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RECOLLECTIONS OF RACHEL CARSON

It was in the spring of 1947, in Washington, D.C., that I received a phone-call from Edwin Way Teale. He and his wife were passing through on that trip from Florida to New England that he later memorialized in North with the Spring. Could I have lunch with them, he asked, to meet a friend who worked in the Department of the Interior, was interested in nature, and had read a recently published book of mine called Spring in Washington? So the four of us had lunch together, and that was how I met the Teale's friend, a Miss Carson.

Miss Carson was quiet, diffident, neat, proper, and without any affectation. My recollection is that she had not yet passed the age when one might refer to her as a "girl," although "young lady" might have been more appropriate in her case. There was something about her of the nineteenth century, of the times when there really had been young ladies. She had dignity; she was serious; and, as with Lear's Cordelia, "her voice was ever soft, gentle and low."

My recollection, which was to prove embarrassing later, was that she had sought this meeting to ask my advice on how to develop a good literary style. This was a cherished compliment in itself; but I could not then know how great a compliment it really was, because all I knew of her at the time was that she was one of the "government girls" with which Washington swarmed. (It was also a very special compliment to be asked for advice on the art of writing in the presence of Teale, one of the most accomplished living writers in the field of nature.) To me, however, it was more than just a compliment. For years I had been over my head in love with the English language, as I still am, and there was this government girl earnestly asking me to speak to her about my love.

It is probably just as well that I don't remember what I said. When, some three years later, a book called The Sea around Us came out I discovered that I was the one who should have
been listening while she did the talking. At the very least, we
should have been talking together as fellow craftsmen, not as tea-
cher and pupil. Typically, however, it was she who had put herself
in the role of pupil. Later I almost felt as if I had been tricked,
although she could not have tricked anyone in her whole life,
such was her seriousness and integrity.

I never got to know her well. She was one of the persons I
occasionally saw to say "hello" to, and I recall that my wife and
I, during a return visit to Washington after we had moved away,
had tea with her and her mother at their house in Silver Spring.
She was then paying a common penalty of fame, for she had become
a public institution without having the facilities of an insti-
tution. She was daily overwhelmed by mail from her readers, mail
that such a conscientious person would feel obliged to answer in
detail. But she did not have the research assistants and the
secretaries that, as a national institution, she needed. I doubt,
moreover, that she would have enjoyed running herself as one runs
a business. She could not have got away from being a simple human
being; she could not have made herself behave like an institution.

One final memory that provides an echo of our first meeting.
It had been my fortune to discover the nest of the first Veeries
known to breed in Washington or anywhere near it, and to follow
the increase in nesting Veeries over the first few years, while
they were becoming the common breeding birds they now are. All
this was duly reported in the Atlantic Naturalist. One spring
day Rachel phoned me, told me she had never seen a Veery or heard
one sing, and asked me to arrange a meeting. On a Sunday morning,
then, I took her out into upper Rock Creek Park, where she listen-
ed to that phantom song, as evanescent as breath on a windowpane,
with precisely the same air of seeking knowledge with which she
had once listened to a youngish man (himself as unaware as the
Veery) discoursing on the possibilities of the language.

I remember her as always attentive, always listening, always
wanting to know. The French existentialists (none of whom, I
suspect, has ever gone to a bird for knowledge) talk a great deal
about living the "authentic" life. But Rachel Carson exemplified
it.