

## **Sidedoor Season 4, Episode 7: Field Trip**

[INTRO MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Good morning, Justin! Have you had coffee?

Justin O'Neill: No.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm. That's a problem.

Justin O'Neill: It's sitting right next to me though. I'm looking right at my coffee.

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah, well, let's fix that!

Justin O'Neill: (Laughs)

Lizzie Peabody: We've got stuff to do today! Introduce yourself!

Justin O'Neill: I am the producer of Sidedoor.

Lizzie Peabody: Yes, and today we are doing something completely different.

Justin O'Neill: Yes, we are. Um, we are getting out of these four walls.

Lizzie Peabody: We're busting loose!

Justin O'Neill: Yeah, we spend a lot of our time in here and we're going on a field trip.

Lizzie Peabody: Field trip! It's the beginning of the school year. Kids are going back to school. So, we are leaving the studio, and we are taking the best field trip that you've never been on.

[MUSIC]

Justin O'Neill: And, as I remember school, usually you have to, like, sit in class for at least a month before the teachers take you anywhere, but we're a bit more indulgent here. And, you know what? Like, we don't have to wait a month! We can go on a field trip, right at the beginning of the school year!

Lizzie Peabody: That's right. We also have been sitting in our own kind of classroom for many months. We're going to go behind the scenes of some of our favorite museums.

Justin O'Neill: And I set up some things that I'm excited to see, and I think you did too?

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah, I have some cool stops lined up. But you're leading us off. So, where to first?

[MUSIC]

Justin O'Neill: First stop: breakfast.

Lizzie Peabody: Ooooh, okay! I'm hungry. Let's get going!

Justin O'Neill: So, this time on sidedoor...

Lizzie Peabody: Oh yeah! So, this time on sidedoor...

Justin O'Neill: A field trip!

Lizzie Peabody: Field trip.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: We left our downtown D.C. studio, and stepped out on to the National Mall; it's pretty much the front lawn for most of the Smithsonian's museums. On our way to the first destination, we went over some basic field trip etiquette.

Justin O'Neill: It had been awhile, so I had some questions.

[OUTSIDE NOISE]

Justin O'Neill: You used to be a teacher, so you're used to, like, you know the rules of the field trip road a little bit better than I think I do.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh yeah.

Justin O'Neill: So, if I do anything that's like, not field trip acceptable today...

Lizzie Peabody: Uh, huh.

Justin O'Neill: You'll have to point that out to me and, I don't know. I don't know what happens, but...

Lizzie Peabody: Okay, well I'll let you know.

Justin O'Neill: Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: First thing you should not do is run away from me.

Justin O'Neill: (Laughter)

Lizzie Peabody: That's actually why teachers never take field trips in the first month because you don't know your students well enough to know who's the flight risk.

Justin O'Neill: Who's the runner? Yeah. Is there always a runner? There probably is.

Lizzie Peabody: There's almost always a runner.

Justin O'Neill: (Laughter)

[MUSIC]

Justin O'Neill: I don't know why I find that so funny.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: We've been here before.

Justin O'Neill: Yeah! We have been here before.

Lizzie Peabody: Are we going to the National Museum of Natural History?

Justin O'Neill: Yes, we are.

Lizzie Peabody: All right! Breakfast at the National Museum of Natural History. Are we allowed to eat in there?

Justin O'Neill: Yes. Well... yes. (Laughs)

Lizzie Peabody: Wait a minute! You planned breakfast in a place where you're not sure if we're allowed to eat?

Justin O'Neill: There's a cafeteria, but that's not where we're going.

[MUSIC]

Justin O'Neill: And so, let's just be very clear about what we're doing here. We have come here to Lizzie...

Lizzie Peabody: Yes.

Justin O'Neill: To have breakfast with a tarantula.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow! That's not the breakfast that I had imagined. I sort of figured we would be eating breakfast.

Lizzie Peabody: Mention of a tarantula actually pretty much killed my appetite and I was actually really surprised to learn that they have live animals at the National Museum of Natural History. I didn't realize that.

Justin O'Neill: No, I didn't either. I thought that they were only at the zoo, but turns out, they're also on the Mall.

