

Before Your Turn

A story about finding your direction and getting started



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Adapted English edition October 2026

About this story

Hamza needs work. He also has a place in a household to negotiate and a growing suspicion that he does not yet know what work he can take responsibility for. While he waits for an introduction, ordinary jobs are taking place around him that he has barely noticed.

The characters and events in this book are fictional. Their outcomes do not promise employment or income, and the payment in the story is not a recommended rate.

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Part One Finding a direction

Chapter 1

The blue folder

Outside the wedding hall, Hamza rubbed the toe of his shoe with a handkerchief. Then he checked his phone. There was no new message. Nobody had promised to send one, but at twenty-six he had developed the habit of looking, as though the next door in his life would open on that small screen.

His father, Rashid, tucked the wedding envelope into an inside pocket. His mother straightened the end of Maryam's scarf. Maryam moved it gently back.

"It's fine, Mum. Watch the folder. It's touching the ground."

Hamza lifted the blue folder. Inside were copies of his qualifications and five printed CVs. His uncle had suggested bringing them in case he saw Salman.

Warm food and strong perfume filled the hall. Before they had reached their table, someone asked, "So, where are you these days?"

Hamza held the back of a chair. "I help at Dad's shop, and I've put in some applications."

The man was already explaining where his own son's new office was. Rashid asked a waiter for water.

Even that seemed to Hamza like an attempt to change the subject. He knew it might mean nothing of the sort, but that evening every gesture appeared to concern his lack of a job. A cousin was taking photographs with a new phone. Hamza remembered the picture Bilal had posted that morning: glass walls, coffee, an office pass around his neck. He turned his own phone over in his pocket.

Salman arrived just before dinner. He shook two hands on his way to their table, noticed the blue folder and nodded.

"Yes, I remember. Someone I know was looking for a person. Remind me tomorrow. I'll ask."

Hamza opened the folder at once.

“Keep it for now,” Salman said. “Send it on WhatsApp. It’ll get lost here.”

“What sort of work is it?”

An older relative called Salman’s name.

“Office work. Let me speak to him first.”

He was gone before Hamza could ask anything else. Hamza closed the folder and sat down. For the first time that evening, he could breathe comfortably. He hadn’t found a job, but he had acquired an answer for the next two days. If anyone asked, he could say something was in progress.

On the way home, above the sound of motorcycle horns, Maryam said she needed the laptop the following afternoon. Her presentation wasn’t finished. Hamza agreed without looking up. He was composing his message to Salman. Three times he typed a sentence about how grateful he would be; three times he deleted it. He eventually sent a short introduction and his CV. A thumbs-up came back.

At the repair shop the next morning, he put his phone on the glass counter while he opened the wiring on a fan. His father pushed a little bowl towards him.

“Keep the screws in that. You mixed the sizes last time.”

Hamza dropped in two screws and looked at the screen as it lit up. An advertisement for a mobile data package. Rashid began to say something, then turned to the customer waiting at the door.

The next afternoon, there was still no word from Salman. Hamza opened another application on the laptop. Instead of reading the job description, he searched for Salman’s company. Maryam sat beside him with her notebook. After ten minutes, she placed the clock where he could see it.

“It’s my turn.”

“Just one thing.”

She closed the notebook. “Your one thing never finishes.”

At dinner, his mother asked whether Salman had replied. Hamza tore a piece of bread.

“He must be busy.”

His father moved the shop’s rent receipt away from his plate. “Could be. Come in a little earlier tomorrow. There are two irons waiting.”

Hamza wanted to say he didn't intend to spend his whole life in the shop. Then he realised his father hadn't asked for his whole life. He had asked for the morning.

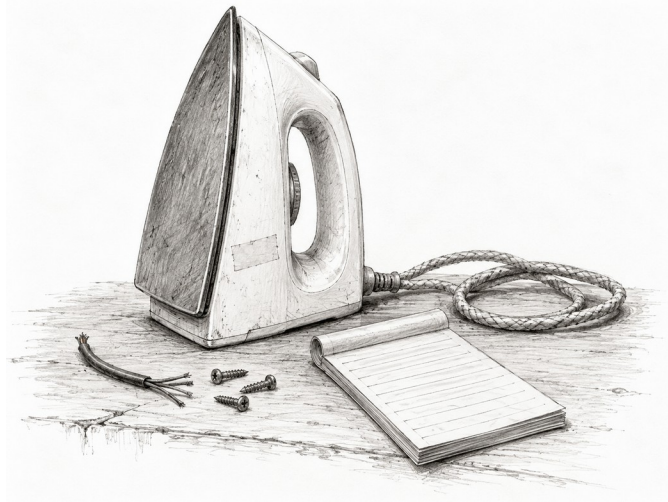
On the third day, Hamza arrived before the shutter was fully raised. A yellow duplicate receipt pad lay on the counter. Each sheet had a thin copying layer beneath it. On one page, without a customer's name, someone had written: the white one.

Hamza straightened the pad. A woman put a bag on the counter.

"Show me the other iron," she said. "This isn't mine."

Chapter 2

The white iron



The woman took the iron from her bag and held a hand over its back.

