The Good from the Bad

My freshman year of high school, my first year of Junior Varsity volleyball, and our very first away game. My whole team began to grow very impatient while waiting for the bus. When the bus finally got to Brighton high school, we all flocked to the bus and took our designated seats: seniors and juniors in the back and sophomores and freshman in the front. Once everyone had settled down and we were on our way to the game, I noticed my coach’s face.

My coach looked uneasy, but I could not figure out why; it looked as though she had something to say but couldn’t formulate the words. I quickly disregarded it and moved on to pull out my math homework, hoping to get a head start on it and have one last thing to worry about once I got home. Right as I put my pencil to my math problem, I heard my coach clear her throat and abruptly ask, “Um so Merve, why do you wear THAT? Is it because your mom wears uh that THING? Why don’t you just wear spandex like everyone else?”. She said this as she waved her hands around her head to symbolize a hijab. The second I processed this absurdity, I felt immediately embarrassed and let down. I remember the feeling of blood rushing to my cheeks, my eyes widening in shock, and my stomach turning. I felt everyone’s body shift towards me. Their curious and intrigued eyes transfixed on me as I struggled to find words to say. I began to try to defend myself, but I wanted to cry. I felt a quiver trail down my voice as I began to speak, but then I took a deep breath and I confidently said, “No, it is not because my mom wears the hijab. I wear longer shorts because I want to. This is my personal decision, and I feel more comfortable wearing this.” My coach looked at me in confusion and had a disgusted expression on her face. It was obvious that my white, blue-eyed, blonde-haired coach had never seen a player wear something other than traditional short spandex.

I felt quiet and shut down for the rest of the season as a direct result of my coach’s belittling questioning. I slowly stopped asking my family to come to my games as much, and always felt like the odd one out on my team. My confidence sank down six feet below and I began to despise playing a sport I once deeply loved. When the season finally ended, I felt a huge weight lift off my shoulders, I felt free from the comments, questions, and looks. Looking back, I realized that the microaggression I faced from my coach taught me to be grateful for making the decision to continue with what made me feel comfortable. It taught me that there is, unfortunately, still work to be done in our local communities and society, to prevent anyone from feeling targeted. I learned that no matter what, my comfort is not worth losing over a comment or microaggression. The importance of raising my voice will forever be held close to me. If others and I do not make ourselves heard, we risk our communities forever remaining undiversified and hostile environments to differences. No child should ever have to feel alienation or abandonment, as a result of their clothes, background, or beliefs.