

Annie Dillard

MY FATHER

Annie Dillard describes her early life in Pittsburgh in *An American Childhood* (1987), in which the following chapter appears. Dillard later lived in the Roanoke Valley of Virginia, and she writes about her experiences there in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1975. A chapter from this book appears in Part Five. Dillard later lived in the Pacific Northwest and wrote about Puget Sound in a collection of essays, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (1982). Her novel, *The Living*, was published in 1992. Selection title by editor.

Years before this, on long-ago summer Sundays, 1
before Father went down the Ohio and ended up selling
his boat, he used to take me out with him on the
water. It was a long drive to the Allegheny River; it
was a long wait, collecting insects in the grass among
the pebbles on shore, till Father got the old twenty-
four-foot cabin cruiser ready to go. But the Allegheny
River, once we got out on it, was grand. Its distant
shores were mostly wooded on both sides; coal barges,
sand barges, and shallow-draft oil tankers floated tied
up at a scattering of docks. Father wore tennis shoes
on his long feet, and a sun-bleached cotton captain-
style hat. He always squinted outside, hat or no hat,
because his eyes were such a pale blue; the sun got in
them. He was so tall he had to lean under the house-
top to man the wheel.

We stopped at islands and swam. There were wooded 2
islands in the river—like Smoky Island at Pittsburgh's
point, where Indians had tortured their English and
Scotch-Irish captives by night. The Indians had tied the
soldiers and settlers to trees, heaped hot coals on their
feet, and let their small boys practice archery on them.
Indian women heated rifle barrels and ramrods over fires
till they glowed, then drove them through prisoners'

nostrils or ears. The screams of the tortured settlers on
Smoky Island reached French soldiers at Fort Duquesne,
who had handed them over to the Indians reluctantly,
they said. "Humanity groans at being forced to use such
monsters."

Father and I tied up at Nine-Mile Island, upstream 3
from Smoky Island, and I jumped from a high rope-
swing into the water, after poor Father told me all about
those boaters' children who'd been killed or maimed
dropping from this very swing. He could not bear to
watch; he shut his eyes. From the tree branch at the top
of the ladder I jumped onto the swing; when I let go
over the water, momentum shot me forward like a slung
stone. I swam up to find the water's surface again, and
called to Father onshore, "It's okay now."

Our boat carved through the glossy water. Pittsburgh's 4
summer skies are pale, as they are in many river valleys.
The blinding haze spread overhead and glittered up
from the river. It was the biggest sky in town.

We rode up in the locks and down in the locks. The 5
locks scared me, for the huge doors that locked out the
river leaked, and loud tons of water squirted in, and we
sat helpless below the river with nothing to do but wait
for the doors to give way. Enormous whirlpools dragged
at the boat; we held on to the lock walls, clawed, with
a single hand line and a boat hook. Once I dropped the
boat hook, a new one with a teak handle, and the
whirlpools sucked it down. To where? Where did the
whirlpools put the water they took, and where would
they put you, all ground up, if you fell in?

Oh, the river was grand. Outside the lock and back 6
on the go, I sang wild songs at the top of my voice out
over the roaring boat's stern. We raced under old steel
bridges set on stone pilings in the river. How do people
build bridges? How did anyone set those pilings, pile
those stones, under the water?

Whenever I was on the river, I seemed to be visiting 7
a fascinating place I had forgotten all about, where

physical causes had physical effects, and great things got done, slowly, heavily, because people understood materials and forces.

Father on these boat outings answered my questions at length. He explained that people built coffer dams to set bridge pilings in a river. They lowered a kind of big pipe, or tight set of walls, to the bottom, and pumped all the water out of it; then the men could work there. I imagined the men piling and mortaring stones, with the unhurried ease of stone masons; they stood on gasping catfish and stinky silt. They were working under the river, at the bottom of a well of air. Just a few inches away, outside their coffer dam, a complete river of water was sliding downhill from western New York to the Gulf of Mexico. Above the workers' heads, boats and barges went by, their engines probably buzzing the coffer-dam walls. What a life. Father said that some drowned in accidents, or got crushed; it was dangerous work. He said, answering my question, that these workers made less money than the men I knew, men I privately considered wholly unskilled. The bridge pilings obsessed me; I thought and thought about the brave men who built them in the rivers. I tried to imagine their families, their lunches, their boots. I tried to imagine what it would feel like to accomplish something so useful as building a bridge. What a queer world was the river, where I admired everything and knew nothing.