“My cord was tied here. This one’s got a new cord.”

Rashid pushed up his glasses and turned the iron over. Hamza remembered two white irons that looked much the same. One had arrived on Monday. The other might have come on Tuesday. In the yellow pad, the ink beside the date had spread into a blur.

“Leave it until the afternoon, Razia. We’ll sort it out,” Rashid said.

She gripped the mouth of her bag with both hands. “You said the afternoon yesterday. I have clothes sewn and waiting. What am I supposed to give my customer?”

She wasn’t shouting. That somehow made the delay harder to answer for. Hamza opened the pad. One sheet said white one, cord. Another said not heating. Neither identified a model.

He lifted the other iron from a shelf and noticed a small strip of red tape underneath.

“That’s mine,” Razia said at once. “I put that there.”

But it hadn’t been repaired. The correct iron had gone onto the wrong shelf, and the finished one had gone to the wrong person. Rashid carried it silently to his workbench. Hamza looked again at the two scraps of writing. Such a small omission had produced so much explanation.

He asked Razia how long her work could wait.

“It’s already waiting. Someone’s coming for their clothes at five.”

He was about to promise the iron for four when his father raised a hand.

“Let me look at the fault first.”

Hamza felt his face warm. Ten minutes later, Rashid said the part was in stock and the repair should be finished by three. Hamza wrote the time and began to tear off the top sheet.

“Put my name on it too,” Razia said.

He added her name, the date and the red identifying mark. The writing on the duplicate was faint, so he pressed over it again.

“Tell me before I come,” she said as she left. “I have to leave my own shop.”

Rashid took the pad. “If we write all this for every item, when will we do the repairs?”

Instead of arguing, Hamza put three things on the counter: a fan, a small blender and an iron with a black handle. They were easy enough to distinguish. What wasn’t obvious was which customer had received an estimate, which repair was waiting for permission and which item could go home.

His father remembered. But each answer required him to put down his tools.

Hamza drew three spaces on a sheet. Rashid took the pen and changed Price to Estimate discussed?

“The price can change when we open it. We have to ask first.”

Hamza nodded. He hadn’t thought of that. His father moved the blender back.

“Leave this one. The owner said he’d call next week.”

The sheet needed another status.

At lunchtime, a boy arrived to collect a fan. He had no receipt and wasn’t sure of the owner’s full name. Hamza’s notes helped him find the likely item, but he stopped short of handing it over. His father checked with the customer first. Only then did the fan leave the shop.

“Where’s the bill?” the boy asked.

Hamza tore off the yellow sheet. Its duplicate stayed behind.

Razia's iron was ready at ten past three. Rashid finished testing it before Hamza contacted her. When she arrived, she checked the iron and then the receipt.

"Write down the identifying mark at the start next time."

"Yes," Hamza said, with a small, uncomfortable smile.

His father apologised. The mistake hadn't belonged entirely to a piece of paper, and a better piece of paper couldn't erase it.

At closing time, Rashid gathered the loose sheets from the counter. He didn't praise the new arrangement. He simply pointed at two appliances and said, "Write those down tomorrow as well. I keep having to remember them."

At home, Hamza asked when Maryam would be finished with the laptop. While he waited, he laid a blank yellow sheet on the table. In place of the real iron, he wrote a practice entry for a fan.

Chapter 3

The work behind the title

The paper cutter was running when Hamza entered Farah's print shop. He waited for it to stop before asking his question. On the way there, he had planned to ask what kind of work was worth learning these days. Now he looked at the wedding-card boxes along the wall, the school exercise books on the counter and the unfinished orders in front of Farah. He asked something else.

"What takes up too much of your time?"

"Your question, at the moment." She didn't look up. "Hold that paper. It's blowing away."

He caught the sheet. He had often collected printed bills for his father here, but he had never stayed more than ten minutes. Today he stood beside the machine. One customer pointed out a misspelled name on a card. Another phoned to change a quantity. Farah ended the call, crossed out the old number on an order slip and showed the correction to Adnan, who worked with her.

"If that reaches us before printing, it takes ten minutes," she said. "After printing, we do the whole job again. What is it you want to learn?"

Hamza gave the answer he had practised. "Keeping shop records on a computer."

"Financial records?"

"Those too. And orders."

"If the money's wrong, who finds out why? Have you learned bookkeeping?"

He admitted he hadn't. Farah put a blank slip in front of him.

"I need to know what's due on Thursday and whose approval is still missing. Start by understanding that."

She wasn't offering him a job. As she gathered the papers, she said plainly that even paying an experienced assistant was difficult this month. Hamza took out a small notebook and wrote two questions: Who enters the job? When do changes get entered?

On his way home, he met Imran, an old classmate who worked at a warehouse. Rather than showing him private records, Imran described what occupied most of his day: counting stock, finding differences and asking the right person about them.

“There’s more to it than using the computer,” he said. “Yesterday I counted twelve boxes again myself.”

That evening, Hamza told Maryam about both conversations. He rather hoped she would announce that he had found his direction.

“Did you like the work,” she asked, “or did it just look like something you might find close to home?”

“It could be both.”

