

Eleanor Rigby at the Turn of the Millennium

Paul McCartney wrote the lyrics of “Eleanor Rigby” in 1966.

With its refrain about all the lonely people, the song went on to become one of the Beatles’ greatest hits. According to McCartney, “Eleanor Rigby” is an ode to the old ladies he met doing odd jobs as a teenager in post-war Britain. While I always loved the tense violin opening, after my experience working at a chemical factory in my hometown in the summer of 1999, the song came to remind me of that job and of that time as I became an adult in the context of a new millennium, with its possibilities and growing pains layered onto my own.

— Molly Watson

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Molly was 21 years old when she got the job at the chemical factory in Wellesport, out in the small town’s industrial park. It was 1999. Y2K fever gripped the nation, at least that’s what it felt like to Molly. Her uncle had a pyramid of tuna cans in his garage, next to a newly purchased generator.

Molly wasn’t supposed to spend her summer in Wellesport, her hometown nestled among similar New England coastal towns with white church steeples and red brick sidewalks and taverns called Publick Houses. She was supposed to be in Belize, on a spelunking trip. She had just graduated from Princeton University.

Molly’s older brother, Mike, had some concerns during the graduation festivities he attended alongside their parents. He noted the opulence at Molly’s Princeton eating club

graduation lunch. Molly thought the other club members, all undergraduates, were basically nice, basically her friends. But Mike took a scan of the room. He saw guys wearing loafers without socks and catering trays loaded with Oysters Rockefeller, and heard kids call out to each other by names like Paget and Beau. It hit him: the place was thick with blue bloods, probably headed off on European tours or unpaid internships at art galleries and wineries. Mike didn't want Molly getting any ideas. Their family didn't have that kind of money, those kinds of connections.

Mike ran his own company and drove a BMW. He worked for every cent he had, and actually, he had given a lot of it to Molly. He paid the balance to Princeton, after financial aid. But now, he worried. What if Molly didn't understand that hard work was necessary for the things she wanted? And now she was about to spend three weeks spelunking in Belize? He scanned the list of equipment Molly said she needed for the trip. A Gore-tex rain jacket and pants, three different kinds of head lamps, a harness and carabiners for repelling. Mike staged an intervention to stop the trip. See, Molly had been a surprise baby, which left her now with a 40-year-old brother and parents in their sixties. Mike was the de facto dad, giving Molly's actual dad the space to check out.

Molly would never forget that afternoon, sitting in the living room at her parents' house in Wellesport, on the couch next to her mother, and Mike and her father sitting in chairs facing her. Her brother's words, "We think you should get a job." Her mother and father nodding. She didn't think, "How dare they? How dare they take away my trip? How dare they tell me what to do?" She nodded, in complete understanding. Of course. It made sense. She was starting graduate school in the fall in Madison, WI. Of course she needed to earn money. She understood, along with her parents and brother, that she would not be receiving a salary from her

anthropology Ph.D. program. It made sense that she should get a job now and build a bit of a financial cushion before heading to Wisconsin.

But, a little time bomb in Molly's soul clicked on. Tick, tick, tick. The timer of her tolerance for other people making decisions for her clicked on. And one day, it was going to go off.

Eleanor Rigby

wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door.

Who is it for?

Molly was both shocked, and completely unsurprised when she was offered a full-time job at Streich Chemical that summer in 1999. Shocked because it was a real job and she felt more infantile than ever, daydreaming about archaeology during the day, and at night in an email relationship with a guy from Princeton that she dreamed would work out like that Meg Ryan movie, "You've Got Mail." And completely unsurprised because yes, she did have a piece of paper in her hand stating that Princeton University had awarded her a bachelor's degree in chemistry, despite a nagging feeling that she might not know any actually useful chemistry. All she had to do to get the job was meet with Rodney Streich, president of Streich Chemical, which sat on a corporate road next to a place called the Cheesecake Factory. (Not like the big-city restaurant, but simply a factory that made cheesecake, as Molly knew from having picked up cheesecakes there for various events — birthdays, holidays, and the like during her time growing up in Wellesport.) Becoming a junior chemist at Streich was probably the only job in Wellesport

that could match her impressive resume, and Molly might have been the only Ivy League graduate for miles who majored in chemistry and who happened to be free for a few months to work there.

When Molly had gone in for her interview, she thought Streich Chemical looked kind of like how offices on TV looked. She had waited in a modern plastic chair in a front area decorated in calm shades of beige and light blue with soft carpeting that absorbed almost all the sound. Cubicles lined one wall. It wasn't luxurious, but it was nice. From that front area, there was no suggestion of the oddities that lay beyond the double doors covered with a sign that said "Lab Area: Authorized Personnel Only."

