The same spark by [redacted]

Walking through airport terminals was never a novelty to me. Growing up in Colombia, my family moved whenever my father's work took us to a new city. Flying was routine, and the United States wasn't even new to me. Yet four years ago, when I landed to start graduate school, that confidence vanished. I wasn't just here for a quick visit; I was actually staying.

Moving across the continent meant leaving behind every certainty I owned: my routine, my family, my closest friends, and essentially a whole chapter of who I was. Arriving in a quiet university town that felt like a blank map, my chest tightened with that weird, universal mix of adrenaline and quiet unease. It's like walking into a dinner party where everyone already knows each other; you've been invited in, but you're still lingering by the front door, holding onto a drink, wondering how to laugh along at an inside joke you weren't there for.

Everything was strange at first: the cadence of the voices, the different rhythms of how people interact, the unspoken social rules. But it did not take long for a simple, unguarded smile, a five minute chat about bad weather, somebody holding the door open for me, or a genuine greeting to ground me. Those tiny interactions cracked open a truth that changed how I see moving through the world. Beneath our languages, borders, and accents, we are all stumbling through the exact same journey. We are flawed, stubborn, a little anxious, and desperately eager to find our people.

As an international student, the sharpest lesson I have learned is that the human experience is never exclusive. It is like a river that runs underneath all of us. When you move across the world, it is so easy to trick yourself into feeling like a solo sailor adrift on an unexplored ocean, convincing yourself that nobody has ever felt this exact brand of homesickness or doubt. But

sooner or later, you realize that water has touched millions of hands before yours. None of what we feel in a new place is uncharted territory; it's simply our turn to walk through it.

Fear, excitement, nostalgia, and relief have a thousand faces, but they beat with the exact same heart. During my first weeks on campus, that quiet sting of being out of place followed me everywhere. I felt exposed, hyperaware of my accent, wondering if everyone else had been handed an instruction manual for graduate school that I had missed. Then I caught a classmate's frantic, overwhelmed glance right before a midterm, or saw the tired slump in someone's shoulders at the library at 10:00 p.m., and it clicked to me that nobody actually has it figured out.

Emotion is humanity's native tongue. Nobody sits down to teach you how to feel grief, joy, or relief, yet everyone recognizes them instantly across a crowded room. In a burst of shared laughter when a presentation goes sideways, the ego drops, fear dissolves, and two people who grew up thousands of miles apart suddenly speak the exact same language.

I used to think finding a community was an active hunt, something you tracked down by signing up for every club and showing up to every event with a stiff smile. Turns out, the community usually catches you sideways. It lives in the margins of ordinary days, inside jokes born from exhausting study sessions, or comfortable silences where nobody feels the need to perform. I found that sense of belonging in the kindness of people who showed up for me when I needed it most, whether it was helping me through the difficult days after an accident I had or simply offering me a ride to get groceries. These moments might have seemed ordinary to them, but to me, they were reminders that even thousands of miles from home, I was never truly alone.

Belonging is not about erasing where you come from to blend in; it is about taking your distinct thread and tying it into someone else's until you create an entirely new fabric. Community isn't a

zip code or a building. It is the simple, radical act of showing up and letting another person take up space in your life.

Every person you pass on the street is living out an entire novel you will never read. Some people run through life like they are constantly five minutes late; others stop on the sidewalk just to look at the sky. Some show love with loud, unapologetic affection; others show it quietly, through acts of service and presence. It took me time to realize that our differences are mirrors, not walls. When you stop treating someone else's rhythm as foreign or strange, it becomes a blueprint for understanding life from a fresh angle. Difference does not push us apart; it simply adds contrast and color to a canvas that would otherwise be dull.

If someone getting off a plane today to start graduate school asked me what these four years taught me, I would tell them: do not be afraid to be who you are, but never be too proud to let yourself change. Real life does not happen on the sidelines. Step into the uncertainty. Make the awkward grammar mistake in class. Walk into the room where you do not know a single soul. The ground will feel shaky at first, but that unsettled soil is the only place real confidence grows.

Most importantly, look up. You might feel like you are walking alone in the dark, but if you look closely at the person next to you, you will see the exact same spark, the exact same doubts, and the exact same hope. Being unique and being connected are not opposites, they are the whole point. We preserve what makes us who we are precisely so we have something meaningful to give each other when we finally cross paths. You've got this!

***AI usage acknowledgement:** AI was used to correct spelling and grammatical errors, suggest synonyms for specific words, and review sentence structure, as I originally wrote this essay in Spanish. The ideas, personal experiences, and reflections expressed in this essay are entirely my own.