“Then write both.” She wound up her charger. “And write down my laptop time. My presentation’s on Friday. You starting something can’t mean I stop preparing mine.”

Hamza wrote that he liked putting confused information in order. He was willing to spend time finding an error. Repeatedly entering the same kind of information bored him, though. Below that, he added Imran’s story about counting the twelve boxes. That was part of the work too.

He didn’t search for another course that night. He asked his father whether, for the next two weeks, he could try improving the paperwork for half an hour before closing.

His father glanced at the clock. “If there’s a customer, attend to them first. Otherwise, sit down and do it.”

Chapter 4

The deadline in the advertisement

The man in the advertisement changed screens so quickly that Hamza liked every image without quite understanding the work in any of them. A large sum appeared at the end, with a former student's name beneath it. The voice said the next intake was closing today.

Hamza opened the enrolment page. The fee was a little less than his savings. He tried to work out what would remain for travel and internet access, then abandoned the calculation. If he found work quickly, those expenses would take care of themselves. The thought was so comfortable that he wanted to keep thinking it.

A message from Bilal arrived the next morning. It contained a link to the same programme.

"Have you done it?" Hamza asked.

"No. Someone I know is promoting it. I'd get a referral payment if you joined. Check the details first."

Hamza appreciated him saying so. He watched the advertisement again, this time without the sound. The syllabus listed plenty of subjects. It didn't explain what a student would make or who would assess it. He sent a question. The first reply reminded him of the discount deadline. The next contained a testimonial video.

At lunchtime, Farah took his phone and read the small print beneath the earnings figure.

"Revenue or profit? For how many months?"

"It doesn't say."

"Then we don't know." She handed the phone back. "I'm not saying the course is bad. This just doesn't tell me enough to decide."

Hamza wrote again. What software would he need beyond the course fee? Who would review his practice work? Where could he ask a question? What were the written cancellation terms?

A reply that evening clarified some of it. Expensive software wasn't essential. Individual feedback on exercises, however, wasn't included. That belonged to a separate group. The refund conditions didn't suit the time he would need to assess whether the course worked for him.

He sat with the reply open. Without the excitement of the advertisement, he felt oddly disappointed, as though a party had closed its doors. Perhaps, he thought, he was finding faults in every opportunity so he could remain where he was.

That evening Imran sent him a link to a basic lesson.

"Try making one sheet first. Then you'll have a better idea of what you need to learn."

Hamza paused the video after the first lesson and entered five jobs for practice. The dates refused to appear in a consistent format. Half an hour later, he understood that he needed to learn this ordinary little task before several of the things in the advertisement would be of any use.

He closed the enrolment page. He was glad he still had his money, but he didn't send anyone a warning that the course was fraudulent. He didn't know enough to make that claim. In his notebook, he recorded the reason for his own decision: he needed beginner practice and feedback, and the offer didn't clearly provide both within his budget.

"What happened?" Bilal asked that night.

"I didn't enrol. I'm trying a small project."

"Show me when you're done. Perhaps you can sort out my expenses."

Hamza smiled. He wasn't ready to take responsibility for anyone else's accounts.

Part Two Learning through work

Chapter 5

Twenty practice records

On the first day, Hamza named his file Complete System. On the second, it had six separate sheets. On the third, he couldn't remember where he had entered a collection date.

Maryam looked at the screen. "Is this your two-week project?"

"Yes. A few more things have gone into it."

"By themselves?"

He didn't answer. Adding fields had become more enjoyable than correcting the errors already there. He closed the file and put a blank yellow receipt in front of him. Why had he needed it in the shop? To identify an item, record what had to happen, show what permission was still needed and say when it could be collected. Beside those questions, his file looked rather large.

On a fresh page, he set himself twenty repair records to practise with. Each would have its own number. No real customer names, phone numbers or addresses. He chose four possible statuses: awaiting inspection, awaiting approval, work in progress, ready for collection. At the end of two weeks, he would demonstrate how the list answered questions about the jobs.

His father looked at the fan entry in the practice list.

"How can this be in progress? The owner hasn't agreed to the price of the part."

Hamza changed the status. Then he stopped. Correcting this particular mistake wouldn't prevent it happening again. He added a short instruction: work must not be marked as started while approval was missing.

"Sometimes they approve it over the phone," his father said.

That needed a date and a brief note too.

By evening, there was another problem. He added a test case: an iron had been collected and then brought back with a complaint. Hamza had created a new job for it. The same iron now appeared twice, with two different statuses. He considered deleting the earlier entry. Instead, he recorded a return date and kept the original job number. He still needed someone to check whether his approach made sense.

The next day, he took three printed pages to Imran.

“What happens if someone repeats a job number?” Imran asked.

Hamza opened his mouth to answer, then looked down the page. One number appeared twice. He had made the mistake himself while building the exercise.

