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I and You

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Arc Pair Press

Introduction: On Family, Fiction, and Identity

I.

*I*n 1899, Bark Gok “B.G.” Woo boarded a steamer for the United States. Like many young Chinese men before him, he planned to work on the western railroads until he earned enough money to return home, marry, and start a family. When his ship docked in Seattle, though, two Baptist missionaries boarded and told the Chinese passengers that American law now prohibited them from entering the country. Their only hope was a quick escape before Customs agents arrived. Bark Gok Woo heeded this warning. He was sixteen years old.

Bundled off the ship by the missionaries, he commenced a series of rail journeys that ended in Richmond, Virginia. There, in the 1000 block of West Broad Street, he opened a laundry. His plan of returning to China stalled for more than a decade, until the U.S. government granted him certification for reentry. Even then, his papers covered only himself. He could not return with a spouse.

He went to China anyway, where he married Tai Hai Chin. In 1913, she gave birth to Quin Chon “John” Woo. She was sixteen years old.

Like many Americans, I once viewed immigration as a largely finite proposition. *When did your ancestors reach the United States? When did they become citizens?* But for many Chinese-American families, well into the 20th century, immigration was often an uncertain process marked by transience and separation. For almost a decade, B.G. Woo ranged between Virginia and China alone. Eventually, he used his mother's data to falsify travel documents for his wife, who arrived in Richmond in 1922. She brought their son as well as an unrelated seven-year-old boy, who gained entry using the birth certificate of another child that had died in infancy years earlier. Over the next half-decade, the couple welcomed three more children in the United States. But their fifth child—a daughter—was born during a family trip to China in 1931. B.G. altered the girl's paperwork to indicate a male birth before selling the certificate to acquaintances. When the family returned to America, the baby stayed behind with relatives.

For most people, I suspect it is a humbling experience to review the precise turnings of history—the myriad microscopic events—that gave rise to their existence. John Woo married in China in 1938 and, unlike his father, planned on settling there. But Japanese military actions forced him to return to America without his wife, Mae, a year later. She was already pregnant with their first child, Wei Hong “William” Woo. The couple would not see each other again until after the war, when they reunited just in time to escape to Hong Kong before the advancing Communists. One year and another child later, they travelled back to Richmond, where John opened his own laundry not far from his father's.

Later still, William Woo travelled to Hong Kong to get married. This was 1961, and Lanny Chan was sixteen years old, determined to make money in America to send back to her family. She returned with William to the laundry in Richmond, where she accelerated her acquisition of English by watching game shows and reading romance novels.

Even later—in 1980—William and Lanny's youngest daughter rode a bus over an hour each morning to reach her middle school in

Chesterfield County, Virginia. That's where we met. We later married. In our first meaningful encounter, however, she beat me in a student government election in the sixth grade. We joke that it set the right tone for the relationship.