

When Alisson arrived to the airport in late August this year adorned in a puffy jacket after traveling for the better part of a day and our family welcomed her with flowers, signs, and open arms, none of us could have imagined how the next few months would bring us together. She was here, for better or worse, to be thrown into the beautiful chaos that is our family. The best part about Alisson is that she was excited to do it.

Alisson couldn't have arrived at a better time - our family does holidays BIG, and autumn was just starting. In Vancouver, Washington, we have distinct seasons, which is something that she had never experienced in her home country of Ecuador. We immediately set to sharing our cultures the best way that we knew how - with food. We made a list of her favorite meals from Ecuador that she could share with us, and also listed out the American foods not named hamburgers or hotdogs that are engrained in our regional gastronomy that she had never tried before (biscuits and gravy, anyone?).

As we established schedules and routines, Alisson's love of crafts came out in a huge way as the leaves turned from green to brown and red. The kids were delighted to be finger painting, making woodland animals out of toilet paper tubes, and using sticks for art projects that my non-creative brain couldn't dream of. Halloween was coming, and we planned costumes together, and went to haunted houses to prime the season's pumps.

Then, life got hard.

In early October, my father was hospitalized with undiagnosed and untreated lung cancer, and I needed to go be by his side. With my wife being 7 months pregnant, Alisson helped to shoulder the duties of running the house in my absence without hesitation and with humility. Her caring and compassion was evident from the start, but the way that she comforted me and told me to go be with my dad when I paused to worry if I should stay or fly to Texas let me know that she understood family, and that she was now part of ours.

Dad passed away that week. My wife and Alisson were doing such a great job of managing the family, but the day after my father died, as I was preparing for the funeral, my wife and two of the three children fell ill with COVID-19, with my wife needing to be rushed to the hospital and placed on oxygen. Knowing that my family and Alisson were being spread thin, I opted to take an emergency flight home rather than bury my father. During this tumult, Alisson was so strong and present for the children, going above and beyond her duties as an au pair. She was family.

Slowly, things returned to normal, and my wife and I arranged our neighbors and former nanny to watch the kids while we returned to Texas for my dad's memorial in late October. The family was racked with grief, and Alisson worked with the children to make a beautiful shrine to their Papaw in line with the Ecuadorian tradition of Dia de los

Muertos. We still trick or treated and celebrated Halloween, and looked forward to Thanksgiving and Christmas (we move at the speed of holidays in this family).

Not a week later, in early November, my wife was rushed to the hospital again, this time with pre-eclampsia as a complication from her previous bout with COVID-19. The doctors told us that the baby had to come that day, at the risk of losing my wife. So, two months before her due date, the family was in crisis. And, just like before, Alisson stepped up to the plate, this time working with me to shoulder the stress of taking care of the kids while I went to and from the hospital. On November 8, our fourth little was born. For three weeks, she stayed in the NICU, and my wife never left her side. For three weeks, Alisson and I took care of business at home, feeling the weight of the situation, but persevering nevertheless.

When our new baby finally came home, just days before Thanksgiving, Alisson took such pride and joy in the addition to our family. Instead of shirking the unpredicted responsibilities, she embraced them. As we joined hands for a heavy-hearted benediction of our Thanksgiving meal, a job historically reserved for my dad, we shared the grief and emotion of loss, and basked in the blessing of having our healthy baby and mama home at last - together as a family.

