


RACHEL CARSON

Witness

for 

Nature

LINDA LEAR



MARINER BOOKS HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT
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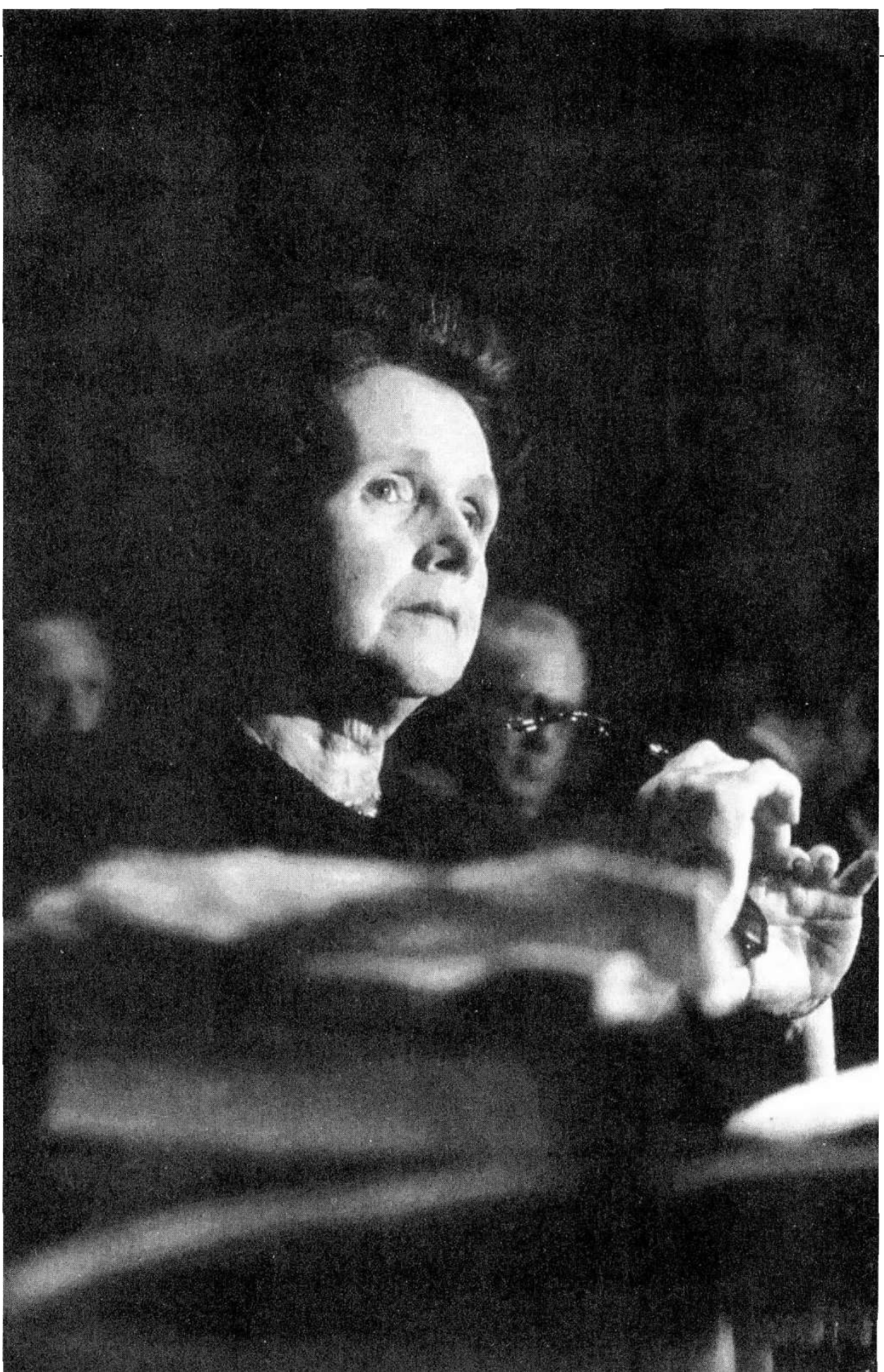
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*To the loving memory of my father and mother,
James C. and Henrietta D. Lear*

*and for my son,
Ian Cole Lear-Nickum*

Acknowledgments

My search for Rachel Carson has absorbed almost a decade. It has taken me full circle from my childhood home a few hills to the north of Carson's birthplace in Springdale to another Maryland suburb just west of her last home in Silver Spring. My exploration of her life has been long, often arduous, but never without generous companionship.

Writing Carson's life became a possibility through the intercession of four of Carson's closest friends: Paul Brooks, Carson's editor; Jeanne V. Davis, her administrative assistant; Shirley A. Briggs, Carson's colleague, a founder and executive director emerita of the Rachel Carson Council, and now the curator of the Council's Rachel Carson History Project; and Ruth Scott, a premier Pennsylvania naturalist. Without their personal friendship and advocacy this biography would never have been possible.

Since Carson's literary and professional papers were carefully screened by her literary executor prior to their deposit at the Beinecke Library, interviews with those who knew Carson or who were involved in one way or another with her life and work constitute a major source for this work. A list of those who graciously allowed me interviews is to be found in the bibliography. Helga Sandburg Crile, Frank Egler, the Reverend Duncan Howlett, Margaret Kieran, Martha Skinker, and Stewart Udall have also given me valuable material from their own collections.

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Early in my research Neil Goodwin, founder and producer of Peace River Films, Cambridge, Massachusetts, asked me to be a consultant and to write the historical background for his production of "The Silent Spring of Rachel Carson" filmed for PBS's *The American Experience* in February 1991. I am grateful for the opportunity he gave me to work in his world. My colleagues on this project included the best and the brightest: William Cronon, University of Wisconsin; David Pimentel,

Cornell University; Suzanne Smith, George Mason University; Margo Barnes Goodwin; and Sharon O'Brien. I am indebted to them for sharing their expertise and particular understanding of Carson's work.

