

# ONE LIFE: THE RACHEL CARSON PROJECT

## 1. Opening

### Narrator

Air!

The wispy, almost invisible blanket that covers us all.

The sky-blue comforter of downy clouds that warms the cold earth through the longest of winters.

Water!

The simplest of gifts, the easy marriage of two elements to make a miracle.

Life-giving, life-nourishing, life-preserving dew  
that bathes the planet in storms and streams, and rivers and seas.

Earth!

The foundation of all our exploits, all our dreams.

The tiny rocky globe that circles the sun and gives us a home.

These three are here met together, miraculously,  
and make possible that most improbable of elements -  
the fire of Life!

This is one story of that Life.

This is the story of a woman whose heart and mind strove to understand  
the vast and intricate tapestry of Life.

This is the story of one woman.

And perhaps it is the story of all women,  
in a way we have yet to learn...

for we have *yet* to learn how to follow the voices of the elements of our earth.

## **2. Chorus: The Elements of Life**

Follow where the rivers run  
and you will see me.  
Trace the rain and mist and sun  
that stream to feed me.  
The billion fish that man has never seen  
flourish in glorious profusion beneath  
the element of water.

Follow where the zephyrs tease  
and you may watch me.  
Play tag with the summer breeze  
but never catch me.  
The hurricane and the scirocco's heat  
The wind and all the blustering billows meet  
the element of air.

Follow where the forests lead  
and you will find me.  
Ask directions of the cedar  
or the pine tree.  
The crocus knows me intimately,  
ground for the oak and the cinnamon tree.  
the element of earth.

Follow all that now surrounds you.  
Follow all that leaps around you.  
If you follow all that's far and wide, you  
find that which is buried deep inside you,  
the element of life.

## NARRATOR

Yes, the elements of life are beautiful. But the tapestry of life is vast and infinitely complex.

I could *never* tell you the story of *all* life, so I must choose one life and try to let it speak for all.

And which species to choose, when there are so many thousands! Shall we have a chorus of crickets? Or the quartet of coyotes?

Bats would be exciting, but they're so flighty!

Whales are terrific singers, but difficult to costume and terrible at taking direction.

But trust me for the moment and I will repay your trust by telling you the story of one life which speaks for many more. A human life. A human woman's life. And this is the story of many women, because it is the story of one woman.

It was just her luck to be born in a time when women were offered two exciting career tracks: housewife, or motherhood. And the exceptionally ambitious woman could become a housewife *and* a mother.

Yet if a young girl, say, with a certain penchant for observation and rigorous thought should attempt to make a career out of science, for instance, she is likely to have been met with this firm, but manly, response.

### **3. Quartet: Science is for Men**

Science is a job for men.  
Bright men, the right men,  
invariably white men.  
Whose rigorous minds don't sway and bend  
to moody womanish whims.

Science is a job for men  
to take the world apart and then  
put all the pieces back again  
in whatever shape we choose,  
the earth is here to use,  
and Man would be a fool  
not to use it as a tool.

Women are almighty,  
though emotional and flighty,  
they can help a man unwind  
mostly cause they have no mind.

Science is a job for men.  
Strong men, long men  
and generally blond men.  
Whose rational thoughts don't trouble themselves  
with whimsical womanly moods.

Men haven't time to brood.  
For Science is a job for men.  
Yes! Science is a job for men.  
Wait!

We know what you're about to say,  
we hear this comment every day,  
to which we offer this rebuke:

Madame Curie was a fluke.

And Science is a job  
for Men!

## NARRATOR

Many, many women had to deal with these manly objections against careers in science.

But one woman fought against these obstacles to achieve her goal. A quiet woman, short, and demure, and wholly unassuming, she would thrill millions of readers and absolutely *terrify* governments and corporations...but I am getting ahead of myself.

Rachel Carson was born in the early hours of a late May morning in 1907, in a small town not far from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

I think that as the earth circles round each year to the season of our birth, we each come to take on the character of that season in which we were born. Winter babies feel proprietary over blizzards and ice, autumn children have a deeply personal attachment to the scarlet leaves of October.

For Rachel, the birthday earth was strong and bursting with new life: summer in its first full growth, the hardy lilacs still casting their thick perfume through the air, and the woods wholly green and cool and fresh.