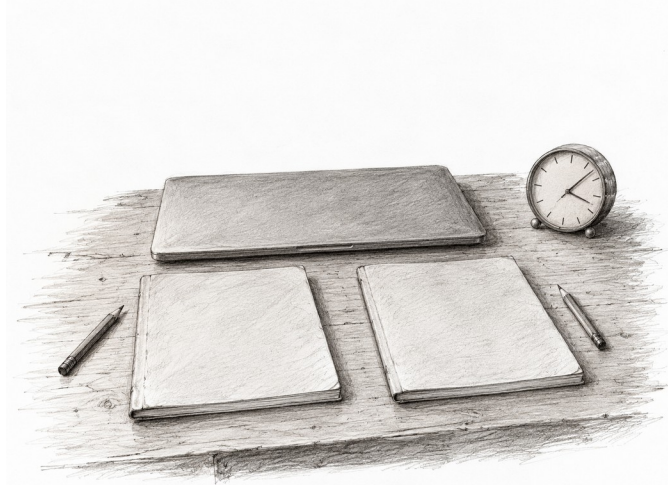
Imran laid the pen on the table. “Better here than later. Don’t just show me the best-looking page. Show me the bit you’re unsure about.”

On the way home, Hamza resisted the urge to rebuild everything. He wrote down three problems: duplicate numbers, returned items and blank dates. That day, he watched only as much of the lesson as he needed for the first problem.

Before bed, he renamed the file Twenty Practice Records. The name felt smaller. In the morning, though, he opened it and knew exactly what he had come to work on.

Chapter 6

The shared laptop



Maryam didn't close the laptop. Hamza stood in the doorway. It was half past eight; the paper on the wall gave him the machine from eight.

"Five minutes," she said.

They both laughed. It was the sentence he had been using for days.

The laughter didn't solve the problem. Her presentation was the next morning, and a teammate had just sent changes to the final section. Hamza pulled out his chair, then pushed it back.

"How much is left?"

"Forty minutes, if you don't ask every five."

He took the yellow pad to the kitchen table. He could check his practice receipts without a computer. Until then, he had treated this as a minor task outside the real learning. Two conflicting dates reminded him that the screen would only make bad information look tidy.

At nine, the power went out. The laptop battery was low. Maryam saved her presentation and put a copy on her phone. Hamza opened the window. A generator started somewhere nearby. He wanted to leave today's practice box empty and write No time.

His mother set a candle on the table.

“Did you collect the medicine?”

He had forgotten. He was supposed to pick it up on the way home from the shop. As he went out, he felt irritated with his practice, with Maryam and with the way every part of his life seemed to have a task waiting for him.

When he returned, his father was sitting on the veranda.

“You look tired.”

Hamza told him plainly that the time he had put on paper didn’t really exist between the shop and the things he had to do at home. His father asked how much time he needed each day.

“An hour,” Hamza said, then reconsidered. What he needed more than a daily promise was three dependable evenings each week. He could do checks on paper on the other days.

On Sunday, they revised the schedule together. Maryam kept the two evenings she needed. Hamza chose three. They left one evening open to rearrangement, provided they discussed it beforehand. His father agreed to handle the ordinary jobs that came in during the final half-hour at the shop, though busy periods would require another arrangement. Hamza added the medicine collection to his phone separately.

One evening still disappeared the following week. A repair took longer than expected. This time he didn’t stay up until two in the morning to recover every lost minute. At the next session, he resumed from the sentence he had left himself: Check the return date.

Maryam’s presentation was over by then. She stopped beside his chair.

“How many of your twenty things are left?”

“Still twenty. Fewer mistakes.”

She moved the yellow sheet where the fan wouldn’t blow it away. When his session ended, Hamza turned the laptop towards her. That night, he overran by only a minute, while he closed the file.

Chapter 7

Seven in the green cell

On the fourteenth evening, Hamza coloured the final cell green. It displayed the number of completed jobs. He leaned back, feeling for the first time that the sheet was ready to show someone.

The answer was seven.

He counted the paper records with his finger. Six.

He counted again, then looked at the screen as though it might have corrected itself. Seven remained in its green cell.

He had asked an AI tool to help him write the formula. He had provided the practice sheet's column headings and an explanation of what he wanted, without uploading a real receipt. The answer had come with an explanation that he had understood at the time, or thought he had. Now he needed to read it again.

He asked the tool what might be wrong. It suggested several possibilities. One was relevant, but trying a succession of new formulas still wouldn't enable him to explain why the result was right.

Maryam saw the long conversation on his screen.

"Are you telling it your answer or your question?"

"Both, perhaps."

She went away with her book. Hamza closed the chat window. He didn't simply need the number six to appear. He needed to understand where the seven had come from. Otherwise, the next number could be wrong too.

He made a separate testing copy with only three jobs. One was being repaired; two were ready. The result was two. He marked one of the completed jobs as returned. The result stayed at two. Looking back through the entries, he found the earlier completed version of the same job. The formula was counting that old row as well.

When he called Imran, his friend didn't immediately offer a replacement formula.

“Are you keeping one current row per job, or making a new row for every change? Decide that first.”

Hamza hadn’t asked himself. In some places he had added a row; in others he had changed the old one. Both methods had ended up in the same list. With only three jobs on the screen, the confusion was obvious.

The next evening, Imran explained the advantages and difficulties of different approaches. For this small exercise, they agreed that each job would have one current-status row. Returns and changes would have brief notes elsewhere. This was not a full accounting system, and it would not calculate payments. Hamza wrote that limitation into the file.

