It's a big night for my parents. The friends have come over. The popcorn is popped and buttered and salted. Lively conversation coasts from the living room and into the kitchen where I'm planning my floor show. Why do old people lay about and gab and play Monopoly when they could simply sit back and let me amuse them? Who cares about who owns Marvin Gardens or who gets to be the Scotty Dog? It's Friday night, and all my parents can think to do is invite their friends over to play out their real estate fantasies in a languid waltz of little green plastic houses. Perhaps I'm just jealous because the Monopoly box is always cruelly out of my reach on the top shelf when I want to play -- as if I don't know enough not to swallow a game piece. At any rate, it's time for variety.

I strip down buck, saddle my wooden, wheeled, bright yellow Playschool giraffe and scoot into the living room. Adult heads turn and eyes squint as cheeks divide into smiles. I bear down hard as my wheels abruptly meet the green shag rug and strain to plow on through. This is the moment I've been training for. If I don't make at least one complete circuit around the coffee table the whole venture will have been wasted. However, before my round is even half way finished, it's obvious that I've reached my goal. I am the center of attention. Who needs board games and popcorn when you've got a naked kid and his wooden giraffe? My victory is short-lived, though. Amid chuckles and sniggers, Mom quickly scoops me up and Dad impounds my ride, but the damage has been done. After my little cabaret, Monopoly will pale in comparison. In short order I find myself doing time behind the netted walls of my play penitentiary, my senses still reeling from the heady intoxication of a job well done. Let Mom and Dad tromp back to their game. Once I bust out of the stir, no get-together in town will be safe from my naked abandon.

Whatever happened to the carefree days when we were young and didn't care what other people thought of us? When I was a little kid I wore absurdly generic clothes, shed them whenever my parents had company, scratched myself whenever I had an itch, and generally worked all manner of tomfoolery without any care as to what others would think. It seems as though much has changed since then. Somewhere along the line I began to care about what other people think of me. I don't think I'm much different from anyone else. Whether we admit it or not, to greater or lesser degrees much of how we act and what we do is influenced by how we want our peers to look at us. When did I begin to care about who's watching? As near as I can remember, as late as fifth grade I was still oblivious to the status quo.

By fifth grade a good percentage of kids had already begun combing their hair and actually spending time deciding what to wear to school. Nonetheless, a small, elite group of us were still contentedly living in our foolishly ignorant child paradise. Most of the student body knew us as the Safety Patrols. For the record, our job was to take up position at various neighborhood intersections in order to help the other students cross the street safely on their way to school. Off the record, we were nothing more than a group of ultra obvious tattle-tails. Granted, we may have kept a few first graders from running recklessly into on-coming traffic, but ultimately we were commissioned to tell on our fellow class mates for knocking over trash cans or committing any other acts of miscellaneous mischief.
My entire elementary school career had led up to the day when I would finally be permitted to don the bright orange over-the-shoulder belt and badge of the safety patrol -- which I proudly wore for my school picture that year. At the risk of sounding smug, I was one of the best. I told on everyone for everything. Whether they were walking in the street or making loud jokes about the principal, I filed reports on everyone for any minor violation. I even reported my own little brother on his first day of kindergarten for chasing a neighbor's cat. 'Just doing my job, Mom,' I later professionally explained. In short, I spent my fifth grade year selling out my classmates, partly for the power trip, and partly in anticipation of the end of the year patrol party, which in the end amounted to nothing more than two dry cookies and a Dixie Cup of tepid orange drink.

Not until later reflection did I realize that I had actually sold my soul to the principal, deprived myself of any friendship, and reduced my extra-curricular life to getting home from school in time to catch G.I. Joe. As I look back now it's no wonder that I didn't have many friends. At the time I didn't care at all what other people thought of me, and that apathy led me into the role of Kerrydale Elementary's all-time champion stool pigeon. It's clear to me now that my peers must have laughed and joked about me behind my back, but in all honesty, I asked for it. At ten years of age, however, I simply had no idea that what I was doing would make me unpopular. More accurately, I had no notion at all of the concept of popularity and what it takes to achieve it. I didn't care what others thought, mainly because it had yet to occur to me that anyone was even aware of my actions.

However, as summer vacation tapered off and sixth grade and junior high grew near, I inched closer and closer to that line which all of us must cross at one point or another. Junior High School with its wide halls, and dances, and locker rooms was a wake-up prod. For the first time, it became brutally apparent that I didn't fit in. I had always trusted my mom when she bought me pair after pair of corduroy trousers, but when I eventually noticed that I was the only one in school wearing them, I began to grow suspicious. A new desire to join the blue-jeaned masses welled within me. Unfortunately though, school clothes are only bought once a year in my family, and so the rest of sixth grade found me zip-zupping sullenly back and forth to class. However, as soon as seventh grade rolled around I wasted no time going stone washed and Converse.

I suppose it's been that way ever since, and it goes a lot deeper than the clothes I wear. For better or worse, since the junior high coming of age, my peers and my environment have influenced the things I say and do as well as the way I interact. It's not necessarily about bending and forcing myself into a cold cast confining form, but rather more about just wanting to fit in. I've arrived at the conclusion that conformity doesn't have to mean losing yourself to what society in general thinks you should be. Conformity, despite its present day negative connotations, is useful and even necessary in regulated doses. Still, at the same time, when the primal need to fit in begins to threaten a person's individuality, things may have been taken too far. Where's the balance to be found?

To get anywhere in this world you first need a place in it -- a starting point. This is where rules and conformity come into play. By some stretch of the imagination, one could say that my safety patrol span was peppered with turncoat nonconformity. I carelessly disregarded the laws of common decency and let myself become petty in an effort to catch my peers breaking the rules. My little brother will attest to this. By deliberately trying to get my classmates into trouble I consequently broke some basic social guidelines and deprived myself of a place in my elementary school world Being blatantly counter-culture got me nowhere. Some rules are simply meant to be a running standard.

It's unfortunate however, that conformity and concern for others' opinions can be and often is taken too far. At the point in life when we realize that our peers are watching, innocence is lost and in many cases we strip ourselves of the freedom to be creative and individual. For little children there are no inhibitions, only the need to continually test the water and try new things. None of the adults at my parents' party were naked, but that didn't bother the two-year-old me. There was nothing inside to hold me back from creating disturbance and
contrast. Even with all our cultural ground rules, the misfit ability to pioneer and constructively depart from the established is a quality that direly needs to be preserved.

The elusive catch is finding the grassy path between the high and low roads. Determining which rules are set in stone and which ones were made to be chiseled at is hardly elementary, but it's an art that needs to be mastered all the same. Sometimes we need to give heed to what other people think of us. Other times it's best to strip down and see what happens. Who's to say which is which? I'd like to think that I've more or less figured it out for myself -- but that's strictly between me and my wooden giraffe.