

Illustrated By: Natalie Boyle

# Gabrielle and the Green New Deal

A Journey Through the Healthcare System



Written By: Trevor Flanary, Mariam Hasan, William Harral, Madeline Lavoie, Natalie Boyle

Empowering the next generation.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Gabrielle Goes to the Doctor.....	6
Chapter 2: Gabrielle Visits Chicago.....	18
Chapter 3: A Trip to the Dog Park.....	36
Chapter 4: Christmas Eve with Aunt Chris.....	47
Chapter 5: Grandpa Comes to Visit.....	62
Chapter 6: Gabrielle Learns About Insurance.....	72
Chapter 7: Garielle's Final Project.....	80
Chapter 8: Gabrielle Goes to College.....	92
Chapter 9: Thanksgiving with Aunt Chris and Uncle Sal.....	101
Chapter 10: Gabrielle Goes to Cuba.....	117
Chapter 11: Hidden Treasures.....	127
Chapter 12: Gabrielle's Green New Deal.....	139
Epilogue.....	146

# 1

## GABRIELLE GOES TO THE DOCTOR

Gabrielle held her breath, and tried to stay as still as she could behind the shower curtain. Surely, if her mom couldn't hear her, she wouldn't find her, and then Gabrielle wouldn't have to go to her doctor's appointment. Just when she was sure her mom was giving up, Gabrielle heard a soft knock on the bathroom door. As the door opened, Gabrielle burst into tears.

"Honey", her mom began, "I know that you're scared of going to the doctor, but you need to go. Some kids aren't able to go to the doctor, so you should be grateful. And remember that you'll get a prize from the prize box when you're done. Maybe they'll even have new stickers..."

Her mom gently reached into the shower where she was hiding, moving aside the Princess and the Frog shower curtain to hug Gabrielle and coax her out. Though Gabrielle pretended like their themed shower curtain was all because her younger brother Jackson wouldn't let them get a new one, she was secretly

very happy they still had it.

Gabrielle let her mom lead her out, confused as to why she would say that other kids couldn't go to the doctor. As if that was a bad thing! If only she was so lucky! Plus, all the kids she knew at school had to go to the doctor. Gabrielle wished she was one of the ones who didn't have to go. She almost told her mom as much, but figured it would only make her mom think she was being whiny, and she didn't want to seem like a little kid. She was ten years old now. And ten is double digits. Ten year olds weren't whiny, she kept thinking to herself.

So Gabrielle left the bathroom, and followed her mom down their long wooden staircase, and past the hanging picture of her Grandpa in his army uniform. He was in the 92nd Infantry Division, which Gabrielle's mom said was the first African American division. She said it was important to keep the picture up to remind them of where they came from. Gabrielle usually just looked at it because she thought her Grandpa's hat looked funny in the picture.

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At the doctor's office, Gabrielle waited with her mom in the healthy child waiting room, where there were lots of games for her to play. She messed around with some blocks and flipped through a few magazines until a nurse called her name. The nurse was wearing pink scrubs with monkeys on them, which Ga-

brielle liked, because pink was her favorite color at the moment.

As they walked to the room, she told her mom that she wanted clothes just like the nurse's for Christmas. Her mom just laughed at her, which confused Gabrielle, because she was being very serious. Who would joke about pink clothes? Gabrielle's focus was pulled by the doctor waiting for them. He too had monkeys on his scrubs, but his were blue. Once they got in the room, he asked Gabrielle how old she was. "I'm ten," she replied. "So that makes me pretty grown up. And since I'm so old, my mom is finally going to let me get my ears pierced."

The doctor laughed, and said, "Well Ms. Gabrielle, since you're so old, I think you should get to sit on the big kid's seat now, how would you like that?"

Gabrielle tried to contain her excitement as the doctor stood up off the spinning stool and rolled it over to her. As she took her new seat, she felt very grown up. Just as a ten year old should. As the doctor examined her, he chatted pleasantly with her mom, and made sure to keep Gabrielle laughing to calm her apparent nerves.

After the exam, he sat with them for even longer, answering questions Gabrielle's mom had about her peanut allergy. Her mom was curious about the recent increase in the price of EpiPens, and she also needed a prescription for Gabrielle to get new ones before school started back up for the year. The doctor

explained that the price increase didn't have much of a reason except for the fact that the company who owned it decided to do it. He assured Gabrielle's mom that the increase wouldn't affect them much since they had a very good insurance policy, but the new prices would mean that a lot of people would no longer be able to get them.

Gabrielle's mom and the doctor talked about EpiPens for what felt like hours, which annoyed Gabrielle, because she was itching to get back to the lobby to pick out her prize. She wondered why her mom wouldn't stop asking him questions, and why the doctor was still talking to them if he had other sick people to see.

When her mom finally ran out of questions, Gabrielle followed closely on the doctor's heels out of the room and practically ran up to the prize box. The doctor and her mom laughed as she rummaged through it, eventually settling on a yo-yo with Tiana from Princess and the Frog on the side of it. She headed toward the door, excited to start playing with her newly earned toy, when her mom stopped her. "Gabbie, please say thank you to the doctor for spending so much of his time with us today."

Gabrielle turned around and thanked him, flashing him her best smile. Though she meant her thank you, she still wondered why it was necessary. Didn't all doctors spend time with the people who came to see them? Wasn't that their

job? Her thoughts quickly shifted back to her new toy, however, as her mom thanked the doctor herself, and headed toward the car.

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As they drove home from the doctor's office, Gabrielle stared out the window at all the houses lining the streets of their neighborhood. All of the long driveways were lined with lights leading to the garages, sitting next to perfectly groomed lawns. Bikes, scooters, soccer balls, and more littered each.

As they continued driving, her thoughts drifted from the houses back to the doctor's visit. She had been scared of going to the doctor ever since a particularly frightening nurse had given her a shot at one appointment when she was seven. How anyone could be expected to get a shot and then not hate the doctor, she couldn't understand. At least she wouldn't have to go back for another year though, for her next check up. She was again filled with jealousy of the kids who didn't have to go to the doctor.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the excited screaming of her four year old brother Jackson in their driveway as their car pulled in toward the garage, his babysitter close behind him. Gabrielle already knew what all his commotion was about. For his birthday last week, he had received a bike - not a real bike though, only big kids like her had real bikes - and he constantly wanted her to

ride around the street with her. With all her fear about her doctor's appointment, she had forgotten that she'd agreed to go biking with him that day.

As she exited the car, Jackson ran up to her, ready to go. "Okay Jackson," she laughed as he tried to hand Gabrielle her helmet, "Let me just go get my bike from the garage and then we can go."

She quickly retrieved her bike from the garage, careful to place her new toy from the doctor inside so it wouldn't get lost, and made her way to the end of the driveway where Jackson was waiting. She looked back to ensure that her mom was outside, which was her one rule. If Jackson was outside, her mom said that at least one adult had to be outside too.

Her mom had made herself comfortable on the porch, but came down to the end of the driveway to watch them. "Go on guys, have fun! Just not past the end of the street, okay?" her mom reminded them.

"Yes mom, of course. Let's go Jackson!" Gabrielle replied.

As they set off, Gabrielle at a slower pace than she would take on her own, as Jackson was slower, their mom stood in the driveway watching them with a smile on her face. Although Jackson got tired early and Gabrielle's mom picked him up to carry him the rest of the way, Gabrielle had enjoyed the little bit of



Later that night, after Gabrielle and Jackson were sufficiently tired out from biking up and down the street all afternoon, their mom called them inside for dinner. They both ran back up the driveway, more than ready to eat the lasagna they had been smelling through the windows all evening.

They bounded into the house, leaving their muddy clothes and shoes strewn on the floor of their mudroom. Once they were dirt free, they ran through their spacious house to find their dad, who had come home from work while they were out playing. “Dad!”, they both yelled excitedly as they ran to him for a hug, Jackson trailing slightly behind due to his short, four year old legs.

Their dad scooped them both into hugs, and then they all walked into the dining room where their mom was waiting with dinner. “Oh, honey this looks amazing, as usual,” their dad smiled at their mom.

“Thank you sweetie,” their mom replied, as she leaned over to give their dad a kiss.

This elicited a loud “Ewwwww!” from both Gabrielle and Jackson, which caused their parents to erupt with laughter.

“Oh you guys like that huh?” their dad joked as he pretended to lean over and kiss their mom again.

“Dad please no, it’s so gross!” Gabrielle pleaded.

Jackson backed her up with a chorus of “Gross, gross, gross!”

Once again, their parents laughed, and they all sat down to enjoy the meal Gabrielle’s mom had prepared. As they began to dig in, their dad prompted, “Okay everyone, what is one thing you’re grateful for today? Gabrielle, why don’t we start with you tonight?”

Gabrielle finished her bite of lasagna, then began, “Today I am grateful for my new Tiana yo-yo I got from the doctor’s office.”

“That’s right,” her dad remembered, “How did your appointment go?”

“It was good. I was scared at first, but then the doctor let me sit in his spinny chair because I’m ten now, and I felt better. It was really long though, he and mom just kept on talking.”

“That’s great Gabbie, I’m glad you were able to work through your fear. I’m proud of you. And I’m sure your mom was asking the doctor some good questions. You know we’re lucky that we have such a good doctor who spends so much time with us.”

“That’s exactly what mom said too!” Gabrielle laughed. Her parents often said the same things to her, which she sometimes suspected they planned. Mostly it was just funny though. It was somewhat of a running joke in their family that her mom and dad were almost the same person.

“I did say that!” her mom laughed. “And that’s what I’m the most grateful for today, that we have such good doctors that keep us all healthy, because there are so many people that don’t have that.”

Gabrielle was once again reminded of her jealousy of the kids who didn’t have to go to the doctor, but her parents’ statements made her start to think that perhaps she was the lucky one. She still wished she didn’t have to go though.

“I’m grateful for bikes!” Jackson interrupted excitedly from across the table. Everyone laughed again, delighted at Jackson’s joy for his new favorite activity.

“And I’m grateful for all of you,” her dad said. “We have a wonderful family, and I love you all very much.”

“Oh dad! You’re always so emotional!” Gabrielle teased him. But though she wouldn’t admit it all the time, she felt the same way. All family dinners went like this, with them laughing and talking. It was her favorite time of the day, when they could all be together.

“Or you could say I’m - cheesy -” her dad replied with a wink, and a pointed look at the lasagna. The table once again laughed together, this time at their dad’s, well, dad joke. The rest of dinner continued in the same way, and by the end they were all happy and full.

“Alright kids,” her mom said when dinner was over, “Time to go and shower, then maybe we can all watch a movie before bed.”

“Oh yay!” Jackson answered, excitedly.

He loved movies, especially Disney ones. Gabrielle had a lot of Disney princess movies and toys scattered throughout the house, which Jackson enjoyed to play with just as much as she did when she was his age.

Gabrielle took her and Jackson’s dishes from dinner to the sink - one part of being ten she didn’t enjoy, her chores had been upgraded from setting the table, to setting and clearing it - and then led her brother upstairs. As they walked, she asked him what movie he wanted to watch. Not surprisingly, he responded, “Tiana, Tiana, Tiana!”

She laughed, and said, “Okay Jackson, we can watch Princess and the Frog.”

Though she had seen it probably five times in the past month, she still loved it

just as much as he did - though she wouldn't admit it - and was happy to watch it again.

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Later, after they were both clean and in pajamas, Gabrielle settled into the couch with her family to watch the movie. She gazed up at the large screen, illuminating the room from floor to ceiling, and bathing her whole family in artificial light. She liked the new speakers that her dad had just put into the walls, so that the sounds from the movie seemed like they came from every corner of the room.

Gabrielle cuddled up under her dad's arm, and he draped a blanket over her to keep her warm. About halfway through the movie, lulled by the sounds on the screen and of her little brother's squeals of delight, she happily fell asleep.

# 2

## GABRIELLE VISITS CHICAGO

Shortly after Gabrielle's thirteenth birthday, she got to visit her Aunt Chris. Gabrielle's parents were headed out of town for the weekend, and Jackson would be staying with his friend who lived in their neighborhood. Aunt Chris lived nearby in Chicago. When Gabrielle's mom offered for her to stay with her aunt, she jumped at the opportunity. Gabrielle knew Chris would buy her favorite junk foods and let her stay up late watching TV. There weren't nearly as many rules in her house, and Gabrielle was eager to see her again.

That Friday, her mom's minivan pulled into the gravel driveway of Aunt Chris' home. It was a warm October afternoon, and most of the leaves in the neighborhood had turned orange or yellow. Aunt Chris' house didn't look as pretty as the transitioning trees. The house was falling apart, and the yard had not been kept up with. It didn't look anything like Gabrielle remembered it from when she last visited a few years ago. Shingles were falling off the roof, the grass was nearly a foot tall, and paint was chipping off the siding. Gabrielle began to re-

alize most of the houses on the street looked similar and none of them were as well maintained as her family's home.

As the automatic sliding door of the minivan began to open, Gabrielle grabbed her backpack and asked her mom, "Has Aunt Chris' home always looked like this?"

Her mom responded, "She's lived here for as long as I can remember and she's never been the best at keeping shingles on her roof."

Gabrielle didn't think her mom's joke was very funny but she chuckled anyway. Then her mom said, "Please don't ask your aunt too many personal questions this weekend, she's been having a tough time recently."

Gabrielle was naturally very curious about adult life, and her mom knew she might force her aunt to talk about things she otherwise wouldn't want to discuss. Gabrielle nodded her head to acknowledge her mother's request and they got out of the car.

The two of them walked through the tall grass on their way to the front door of Chris' home. Gabrielle rang the doorbell, and after 30 seconds or so her aunt answered, "How are my favorite niece and my least favorite sister?"

Gabrielle's mom rolled her eyes and gave Chris a big hug. Gabrielle chimed in, "I've been doing great!"

Aunt Chris pulled away from the hug and said, "I'm so glad to hear that, I'm looking forward to a fun weekend with you."

Gabrielle smiled and her mom said, "I'll be back to pick her up on Sunday and please try to feed her some vegetables."

As Gabrielle's mom turned to walk back towards the van, Aunt Chris gave Gabrielle a subtle wink and whispered, "I've got Oreos and Cheetos in the pantry if you're interested."

After waving goodbye, Gabrielle and Chris walked inside her house to have some snacks and catch up on all the most interesting things that have happened to them since they last talked.

Aunt Chris was a tall woman with a dark complexion. She kept her hair short and she never wore any makeup. She didn't care what other people thought, which Gabrielle admired. The two of them sat down on the couch as the first Harry Potter movie played on the TV. Aunt Chris asked her niece, "Have you seen any of these movies?"

Gabrielle answered, “No, my friends told me I should watch them though.”

Chris enthusiastically replied, “This is my all-time favorite series and they’re playing all eight of them back to back.”

Gabrielle leaned back on the couch and exclaimed, “Looks like I know what we’re doing this weekend!”

Aunt Chris smiled and got up to make popcorn. While her aunt was in the kitchen, Gabrielle asked from the couch, “How long have you lived in this house?”

Chris paused for a moment and then replied, “Far longer than you’ve been alive Gabbie.”

“Do you ever think about moving somewhere closer to where my family lives?”

Chris hesitated then responded, “I sure do but I wouldn’t be able to afford any of the houses near you. I still haven’t finished making the payments on this house.”

Gabrielle remembered that her aunt was unemployed a couple years ago, and only recently found a new job. Gabrielle’s grandparents had given her money so she wouldn’t get kicked out of her home for being unable to pay her bills.

Gabrielle replied, “Well you can come and stay at our house whenever you want,

but you'll have to be in bed by 10!"

Her aunt laughed at the joke and brought the popcorn over to the couch. They sat next to each other and turned their attention back to the movie.

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After finishing the second Harry Potter movie, it was time to eat dinner. The two of them migrated to the kitchen and Gabrielle offered to help make the food. Chris pulled a frozen pizza from the freezer and said, "You can help by preheating the oven."

Gabrielle turned the temperature up to 400 degrees and the oven made a ticking noise as the temperature inside it rose. Ten minutes later, Chris slid the pepperoni pizza into the oven and set a timer for 15 minutes. The two of them sat down at the small kitchen table to wait. Gabrielle commented, "I won't tell my mom we aren't eating vegetables."

Chris smirked and said, "There's actually nowhere to buy fresh veggies around here."

"Wait, what do you mean?" Gabrielle questioned.

Chris stood up and walked over to her pantry. She grabbed a can of green beans and said, “The fruits and vegetables I eat aren’t fresh. I live in what’s called a food desert. It means I don’t have any grocery stores near me. I buy my food from the Dollar General and everything they have is either frozen or processed.”

Gabrielle’s family had a grocery store within walking distance of their home. Her mom would often ask her to go get ingredients for whatever they were eating that night. She couldn’t imagine having to drive far away just to get the food they needed. She asked her aunt, “Do you ever drive to grocery stores to get food that isn’t processed?”

Her aunt replied, “No, it isn’t very convenient because the closest one is almost 20 minutes away, and the food is much more expensive than what I can get around the corner.”