He tested the corrected sheet with examples he could work out himself. No completed jobs should give zero. One completed job should give one. If that item came back, the total should fall. A missing status should draw attention to an error rather than silently assume an answer.

Then he returned to the twenty practice records. Both the paper count and the screen gave six.

“It’s right now,” he told Imran.

“Say what you tested. Don’t say you tested everything.”

Hamza recorded the four checks, along with what he hadn’t tested: complicated financial records or several people working in the file at once. It made the project look less impressive to him. But now he knew which questions he could answer when he showed it to someone.

That night, his father asked whether he had finished.

“I found an error. I’ve corrected it. I’ll show you tomorrow.”

Rashid handed him a cup of tea.

“Good. Run it first. Like the iron.”

Chapter 8

The other side of the counter

Farah took the receipt Hamza had designed and put it on the customer's side of the counter.

"Adnan, write an order on this."

Hamza began to explain. "The number goes at the top, and here—"

Farah held up a hand. Adnan filled two spaces, then stopped.

"Which is the collection date? This one or that one?"

Hamza had made the arrival date prominent and the collection date small. After looking at it every day, he had stopped noticing the difference. Adnan wrote a price in the quantity field and crossed it out. Two labels were too close together.

"I was trying to make it look..." Hamza began, then stopped.

Farah handed the sheet back. There was nothing wrong with making it attractive, she said. But a person at the counter was writing in a hurry. They needed to find the important space first.

For a moment, Hamza felt the two weeks had been wasted. He considered leaving the laptop closed.

"Where's the list that shows what's outstanding?" Farah asked.

He opened it. This time, he began by explaining that it was an exercise with twenty repair records, not a record of results from a real business. AI had helped with the formula. Imran had helped him understand and test the error. He had organised the file and made the revisions himself.

Farah nodded. "Show me something waiting for approval."

He did.

"That could be useful here. But we'd need final approval for printing. That's different from a repair."

Hamza opened his notebook. He let Adnan fill in the receipt again and marked the places where he hesitated. Back at home, he worked on those problems. Instead of shrinking the type, he removed an unnecessary field. He made the date labels clearer and separated quantity from price. Then he removed the price field from his exercise altogether. For now, he was taking responsibility for the status of the work.

Once the sample was ready, he thought of including an actual receipt from his father's shop. It carried the business name and customer phone numbers. He was about to scan it when he stopped. Why did he need a customer's details to demonstrate his design?

He made a fresh version, replacing customer details with sample entries. He asked his father whether he could refer generally to what he had learned at the shop. The real receipts stayed there.

He wrote a short introduction to the sample. His first sentence described him as a business systems expert. Two minutes later, he removed the phrase. He had made a receipt and a small tracking sheet, tested them in several specific ways and revised them after two people tried using them. Saying that took less space.

Maryam read the final page.

"Have you said what you improved?"

He added the problems with the dates and quantity field. Then he opened the file as if he were seeing it for the first time. The name made sense. The first page explained the task. The next two showed the sample. The final note described his checks and the limits of the work.

Before sending it to Farah, he spent far too long writing the message. In the end, he said he had corrected the points she had raised and attached the new version.

He pressed send and put down the phone. No answer had arrived when he left for the shop.

Part Three Working with people

Chapter 9

Outside the photograph

The first reply came the next morning. It was short: his application had not been selected. Hamza read it three times. Each time he searched for a reason hidden between the words. There weren't many words to search.

The role involved recording incoming and outgoing stock, as well as some bookkeeping. In his application, he had said that he didn't have full bookkeeping experience. Now he wondered whether he should have left that out. Then he imagined getting the job and being asked to do it in his first week.

Before his next application, he read the duties again. This time, he looked beyond the title. Beside each task, he noted what he understood, what he could demonstrate and what would require training. He decided against some vacancies himself. That reduced the number of applications, but he knew what needed to change in each one he did send.

Another message promised immediate selection if he first paid a training registration charge. He tried to verify the vacancy through the organisation's own website and couldn't confirm it. He sent neither money nor identity documents. He kept the message and continued looking.

Bilal came for tea on Friday. When he placed his phone on the table, Hamza noticed the cracked glass on its back. He had seen a fresh office photograph from Bilal that morning. Seeing the photograph and the damaged phone in the same day made him feel awkward, as though he had looked at something private.

"Everything all right at work?" he asked.

"All right." Bilal turned his saucer. "My contract ends next month. They haven't said whether they're extending it."

"But from your pictures..." Hamza began, then stopped.

Bilal laughed. "Should I put the contract in the picture? I was sitting somewhere nice. I took a photograph."

They were quiet for a while. Bilal said that, two months earlier, hearing another friend's salary had made him consider leaving. Then he had looked at what his household needed and decided to find something else before resigning. He didn't say it like the conclusion of a speech. He was counting what remained for tea and asking why the samosas had become so expensive.

Hamza showed him the rejection. Bilal didn't pretend to know why it had happened.

"The person they hired at our place had worked in a similar warehouse. When you apply, put the relevant work in front of them. After that, it's their decision."