Many individual scholars contributed to my understanding of the times in which Carson lived, and many others influenced my thinking about her life. Foremost among these is Clayton Koppes, whose friendship spans over two decades and whose thinking about environmental history has deeply influenced my own. I wish to thank Allida Black, Darlis Miller, Jennifer Logan, Ralph Lutts, Cheryll Glotfelty, Joseph B. C. White, Susan Flader, Samuel Hays, Carol Gartner, H. Patricia Hynes, Leo Ribuffo, Sharon Kingsland, Jane Maienshein, Edmund Russell III, John Perkins, Yaakov Garb, Jeffrey Ellis, Sara Jameson, Christine Orvavec, Craig Waddell, and Daria Martel, who have read, listened, conferred, and consoled for too many years but have never lost their interest in what I was trying to accomplish. Sandra Steingraber, biologist, writer, and cancer activist, gave me the perspective I needed to evaluate Carson's illness and her medical treatment. I owe other debts of a personal nature to Dr. Marc Bergman of Boca Raton, Florida, Dr. Bette Ann Weinstein of Bethesda, Maryland, and the Reverend Caroline Smith Pyle of Washington, D.C. Each of them has contributed to this work and to my well-being.

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At the end of 1994, just as I was deep into my writing, I lost my best and truest muse, my mother, Henrietta DeHaven Lear. She was my touchstone, my keenest listener, and my best critic. With her death, I shared another sadder dimension of Carson's life. Twenty months later, my father, James C. Lear, died. He encouraged me to take this path and never questioned its course or successful outcome. These life events set this work back in different ways and at different points, but I'd like to hope that these losses were also enrichments to the process of writing a life of one for whom suffering was no stranger.

When I began this biography my son, Ian Cole Lear-Nickum, was ten years old. When it is published he will be a freshman in college. Growing up in the shadow of Rachel Carson, he has gained a perspective that I hope will enrich his life in the years ahead. He has willingly shared his time with Rachel and grown to understand my enthusiasm for the relevance of her witness to his generation. To honor his love, and for his support of his mother's creative life, this book is dedicated to him.

L. L.

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66. The Sheepscot shore at Newagen, Maine. Photograph by Peter Larsen. LCC/CC.

Preface to the 2009 Edition

I can still vividly recall the sunny afternoon in June 1962 when, as a college senior, I pulled a copy of the *Saturday Review of Literature* from my family's mailbox in western Pennsylvania and studied the compelling photograph of Rachel Carson on the magazine's cover. The first installment of Carson's *Silent Spring* had just been published in *The New Yorker*. Everyone was talking about the woman who claimed that we were destroying the Earth by our misuse of synthetic chemical pesticides. What, I wondered, gave this highly respected nature writer such extraordinary courage and conviction? What propelled her to take such a personal risk and to challenge the governmental and scientific establishment? I was intrigued by Carson then, and I remained so as I went on to become a university professor and a teacher of environmental history.

By the 1990s, thirty years after Carson's death, my history classes were filled with students who had never heard of Rachel Carson or read *Silent Spring*. Why, they wondered when I assigned this book, had it caused such controversy, and why did Carson's name still arouse such passion?

Rachel Carson and I are not from the same generation, but we grew up only a few Allegheny hills apart. As I explored her life, I was to discover that we shared more than our childhood geography. Her mother and my grandmother were acquainted. Her best friend in college later became my high school biology teacher. In fact, our lives intersected at so many points, personal and professional, that I eventually concluded I was meant to tell her life, to answer my own questions and those of my students.

It took me more than a decade. During that time I lived and worked in Maryland and Washington, D.C., just as Carson had. Many of Carson's close friends, neighbors, and fellow scientists were then still alive and willing to talk to me. Their memories and voices, now stilled, give this biography an invaluable perspective.

I always intended to keep Carson the woman, the writer, and the naturalist as my central focus, but her life was tragically cut short and she died less than eighteen months after *Silent Spring* was published. The last years of Carson's life were consumed by the heroic effort of writing, publishing, and defending this book. Rachel Carson's witness for the living world was greater than any single book, but her courage in sounding the alarm and her ecological vision of the oneness of all life indelibly shaped the contemporary environmental movement, and anticipated the global crisis we face in the twenty-first century.

I am indebted to a host of literary associates, most of them acknowledged a decade ago. I happily owe new debts to my editor at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Deanne Urmy, who wanted this biography to stay in print as much as I did, and to Cynthia Cannell, who is so much more than simply my literary agent.

When I finished *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*, I knew my life had been transformed by my encounter with her and that I was the better for it. May it be so for you.

L.L.

Bethesda, Maryland
Spring 2009

Prologue

The prematurely white-haired junior senator from Connecticut peered over his fashionable reading glasses at the famous lead-off witness. It was the fourth day of hearings called by his special subcommittee on environmental hazards. Things had gone very smoothly so far; his staff had done well. But today was the big event.

An overflow crowd packed the small, windowless hearing room #102 on the ground floor corner of the New Senate Office Building. Television lights illuminated the walnut-paneled room, revealing stains on the maroon carpet and watermarks on the matching velvet drapes. Cameramen and equipment filled the aisles and cluttered the small space between the hearing table and the dais. Reporters checked their microphones and recording equipment.

The witness sat calmly but expectantly at the table, hands folded in her lap. Her carefully worded testimony, on large typewritten note cards, was arranged neatly in front of her. She seemed unaware of the commotion in the room or the anticipation of the crowd. She spoke to no one.

The room quieted when the senator cleared his throat and began his well-rehearsed paraphrase of Abraham Lincoln's remark on meeting Harriet Beecher Stowe. "Miss Carson . . . we welcome you here. You are the lady who started all this. Will you please proceed. . . ."

