

The Day the City was Free

The tram doors opened with a soft chime, and Sara hesitated.

"Mum... we didn't tap on."

Preeti lifted her phone, smiling. "We don't need to this month. Free travel for April."

Sara stepped inside carefully, half expecting a voice to call them back, a hand on her shoulder. But nothing happened. The doors slid shut, and the tram moved on.

It felt wrong. Like breaking a rule that still existed somewhere.

Outside, Melbourne drifted past graffiti walls, autumn trees, cafes spilling people onto footpaths. School holidays had softened the city.

"Where are we going?" Sara asked.

"Anywhere you want."

Sara frowned. "No plan?"

"No plan."

Sara glanced around, uneasy. A man in high vis stood near the door. For a moment, she was sure he was watching them. Her hand slipped into her pocket, brushing her Myki card.

But he turned away at the next stop.

They stayed on until the last stop. Then they got off. Crossed the road. Boarded another tram. No destination. No cost. Just movement.

At one stop, a violinist played soft notes that quieted the carriage. At another, a toddler handed out invisible tickets to strangers, who accepted them with solemn nods. Sara laughed.

"Everyone's acting weird today."

Preeti shook her head. "Not weird. Free."

"Same thing," Sara said. But she wasn't so sure.

They got off near the river and bought hot chips. Seagulls circled overhead, loud and hopeful.

"Did you ever do this when you were a kid?"

Preeti hesitated. "No."

"Why not?"

Preeti watched the water. "We didn't have time for wandering or money for travelling."

Sara looked at the chips in her lap. "But today it's free."

"Yes," Preeti said quietly. "Today it is."

On the way home, the tram felt different. Sara noticed the hum of tracks, the rhythm of stopping and starting, the quiet agreement between strangers. Everyone was going somewhere.

But no one seemed in a hurry.

At their stop, Sara didn't move straight away.

"Mum? Why does this feel... important?"

Preeti thought for a moment. "Because it doesn't happen often."

"What doesn't?"

"A Day where nothing holds you back."

Sara nodded slowly.

When they stepped off, the tram disappeared down the tracks. For a moment, everything fell still.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out her Myki card, turning it over in her hands.

All day, she hadn't needed it. All day, she had gone further than she ever had. Not just across the city, somewhere inside herself she hadn't known existed.

She looked at the empty tracks, then back at the card.

For a moment, she thought about throwing it away. Not because she didn't need it, but because she finally understood what it meant to.

She slipped it back into her pocket and took her mum's hand.

"Mum? Next time... let's not wait for it to be free."

Preeti didn't answer straight away. Then she squeezed Sara's hand.

"Next time," she said quietly, "we won't."