Before they left, Bilal asked Hamza to read one of his own applications. A sentence didn't make his responsibility clear. They rewrote it together. Hamza realised that, for once, their friendship involved him giving useful help as well as asking for it.

That night, he didn't block Bilal's photographs. He wanted to keep his friend. He did, however, spend less time scrolling before sleep and leave his next application for the morning.

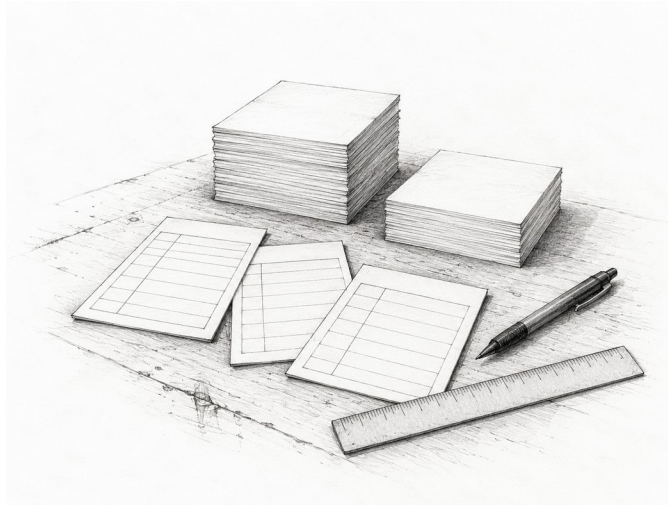
The habit of comparison hadn't disappeared. A picture of a cousin's new car still made his stomach sink. He put down the phone and corrected a spelling mistake in his sample's filename.

Farah replied the following afternoon. Could he come on Monday to discuss a small assignment?

He asked what time. He didn't tell anyone he had found a job.

Chapter 10

A five day assignment



On Monday morning, Farah put a blank sheet in front of Hamza, rather than a pile of old receipts.

“I want to see the status of up to thirty jobs coming in this week. One new order slip and one list. We’ll try it over five days.”

“Are the old accounts included?”

“No. The financial records stay where they are. You’re dealing with job numbers and statuses. Don’t take customer names or phone numbers home.”

They wrote down the arrangement. Hamza would prepare one order-slip layout and one simple tracking sheet. Adnan would use them. On Friday evening, they would check together whether the agreed work was complete. The fee was PKR 2,500, payable on completion. One round of revisions based on use was included. Extra work or substantial additions would need a separate agreement.

Hamza read it and kept his copy.

“I can’t answer questions every hour,” Farah said. “Choose a time at midday.”

The first two days went well. He examined real entries inside the shop and used a separate set of job numbers in his practice copy. Then he began making room for every

new idea that occurred to him. On the third evening, another shopkeeper heard what he was doing and asked for a similar sheet. Hamza promised it for Sunday without thinking.

That night, he added colours, an extra page and an automatic summary to Farah's file. If he gave her more than she expected, he thought, she would certainly give him another assignment.

After midnight, two fields for returned and cancelled work became confused. He had a saved earlier version, but instead of opening it, he kept trying to repair the new one.

Adnan called on Thursday.

"This isn't the layout you showed me. Where am I supposed to enter things?"

Hamza said he would explain in ten minutes. Forty-five minutes passed. Then Farah sent a message: they couldn't hold up the printing to wait. They were using the old slips.

He wanted to blame the internet. Instead, he called and admitted that he had made unnecessary changes. He was restoring the agreed version. Some corrections would be ready that day, but he needed more time to test the rest on Friday.

Farah didn't soften her voice.

"I have orders to deliver tomorrow. Come here and work through it with Adnan. The colours can wait."

He went that evening. They opened the saved earlier copy and set the extra summary aside. Adnan tried the slip with five current jobs. Two places needed correcting.

By the agreed time on Friday, the work still hadn't been fully checked. Farah agreed to a short additional session on Saturday morning, with payment after that review. The fee did not increase simply because Hamza had taken longer.

At home, he called the other shopkeeper. He wasn't ready to take on the new assignment by Sunday, he said, and couldn't promise another date yet.

The man said, "All right." There was no lecture. Hamza still remembered how easily he had said yes.

Before closing his file that night, he read the agreed scope again. One order slip. One tracking sheet. Those were the two things he had undertaken to deliver.

Chapter 11

Paper returns

On Saturday morning, Adnan entered the first job number, then answered the phone. By the time the call ended, another customer was at the counter. When the third order arrived, the computer still contained only one entry.

Hamza's first thought was that a system couldn't work if people didn't use it properly. He kept the thought to himself and watched for ten minutes. Adnan had to turn away from the counter to reach the computer. To hear a caller over the machine, he moved in the other direction. The problem wasn't contained neatly within Hamza's file.

"Could you write the slip now and enter it a little later?" he asked.

"I could. Unless someone's standing here asking about their bill."

Farah joined them. They chose two times of day to bring the list up to date. Urgent changes, such as a hold on approval or a revised delivery date, would be marked clearly on the paper slip and transferred at the next session. Before answering a customer, they would check the relevant slip. The list wouldn't always be current to the minute. Hamza made that limitation visible at the top.