Lizzie Peabody: We met Anne Hyman and she's part of a team of volunteers who conduct regular tarantula feedings.

Anne Hyman: So, Lizzie, how many times a week do you eat breakfast?

Lizzie Peabody: Uh, I eat breakfast seven times a week.

Ann Hyman: Okay. So, typically, our tarantulas only eat one time a week. They don't require a lot of energy. Um, they are very slow moving. They, they typically stay in one space, unless there is prey in front of them. And if they have the opportunity to seize a lot of prey to become food at one time, they typically wrap silk around it and store it for later eating.

Lizzie Peabody: Huh! Wow. Okay. So, we're going to be feeding this tarantula?

Ann Hyman: Yes.

Justin O'Neill: Chris Mooney was also there behind the scenes. Um, and he runs the insect zoo and butterfly pavilion. And he introduced us to a very hungry tarantula named...

Lizzie Peabody: Thad.

Justin O'Neill: Thad.

Chris Mooney: Uh, Thad Bosley is a Bolivian Salmon Pink Tarantula.

Justin O'Neill: Why do you call him Thad Bosley?

Ann Hyman: We don't want our visitors to be disappointed and we certainly don't want you to go away feeling hungry this morning either. So, we have pinch eaters that are named after famous pinch hitters from baseball.

Lizzie Peabody: Thad the tarantula is one of two pinch eaters at the museum. These guys will eat whether they're hungry or not, much like Justin, but to prevent them from over-eating, they need to go on spider diets.

Justin O'Neill: So, when was the last time Thad ate?

Chris Mooney: The last time Thad ate, I believe, is May.

Lizzie Peabody: What?

Chris Mooney: Yes.

Lizzie Peabody: Wait a minute. It's August. It's the end of August.

Justin O'Neill: (Laughter)

Chris Mooney: So, tarantulas, generally speaking, can go months without eating or drinking.

Lizzie Peabody: Thad suddenly looks a lot more menacing to me. (nervous laughs) He just looks...

Chris Mooney: Thad's actually a she.

Lizzie Peabody: Thad is a she? Okay.

Chris Mooney: So, we use primarily female tarantulas. Uh, that's because males only live about one to two years after they become an adult. And so, it takes them about five years to reach adulthood. Uh, and then for females, depending on the species, they can live another 15 to 20 as an adult.

Lizzie Peabody: Whoa! All right. So, I'm thinking that poor Thad has not eaten since May. And, maybe...

Justin O'Neill: And we're just like delaying her, right?

Lizzie Peabody: I know! She's like, "I can sense it."

Justin O'Neill: It's like, "All right. I'm ready."

Lizzie Peabody: Okay.

Justin O'Neill: Let's do it!

Lizzie Peabody: Uh, let's watch!

Anne Hyman: Are we ready?

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: So, at this point, Anne pulls out a cricket that I hadn't even really noticed, sitting in a small vial on the table. And she dumps this tiny cricket into the tank. And nothing really happened, at first, until Chris pulled out these long set of tongs. And he sort of poked the cricket in the butt, right toward Thad, who was waiting very patiently.

Lizzie Peabody: It's moving along. Oh, you're directing the cricket toward the spider! (Gasp) Oh!

Anne Hyman: So, you see how it lunged...

Lizzie Peabody: Oh my God. It just fed it...

Anne Hyman: And attached its fangs on it.

Lizzie Peabody: (Gasp)

Anne Hyman: And it's injecting the venom right now. I saw a small little white bubble of venom come out alongside the cricket. The cricket at this point is no longer mobile. It's injecting its digestive juices right now.

Lizzie Peabody: Ooohhh.

Chris Mooney: And so, it'll be sitting here, slowly spitting up digestive fluids, waiting for the cricket to dissolve for the next couple of hours.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm.

Chris Mooney: And then, it will drink up all the juices and then it'll be done.

Lizzie Peabody: So, with Thad Bosley's breakfast behind us, I sort of figured we would be leaving, but Chris asked a question that was a little startling.

Chris Mooney: So, do you want to hold one?

Lizzie Peabody: Uh...

Justin O'Neill: Let's do it, Lizzie!

Anne Hyman: They are, they are very dopey, sweet, docile house cats, in tarantula size.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. He's picking it up. Oh, Justin is holding out his hand.

