

# The Johnstown Flood

David McCullough

On the morning of the 31st, James Quinn had gone to the store early to supervise the moving of goods to higher levels. Before leaving home he had told everyone to stay inside. One of his children, Marie, was already sick with measles, and he did not want the others out in the rain catching cold. He did, however, allow young Vincent to come along with him downtown to lend a hand.

At noon, when he had returned for dinner, the water had been up to his curbstone. He had been restless and worried through the meal, talking about the water rising in the streets and his lack of confidence in the South

10 Fork dam. **A**

A few days before, he and his wife and the infant, Tom, and Lalia had gone to Scottdale for a christening, and Mrs. Quinn and the two children had stayed on to visit with her sister. Now Aunt Abbie and Libby Hipp were more or less running things, and he was doing his best to make sure they understood the seriousness of the situation.

"James, you are too anxious," his sister-in-law said. "This big house could never go."

In recalling the day years afterward, Gertrude felt sure that her father was so worried that he would have moved them all to the hill that morning, even  
20 though he had no special place to take them, if it had not been for Marie. He was afraid of the effect the light might have on her eyes.

After dinner he had gone back to the store, and Gertrude slipped out onto the front porch where she began dangling her feet in the water, which, by now, covered the yard just deep enough for the ducks to sport about among the flowers. Everyone who survived the flood would carry some especially vivid mental picture of how things had looked just before the great wave struck; for this child it would be the sight of those ducks, and purple pansies floating face up, like lily pads, in the yellow water. **B**

## ANALYZE VISUALS

What does the photograph convey to you about the destructive force of the Johnstown flood?

## **A** CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

What signal words in lines 1–10 tell you when the events took place?

## **B** MOOD

Reread lines 22–28. What mood do these unusual details create?

Shortly before four Gertrude's father suddenly appeared in front of her. He  
30 took her with one hand, with the other gave her a couple of quick spanks for  
disobeying his order to stay inside, and hurried her through the door.

"Then he gave me a lecture on obedience, wet feet, and our perilous  
position; he said he had come to take us to the hill and that we were delayed  
because my shoes and stockings had to be changed again. He was smoking a  
cigar while the nurse was changing my clothes. Then he went to the door to  
toss off the ashes."

It was then that he saw the dark mist and heard the sound of the wave  
coming. He rushed back inside, shouting, "Run for your lives. Follow me  
straight to the hill."

40 Someone screamed to him about the baby with the measles. He leaped up  
the stairs and in no more than a minute was back down with Marie wrapped  
in a blanket, his face white and terrified-looking.

"Follow me," he said. "Don't go back for anything. Don't go back for  
anything." Everyone started out the door except Vincent. Just where he was no  
one knew. Helen and Rosemary ran on either side of their father, holding on  
to his elbows as he carried the baby. When they got to the street the water was  
nearly to Rosemary's chin, but she kept going, and kept trying to balance the  
umbrella she had somehow managed to bring along. The hill was at most only  
a hundred yards away. All they had to do was get two short blocks to the end  
50 of Main and they would be safe. **C**

James Quinn started running, confident that everyone was with him. But  
Aunt Abbie, who was carrying her baby, and Libby Hipp, who had Gertrude  
in her arms, had turned back.

When she reached the top of the steps that led from the yard down to the  
street, Aunt Abbie had had second thoughts.

"I don't like to put my feet in that dirty water," Gertrude would remember  
her saying. Libby said she would do whatever Aunt Abbie thought best, so they  
started back into the house.

"Well, I kicked and scratched and bit her, and gave her a terrible time,  
60 because I wanted to be with my father," Gertrude said later. How the two  
women, each with a child, ever got to the third floor as fast as they did was  
something she was never quite able to figure out. Once there, they went to the  
front window, opened it, and looked down into the street. Gertrude describe  
the scene as looking "like the Day of Judgment I had seen as a little girl in  
Bible histories," with crowds of people running, screaming, dragging children,  
struggling to keep their feet in the water.

Her father meanwhile had reached dry land on the hill, and turning around  
saw no signs of the rest of his family among the faces pushing past him. He  
grabbed hold of a big butcher boy named Kurtz, gave him Marie, told him to  
70 watch out for the other two girls, and started back to the house. **D**

**C MOOD**

Reread lines 37–50. What  
details help create a  
mood of terror?

**D CHRONOLOGICAL  
ORDER**

Notice the signal word  
*meanwhile*. What two  
sets of actions occur at  
the same time?

But he had gone only a short way when he saw the wave, almost on top of him, demolishing everything, and he knew he could never make it. There was a split second of indecision, then he turned back to the hill, running with all his might as the water surged along the street after him. In the last few seconds, fighting the current around him that kept getting deeper and faster every second, he reached the hillside just as the wave pounded by below. ♦

Looking behind he saw his house rock back and forth, then lunge sideways, topple over, and disappear.

Gertrude never saw the wave. The sight of the crowds jamming through the  
80 street had so terrified her aunt and Libby Hipp that they had pulled back from the window, horrified, dragging her with them into an open cupboard.

