

Mark word choices in descriptive and narrative passages that contribute to the dominant impression and help to show why the event or person was significant. For example, Brandt shows her feeling of shame vividly in this passage:

As the officers led me through the mall, I sensed a hundred pairs of eyes staring at me. My face flushed and I broke out in a sweat. (par. 18)

Consider whether the story's **significance** encompasses mixed or ambivalent feelings and still-unresolved conflicts. For example, notice the seesawing of feelings Brandt reports:

Right after shoplifting, Brandt tells us "I thought about how sly [I] had been" and that "I felt proud of [my] accomplishment" (par. 5).

After she is arrested, she acknowledges mixed feelings: "Being searched, although embarrassing, somehow seemed to be exciting. . . . I was having fun" (19).

It is only when she has to face her mother that Brandt lets her intense feelings show: "For the first time that night, I was close to tears" (26).

At the end, however, by transferring the blame from Brandt to the police, her father seems to leave the conflict essentially unresolved and repressed: "Although it would never be forgotten, the incident was not mentioned again" (38).

Readings

Jean Brandt *Calling Home*

As a first-year college student, Jean Brandt wrote about a memorable event that occurred when she was thirteen: She shoplifted and was caught. As you read about Brandt's experience, you might want to think about these shoplifting factoids (unreliable because they show who is getting caught, but not necessarily who is shoplifting): According to the National Association for Shoplifting Prevention (NASP), shoplifting is pretty equal among genders, socioeconomic classes, and ethnicities, and contrary to expectation, only about 25 percent of shoplifters are kids, including teenagers (shopliftingprevention.org); Christmas season is a peak shoplifting period; some shoplifters report a "high" after getting away with it; shoplifting is seldom premeditated, and is possibly related to peer pressure and what is often called "consumer culture," the ideology that buying things brings intangibles like happiness, status, identity, belonging.

As you read,

- consider which, if any, of this information about shoplifting affects your view of Brandt or your understanding of her story.
- think about Brandt's primary purpose in choosing this event and in presenting it as she does, given that she was writing for her instructor and classmates.
- answer the questions in the margins. Your instructor may ask you to post your answers to a class blog or discussion board or bring your responses to class.

1 As we all piled into the car, I knew it was going to be a fabulous day. My grandmother was visiting for the holidays; and she and I, along with my older brother and sister, Louis and Susan, were setting off for a day of last-minute Christmas shopping. On the way to the mall, we sang Christmas carols, chattered, and laughed. With Christmas only two days away, we were caught up with holiday spirit. I felt light-headed and full of joy. I loved shopping — especially at Christmas.

2 The shopping center was swarming with frantic last-minute shoppers like ourselves. We went first to the General Store, my favorite. It carried mostly knickknacks and other useless items which nobody needs but buys anyway. I was thirteen years old at the time, and things like buttons and calendars and posters would catch my fancy. This day was no different. The object of my desire was a 75-cent Snoopy button. Snoopy was the latest. If you owned anything with the Peanuts on it, you were “in.” But since I was supposed to be shopping for gifts for other people and not myself, I couldn’t decide what to do. I went in search of my sister for her opinion. I pushed my way through throngs of people to the back of the store where I found Susan. I asked her if she thought I should buy the button. She said it was cute and if I wanted it to go ahead and buy it.

3 When I got back to the Snoopy section, I took one look at the lines at the cashiers and knew I didn’t want to wait thirty minutes to buy an item worth less than one dollar. I walked back to the basket where I had found the button and was about to drop it when suddenly, instead, I took a quick glance around, assured myself no one could see, and slipped the button into the pocket of my sweatshirt.

4 I hesitated for a moment, but once the item was in my pocket, there was no turning back. I had never before stolen anything; but what was done was done. A few seconds later, my sister appeared and asked, “So, did you decide to buy the button?”

5 “No, I guess not.” I hoped my voice didn’t quaver. As we headed for the entrance, my heart began to race. I just had to get out of that store. Only a few more yards to go and I’d be safe. As we crossed the threshold, I heaved a sigh of relief. I was home free. I thought about how sly I had been and I felt proud of my accomplishment.

6 An unexpected tap on my shoulder startled me. I whirled around to find a middle-aged man, dressed in street clothes, flashing some type of badge and politely asking

Basic Features

A Well-Told Story

Vivid Description

Significance

How well do these descriptive details help you visualize the scene?

What is your first impression of Brandt?

How do these action verbs (highlighted) and dialogue contribute to the drama?

me to empty my pockets. Where did this man come from? How did he know? I was so sure that no one had seen me! On the verge of panicking, I told myself that all I had to do was give this man his button back, say I was sorry, and go on my way. After all, it was only a 75-cent item.

7 Next thing I knew, he was talking about calling the police and having me arrested and thrown in jail, as if he had just nabbed a professional thief instead of a terrified kid. I couldn't believe what he was saying.

8 "Jean, what's going on?"

9 The sound of my sister's voice eased the pressure a bit. She always managed to get me out of trouble. She would come through this time too.