Rachel Carson was ready. She had thought about what she wanted to say in such a place long before she had finished writing *Silent Spring*. This was the moment she had hoped for: one final chance to translate her vision into policy, to make a difference, to change the way people looked at the natural world, to stop the warfare against it. Graciously thanking Senator Abraham Ribicoff for his invitation to present her views, she put on her thick black-framed glasses and began reading her testimony in her distinctive, low voice. The room hushed, all eyes on the attractive, middle-aged woman in the fashionable sage-green suit. She began: "The problem you have chosen to explore is one that must be solved in our time. I feel strongly that a beginning must be made on it now—in this session of Congress. . . ."

Her words marked an end and a beginning. As she spoke, Rachel Carson was dying of cancer. This appearance, and one two days later before the Senate Committee on Commerce, would be her last on Capitol Hill. Several present that sunny spring morning in June 1963 might have predicted that Carson's recommendations eventually would be translated into public policy, but probably no one could have guessed that as she spoke, her vision was already shaping a powerful social movement that would alter the course of American history.

Senator Ribicoff later observed that Rachel Carson's power came from the fact that she believed in her vision so strongly, had accepted her obligation to bear witness. The senator sensed that Carson was that rare person who was passionately committed when few others believed very much in anything. Hers was a singular vision encompassing nothing less than the mysteriously intricate living world whose workings she understood so deeply and described for others with such poetry.

Carson could not be silent. She had peered into the fairy caves and tide pools of her beloved Maine coast and had seen the fragility and tenacity with which even the smallest creatures struggled for life against the relentless ocean tides. Her flashlight had captured the unforgettable spectacle of the solitary crab on the rocky beach at midnight, vulnerable yet unassailably resilient. She could not stand idly by and say nothing when all that was in jeopardy, when human existence itself was endangered. That was the message that brought her to the Senate hearing room. That was what had sustained her for the past five difficult years.

Rachel Carson was an unlikely person to start any sort of popular movement. She treasured her solitude, defended her privacy, rarely joined any organization; but she meant to bear witness. She

wrote a revolutionary book in terms that were acceptable to a middle class emerging from the lethargy of postwar affluence and woke them to their neglected responsibilities. It was a book in which she shared her vision of life one last time. In the sea and the bird's song she had discovered the wonder and mystery of life. Her witness for these, and the integrity of all life, would make a difference.

“Wild Creatures Are My Friends”

Most of all, it was her determination that set her apart. As a child, Rachel Louise Carson decided that she would be a writer. Literary talent, perhaps genius, and a hard-driving intelligence brought her that. But at the base of it, there was a ferocious will.¹

Her literary career began innocently enough in the spring of 1918, when she was weeks shy of her eleventh birthday. Spring was always a season laden with meaning for her, and this one was no exception. Ever since she was quite little, she had been reading the stories written by other young people published in the children’s section of *St. Nicholas Magazine*. Now Rachel was ready to enter her own story of 253 carefully counted words in the *St. Nicholas* League Contest #223 as described in the May issue.

Her mother endorsed the unlined coarse-grained tablet page in the upper right corner, certifying that “this story was written without assistance, by my little ten-year-old daughter, Rachel.” The next day her father dropped it at the Springdale, Pennsylvania, post office on his way to the Butler Street train station. The little girl was confident this would be the beginning of her writing career, and she was right.²

When Rachel recalled that childhood time much later, she always linked this first *St. Nicholas* story with her love of nature and her mother’s influence. “I can remember no time,” she told a group of women in 1954, “even in earliest childhood, when I didn’t assume I was going to be a writer. Also, I can remember no time when I wasn’t interested in the out-of-doors and the whole world of nature. Those interests, I know, I inherited from my mother and have always shared with her.” At other times when she spoke of her childhood, she would add that among her earliest conscious memories was a “feeling of absolute fascination for everything relating to the ocean.”³

Springdale residents who remember Rachel as a young girl tell the story, perhaps true, perhaps apocryphal, that her romance with the ocean began one day when she found a large fossilized shell in the rocky outcroppings on the family’s hillside property. It provoked questions that Rachel wanted answers to. She wondered where it had come from, what animal had made it and lived within it, when it had gone, and what happened to the sea that had nurtured it so long ago. Whether such a single event provoked her curiosity and drew her to the sea or not, the account is intriguing. Town children found and collected many fossilized shells on the Carson property as well as along the riverbanks. True or not, the story underscores the wisdom that “to understand the fashion of any life, one must know the land it is lived in.”⁴

Rachel Carson was first of all a child of the Allegheny River, its woods and wetlands. Although she could not see the wide bend of the Allegheny from the front porch of the Carson homestead near the top of the hill just off Colfax Lane, she could look over the white pines that grew along the north bank and see the traffic on the road running parallel along the opposite shoreline. She could hear the horns of the riverboats and paddle-wheelers coming and going on the river. In the spring the fog would rise over the river, hiding the road and muffling all sound, allowing an imaginative little girl to wonder where the river had been long ago and what sorts of things it had carried in its swift current as it curved sharply at Springdale and headed down its last sixteen miles on its way to converge with the Monongahela at Pittsburgh.

Springdale was a promising Pennsylvania river community of 1,200 people when Rachel’s parents Robert and Maria Carson, settled on the western edge of town in 1900. In 1901 the *Pittsburgh Leader* focused on the more bucolic qualities of Springdale, noting “considerable acreage of woods and farm

land, picturesque streets . . . and pretty little frame dwellings set amidst overhanging apple trees and maples.”⁵

Such rural charm was even then being replaced by the relentless engines of industry, leaving scars on the land, pollution in the air, and debris in the river. Locks on the Allegheny enabled stern-wheelers to move iron ore to Pittsburgh from the many furnaces that dotted the hills to the northwest. Oil moved down the river at accelerating rates after the Civil War, and the heavy logging of the Appalachians that began in the 1880s was soon reflected in both river traffic and shorelines awash in timber waste.

Until the panic of 1907, Springdale’s economic prospects remained bright as new industries located upriver and workers and their families moved in. Rachel’s father was counting on that growth continuing when he invested in real estate, but his gamble failed.