Father explained how to make glass from sand. He explained, over and over, because I was usually too frightened to hear right, how the river locks worked; they ran our boat up or down beside the terrible dams. The concrete navigation dams made slick spillways like waterfalls across the river. From upstream it was hard to see the drop's smooth line. Drunks forgot about the dams from time to time, and drove their boats straight over, killing themselves and everyone else on board. How did the drunks feel, while they were up loose in

the air at the wheels of their boats for a split second, when they remembered all of a sudden the dam? "Oh yes, the dam." It seemed like a familiar feeling.

On the back of a chart—a real nautical chart, with shoals and soundings, just as in *Life on the Mississippi*—Father drew a diagram of a water system. The diagram made clear something I'd always wondered about: how water got up to the top floors of houses. The water tower was higher than the highest sinks, that was all; through all those labyrinthine pipes, the water sought its own level, seeming to climb up, but really still trickling down. He explained how steam engines worked, and suspension bridges, and pumps.

Father explained so much technology to me that for a long time I confused it with American culture. If pressed, I would have claimed that an American invented the irrigation ditch. Certainly the coffer dam was American, I thought, and the water tower, the highway tunnel—these engineering feats—and everything motorized, and everything electrical, and in short, everything I saw about me newer than fishnets, sailboats, and spoons.

Technology depended on waterworks. The land of the forty-eight states was an extended and mighty system of controlled slopes, a combination Grand Coulee Dam and Niagara Falls. The water fell and the turbines spun and the lights came on, so steel mills could run all night. Then the steel made cars, millions of cars, and workers bought the cars, because Henry Ford in 1910 had come up with the idea of paying them enough to buy things. So the water rolled down the continent—just plain fell—and everyone got rich.

Now, years later, Father had picked Amy and me up after church. When we got out of the car in the garage, we could hear Dixieland, all rambling brasses and drums, coming from the house. We hightailed it inside through the snow on the back walk and kicked off our icy dress shoes. I was in stockings. I could eat something, and go

to my room. I had my own room now, and when I was home I stayed there and read or sulked.

While we were making sandwiches, though, Father started explaining the world to us once again. I stuck around. There in the kitchen, Father embarked upon an explanation of American economics. I don't know what prompted it. His voice took on urgency; he paced. Money worked like water, he said.

We were all listening, even little Molly. Molly, at four, had an open expression, smooth and quick, and fine blond hair; she was eating on the hoof, like the rest of us, and looking up, a pale face at thigh level, following the conversation. Mother futzed around the kitchen in camel-colored wool slacks; she rarely ate.

Did we know how water got up to our attic bathroom? Money worked the same way, he said, worked the way locks on the river worked, worked the way water flowed down from high water towers into our attic bathroom, the way the Allegheny and the Monongahela flowed into the Ohio, and the Ohio flowed into the Mississippi and out into the Gulf of Mexico at New Orleans. The money, once you got enough of it high enough, would flow by gravitation, all over everybody.

"It doesn't work that way," our mother said. She offered Molly tidbits: a drumstick, a beet slice, cheese. "Remember those shacks we see in Georgia? Those barefoot little children who have to quit school to work in the fields, their poor mothers not able to feed them enough"—we could all hear in her voice that she was beginning to cry—"not even able to keep them dressed?" Molly was looking at her, wide-eyed; she was bent over looking at Molly, wide-eyed.

"They shouldn't have so many kids," Father said. "They must be crazy."

The trouble was, I no longer believed him. It was beginning to strike me that Father, who knew the real

world so well, got some of it wrong. Not much; just some.

Comment

The writer of autobiography may narrate a personal history to make a point or argue a thesis. Other writers give us an account of their lives without developing a thesis, though they usually interpret events and may make comparisons with present-day life. Benjamin Franklin wrote his famous autobiography as a lesson on how to succeed in the world, his "having emerged from the poverty and obscurity in which I was born and bred to a state of affluence and some degree of reputation in the world." By contrast, Mark Twain, in his autobiographical *Life on the Mississippi*, had no intention of making his own life a model for others; he wanted instead to re-create the Missouri river town of his youth and recall his experiences as a cub pilot on the Mississippi. Like Twain, Annie Dillard also describes the river town of her youth and experiences that shaped her life. And like Twain, she is not presenting her life as exemplary; but she does make discoveries that tell us something about family relationships and the world in general.

Questions for Study and Discussion

1. Why does Dillard give us the history of Smoky Island? Does she wish to tell us something about her father, or the Pittsburgh of her youth, or her experiences on the Allegheny River? Or does this history serve another purpose?
2. What do her experiences on Nine-Mile Island and the conversations with her father tell you about their relationship?
3. What does the final episode reveal about her mother and family relationships?
4. What did her father get right about the world, and what did he get wrong? Is Dillard referring to the information he gave about dam building, water systems, and other technical matters, or to something else?