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*all our
ordinary stories*

A MULTIGENERATIONAL
FAMILY ODYSSEY

Of course, it is convenient to blame our distance on language.



When it might just have been our family circumstances.



My parents weren't around much.



Welcome to Yan Gao Cook!



No! No ma! That means "how are you?" in Cantonese.

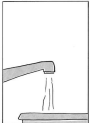


~brrring~

Today we are going to make crab and bean curd soup!



I need you to wash some rice. I'll be home by seven.



X-ray view



Remember, if you can cook,



so can you!



During summer break, my mom often brought us with her to Deerfoot Mall, where she worked.



It was more interesting than staying at home, but only slightly.



Mostly, it involved hanging around weird 1980s mall art.



And wondering if the lush mall vegetation was real or fake.



There was only so much you could expect from a second-rate suburban mall in Calgary, Alberta.



But I found ways to pass the time.



Even though I couldn't afford the \$3.95.



I would read a few pages at a time until someone walked by—



then flip quickly to the back cover so it looked like I was browsing.



I thought I was so smart.



It's easy to believe you're invisible at the mall.



Especially if you stay out of people's way.



And spend time in the in-between places.



When I ran out of things to do, I'd sit and watch my mom work.



It never occurred to me that she might have noticed me watching her.



She dished out the same fast food we often ate for lunch or dinner, or both.



All the stuff I still can't stand as an adult.



Can I get extra soy sauce?





In the long lulls
between customers,
she seemed
especially far away.



Although we were in
the same place
physically, it felt like
my mother was
somewhere else
entirely.



Years later, I would
find words for this
feeling in a book by
Yiyun Li:

"What a long way it
is from one life to
another."

Li goes on to say
that writing is meant
to bridge the
distance.

If only

How I longed to be
able to read my
mother.



But a
person
is not a
book.

And some distances
are so confusing, so
illegible, you don't
even know how to
begin.