When she stepped through those double doors on her first day of work, Molly found herself in one gigantic room with lab benches and equipment throughout. It was dark with high ceilings and had the echoey feel of a warehouse. Rock music was coming from somewhere. She looked up and saw a boom box and speakers attached to the ceiling with bungee cords. Only half a dozen scientists worked in the spacious lab. Molly mainly worked with Zach, synthesizing various chemicals, nothing much more complicated than what she had done in sophomore organic chemistry labs. Zach was 27, drove a red Mazda Miata into work, and loved to comment on how he spent more time with Molly at work than he did with his wife at home. Molly and Zach reported to Babu, an Indian gentleman with gray hair, glasses, and a soft voice. Babu carried a clipboard and wore a pencil behind his ear.

At least once a day, Molly heard a scream, or perhaps more of a wail. A man's guttural cry yelled, "Eleanor Rigby!" As if he had lost Eleanor Rigby, as if she had just fallen off a boat at sea. "Eleanor Rigby!" the voice would cry again. Molly would hear the Beatles' song over the

speakers, then the sound of a metal mixing bowl thrown into a sink, near a lab station further back in the warehouse. It was Norman, screaming and throwing metalware. Norman had worked at Streich for years. He had a limp. Molly couldn't tell exactly what his job was. He knew chemistry, that she knew from one time when he showed her where to find certain chemicals and another time explained how to set up a twenty liter round flask for a synthesis reaction. But he never seemed to be doing his own projects, just assisting others or tossing metal and screaming. And, he was in charge of the music.

All the lonely people

Where do they all come from?

Where do they all belong?

Halfway through Molly's employment, Babu pulled her and Zach aside and asked them if they would be willing to learn Good Manufacturing Practices in order to make an anti-cancer drug in the clean room off the main lab. Everything about this struck Molly as strange. She and Zach were so young and basically inexperienced. And the two of them were going to make a drug that sick people, actual cancer patients would take? And there was actual pharmaceutical manufacturing in the tiny town of Wellesport? They had both nodded yes to Babu right away, but Molly wondered, what if they had said no? Who would have done it instead? Babu? Norman?

Molly and Zach learned how to suit up like they were in the movie "Outbreak", but instead of the suits protecting the humans from germs, they protected the chemicals from the humans. They worked in tandem, carefully measuring and mixing various chemicals, baking

liquid mixtures so they turned into a powder that would one day be added to an infusion for patients undergoing chemotherapy. Each time one of them completed a step, the other person had to initial it on a form that would be sent to the FDA. Molly hated working in the suit. The clean room didn't have air conditioning and it was like working in a greenhouse wearing a snowsuit. Zach and Molly agreed to start coming in at 6 AM and leaving at 2 PM, before the hottest part of the day. They worked in the clean room for a month, making untold amounts of the sulfur yellow powder that left Streich in jars and went onto the next step in the supply chain. Large manilla envelopes housed their signed forms that traveled to the the FDA in Washington, DC.

There was an Erlenmeyer flask at Streich that Molly especially loved. There was something different about it. The mouth was a little too wide, and the body a little too narrow. It was faded.

On her last day of work, she stole it.

She somehow shoved it into her bag, amidst the goodbye handshakes and hugs. She had never stolen anything before in her life.

Father McKenzie

Wiping the dirt from his hands as he walks from the grave

No one was saved

On Molly's first day in grad school, she sat in her advisor's office with the other students and listened as they told about their summers. An older gay woman had gone to Alaska and had

been hunted by polar bears while her team tried to observe villagers hunt and process salmon. A young woman just one year ahead of Molly had gone to Peru to collect soil samples and guinea pig bones. A guy who was missing a hand had gone to Portugal looking for human fossils. When it was Molly's turn, she felt ashamed that she couldn't say she had gone spelunking in a cave in Belize. Instead, she said she worked at a chemical factory in her hometown, and then with a flourish, added, "and I learned what I DON'T want to do with my life!" Everyone nodded approvingly, a collective eschewing of conventional jobs and corporate organizations and chemicals. Molly's advisor raised his brows and the corners of his mouth lifted, perhaps impressed that she had worked in a real job, perhaps nervous that she had some real life experience that could loosen her tether to the Anthropology department.

Ahh, look at all the lonely people

A few weeks later a friend from Princeton came to visit Molly in Wisconsin. The millennium was coming. What would it bring? They sat on the futon bed in her studio apartment, dipping their hands into the Erlenmeyer flask Molly had stolen from Streich and filled with Hershey's miniatures. They unwrapped the chocolates, and talked about their hopes and dreams.