

To Have a Friend
By: Megan Dugger

The issue of conformity is one that has plagued me since childhood. The following story is a true account of my experiences with this particular subject. Although there are positive forms of conformity, such as the military's coming together of individuals for the common purpose of defending the country, I have chosen to focus on the negative connotation that has affected me directly. As a child, I compromised my individualism to be accepted, to fit in, and most importantly, to have a friend.

As I eyed the shards of severed hair falling from Betty's hairdressing scissors over my youthful face, I smiled with glee as I envisioned the looks on my friends' faces when they saw. *I will finally be accepted.*

"Are you sure this is the cut you want?" Betty asked.

"Yes," I readily replied. "This is exactly what I want."

Betty hesitantly looked toward my mother, sitting on the edge of the visitor's chair that sat among stacks of how-to style magazines.

"Kim," Betty whispered, in an unsuccessful attempt to keep me from hearing. "Are you sure about this? I mean, she's only six years old... And this is- well it's a *boy's* haircut."

Yes, that's the point!

Mom panned her vision downward from Betty's horrified expression to my face, glowing with the utmost excitement.

"Megan," began my mother with strong apprehension. "You know that once your hair is cut, it is cut. No more ponytails. Your hair will be too short for that."

I looked to my mother through the round mirror in front of which I sat. Her hair, a mixture of brown and gray, flowed down her back like the majestic mane of a stallion. My eyes followed the strains of her beautiful hair, from scalp to tips. Its waves reminded me of the gentle waves of the Gulf of Mexico that I had seen in Fort Walton Beach the summer before. It hit her shoulders in the same manner that the proud waves struck the shore. I wanted hair like that.

No. Remember what you're doing this for.

"Yes!" I screeched with supreme confidence and great certainty. "My mind is made up. I don't like long hair anymore. It gets in my face, and it's annoying, Mom! I'm six years old! I should be able to cut my hair if I want to!"

Mom looked into my eyes and shot me a look consisting of both pity and pride, unaware of my real reasons. The corners of her mouth pulled downward to form a sympathetic smile. She turned her attention back to Betty, who stood waiting with scissors in her right hand and comb in her left.

"Go ahead, Betty," Mom said with a slight tone of defeat. "If that's what she wants then cut it."

Betty turned her attention to me and once again began chopping inches off of my blonde hair. I watched it fall to the ground and gather into a pile that Betty later swept away, never again to be

a part of me – a symbol that I had changed. No longer would I be the girl that the boys refused to play with.

That night I lay in my comfy bed, staring at my pink ceiling, anxiously awaiting the beginning of my new life. *For once, I will have friends. They will want to play with me!*

The next morning when mom woke me, I had had no sleep but adrenaline fueled me to full energy. I could hardly wait to go to school. I rushed through my daily routine, brushing my teeth as fast as my little arms could brush, violently ripping off my pajamas and replacing them with dress clothes, and slicing a comb through my hair as quickly as possible (which took much less time since my hair was then far too short to be bombarded with tangles).

Mom drove me to the elementary school, kissed me gently on the cheek (a gesture that she insisted on but always succeeded in thoroughly embarrassing me), and sent me on my way. As I approached the door, I looked at my reflection in the glass. *This is it. I'm finally going to fit in.* I flung the door open, blew past the secretary, and ran to my classroom in haste. The enormous wooden door – the only thing standing between me and my new friends – intimidated me. I stood, staring at the words “Mrs. Winston’s Kindergarten Class” that was etched into the wood. *I can do this.* In one quick motion, I mustered every ounce of my confidence into one seemingly simple motion: turning the doorknob. As I walked into the classroom, all of the kids stared at me with blank expressions. *Everyone is so surprised! I'm so happy I did this!* There was not a sound aside from Mrs. Winston’s chalk that screeched across the blackboard, followed by the occasional click as she pushed the utensil into the board to form the next word. Upon hearing the door shut, she turned to me and observed my new haircut.

“Oh,” she exclaimed, her eyebrows rising in a desperate attempt to appear friendly. I suppose she found no words to throw into a false compliment as she turned back to the blackboard and continued writing. Years have passed since that moment and she has remained speechless. *Well, I didn't expect her to like it, but that's ok because Kyle and Ricky will let me play with them during recess now.*

Fortunately, my assigned seat was between the two boys whose acceptance I so desperately sought. I hosted an obnoxious smile, stretching my face to its fullest extent and flashing every one of my tiny, white baby teeth. Both Kyle and Ricky sat in awe.

“Wh-what did you do?” Kyle managed to get out.

“Oh,” I said with a smirk, running my tiny fingers through my hair. “You told me the only reason you guys wouldn’t let me play with you at recess was because I look like a girl, so I cut off all of my hair and now I look like a boy! Now, I can play with you guys, right, Ricky?” Ricky did his best to fight laughter for fear of reprimand by Mrs. Winston for disturbing the class.

“Megan,” he said, pressing his lips as tightly as he could to suppress his giggles. “You’ve done some pretty stupid things, but this is the dumbest thing I’ve ever seen anyone do in my life.”

I gave Ricky a questionable look, halfway expecting him to tell me he was only joking. I turned my pitiful gaze toward Kyle. He was now trying to contain his amusement as well.

“I d-don’t unders-s-stand!” I began to cry. “Yo-you s-s-said if I looked like a b-bo-boy, you would be m-m-my f-friend.”

At this point, Kyle and Ricky burst into a solid boom of laughter.

“You idiot!” Kyle was almost in tears from laughter. “We didn’t mean you should actually do it! We thought we could get rid of you that way! Why don’t you go hang out with Sarah and Katie?”

“I don’t li-like them. They d-don’t like to pl-play in the dirt like yo-you do! I did th-th-this so I c-co-could be yo-your f-f-fr-friend!”

“Well maybe you should start liking what they like, you freak,” Kyle screamed with hilarity.

At this, Mrs. Winston twirled around and shushed the entire class. “Hush!”

I had never noticed Mrs. Winston’s hair before. It was so stunning – long, black, curly.

Tears were flowing down my cheeks like rain. I had to get out of that classroom. I burst out of my seat and flew down the hallway to the restroom. I stayed in the stall for what seemed like hours, sopping up my endless tears with toilet paper.

I can’t believe I did this. I look like a little boy. No one will ever like me.

The rest of that day is but a blur in my memory. That night I lay in bed, still allowing the occasional tear to escape my eye and slide down my cheek into my pillowcase. Mom sat beside me, trying her best to comfort me by gently rubbing my forehead with her long fingernails.

Before long, my anxiety subsided and I was nearing sleep.

“Mom,” I said, my voice low with exhaustion. “Could I wear my hair in a ponytail tomorr-”

Before I could finish my question, pain stabbed my throat and chest as I remembered what I had done.

“Honey,” Mom replied. “Remember, it’s what you wanted.”

I looked deep into her eyes. “All I wanted was to have a friend.”