"Libby, this is the end of the world, we will all die together," Aunt Abbie sobbed, and dropped to her knees and began praying hysterically, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, Have mercy on us, oh, God . . ."

Gertrude started screaming and jumping up and down, calling "Papa, Papa, Papa," as fast as she could get it out.

The cupboard was in what was the dining room of an elaborate playhouse built across the entire front end of the third floor. There was nothing like it anywhere else in town, the whole place having been fitted out and furnished  
90 by Quinn's store. There was a long center hall and a beautifully furnished parlor at one end and little bedrooms with doll beds, bureaus, washstands, and ingrain carpets on the floors. The dining room had a painted table, chairs, sideboard with tiny dishes, hand-hemmed tablecloths, napkins, and silverware.

From where she crouched in the back of the cupboard, Gertrude could see across the dining room into a miniature kitchen with its own table and chairs, handmade iron stove, and, on one wall, a whole set of iron cooking utensils hanging on little hooks. Libby Hipp was holding her close, crying and trembling.

Then the big house gave a violent shudder. Gertrude saw the tiny pots and  
100 pans begin to sway and dance. Suddenly plaster dust came down. The walls began to break up. Then, at her aunt's feet, she saw the floor boards burst open and up gushed a fountain of yellow water.

"And these boards were jagged . . . and I looked at my aunt, and they didn't say a word then. All the praying stopped, and they gasped, and looked down like this, and were gone, immediately gone."

She felt herself falling and reaching out for something to grab on to and trying as best she could to stay afloat.

"I kept paddling and grabbing and spitting and spitting and trying to keep the sticks and dirt and this horrible water out of my mouth."

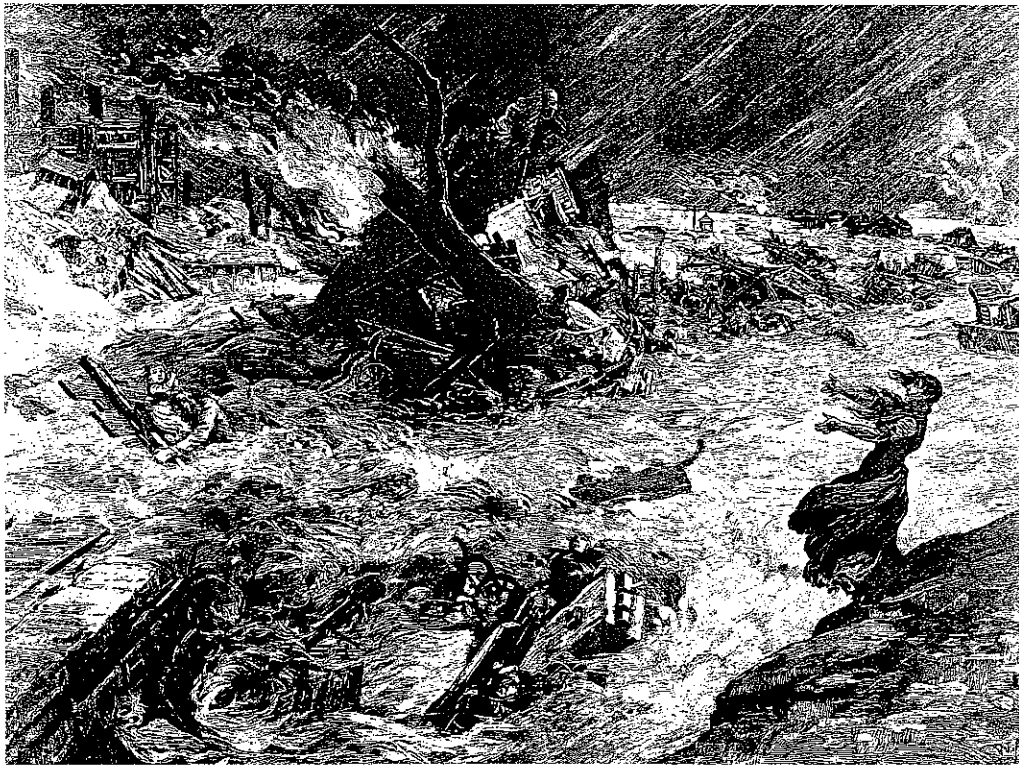
110 Somehow she managed to crawl out of a hole in the roof or wall, she never knew which. All she saw was a glimmer of light, and she scrambled with all her strength to get to it, up what must have been the lath<sup>1</sup> on part of the house

♦ GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Reread lines 71-76.

Notice how McCullough makes the scene's action come to life through the use of **strong verbs** and verb forms, such as *demolishing*, *surged*, and *pounded*.

1. lath: a narrow strip of wood used to support plaster or tiles.



A bridge washed away by the Johnstown Flood

#### ANALYZE VISUALS

What does the drawing communicate about the flood that the photo on page 103 does not?

underneath one of the gables.<sup>2</sup> She got through the opening, never knowing what had become of her aunt, Libby, or her baby cousin. Within seconds the whole house was gone and everyone in it.