This made Gabrielle wonder about her aunt’s nutrition and eating habits. Gabrielle had recently learned in school the importance of fresh fruits and vegetables in staying healthy and feeling good. She knew better than to ask any further questions because she didn’t want to be rude. However, Gabrielle was worried about her aunt’s health, so she started brainstorming ways for her to get fresh food. The timer rang, and Chris stood up to take the pizza out of the oven. They were both pretty hungry, and scarfed down the slices as soon as they knew they wouldn’t burn their tongues.

After they finished eating, they sat down to continue their Harry Potter marathon. In the middle of the third movie, Chris began to doze off. Gabrielle also had trouble paying attention to the TV, as she thought about how different her aunt's life was compared to her own. She always knew her family was more well off than others, but she was unaware of some of the challenges Aunt Chris faced on a daily basis. Her house was in poor condition, and she couldn't even get healthy foods. The thought that her aunt's health could be impacted by where she lived or how much money she made really bothered Gabrielle.

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The next morning, Gabrielle and Chris went on a walk to the neighborhood park. Aunt Chris' neighborhood was densely developed with one-story homes and small yards. Most of the houses had a similar design, and almost none of them were well taken care of.

It was a good day for a walk, and there were plenty of other people out. Gabrielle noticed that most of these people looked like herself, with darker skin, and dark, curly hair. She didn't see many white people, and she wondered why that could be. In her family's neighborhood, a majority of the people were white and there were not as many African Americans or Hispanics.

Gabrielle realized that more minorities might live in this neighborhood because it was less expensive than where her family lived. She knew that most African Americans and Hispanics made less money than white people for some reason. Her parents were fortunate to have high paying jobs, but many other people of their race struggled to make ends meet.

Aunt Chris began breathing loudly after they'd walked uphill for a bit. Her face was red and there was a circle of sweat forming around the collar of her shirt. Gabrielle asked, "Are you feeling okay?"

Her aunt stopped walking to catch her breath, "I've been struggling to go on walks these days because I always lose my breath."

Surprised, Gabrielle asked, "Have you seen a doctor about it?"

"No, but I have a friend who's a nurse and she thinks it could be something serious. I'm pretty sure it's just asthma though."

"You should go get it checked out, I'm sure a doctor could help."

"Maybe you're right, but I don't have health insurance and I wouldn't be able to afford any care."

Gabrielle was shocked and said, "Why don't you have insurance?"

Her aunt explained, “My job doesn’t provide it, and private insurance is very expensive. I make too much money to qualify for Medicaid, but not enough to afford another health insurance plan. Sadly, there are millions of Americans who are in the same boat as me.”

Gabrielle couldn’t believe what her aunt was telling her. All of her friends at school were able to get the healthcare they needed, so it didn’t make sense that there were so many people who couldn’t. Curiously, she asked, “What is Medicaid?”

Chris thought for a moment and said, “It’s a government program that provides medical care for people with a low income. The problem is it doesn’t cover enough people and the medical care isn’t as good as what someone can get with private health insurance.”

It seemed odd to Gabrielle that some of the people who needed medical care the most were unable to receive it because of its cost. She knew in other countries everyone had access to healthcare regardless of where they lived, what they looked like, or how much money they made. She asked her aunt. “Do you know any other people who don’t have access to the healthcare they need?”

Aunt Chris said, “Many of the people who live in this neighborhood struggle to

get the medical care they need. In our country, African Americans are one of the most disadvantaged groups in terms of healthcare access. A lot of the people I know have Medicaid, but the coverage isn't nearly as good. Their access to high quality care doesn't compare to people who can afford private medical insurance."

Gabrielle wanted to know more. "Why is it that so many of the people in this area don't have access to high quality medical care?"

Chris continued, "My community doesn't receive enough money from the government, so many of the hospitals don't have the resources they need. This has caused a lot of medical facilities to shut down, while others are forced to provide lower quality care."

Gabrielle responded with what first came to her mind, "That shouldn't even be allowed! Why doesn't the government give this area the assistance it needs?"

Chris answered, "That's a really difficult subject Gabbie."

After a moment, Gabrielle looked at her aunt and said, "We've got time."

Her aunt gave a soft smile and said, "You sure do ask a lot of questions, you know that?"

Gabrielle said, “That’s what my mom tells me.”

Her aunt began explaining why her community was so financially disadvantaged. “Our country was founded in a time where African Americans were seen as lesser than white people. We didn’t have the same rights as other Americans until recently.”

Gabrielle chimed in, “We learned about this in school. They taught us about racism and the Civil Rights movement in history class.”

Her aunt continued, “Well, not everything was fixed by the Civil Rights movement, and there is still structural racism present in our country today. Basically, that means the way our society is built makes it more challenging for certain minority groups to succeed. For many African Americans, it makes it harder to access healthcare because our race experiences higher unemployment and lower average income overall.”

Gabrielle was beginning to understand why her aunt hadn’t gone to the doctor. She always thought that everyone had equal access to healthcare, but she was quickly realizing that wasn’t the case. Not only was her aunt an African American woman, but she also struggled financially, so it was extra challenging for her to get the care she needed.

After Chris caught her breath, they continued walking up the hill. A few minutes later, they arrived at the park where there was a beautiful view of inner-city Chicago. Chris said, “This is my favorite spot in the whole city.”

Gabrielle could easily see why, and so could the dozens of other people at the park. As people came and went, Gabrielle and her aunt sat on a bench in front of one of the largest trees in the park, enjoying the view. They stayed at the park for a little over an hour chatting about less serious topics.



Later that afternoon, Gabrielle and Chris watched the fifth Harry Potter movie, while playing cards. Gabrielle was impressed with how many different games her aunt knew. Shortly after learning a new one, Gabrielle asked, “How do you know all these games?”

Chris quickly replied, “Your mom and I used to play cards all the time growing up. I always won of course.”

Gabrielle grinned at this, then turned her attention back to the movie.

Chris stood up to get a can of soda, and Gabrielle asked for a glass of water. Chris poured a glass of water from a pitcher and handed it to her niece. As she did she said, “I really need to start drinking more water. My teeth have been bothering me and I think I might have some cavities from drinking too much soda.”

Gabrielle knew cavities often developed because of sugar, and they could be very painful if they weren’t taken care of. She asked her aunt what her dentist said the last time she went in for a check-up. Chris said, “I haven’t been to the dentist in four or five years but my teeth were fine the last time I was there.”

Gabrielle went to the dentist twice a year, so she thought her aunt probably wasn’t going often enough. She had always hated the dentist, but she had never had any cavities to worry about before.

She didn't bother asking her aunt why she hadn't gone more often because she already knew the answer. Once again, she thought about how important it was for people without insurance to be able to access healthcare. She couldn't understand why healthcare wasn't available to everyone because she felt like it should be a basic human right.

After the movie ended, it was time for dinner. Chris started boiling some water to make rice, and she asked Gabrielle to put chicken nuggets in the microwave. Gabrielle noticed they wouldn't be eating any fruits or vegetables for this meal either. She wondered if her aunt ever ate any healthy foods. She asked, "Are there any restaurants you like to eat at nearby?"

Chris shook her head and said, "All we really have is the McDonald's down the road and a Burger King on the other side of the neighborhood."

Gabrielle decided she would ask her parents if Chris could come visit so she could eat with them more often, since it didn't seem like she ate fresh food enough.

Gabrielle helped her aunt with the dishes after they finished eating. Chris said, "Thank you for helping. This is my least favorite part of my job."

Gabrielle realized she didn't know where Aunt Chris worked so she asked her.

Chris replied, "I work in the kitchen at the Best Western hotel a few miles from here. I mostly help with breakfast, but sometimes I stay and work the dinner shift too. I've only been there a few months now but I like it better than my last job as a cashier."

Gabrielle said, "I'm glad you like it better than your last job!"

Her aunt responded, "I wish I made a little more money, but I'm just happy to be employed."

Gabrielle, being the curious 13 year old she was, asked, "Are there other jobs around here where you could make more money?"

Chris smiled, because she knew Gabrielle wasn't trying to be impolite, but talking about money often made her feel uncomfortable. After a moment, she replied, "There are plenty of jobs where someone could make more money than I do, but I don't have the proper qualifications. I never went to college, and a lot of good jobs require their employees to graduate from a university. That's why it's so important that you do well in school."

Gabrielle was impressed by how happy her aunt was despite the many problems she faced in her life. She admired Chris' ability to look at the bright side and never give up. She truly valued her advice, and she would certainly continue to

do her best in school so she could get into a good college.

Once the two of them were done cleaning up, they watched the next Harry Potter movie. They were nearly done with the series, and Gabrielle was really enjoying them. The characters were easy to relate to, and she was glad her aunt had recommended it. Gabrielle thought to herself that her aunt was a lot like one of the characters from the movies. His name was Hagrid and he was always kind and helpful to the other characters. He lived alone and he was a little down on his luck but he stayed positive.

She told her aunt about the comparison, and Chris bursted out laughing, “He’s a big hairy giant!”

Gabrielle thought she might’ve offended her so she said, “I never said you looked like him! I just think he does a good job of looking at the bright side like you do.”

Still laughing, Chris glanced at her niece and said, “Maybe I’ll dress up as him for Halloween!”

Gabrielle thought that idea was hilarious, and the two of them laughed for a good while. Once they both caught their breath, Gabrielle asked Chris, “Which character do you think I would be?”

Without hesitation her aunt responded, “You’d be Hermione, because she’s smart and she asks a ton of questions.”

Gabrielle really liked Hermione’s character, so she was happy with her aunt’s choice. She smiled, and they were both quiet for the rest of the movie.

# 3

## A TRIP TO THE DOG PARK

On Sunday morning, Gabrielle and her aunt decided to go on another walk. Chris said there was a park relatively close to her house where people often brought their dogs. Gabrielle loved dogs and so did her aunt.

The two of them walked out the front door shortly after breakfast and realized the weather wasn't as nice as the day before. It was overcast and it looked like it might rain. Chris looked at her niece and said, "If it starts raining, we can just turn back." Gabrielle nodded her head and they began walking towards the park.

Halfway over a small hill, Chris began slowing down. She said her chest was hurting, and she was having trouble breathing again. Gabrielle was really worried about her and suggested they sit on a nearby bench and take a break. Chris said, "No, lets keep walking. I'm your aunt, not your grandma!"

Gabrielle smiled lightly, but she could tell her aunt was struggling. She was concerned that she wasn't really okay, and wanted to help her.

After they made it over the hill, the park was in sight. Gabrielle could see three dogs playing together and their owners standing nearby chatting. Chris exclaimed, "My friend's dog is down there and he's adorable! He's a one year old golden retriever and he's got loads of energy."

Gabrielle looked for the dog she was talking about in the distance, but less than 30 seconds after the two of them made it over the top of the hill, Chris collapsed. Gabrielle looked over at her aunt in shock. She had fallen to the ground with her lower back stretching over the curb of the sidewalk. She was grabbing her chest, and her breathing was very unsteady. Panicked, Gabrielle shouted for help. The dog owners at the park were just outside of earshot. Gabrielle ran closer to them and shouted again. One of them turned immediately and pointed to get the attention of the others.

Two people began running in Gabrielle's direction, while the third watched after the dogs. It took them a little less than two minutes to get to Chris. She was still breathing, but she wasn't able to talk or stand up. One of the dog owners cried out, "Chris!!!"

Gabrielle assumed this was her aunt's friend. The woman asked what happened,

and Gabrielle was speechless. After a moment of silence she responded, “We were just walking to the park and she was having trouble breathing. I told her we could stop but she wanted to keep going. I thought she was going to be okay and then I heard her fall behind me.”

Gabrielle started crying while Chris’ friend dialed 911. The other woman tried to console Gabrielle but she was distraught. Was it her fault for agreeing to go for a walk with Aunt Chris today? Was there anything she could have done to stop this from happening?

She thought about how her aunt didn’t have medical insurance, and how expensive the ambulance ride would be. She knew Chris’ health was declining, and she had feared something serious like this might happen.

Gabrielle pulled out the flip phone her parents had given her for her 13th birthday. She called her mom to let her know what had happened. Her mom sounded very stressed over the phone, and Gabrielle couldn’t even imagine how she would feel if something like this happened to her younger brother. Gabrielle was having trouble paying attention to the phone call, but she heard her mom say she’d meet her at the hospital just before it ended.

Moments after Gabrielle got off the phone, the ambulance arrived. The paramedics immediately put Chris on a stretcher and loaded her into the back of

the ambulance. They asked if anyone needed to come with her, and Gabrielle told them she wanted to.

She climbed into the back with her aunt and the two paramedics. They began stabilizing Chris and making sure she was able to breathe. She was beginning to talk, but her speech was broken and difficult to understand. The paramedics kept their focus on her for the entire ride to the hospital, which felt like hours to Gabrielle. Once they arrived, they took Chris straight to one of the emergency rooms, while Gabrielle was asked to wait in the lobby.

Gabrielle had never been a part of something so scary. She still had no idea what had happened to her aunt, but she was glad to hear her talking (or at least trying to). There were a few TVs in the waiting room and one of them was showing the last Harry Potter movie. Gabrielle couldn't help but cry. The waiting room was empty and she felt very alone. Her mom was on her way, but Gabrielle felt like she was taking forever.

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After waiting for 20 or 30 minutes, a doctor came out and told Gabrielle that her aunt had suffered from a heart attack. She asked if she could see her, but the doctor said it was too soon. She told Gabrielle that Chris would likely need to stay in the hospital for a few days.

Gabrielle asked, “Do you think she’ll be okay once she gets out?”

“She will be just fine. We’ll prescribe her a few medications to help prevent another heart attack from happening and she should be back to normal in a few weeks.”

The doctor noticed Gabrielle had been crying and she said, “I know it’s tough to see someone you love go through something so scary, but I promise we will do everything we can to make her feel better.”

Gabrielle looked at the doctor and softly said, “Thank you.”

Her mom arrived just after the doctor left the waiting room. She rushed in looking around for her daughter. Gabrielle ran up to her and told her what the doctor had said. Her mom took a moment to process what she’d just heard and then said, “We can’t go back there yet?”

Gabrielle replied, “No, but we should be able to once they know everything’s okay.”

“Did the doctor say what caused the heart attack?”

Gabrielle told her mom she hadn’t asked that question and then said, “I thought heart attacks only happened to old people.”

“No, age is just one of the many factors that can contribute to a heart attack. High blood pressure and high cholesterol can cause them too. Basically, a heart attack occurs when not enough oxygen gets to your heart. Even young people can get them.”

Gabrielle asked her mom if Chris’ diet could’ve played a role in the heart attack. She said, “I know that a diet high in sugar, salt, and fat can lead to high blood pressure. Processed foods aren’t good for your heart if you eat too much of them. That’s why it’s important to eat fruits and vegetables that can help your heart.”

Gabrielle held her tongue, as she remembered that most of what her aunt ate was processed food, like frozen pizza and chicken nuggets. She also thought about the solitary can of soggy green beans in Aunt Chris’ kitchen.

The two of them sat in silence for a good while before the doctor came back out. She said, “Chris is ready to have visitors now.”

Gabrielle and her mom quickly got to their feet and followed the doctor back to the room where Chris was lying on a hospital bed. She slowly sat up to see who had just walked into the room. When she saw her sister and Gabrielle, she cleared her throat and said, “Come on in.”

Gabrielle's mom said, "We're so happy to see you."

Chris smiled and looked at Gabrielle. She could tell her niece had been crying and she said, "I'm so sorry Gabbie. I'm sure all of that was very stressful for you."

Gabrielle shook her head and said, "You don't owe me an apology! I know it was more stressful for you and I'm just relieved to see you're doing okay."

Jokingly, her aunt responded, "We'll see if I'm doing okay after I get the bill for this hospital visit."

Gabrielle was glad her aunt was making light of the situation but she also knew the heart attack would really hurt her financially. She remembered Chris said that the hospitals in this area didn't provide the best care because the government didn't invest enough money in them. This concerned her a little bit, but her aunt seemed to be doing fine so she didn't overthink it.

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After about 30 minutes of talking, Chris began to feel tired. She told Gabrielle and her mom that she was going to take a nap. They said their goodbyes, and Gabrielle's mom told Chris to let them know if she needed anything. Gabrielle gave her aunt a gentle hug and said, "Feel better soon so I can visit you again!" Chris smiled and said, "Sounds like a plan."

Gabrielle walked out of the room with her mom and said, “I’m really worried about her.”

“Me too, but she’s in good hands.”

“She doesn’t have insurance and I’m sure the hospital bills will cost a fortune.”

“How do you know she doesn’t have insurance?”

“I asked her of course! She said the doctors and hospitals around here aren’t very good either.”

“First of all, I told you not to ask her personal questions, but you’re right. She will most likely have to go into debt because of this visit. There aren’t any other hospitals nearby so we should just be grateful this one could take her in so quickly.”

“She’ll have to go into debt because she had a heart attack?”