Justin O'Neill: Should I put my hand over there?

Lizzie Peabody: Oh my God, Justin. What does it feel like?

Justin O'Neill: It feels like a very soft hand, just sort of laying on my hand. She's just kind of sitting there as if she's not sure either what's going on, I guess. Is it because my hand isn't quite perfectly still?

Chris Mooney: Ah, so they don't move much when they feel comfortable. So, if they feel safe and not like, threatened or anything, they'll stay, sit still 'cause they don't want to waste energy.

Anne Hyman: So, what Chris is trying to say is that she likes you.

Justin O'Neill: She likes me! I like her to then.

Lizzie Peabody: She likes you Justin.

Justin O'Neill: Through this very calm and rational conversation we've been having, they're still a four-inch tarantula on my hand. Um...

Lizzie Peabody: Are you ready for it to be off your hand?

Justin O'Neill: I would be perfectly content if she went elsewhere.

[MUSIC]

Justin O'Neill: Oh wow! She's very calm though. I liked her very much.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: That was awesome! Do you feel...

Justin O'Neill: My hand still feels hot from where the tarantula touched me. Like...

Lizzie Peabody: (Gasp)

Justin O'Neill: She was hot!

Lizzie Peabody: Really?

Justin O'Neill: It was hot.

Lizzie Peabody: Hot.

Justin O'Neill: Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: Huh. I actually feel like I have a changed relationship with arachnids!

Justin O'Neill: (Laughs) Its funny you say that. I do too. Um, not necessarily arachnids in my house, but arachnids everywhere else.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. So, after the National Museum of Natural History, you led us next door to the National Museum of American History, and the only thing you told me was that we'd be looking at some monsters.

Justin O'Neill: Exactly. And I lined up a meeting with American History Entertainment Curator, Ryan Lintelman.

Lizzie Peabody: He brought us behind the scenes to a floor of the museum where I had never been.

[MUSIC]

Ryan Lintelman: Uh, let me go ahead and grab some gloves here.

Justin O'Neill: So, this room was packed with like, skateboards, tennis rackets, trophies, football helmets, and a bicycle.

Ryan Lintelman: And the ventilation in here is probably going to be bad. So, I was thinking, let's go to the back of the room.

Justin O'Neill: It's not ideal, but it's workable.

Justin O'Neill: Is that your bike?

Ryan Lintelman: That's Lance Armstrong's bike. (Laughs)

Justin O'Neill: Oh, that's...

Lizzie Peabody: That's Lance Armstrong's bike?

Ryan Lintelman: Yeah. Yeah. He rode that in the Olympics and the Tour de France. So, you can see his name on the support rod there.

Justin O'Neill: Oh yeah!



Lizzie Peabody: Okay. So, Ryan, you brought us here to meet some monsters.

Ryan Lintelman: Yes.

Lizzie Peabody: Can you introduce these monsters?

Ryan Lintelman: Yeah! Sure. So, here they are!

Lizzie Peabody: This is fine.

Ryn Lintelman: The puppets from Avenue Q!

Lizzie Peabody: Ok Justin, explain Avenue Q, because I didn't know what it was.

Justin O'Neill: Yeah, so, Avenue Q is a Broadway musical; the first ever to have puppets as main characters. But the easiest way to think of the show is basically, it's Sesame Street for adults. At least, that's how Ryan described it.

Ryan Lintelman: Yeah. I mean, a cynical way of, of reading it and its relationship to Sesame Street is like, we were all told we were special. We were told what we were supposed to do. We were supposed to learn our ABC's and learn how to count. Um, what would we learn from puppets today, if there were an adult version of Sesame Street? Maybe we would learn about racism or we'd learn about what the Internet is for, uh, we'd learn about how to get along in a modern city.

Lizzie Peabody: Ahhh.

Ryan Lintelman: And, uh, so, that was the sort of the seed of the idea that became Avenue Q.

Lizzie Peabody: And the puppets themselves look a little like hard-worn versions of Sesame Street characters, like slightly more haggard, more grown up...

Justin O'Neill: Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: ...than the originals.