This was some distance from the fully automatic system he had pictured. At first, he felt embarrassed that paper had come back into the arrangement. Then Adnan put the next job in the right place without asking. Farah checked the midday list and called about a missing approval. That was a question the shop actually needed answered.

They reviewed the agreed examples. Hamza saved the final versions on Farah's own computer with clear names. He showed her where the previous copy was and explained that access should be limited to the people who needed to use the file. He had no reason to retain real customer details himself. If he wanted to show a sample later, he could use the records he had made for practice.

Farah paid the agreed fee. Before putting the money away, Hamza wrote a receipt. It was his first payment for this kind of work. On the way home, he repeatedly wanted to check his pocket.

He thought of buying something for Maryam. Then he opened his notebook and counted the week's travel and printing costs, along with the hours he had spent.

There had been more hours than he expected. After expenses, less money remained than the figure in his pocket suggested. He was pleased to have completed paid work, but taking on many assignments at the same fee and effort wouldn't be sustainable. He left the notebook open. Before making another offer, he needed a better understanding of the task, the time and the help it would require.

"So, are you leaving the shop now?" his father asked that evening.

There was more concern than teasing in the question.

"Not yet. I've done one small assignment. I'm still looking at suitable jobs. I won't take more than one outside project a week until I understand the time better."

Rashid put the rent receipt into its folder.

"Just come when you say you'll come. I need to plan around that."

The next day, Hamza met the other shopkeeper and listened to what he needed. He didn't hurry to sell him a finished template. It turned out the man wanted old accounts corrected, rather than an order list.

Hamza didn't take the job. He explained that it needed someone with bookkeeping experience.

On the way back, he felt the loss of the opportunity. The feeling stayed with him until he reached his father's shop. A customer held out a receipt. Hamza checked the job number and called to his father.

Chapter 12

As far as the bus stop

Salman called while Hamza was sprinkling water on the ground outside the shop. He set down the bucket and lifted the phone.

“I’ve spoken to them. Send me your CV again. They need someone in the office.”

A few weeks earlier, Hamza would have told everyone at home before asking another question. This time, he asked about the duties, the location and the hours. Salman didn’t know all of it.

“Just meet them. You can ask there.”

“I will. Send me the name and the correct office address. I’ll arrange a time first.”

Hamza ended the call and picked up the bucket. He hadn’t decided to resent Salman, and he didn’t need to prove he could manage without help. An introduction might be useful. His days simply hadn’t remained empty until it arrived. He now had questions to take to the meeting.

That afternoon, he updated his folder. The initial practice project stayed clearly identified. With Farah’s permission, he added a brief description of the paid trial: he had designed an order slip and a status list for a limited assignment, then revised them in response to use.

He included no customer names, private financial figures or claims about business results. He couldn’t show how much sales had increased because of his work. Farah hadn’t made that claim either.

Bilal’s contract had been extended for a short period. He sent a message saying it wasn’t quite an occasion for a celebration, but it gave him some breathing room. Hamza congratulated him and asked about his other application. There was still no answer. Both of them still had things to wait for. Their conversations had simply grown wider than the photographs.

Maryam came into the room.

“Can we swap Thursday?”

Hamza didn't automatically agree. He checked the meeting time and offered Wednesday instead. They changed the schedule on the wall. Maryam told him she would be leading her team's next presentation. For once, he asked about the whole thing. His wasn't the only future being built in that house.

The night before the meeting, he became nervous again. Someone might ask a question he couldn't answer. He opened his samples and practised explaining two decisions. He got stuck on one part. Instead of memorising a sentence that sounded convincing, he wrote down what still needed practice.

Then he set aside the questions he wanted to ask the employer. Who would help him learn the work? How much bookkeeping did it involve? How would the travel time and cost fit with the arrangements at home?

In the morning, his mother saw him dressed and wished him ease and good fortune. His father put the shop key on the table.

"Tell me if you'll be late coming back."

Nobody gave him a speech about success. Maryam was looking for her shoes by the door. She had somewhere to be too.

Hamza picked up the blue folder. It held more than copies of his qualifications now: two short samples, explanations of the work and questions in his own handwriting. He didn't know whether he would get this job, or whether he would want to accept it. The household expenses remained. The shop's rent would come round again. Nobody had guaranteed next month's work.

At the corner, he met Razia carrying a bag of clothes.

"Will the shop open late today?" she asked.

"Dad's on his way. I'm going to meet someone."

"The receipt for the iron I brought in yesterday is with him. Ask him to check by tomorrow. I'll call myself."

Hamza took out his notebook and wrote it down. Then he put his phone away and walked towards the bus stop. This time, he was taking something with him besides the hope of an answer.

Take a moment to think about yourself

The story does not tell us what answer Hamza received after the meeting. But the way he works has changed. Now he listens to the whole explanation first, asks what work is expected of him and tries to learn what he does not know instead of hiding it. His difficulties have not disappeared. He still has responsibilities at home, and nothing about his employment is certain yet.