“Yeah, it’s not exactly fair, but that’s how the system works for people who don’t have good insurance and can’t afford to pay out of pocket expenses. Ambulance rides and hospital stays are costly so your aunt will have to pay them off over time. Your father and I are fortunate to have insurance that covers our family’s medical needs, so you don’t have to worry about that.”

“Well I’m still worried about Aunt Chris! How much money will this cost her?”

“Your grandfather had to ride in an ambulance a few years back and I believe it was around \$1,000.”

“\$1,000 dollars for a short ride? That seems crazy.”

“That’s only the beginning of the expenses. Her hospital stay will probably add up to tens of thousands of dollars.”

“Most people wouldn’t be able to afford that!”

“Without a high paying job or private insurance a lot of people struggle to pay off their medical bills. The cost is one of the main reasons your aunt avoids going to the doctor, but if she had they may have been able to prevent her heart attack.”

Gabrielle considered what her mom had just said. If her aunt had better access to quality healthcare, there was a chance she wouldn’t even be in the hospital right now. Instead, her heart attack could cause her to lose her job and go into serious debt.

After walking through the automatic sliding doors of the hospital, Gabrielle and her mom were approaching the parking lot. It was mostly empty, probably

because it was Sunday evening. They quickly found their van, and Gabrielle climbed into the passenger seat. As the sun was setting, the van pulled out of the parking lot. The drive home was a little less than two hours and Gabrielle did a lot of thinking.

Once again, she thought about how different her life was from her aunt's. She never had to worry about being able to see a doctor. She got yearly checkups, and whenever she felt sick she'd get the medicine she needed. Her parents always fed her well and they lived near a nice grocery store. They had one of the best hospitals in the state closeby, and Gabrielle knew she would be able to get the medical care she needed if anything went wrong.

On the other hand, her aunt avoided going to the doctor. She had known something was wrong before she had her heart attack, but she still chose not to see a medical professional. She didn't have easy access to healthy foods, and the hospital closest to her home lacked the resources to properly treat many of their patients. Chris lived in a neighborhood full of people in similar situations. Most of them didn't make enough money to afford the healthcare they needed and almost all of them were Black or Hispanic.

Gabrielle thought back on what her aunt had told her about systemic racism. It seemed to her like the African Americans living in Chris' neighborhood were automatically disadvantaged because of their skin color. They didn't have access

to many of the resources they needed, and this was likely causing many of them to experience health issues like Chris. Gabrielle wished the government would do more to help her aunt's community and assist her neighbors in getting their basic needs taken care of.

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Midway through the drive home, Gabrielle's mom asked, "Did you have a good time with your aunt other than everything that happened today?"

"Yeah, she's a lot of fun. I hope she recovers quickly so I can make another visit."

Her mom smiled and said, "It makes me happy you two get along so well."

Gabrielle was exhausted, so she took a nap during the second half of the car ride. Her mom gently shook her awake as they pulled into their driveway. It was only 8:00pm, but Gabrielle was ready to go to bed. She got out of the van and walked inside.

On her way up to her room, she grabbed an apple out of a bowl on the counter. She was reminded of how fortunate she was to live where she did. Gabrielle decided that when she got older, she'd like to do something to help people like her aunt. She knew it wasn't right that some people had worse access to healthcare simply because of their income, race, or insurance status, so she would set out to do something about it.

# 4

## CHRISTMAS EVE WITH AUNT CHRIS

At last. Christmas Eve was here. The Christmas lights were up, as they always were since the day after Thanksgiving. That had been a tradition for Gabrielle and her mom for as long as she could remember. Christmas lasted the entire month in their house. This meant baking Christmas cookies every weekend, wrapping the house up in lights, and best of all, the presents! This Christmas, however, was without Jackson. The next-door neighbors offered to take him on a ski trip for the holidays, and he couldn't resist.

"You up yet, honey?" her mom asked as she peeked her head in the door. "It's almost time to go to Aunt Chris' house," she added.

"Coming, Mom!" Gabrielle responded, rolling out of bed.

In the car, Gabrielle remembered it had been two years since the last time she saw her aunt. The last time she saw Aunt Chris was in the Chicago hospital,

and since then, she had only heard a few small things about how she was doing. Some nights she heard her mom on the phone in the kitchen talking in a low, worried voice. Gabrielle felt curious and worried about her aunt.

“Mom, is Aunt Chris okay?” she asked while gazing out of the car window.

“Sweetie, I think it’s time I tell you. Ever since the heart attack, Aunt Chris hasn’t been feeling the same. She has a hard time getting out of bed now and only gets up to eat and use the bathroom. As you know, your Uncle Sal moved in with her a few months ago to watch over her. He’s been taking good care of her, making sure she gets the help she needs.”

Gabrielle didn’t know what to say. She knew it was bad but not this bad. She remembered only two years ago watching the Harry Potter series with her aunt, laughing and having fun.

“Will she ever be the same?” Gabrielle whispered as her eyes started to water up.

“We don’t know, honey. As you know, Uncle Sal is one of the best nurses where Aunt Chris lives. He’s doing the best he can to get her back to how she was.”

As they pulled into Aunt Chris’ driveway, Gabrielle noticed the garbage bin

tipped over, dirt on the side of the house, and fallen branches on the front stoop. “This can’t be good,” she thought. The house looked as it did two years ago, but even more run-down. Gabrielle slowly unbuckled her seatbelt and looked down to the single present sitting on her lap, addressed to Aunt Chris. Inside the freshly wrapped present: 99 packing peanuts and a handwritten note, a tradition between Gabrielle and her aunt that never failed to bring a smile to her aunt’s face. Gabrielle wrapped and prepared a huge box for her Aunt every year just to hold her handwritten note. “Is this year different? Are packing peanuts not thoughtful enough? Should I just leave the present in the car?” Gabrielle asked herself, beginning to worry. She decided to bring the present just in case.

Gabrielle shakily followed her mom up to the front door of the now run-down house. She paced around, waiting for the door to open.

“Look who it is!” Uncle Sal shouted as the door swung open. Gabrielle’s anxiety disappeared for a moment. Uncle Sal’s giant smile never failed to cheer her up.

“Uncle!” Gabrielle exclaimed as she ran up to give him a big hug. Gabrielle looked for Aunt Chris behind her uncle, but didn’t seem to see her. It felt weird having anyone but Aunt Chris greet her at the door. She didn’t say anything and carried on.

“Brother, I’ve missed you so much,” Gabrielle’s mom said as she joined the hug.

“I’ve missed you both! It’s been too long. Gabbie, I see you’re almost as tall as your mom now!” Uncle Sal responded, hugging them tighter.

“I’m so close. Just a few more years and I’ll be taller! She says the minute I grow taller than her, she’ll buy me the Uggs I’ve always wanted,” Gabrielle responded.

Uncle Sal laughed. “Please, come in!”

They stepped inside, and it was exactly how Gabrielle remembered it from when she was younger. The red and green stockings hung over the warm fireplace. The small Christmas tree in the corner, all of its ornaments neatly arranged. The light shining through the smudged glass door. The smell of Christmas. The feel of Christmas. Uncle Sal walked them to the tiny mudroom that definitely suited its name well, considering the hanging boots dripping with muddy snow. They hung their coats and scarves and added their snowy boots to the collection, Gabrielle’s always being the smallest. They followed Uncle Sal back through the living room, as he and Mom caught up after a long two years. The living room was small but homey, just how Gabrielle liked it. She noticed a pile of coupons on the coffee table next to a half-completed crossword puzzle.

“That’s my crossword alright,” Uncle Sal said, watching Gabrielle scan the room.

“You know at my age, I have to do anything to keep me from going crazy! I

spend all day in this house now and an old man needs his games. You brought games, didn't you?" He and Gabrielle giggled.

"We sure did! Gabbie, why don't you bring our stuff to our bedroom and maybe bring out the Uno cards?" Mom said looking over to Gabrielle.

Gabrielle smiled and ran to the front door to grab the bags and the present she wrapped for Aunt Chris. She placed the bags down on the single queen mattress that she and her mom had to share. Gabrielle didn't mind though, knowing it was better than the old air mattress she used to sleep on with Jackson. She wondered where Aunt Chris was but didn't want to speak up. As if her mom just read her mind, she heard her ask from the other room, "Where's Chris, Sal?"

"Oh, she's resting. Let me go check on her and see if she's up to come and play some games with us," Uncle Sal responded.

As he left the living room and walked by to check on Aunt Chris, Gabrielle's heart started beating faster. She rested her ear on the bedroom door, knowing Aunt Chris was only across the hall. She couldn't help but listen.

"Hey, how are you feeling?" Uncle Sal whispered, opening the door across the hall from Gabrielle's.

A raspy, tired voice responded, “I’m okay. Are Gabbie and Elizabeth here?”

“Yep, they arrived just a few minutes ago. Are you up for a game of Uno?”

“I guess so. I can’t be a rude host!” Gabrielle heard her slowly get up from bed and ran to the dresser, pretending to unpack as her uncle walked by.

He shouted from the hallway, “I’m going to get some snacks and juice for you guys and Chris will be out in a minute!”

“Okay! Be right there,” Gabrielle replied.

Back in the living room, Uncle Sal prepared a bowl of red hot Doritos and grape juice while Gabrielle and her mom gathered around. Gabrielle poured the cards out as Aunt Chris slowly rolled in on her wheelchair.

“There she is!” Mom yelled, happy to see her sister again.

Chris coughed and said, “Oh my, I’ve missed you guys. Come give me a hug, Gabbie.” Gabrielle got up and ran toward her aunt, giving her an awkward hug. Because Chris was sitting in her wheelchair, Gabrielle had to bend over at an odd angle to hug her. Chris’ sweater scratched Gabrielle’s face as they embraced. Aunt Chris then spotted the Uno cards on the table and exclaimed, “I know I’m

in a wheelchair, but I'll still kick your butt in Uno!"

Everyone sat down again, ready to play. Gabrielle dealt the cards with a soft smile on her face. She couldn't help but feel bad for Aunt Chris, seeing her in a wheelchair after all those months. At the time, the heart attack didn't seem like it would affect her too much, as the doctors said she would be out and about in no time. Gabrielle now realized they were quite wrong.

"Gabbie, how's school?" Uncle Sal chimed in as the game began.

Gabrielle softly responded, "School's okay. It feels good to have a break every once in a while, especially for my favorite holiday of the year."

"I know what you mean," Chris replied. "My little niece is in high school now, how fast you've grown up."

"Oh yeah! I was pretty scared at first going to a huge school, not knowing that many people, but I've made a lot of friends in my classes," Gabrielle said with a growing smile.

"Good for you sweetie. What's your favorite class?" Aunt Chris asked while placing down a Draw 4 card for Mom, who then gave off a smirk.

Gabrielle answered, "I love my history class actually. My teacher is so much fun, and the stuff I'm learning is very interesting. We're learning a lot about slavery during the Civil War now."

"Well, can you teach us anything?" Uncle Sal said, leaning in for his turn in Uno.

"I remember him talking about slaves being taken from their families in Africa at a super young age. That really doesn't seem right to me," Gabrielle replied with concern.

Chris' smile melted off her face. She said solemnly, "Sweetie, unfortunately, some of that unfairness is still around today. Take me for example. I had my heart attack almost two years ago now. Look what it has done to me; I'm still having a hard time recovering. People with little to no money like me have a hard time getting the care that they need to get better. People seem to not care as much about us," Chris paused. "I almost went to the doctor a few weeks before the heart attack with chest pains, but they couldn't see me in time, and I didn't have insurance to cover it. Then what do you know, two weeks later I had a full-blown heart attack right down the street, as you unfortunately had to experience. I'm even still paying off the fees from the ambulance ride and all the stuff they did to me in the emergency room. If I had just gotten the care I needed beforehand, I could have probably saved a ton of money and pain."

Uncle Sal got up and walked to the kitchen, seeming upset.

“Oh, Aunt Chris I’m so sorry. I didn’t know about all of that,” Gabrielle mumbled. “But don’t doctors just make mistakes sometimes?”

Aunt Chris was quick to reply. “They sure do, but this is way too much of a pattern for people like me. I’m not just blaming my doctor either. After talking to many of my neighbors, I see they have to deal with similar situations like mine; they have also received lousy care during their doctor visits and ended up paying tons of money. That’s one of the reasons why I don’t go to the doctor’s or dentist’s very often.”

Mom chimed in, directing her attention towards Gabrielle, “Back where we live, I see most of our neighbors walking around with their Whole Foods grocery bags in their left hands and their Starbucks in their right. They can’t stop talking about their great personal trainers or gym memberships during our neighborhood block parties. They can afford to keep their bodies healthy, but even if they did have a medical emergency, I have no doubt that they could get the right care as soon as they needed it. This helps them live happier and healthier lives than most people. People like Chris-” she paused, looking at her sister briefly. She continued, “People who don’t have a lot of money often live unhealthier lives and get sick more often because they can’t afford to go to the doctor regularly. People like us are also treated differently for being Black.” Ga-

brielle was at a loss for words like everyone else in the room. She looked down at her three remaining cards.

Uncle Sal suddenly leaned in from the kitchen and added, “There’s a lot of things that need to change here. It’s hard for me to talk about this stuff after having seen what this awful system has put your aunt through, Gabbie. It’s all such a shame. I quit my job as a nurse to be here with her because nobody else could take care of her.” He returned to his seat in the living room and played his card.

“So, just like the slaves you learned about in history class, Black people are treated worse just for the color of their skin. Today, this leads to things like us living in worse neighborhoods or getting sick more often than white people,” Aunt Chris said shaking her head.

“Jeez. This all doesn’t sound good. I never really thought about it like that. No wonder Aunt Chris’ house always has my favorite Oreos, since they are unhealthy,” Gabrielle said innocently, putting all the pieces together in her head. Everyone burst into laughter and the mood lightened up. Uno continued as Gabrielle’s mom played a reverse card.

“That’s exactly right, honey,” Aunt Chris added. “Oh, and UNO!” she shouted, laying down her second to last card.

Uncle Sal played his card, followed by Mom's and Gabrielle's cards, setting Aunt Chris up to place her last card down. "And that's the game," she said smiling, announcing her win.

Uncle Sal started on dinner while Chris went to lay down for a bit. Gabrielle packed the cards up and took a quick shower to clean up before Sal called for dinner. Mom and Gabrielle set the table and helped Chris get from her bed to the dinner table. Uncle Sal prepared microwaved green beans and mashed potatoes for dinner. Gabrielle was okay with it, knowing it was all they could afford. Over dinner, Gabrielle and her family gave thanks and gossiped about other relatives, only in the best ways.

Dinner finished and everyone made their way over to the living room, greeted by the warm fire and a batch of cookies that Gabrielle's mom baked the night before. Gabrielle almost forgot it was Christmas Eve; her favorite part of the night was finally here.

Gabrielle eyed her homemade present addressed to her aunt, and felt it was right to still give it to her. Even with the heart attack followed by a rough two years, Aunt Chris was still the same, silly aunt she had always been. Presents were passed around, as everyone smiled and hugged one another after giving and receiving gifts. Gabrielle got a fresh new pair of fuzzy socks and a new book that Uncle Sal recommended. Then, she was up to give her presents.

“Here Aunt Chris! This one’s for you,” Gabrielle said, handing her the biggest present under the tree. Aunt Chris winked at her, setting the present on her lap. As she tore off the wrapping paper and ripped open the present, packing peanuts flew everywhere. Uncle Sal let out a stubborn chuckle, knowing that he was going to be the one to clean everything up afterward. Inside, of course, was only the small handwritten letter.

“Oh, honey! You shouldn’t have!” Chris exclaimed with a snicker. “But guess what? I got you one just like it!”

She pulled out a huge present, wrapped with Harry Potter themed paper, which had been hidden behind the couch; she passed it over to Gabrielle. Gabrielle tore open the present only to find a letter underneath all the packing peanuts. Aunt Chris’ handwriting was so neat compared to hers. The flowing cursive was beautiful to see, and Gabrielle was excited to read what it said.

Gabrielle got up and gave Aunt Chris a big hug. “Thank you, Aunt Chris. It’s just what I wanted,” she said, trying not to giggle.

“Same present next year?” Aunt Chris asked, already knowing the answer to her question.

“Only, as long as you promise we will never miss another Christmas together again,” Gabrielle said, walking back to her seat next to Uncle Sal.

“Oh Gabbie, Aunt Chris and I can make sure that happens,” said Uncle Sal, putting his arm around her.

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Three weeks later

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On Gabrielle’s first day back in history class, she thought back to the conversation she had on Christmas Eve with her family. She remembered how people have been treated badly for many years based on their skin color or how much money they made. It also seemed like the people she knew who lived on the worse side of town, the ones who smelled like smoke and had clothes that didn’t look as nice to her, usually had the same skin color as her and her family. She pondered this idea. As the bell rang for lunch, Gabrielle rushed to find her friend Claire, who she knew had a huge house and really nice clothes. Gabrielle had been jealous of the backpack Claire had gotten at the beginning of the year, since it was from a really expensive fashion designer Gabrielle had only seen before in magazines.