Justin O'Neill: Yeah. And the reason for that is that some of Avenue Q's puppeteers and puppet makers had earlier in their careers worked on Sesame Street, so there's definitely an echo between the two. So, the first puppet we met was a character named Nicky.

Ryan Lintelman: Nicky is, uh, he might bear a passing resemblance to Ernie from Sesame Street. Um...

Lizzie Peabody: Oh yeah. He looks like, Ernie's drunk uncle.

Ryan Lintelman: (Laughs)

Lizzie Peabody: ...who needs a haircut and a shave.

Ryan Lintelman: (Laughs)

Justin O'Neill: Unshaven for sure. Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs)

Ryan Lintelman: Yeah. It's, it's interesting to see a, you know, five o'clock shadow rendered, in puppet fleece.

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah.

Ryan Lintelman: But, it's been done very well here. Um, he's definitely got some stubble and looks like he needs to, you know, kind of take a shower. So, uh, his roommate is Rod and this is Rod next to him, here. Rod is a, in some ways, the opposite. He actually has gel in his hair, in his puppet hair.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs)

Ryan Lintelman: It's well-coiffed and uh, you know, he's wearing like really nice, uh, glasses and he's got on a suit and tie and a, you know, he's taking pride in his appearance here as compared to Nicky. You wouldn't be wrong to say maybe he looks like Burt to Nicky's Ernie, right?

Justin O'Neill: Yep.

Ryan Lintelman: Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: Ahhhh. So, is that a, are they playing with Burt and Ernie? Sort of an older version?

Ryan Lintelman: Absolutely. Yeah.

Justin O'Neill: Do we, do we have Ernie and Bert in here?

Ryan Lintelman: We do! You want to see them?

Justin O'Neill: Lizzie, let's, you and I both, take a quick mental snapshot right here.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. All right.

Justin O'Neill: Okay. We're ready for you.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. We're ready.

Ryan Lintelman: Let's walk back in time.

Lizzie Peabody and Justin O'Neill: (Impersonating The Twilight Zone theme music) Doo-doo-doo-doo-doo-doo...

Lizzie Peabody: Whoa! Is this the puppet closet?

Ryan Lintelman: So, you're looking at the original Ernie and Bert from Sesame Street in 1969.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow! Oh my God!

Ryan Lintelman: So, you can see their body shapes are similar. You know, they uh, kind of have the same affects to them.

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah.

Ryan Lintelman: I mean, Ernie, you know, I don't think he's growing stubble yet, you know.

Lizzie Peabody: He's got rubber ducky in his hand.

Ryan Lintelman: (Laughs)

Lizzie Peabody: They both look healthier colored.

Justin O'Neill: (Laughs)

Lizzie Peabody: They both, they have sort of a youthful...

Ryan Lintelman: That glow.

Lizzie Peabody: ...glow to them...

Ryan Lintelman: Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: ...that is no longer present in the adult version.

Ryan Lintelman: I think the really important comparison to make is the, the relationship that they have with each other because Ernie and Bert are also roommates, right?

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm, mmm.

Ryan Lintelman: And, uh, they're very different personalities. And that was the idea of Sesame Street. You know, Sesame Street was a really pioneering television show because it used all these new ideas from childhood development and, um, you know, educational theory about what it's, what's important to teach children at a preschool age. Uh, a lot of that isn't, you know, ABC's and one, two, threes. But, it's also about, um, you know, communication and about relationships and how to get along with somebody who's different from you, right? And that was the big thing about Ernie and Bert. That's the idea with Avenue Q, too.

Justin O'Neill: Okay. So, do you want to go back and see our friends from Avenue Q?

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah!

Ryan Lintelman: Okay.

[SOUND OF DOOR OPENING]

[SOUNDS OF FOOTSTEPS]

Justin O'Neill: But there is like, a real sweetness to Nicky and Rod in Avenue Q because one of their, like, feature songs is, "If you were gay," in which Nicky is sort of trying to encourage his friend to come out of the closet and, be himself.

Nicky From Avenue Q Singing: "If you were gay, that would be okay. I mean, 'cause hey, I'd like you anyway."

