Between the Lines

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At the zebra crossing outside my school, the beeping starts before anyone is ready - like it's already decided before we even start.

My shoes squeak as I shift my weight. Around me, people prepare to move: heads down, faces lit by their phones, backpacks brushing past. Someone's shoelace drags along the pavement behind them, unnoticed. A car idles too close to the line, its engine humming like it's impatient.

The beeping speeds up.

The light turns green, and everyone steps forward at once.

From above, it would probably look neat. Lines. Timing. No gaps.

But standing there, it doesn't feel like that.

A man in a suit walks past me, still looking at his phone. Someone bumps my shoulder and says "sorry" without really seeing me. A group of students laugh at something on a screen. We're close enough to touch, but not enough to notice - like we've all agreed not to.

I cross with them anyway.

On the other side, everyone spreads out quickly, like we were never really together. People turn off in different directions: into shops, down side streets, through the school gates behind me.

I turn left and walk towards the bus stop.

The air still holds the warmth of the day. It sits on the pavement, rising in soft waves you can almost see. A magpie calls from somewhere above the power lines. Cars pass in short bursts, then it quiets again.

It's always busy after school. People stand in loose lines that aren't really lines, just watching for their bus and pretending they were there first.

There's an old man there most afternoons. I don't know his name, but I've noticed him. He wears the same brown coat, even when it isn't that cold, and carries a canvas shopping bag that never looks very full. Sometimes he watches the road. Sometimes he just stands there.

He usually stands a little apart from everyone else.

Today, he looks different.

Not much. Just… slower.

Like he's not quite sure where he's meant to be.

The bus pulls up with a loud hiss. People move quickly now, forming something closer to a proper line.

I step forward with them.

The old man doesn't.

He stays where he is, slightly out of place, like the moment has moved on without him.

At first, I think maybe he's waiting for a different bus.

Then the doors open.

People start getting on.

He still doesn't move.

There's that same feeling I get at the crossing — that quiet pressure to keep going, not to stop, not to be the one holding everyone up.

No one says it. But everyone follows it anyway.

So, I step forward.

One step.

Then another.

I'm almost at the door.

But something feels wrong.

I glance back.

He's still standing there, looking at the bus like he's trying to remember something.

Or maybe like he's forgotten.

I hesitate.

The line moves.

Someone behind me sighs.

I step onto the bus.

Inside, it smells like warm plastic seats and dust. I sit by the window: the kind where you can see everything outside without anyone really noticing you.

Through the glass, I watch.

The driver looks straight ahead.

The doors stay open.

People sit down, already moving on.

The old man takes a step forward.

Then stops again.

For a second, I think he might miss it.

Or maybe not even realise it's his bus.

Something tight settles in my chest, like I've already decided something, and I don't know what it is yet.

I don't move.

I just watch.

Then someone behind him reaches out and gently touches his arm.

The old man turns. They say something I can’t hear.

He nods.

Slowly, he steps forward.

He gets on the bus.

The doors close.

We pull away.

No one says anything. No one makes a big deal of it.

But something doesn’t quite settle.

I look down at my hands.

Then back out the window.

I almost didn’t stop.

I almost didn’t even see him. And that feels worse than it should.

And if that person hadn’t-

maybe no one would have.

The bus turns the corner, past the same shops and quiet streets, and the crossing disappears.

Tomorrow it will happen again. The lights will change. People will move. The same quiet rush. The same not-looking.

But tomorrow I won’t just walk.

I’ll look.