In the end, Rachel Carson remembered only how embarrassed she was by the foul smell of the glue factory that greeted disembarking passengers at the train station; how dreary and dirty the working-class town became when the West Penn Power Company and Duquesne Light Company squeezed it between their huge power stations at both ends, and how endlessly ugly Springdale was.⁶

Robert Carson’s parents, James and Ellen, had come directly to Allegheny County from Ireland. They settled in Allegheny City, a bustling Scots-Irish working-class town on the north plain just across the river from downtown Pittsburgh. James Carson, a successful carpenter, provided adequate for his family. Robert, the eldest of their six children, was born in 1864 and may have finished high school, or come close to doing so. The family was active in the Fourth United Presbyterian Church of Allegheny City, where Robert sang in the choir and toured with the men’s quartet.⁷

In the winter of 1893 Robert Carson’s quartet participated in a choral social in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, a prosperous sheep-farming community in Washington County, about eighteen miles southwest of Pittsburgh. Among the other groups performing in Canonsburg that evening was a local female group, the Washington Quintette Club, from nearby Washington, Pennsylvania, which featured alto soloist Maria Frazier McLean.

Maria was attracted to the quiet, debonair Carson, who at thirty must have appeared more mature than many of the young men she knew. Robert was a slender, pleasant-looking man of average height with prematurely thinning dark hair and kindly blue eyes. He sported a thick, sweeping mustache in the grenadier’s fashion that he waxed into perfect sharp tips. Robert courted Maria McLean, who agreed to marry him less than a year later in June 1894, even though his background was educational and socially inferior to hers. Although Robert came from a proper United Presbyterian family, Maria’s widowed mother, Rachel Andrews McLean, was probably not enthusiastic about the match.

The roots of the McLean family went even deeper into the western Pennsylvania soil than those of the Carsons. The McLeans were part of the first large Scots-Irish migration that settled in western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio. Maria’s father, Daniel M. B. McLean, was born on a farm in Wellsville, Ohio, in 1840. Coming from a family of some means, he graduated from Jefferson College in Canonsburg, Washington County, in 1859. He entered Allegheny United Presbyterian Theological Seminary immediately upon graduation, and was ordained and installed pastor of the Fourth United Presbyterian Church of Allegheny City, the same church that the Carsons attended, in 1863.⁸

The following year McLean married Rachel Andrews of Washington, Pennsylvania. The couple served in Allegheny City and for a time in Cleveland, Ohio. They had two daughters, Ida, born in Allegheny City in 1867, and Maria, born two years later in Cleveland. The climate of the lake region did not agree with the Reverend McLean, however. In November 1870 he answered the call from the Chartiers United Presbyterian Church in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, and moved back to his college town with his wife and two small daughters. Three years later he nearly died of consumption.

Thereafter he frequently was unable to fill his pulpit and was completely bedridden the year before he died of tuberculosis at age forty in 1880.

After his burial, Rachel McLean moved back to Washington to raise and educate her daughters, the fourteen and eleven. Intent on giving them the best education available, she enrolled Ida and Maria in the elite Washington Female Seminary there.⁹

The Washington Female Seminary, a strongly United Presbyterian institution situated on the edge of the Washington College campus, had a reputation for providing not just a finishing education for young women of good Christian standing but a rigorous, classical curriculum. Founded in 1836 with forty students, it grew to a school of over two hundred young women, many of whom boarded. It augmented its sizable female faculty with professors from Washington College who taught advanced classes.¹⁰

Both McLean daughters displayed intellectual curiosity and promise in their studies and graduated well prepared for civic responsibility and Christian motherhood. Ida graduated in 1885 and followed in her mother's footsteps, marrying the Reverend J. L. Vance, a leader in the western branch of the United Presbyterian Church, in 1891. They settled in Oak Grove, Illinois, a suburb of Rock Island, ten years later.¹¹

Maria, the more studious of the Reverend McLean's two daughters, graduated with honors in Latin in 1887, taking advanced courses at Washington College. Maria was a becoming but not beautiful young woman with fine bones, a high forehead, deep-set eyes, curly light-brown hair, and a distinctive angular chin.

Maria's classmates remembered her for her uncommon musical ability, playing the piano, singing and composing, and winning distinction in each. After her graduation in 1887, Maria McLean taught school in Washington County, was an enthusiastic member of the Washington Quintette, and offered piano lessons in her mother's home. Married women were not permitted to teach school in those days, so when the twenty-five-year-old Maria agreed to marry Robert Carson, she had no choice but to give up her career.¹²

The couple stayed in Canonsburg during the first few years of their marriage, probably living with Mrs. McLean, since Robert Carson, who was employed as a clerk of some kind, could not have afforded an independent home. In 1897 a daughter, Marian Frazier, was born, followed by a son, Robert McLean, barely two years later. In 1900 Robert and Maria Carson left Canonsburg to strike out on their own.

With their young family, the Carsons needed more room. On April 2 Carson signed a mortgage of \$11,000 for a sixty-four-acre parcel in Springdale belonging to the estate of Samuel Pearce. Part of the tract included an orchard of forty apple and pear trees along the top of the hill behind the modest house. There was ample room for a few necessary farm animals—some sheep, a pig, chickens, and a horse.¹³

The Carson property was bounded by Colfax Lane, rising steeply on the west, and Ridge Road, on the north behind the orchards. Later Marion Avenue was laid out down the hill on the south, probably named for Carson's eldest daughter. A gable-roofed barn with matching stable, a springhouse, chicken coop, and two outhouses completed the original outbuildings.