Gabrielle spotted Claire packing her stuff into her locker, her light blonde hair tied into a tight bun. “Claire, hey! I missed you. How was your break?” she said as Claire saw her and ran over for a hug. She smelled like flowers and candy. She must have gotten a new perfume, which was really popular in her grade now.

“It was really nice! My family and I went to visit my grandparents in Florida,” Claire replied, happy to see Gabrielle. “My grandma made me play a lot of tennis with her. I never thought a grandma could be so good at tennis, especially after her heart attack earlier this year.”

“Oh my gosh. I’m sorry, Claire. My aunt actually had a heart attack too.” Gabrielle responded, thinking of Aunt Chris in her wheelchair.

“Oh no. How is she?”

“She’s not doing too well. Her heart attack was two years ago and she’s still in a wheelchair recovering,” Gabrielle said, looking down at the ground. “How long ago was your grandma’s heart attack?”

“Only a few months ago. She’s just about better now and back on the courts,” Claire said with a giggle.

“Oh wow, that’s lucky,” Gabrielle said, realizing that it might not have just been

luck, but maybe more about money, like she talked about with Aunt Chris and Uncle Sal.

“Yeah. I hope your aunt gets better soon. I guess some people just recover differently,” responded Claire, unaware of what Gabrielle was thinking about.

Gabrielle walked away from that conversation not upset, but determined. It was at this moment that Gabrielle reinforced her vigor to make a difference to help people like Aunt Chris in whichever way she could.

# 5

## GRANDPA COMES TO VISIT

Gabrielle sat in her uncomfortable plastic chair, watching the time slowly tick by on the clock. The longer she watched, the slower the time seemed to pass. Her junior year history teacher, Mr. Thomas, was talking about their final project for the school year. As hard as she tried, it was almost impossible to pay attention to him. Though the class was interesting, and he was a decent teacher, Gabrielle found it difficult to follow his excited ramblings about the topics of the day. What would start as World War 1 would always become a story about his brother, or his cousin, or his friend that had known someone who knew someone - it never ended. Mr. Thomas's classic ties didn't help her pay attention either. He wore a new crazy tie everyday - today it had flamingos all over it.

Today it was especially hard, because Gabrielle couldn't wait to get home. Plus, she had already read all about the final project online on her class page, so she felt like she didn't even need to be paying attention. When she finally was let out of class, she would get to go home and see her Grandpa who was visiting. She

could hardly wait to see him. She had begged her mom to let Grandpa come pick her up early from school, once her mom picked him up from the airport, but both her mom and her Grandpa had objected. Like father like daughter, Gabrielle figured. Both of them had said that school was too important, and that she could wait a few extra hours before seeing him.

When her mom told her this decision, Gabrielle had to swallow the urge not to fight back, but her desire to seem mature – she was 16 now – had won out. So she huffed off to school that day, and was finally sitting through the last moments of the day. Just when she thought she couldn't take it any longer, the bell finally rang, and she sprung up from her seat. She had almost made it through the doorway when her friend Harry caught up with her.

“Hey Gabbie, what do you think of the project?” he asked.

Though she really just wanted to run home, Gabrielle liked Harry, and decided she could wait just a little longer to see her Grandpa.

“Hey Harry! I'm actually excited to do it. Have you picked your topic yet?” she replied.

“I'm not sure yet. Mr. Thomas said we have to pick someone to interview about any historical topic we like, so I'll probably interview my mom, since she works

at the history museum. What about you?”

“My Grandpa is actually visiting right now, so I’m going to interview him. I’m going to ask him all about the history of the healthcare system, since I’ve learned a lot about that from my family already.”

“That sounds cool! I don’t know much about healthcare, so let me know what he tells you,” he replied as they reached the front doors of the school. “Well, I gotta go, or I’ll miss my bus, and I’ve missed it so many times already that if I miss it again my mom will kill me!” Harry joked. “See you tomorrow!” he called as he ran towards his bus, his blonde hair disappearing into the sea of kids.

Finally on her own, Gabrielle rushed toward the front door of the school.

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Gabrielle bounded through the front door of her house, breathing hard from running. She dropped her backpack and jacket on the floor, which she knew would earn her a scolding from her mom later, but she didn’t care right now. She just wanted to see her Grandpa! She ran to the kitchen, and found her Grandpa and her mom sitting at the table eating Oreos, Grandpa’s favorite. When her Grandpa saw Gabrielle, a warm smile broke across his usually serious face. He stood to give her a big hug.

Gabrielle could tell that her quiet Grandpa had always had a soft spot for her. He spent most of his time during his visits alone, sitting on the porch reading or playing solitaire. Gabrielle was the only one who he would ask to join him. It always made her feel very special. She sat happily at the table with them, and when her mom offered her some Oreos, she almost laughed out loud, because who would ever turn down an Oreo? After listening to them talk about his flight for a bit (there was one especially loud baby on the plane, he said) she brought up her project.

“Hey Grandpa, would you be able to help me with my history project this week? We have to pick someone to interview about a historical topic, and I thought you would be a good person to choose.”

“Well, of course I’ll help you honey, I’m honored you think an old guy like me could be of much help to a bright young girl like yourself,” he replied with a smile. Gabrielle figured he was being humble, since he was the smartest person she knew.

“What topic did you have in mind?” he asked.

“I was thinking about healthcare,” Gabrielle answered. “I’ve learned a lot about the healthcare system from mom and Aunt Chris over the years, and I think it’s really interesting. I thought maybe you would have a new perspective since you

grew up while the healthcare system was changing.”

“Well I will certainly try my best to help you with that. I’m proud of you for taking interest in such an important topic at such a young age, Gabrielle,” he replied. That made Gabrielle much happier than any Oreo could.

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The next day, after Gabrielle had gotten home from school, and had her Oreo snack with her Grandpa, she rushed through her homework. She was excited to start interviewing her Grandpa for her history project, mostly because it meant that she got quality time with him, without her brother there to pull Grandpa’s attention elsewhere. After finally finishing her last math problem for the day (seriously, when would she ever actually need to know this?) she went to find her Grandpa. As usual, he was sitting on the porch, reading. Fittingly, he was reading a book called ‘The Green New Deal,’ which, from her understanding, was a set of new laws that would help slow down climate change, and help a lot of people get better jobs and better access to things like medical care, or doctor’s visits.

“I see you’re doing your homework for this project too, Grandpa,” Gabrielle joked, as she sat down next to him.

“Oh yes, I gotta keep up with my reading so that you can’t tell how old I really am,” he chuckled.

“I wrote down a list of questions to ask you, so should I just start there?”

“Sounds like a wonderful plan to me. Fire away.”

“Okay, so my first question is what was the healthcare system like when you were young?”

“Well, and now this was a little bit before even my time,” he began, “but there was a time when we didn’t really have a healthcare system. There were no hospitals, and people didn’t even really believe in doctors and medicine much.”

This surprised Gabrielle, and she asked, “So if there were no hospitals, then what did people do when they were sick?”

“Well most of the time doctors would just come to people’s houses. This was easy because there weren’t hospitals, and there wasn’t a lot of medical technology, like x-ray machines and heart monitors, so they didn’t need to be in one place like a hospital to treat sick people,” he explained.

“But wasn’t that expensive? I mean, I’ve only ever heard of doctors going to

people's houses when they're really rich, like the Kardashians or the Obamas," Gabrielle protested.

Her Grandpa laughed, and answered, "Well that's true today, yes. But back then, seeing a doctor wasn't expensive. People didn't even have insurance in the beginning. They were able to pay for the doctor's care with just money they had from their jobs. Seems crazy now right?"

"So what happened? What made it so expensive?" Gabrielle asked.

"Well, first, a lot of new technology was invented. Much of that technology was new machines to use to test sick people, and those kinds of machines are very expensive, just like computers or TVs. So, as the newer technology started getting used more often by the doctors, they had to charge their patients more money," he answered.

After pausing a moment to consider all the new information she was getting, Gabrielle questioned, "So all the new technology made healthcare and doctor's visits more expensive, but you said that the doctors were only able to go to people's houses because they didn't have a lot of technology, right?"

"That's right Gabbie," her Grandpa affirmed.

“So then what happened when the new technology started to be used? How did people see doctors?”

“That’s a great question.” her Grandpa began. “As the newer technology began to be used, it helped people have more faith in medicine and doctors. You see, before that, medicine wasn’t as respected as it is now. People didn’t trust doctors the same way that we do today. That was partly due to the newness of medicine and medical care, and partly because people didn’t see medicine as science yet. As new technologies became more common and trusted, they helped people understand how reliable medicine was at helping people.”

“Wow. So people used to not trust medicine?” Gabrielle replied, slightly shocked.

“That’s right. Some people still don’t. But keep in mind, for a long time medicine wasn’t what it is today. There were a lot of medical practices and ideas that weren’t based on science, and would never be performed today. For example, people used to think that bumps on a person’s head could tell you about their personality traits and intellect.” her Grandpa answered.

“That sounds ridiculous. So what made it better?” Gabrielle asked.

“It was mostly just the progression of science. As scientific practices improved, we were able to learn more about diseases and health problems, and scientists

were able to develop better technology. And as that technology became more common, people started to trust it more, and believe that medicine was based on science.”

“So then where did people see doctors? With the new technology and machines, like x-rays, the doctors surely couldn’t go to people’s houses anymore, right?” Gabrielle said.

“That’s right, good thinking.” her Grandpa said with a smile. “Since they had this new technology, which as you pointed out, meant big heavy machines a lot of the time, doctors began to work out of offices. It made more sense for patients to go to the doctors, with the doctors working in one place, then for the doctors to go see each patient at their homes. Gradually, as the demand for medical care began to grow, hospitals were built, and soon those hospitals were the primary places for medical care, as they are today.”

“So, once hospitals were popular, is that when health insurance started to get popular too? And what about the differences in access to healthcare? Aunt Chris has taught me a lot about that. Were there always so many differences in care between people who had a lot of money and those who didn’t? Or differences between the medical care of white people and Black people, like us?” Gabrielle probed.

“Woah there honey, that’s a lot of questions all at once.” her Grandpa said with a chuckle. “I’m very impressed by how deep you’re thinking about all this. Those are some very insightful and important questions you’re asking. But those are both pretty complicated questions, so how about we save them for another day? What do you say, let’s stop for today, and pick back up tomorrow when you get home from school?”

“Okay then, that sounds good,” Gabrielle answered with a shy smile, delighted at her Grandpa’s praise. “Thanks again for helping me with this, Grandpa.”

“Well of course honey, anything for my favorite granddaughter,” he replied with a wink.

# 6

## GABRIELLE LEARNS ABOUT INSURANCE

At school the next day, Gabrielle again struggled to pay attention. She had spent all of her lunch time planning out more questions for her interview with her Grandpa, and was thus left with a stomach ache because of not having eaten anything. Her hunger, along with her excitement at the continuation of her interview, rendered her unable to focus on Mr. Thomas once again.

Today, wearing a tie with skiing Santas all over it - an odd choice as it was April - Mr. Thomas was talking about the Battle of Normandy. Well, that's what he had started talking about when class began, but as Gabrielle tuned back into his lecture for a moment, she found that he had diverged into an account of his and his wife's trip to France last summer. He interrupted Gabrielle's thoughts of healthcare and hunger when he slammed his hand down on his desk, a demonstration of the loud sound he and his wife heard in the middle of the night at their haunted hotel.

After she recovered from her fright at her teacher's loudness, she focused on the clock mounted on the wall behind Mr. Thomas, watching the hands slowly tick on, willing them to go faster just as she had done the previous day. To her dismay, she heard Mr. Thomas say "group work", her least favorite phrase to hear while in school. She turned her attention back to him, so she could hear what assignment she would have to endure today.

"Split up into groups of four, and talk about what ideas you have for your final projects, and what progress you've made so far." Mr. Thomas instructed them.

That wasn't so bad, Gabrielle thought. She was actually excited to share what she had done for her project so far, and thought it would be interesting to hear what her classmates were working on. Gabrielle turned to the four people closest to her, one of which was her friend Harry.

"So what's everyone working on?" Harry started.

"Well I'm doing my project on the history of the healthcare system," shared Gabrielle. "My Grandpa is in town this week visiting, so I'm interviewing him about it, since he kind of grew up while the system was changing."

"Oh that's right," Harry remembered. "How is it going so far?" he asked.

“Pretty good! I started interviewing him yesterday, and we talked about how the healthcare system, like technology and hospitals, has changed over the years. Today we’re going to talk about how health insurance came about, and I think tomorrow we’re going to talk about disparities in healthcare.” Gabrielle replied.

“What do you mean by disparities in healthcare?” asked one of her other group members, Emma.

“I mean that people have different access to healthcare, like doctors offices and insurance. And since for some people it’s not as easy to get good medical care, or care at all, they experience worse health outcomes. Basically, they’re more likely to get sick and stuff.” replied Gabrielle.

“That’s pretty interesting.” answered Emma with a thoughtful expression on her face. “It sounds like you already know a lot about this stuff. So why did you choose this for your project topic?”

“Well, I know a fair amount of information about it, but it’s mostly about how the healthcare system is today. My Aunt Chris has taught me a lot about it, since she doesn’t have very good access to healthcare.” answered Gabrielle. “But for the project I’m focusing more on the history of everything. So I want to learn more about why the disparities exist, and how they came about. Basically I want to know how we got to the system we have today.”

“That sounds really cool.” answered Emma.

The rest of the group took turns talking about their own project topics. Harry was interviewing his mom about how museums decide what historic artifacts and stories to display. Emma was interviewing her sister about 9/11, since she was quite a bit older and remembered when it happened. And Luke, the fourth member of their group, was interviewing his neighbor about the civil rights movement of the 60s, since his neighbor’s grandfather had been a freedom fighter. After hearing about their projects, Gabrielle became more excited to hear what everyone else learned.

When the bell finally rang, Gabrielle made her way home excitedly, anxious to get talking to her Grandpa again.

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She walked into her kitchen to once again find her Grandpa eating his daily Oreo snack and reading a book. This was one of the first pictures that came to her mind when she thought of her Grandpa. Sometimes when she ate Oreos herself, she could practically smell her Grandpa’s house, and felt like she was there all over again, just as she had been when she was a kid. She made her way over to the table to join him, reaching for an Oreo as she sat down.

“Hey there honey. How was school today?” he asked with a warm smile.

“Really good. In history we all talked about what we were doing for our projects. My classmates have some really neat ideas.” she answered.

“That’s great. Are you ready for more healthcare system talk today?” he asked.

“Always,” she said with a laugh, though she wasn’t really joking.

“Should we just work here today?” he suggested.

“Yeah sure,” she answered, “Wouldn’t want to tear you away from your precious Oreos,” she joked.

Gabrielle’s grandpa laughed and teased back, “I don’t see you stopping either” as they both reached for another.

“Touche.” she answered with a smile. “Alright, so I figured we would pick up where we left off yesterday and talk about the evolution of health insurance. Does that work for you?”

“Sounds perfect. What would you like to know?” he asked.

“Well, let’s just start at the beginning. I know a little bit about insurance already, but can you explain it a little more so I can be sure I understand?”

“Of course. Basically, people pay money every month to a health insurance company, and then when they have to go to the doctor, hospital, or even get surgeries, the health insurance company pays for most of it. It makes it a lot easier for people to get medical care, because insurance makes it cheaper.” her Grandpa explained.

“So how did people start using insurance? Because yesterday you said that people used to pay for medical care and doctors visits out of their own money.” Gabrielle asked.

“Yes, that’s right. Back then, costs were lower, as we talked about yesterday. As costs increased, and people had more of a desire for healthcare, they wanted to find a better way to pay for it. Health insurance plans didn’t start until about the 1920s. The first one was given to a group of teachers in Dallas, Texas. This group went to the Baylor University hospital, and asked if it was possible to get some sort of plan. Funnily enough, my dad was one of these teachers.”

“Woah really?!” Gabrielle exclaimed. “That’s so cool!”

“Yes, it is! Though at the time, I was young, so I didn’t understand or realize it!”

her Grandpa answered.

“So what was the plan they gave him? Was it similar to how insurance plans work today?” Gabrielle asked.

“No, it was a much smaller plan. For monthly payments, we got up to 21 days of medical care each year at the university hospital.”

“So is that what all the first insurance plans were like?” Gabrielle asked.

“They weren’t all exactly like that, but they were similar. As they became more popular, some allowed people to get medical care from more than one hospital, unlike the plan we had. And during the Great Depression, more people wanted medical insurance, so they became more popular. After about 10 years, there were a lot more kinds of plans offered, and a lot more people had them. Eventually, a couple big companies emerged that offered all the insurance plans.”

“So these companies weren’t the government? Doesn’t the government give people health insurance now?” Gabrielle wondered.

“No, these were private companies. The government started offering health insurance in 1965, when Congress created the Medicare and Medicaid programs. So today, there are plans offered by private companies and some offered by the

government.” her Grandpa answered.

“Interesting” replied Gabrielle. “So how do all the different plans work today?”