You may have an unfinished application in front of you, the first lesson in a new skill, or a task you need to find time for around your responsibilities at home. Think about that for a moment. Whose answer are you waiting for? What small task can you begin while you wait? Who could help you understand the work? And which responsibility at home or at work would need to move to a different time?

If you do not have an answer yet, write down your question. Everything does not have to change tomorrow. The next time you sit down to work, it is enough to know what you need to do, whom to ask if something is unclear, and how you will know the work is complete.

Before you choose a course or job

Before enrolling in a course or accepting a job, find out what you will receive, what work will be expected of you, and how much time and money it will take. A good advertisement also needs clear information.

1 What will you learn on the course

Before paying, read the syllabus. What will be taught? How much practice will there be? Who will review your work and explain your mistakes? Ask for the full cost, including any charges for examinations, certificates, equipment or required software. Get the refund conditions in writing in case you leave the course.

For example, suppose you want to take an Excel course advertised at PKR 10,000. Ask whether that includes only videos or whether you can make a spreadsheet yourself and show it to a teacher. Is there a separate certificate fee? Seeing a sample lesson or exercise can help you decide whether the course fits what you need.

2 What does the job actually involve

Do not agree on the strength of the job title alone. Ask about daily duties, hours, pay and payment dates. Verify the offer through the organisation's own website or a reliable contact you have found independently. Do not rely only on the number provided by the person who approached you.

For example, an advertisement says "office assistant", but the conversation reveals that the work is selling over the phone and earnings depend on each sale. Knowing this beforehand helps you decide whether the work fits your needs and skills. Ask for the duties and payment terms in writing.

3 What if someone asks for money to secure a job

Asking for money in exchange for a guaranteed job is an important warning sign of a scam. If you are pressured to send money immediately, pause and verify the offer.

For example, someone on WhatsApp says you have a work-from-home data-entry job and only need to send PKR 2,000 first. Do not send the money. Find the company's genuine contact details yourself and ask whether the vacancy and the person contacting

you are really connected to it. Do not provide identity documents or bank details before verification either.

4 How to assess praise and online reviews

Reviews are comments in which people describe their experience of a course, organisation or service. Do not decide solely on praise, five-star ratings or favourable comments displayed on the organisation's own page. Read recent reviews in different places. Look for whether the reviewer actually took the course, what they learned, and what helped them or caused difficulty.

For example, "A very good course" tells you little. "I learned to make a spreadsheet and the teacher helped me correct my mistakes" gives you something more specific. Even then, one comment is not enough. If several people report the same problem with refunds, absent teachers or a lack of practice, ask the provider to explain before enrolling.

Some reviews may be written in exchange for money or gifts. Rather than relying on reviews alone, check the syllabus, fees, practice opportunities and refund conditions yourself. Finding no complaints does not guarantee that an offer is trustworthy.

Ask about anything you do not understand. If an important condition about fees, work or payment is unclear, understand it before deciding. Keep the advertisement, relevant messages, written terms and receipts.

These precautions are also consistent with consumer guidance from the United States Federal Trade Commission, or FTC. Referring to that guidance does not mean this book or any offer has government approval. In Pakistan, check the local rules and current terms relevant to your situation.

Where to verify information in Pakistan

If you are enrolling for a degree, check the university and the exact campus where you will study in the Higher Education Commission's lists. Check the programme information too. Not every short skills course falls under HEC. For such a course, ask who will issue the certificate. If an advertisement claims NAVTTC or TEVTA approval, verify that particular course with the relevant body. A government logo or participation in an earlier programme is not enough.

If an agent is arranging overseas employment, check the agent's licence and current status in the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment's list. Verify the job, pay and conditions as well. The formal overseas-employment process may involve prescribed fees, so it is not correct to call every fee a scam. First establish what the payment is for, the officially prescribed amount, and who should receive it. Obtain a receipt. For a job within Pakistan, verify directly with the actual company.

The Competition Commission of Pakistan also warns about misleading endorsements and reviews that conceal payments, gifts or free services. When reading a review, consider whether the writer is describing their own experience or promoting an offer. Look at different people's views as well as the actual terms.

If online fraud occurs, keep the advertisement, messages and receipts. NCCIA provides an official route for cybercrime complaints. For an ordinary dispute over fees or a service, ask the consumer-protection body in your province about the procedure.

Sources and further reading

- 1 Federal Trade Commission Choosing a Vocational School or Certificate Program
<https://consumer.ftc.gov/articles/choosing-vocational-school-or-certificate-program>
- 2 Federal Trade Commission Job Scams
<https://consumer.ftc.gov/articles/job-scams>
- 3 Federal Trade Commission How To Evaluate Online Reviews
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- 4 Higher Education Commission Recognised Universities and Campuses
<https://www.hec.gov.pk/english/universities/Pages/Accreditation.aspx>
- 5 NAVTTC Partner Institutes
<https://navttc.gov.pk/partner-institutes/>
- 6 Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment Overseas Employment Promoters
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<https://cc.gov.pk/home/viewpressreleases/447>
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- 10 Further reading FTC When a Business Offer or Coaching Program Is a Scam
<https://consumer.ftc.gov/articles/when-business-offer-or-coaching-program-scam>