Rod From Avenue Q: (Groans)

Nicky From Avenue Q Singing: "Because you see"

[AVENUE Q's "IF YOU WERE GAY" MUSIC PLAYING IN BACKGROUND]

Ryan Lintelman: Yeah, exactly. And uh, that's one of the reasons why I wanted to collect these two puppets. The reason why we collect entertainment here at this museum is to show how it helps people to talk about what's happening in the world around them, right? And, looking at the data now, there've actually been studies that have shown that increasing representation of gay characters on television correlates like, exactly with, um, acceptance of gay marriage or you know, um, for gay rights, right? And like this, this sort of, uh, you can't like hate or dismiss somebody that you see, right?

[AVENUE Q's "IF YOU WERE GAY" MUSIC PLAYING IN BACKGROUND]

Ryan Lintelman: That you understand their stories.

[AVENUE Q's "IF YOU WERE GAY" MUSIC PLAYING IN BACKGROUND]

Rod From Avenue Q: (Groans)

Nicky From Avenue Q Singing: "And I know that you."

Rod From Avenue Q: "What?"

Nicky From Avenue Q Singing: "Would accept me to."

Rod From Avenue Q: "I would?"

Nicky From Avenue Q Singing: "If I told you today, 'Hey! Guess what I'm gay!'"

Rod From Avenue Q: "But I'm not gay."

Nicky From Avenue Q Singing: "I'm happy just being with you."

Ryan Lintelman: So, anyway, I think that this, the song in Avenue Q is great because, uh, I think it kind of became an anthem for some people and it might've actually helped to provoke some of those conversations with friends, right?

Lizzie Peabody: And what time was that? When did the musical come out and how cutting edge was that attitude at the time?

Ryan Lintelman: Yeah. The show premiered in 2003. So, that's definitely a moment where this is still, um, you know, kind of a touchy subject, right? Like that's around the time a lot of states are passing, um, anti-gay marriage legislation, right? Broadway musicals deal with contemporary times and they bring up contemporary issues. Um, this show is like directly addressing them. Um, doing it in a, in a person to person way that could be super uncomfortable if it wasn't puppets on stage talking about it, singing about it, making jokes about it.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm, mmm.

Ryan Lintelman: And I think that's the brilliance of the show.

Lizzie Peabody: Honestly, we could have spent all day with Ryan Lintelman, but we had to get going.

Lizzie Peabody: Good to meet you!

Justin O'Neill: Yeah. Good seeing you.

Ryan Lintelman: All right. See you later!

Lizzie Peabody: All right. Bye.

Justin O'Neill: See you, Ryan.

Lizzie Peabody: Because there was one more place I wanted to go before lunch, an installation I've been wanting to check out for over a year and I figured it would be a good palate cleanser before we ate. So, we hopped on the metro.

Automated Voice Of Metro Train: Ronald Regan National Airport. The next stop is, Federal Triangle.

Lizzie Peabody: And, we'll meet you at our next destination, after the break!

Justin O'Neill: I'm still thinking about that spider sitting on my hand.

[MUSIC]

[SOUND OF METRO DOORS OPENING]

Automated Voice Of Metro Train: Doors opening.

Lizzie Peabody: We're back, and we're still on our stupendous Sidedoor field trip around the Smithsonian. After a brief metro ride, we arrived in front of the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery, which is an art museum dedicated to contemporary American crafts. This was our final stop before lunch, and not a moment too soon because Justin was getting hangry.

Justin O'Neill: Lizzie, I love the Renwick...

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm, mmm.

Justin O'Neill: ...but also, I love lunch and I'm very hungry. So, how, how long is this going to take in here?

Lizzie Peabody: Justin, this is not going to take very long and I don't think you're going to regret it. Let's just go in.

Justin O'Neill: All right.

Lizzie Peabody: Five minutes.

Justin O'Neill: Let's go do it.

Lizzie Peabody: Five minutes.

Justin O'Neill: Okay. Sounds good.

[MUSIC]

Justin O'Neill: My feets are tired, so I'm digging this like, soft, cushy, plush carpet that they have.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs)

Justin O'Neill: Oh, wow! It's like a cathedral of some kind. It's like a...

Lizzie Peabody: (whispered) Yeah.

Justin O'Neill: Like just a church space.