The two-story, clapboard house with four small rooms had been built as a log cabin between 1867 and 1892. It faced south to the town and the river beyond. The house never had central heating or indoor plumbing during the twenty-nine years the Carsons lived there. There were fireplaces at both ends of the house and other rooms were heated by coal stoves, and the only electric light came from ceiling fixtures. The first-floor parlor and dining room were divided by the staircase that led up to two small bedrooms above. The kitchen was a one-story lean-to on the north end of the house with a

wooden floor, one tall double-hung window, and a door opening onto a small stoop. At some point the Carsons added a gas stove.

A cellar, accessible only from outside steps, was used to store seasonal fruits and vegetables. Maria maintained a large kitchen garden behind the garage. A lilac bush softened the front of the house, while a small weeping mulberry and several maples traced down the front hillside. A vigorous honeysuckle curled itself up along the west end of the porch, lending color and scent in season. Sometime later Robert Carson laid out a rose garden, which he tended meticulously.

The hillside property remained rural while the town of Springdale spread industrially to the southwest. Another large farm, belonging to the Moyer family, bordered the Carsons' property on the east, and by crossing it, the Carson children could walk to the School Street School, about three-fifths of a mile away. Since the business district of Springdale was another mile east along both sides of Pittsburgh Street, the Carsons used horse and buggy for church and shopping. Otherwise it was a long walk to the post office and the Butler Street train station.¹⁴

Many of the Polish and Hungarian immigrants coming to Springdale after 1915 moved to the bottom of Colfax, with their homes spreading along the other side of Pittsburgh Street. There was a flag stop for the Conemaugh Railroad at Colfax. At one time or another nearly everyone in Springdale visited Carson's Grove, on the top of Colfax hill. The orchard was the site of many clandestine lovers' picnics and of festive town gatherings. On the latter such occasions Robert Carson often sold apples and showed off his real estate.

Robert Warden Carson remains an elusive figure. By most accounts he was a quiet, kindly man with a reserved but dignified manner. Thirty-six years old when he bought the Springdale farm, he listed himself as a self-employed traveling salesman for the Mercantile Company, a subsidiary of the Great American Insurance Company. He took little interest in developing the farm other than maintaining the house and outbuildings and keeping a few farm animals. A "city boy," he dreamed of being a developer. He subdivided the downhill sections of his property into large level lots and in 1910 began advertising them for sale for \$300 each.¹⁵

Local bankers recall him as a reserved man who never defaulted on his loans but was often in arrears on payments. Carson was land poor and frequently had to borrow to make ends meet. But some other townspeople have less kindly memories of him, bitterly recalling the debts he left unpaid when the family moved somewhat abruptly to Baltimore in 1930.

In 1920 Carson was employed as an electrician at the Harwick Mine and was probably still selling commercial insurance for Great American on the side. Sometime later in the decade he worked part time for the West Penn Power Company. There is some suggestion that during these years he was frequently in poor health.

Although his many photographs of his children reflect his interest in them, Robert Carson was an affectionate but almost irrelevant parent. The Carsons were more often poor than of modest means, and this privation shaped Rachel's opportunities and her personality from the outset. Embarrassed by her circumstances but fiercely loyal, her personal reserve was, among other things, a necessary strategy of self-protection.¹⁶

Maria Carson had been raised in an exclusively female household. Her mother was a woman of strong opinion and independence, traits she passed on to both daughters. When Maria married Robert Carson, she exchanged narrower social and economic circumstances for the opportunity of marriage and family. The dominant personality within the family from the outset, she reproduced her own mothering in her unequal partnership and parenting.¹⁷

She energetically directed her children's social activities as well as their education, apparently with her husband's approval but certainly without his interference. Whether Maria was happy about leaving

Washington County in 1900 or not, fervent letters indicate that she missed her mother and sister a great deal. Although she went to church regularly, her lack of means prevented much socializing. She made few friends in Springdale and kept herself and her family aloof. But she enjoyed the opportunities the large Carson property provided for out-of-door activities.

Maria was an avid reader and believed in using her leisure time to improve the quality of her children's lives as well as her own. One of her keenest interests was natural history. She was not alone in this passion, for botanizing, bird-watching, and nature study were interests avidly pursued by amateur naturalists all over the country at the turn of the century, particularly among middle-class, educated women.

Bird lore was popularized in women's books, literary magazines, and children's literature. It was touted as a special interest for young readers who would, through learning the habits of birds, come to love nature and make an emotional commitment to its protection. Beginning in 1875 and continuing until after World War I, talented female writers such as Olive Thorne Miller, Mabel Osgood Wright, and Florence Merriam Bailey turned out exceptional books and articles promoting an interest in all living creatures, particularly birds.¹⁸

The nature-study movement had its intellectual origins in natural history and theology, but it was popularized by the great botanist Liberty Hyde Bailey and his Cornell University colleague Anna Botsford Comstock about the time the Carsons' eldest child, Marian, entered public school.¹⁹

Nature-study advocates were not interested in botanizing, collecting, or bird-watching for the sake of taxonomy or mere scientific observation. Nor were they interested exclusively in pedagogical reform. Disturbed by the numbers of agricultural families leaving the land and by an increasing alienation of urban children from their agrarian roots, nature-study advocates like Bailey and Comstock wanted to put children in sympathy with nature.²⁰

Important as Bailey was to the acceptance of the nature-study movement among the scientific community and agricultural leaders, it was Anna Comstock whose enormously popular published lessons and summer program for teachers at Cornell brought the movement into home and school.

Comstock's *Handbook of Nature Study* (1911) taught the methods by which every elementary-age child in the country could learn to love nature. Nature-study, according to Comstock, would cultivate the child's imagination, his perception of the truth, and his ability to express it. Most important, it would instill a "love of the beautiful," a "sense of companionship with life out-of-doors, and an abiding love of nature." Embracing the ideas of natural theology that by studying nature, the intricate design of the Creator would become visible, the nature-study movement taught that nature was holy. The implications for the individual were clear; conservation was, as Bailey said, "a divine obligation and the conservation movement, a religious crusade."²¹

Maria Carson was the perfect nature-study teacher. She welcomed the Comstock readers that Marian and Robert brought home from school. Each one suggested outdoor lessons that parents could do with their children, and Maria Carson had a sixty-four-acre laboratory to work in. She and the children were outdoors every day when weather permitted, and she shared with them her knowledge of natural history, botany, and birds. In the evenings, Maria played the piano, and she and the two children sang songs and read stories from the several children's magazines she subscribed to.²²

Maria impressed her respect and love for wild creatures on all her children. When they returned from their woodland adventures with treasures to show her, Maria instructed the children to return them to where they had been found. This kind of care for the natural world had a spiritual dimension that at least her youngest daughter embraced and would practice all her life.