Even as a very young girl Rachel felt the call of these woods and would wander the fields and valleys with Pal, her dog.

Many children do the same, of course. But Rachel was special, for even as a child she felt the call of the literary life. She knew she was meant to be a writer.

By the time she was 15, Rachel could turn that walk in the woods into a beautiful story, full of exact observation and accurate description. For Truth was a calling as strong as Poetry in Rachel's soul. And I think that it is only in writing the Truth that real poetry can happen.

Listen to this story, written by that 15 year old Rachel Carson, about her walk in the woods. If you listen closely you will be able to hear, echoing after her story is told, the song of spring as the woods themselves might sing it.

#### **4. Soprano: A Walk in the Woods**

The call of the trail on that dewy May morning  
was too strong to withstand.

The sun was barely an hour high  
and Pal and I  
set off for a day of our favorite sport  
following the beauty of the spring.

The bobwhite's nest,  
and the oriole's aerial cradle,  
and the jewel-like eggs of the yellow throat  
all waited to be discovered.

Till the setting sun transformed the sky  
into a sea of blue and gold  
and a vesper-sparrow sang his evening lullaby.

The day is full of beauty.  
The earth is full of life.  
And we turned slowly homeward  
gloriously tired,  
gloriously happy.

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## **5. Chorus: Spring Song**

More permanent than the stars  
the earth turns again to spring  
as migrant geese streak the sky  
catching the air  
poised between  
so fiery an April sun  
and the lush green earth.

The woods themselves are melting  
giving way to silt and sprout.  
The permanent earth is ground  
from another ancient age's  
permanent rock, and slips  
towards some other thing  
permanently.

More permanent than this  
our hope,  
our only place  
this earthly garden  
and the ever returning spring of life.

## **NARRATOR**

Fortunately, Rachel met a number of inspirational teachers at Pennsylvania College for Women. And one science teacher, a dynamic and brilliant woman, changed Rachel's life. Rachel fell under the spell of the zoology lab and the physiology class. Such things are possible, you know. It simply means that you were meant for a life of Science. Rachel changed her major from English to Biology. The president of the college was scandalized, but Science would be a job for this one woman, at least.

And the subject of Rachel's scientific curiosity was an object she had never laid eyes on before she graduated from college. Rachel sought to understand the sea.

The sea!

Pittsburghers generally don't know very much about it.

Western Pennsylvania has no conveniently located ocean-front property. Perhaps you have noticed. But millions of years ago, ah!, the earth was a different place then! A huge ocean stretched much farther than now, and dashed its waves as far West as Ohio. And millions of ocean creatures lived and died in this ancient, early sea, and their shells floated down to the mud of the ocean's floor. The mud turned to shale, and the shells to fossils, which Rachel often found in her explorations through the woods. And if you go looking yourself, you can find them too.

A fossil is like a promise of life vouchsafed by rock, or the frozen sound-track of an ancient ocean surf. If you listen with the ears of a poet and a scientist you can hear the rocks themselves sing out with the voice of the endless watery sea.



## **6. Soprano: The Watery Sea**

All of the earth is held  
in a watery embrace  
by a single massy sea.  
The low tide line  
as old as the earth itself,  
the endless current of the open sea,  
the turquoise waters and the quiet stream.  
the gushing springs, the steaming hot geysers,  
the shallow forest pool and the frozen fjords,  
the pallid, torpid equatorial waters  
and the sleek glinting glaciated ice pack of the antarctic  
is all one,  
all is one:  
one ocean,  
one embrace.

## NARRATOR

As men have done since Plato first renovated his cave into an academy and as women have done since their fathers first let them learn to read, Rachel pursued an advanced degree.

Rachel studied biology at Johns Hopkins, and secured a job with the Bureau of Fisheries in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. And then something marvelous happened. Her government job united the poet and the scientist.

The biologist and the writer were brought together in a series of department brochures that grew into newspaper stories. And those newspaper stories grew into magazine articles. And before you know it, the writer was keeping the scientist awake for hours into the night as she wrote her first book. She called it *Under the Sea Wind*, and it was a travelog set upon the ocean. Readers lost themselves in the adventures of the lives and deaths of the characters, for they were *not* characters - they were not even human.

Rachel wrote about creatures on the edge of the sea, and the deep diving eels and mackerel that live beyond all human sight, and the continent crossing sea-birds that fly from the arctic to the tropics in their annual cycle of life and death.