Lizzie Peabody: (whispered) Do you want to read it?

Justin O'Neill: (whispered) Yeah. I'll read it.

[MUSIC]

Justin O'Neill: (whispered) "This temple is a sacred place for memorial and reflection. Many places exist for celebration, but few places are created to honor the universal human experience of grieving and loss. This is such a place. Please respect it for the solemn purpose."

[MUSIC]

Justin O'Neill: (whispered) It's like, we're in a cathedral, built kind of out a wooden doily. It's like, really intricate sculpture.

Lizzie Peabody: (whispered) Yeah, this is a, this is a David Best temple. He's famous for building them at Burning Man and then setting fire to them after they're done. And he built one here in the Renwick.

[MUSIC]

Justin O'Neill: (whispered) I'm going to go sit over there.

Lizzie Peabody: (whispered) Okay.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: We spent a few minutes sitting in this temple. It's built entirely of plywood, but it has the cavernous, tranquil feeling of a real gothic cathedral. All around, people have left notes and photographs in memory of the people they've lost.

[MUSIC]

Justin O'Neill: That was awesome. I feel like, um, I just got a massage or something like that.

Lizzie Peabody: We emerged rejuvenated, relaxed and...

Justin O'Neill: All right. I'm, I'm really hungry now, Lizzie.

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah, I will admit that while we were sittining there, I heard my stomach start to grumble.

Justin O'Neill: (Laughs)

Lizzie Peabody: Hungry.

Justin O'Neill: Time for lunch!

Lizzie Peabody: Smithsonian style!

[OUTDOOR NOISE]

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. So, we could take the metro, or we could scoot.

Justin O'Neill: Or we could ride bikes!

Lizzie Peabody: Or we could ride bikes.

Justin O'Neill: Let's ride bikes!

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. We pedaled to Mitsitam Cafe, which is in the National Museum of the American Indian.

[OUTDOOR NOISE]

Lizzie Peabody: Hi, could I please have some of the green chicken chili?

Justin O'Neill: And the cafe itself is almost its own exhibition.

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah, it's as much a part of the museum as any object on display.



Justin O'Neill: It's clearly been carefully curated to represent a lot of different Native American traditions of cooking.

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah, food is part of the living history of native peoples and they really use the cafe to demonstrate how traditions were passed down and shared through food.

Justin O'Neill: Yeah, it was delicious. I had this fried bread, topped with meat and beans and avocado...

Lizzie Peabody: Hmmm.

Justin O'Neill: Corn.

Lizzie Peabody: And I had a hearty chicken stew with hominy.

Justin O'Neill: It really hit the spot and got us back on the road.

Lizzie Peabody: We're back! We're fed! We're live! And we're local to Washington, D.C.!

Justin O'Neill: After lunch, it was time for some art!

Lizzie Peabody: But not just any art. The paintings of one of the most recognizable and celebrated artists in the world, whose name, you might not actually recognize. So, we headed to the Freer Gallery.

Justin O'Neill: But, we got there a little early, so we took a rest in the garden outside of the gallery. Lizzie fell asleep.

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah, well post lunch, you know.

Justin O'Neill: Yeah. Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: I can sleep anywhere.

Justin O'Neill: Fair enough.

Lizzie Peabody: Sitting up.

Justin O'Neill: And I got bit by a bunch of mosquitos and my legs were itchy.

Lizzie Peabody: Do you remember what else happened?

Justin O'Neill: Well, my legs were itchy, so I went in a sprinkler.

Lizzie Peabody: Justin is misting his legs. (Laughs)

Justin O'Neill: My legs are itchy.

Lizzie Peabody: You took a direct hit to your phone. (Laughs)

Justin O'Neill: I know. (Laughs)

[LAUGHTER]

Justin O'Neill: I am what you would call very wet.

[LAUGHTER]

Lizzie Peabody: So, one of us dampened and both ready to get out of the heat, we walked into the cool marble halls of the Freer Gallery of Asian Art, which is where we met Frank Feltens, assistant curator of Japanese art, and he took us down to storage.

Frank Feltens: Everyone down the stairs, right? I don't want to put you in this rumbling elevator. If you're right, once in that thing, you're never gonna think about elevators the same way again.