When Rachel Louise Carson came into the world in the early-morning hours of May 27, 1907,

Springdale was still full of pristine possibility; the woods and hills behind the tiny house were wild and untouched. A proud thirty-eight-year-old Maria Carson named her infant daughter for her own mother. She described Rachel as a “dear, plump, little blue-eyed baby” of nine pounds who was “unusually pretty” and “very good.”²³

When Rachel was born, her father was forty-three years old and spent long periods away from home selling insurance. Marian was in the fifth grade at the School Street School, and young Robert had started first grade the fall before. Instead of being a lonely housewife with school-age children, searching for new interests and outlets, Maria Carson had a new baby daughter to care for and enjoy almost exclusively.

Symbolic of the delight she found in this child, Maria began keeping a “mother’s diary” chronicling Rachel’s babyhood. Three tiny, closely written pages of this diary remain, testifying to Maria’s enchantment with her baby daughter’s milestones of growth and documenting Maria’s love of the outdoors and Rachel’s early introduction to it.²⁴

The Carsons had joined the Springdale United Presbyterian Church soon after they moved to Springdale. Robert was christened there, as was Rachel, who was presented just as she was recovering from influenza. Maria was thrilled with the baptism ceremony for her daughter, recounting in her diary that the Reverend Watson S. Boyce officiated but that the christening prayer was offered by the famous Reverend W. W. Orr of Charlotte, North Carolina, who was holding evangelistic meetings in Springdale at the time.

The Reverend Boyce left sometime in 1911 and the Carsons withdrew from the congregation the next year, apparently out of some dissatisfaction with the new minister. The family subsequently joined the Cheswick Presbyterian Church on the other end of Springdale Township, where they remained members until they left the area. Rachel attended Mrs. Berz’s Sunday School class and was confirmed on April 11, 1917.²⁵

From the time Rachel was one year old, she and her mother spent increasing amounts of time outdoors, walking the woods and orchards, exploring the springs, and naming flowers, birds, and insects. With Marian and Robert gone all day, the two were left at home together doing chores, talking, reading, drawing, playing the piano, and singing “Mother Goose” rhymes, which Maria enjoyed setting to music. Some afternoons they would take one of their many dogs, cross the Moyer place on the eastern boundary of their property, and wait to walk the two older children home from school. They talked about what they saw in the woods and particularly watched for birds. The distinctive quality of their experience in the outdoors was shared delight. From the first Rachel responded emotionally to her mother’s love of nature. Her acuity of observation and her eye for detail were shaped on these childhood outings.

Rachel remembered herself as a “solitary child” even if she was not an only child, for there were no other small children up on Colfax hill to play with. Resourceful and imaginative, she was always “happiest with wild birds and creatures as companions,” and it would be so all her life.²⁶

Like many little children, Rachel liked to draw. Two early efforts stand out. The first is a “night scene,” so labeled in Maria’s hand, of five clearly identifiable pine trees standing atop a hill with the moon coming out in the dark sky and large rocks in the foreground, a scene familiar to that part of western Pennsylvania, but an unusually observant rendering for a preschooler. The second is a childhood book of ten pages, carefully bound together with flour-and-water paste. It is the only known gift from young Rachel to her father.²⁷

“The little book for Mr. R. W. Carson” begins, “This little book I’ve made for you my dear, I’ll hope you’ll like the pictures well; the animals that you’ll find in here—About them all—I’ll tell.” The title page is illustrated with a fine drawing of an elephant. Although some of the laborious printing is

Rachel's work, Maria obviously helped with the outlines of the nine animals and the picture of Mr. Lee, perhaps the owner of the Springdale laundry, who is the solitary human in the book. Rachel selected the animals, colored them in with crayon and colored pencil, not always neatly, and helped make up a verse to go with each drawing.²⁸

The book is remarkable not for drawing or verse but for the obvious relationship that existed between the child author and the wild creatures pictured in her book. Mouse, frog, bunny, and owl are identified as woodland "friends" whom Rachel encountered in her walks. Dog, hen, canary, and fish are her farm animals and household pets. This charming present for "Papa" reveals her knowledge of the creatures she encountered in her woods and fields and reflected the influence of the nature-study movement in the Carson household.

Another of Rachel's earliest childhood memories was her love of books and reading. "I read a great deal almost from infancy," she recalled, "and I suppose I must have realized someone wrote the books, and thought it would be fun to make up stories too." At about age eight, she began a story in a controlled cursive entitled "The Little Brown House." The opening page is decorated with birdhouses in all four corners, similar in style to the illustrations accompanying the stories in *St. Nicholas Magazine*. Her story describes two wrens searching for an appropriate house and happily finding a "dear little brown house with a green roof." "Now that is just what we need," Mr. Wren exclaims happily to Jenny, his mate. In a longer version of the same story written a bit later, Rachel described the wren's nesting habits in her little green house, adding wonderful details.²⁹

In fourth grade, Rachel wrote a story called "A Sleeping Rabbit." Her cover illustration shows a plump white rabbit sitting with eyes closed in a chair beside a small round table on which are placed a candle and a book entitled *Peter Rabbit*. These stories and drawings reflect not only Rachel's keen observation of bird and animal life but the kind of children's literature she was reading and being read. The stories she loved anthropomorphized animals so that they shared the same needs as humans for comfortable houses, domestic companionship, and good books.³⁰

