

The Ice Age Room

The Antsfield Community Natural History Museum opens at exactly nine o'clock in the morning, rain or shine, Monday through Friday (and an hour and a half later on weekends or bank holidays).

Florence knows all this, of course. She has the schedule memorized.

It's currently 9:17, and Florence is sitting in her spot, the little alcove tucked up behind the row of trees off by the wheelchair ramp. If she leans just a bit to the left, she has a perfect view of the slowly-picking-up stream of people plodding up the steps and into the museum.

If she leans a bit to the right, then a bit more, and then - there, Florence can watch as the familiar school bus, yellow-painted and peeling, pulls up the curb with a squeal of brakes. There's a muffled speech from inside the bus, presumably from the silhouette standing at the front with their hands placed firmly on their hips, then the door bursts open and a crowd of children floods into the front courtyard.

Florence stands up, brushing off stray dirt. The dewy ground has left her pants slightly damp, but she doesn't have time to bother with it.

(Florence has done this enough to know when her window of time will close, and close it will if she doesn't get a move on).

Head down and feet fast, she slips out from behind the building and into the clamoring crowd as they pass by. The teachers aren't paying attention, and what's one more ten-year-old in a sea of other kids? Little terrors, all of them, anyway.

Florence checks her watch. 9:20.

They start up the steps, the river of chattering and tugging and shrieking children ushering Florence along like salmon up a river.

(Florence knows all about salmon. There was an exhibit about them last May. That's what used to be next to the elevators on the third floor, before they got the walrus bones.)

"Everyone in," a harassed security guard calls, unclipping the rope from the special school-trip entrance. The entrance where you don't need to buy a ticket.

Florence looks up just enough to clock his face - George. That's good, George rarely does head counts.

The crowd bottlenecks for a moment at the open brass-edged doors, then one more push and Florence pops through the door and into the enormous front hall. She catches a glimpse of the whale replica, suspended above from the carved ceiling, before ducking out of the fray and behind the rusty suit of armor.

The school group disappears into the French Revolution hall, the sound of competing voices fading away, and Florence sighs.

9:23. A blissful eight hours and seven minutes more before they lock up for the night.

(She did try to stay the night, once. She had the spot all picked out, behind the mummy's tomb on the first floor, but she'd sneezed and the late security caught her. Florence had pretended she was lost, even managing to cry, though that was more over the loss of her perfect plan.)

Florence pulls on the two halves of her ponytail, tightening it. She's due a visit to the Ancient Greece wing, and she needs to check the new paint on the Dinosaur diorama ...

Florence points her feet toward Ancient Greece, but somehow, without really thinking it, she's crossing the entrance hall toward the sign that says Ice Age instead. She slips in behind a

mum and her whining kids and an artsy-looking teenager, skirting around the saber-toothed cat fossils and dodo diorama until she's rounding the corner and then- there.

"Hello, Missy," Florence whispers. The teenager gives her a funny look from across the room.

Florence ignores her, crouching down in front of the fingerprinted glass window. She settles into a criss-cross sit, her neck tilted all the way back to see the towering creature in front of her. A massive mammoth, all shaggy fur and flapping ears and smooth tusks and black eyes that glitter in a way that lets Florence know she's listening. She's at least as tall as two Florences on top of each other, her trunk curling down to pick up a leaf.

Florence pulls out a folded square of paper from where it was tucked against the waistband of her pants. Careful as anything, she unfolds the creased paper to reveal her drawing from yesterday.

"Oh, Missy, you didn't do a good job hiding it this time," Florence whispers, flicking her eyes from the paper to the mammoth.

The artsy teenager huffs and leaves the room.

"Your left leg is too bent," Florence continues, happy for the privacy. This a conversation between her and Missy, anyway. "And your truck is a bit too unfurled, sorry to say. You've not been trying as hard as you used to." Clicking her tongue the way she's seen disgruntled mums do, Florence settles in to sketch a new Missy beside yesterday's, arrows pointing out the differences.

Missy is a *mammuthus*, commonly called the woolly mammoth, hailing from East Asia approximately 400,000 years ago.

(It says all this on the information plaque on the glass separating them, for any museum-goer to read, but Florence has it memorized.)

Her name's not really Missy, but Florence thinks it suits her.

"Good girl, Missy," Florence coos, adding the final shading. She folds up the paper again and tucks it away. Looking left, then right, she leans closer, her nose almost touching the glass. If she tilts her head just right, and squints her eyes, she can blur out the badly painted wall and too-green grass, leaving just a fuzzy outline. All that's left is Missy, one leg raised like she's about to step forward into life. For a moment, Florence holds her breath, and she's there, right next to Missy, a few thousand years ago with the real grass and real trees and wide open sky, and if she's very still, if she sits without moving, without so much as blinking, Missy will shake herself to life and reach down, trunk wrapping around Florence and lift her up into the boundless icy air, high, high onto her back and Florence will nestle into the soft hair and Missy will carry her away, away from the museum and away from the endless dusty artifacts and away-

Someone coughs behind Florence, and she's jolted back into her own skin. Her eyes hurt from squinting, and Missy is as static as ever. Of course she is, it's 9:34 and Missy doesn't move during the day.

Only Florence knows the secret, why Missy's pictures never seem to line up perfectly. One day she'll prove it for sure, one day she'll manage to stay the night and then, then, Missy will really lift her up. That day, Florence will finally leave her world behind.

But until then, there's nightwatchmen and security guards and Florence can only sit quietly, talking to something that can't talk back.

One day. One day, she'll prove it.

Florence gets up and dusts off her shirt.

“Bye Missy,” she whispers. “See you tomorrow.”

After all, it’s a big museum. Florence has eight more hours to see everything.