[LAUGHTER]

Justin O'Neill: We took the stairs.

Lizzie Peabody: And emerged into a clean, bright room. On the far wall, hung two long scrolls. Let's start with who is Hokusai?

Frank Feltens: Who is Hokusai?

Lizzie Peabody: Yes.

Frank Feltens: Okay. That's not an easy question to answer. I think Hokusai is probably, nowadays, best known for his famous print, "The Great Wave Off the Coast of Kanagawa." And, uh, that is really one of the most iconic images of world art, I would even say, not just Japanese art.

Justin O'Neill: So, you know this print. It's called, "The Great Wave" and it shows exactly that. There's a huge wave coming out of the left side of the image.

Lizzie Peabody: Right and it has this white crest, which is edged with these, like, little fingertips of froth curling over.

Justin O'Neill: There's also a small boat beneath the wave, and a teeny, tiny Mount Fuji in the background.

Lizzie Peabody: And Hokusai created it around 1830. You can find a link to the image in our episode description.

Justin O'Neill: So, I knew how famous this painting was, but what I didn't know, is how beloved Hokusai is in Japan.

Frank Feltens: In terms of Japanese cultural identity, he is really the most important artist by far.

Lizzie Peabody: Frank explained that Hokusai is best known for his prints, like, "The Great Wave", but he also made paintings. Lots and lots of paintings.

Frank Feltens: He called himself, "the man mad about painting" and he used that in some of his signatures as well on his, on his artworks. He had this insatiable urge to, to paint and really capture everything around him onto a, some kind of artwork. And he even continued painting almost until the moment he, he died, basically.

Lizzie Peabody: The Freer Gallery has the largest collection of Hokusai's paintings, drawings, and sketches in the world: works spanning the length of his life. And Frank says that as Hokusai aged, his paintings actually gained urgency and energy.

Frank Feltens: They are more vigorous. And I think he was just also going against his own physical decay, right? Saying now or never basically. And, uh, creating something that is, uh, imbued with a life force and this strength that he increasingly lacked as, as an actual human being.

Lizzie Peabody: But there's something very different about the scrolls hanging side by side in front of us on the wall, which are thought to be the last paintings Hokusai did.

Frank Feltens: So, these paintings were meant to be together. And so, on the right, you have a woodcutter and on the left you have a fisherman sitting on a basket of fish. So, in these paintings, um, Hokusai's advanced age is very clearly visible in several areas. So, you can actually see his hand, how his hand shook, while he painted it. You know, this is where, this is supposed to be a straight line, but it's not in this painting.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm.

Frank Feltens: So, this is the hand of an old man, not quite, the master anymore of his own movements. And uh, these paintings were made when Hokusai was 90.

Lizzie Peabody: In the first painting, the woodcutter leans on his axe, smoking a pipe with this look of great satisfaction. His wood is bundled at his feet. Behind him, mountains rise up in the

background. In the second painting, the fisherman is also resting. He sits on his basket of fish, but unlike the woodcutter, he's facing away, looking out past the water to the horizon, which is empty.

Frank Feltens: There is this huge empty space above the sea. Did Hokusai, uh, lose his energy? Did he even die, while he painted these paintings and didn't get to finish this painting completely?

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm, mmm.

Frank Feltens: We don't know.

Lizzie Peabody: What we do know, is that Hokusai died the same year he made these paintings.

Frank Feltens: And a signature also says, "old man of 90." And, um, you know, the way the lines are drawn there is a, there is a hesitancy and shakiness that you don't find in many of Hokusai's other paintings painted before that.

Lizzie Peabody: Hmm.

Frank Feltens: So, this is a very moving testimony of, you know, the very dusk of, of an incredibly accomplished artist's life.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: It gave me this strange sense of connection to look at what might have been the final thing that Hokusai, the man mad about painting, ever painted.

Justin O'Neill: Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: And to see what he might have been seeing in the final days, or even moments, before he died, it makes me feel like we're connected to him in a way; like, this painting is a portal of sorts.

[MUSIC]

Justin O'Neill: And the fact that one of those paintings was kind of incomplete really heightens that sense.

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah.

