

A (MOODY) RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

I do not know much about gods; but I think
that the river is a strong brown god--sullen,
untamed, and intractable.

--T. S. Eliot

I can still hear it in my mind's ear: the ominous rumbling that
crescendomed into a cracking, screeching earth-wail loud enough to scare
the bejabbers out of all of us in Mrs. Coleman's algebra class.

Was it a tornado? The beginning of an earthquake? A surprise attack by
the Soviet air force--the one for which we had conducted myriad air-raid
drills, the one that would herald a nuclear holocaust?

The answer turned out to be a familiar one to us adolescents: none of
the above. The racket outside was the breakup of the ice in the
Susquehanna River (the west branch of the Susquehanna, to be exact)
after a particularly cold winter.

Most years, the March thaw would bring about a benign breakup of the
river ice, and the exodus would be marked only by the soft singing of
the floes as they wended their way down the valley toward the city of
Lock Haven. This time, however, it was different. This time, because
there were some jams, the ice was buckling in places and room-size
chunks were being pushed halfway up the riverbank. There wasn't
anything we could do but watch in wonder.

A day later, nature's end-of-winter demolition derby abruptly ended, and
the Susquehanna went back to masquerading as a good-natured,
well-behaved tributary.

That sort of erratic behavior was completely in character for the river,
which was given to wild mood swings. One minute, it would be flowing
more gently than sweet Afton, putting up with the antics of canoeists
and other recreation-minded riffraff, and the next, it would be throwing
a hissy flood or--worse yet--making off with the baseballs that rolled
down the riverbank near the Little League field.

In fact, the Susquehanna almost had its dastardly way with two
unsuspecting members of the Clearasil set one early-spring evening in
1959. The young lovers were celebrating their newly won freedom (he had
recently obtained his driver's license; she had recently obtained
permission to stay out a half-hour longer on weekend evenings) by
parking near the river. Awww, what the heck--why don't I let them tell
it:

"The river was raging, our hormones were raging, our hearts were
floating--and so was the car! The water had come over the bank while we
were, ahem, otherwise occupied. We managed to escape, but you'd better
believe that we never parked near the river again in the spring."

Shakespeare buffs and rock-'n'-roll cognoscenti will instantly recognize
that the young lovers' story illuminates two eternal truths: (1) there

is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to
Lock Haven; and (2) don't take the Chevy to the levee in the springtime,
baby, 'cause the levee ain't dry.