

The Bridging Exile

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Introduction

Exile is usually imagined as a sweeping, dramatic journey away from a beloved home, a physical severing from the soil that raised you.

In the ancient, sprawling verses of the *Ramayana*, Rama's exile begins with a devastating suddenness when a binding promise made within the perfumed, echoing halls of a royal household abruptly changes the entire trajectory of his life. He leaves the golden city of Ayodhya, a metropolis bright with the warm, flickering glow of thousands of earthen oil lamps, the air thick with

the intoxicating scents of burning camphor, crushed jasmine garlands, and rich sandalwood paste. Stripped of heavy silks and shimmering gold, he departs for the Dandaka forest, accompanied by his wife, Sita, and his brother, Lakshmana.

Immediately, the sensory world shifts. The forest becomes vastly more than a mere physical location on a map. It becomes a dense, overwhelming realm of deep, emerald shadows and piercing shafts of golden sunlight breaking through the ancient canopy. It is a place vibrating with the deafening shrieks of exotic birds, the low, terrifying growls of unseen predators, and the heavy, humid scent of wet earth, rotting wood, and blooming wild orchids. It becomes an agonizing period of unending uncertainty, brutal physical hardship, unbreakable loyalty, visceral danger, and profound spiritual transformation.

The Bridging Exile carries that ancient, mythical architecture of displacement into a vastly different, aggressively modern world.

Lakka Malhotra and Komal Gupta are not crowned princes or princesses draped in velvet. They have no glittering kingdom to lose, no royal decree etched in stone to explain their sudden displacement, and no cheering crowds to mourn their departure. Their world is the sharp, fast-paced reality of contemporary Australia. It is a landscape built on digital immigration applications glowing harshly on laptop screens, strict visa conditions printed in tiny, unforgiving black fonts, demanding skills assessments, and sterile government notifications that arrive with a cheerful, terrifying electronic chime. It is a world of echoing, wind-swept train stations smelling of ozone and hot brakes, cavernous industrial warehouses vibrating with the deafening roar of diesel forklifts, suffocating catering kitchens thick with the smell of scorching oil, cramped shared houses chaotic with a dozen overlapping

languages, and drafty community centres smelling of wet umbrellas and cheap instant coffee.

Yet, beneath the synthetic hum of this modern infrastructure, the deep emotional structure of their experience is strangely, painfully familiar to the ancient myth.

A meticulously planned migration pathway they had deeply trusted—a pathway that had promised a bright, upward trajectory—suddenly and violently stops working as expected. The professional futures they had confidently imagined, once filled with the quiet hum of air-conditioned boardrooms and the crisp smell of new business cards, become violently uncertain. High-paying jobs that once perfectly reflected their years of gruelling education and fierce ambitions disappear in the blink of an eye. In their place, temporary, bone-breaking manual work becomes an absolute, immediate necessity simply to pay the monthly rent and keep moving forward through the fog. They are forced to abandon their private, quiet home and move into a crowded, noisy brick house shared with other desperate migrants, whose own suspended futures are also ruthlessly governed by watermarked documents, unyielding deadlines, and the deafening silence of unanswered bureaucratic questions.

Their exile is therefore not a geographical relocation.

They remain firmly planted in Australia.

They continue to travel the exact same cracked asphalt streets, catch the same silver trains with their bright red doors, and gaze up at the exact same glittering, glass-and-steel city skyline that reflects the burning amber of the setting sun.

What fundamentally, devastatingly changes is their relationship with the future itself.

For Lakka, the catastrophic loss is not simply a high-paying job. It is the sudden, violent separation between the proud professional identity he had painstakingly built over a decade and the menial, back-breaking work he is now legally forced to perform. A highly educated man who once elegantly designed complex digital software systems finds himself standing in the freezing dawn, wearing a high-visibility vest that smells of old sweat, sorting heavy wooden pallets in an echoing warehouse. The burning flush of humiliation is incredibly real, settling deep in his chest. But so is the unexpected, profound lesson he learns amidst the dust and the roar of the engines: true, useful human knowledge does not simply evaporate into the cold air just because a prestigious job title is stripped away.

For Komal, the transformation is equally complicated and sensory. Her chaotic, blistering catering work teaches her exactly how the massive machinery of invisible labour operates. She becomes a master of the shadows, highly skilled at solving catastrophic logistical problems behind heavy wooden doors that the wealthy, perfume-scented guests never even realize exist. She learns the art of moving silently, carrying heavy silver trays through narrow, dimly lit corridors smelling of bleach and raw onions, all while watching her own vast professional abilities become entirely impossible to express through the incredibly narrow, restrictive categories of her uncertain immigration status.

Their gruelling struggle is therefore not only about the binary legal question of whether they will be permitted to remain in the country.

It is a much deeper inquiry into what actually happens to a human being when the suffocating paperwork surrounding a migration pathway begins to aggressively reshape every other aspect of their existence.

What happens to a burning ambition when the expected, sunlit career suddenly disappears into a dark tunnel?

What happens to the warm intimacy of a marriage when every single joyous plan—a holiday, a new home, a child—must be coldly measured against the looming threat of another printed immigration deadline?

What happens to human dignity when highly capable, brilliant people are forced to swallow their pride and take whatever exhausting, dirty, lawful work is available, just to afford groceries that smell of compromise?

What happens to a person's core identity when a respected professional becomes known primarily—by the government, by employers, and eventually by themselves—by the terrifying uncertainty surrounding their visa subclass?

And what does the concept of "home" actually mean when remaining physically in a country still does not guarantee that a person feels remotely safe, secure, or welcome within its borders?

Lakka and Komal's answer to this crisis is not found in a single, cinematic, dramatic decision made in a flash of lightning.