“To be honest, I don’t know much about them. It’s a pretty complex system now. I know more about the history of it all, but not much about how it functions today. Maybe that’s something you could research more on your own, or even take a class about one day.” her Grandpa suggested.

“That’s a good idea, I think that could be cool. Well, my next questions are about the disparities in healthcare throughout history, but I think we should save those for tomorrow.” Gabrielle answered.

“That works for me. Plus, we’re out of Oreos now,” he said, pointing toward the empty box. “We may just have to make a run to the grocery store for more before our talk tomorrow.” he said with a mischievous smile. He knew that her mom didn’t let them have more than one box of cookies a week, but he liked to spoil her and Jackson when he visited.

“Grandpa, you know I’ll never argue with eating more Oreos.”

# 7

## GABRIELLE'S FINAL PROJECT

The next day, a Saturday, Gabbie awoke early. This was usual for her, as she enjoyed getting to make the most of her time away from school. As she made her way downstairs, she noticed her Grandpa already sitting out on the porch, reading a book. She could hear her mom making breakfast for Jackson as he chattered away. She also heard the telltale sign that her dad was awake, which was the sound of the newspaper rustling at the kitchen table. She made her way into the kitchen, greeting her family with a friendly, "Good morning."

"Good morning sweetie" her parents said at the same time, causing her family to laugh. "Do you want some breakfast Gabbie? I'm making Jackson eggs." her mom asked.

"Yeah sure, thanks mom." Gabrielle replied.

A few minutes later, Gabrielle's mom set a delicious looking omelette down in

front of her at the table, and Gabrielle dug in, not realizing how hungry she already was. Jackson was also busy devouring his omelette at his place across the table from Gabrielle. Just as they both finished eating, their Grandpa wandered in from the porch.

“Good morning everyone!” he greeted joyfully.

“Good morning Grandpa,” Gabbie and her brother answered.

Her Grandpa turned to her and said, “Are you ready to get back to work little lady?”

“Yes of course!” replied Gabrielle. She knew that today was her Grandpa’s last day with them, since he was leaving to go see her Aunt Chris before he had to get back home. She was excited to keep working on her project, but she also wanted to make sure they had time to do something fun and non-school related before he had to leave.

“Where shall we work today?” her Grandpa asked her.

“How about the backyard?” she suggested.

It was a beautiful spring morning, not even a hint of a cloud traced the shining

blue sky. There was a warm gentle breeze in the air, the kind that makes it feel like the beach in the summer. In other words, it was Gabrielle's favorite kind of day. The kind of weather that made it impossible, almost painful, to not be outside enjoying it.

"You read my mind." replied her Grandpa.

Gabrielle quickly ran up to her room to grab her notebook, then the two of them made their way to the back of their large lawn. They both took a seat at the quaint white gazebo that was settled into the grass, and her Grandpa looked to her, waiting for her first question.

"So, were the disparities that are present in the healthcare system now always there?" she began.

"Well firstly, let me go over some of the most important disparities that I'm aware of. It tends to be that people of a low socioeconomic status, or people who don't have a lot of money, and minorities like us are affected more. Those people have less access to healthcare and don't get as high quality care as people who have more money, or are white. And to answer your question, yes, these disparities have always been a part of the system. In fact, they are closely tied to the social attitudes of the country. For example, people's thoughts about how race affects a person. So, at times when there was more racial segregation and

discrimination as a whole in the country, there were more racial disparities in healthcare too.” he explained.

“So African Americans have always had worse healthcare?” Gabrielle asked.

“Yes, that’s right. In fact, they’ve had worse healthcare since the United States was created. This is almost entirely due to the racist ideologies and practices that have marked our country since its beginning. In the colonies, as you’ve learned about in school, there were health standards a person had to meet in order to get a job. Because often African Americans were slaves, and very poor, they couldn’t afford or weren’t allowed to get proper medical care. Because of that, they weren’t as healthy, and therefore couldn’t get jobs.”

“So the healthcare disparities are because of racism?” Gabrielle asked.

“In a large part they are. Racism has made it significantly more difficult for African Americans to get ahead in life in all aspects, including healthcare. Because racist ideologies have existed since our country was founded, those ideologies end up affecting how things like the healthcare system are created. Because of that, racism ends up being built into systems like healthcare in a sense. Many of these systems - healthcare, criminal justice, etc. - are products of racist thought.”

“Could you give me an example Grandpa? I’m having a hard time really under-

standing this.” Gabrielle asked, feeling slightly ashamed that she couldn’t grasp it.

“Of course. I know, it’s a difficult thing to understand. Especially now, when so many people no longer believe that a person’s race says anything about their value or the type of person they are. You’ve learned about the Jim Crow era in school, right?” her Grandpa asked.

“Yeah. That was the time when segregation based on race was legal, right?” Gabbie ventured.

“That’s exactly right,” her Grandpa confirmed. “At that time, the idea was essentially ‘separate but equal’ which of course was untrue. Everything was separated based on race, but it most certainly was not equal. So, in terms of healthcare, that meant that African Americans, or other ‘colored’ people had to go to different hospitals than white people. Those hospitals were staffed by African American doctors, who went to separate schools than whites. And as I said, all of the ‘colored’ places - schools, hospitals, libraries, everything - weren’t as good as the ‘white’ ones. So, even if an African American person had health insurance and access to a hospital, the medical care they could get there just wasn’t as good as it was at a white hospital, due to the racist laws of the time. Does that make more sense?”

“Yeah I think so.” Gabrielle replied. “So basically people were racist, and that meant that the laws were racist, which meant that schools and hospitals and everything else is influenced by those racist ideas?”

“Yes that’s correct. It’s like a cycle. And it’s very difficult to change it.”

“So what happened when the Jim Crow era ended and things were no longer segregated?”

“That’s a great question. As you can tell from how hospitals are today, people of all races go to the same hospitals. But, because of the past, it’s still more likely that African American people, and those with less money, won’t have access to the hospitals that have the best quality care,” Gabrielle’s grandpa answered.

“Why is that?” she asked.

“Well, think about it this way. Why is it that you live in this big house in this nice area and have all the opportunities you have?” her Grandpa questioned.

Gabrielle thought for a moment. “Well, because my mom and dad have good jobs, and they’re able to pay for a nice house in a nice neighborhood.”

“That’s right. So you see how what your parents have can have a big impact

on what you have. The same thing happened with many other African American families, though they weren't as lucky as you. Since their parents, or their grandparents, lived through times like the Jim Crow era, where they were put at a large disadvantage, they weren't able to give their kids as much money or opportunities as you have. Since they had less money overall, and less access to quality healthcare, their kids also had less access. It becomes a cycle that's difficult to break. You're very lucky that you have all you do, and it's because of how hard your parents have worked, and the good fortune they've had to be able to get the education and jobs they did. Your father came from a very wealthy family, unlike ours, which is a huge privilege," her Grandpa explained.

Gabrielle had grown quiet, and run out of questions, which was very unlike her.

"What's the matter Gabbie?" her Grandpa asked after she had been silent for a minute.

Gabrielle hesitated, a thoughtful and sad look on her face, then said, "It's just so sad. It's so sad and so unfair that people's lives are still being affected because people fifty years ago were racist. I just wish there was something I could do to make it better, to help them."

"I know honey. It is difficult. And it's even harder because racism still exists in the world today. But I think it's wonderful that you're so curious about these

issues. And it makes me very proud to see how much you care about others. I know it's challenging to understand sometimes how the world can be like this, but learning about it is the first step. The world needs more people like you to help make a change. I'm very proud of you Gabrielle," her Grandpa said as he wrapped his arms around her for a comforting hug.

"Thanks Grandpa," she said, hugging him back.

"Now I think that's enough talk for now. Why don't we take a break, have some lunch, and then we can finish talking?" Gabrielle's grandpa suggested.

Gabrielle was relieved he had suggested this, as she was feeling very overwhelmed and sad at all that she had just learned. "I think that's a good idea," she replied. As they made their way in for lunch, all this new information buzzed in her mind.

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Gabrielle and her Grandpa enjoyed a lunch of grilled cheese and tomato soup, a personal favorite of Gabrielle's. The whole family ate together, since it would be their last meal together before their Grandpa left for Aunt Chris' house. It was just what Gabrielle needed, and their laughter as they ate allowed her thoughts of healthcare and racism to be temporarily silenced.

Her mood was further improved as her Grandpa helped her and Jackson clean up from lunch, when a water fight broke out. Her Grandpa had a hold of the extendable sink faucet, and when Gabrielle and Jackson had their backs turned, mounted a sneak attack of wet spray on the back of their shirts. They both turned, shocked, then broke out into laughter, grabbing the remaining water glasses from the table and splashing their Grandpa right back in retaliation. The whole ordeal ended with all of them soaked and laughing.

Once they had all dried off, Gabrielle's grandpa said to her, "Are you ready to finish our last interview?"

"Yeah I am, let's do it." she answered.

They settled back into the furniture on the patio, and Gabrielle's grandpa said, "Well honey, we've covered a lot. I think I've told you most of what I know, but do you have any other questions?"

"I do have one that I thought of because of everything we talked about earlier."

"Shoot." her grandpa answered.

"Well, you explained how racism affected the people and things like hospitals, but what about how it affected science? In school we've learned about some

experiments that were done that weren't right, but did racism have anything to do with that?"

"That's a great question, and you actually have reminded me of something I failed to mention earlier. Racism did affect science and medical research a lot, and it is actually one of the biggest reasons for the race based disparities in healthcare. Something that was fairly common back in the day was an idea that is now called scientific racism. This basically means that people believed that there was a scientific basis for racism. So, people thought that there were scientific differences in people based on their race, which we know today is not true. But at the time people really believed it, and it led to very unfair treatment of African Americans," her Grandpa explained.

"What kind of unfair treatment? Was it the same as segregation?" Gabrielle asked.

"No not quite." he began. "Scientific racism led to African Americans being mistreated in research mostly, and in some medical treatments. There were lots of experiments in which African Americans were treated very poorly, and were taken advantage of. There were also medical treatments done specifically to African Americans because people thought them to be different because of their race. It's just another way that racism has caused our healthcare system, throughout history, to be worse for minorities."

“Wow..” Gabrielle reacted. “So even though racism and people’s attitudes toward African Americans have changed over time, the healthcare system hasn’t really stopped reflecting those beliefs.”

“That’s right. Attitudes may change, which is great, and a lot of progress has been made, but it doesn’t change the fact that our healthcare system was created with racist attitudes in mind. Therefore it’s a result of the history of racism in the United States,” her Grandpa summarized.

“Thank you again for helping me Grandpa. You’ve taught me so much that I didn’t know before. I think this is going to be a really great project.”

“You’re very welcome, honey,” he answered with a smile. “One day soon, if it hasn’t happened already, you’re going to know more than me!”

Gabrielle laughed. She doubted that would ever happen. There was just so much to learn about the world, and her Grandpa seemed to know it all. She hoped one day she would be able to learn as much as he had.

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A week later, Gabrielle stood before her history class. Mr. Thomas was sitting directly in front of her wearing a tie with Tiana from Princess and the Frog on

it, which gave Gabbie pleasant flashbacks to her childhood. Her heart was beating fast in her chest, and she tried to take a deep breath to calm her nerves. It was her turn to present her final history project, and though she was excited to share all she had learned, public speaking still made her nervous.

She thought back to what her Grandpa had said to her right before he left for Aunt Chris' house as she had expressed her nerves about this presentation, "Trust yourself honey. You are smart, and you are caring, and you know a lot more than you give yourself credit for. You've worked so hard on this, so go out there and teach your classmates what you've learned. Maybe it will help inspire someone else to want to make a change, just as it has begun to inspire you."

With that in mind, Gabrielle took one last deep breath, and launched into her prepared speech, her nerves melting away as she began to teach her classmates all that her Grandpa had taught her.



## GABRIELLE GOES TO COLLEGE

Gabrielle sat outside on the grass on the front lawn of the University of Chicago campus, admiring the beautiful day at her new college. As she looked at the people walking by, she thought about how much she loved meeting more kinds of people. Everyone in the neighborhood she grew up in looked pretty much the same: little blonde boys and girls with bright eyes and stiff ironed clothes. She remembered how different the kids in her Aunt Chris' neighborhood were compared to her friends at home.

As she breathed in the crisp fall air, she reflected on the one or two other Black kids from her high school class. She had never really thought much about her skin color before, except on a few occasions when some mean kids called her a bad name. She remembered all the conversations she had had with Aunt Chris and Grandpa Joe, but she never really experienced the issues they told her about first-hand. Most of the other Black kids from her school didn't ever like her very much. She thought it was because she was from a different area than them; they

dressed differently to her and her friends.

As she laid back on the grass and stared up at the cloud-filled sky, she hoped that she could be friends with more people that looked like her now that she was in college. She always felt different than her friends because of the way she looked, and she wanted to have more friends who looked like her too. She thought about Alina from down the hall, who had helped her move in. Gabrielle liked her. Gabrielle had noticed that Alina's roommate had hair that looked like Gabrielle's before she straightened it. She was always told that she had to straighten her hair once she got to middle school. Maybe in college she could wear her hair in different ways, however she wanted.

Gabrielle sat up and opened her computer. Her college advisor had told her earlier that week that she should decide what she wants to study, since that would make it easier for her to figure out her schedule. She thought about all the conversations she had with her mom, grandpa, and Aunt Chris. She loved learning about all the things they had taught her about how America handles its healthcare system. Maybe that could be something she could study in school.

She put in some details into the school website about her interests, and up popped a degree option called 'Public Health.' Gabrielle thought that looked interesting, and that health for the public seemed like a cool career.

She clicked a button underneath the public health label, and a list of classes popped up. Well, now she could tell her advisor that she didn't have to worry about her schedule anymore. Gabrielle closed her laptop, content with the small amount of work she had done. She knew that she wanted to learn more about the healthcare system, and she was excited to learn about it in the classes she would take soon. She laid back onto the grass, looked back up at the sky, closed her eyes, and breathed in a deep sigh. She thought to herself that college was going to be good.

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Back in her dorm room later that day, Gabrielle leaned over her bed rail and looked down at her new roommate, Ella. "Hey, Ella." She mused. "What are you going to do for your major? Have you chosen yet?"

Ella looked up at Gabrielle in her lofted bed, turning away from her unpacking. She sighed and furrowed her brow. "Uhh, actually I haven't thought about it much yet," she said. "My mom went to school for business, but I don't know much about that, or if I would be interested in it. Have you decided on one yet?"

Gabrielle's eyes lit up. "Yeah, I actually went on the school website today and found a major that I think matches my interests - public health."

“What’s that about?” Ella questioned.

“I think it has to do with health for a community. Did you ever go to the doctor’s office in your town?” Gabrielle responded.

“Yeah, I remember my family and I had to drive a little farther to get to a nice one though, since the one closest to my house wasn’t as good.” Ella said.

“Yeah, I think that’s what public health is about. The doctor’s office near my home growing up was really nice, but I remember that the doctor’s office near my Aunt’s place was so different. I went with her to an appointment last year, and the place looked so much dirtier than the one near my house. I remember it took longer for her to talk to the doctor, and she couldn’t get the medicine she needed from the office like I could at mine. I think public health is studying that stuff. My mom explained to me how this sort of stuff has to do with how much money someone has, or how much money a community has to put into things like doctor’s offices.”

“That makes sense.” Ella said. “I guess I didn’t live in the best neighborhood. Maybe that was why the closer doctor wasn’t as nice, because the office didn’t have as much money to make it nicer.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t seem very fair.” Gabrielle thought for a moment. “My

grandpa and aunt have told me a bit about why doctor's offices in poorer communities have worse quality care, but hopefully my classes can teach me more about how they can be fixed. It doesn't seem right that just because someone doesn't have as much money, they are forced to get worse help with their health."

"That's a good point. Speaking of health stuff, did you hear about the girl who lived in this dorm last year? Jessica I think her name was?" Ella responded. Gabrielle shook her head. Ella continued, "I heard from the RA that she got something called meningitis early last year."

Gabrielle made a face. "That sounds scary. What does that mean?"

"I think it's a brain infection, I heard it's really serious. Apparently it's somewhat common in people living in dorms. Anyways, the RA said that she got it early in the year, like a week or two after moving in, and her health insurance didn't cover her hospital bills so it ended up costing her almost \$100,000," Ella answered.

Gabrielle was shocked. "\$100,000? That's so much money! What happened to her?"

Ella said solemnly, "She dropped out of school, because her parents couldn't afford for her to keep going to college and pay for her medical bills. I think she

had to get a job to help pay the bills off. It's really sad."

Gabrielle looked down. That didn't seem fair, either. It didn't make sense why anyone who got sick would have to lose out on getting their education because they can't afford to pay for school and medicine. There needed to be a better way. She placed her chin in her palms, thinking about what the solution would be. She looked forward to her classes on Monday, which could maybe teach her a thing or two about it.

...

"Alright class, make sure to have your readings done by next week, we are going to be talking about the different types of health insurance next class. Please be prepared to contribute to this discussion."