These were not fake animals, or all-too-human story book characters painted up to look like cartoon creatures. This was something new.

And in Rachel Carson's prose, readers fell out of their human world and entered the larger world of life. If you listen you can hear the world of the sandpipers, for whom a sudden lightning burst shuts off the sky in a massive wall of stormclouds, while fair winds and clear skies can open up a path that stretches halfway across the world.

## 7. Alto: The Airy Sea

The clouds are capacious pillars of water vapor  
like massy marble doors.  
Open and the sun comes in.  
Shut and the sky is shuttered out.

Open, shut, open.  
Open, shut, open,  
the ocean of air.

The air is a sea with waves of wind,  
and billows of the tempest asking  
Yes - shall I take you in my arms?  
No - shall I leave you grounded there?

Yes, no, yes  
Yes, no, yes  
the ocean of air.

The ocean stream and the earth and the stars  
are viewed through the glassy sea of air  
where the monarch butterfly hold her courts  
and the millions of birds fly free.

Fly free!  
Fly free!  
Through the ocean of air.

Yes! No!  
Yes! No!

Open! Shut!  
Open! Shut!

## **NARRATOR**

You'd think that would be it. Rachel has a job and a career. She is both a scientist and a writer. She has her dear friend Dorothy always nearby, and her orphaned nephew Roger whom she raises from a child. Book follows book, each selling more than the previous one, and Rachel is a best-selling nature writer, known and loved by thousands and thousands of readers.

The story ought to stop here.

But I have promised to tell the truth, and the truth is that stories never end in this happy way.

Things change. How could they not? All of life is change. The true happy ending of the story comes according to how we face the changes that are the facts of life.

Not that everybody understands the facts of life, and I don't mean sex!

Facts are, that the earth and us and all of life are in this thing together, and the sooner we understand that the happier our story will be. To control the earth we must control ourselves.

This is not the only way of looking at the earth, of course. There are people with some pretty deep pockets and some pretty strong opinions about control.

## **8. Quartet: The Song of Control**

The earth is organized from top to bottom  
in terms of resources, and them what got 'em.  
If you're smart, this sanctuary will  
be used as raw material  
for all the earth is placed here  
to control, control, control, control!  
For all the earth is placed here to control.

The Bible and the Sciences agree.  
Man was born take up total mastery.  
And it's our expert opinion  
that Mankind must take dominion  
for all the earth is placed here  
to control, control, control, control!  
For all the earth is placed here to control.

Let the women and the wussy poets yammer.  
Man must build the world and Science is his hammer!  
And should insects turn inimical  
we'll kill them with a chemical  
for all the earth is placed here  
to control, control, control, control!  
For all the earth is placed here to control.

## **NARRATOR**

It seems that the world was going to get better living through chemistry, whether it could survive it or not!

And man was so proud of his new creations, chemicals that could swat gnats down by the thousands, and conquer the pests that plagued the harvest.

These chemicals were so modern! And so safe! Especially a little molecule called DDT. Why, we could dose our children with clouds of the stuff while they swam, drop tons of the chemical over our woods at night, work the molecule into our soil and percolate it through our streams.

What was the harm?

In the complex tapestry of earth and air and animals and plants, there is only one life, moving through it all. The chemical that kills the mosquito is swallowed by the fish, and the fish is eaten by the eagle, and no part of the tent of life is left unstained by the ingenious poisons of man's devising.

Rachel understood. She had the scientific training to bring together the results of the hundred scattered studies, and she had the gift of words to make her vision live in the minds of her readers.

This was not a vision of playful ocean currents. This was a vision of death, a vision of a chemical winter that would never again burst into blossom. A silent winter, followed by a silent spring.

## **9. Chorus: Silent Spring**

March came this year  
with no butterflies.  
The skies that should have carried  
clouds of gnats and graceful nymphs  
is empty.  
No cricket sings.  
No grasshopper wings  
from grass to leaf.  
And all of spring  
is silent.

April came this year  
but the sparrow did not follow.  
No robins roundelay,  
no oven-bird, no jay.  
No buzz of bee  
and the apple tree  
does not bear fruit.  
And all the fields  
and all the sky  
is silent.

