

Feels Like Home

Honi. Besitos. Kisses. I flew home this summer and as I sat on a bench outside on the curb, waiting for my mom to finish work, my shirt and pants already clinging to me as the humidity set into my skin, an old friend's mother and father pulled up. As soon as they saw me, they smiled. They got out of their van, and they approached me and hugged me. Then they pressed their faces to mine. "It is so good to see you." "Good to see you Auntie. Good to see you Uncle." I knew I was home.

A month ago, I walked into a new office building, no vinyl lettering on the doors to indicate whose office it was, fresh paint, new flooring. I wandered into the conference room where an attorney—the *abogada*—sat huddled around her MacBook, an employee on both sides of her. I said hello and she smiled, looking back at me. She stood from her seat and approached me and hugged me. Then she pressed her face to mine.

I didn't know I could work at a law firm and feel that same feeling I feel on the curb of my home island's airport, but I have felt it every day since I started working with the *abogada*. Every day I walk through the door of the new office of the new, one-year-old firm, each time I sit in front of the *abogada*, and she explains to me a new client's story or a new assignment or a new-to-me-acronym, I feel that feeling. Every hour I sit at my workspace between legal assistants, learning about visas and asylum, reading through client files, and witnessing the team really help really vulnerable people, I feel like I'm really home.

When I lived in Chile as a missionary, the food that was salty and sweet all at once was foreign and the spiked gates that surrounded every building were foreign and the words that oozed from books and left the mouth of every person I met was foreign. But one thing felt like home: a face pressed to mine. We met people in the streets, and we talked about God to them and to God about them, and we carried their food from the market, and we held their hands as they cried. When we walked up to their homes and shouted, "¡Alo!" the ones who let us in approached us and hugged us and pressed their faces to ours. It felt like home.

On the *abogada's* desk sits a large wood carving of a turtle. One day she caught me looking at it and ran her hand across its back. She explained, "Turtles are precious. Turtles are migratory creatures." She explained to her following on TikTok, a following that feels hope in her answers to immigration questions and finds comfort in her calming voice, "*La tortuga tiene un escudo.*" "Turtles have shields." "*El escudo es un símbolo de que estoy tratando a defender sus derechos.*" "The shield is a symbol that I am trying to defend your rights."

When I hold my little nephew in my arms, I just have to say "*honi*" and he presses his face to my cheek. He is being raised like I was raised, taught from a young age to hold close the things that matter most. These are the things that matter: helping people feel like they are home; helping people feel like they are protected; helping people feel like their story matters and that it should be cemented into an affidavit, signed, sealed, and delivered to a government agency to petition for an opportunity; helping people be here and stay here; helping people by pressing my face to theirs. I want to help people feel like they are home. I want to be their shield.