The health policy professor dismissed the class, and Gabrielle was taken aback at how difficult the information was that her teacher just presented. She knew very little about what insurance was, let alone the different aspects of the health insurance system, aside from the few things her grandpa and aunt had taught her. She put her heavy textbook back in her bag, and stood up to leave the lecture hall, exiting with her 300 other classmates. She had only been in school two weeks, and she already felt overwhelmed with how much she had to learn. Her family had explained so much to her about health already, she thought that she

would have no problem with the things she still had to study. She was wrong.

The healthcare system was so much more complicated than she expected it to be, and she had begun to think that she would have to read her textbooks inside and out to understand what the teacher was talking about. She was nervous about how much work she would have to do to prepare for the first exam, which was less than 2 weeks away.

She walked across campus as she made her way back to her dorm room, feeling the weight of the books in her bag and the anxiety in her chest weigh her down. But she wasn't a quitter. Even though something might be hard to learn, she knew she could still learn it. To get the kind of job she wanted after college, she had to understand all the things she was learning about in class. She had been doing more research about public health and what she could do with it after college. She discovered that the way to make changes and fix the unfair ways that the healthcare system worked was to go into government. In government, they write new laws and rewrite older ones to help the people in their communities.

She sighed as she walked. Last night, Ella had talked some more about switching her major to Gabrielle's too, but it was past the point in the semester where Ella could take the classes Gabrielle was taking. Gabrielle wished she knew some of the people in her class, so she could have someone to study with. She had been

too shy to speak up because everyone else seemed to already understand what the professor was talking about.

As she approached her dorm and made her way up the front steps, she recognized another girl walking up the stairs in front of her, a girl she remembered from her class who sat a couple rows in front of her today. Now was her chance to make a friend who could help her study, who seemed to live in the same dorm as her. Gabrielle ran to catch up with her and shouted, “Hey!”

The girl turned around. Her dark brown eyes sparkled in the sunlight, and her coffee-colored skin stood out against her bright-white ensemble of jacket, billowy hat, and bag. She smiled, her curly brown hair covering parts of her face as it whipped around in the wind. “Hey.” she responded.

Gabrielle caught up with her, slightly out of breath, and said, “I’m Gabbie, I think we are in the same governmental health class?”

“Yeah, I just came from there. My name is Anna. Are you a public health major too?”

Gabrielle smiled. She realized that this girl was Alina’s roommate from earlier in the semester. She lived in the same hall as Gabrielle. “Yeah, I am. I was curious if you wanted to study together sometime soon? I’m having a lot of trouble

with all the stuff the professor has been going through.”

“Of course, this stuff seems really difficult. I have a couple other friends in the class that I was planning to study with next week for the exam, if you want to join us.”

“I’d love to!” Gabrielle responded. “I also think you live on my hall.”

Anna looked surprised. “That’s crazy. Well, we can walk the rest of the way there together, then. Do you know my roommate, Alina?”

Gabrielle nodded. “I met her during move-in.”

“That’s super cool. I’m glad I know you now, it will be nice to have someone closeby to talk to about this class stuff.”

“Me too.”

The duo walked up to their rooms together, Gabrielle proud of herself that she had made a friend who just so happened to be in the same major as her. As she entered her room and said hello to Ella, she felt like she had a plan for success that she was excited to execute.

# 9

## THANKSGIVING WITH AUNT CHRIS AND UNCLE SAL

Two months later...

Thanksgiving break had been hanging over her head like an unreachable goal for the last two months, but finally it had arrived. Her mom had told her that they were going to have Thanksgiving at Aunt Chris' and Uncle Sal's this year, so they could all spend some time with Aunt Chris, since she still wasn't doing well. Although Gabrielle hadn't mastered the art of cooking like her mother had, she could appreciate all the effort her mom put into making Thanksgiving a holiday to remember and enjoy.

Before Gabrielle had come down, her mom told Gabbrielle that her and Gabrielle's dad were going to bring some of the family's favorite autumn foods, since aunt Chris and uncle Sal didn't have the same options to buy from the store that Gabrielle's parents did.

Gabrielle stepped out of the car and stretched her legs. The long drive to Aunt Chris' house was finally over. Although she was running late, she was happy to see the run-down place that she spent so many winters in her past. She pried open her trunk, packed full to the brim with her clothes and books she had diligently read in preparation for her final exams. Ever since joining Anna's study group, Gabrielle had met so many new friends who helped her study. She could now understand the difficult concepts in her classes, and was looking forward to reading more while visiting Aunt Chris.

She grabbed as many of her things as she could hold, wobbling to her aunt's front door, and reached out with a single free finger to ring the doorbell. As soon as she did, she heard a commotion from inside. Her mom and dad opened the door, and the smell of roasted turkey wafted into Gabrielle's nose.

"Hey, Gabbie! It's great to see you!" Her mom pulled Gabrielle into a tight hug, while her dad wrapped his big arms around both of them.

"Honey, it's great to see you, I wish you would call home more often." His deep voice echoed through her bones, sweetened with a softness unique to fathers.

Gabrielle smiled warmly, and hugged them back. "It's great to see you guys too, I've missed you both so much. College has been so different than home, it's been hard not having your home-cooked meals every day, Mom."

Behind the Johnson family hug in the doorway, Gabrielle heard Aunt Chris' gravelly voice echo from the living room, "Is that Gabbie?"

Gabrielle's mom and dad let her go, and she quickly placed her belongings down near the entranceway and peered into the living room. Her aunt sat in her reclining chair that she had been in every time Gabrielle had seen her for the last two years. Her once dark brown hair was now more gray than brown, with white flyaways running down the sides of her face. Her eyes looked tired, but still full of affection. Her brother Sal stood up from the couch next to her, and held out his arms to pull in Gabrielle. "You've grown so much, Gabbie. It's great to see you."

As she hugged her uncle, Chris called out again meekly, "Don't forget about me, I want to get in on the hugs, too."

Gabrielle chuckled and walked over to Chris, bending over to embrace her frail frame. Gabrielle could feel Chris' bones through the bulky sweater she wore. She held her, trying to be gentle, so that she wouldn't hurt her. It seemed like her aunt would break if Gabrielle squeezed her too hard. She smelled like coffee and mothballs, which was different from how Gabrielle remembered. As she let her go and stood back up, Chris smiled up at her. "You look just like your mother and I when we were your age. Quite beautiful." she laughed.

“Okay Aunt Chris, we get it, you were pretty,” Gabrielle chuckled.

Chris sat up, obstinate. “Were? I think you meant ‘are.’” Gabrielle’s mom and dad had migrated into the room, and they all laughed. “Yes Aunt Chris, I meant ‘are.’”

From the kitchen, her Grandpa called out, “Hey guys, bring the party in here, the food is almost ready and I want to see our grown-up college girl too!”

Gabrielle’s mom spoke softly to Chris, “We’ll be right back. Do you want me to bring you a plate?”

Chris shook her head. “Not today, my stomach is bad again. The new meds are really getting to me. I do appreciate you all bringing all this wonderful food to Sal and I’s house, though. We don’t get that lucky very much.”

Gabrielle listened to their brief conversation as she made her way into the kitchen to get some food for herself. While she was in the kitchen, she said hello to her grandparents and brother. She thought about all the things she had learned about through her classes, and was curious how Chris’s care had been impacted by the systems she had been learning about, like her insurance.

...

After dinner, Gabrielle sat down next to Chris. She had stuffed herself with creamy mashed potatoes, gravy, roasted turkey and grilled brussel sprouts. As the rest of the family sat comfortably and watched the Thanksgiving day parade on the TV, Gabrielle pulled out one of her textbooks and notepads to continue some homework she had for her government health class. She sat in the corner of the living room, studying for some time.

After completing most of the homework she needed to do, she looked up from her book at her family. Out of curiosity, she asked Chris, “You said earlier you’re on a new medication? Why the change?”

Chris sighed deeply. “Well, it’s complicated. My insurance changed and it didn’t cover my old doctor or the old prescription I was on for my blood pressure, which I really liked. This new stuff is cheap enough so I can afford it and my insurance covers it, so it’s what I have to use. I don’t know a lot about insurance, but that’s the gist of it.”

“I know in one of my classes we are learning about different insurance systems. I know that health insurance is special in America because it isn’t just provided through the government, but it is usually given to people through their jobs. And I know a bit about how it used to work, back in the day, because of a project I did in highschool,” Gabrielle added, her Grandpa winking at her from across the room.



“Yeah, that’s true.” Aunt Chris said. “Ever since I had the heart attack, I wasn’t able to keep my job, so I no longer have any income. Without insurance, I couldn’t afford to go to the doctor, or afford any of my medications. So I applied for Medicare, which made my healthcare more affordable, and it helped me pay for all the tests I had to have done and all the medications I have to take every day. But it doesn’t cover all the medications and doctors that I need, so I do the best that I can.”

Gabrielle thought about what she had been learning in class. “Yeah, that makes sense, unfortunately. I learned that Medicare was actually designed to not cover everything somebody needs for their medicine and bills from doctor visits.”

Aunt Chris looked surprised. “Why would anyone make something like that? Isn’t Medicare made for people who don’t have enough insurance through their job or who don’t have any money to spare?”

Gabrielle nodded solemnly. “Yeah, it is. It was meant to be a system to fill in the gaps that insurance given through other ways, like through someone’s job, didn’t meet. It’s now become so that most people who have Medicare don’t have any other insurance, so the gap-filler now has a ton of gaps. That’s the reason that you can’t get the medicine that works best for you or see the same doctor you used to see. Medicare wasn’t made to do it all.”

Gabrielle's brother Jackson had been listening in on their conversation and asked, "That's so weird. I remember when one of grandparents of Gabbie's friend Claire had a heart attack around that time too, but they didn't have any of those problems. I remember I had class with one of their siblings, and they said that their grandparent recovered super quickly."

Gabrielle's mother joined in. "Those were the Morris'. The dad is a lawyer, and the mom worked at a hospital until they had kids. With jobs like that, the insurance coverage is amazing. They could afford to not have insurance, but lawyers and doctors always have great coverage. I remember they flew their grandparent out to a hospital hours away to get seen by one of the best heart doctors in the world, and they were able to enroll them into a new trial for heart medication that worked really well for her."

Jackson interrupted. "Hold on. So what you guys are saying is that going to the doctor and getting treated when you are sick is really expensive..."

Gabrielle nodded.

He continued, "... But rich people get really good insurance that makes the cost a lot lower for them..."

"Correct," she assured him.

“...Even though they could probably afford to pay it without insurance, while poor people who can hardly afford anything get insurance that doesn’t cover the things they need to survive?” he asked.

“Yeah, that’s pretty much exactly right, Jack. That’s why so many people are scared of losing their jobs. Without their jobs, they can’t pay their bills or buy food, but they also can’t pay for doctors to treat them if they get sick.” Gabrielle responded.

Aunt Chris chimed in. “Well, I’m sure there’s a reason that it works the way it does. Is it less expensive this way?”

Gabrielle said, “Ironically, no. It actually is more than twice as expensive per person than what people pay in other countries that are as developed as we are. This includes most countries in Europe and Australia. And what’s worse, is that even though we pay more for healthcare, we are less healthy than a lot of other countries. We die younger, we have more diseases, and have a lot of bad things like that. The way our health insurance system works is actually really bad compared to other countries, and very inefficient.”

Gabrielle’s mom spoke up, “Gabbie, you really seem to know a lot about this. Are you learning about health insurance in your classes this year?”

Gabrielle nodded. “Yeah, I’ve actually made a lot of friends in one of my classes that has to do with the healthcare system in America, and they have helped me study, so I’ve learned a lot about it so far.”

Jackson said, “But wait. Everything you just said sounds really unfair for poor people.”

“That’s because it is.”

“So how do you fix that? Poor people don’t deserve to die just because they can’t work or pay for healthcare that costs, uh, how much does it cost?” Jack asked.

“It can be over a million dollars, easily, without insurance.” Gabrielle said.

“A MILLION DOLLARS?!? That is so much money, only super rich people could ever afford that without insurance. But as I was saying, I don’t think poor people deserve to die just because they can’t pay a million dollars to get the care they need to stay healthy.” Jack exclaimed.

“Tell me about it,” Aunt Chris said under her breath, ironically.

“Well, there is a solution some people have been talking about that could help fix some of those problems, and make it so that poor people don’t have to struggle

because they can't afford healthcare." Gabrielle mused. "We just started learning about it in one of my classes."

Gabrielle's mom added in, "Health insurance is a really divisive issue. Lots of people have lots of opinions about it, and a lot of people don't want it to change."

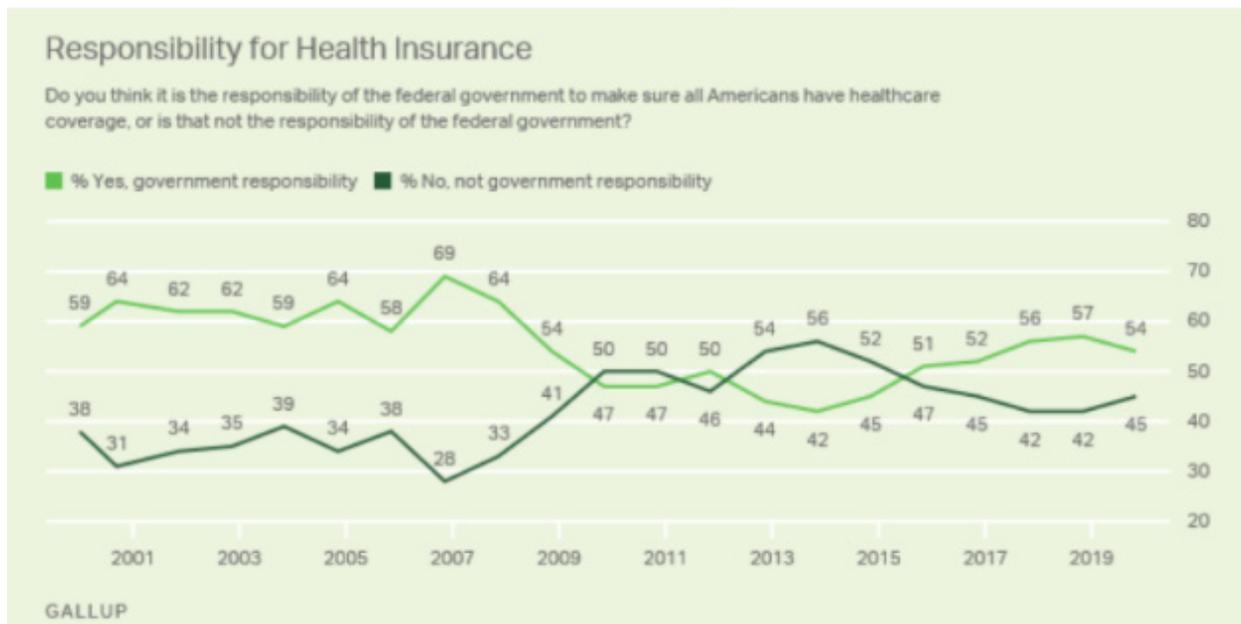
"Why would people not want it to change? It seems like the way it works now, things aren't the best for most people." Jack responded.

"That's true, the current system is not the best. But the people who have the power to change things aren't convinced yet."

Gabrielle flipped through the textbook that was still on the couch from earlier. "Yeah, actually I remember a specific graph that my professor talked about last week," she found the page, pointing to it while she showed Jack and Chris. "So this graph shows how people feel about having a health insurance system run by the government instead of how it is now."

She traced the lighter green line with her finger, as it zig-zagged up and down around the darker green line. "This line shows how many people support changing the health insurance system into one run by the government completely, instead of private companies like it is now. You can see that the graph shows more than half of people support it; My professor said that the numbers are even

closer to 70%, based on some data from this year.”



Jackson asked, “What do you mean by private?”

Gabrielle remembered what she had learned in her class and responded, “It means that anybody could have an insurance company, like you or me, and we can also make money off it if we want to. Having everything government-run is called public healthcare, because only the government can control the health insurance provided. It’s also different when health insurance is provided under the government, because it’s all centralized. The way it is now, there’s a lot of different companies all working to do the same thing, which makes it all a lot more expensive for the people paying for it. Like us.”

Aunt Chris chimed in, “Well, I thought that what I have, Medicare, is through the government. I just got it pretty recently, after I lost my job because of my

heart problems, so I'm not very familiar with it yet. Is that correct?"

Gabrielle nodded. "It is. The difference between what you have, and what some people think would fix the problems with health insurance, is that Medicare and Medicaid, which are similar, are really only given to poor people or people who are disabled in some way that makes it hard for them to work, either through illness or old age." She paused.

"People with more money who can afford private insurance are going to use that instead, because private insurance is better right now. The idea that some people had to fix this is to make one big insurance plan, run by the government, that makes it so everyone has the same kind of insurance. When rich people are invested in how good their insurance is, it is more likely for them to make the insurance better, because rich people usually have more power to make policy changes."

Jackson thought about what Gabrielle had said. "So that makes sense, I guess. It would make the insurance for the rich people maybe not as good, but then everyone could get some insurance?"