The next thing she knew, Gertrude was whirling about on top of a muddy mattress that was being buoyed up by debris but that kept tilting back and forth as she struggled to get her balance. She screamed for help. Then a dead horse slammed against her raft, pitching one end of it up into the air and  
 120 nearly knocking her off. She hung on for dear life, until a tree swung by, snagging the horse in its branches before it plunged off with the current in another direction, the dead animal bobbing up and down, up and down, in and out of the water, like a gigantic, gruesome rocking horse. **F**

Weak and shivering with cold, she lay down on the mattress, realizing for the first time that all her clothes had been torn off except for her underwear. Night was coming on and she was terribly frightened. She started praying in German, which was the only way she had been taught to pray.

A small white house went sailing by, almost running her down. She called out to the one man who was riding on top, straddling the peak of the roof and  
 130 hugging the chimney with both arms. But he ignored her, or perhaps never heard her, and passed right by.

"You terrible man," she shouted after him. "I'll never help you."

Then a long roof, which may have been what was left of the Arcade Building, came plowing toward her, looking as big as a steamboat and loaded down with perhaps twenty people. She called out to them, begging someone to

#### **F** MOOD

What do the details about the dead horse contribute to the mood of the passage?

2. gable: a triangular portion of a roof.

save her. One man started up, but the others seemed determined to stop him. They held on to him and there was an endless moment of talk back and forth between them as he kept pulling to get free.

Then he pushed loose and jumped into the current. His head bobbed up, then went under again. Several times more he came up and went under. Gertrude kept screaming for him to swim to her. Then he was heaving himself over the side of her raft, and the two of them headed off downstream, Gertrude nearly strangling him as she clung to his neck.

The big roof in the meantime had gone careening on until it hit what must have been a whirlpool in the current and began spinning round and round. Then, quite suddenly, it struck something and went down, carrying at least half its passengers with it. **G**

Gertrude's new companion was a powerful, square-jawed millworker named Maxwell McAchren, who looked like John L. Sullivan.<sup>3</sup> How far she had traveled by the time he climbed aboard the mattress, she was never able to figure out for certain. But later on she would describe seeing many flags at one point along the way, which suggests that she went as far up the Stony Creek as Sandy Vale Cemetery, where the Memorial Day flags could have been visible floating about in the water. Sandy Vale is roughly two miles from where the Quinn house had been, and when Maxwell McAchren joined her, she had come all the way back down again and was drifting with the tide near Bedford Street in the direction of the stone bridge.

On a hillside, close by to the right, two men were leaning out of the window of a small white building, using long poles to carry on their own rescue operation. They tried to reach out to the raft, but the distance was too great. Then one of them called out, "Throw that baby over here."

McAchren shouted back, "Do you think you can catch her?"

"We can try," they answered.

The child came flying through the air across about ten to fifteen feet of water and landed in the arms of Mr. Henry Koch, proprietor of Koch House, a small hotel and saloon (mostly saloon) on Bedford Street. The other man in the room with him was George Skinner, a Negro porter, who had been holding Koch by the legs when he made the catch. The men stripped Gertrude of her wet underclothes, wrapped her in a blanket, and put her on a cot. Later she was picked up and carried to the hill, so bundled up in the warm blanket that she could not see out, nor could anyone see in very well. **H**

Every so often she could hear someone saying, "What have you got there?" And the answer came back, "A little girl we rescued." Then she could hear people gathering around and saying, "Let's have a look." Off would come part of the blanket in front of her face and she would look out at big, close-up faces looking in. Heads would shake. "Don't know her," they would say, and again the blanket would come over her face and on they would climb.

**G CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER**

Reread lines 128–147.

Notice that several events take place in a short amount of time.

Briefly summarize what happened, in order.

**H CONFLICT**

How is the conflict resolved? What builds suspense just before this resolution?

3. John L. Sullivan: a boxing champion in the late 1800s.



Survivors of the Johnstown flood take shelter in a cave.

Gertrude never found out who it was that carried her up the hill, but he eventually deposited her with a family named Metz, who lived in a frame  
 180 tenement also occupied by five other families. The place looked like paradise to her, but she was still so terrified that she was unable to say a word as the Metz children, neighbors, and people in off the street jammed into the kitchen to look at her as she lay wrapped now in a pair of red-flannel underwear with Mason jars full of hot water packed all around her.

Later, she was put to bed upstairs, but exhausted as she was she was unable to sleep. In the room with her were three other refugees from the disaster, grown women by the name of Bowser, who kept getting up and going to the window, where she could hear them gasping and whispering among themselves. After a while Gertrude slipped quietly out of bed and across the  
 190 dark room. Outside the window, down below where the city had been, she could now see only firelight reflecting on the water. It looked, as she said later, for all the world like ships burning at sea. ∞ ①

#### ① MOOD

How has the mood changed at the end of the selection? What atmosphere does the last image create?