair Club met its demise things were never quite the same between Estherine and me. I would race to the swings and try to get the one next to her. She was always nice and would still encourage me to "pump hard," but I could tell that she no longer thought of me as special, as the person who was known as the one that was always nice to everybody.

A hard rain came up the summer before we went to 4th grade. Kids would sometimes go swimming in the city ditches. That summer before 4th grade, Estherine drowned in a city ditch near her house.

I remember the last time I tried to get a swing beside Estherine, but another girl got there before me. I remember her looking at me and saying with her eyes, "Well, how does it feel when it happens to you?" I see her, wind blowing back those wispy thick ponytails, her legs pumping, pumping, and pumping. Her eyes looking, searching deep into my soul.

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