Sometimes, when I’m bored I play this game in my head where I try to come up with backstories for strangers I see. I’d be waiting in line at the grocery store and decide that the elderly gentleman ahead of me was once a World War II pilot who had saved several lives on a dangerous rescue mission. Or the young, pink-haired cashier helping him out was a tired college student, working extra shifts in order to fulfill her childhood dream of becoming a lawyer. I give them all different, interesting stories, but wonder what they would think if they knew. Perhaps their stories were even more exciting than I had imagined.

One day, I curiously asked my parents what their story was. Seeing my family from afar, we seem so mundane and almost boring, but my father told me the story of how he moved to California with only five hundred dollars to his name and no source of income. For six months, he had worked in a restaurant and lived with his aunt and uncle while my mother was still in India, working tirelessly to afford her own ticket over. They were both unfamiliar with American culture and felt like fish out of water in those first few months. However, with people of several different cultures, my parents were able to find people who had similar experiences adjusting to a new way of living and grew to love California as well. My father eventually found a job as a chemical engineer while my mother worked as an accountant for a local business until she resigned to look after me and then my sister.

I spent my early years living in a one-bedroom apartment and watched, over the years, as my father would come home announcing that he had gotten a promotion at work, and when my mother decided that she would start working again. I watched as my parents became official U.S. Citizens. I was there when my parents bought their first house and listened when my grandparents would tell me of all the hardships my parents had gone through to get to where they are now. And when my parents urged me to study harder and to focus on my future, I reminded myself that they want my life to be free of all the difficulties they had encountered when they started a new life in a foreign country.

My mother, who only knew how to cook Indian meals before moving to the United States, served me a plate of enchiladas as she talked of all the important people who helped her adjust to her new life. People she worked with, who have all known me since I was born, and some of my extended family here, who helped my parents settle in. She tells me of the first time she celebrated Christmas and Thanksgiving with new friends that she made, and of all the road trips she and my father went on around the country. As I listened, I wondered how I lived with my parents all these years and didn’t know much about their lives before me.

My parents were able to bridge the gap between their culture and the cultures they’re surrounded by, like many other immigrants. Together, they managed to learn about other cultures from all over the world and celebrate them while still remaining faithful to their own. I grew up lighting candles for Diwali in November and then decorating our Christmas tree in December. And though I still wonder what people’s stories are, I realize that they may not be so monochromatic after all, they could be an internal struggle that someone worked for years to overcome. Now, when I walk around, I walk across a Mexican restaurant next to a salon advertising “Best Thai Massages”. I see a Domino’s Pizza next to a small ramen shop, and watch people of all different shades walking out smiling. This is our society now, a place where everyone celebrates everyone’s cultures in one city.