

The Girl in the Bubble

I walk into debate class, sitting with my friends, laughing, and just enjoying life and the feeling of fragile security that surrounds me. I feel the familiar warmth of my friends' smiles, but something in my stomach twists anyway. I stand up confidently and walk to the front of the room, getting encouraging smiles from my friends. I swallow hard, feeling the weight of their expectations and the pull of my own convictions. It is my turn to read the title of my amendment: "A Resolution to Limit Civilians' Right to Bear Military Arms, and Automatic Weapons." *I did my research and I am prepared. It's my turn to take a stand.* My hands tighten on the paper, I steady my breath and put on my most winning debate persona, title read loud and clear. Silence falls like Utah snow thick and hard. My friends' faces go from pleasant to sober in an instant as the whole class stares me down. I take a deep breath. I feel my heart beat and breath quickening. I read my amendment and give the speech. My voice catches, but I push on, hoping the words carry the fire inside me. The applause they gave for others never comes. Their faces are red, burning into me and the air in the room thickens with every pause. The room buzzed with noise for others, lifting them; but the silence that followed presses down on me. I feel a pit in my stomach and my mouth is dry. The lights feel too bright for this moment. *Maybe I made the wrong choice, maybe I shouldn't have challenged their norm.* Utah's bubble would have kept me safe. My bubble keeps me me. But honestly? It's pretty lonely here.

Utah is a bubble. It used to be mine. But I've grown up, and so have my parents. They helped me see the cracks in this life and I didn't realize that my peers would think I'm the one that's broken.

Stepping out was worth it for me, why can't they just accept that? I make my way back to my seat and sit down as our teacher asked, "Does anyone want to give a speech in the negative?"

Almost every hand goes *They are so eager to talk about how wrong I am*"

"Me!"

"Please I have to!"

"But I have a good one!"

At that moment it hit me how different I really am. I am not just a kid with an unpopular opinion; I'm standing alone in a sea of political, religious, and educational differences. Whispers ripple across the room; my stomach twisting as I glance at my once supportive friends, trying to steady my voice. I had studied every side, yet they judged me before I spoke. Every misstatement pricks at my chest, and I tap my pen against my leg, forcing my voice steady despite the frustration inside. I try and smother the fire burning within me at their disregard. We take the final vote and it is exactly what I had assumed, no one votes in favor. *I am once again alone*. For a fleeting moment, I had allowed myself to hope someone might understand, even just a little. If judgment were ice, this room would have frozen me a long time ago. I whispered a joke to the girl sitting next to me, someone I had felt close with. *Maybe she'll actually smile this time*. She just looked at me like I am something less and turned away.

After that day, people will often glance at me and mutter, "Well, you're a Democrat, so...". The words follow me everywhere, their judgment pressing into every corner of the room. All the weeks of comments like "Kamala Harris voters should be thrown to the sharks", and snide remarks about "crazy stupid leftists" no longer felt like something I could brush off

because now they labeled me as one. I still feel my breath catch and hands ball into fists as the words echo in my head. I know they would never intentionally hurt me; I can see it in the way they keep their distance rather than attack. My dreams of running for senator feel as impossible as snow on a beach. Labels swarmed me: Democrat, outsider, Christian. Each one carries a verdict, deciding whether I am “acceptable” or “wrong” in their eyes. And so, I retreated into the bubble I had built, a space of protection and exile alike.

This was the creation of my bubble, not the one that my peers thrive in, but the one I have designed. These are the walls I’ve built, the disconnection that allows me to survive, letting the words bounce off my bubble instead of pierce me. I am no longer afraid to share my opinion because my bubble is my brand, my protector, my truth. It is also my captor. That is simply the reality I face. But sometimes I think one of the bubbles should pop—mine or theirs. The question is which one...