

Father Cures a Presidential Fever

Pardee Lowe

FOCUS: AUTOBIOGRAPHY

How I came to be infected with presidentitis even now I find somewhat difficult to explain. That it was not *congenital* was *amply* demonstrated by Father's matter-of-fact superiority over such divine foolishness. And Mother, bless her realistic Chinese soul, never affected awareness of such *mundane* matters until the political clubs of our neighborhood (we lived in the toughest one in East Belleville) celebrated under her very nose with torchlight parades, drunken sprees, black eyes, and cracked skulls the glorious victories of their Men of the People. Whenever this happened she would exclaim, "My, my, what queer people the Americans are!"

The first time Father discovered how long the firstborn man child of his household had been exposed to the ravages of this dread disease, he was horrified. "Unbelievable!" he stormed. But Mother, who had a strong will of her own, flew right back at him. And when she cried aloud, with Heaven as her witness, that she did not know how I caught it or how she could have prevented it, Father recognized the justice of her remarks. She couldn't. Kwong Chong, our own neigh-

borhood dry-goods store, household duties, and two new babies kept Mother so harassed that she had no time to chase us about the streets or down the back alleys. Later, to still her flow of tears, Father even grudgingly admitted his full responsibility. By moving our family to an American neighborhood, according to Mother, he had needlessly exposed us all to the malady.

That this was the source of the trouble, probably no one knew better than Father. When the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire consumed all his worldly goods and forced him to flee Chinatown with his wife, two babies in arms, and a *motley* feudal *retinue* of kins-



A CLEANSER LOOK

Lowe describes the characteristic Chinese sense of responsibility for the extended family, which is compared to the **feudal** economic system of landholding that existed in Europe from the 9th to 15th centuries. In this system, a vassal — a subordinate or servant — lived and worked on land owned by a lord and received protection in return for service and allegiance to the lord.

What does the author mean by "infected with presidentitis"?



What does the author mean by "infected with presidentitis"?

A. He means that as a young boy he was possessed by the desire to become president of the United States.

1 Point out to students the gently humorous tone in which the story is written. Lowe uses figurative language and overstatement as humorous techniques. For example, in the very first sentence, he states that as a child, he was "infected with presidentitis." Once you have established the fact that this "illness" is the author's desire to become president when he grows up, it becomes clear that the word "infected" is being used figuratively. Lowe continues in this humorous vein by using overstatement, or exaggeration. He explains that his "illness" was not an inherited trait, since his father dismissed the very idea of such "foolishness." Father was above entertaining a notion as ridiculous as the idea that someone in his family could become president. This stance also indirectly reveals Father's realistic understanding that the son of a Chinese immigrant did not stand a chance of achieving such high office. Today, about 90 years later, it has become much more possible for a member of an ethnic minority to be considered for the highest office in the land.

2 The people hotly debated the issues that affected so many of them directly — issues such as land rights and employment opportunities in undeveloped areas of the country. The paragraph explains how the members of political clubs wildly celebrated the victories of their candidates, and often engaged in drunken brawls with those of differing political sentiments.

- 3 Humorous exaggeration continues in the first sentence of this paragraph as Lowe describes his father's horror at the discovery that his child has "been exposed to the ravages of this dread disease." The humor is furthered by the mother's denial of blame for her son's "condition" and the father's final acceptance of responsibility.
- 4 "Motley feudal retinue of kinsmen": in this rich, concise phrase, the author describes his extended family as a diverse entourage of people who still adhere to a family code that involves a hierarchical network of family allegiances, much in the manner that vassals once owed loyalty and service to their lords in the feudal system of property in medieval Europe.



What is the significance of the simile “like a phoenix”?

A. The author uses this simile to explain that even though his family had to flee Chinatown during the earthquake, his father hoped to build their future anew, rising from the ashes in East Belleville, an American neighborhood in the city.



What does the narrator mean by “a hyphenated world”?

A. He means that they would assume a dual identity. They would become Chinese-Americans, American citizens who retain their native Chinese cultural lifestyle.



What is out of Father’s control in the upbringing of his son?

A. Father has no control over what happens outside his household — for example, what his son learns in school.



Why does the teacher pronounce the students’ names “clumsily”?

A. The students are predominantly children of immigrants and their names are foreign to the teacher.

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men, relatives, and garment-sewing employees, he merely considered it more or less a blessing in disguise. From the ashes of this catastrophe, which represented for Mother the end of her Chinatownian world, Father’s thoughts and plans for the future soared like a phoenix.*



On April 18, 1906, a major **earthquake** caused severe damage in San Francisco. The rupturing of gas lines and electric cables resulted in explosions and **fires** that devastated the city. Broken water mains meant the loss of water pressure, making it almost impossible for firemen to control the flames. Some buildings were dynamited to create a fire break — a bare area the fire could not cross. Fires raged through April 20, destroying numerous buildings. In some cases, entire neighborhoods were destroyed, and many people were forced to relocate.

At long last the visions and dreams for his offspring, present and potential, would be realized. His family would rub shoulders with Americans. They would become good American citizens albeit remaining Chinese. They would inhabit a hyphenated world. By some formula, which he never was able to explain, they would select only the finest attributes of each contributory culture. They would reflect everlasting credit on him and on the name of Lowe.

(Even then, Father’s faith passed all human understanding. He expected us somehow to muddle through. We did — but in a manner totally unexpected.)

From Father’s point of view, we children were to be raised at home according to the old and strict Chinese ideal. But in that ever-widening circle of American

neighborhood life beyond the narrow confines of our home, Father had no control. A daily commuter to his shop in San Francisco’s Chinatown, an hour’s ride away by steam train and ferry, he was never fully *apprised* of our actions until too late.



A CLOSER LOOK

The Golden Gate Bridge was not erected until 1937; thus, Father traveled by **train and ferry**.

He was ignorant, for instance, of what transpired in the large wooden public school situated some three short blocks from our home. He was confident we were in good hands. If he had only known what was awaiting his son there, he might not have been so eager to have me acquire an American schooling.

When at the age of five I entered the **5** *portals* of this mid-Victorian architectural firetrap,* surrounded by its iron-spiked fence and tall trees, for the first time, I recognized it as an international institution in which I was free to indulge my own most un-Chinese inclinations — and, unintentionally to be sure, to undermine Father’s high hopes.

I can still vividly remember the strange excitement of the first morning roll call, which was to be repeated daily for many years to come. Clumsily, the teacher pronounced our names. As we rose, she **6** checked our nationality.

“Louisa Fleishhacker — Austrian.” She underlined the word *Austrian*. “Elsie Forsythe — *English*. Penelope Lincoln — *American Negro*. Yuri Matsuyama — *Japanese*. Nancy Mullins — *Irish*. Maria

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

phoenix — a legendary bird that consumes itself by fire every 500 years and rises again from its own ashes.

firetrap — a building which is a fire hazard.

- 5** Lowe uses a very concise and well-worded phrase to convey a rich visual image. He describes the school as a “mid-Victorian architectural firetrap,” conjuring up an image of an old-fashioned building which, in spite of its elegant design, is quite unsafe.
- 6** You may wish to point out that each student courteously rises as his or her name is called so that the teacher can familiarize herself with, and identify, the students.