Their gritty story moves slowly, painfully, through a labyrinth of online applications, bruised muscles, endless waiting, drafty community meetings, thick cardboard document folders smelling of cedar and panic, whispered conversations with tired legal advisers,

and the gradual, beautiful recognition that crushing uncertainty becomes slightly easier to endure when the heavy burden is shared with others in the dark.

Their eventual bridging visas do not provide a perfect, golden solution to their nightmare.

They do something vastly more modest, and vastly more essential.

They provide time.

That specific distinction matters more than anything else.

A bridge is not a warm, welcoming destination. It is cold, constructed of steel cables and rigid legal conditions. It does not promise permanent, sunlit security or magically restore everything that was lost before the collapse. It simply, practically allows a terrified person to cross a dangerous, churning space without falling into the black water below.

For Lakka and Komal, that temporary, suspended space becomes unexpectedly, profoundly important. The administrative bridge gives them the physical and mental room to continue working lawfully without fear of deportation, to painstakingly organise their scattered documents, to seek out expensive legal advice, to slowly rebuild their shattered professional confidence, and to look around the crowded room and discover that they are not alone.

Their noisy, chaotic, garlic-scented shared house becomes a fierce, protective community.

Their thick, terrifying folders of government documents become a structured, navigable map.

Their temporary, back-breaking jobs become profound lessons in human resilience and operational empathy.

Their suffocating uncertainty becomes something they can finally articulate aloud in clear, ringing voices, rather than a shameful secret they must desperately hide behind fake smiles.

And slowly, inevitably, the very idea of what constitutes exile begins to change its shape.

It is no longer simply about being physically forced to pack a bag, board a plane, and leave a country behind.

It becomes the haunting, disorienting experience of remaining physically present—smelling the same ocean breeze, feeling the same harsh summer sun, hearing the same native birds—while becoming entirely separated from the bright, predictable future you once believed inherently belonged to you.

That is the dense, terrifying modern forest through which Lakka and Komal must travel.

Its towering trees are brutalist concrete apartment blocks reaching into the smoggy sky.

Its twisting, dangerous paths are humming, electrified train lines.

Its temporary hermitages are cramped, noisy shared houses smelling of eight different dinners.

Its hidden hazards are sudden unemployment, crippling financial pressure, labyrinthine bureaucratic complexity, and the ice-cold fear of making one single administrative mistake too many.

Its unexpected guides are tired friends, overworked legal advisers, fellow terrified migrants, passionate advocates, and ordinary, exhausted people willing to share a cup of tea and a moment of clarity.

There is no multi-headed, roaring demon waiting to be slain at the end of this journey.

There is no blood-soaked, mythical battlefield that can decisively settle everything in a single, glorious afternoon of combat.

There is only the slow, grinding, deeply sensory work of waking up, putting on your shoes, and continuing.

The story that follows is therefore not a fairy tale of magically defeating an unfeeling, monolithic system.

It is a gritty, textured story about learning to live and breathe through absolute uncertainty without allowing that uncertainty to become a permanent identity.

Lakka and Komal do not know exactly where their long, dusty road will ultimately end.

What they learn, through fire and paper and exhaustion, is that sometimes simply knowing how to find the strength to take the very next step is entirely enough.

And sometimes, a cold, administrative bridge matters deeply—not because it leads immediately to the warm, glowing destination you desperately wanted, but because it provides just enough solid ground beneath your feet to keep walking toward the dawn.

Chapter One — The Fourteen Days

The message arrived at 6:17 on a Tuesday morning, its silent delivery entirely at odds with the destruction it carried.

Lakka Malhotra was standing barefoot on the cold linoleum floor of their Parramatta apartment kitchen, waiting for the kettle to boil. Outside, the world was steeped in the charcoal greys and bruised purples of an early Sydney dawn. A steady, drumming rain beat against the glass, making the ordinary buildings across the street look fragile and temporary. The wet concrete of the balconies gleamed like dark slate, the metal railings slick and shining under the amber glow of the streetlamps, and every parked car below seemed to have been abandoned to the deluge. The air in the kitchen smelled faintly of damp earth creeping through the window seams, mixed with the sharp, comforting aroma of loose black tea waiting in the tin.

His phone vibrated against the synthetic marble countertop—a harsh, buzzing rattle that broke the quiet rhythm of the morning.

He assumed it was another email from the recruitment agency. He had been waiting for an update about a solution architect position in North Sydney, a role that seemed almost perfectly aligned with the professional experience he had painstakingly accumulated over the last decade. He reached for the device, the cold metal of the casing biting into his warm palm.

Instead, the subject line radiating from the glaring white light of the screen contained a phrase he had never seen before.

Immigration Decision Notification.

He opened it, his thumb hovering over the glass.

Komal Gupta came into the kitchen, the soft rustle of her cotton robe brushing against the doorframe. She was tying her dark hair into a loose knot, bringing with her the warm, floral scent of jasmine shampoo and sleep.

"What is it?" she asked, her voice thick with morning grogginess.

Lakka did not answer. The words on the screen seemed to detach themselves from the white background, floating in a disorienting blur.

She poured water into the kettle, the sudden, rising hiss of the element heating up filling the silence, and watched him scroll. The blue light from the phone painted sharp, hollow shadows beneath his eyes.

"What happened?"

He read the first paragraph twice. Then a third time, searching for a misread word, a misplaced comma, any sign that he had misunderstood the bureaucratic English.

The notice explained that the migration pathway he had been pursuing could no longer proceed on the basis on which his application had been assessed. The occupation he had nominated was no longer eligible for that particular pathway under the rules then applying to his application. The wording was formal, bloodless, and precise. It tasted like dry ash in his mind.

It did not accuse him of dishonesty.

It did not say that his degree, framed in heavy oak in the study, was fraudulent.