"Well, not quite," Gabrielle said. "It's more like insurance would be the same for everyone, so everybody could access the same medical care, no matter how rich or poor. Everyone would get insurance, though, which is the goal."

“You know so much about all this, Gabbie,” her mother said. “It’s quite impressive.”

Gabrielle smiled. “Well, I think it is pretty interesting to learn about. If I want to work in government myself one day to make things more fair, I have to understand how everything works.”

Gabrielle’s mom reached over to give Gabrielle a hug. “You seem like you are well on your way, then. I’m sure you are going to be the best person for the job.”

“Thanks, mom. I still have to learn about how the government running all health insurance would work, though. It seems like a good plan, but I know that in some other countries there have been issues with it, too.”

Jackson made a face. “Well, does that mean that there isn’t any way to fix the problem?”

Gabrielle laughed. “No, silly, it just means that we can learn from the success AND the mistakes from other countries, so that when we put a new system in place, we can do it so that we have already thought of how to fix the things that could go wrong. The way healthcare works in our country is super complex from everything I’ve learned, and it needs just as complex of a solution to fix the issues it has. But, with a bit of hard work, it can be done.”

Aunt Chris was still thinking about the graph Gabrielle had shown them earlier. “You said most people support changing the system to the way other countries have it, run through the government, because it costs less and gives insurance to everyone...”

“Yes, that’s right.” Gabrielle responded.

“Hmmm... well then, why hasn’t it been approved yet? You would think if so many people want something to happen, then the government would make it happen.” she pondered.

“It’s because they don’t think that healthcare is something that everyone should have. Other countries see healthcare as a right we are born with, just like we have the right to life, because we now live in a world where everyone CAN have healthcare, but the government in the U.S. is just choosing not to allow everyone access to it. We have to start thinking about healthcare as something we deserve, instead of something we need to afford; my teacher says it’s all about a mentality shift, and then the policy change will follow that. It takes time for people to change, but I will be the one to change their minds and make the difference, if no one else can.” Gabrielle stated proudly.

Jackson sat, digesting the Thanksgiving turkey and the new ideas implanted in his mind from his sister. Chris leaned back in her recliner, turning her focus to

the television again, like she so often did to distract herself from the aches and pains all over her body. Gabrielle's mom thought about how quickly Gabrielle had grown since going away to school, and was so proud of how much she had learned in such a short amount of time. Gabrielle turned her focus back to the homework she had been completing earlier. She began to write in her notebook all the ideas she hoped one day could make the world a better place, that would help Aunt Chris and people like her get the care they deserved.

# 10

## GABRIELLE GOES TO CUBA

The warm, humid air brushed against Gabrielle's skin as she sat in the pedicab. Pedicabs were like taxi cabs but the "driver" rode a bike that was attached to seats for the passengers. It was such a unique concept, but Gabrielle always felt bad for the driver. It was the end of the rainy season in Cuba, so little puddles filled the sides of the run-down streets. There were many bumps on the brick road, so Gabrielle clutched onto her belongings tightly. Each bump felt ten times more intense on the pedicab.

Even though the buildings appeared rundown, the city felt lively. The fragrant scent of food and cute antique cars filled the streets. Gabrielle felt like she was in a 60s film. As they drove further into the city, Gabrielle noticed that the buildings seemed more well-kept than those on the other side of the island, and their colors were more vibrant. No two buildings were the same. Hot pink, cyan blue, neon yellow, pastel orange, baby pink... Gabrielle kept a mental note of every hue.

Gabrielle had been in Cuba for a month now, on a study abroad trip for school. Intrigued by the introductory classes of her public health major, she wanted to learn more about the healthcare system in other countries. Her advisor told her about a semester-long, school-sponsored study abroad program to Cuba, and she immediately signed up for it during her junior year of college. It was a bit hard for Gabrielle to get used to the new environment, as she had never been outside the country, but her professors and new friends made her feel welcome.

The program's focus was on learning about the unique Cuban medical system that provided free healthcare services to all Cuban citizens. This was a big accomplishment for such a small nation, especially because their disagreements with the United States had caused huge financial strain. Despite this, Cuba has an average life expectancy that was even higher than the U.S. Gabrielle's goal was to learn the ins and outs of Cuba's healthcare system.

Some of the professors in her major department, Ms. Perez and Mr. Santos, were native Cuban citizens, and they took the lead on the trip. It was their responsibility to take the students around the country. In their first month, the students took introductory Spanish classes and learned about the history of Cuba. Luckily enough, all of the classes were taught in English. Their next few weeks were when they would be allowed to tour all of the hospitals and clinics, to actually get a feel for Cuba's healthcare system.

Because of the chaos of trying to settle into a new country, Gabrielle did not have much time to explore. When Rosie, her roommate, asked if she wanted to visit Old Havana with her Cuban friend, Anton, Gabrielle immediately said yes. Anton was born and raised in Cuba, and he had dreams of going to medical school. Rosie got sick when they first landed, so she was at the clinic a lot. Since Anton volunteered there, they became good friends. He offered to take Rosie and Gabrielle on a tour around the city, which they gladly accepted, since they both still struggled with their Spanish and had a hard time getting around.

“¡Nosotros estamos aquí!” exclaimed the driver.

Gabrielle leaned over to Anton and whispered, “What did he say?”

“We’re here, dummy!” Anton exclaimed. “You’ve been here a month and you’re still struggling... I guess that Rosetta Stone isn’t helping.” Gabrielle’s face turned red as they hopped out of the pedicab. Rosetta Stone is an online program that Gabrielle had been using to help her learn Spanish.

“You know, don’t they get tired driving people around all day on that bike? We’re over 300 pounds combined! I couldn’t imagine,” Rosie remarked.

“Yeah, but people have to do what they can to survive on this island... we don’t have as much as you guys in America. That’s why I want to go to medical school.

Má says that's my best bet at making it... especially if I can go overseas and work.”

Anton's family wasn't poor, but they definitely weren't living lavish. That seemed common amongst everyone here. Gabrielle still felt bad because their driver looked no older than 20, only a year older than she. They tipped the driver and took off to explore the city.

The first thing on their itinerary was to get something to eat. Rosie had the appetite of an American football linebacker, but you could never tell from her petite frame. “Anton! I'm tired of rice and beans, what else does this island have to offer?” Rosie exclaimed.

“Ay Rosie,” Anton sighed, “at least there are a lot of options here in Old Havana, but if you're going to survive the next couple of months, you're going to have to learn to love our rice and beans.” Gabrielle just laughed. She was tired of rice and beans too, but she'd learned to spice things up with the hot sauce she now kept in her purse. She was skeptical when her mom packed her a couple bottles before she left, but turns out moms do know best.

At the restaurant, Rosie got a sandwich called Medinoche that consisted of a sweet bread filled with pork and cheese. Anton and Gabrielle both got a classic Cuban sandwich called a Cubano. “My mouth is watering, gracias!” Rosie

thanked the waiter. After they finished eating, they walked towards their next destination.

“So... Anton,” Gabrielle interjected, “tell me more about this clinic that you work at. I mean, we have clinics in the U.S. but they seem a lot different.” Gabrielle had learned that Cuba’s health clinics were created after the revolution to help provide healthcare services to all Cuban citizens, but she hadn’t gotten to visit any just yet.

“I’d love to!” exclaimed Anton. “So they’re officially known as polyclinics and they essentially provide basic healthcare services to the families in the area.”

“So you guys also do regular check-ups and dentist appointments and stuff?” asked Rosie.

“Yeah! Sometimes the nurse or doctor will live on the first floor so they can be available 24/7.”

“Isn’t that a bit draining, though? Like, living in the hospital makes it seem like their whole life revolves around work?” Gabrielle questioned.

Anton laughed. “I mean, no matter where you live, everyone’s life pretty much revolves around work, no? The government just wants to make sure the medical

personnel have good living quarters, so they have one less thing to worry about. They don't have to live there, but many times they do because our salaries aren't that high. I mean, it's obviously not ideal but again, we make do with what we have. Here, the government regulates a lot. Our society values communal health, so healthcare services and stuff are practically free, but it comes at the cost of a lot of the freedoms you guys have. For example, no one can get really rich here because the government regulates our incomes and how that money is distributed. Even if I were to work abroad, part of my salary goes back to the government."

"Huh?? They just... take your money?" Gabrielled interjected. "That sounds criminal."

"I wouldn't think of it like that. The government pays for all of my schooling and all healthcare is pretty much free. My abuela (grandma) is 80 years old and she is living her best life because the doctors take such good care of her. By the way Rosie, I know you hate rice and beans but you have got to try my abuela's dish. She knows how to season her food."

"I'll take that as an invite! Give me a time and place and I'm there. I'd do anything for free food. About what you were saying though, I did hear you guys have nearly no homeless or unemployed people..." Rosie replied.

“Yeah, but don’t get me wrong, some taxi drivers make more here than the doctors... My aunt’s boyfriend is a taxi driver and he comes into Old Havana every once in a while to drive around the tourists. They tip really well and it’s harder for the government to regulate their money. I don’t know, sometimes knowing that makes it really hard for me to motivate myself to study, but I tell myself it’s for the better of my community.”

“You have a good heart, Anton.” Gabrielle replied.

The rest of the day they walked around the city to visit a bunch of different places. First, they visited the Castillo de la Real Fuerza, a 16th century fortress that served as a military base. It was a rugged brick building stationed atop of a pool of water that looked like a four-leaf clover. Rosie and Anton ran off and took silly pictures with the old cannons, pretending to aim at each other. Gabrielle just laughed and walked around the fortress. The whole time she kept thinking about her Aunt Chris, and what it would be like if she got the proper care she needed earlier on, like they could here in Cuba.

Gabrielle met back up with Rosie and Anton and asked, “Is it true that the doctors just go to peoples’ houses to do check ups?”

Anton laughed and said, “Yeah, people have mixed feelings on that. At least in my clinic, we try not to intervene at random times, but we do make rounds



for regular checkups at our designated community. It's nice because we build a bond with the people we treat. There's mutual trust, and I almost feel like a part of their family. The elderly have especially appreciated our company, but the occasional tío (uncle) will get mad at us for asking pesky questions about their diet or exercise. We have to do it though. Since we don't have many resources due to the U.S. embargo of goods, we focus on what's called preventative care. We don't have fancy drugs and treatments, so we have to make sure everyone gets screened for diseases before they become really sick.”

“I wish there was something like that for my Aunt Chris. I know my uncle is there to take care of her, but it’s draining for him sometimes. She has a doctor, but I don’t know how much they actually care. It’s like they only care if you have money to spend,” replied Gabrielle.

“Eh, I disagree, I don’t think I like the idea of it,” Rosie interjected. “In the U.K., the government pays for most of our stuff too, but we just go to the doctor as we need to. The biggest issue is you have to wait like 3 weeks before a doctor will see you. My aunt almost threw a fit last time she made a doctor’s appointment because they didn’t have any openings for almost a month. Like, is the whole UK dying? What does a girl have to do to get her annual physical done?” she sighed.

“I made my first appointment by myself last year and they got me in the next 3 days. I guess the U.S. may have something good.” replied Gabrielle.

“Okay, while I’d love to entertain this conversation more, there’s still more for us to do, ladies!” Anton exclaimed. “Next stop: Catedral de San Cristobal.” The Catedral de San Cristobal is an ancient cathedral built in the 1700s and it features a baroque-style brick building with stained glass windows and two beautiful bell towers. They also visited the Museo de la Ciudad which features old relics from the revolution, and the National Capitol Building, known as El Capitolio.

Gabrielle tried her hardest to enjoy the beautiful scenery around her, but she just kept thinking about her aunt and how things could have been different. Cuba's healthcare system was amazing in that it really seemed to help and provide for the people without pushing any individual into debt. However, she was wary about the ways in which the Cuban government was regulating almost everything. She knew Rosie could probably give more insight into the ways in which the UK handles their national healthcare system without the strict rules and regulations that Cuba does.

# 11

## HIDDEN TREASURES

Later that evening, they all gathered in Rosie and Gabrielle's apartment and took a break from their eventful day.

“¡Gracias por mostrarnos alrededor, Anton!” Gabrielle exclaimed.

“Look who's spanish is getting better! If this doctor stuff doesn't work out... maybe I should be a teacher,” Anton chuckled. “Hey, Rosie, what'd Gabbie just say?”

“All I could comprehend is thank you...” confessed Rosie.

“Okay so ‘por’ means for and ‘mostrarnos alrededor’ means showing around,” explained Anton.

“Ah! So ‘thank you for showing us around?’” Rosie exclaimed.

“You got it!” Anton cheered.

“Hey, Rosie,” Gabrielle began, “Do you happen to know a lot about the UK healthcare system? I’m really curious.”

“Yeah, what’s up?” replied Rosie.

“So... Everything is free?” Gabrielle questioned.

“I mean, everything is really affordable, but if you can’t afford to pay, the government has some type of system in place so that your family won’t go into debt. For families that are really poor, they don’t need to worry about paying. A lot of our tax dollars go into it, but it ensures healthcare for everyone, so I can’t really complain,” Rosie replied.

“I think I’ve heard about that on the news before... Universal Healthcare,” Gabrielle mused.

“Wait - before you ladies get real deep in this conversation, I have to head out. My mamá doesn’t like me staying out too late and I want to be able to study some more for my Organic Chemistry test. I had a great time with you guys! And my invite still stands for the both of you for dinner with my abuela. Mi casa es tu casa.”

“Our house is your house too, Anton. It’s small but you’re always welcome back. Thanks again!” smiled Rosie. “And we’ll stop by next weekend or something!”

As the door shut, Rosie and Gabrielle tidied up. “Gabbie,” Rosie started, “You’re really passionate about all of this healthcare stuff, huh?”

“I guess you could say that. Ever since my aunt started having health issues, I’ve wanted to find ways to fix America’s system. It just breaks my heart to see her struggle with her health but also have to worry about the financial impacts. My family tries to help her, but her medical bills are insane. Sometimes it feels like the government doesn’t care for people who are poor.”

“But you guys have so many amazing technologies and fancy buildings, and you can make appointments within like a week! That’s a dream for us.”

“If you think about it like that maybe, but sometimes I wonder why everything has to revolve around money. It’s like - maybe we’d all be happier if money wasn’t an issue?” Gabrielle mused.

“Yeah, but that’s a dream for everyone. Even with free healthcare services here in Cuba, Anton still worries about money,” Rosie explained.

“But his survival doesn’t depend on how big his pockets are,” Gabrielle coun-

tered.

“I don’t know, Gabbie,” Rosie sighed. “Let’s talk about something more happy. You’ve been dragging yourself down with this healthcare stuff all day. We’re in Cuba! I want to relax and soak in the Cuban energy.”

“Ok ok. What should we do then?” Gabbie asked.

“Let’s go walk around the town! See what the Cuban city life is about!” suggested Rosie excitedly.

“You don’t think that’s a bit dangerous? It’s like 10:00 at night.” worried Gabrielle.

“You guys don’t go out at night in the states? I hear those sorority parties are crazy.”

“I mean, I’m not in a sorority so I wouldn’t really know. Let me stop overthinking, let’s do it!” Gabrielle said, trying to convince herself.

After they got ready, they both snuck out of the apartment. Both their teachers lived on the same floor and they had a curfew of 11pm, so if anyone saw them leaving now, they’d be sure to wait for them to come back by then.

It was a warm night in Cuba. They were staying in a town close to Havana, but not in the heart of the city. The neighborhood was pretty run down and the paint was peeling off the buildings. It wasn't colorful like Old Havana. Their apartment was the most modern out of them all, yet it was just a clean-looking cement building- nothing crazy.

Rosie said, "I wanna go to a bar."

Gabrielle looked at her as Rosie continued. "You know, Cuba used to be the place to go party for people from the United States? It was like the playground for Americans. Bars and restaurants and everything. But, then gangs and stuff became prevalent and it was really dangerous to live in the city. That's one of the reasons why the revolution happened. Castro, a Cuban revolutionary and politician, wanted to change the country for the better. Too many people were homeless and poor, and the government only cared about profiting from Americans. I mean, Cuba still makes a lot of money from tourism, but not to that extent."

"Rosie, what happened to us not talking about all of these big topics and just relaxing?" Gabrielle teased.

"Ugh you're right. Let's find a bar." Rosie agreed.

“Alright, but I’ll just watch over you. Our drinking age is 21, and I don’t think this is where I want to have my first drink.”

“Whatever you’re comfortable with! I totally forgot about that because our drinking age is 18.” Rosie remarked.

After walking around the town for what felt like forever, they couldn’t find a bar that looked nice enough to stay. They did, however, stumble across this really large field that looked like an old amusement park had been there.

“Let’s go,” Rosie teased.

“The sign says ‘Prohibido el Paso’ that means ‘No trespassing,’ Rosie.”

“Come on, I need some excitement! Plus no one is here anyways. My phone battery is on full charge and both our phones have a flashlight. This could be cool!” encouraged Rosie.