Rachel's favorites were the animal stories by Beatrix Potter with their wonderfully detailed drawings, which she painstakingly imitated. Like countless other children, she was captivated with the adventures of Toad and Mole and their friends in *Wind in the Willows*. Rachel imitated it in one of her most delightful college themes and returned to the animal adventure again and again as an adult.³¹

As an early independent reader, Rachel discovered the novels of Gene Stratton Porter, an apostle of the nature-study movement who believed that through nature a child was led to God. For Porter, studying wildlife was a source of moral virtue.³²

Of equal if not greater influence on Rachel's romantic view of nature were the several children's magazines to which her mother subscribed, read stories from, and that Rachel studied intently long before she could read all the words for herself. By far Rachel's favorite magazine was *St. Nicholas*, which her mother loved and had subscribed to before Rachel was born. The magazine, founded, in 1873, was edited by the creative Mary Mapes Dodge and was regarded by many as the best magazine ever published for children. Dodge intended it to be a "child's playground; where children could be delighted as well as be in charge." Beautifully illustrated and printed, it contained articles, stories, jingles, poems, and a "Letter Box" for readers. It featured some of the leading writers and illustrators of the day. Dodge wanted *St. Nicholas* to be full of "freshness, heartiness, life and joy." Generations of children, including Rachel Carson, found it so.³³

The section children enjoyed most was the *St. Nicholas* League, established in 1899, which published work by children themselves and thereby gave them the privilege of membership. The League stood for intellectual achievement and high ideals. Each month it held contests for the best poems, stories, essays, drawings, puzzles, and puzzle solutions its readers could devise. It awarded

gold badges for the winners, silver for the runners-up, and cash awards for “honor members”—those children who had won both gold and silver badges. In addition, the League printed as many other submissions as space allowed and listed the names of those whose good work could not be squeezed in. *St. Nicholas* League contests were open to any child under the age of eighteen, as long as a parent or guardian certified that the entry was the child’s original work.³⁴

No other juvenile magazine of the period adopted the values of the nature-study movement more completely than *St. Nicholas*. None glorified the virtues of a life lived happily at one with nature more enthusiastically. The League stood for “intelligent patriotism” and for “protection of the oppressed, whether human or dumb creatures.” The editorial attitude toward animal welfare was further clarified in rules for photographic entries. All photographs of wild animals and birds were to be taken in their *native homes*, not even in large game preserves, and certainly not in zoos.³⁵

When Rachel Carson sent off her first story, “A Battle in the Clouds,” to the *St. Nicholas* League contest in May 1918, she joined a distinguished group of poets, novelists, essayists, artists, journalists and scholars who first saw their work in print in the pages of the League. Between 1907 and 1917 League badge winners included such future luminaries as William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edward Estlin Cummings, S. Eliot Morison, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and S. V. Benet. In 1911 an eleven-year-old E. B. White won a silver badge for his essay “A Winter Walk,” which recounted a boy’s pleasure at being out with his dog where “every living creature seemed happy” and where nothing would harm “God’s innocent little folk.” It was a story Maria may well have read aloud to her four-year-old daughter.³⁶

“A Battle in the Clouds” was a story about World War and reflected the influence of Rachel’s brother, Robert, who had enlisted in the Army Air Service in the fall of 1917. In one of his letters home, Robert told of the tragic death of a Canadian flying instructor who had been in combat in France. Rachel was so taken by his account of the bravery of the aviator that she retold the story in her own words for the *St. Nicholas* League.³⁷

Rachel waited for the results of her first entry for five months. When the September 1918 issue of *St. Nicholas* arrived, she discovered not only that “A Battle in the Clouds” had been published by the League but that it had also been awarded a silver badge for excellence in prose. The Carsons were jubilant. Rachel, obviously delighted, was so excited by seeing her first story in the League that she entered the very next competition, #227, on the topic, “A Young Hero (or Heroine).”³⁸

Clearly influenced by other war stories published in the magazine, Rachel wrote about a lone American soldier holding off a German patrol, killing several of the “Huns” before falling wounded and being rescued at the last moment by his comrades. Although not as dramatic as her first story, the setting in a shell crater is well drawn with dark clouds and flashes of lightning to heighten the suspense. This story appeared in the January 1919 League. A third story, “A Message to the Front,” was published the following month, February 1919, and won Rachel a gold badge. The story describes the inspiration that America’s entry into the war gave to a lonely group of French soldiers surviving the winter on the front. The plot is not unusual, but the clear, precise writing and the tension created by the brief dialogue are remarkable for an eleven-year-old.³⁹

A fourth essay, “A Famous Sea-Fight,” printed in the August 1919 issue, was written in April. It retold the story of Admiral Dewey’s victory at Manila Bay in the Spanish-American War. Its appearance in the magazine gave Rachel the vaulted status of “Honor Member” of the League and ten dollars in cash. After four stories appeared in one year, Rachel was convinced she could become what she dreamed.⁴⁰

Rachel’s literary success also had an impact on her mother. Maria’s intellectual frustration and disappointing marriage made it all the more important that her talented daughter have the opportunity

to fulfill her promise. Maria knew that this child of her old age had exceptional gifts. It was also clear to Maria by 1917 that her older children, Marian and Robert, shared little of her interest in music, literature, or nature. Determined that Rachel's gifts would not be buried by domestic life in a small and increasingly ugly town, Maria Carson planned a different future for Rachel.⁴¹

By the summer of 1921 Rachel's writing had nearly outgrown the confines of the *St. Nicholas* League. Barely fourteen, she submitted a piece to the magazine for sale in June 1921. Assistant Editor Frances Marshal replied that while they could not buy her essay for *St. Nicholas*, they could use it for "publicity work" and paid her for it at the rate of a cent a word. When the check came Rachel was ecstatic. She scrawled across the envelope "first payment" and tucked it away.⁴²

That same summer Rachel began sending her work to other magazines. In order to keep track of the disposition of her literary efforts, she designed and maintained a ledger. It shows that she submitted a story, "Just Dogs," of 4,000 words to at least three magazines: *St. Nicholas*, *Author's Press*, and *Our Animal Friends*. Although it was rejected by all three, apparently because of its ubiquitous subject matter, Rachel was undeterred.