Justin O'Neill: So, starting in November, 2019, all of the Japanese galleries of the Freer-Sackler museum will be filled with Hokusai's work, for an entire year.

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah. This is a rare chance to see the arc of a prolific artist's work all in the same place. And these scrolls will be a part of the exhibition.

Justin O'Neill: I definitely plan on going back.

Lizzie Peabody: We will definitely be back.

Justin O'Neill: Goodbye.

Lizzie Peabody: Bye. Thank you.

Justin O'Neill: I love this museum.

Lizzie Peabody: Oh man.

Justin O'Neill: I mean...

Lizzie Peabody: I cannot wait to go live in that exhibit.

Justin O'Neill: From the building alone... But Lizzie had one last thing that she wanted to do.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. So, there's something that, uh, that I've sort of been envisioning would be part of this field trip...

Justin O'Neill: Hmm, mmm.

Lizzie Peabody: ...since the beginning and I'm going to ask you to do this thing with me and I really hope you say yes.

Justin O'Neill: (Laughs) What is it?

Lizzie Peabody: Will you ride the carousel with me?

Justin O'Neill: Yes.

Lizzie Peabody: Yes!

Justin O'Neill: (Laughs)

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. Let's do it!

Justin O'Neill (Laughs) Um...

Lizzie Peabody: Because I was told when I started working here, that I got free rides on the carousel and I have yet...

Justin O'Neill: Wait. Is that true? (Laughs)

Lizzie Peabody: Yes. And I have yet to redeem one.

Justin O'Neill: (Laughs)

Lizzie Peabody: So, I need to work the system!

Justin O'Neill: That's hilarious. I've never even tried.

Lizzie Peabody: And I really just want a picture of you on one of those horses.

Justin O'Neill: (Laughs) Okay. Let's give it a go.

Lizzie Peabody: All right. Carousel rides. \$3.50. Hi! Um, we are Smithsonian employees.

[CAROUSEL MUSIC PLAYING]

Justin O'Neill: Does that help us? They are free, Lizzie!

Lizzie Peabody: What?!

[CAROUSEL MUSIC PLAYING]

Lizzie Peabody: All right. Let's do credits!

[CAROUSEL MUSIC PLAYING]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

[CAROUSEL MUSIC PLAYING]

Lizzie Peabody: This has been a great day! And we want to give a special thanks to all the people who made it possible: Tina Tennessen, Chris Mooney, Anne Hyman, Valeska Hilbig, Ryan Lintelman, the cooks at Mitsitam Cafe, Frank Feltens, Megan Krefting, and Sai Muddasani.

[CAROUSEL MUSIC PLAYING]

Lizzie Peabody: For some photos of our great adventures, including Miss Thad Bosley, the pinch eating tarantula, grown-up Bert & Ernie, Hokusai's last painting, and this very moment, "say cheese," Justin!

Justin O'Neill: Cheese!

[CAROUSEL MUSIC PLAYING]

Lizzie Peabody: Subscribe to our newsletter at [si.edu/sidedoor](http://si.edu/sidedoor). That's [si.edu/sidedoor](http://si.edu/sidedoor). And don't forget to leave us a review on Apple Podcasts!

[CAROUSEL MUSIC PLAYING]

Lizzie Peabody: Sidedoor is made possible with help from people like you! Your support helps makes all the amazing work you just heard about around the Smithsonian possible.

[CAROUSEL MUSIC PLAYING]

Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Jason Orfanon, Michelle Harven, Caitlin Shaffer, Jess Sadeq and Lara Koch. Episode artwork is by Greg Fisk. Extra support comes from John Barth and Genevieve Sponsler. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder, with the exception of this song, which is the carousel song; not by Breakmaster Cylinder.

[CAROUSEL MUSIC PLAYING]

Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening. And thanks, Justin, for coming out from behind the curtain and co-hosting with me!

[CAROUSEL MUSIC PLAYING]

Justin O'Neill: Oh! It was a great time! I'm, I'm, I'm glad we got to, uh, just run around today.

Lizzie Peabody: Yeah, me too! All right. We'll catch you next time!

[CAROUSEL MUSIC PLAYING]

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs) Do you have your stress ball here too? (Laughs)

Justin O'Neill: It's my best friend.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs) Okay.