They both jumped over the fence and walked through the long, tall weeds. Run-down roller coasters and rides were everywhere. They were all made of wood, and it was obviously rotting. Gabrielle wasn’t too fond of the scenery, mainly because she was getting tired and wanted to go home, but Rosie was having the time of her life running around and looking at all of the old rides. The place

didn't seem that old. She wondered why they didn't just tear it down.

As they walked around what seemed to be the original entrance, Gabrielle got creeped out by some clown statues. Their painted faces smiled eerily back at her. Ever since she was young, she hated clowns. Why would anyone find that amusing... let alone children? Creeped out, Gabrielle tried to stay closer to Rosie. "Hey, Rosie you think we should head back now? It's already midnight and I'm honestly getting creeped out."

"Wait! Scaredy cat, come look at this. It's like a secret door." Rosie shined her flashlight over a two foot tall brass door. "You think there's something in here?"

"Maybe? Honestly it looks like someone added that more recently. The rest of the park is made entirely of wood. If you're thinking what I think you are, I don't think that's a good idea." Gabbie cautioned.

Just before Gabrielle could finish her sentence, Rosie opened the door. Before they could even get a peek inside, they heard rustling and saw a flashlight shine in the distance. "¿Quién está ahí?" a distant voice called.

"Shoot! Let's get out of here." whispered Rosie. They both ran to the entrance, but just as they were about to jump over the fence, Gabrielle's foot got caught in the wire.

“Rosie! Rosie! My foot! It’s stuck!!” Gabrielle whispered frantically.

“You’re going to have to pull, quick!!!!”

Gabrielle tugged on her foot, hard, breaking free from the wire but causing several small cuts around her ankle. Once Gabrielle got free, they ran five blocks before they stopped to take a breath. “You think we’re good?” asked Gabrielle.

“Yeah,” replied Rosie, “But you aren’t... look at your foot it’s bleeding!”

“Oh shoot... I didn’t even notice. It was probably the adrenaline. Where did Anton say those medical clinics are again? Someone has to be on staff right? He said they’re there 24/7. I don’t wanna ask Ms. Pereze because she’s going to ask more questions and we aren’t supposed to be out anyways.”

“Yeah, let’s go to the one close to us. I’ve been there and there’s a doctor that knows English well.”

After getting cleaned up and checked for any sprains, Gabrielle and Rosie headed home. Gabrielle couldn’t stop thinking about what had been inside that door in the park. Money? Jewels? It couldn’t be - it was probably just nothing. But why was someone patrolling?

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The next weekend, Rosie and Gabrielle had dinner with Anton and his abuela. Anton was right, her rice and beans were from a different world. Gabrielle didn't even need to use her hot sauce. His abuela mixed in plantains, chilis and some other ingredients Gabrielle couldn't make out. She made a note to get the recipe so she could make it for her parents when she got home.

"Hey Anton, have you ever seen that abandoned amusement park that's near our place?" asked Gabrielle.

"No, but my papá used to tell me stories about it. They say that there's treasures hidden there."

Gabrielle and Rosie just looked at each other. "What, what are you guys hiding?" Anton lowered into a whisper, "Did you go?"

After Rosie explained the whole situation, Anton laughed at them. "Okay, I don't think it's hidden behind some random shiny door. That'd be too obvious! And that was probably just a cop making rounds. That park is government owned, so they have to make sure no one is trespassing. I honestly think the treasure thing was a lie, but it's fun to tell people. My papá would have me so scared. But Gabbie, are you okay?"

“Yeah, I just got a cut, but it healed fine. Those clinics were a great help, though. We were freaked out that we didn’t know what could be wrong with my foot, but they were so accommodating. We definitely woke them up at like 1am. You were right it is kinda nice to have them there 24/7.” Gabrielle acknowledged.

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After 3 months in Cuba, Gabrielle and Rosie had gotten very acquainted with the Cuban healthcare system. Their program required them to shadow doctors and nurses, and they learned a lot about the Cuban medical school education. All of the students had to volunteer in the local community or as a part of Cuba’s international humanitarian efforts. Gabrielle found this fascinating, because even a country with so little was trying to give back. Of course, Cuba had a lot of things to work on, particularly the harsh regulations on almost every aspect of life, but it was nice to see such a small community working together to make the best of what they had.

While they made rounds to check on all the patients, Gabrielle snuck off to spend more time with Anton. They even went back to that abandoned amusement park and found that Anton was right, it was nothing after all. Gabrielle still couldn’t help but feel like there was some type of secret being kept there, it was just so random. Why wouldn’t they just build something on top?

By the end of the trip, Gabrielle grew a fondness for Cuba. She didn't want to leave her new friends, and she loved how carefree the island felt.

On the plane back home, Gabrielle jotted down notes of things she learned about the Cuban system from Anton, and about the UK system from Rosie. Her final project for her study abroad was writing a reflection on everything she learned from the experience.

One of the biggest things she wanted to highlight was their government-sponsored universal healthcare systems. Everyone could receive care regardless of cost. Also, Cuba had polyclinics in all parts of the country, and the doctors were assigned groups of families in their area to care for. Gabrielle really liked this idea because it meant everyone received care. One other thing that stood out to her was how much Cuba valued giving back to the community. For the medical system, that made sure that the people working in the local community knew the needs of that community best, because they grew up there. Cuba also focused on preventative measures like controlling diet or risk factors for diseases before they became serious. That's because they didn't have many resources to spend on fancy technology to treat diseases after the fact. The biggest issue was the lack of choice in the system, but that seemed to be big in Cuba.

From Rosie, Gabrielle learned that the UK system also ensures universal access to healthcare. They didn't focus on preventative measures as much as Cuba be-

cause they had access to resources like the USA, but their healthcare services never pushed anyone into immense debt, like what happens in America. The healthcare system was centralized to the National Health Service (NHS), which made sure care was uniform and costs weren't too expensive. She remembered hearing from Rosie that the biggest issue was that their facilities were lacking, and making a regular appointment could take weeks. Using this information, Gabrielle began writing her reflection. She felt hopeful for a future in which the United States could offer affordable healthcare to people who needed it, like her Aunt Chris.

# 12

## GABRIELLE'S GREEN NEW DEAL

Gabrielle stared down nervously at her note cluttered desk, the noise of her foot tapping against the leg of her chair lulling her mind into a deep focus. She had meticulously reviewed her notes already, and she was more prepared than she'd been for any previous project or presentation. But this one was the most important thing she'd ever done, so she had to get it right. If reviewing her notes for a couple final hours could help her be even marginally more prepared, it was worth it. Today she'd be participating in an initial press conference as part of a team that was going to propose a Green New Deal. The legislation that they were proposing was broad, and covered a lot of areas of policy. She was on the team as one of the healthcare experts. She would be talking about the aspects of the policy that would affect healthcare. This meant that she would be talking first about the problems and disparities in the current healthcare system, and how the Green New Deal would address and correct these issues.

It had been difficult to write her speech, because she had to strike the perfect

balance between sharing all the information, and making sure that those who didn't know all the complexities of healthcare, like she did, could understand what she was saying. After weeks of revision, she thought she had found that balance. In many ways, she felt as though she'd been preparing for this very moment for her entire life. She had learned about access to healthcare from Aunt Chris, the history of health insurance from her Grandpa, health insurance from college courses, and other countries' systems while studying abroad. Gabrielle realized she had spent her life, at times unknowingly, preparing for this. She felt ready, and she knew she was armed with a lifetime of knowledge that would help her.

Her confidence in herself didn't quite calm her nerves though. Gabrielle had been working for a healthcare reform lobbyist group, which was a group that advocated in government for healthcare reform. She had made many presentations on the issues with the healthcare system through her work but she had never spoken to the media before. It was certainly nerve racking, and her strong desire to change the system made the stakes all that much higher. After reviewing her notes, she rose from her desk to practice her speech while standing, and pretending to speak to an audience. She found that aside from reviewing the material, this was the best way to truly prepare for public speaking. She rehearsed while pacing around her small office until she heard a soft knock on her door.

“Come in,” Gabrielle called.

The door eased open with a creak, and Gabrielle’s colleague Luke entered. Luke was a senator from Illinois, and the head of the team proposing the Green New Deal. “You ready?” he asked with his eyebrows raised in question.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Gabrielle said with a nervous smile. “Is it time?”

“Sure is. Meet us down in the conference room in about five minutes and we’ll get started,” Jack replied while shooting Gabrielle his characteristic thumbs up as he backed out of the room.

As the door closed, Gabrielle went to stand behind her desk and gather her notes. As she did, she took a deep breath, and began the walk to what would hopefully be a new future.

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As Gabrielle watched her colleagues take their turns speaking, her nerves turned to excitement. She was excited to share what she knew with the world, and hopefully people would be just as supportive of the need for a Green New Deal as she was. Finally, it was her turn, and she stepped up to the podium.

“Good afternoon everyone. I want to begin by once again thanking you all for being here with us today. Though it’s difficult to summarize the vast system that is American healthcare, and all its issues and opportunities for change, I will do my best.”

She looked around the room, with hundreds of eyes looking back at her. She breathed in, then continued. “As my colleagues have explained, a Green New Deal is a large proposal for widespread policy change with the goal of addressing climate change and economic inequity. Included in these goals is reforming healthcare, as it will help address economic inequity. Built on a system of racism and unequal opportunity, our healthcare policies reflect those ideals of the past.”

She heard a groan or two from somewhere in the audience. Racism wasn’t a topic that these people liked discussing, but Gabrielle needed to say it. It was true. She went on. “These policies - including access to care, insurance, and health outcomes - are not equitable, or fair. The disparities in healthcare based on both race and socioeconomic status mean that people who are minorities, particularly African Americans, and those of a low socioeconomic status are put at a disadvantage in their health. They aren’t able to afford the high costs associated with private health insurance, and the governmental programs often don’t cover enough. These people are also less likely to live in an area with access to quality healthcare.”

She thought about Aunt Chris, saying those words. It hurt to think about her, but she was using that pain to push herself forward. “Given these issues, they are left with much poorer health outcomes - with greater risk and prevalence of disease and sickness. These issues tend to span across generations, as the hardships of one generation often persist with the next. As a country that was founded on the idea of equality, this kind of disparity cannot continue to exist. We need to make changes to ensure that every American has the ability to get quality medical care. This is why the Green New Deal proposes medical care for all. Under this system, we will maintain the private option for insurance, but there would exist a more comprehensive plan for universal healthcare, modeled after the success of such systems in nations like the United Kingdom and Cuba. At the end of the day, we’re trying to make sure everyone has a fighting chance, and that no American has to worry about whether or not they can afford a doctor’s visit or medicine for them or for their children. Thank you again for being here,” Gabrielle finished.

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As Gabrielle drove home, she felt extremely pleased. The press conference had gone better than they expected. Though they had faced some difficult questions at the end, they were well prepared. Their audience seemed more open to the idea of a Green New Deal than she had initially thought, and the day had left her with an overwhelming sense of hope.

Gabrielle pulled into her neighborhood, which was not unlike the one she had grown up in, and her thoughts turned to her family. She wanted everyone else she knew, and all those she didn't - especially other African Americans, and women - to have the same fortune that she and her own daughter had. Her daughter, Emmie, was the happiest part of her life.

After she had returned from her study abroad in Cuba, she and Anton had kept in touch. As they both grew older, they were pleasantly surprised that their friendship had turned romantic. It felt like an easy and natural progression, like all of a sudden everything just fell into place, a perfect puzzle. They had gotten married after she had finished grad school, and moved to the same suburb of Chicago that Gabrielle herself had grown up in. Anton was doing his residency at the same Chicago hospital where Gabrielle had been born.

A couple years later, they had welcomed their daughter Emmie. It was then that Gabrielle's desire to make a change in the healthcare system soared to new heights. She had always been deeply concerned about the disparities, and had become increasingly so across the years as she delved deeper into the system. It was the first moment she laid eyes on her daughter though that she knew with absolute certainty that she would dedicate the rest of her life to making a change in the system. She wanted to leave the world a better place for her daughter. Her decision was only cemented when her Aunt Chris had passed away two years after Emmie was born.

Chris had been the one who first sparked her interest in healthcare, because of the challenges the system created for her. It had been a really difficult loss for both Gabrielle and her family, and it reinvigorated her need to make a change. The day of Chris's funeral had been the hardest day of Gabrielle's life. It was on that day, soon after she returned home, that she had reached out to Jack and begun her work with the Green New Deal. She now kept the last picture she had of Emmie and Aunt Chris - it had been taken only a month before Chris had died - hanging in her office. The picture served as a daily reminder of her passion, and her reason for her work.

## EPILOGUE

Gabrielle held her breath. She had gone in front of these people before to sell her policy changes, but it was still scary each time she had to do it again. Ever since she had helped pass the Green New Deal, she felt like she had finally achieved her dream of making a difference. This was just another step towards that same goal. She grasped the notebook in her hands tightly across her chest, breathed out a quick sigh, then pushed open the door.

Inside the courtroom, hundreds of faces stared back at her. She remembered how few people had looked like her when she first entered that same courtroom, but now she saw other women looking back at her who had hair like hers, skin like hers, eyes like hers, kindness like hers. Even though more people looked like her, she knew it would still be a hard battle to fight to convince them that her ideas were right. The Green New Deal, while more popular than when she was young, was still seen as unrealistic and foolish by many. Gabrielle knew that she was not foolish, nor stupid. She had worked hard her entire life

to know exactly what to say, and how to convince the people around her of the importance of the Green New Deal. She knew in her heart that the things in her policy proposal would change the world for the better, and that Medicare for All could give a fighting chance to someone else's Aunt Chris. Gabrielle fought back the memory of Aunt Chris' last moments, knowing that she was taken from this world far too soon. It hurt for her to remember, even though it happened years ago. She knew she had to use that pain to push her forward in her goals as she always had, and not let it hold her back.

Scribbled on her notebook were all the points she wanted to talk about in front of her intimidating audience - Medicare for All, how healthcare is in other countries who are healthier than America, how important it is to provide healthcare to everyone in America, and how the Green New Deal could help fix these inequalities. She knew what she had to say, and she was ready. She walked to the front of the room, where the podium was waiting for her. She carefully placed her notebook on it, and looked up at her constituents.

“Let's begin.”

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Gabrielle left the courtroom proud of what she had accomplished. Although

not everyone in the room was happy about the things she said, or even agreed with her message, she still found much more support than she was expecting. With luck, this could start the process of making Medicare for All a reality, giving everyone health insurance. As the doors closed behind her, she saw a familiar face peering around the corner.

“Emmie, what are you doing here?” Gabrielle asked mischievously, reaching around the corner to scoop up her daughter. “Who let you run around out here?”

Emmie was squished in her mother’s arms, but squeaked out, “I wasn’t just wandering around, mom, I was watching you!”

Gabrielle looked surprised. She furrowed her brow. “Really? Are you interested in the kinds of things I was saying in there?”

Emmie nodded. “Yeah, I didn’t understand most of it, but it seemed like what you were talking about was super important, and like you really cared about what you were saying. When you talked about when you were little and how your health stuff was different because of where you lived, it reminded me of what some girls at soccer practice were saying last week. I know I never met Aunt Chris, but the way you talked about her showed me how much she meant to you.”

Gabrielle smiled at her little girl. “I didn’t know you were listening to me. You know, I was around your age when I started learning about the stuff I was talking about in there. If you want, I can tell you a little bit about it on the way home.”

Emmie smiled. “Yeah, I would really like that. I want to be like you when I grow up, and I want to know all the things you know about this stuff. Like you said in there, you could change the world.”

“You could change the world too, Emmie. I’m just doing my best to make the world better for you, so that when you’re my age, you can do the same for the people who come after you. But in the meantime, let’s find your father.”

Gabrielle stood up and held the hand of her daughter as she guided her towards the exit. Outside the security station, Anton stood waiting for both of them. “I found Emmy outside my courtroom listening to my presentation,” Gabrielle said, jeeringly.

“Oh, is that so?” Anton responded, jokingly. “She must have gotten away from me.”

“Uh huh. Well, apparently we have another member of the family who is interested in healthcare.” She pointed down not so subtly at Emmie.

“Oh really,” Anton responded. “Well, we have a lot to talk about, then. But before we do that, how about we get some ice cream, to celebrate mom’s success today.”

Emmie jumped up and down, exclaiming, “Ice cream! I love ice cream!”

Gabbie took her hand again. “So do I. Let’s go to the place down on Main Street?”

Anton nodded. “Sounds good to me. Tell me more about how your presentation went on the way?”

Gabrielle nodded, and they walked out of the courthouse together. The sun shined brightly down on them, and Gabrielle squinted her eyes as she looked at the clear blue sky above her. The air was crisp and cool, typical of a fall day in Chicago, and Gabrielle thought about how grateful she was that she could breathe clean air and enjoy this beautiful day. She thought about how her daughter would soon follow in her footsteps to make the world a more equal, cleaner place to live. She knew Emmie, in years from now, would make sure that everyone got the same chance to enjoy the little things, just like Gabrielle.