10 "Excuse me. Are you a relative of this young girl?"

11 "Yes, I'm her sister. What's the problem?"

12 "Well, I just caught her shoplifting and I'm afraid I'll have to call the police."

13 "What did she take?"

14 "This button."

15 "A button? You are having a thirteen-year-old arrested for stealing a button?"

16 "I'm sorry, but she broke the law."

17 The man led us through the store and into an office, where we waited for the police officers to arrive. Susan had found my grandmother and brother, who, still shocked, didn't say a word. The thought of going to jail terrified me, not because of jail itself, but because of the encounter with my parents afterward. Not more than ten minutes later, two officers arrived and placed me under arrest. They said that I was to be taken to the station alone. Then, they handcuffed me and led me out of the store. I felt alone and scared. I had counted on my sister being with me, but now I had to muster up the courage to face this ordeal all by myself.

18 As the officers led me through the mall, I sensed a hundred pairs of eyes staring at me. My face flushed and I broke out in a sweat. Now everyone knew I was a criminal. In their eyes I was a juvenile delinquent, and thank God the cops were getting me off the streets. The worst part was thinking my grandmother might be having the same thoughts. The humiliation at that moment was overwhelming. I felt like Hester Prynne being put on public display for everyone to ridicule.

19 That short walk through the mall seemed to take hours. But once we reached the squad car, time raced by. I was read my rights and questioned. We were at the police

How does your understanding of Brandt deepen or change through what she reveals about her feelings and thoughts?

station within minutes. Everything happened so fast I didn't have a chance to feel remorse for my crime. Instead, I viewed what was happening to me as if it were a movie. Being searched, although embarrassing, somehow seemed to be exciting. All the movies and television programs I had seen were actually coming to life. This is what it was really like. But why were criminals always portrayed as frightened and regretful? I was having fun. I thought I had nothing to fear—until I was allowed my one phone call. I was trembling as I dialed home. I didn't know what I was going to say to my parents, especially my mother.

20 "Hi, Dad, this is Jean."

21 "We've been waiting for you to call."

22 "Did Susie tell you what happened?"

23 "Yeah, but we haven't told your mother. I think you should tell her what you did and where you are."

24 "You mean she doesn't even know where I am?"

25 "No, I want you to explain it to her."

26 There was a pause as he called my mother to the phone. For the first time that night, I was close to tears. I wished I had never stolen that stupid pin. I wanted to give the phone to one of the officers because I was too ashamed to tell my mother the truth, but I had no choice.

27 "Jean, where are you?"

28 "I'm, umm, in jail."

29 "Why? What for?"

30 "Shoplifting."

31 "Oh no, Jean. Why? Why did you do it?"

32 "I don't know. No reason. I just did it."

33 "I don't understand. What did you take? Why did you do it? You had plenty of money with you."

34 "I know but I just did it. I can't explain why. Mom, I'm sorry."

35 "I'm afraid sorry isn't enough. I'm horribly disappointed in you."

36 Long after we got off the phone, while I sat in an empty jail cell, waiting for my parents to pick me up, I could still distinctly hear the disappointment and hurt in my mother's voice. I cried. The tears weren't for me but for her and the pain I had put her through. I felt like a terrible human being. I would rather have stayed in jail than confront my mom right

How does this dialogue add to the drama?

What is the effect of interweaving storytelling and describing with remembering thoughts and feelings in this paragraph?

What do you learn from Brandt's account of her father's reaction?

How well does this final paragraph help you understand the event's significance?

then. I dreaded each passing minute that brought our encounter closer. When the officer came to release me, I hesitated, actually not wanting to leave. We went to the front desk, where I had to sign a form to retrieve my belongings. I saw my parents a few yards away and my heart raced. A large knot formed in my stomach. I fought back the tears.

37 Not a word was spoken as we walked to the car. Slowly, I sank into the back seat anticipating the scolding. Expecting harsh tones, I was relieved to hear almost the opposite from my father.

38 "I'm not going to punish you and I'll tell you why. Although I think what you did was wrong, I think what the police did was more wrong. There's no excuse for locking a thirteen-year-old behind bars. That doesn't mean I condone what you did, but I think you've been punished enough already."

39 As I looked from my father's eyes to my mother's, I knew this ordeal was over. Although it would never be forgotten, the incident was not mentioned again.

Annie Dillard From *An American Childhood*

Courtesy of Michele Strub



ANNIE DILLARD, professor emeritus at Wesleyan University, won the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction writing with her first book, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974). Since then, she has written eleven other books in a variety of genres. They include *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (1988), *The Writing Life* (1990), *The Living* (1993), *Mornings Like This* (1996), and *The Maytrees* (2007). Dillard also wrote an autobiography of her early years, *An American Childhood* (1987), from which the following selection (and the excerpt in Chapter 1) comes.

As you read,

- think about how the first two paragraphs in the reading selection prepare readers to understand the story's significance.
- notice how Dillard sets the scene. Why do you think she describes the time and place with so much specificity?