May came this year  
but no hawk flew about.  
Silent rivers without trout.  
And no tree frogs sang,  
and the forest never rang  
with the symphony of life.  
And all the air,  
and all the waters,  
and all the earth  
is silent.

A cloud of poison came  
and gave  
a silent spring.

## **NARRATOR**

Rachel wrote her final and greatest book, *Silent Spring*. And the world suddenly understood the dangers of insecticides and chemicals, because Rachel could paint that picture with all the poetry of a sea gull's quick-silver dive on mid-wave. And she wrote with the authority of the facts, so that no-one could simply say she was an hysterical woman.

They said much worse.

Government and industry brought out spokesman after spokesman, each trying to discredit the truth Rachel's writing made so clear.

All of this was so public for such a private little woman!

What only one or two people ever knew, as Rachel battled the giants day after day, at press interviews, on the radio and on the television screen, was that Rachel herself was dying.

Through it all, Rachel remained strong and grew wise with the wisdom of pain and loss. In the tapestry of life one natural death is not an ending, but a passing on of life to the rest of life. And if we are lucky, the wisdom of our age rekindles the delight of our childhood.



## **10. Rachel's Creed**

### **Soprano**

Retain the keenness of the child  
but tempered with an adult mind.  
Gaze at the world with your own eyes  
nor fear what you may find.

### **Speaker**

Rachel Carson's reference to the selfishness of insecticide manufacturers probably reflects her Communist sympathies, like a lot of our writers these days. We can live without birds and animals, but, as the current market slump shows, we cannot live without business.

### **Alto**

Remember you are human, please,  
and only guess at what you know.  
And each day can bring something new  
to alter all your certainties.

### **Speaker**

The balance of nature is a wonderful thing for people who sit back and write books or want to go out to Walden Pond and live as Thoreau did. But I don't know of a housewife today who will buy the type of wormy apples we had before pesticides.

### **Chorus**

Dream of the best, and study hard  
observe with an unwavering eye.  
Let prejudice and ignorance  
wither in the light of truth.

### **Speaker**

Why is a spinster without any children of her own so concerned about genetics?

### **Chorus**

And though we may not triumph over pain  
we can prevent the needless hurt  
of humankind against itself  
and our common mother earth.

### **Speaker**

*Silent Spring*, which I read word for word with some trauma, kept reminding me of

trying to win an argument with a woman. It can not be done.

**Soprano and alto**

There's so much that I want to do  
now that I have achieved the power  
to speak and act, alas, to find  
I've reached my final hour.

**Speaker**

The doctors found two tumors, one suspicious enough to require a radical  
mastectomy.

**Chorus**

The hand that can no longer grasp  
the feet that fail now to support  
the cancer that so grows within  
and the weakening heart.

**Speaker**

After radiation treatments Rachel promptly became ill, and lay in bed with fever,  
aching and nauseous. She developed severe inflammation of the iris and, unable to  
read or to tolerate, light she spent two weeks nearly sightless, in terrible pain.

**Soprano and alto**

O Dorothy! we are each a dot  
upon life's vast bright tapestry.  
We feel so much, we know so little.  
It is a little thing to die.

**Speaker**

Severely anemic from the cobalt treatments, she failed to respond to transfusions.  
Only a dangerous operation held faint hope.

**Soprano, alto and chorus**

Don't ever be afraid to die.  
It is beautiful.

**Speaker**

Late in the afternoon, on Tuesday, April 14, Rachel Carson suffered a fatal  
coronary heart attack

**Narrator**

Don't fall into tears, there is no need to weep.  
I have lived!  
And I have been fortunate beyond my dreams.  
I was able to explore life even when others said "no."  
And I was able to warn the world even when others said "Be quiet."

Let those who follow after me not moan, but work!

Let my funeral music be  
not dirges, but a eulogy.

### **Chorus**

Let my funeral music be  
not dirges, but a eulogy.

## **11. Finale**

### **Chorus**

More permanent than this  
our hope,  
our only place  
this earthly garden  
and the ever returning spring of life.

### **Soprano, alto and chorus**

The day is full of beauty.  
The earth is full of life.  
We must turn slowly homeward  
gloriously tired,  
gloriously happy.

To return to the earth.  
In all the Earth  
there is only  
One Life.

### **Narrator**

This has been the story of all life, because it is the story of the One Life.