The format of her ledger for "Just Dogs" is one she used all her life. Its categories included title, class, length, place submitted, dates sent and returned, postage cost, payment, and comments. Intensely conscious of her expenses, she noted that each story cost eight cents in postage to submit. In an unemotional and businesslike way, she recorded that the story was returned by the publishers three weeks later.⁴³

Rachel's final League story, the first about nature, appeared a year later in July 1922. Entered in the category of "My Favorite Recreation," it tells of "going birds'-nesting" in the Pennsylvania hills with her dog for "a day of our favorite sport" armed with lunchbox, canteen, notebook, and camera. Rachel describes the trail and the birds she and her dog found together.⁴⁴

As an adult, Carson liked to say she had become a professional writer at age eleven, confusing the sale of her publicity piece with her first *St. Nicholas* League publication. But her "determination that she would some day be a writer" was her most accurate memory, that and the amount of money she was paid.⁴⁵

Rachel's recognition from the *St. Nicholas* League and her outstanding academic record did not surprise her teachers at School Street School any more than it had her mother. Rachel's report cards from elementary school were all As, with an occasional B in handwriting. From second through seventh grade, however, teachers noted extended absences. Although a few of these reflected genuine illnesses, more often when the winter weather was particularly harsh or when there were known outbreaks of diphtheria, whooping cough, or measles, Maria, like many protective mothers, elected to tutor Rachel at home. Her performance remained consistently superior. Maria's tutoring in fact was probably better than the instruction in the classroom.

Rachel used these occasions at home to read. It was during this time that she became keenly interested in authors who wrote stories and poems about the ocean and seafaring: Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad, and Robert Louis Stevenson. But her frequent and extended absences emphasized her singularity and kept her from making friends.

The Carsons lived not only on the top of Colfax hill but over two miles from the shops and businesses at the center of town. Neither the location of the farm nor Maria's attitude toward outsiders encouraged easy social interactions. Two friends who did come over to play remember that gaining the approval of the stern-looking Mrs. Carson was an achievement. Springdale had no high school, but tutorial classes for ninth and tenth graders were offered in two rooms at School Street. Most students entered high school somewhere else. Some went away to boarding school; others attended Peabody or Allegheny High School on the north side, commuting to and from class on the Conemaugh Railroad.

The Carsons could not afford the train fare, so Rachel stayed at School Street for the first two years of high school.⁴⁶

The source of Rachel's social isolation was not only economic and geographic but psychological as well. In 1921, when Rachel began ninth grade, her family already had weathered several economic and domestic crises. The initial source of the family's difficulties was Robert Carson's failure to find a position that paid him a salary rather than a commission. While the Carsons owned a great deal of valuable land and could borrow against it, Robert Carson sold only an occasional lot or two, and he could not support his family with such unpredictable income. As the economy retracted, the Carsons struggled to get by; at times they were unable to pay their milk and hay bills.

Sometime between 1922 and 1925, Robert Carson took a part-time position with West Penn Power Company, the huge utility sprawling along the riverfront on the eastern edge of Springdale. West Penn was fast becoming the largest employer in the area, and Carson found work at the Springdale switching station. For a time he was the night supervisor, but even this job did not pay enough to support the family. Never a robust man, his health seems to have prevented more vigorous work.⁴⁷

Maria Carson supplemented the family income by offering piano lessons to Springdale's children, charging fifty cents a lesson, and also selling piano music. But the family's future was never financially secure, and they were forced to live spartanly. During their occupancy, the farmhouse was not modernized or remodeled.⁴⁸

By the time Rachel entered her last two years of high school, her family's impecuniousness was a source of some embarrassment as well as community comment. This only added to Rachel's reticence about bringing friends home. In some ways, the Carsons' declining economic status made it easier for Rachel to be independent since she was under no pressure whatever to conform to the social values of her peers. By the time she entered high school, Rachel had embraced her mother's view that intellect and self-worth were far more important than material possessions or social recognition.

Maria's older two children, on the other hand, rebelled. Marian Frazier Carson, a strikingly good-looking young woman, had no desire to finish high school and went to work as a stenographer after completing tenth grade. When she was eighteen she began to date Lee Frank Frampton, age twenty-two, a student from New Kensington. The young couple decided quite precipitously to marry in November 1915. Robert Carson gave his permission for his underage daughter to marry. The minister of the Presbyterian Church of Cheswick performed the ceremony in the pink-and-white wallpapered parlor of the tiny Carson home.⁴⁹

The newlywed Framptons had no money for rooms of their own, so they boarded in the already crowded family home. Although Frampton apparently expressed a preference to move in with his mother, the couple lived on Colfax Lane for four months. Then, on the evening of April 6, 1916, Lee Frampton disappeared.

After about three weeks, Marian found Lee at his mother's home and had him arrested for desertion and nonsupport. At hearings on those charges, Frampton agreed to pay Marian four dollars a week but disappeared completely at the end of that year, and she never heard from him again. In July 1918 Marian sued for divorce, which was awarded in May of the next year.⁵⁰

After Frampton left her, Marian found work as a bookkeeper at West Penn Power. She married Burton P. Williams, a stenographer, in July 1920 in a civil ceremony by a justice of the peace of Allegheny County.⁵¹

Rachel was eight when Marian married Lee Frampton and the couple moved into the house; she was twelve when Marian's divorce was final. The house was so small that there could have been few secrets and little privacy for anyone. After Frampton deserted Marian, Rachel observed her sister's unhappiness and her mother's embarrassment. But she also saw how her mother ignored the fact that

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