
Coffee Break Story Sampler

All Change for a Perfect World

It's a Stretch

Hong Kong Fuey – Superhero!

T'was the Day Before Christmas

All Change for a Perfect World

It's usually an oasis of calm, my home-office. Clean, minimalist, not a thing out of place. Not that I'm obsessive compulsive or anything – no! But I like things the way I like them and I have an organised mind and a systematic approach. OK, OK, so I can be a bit *fussy*. That's just how I am. Like it or lump it.

But this week, all is chaos. I'm trying to set up my new web site, and I can't *think* through the noise. That's to say nothing about the fine layer of plaster dust and wood shavings that seems to have blanketed the whole house. For the last couple of weeks (and it seems like a lifetime) I've had Bob the Builder and his young sidekick in (yes, he really is called Bob) (or so he says). And whilst I know they're doing a good job, and I believe it will all look magnificent in the end, right now, it's mayhem and noise almost beyond endurance. I know it wasn't their fault but they even managed to take out a water pipe with an errant nail, which caused a minor tsunami in the hall and led to me having to clamber over piles of sopping wet pulled-up carpet for 3 days. That set us back a bit, in goodwill terms, you could say. So my blood pressure is through the roof and my concentration is shot to ribbons and I'm playing my relaxation CDs and staying off the caffeine – and supping just the odd bottle or three of vin rouge come the evening, to keep me sane.

But I was telling you about my web site, wasn't I?

A couple of months ago I went on my holiday-of-a-lifetime, to China. I did the tour – Forbidden City, Great Wall, Terracotta Army – the lot. And I know you're not supposed to sneak off by yourself, but I managed to meet up with this guy I'd found on the internet. No, it wasn't *that* kind of meeting. It was business. He and his small-but-perfectly-formed hillside village assembly line manufacture the best, most amazing, customisable storage thingy for itty-bitty girlie stuff that I'd ever seen. I'd stumbled across it on the internet a few weeks earlier and I'd bought one for myself. I'd showed it to my friends, who all got far more excited about it than anybody has a right to get over, well, *a box*. But then you know what girls can be like, don't you? And whilst it's a box, it's a box with a whole bunch of whistles and bells. Anyhow, Mr Ho and I had exchanged a few emails and I'd discovered that he was interested in selling through distributors. I was looking for something to complement my current locally made lines and this nicely made, infinitely reorganisable piece of rather clever storage appealed to my sense of

order. I drafted a quick marketing plan and grabbed a spare hour to sit down with him in Beijing, and after that, it all came together pretty quickly.

So here I am a few weeks later, hardly able to see through the tension headache that has become an almost permanent fixture over the last few days, trying to sort out the finishing touches to the itty-bitty-box web site. Apart from fun and games with html, the marketing plan is working out, and there have been a couple of nice surprises. I'd invested a little in on-line advertising with a few web portals and one or two women's magazines had picked up the threads, so I've even got a couple of feature spots coming up in the next month or two – that'll be a big boost. I just need to have the web site up and running and that would be fine if it weren't for the fact that - I admit - I'm being just a bit *picky* about how it's put together and, yes, I know, *I know*, I have changed my mind once or twice about the look... and about the home page.... and the menu items... the text.... the pictures... and the graphics.... I know my web designer silently curses me. I blame the builders.

But it's nearly there, so next, in my perfect world, comes the job of handling all those hundreds (or maybe thousands?!) of orders that are bound to come bouncing in. Each order of course, will be slightly different from the last. That's the thing about customisable products – no two the same. It's what makes them great, and, from a distribution point of view, it's also what makes them a bit of a pain. But there's money in them there hills, so I'm exploring ways to make it happen, without these itty-bitty boxes taking over my otherwise calm and ordered life.

The sawing, banging, hammering and drilling continues, melding not very seamlessly with the dulcet tones of Heart FM – that's Bob the Builder's paint-stained transistor, deftly smothering my pan pipes and sounds of nature CDs. They didn't have a hope really. But you do understand why it's become so hard to make a decision and then stick to it, don't you? I am trying to keep my perfectionist streak under control, I really am.

I swallow another couple of Aspirin and check into Google. Warehousing, distribution, importing, customs... Lots of firms, but it seems, there's nobody doing everything I need. Until I get to one - Customs Clearance Ltd. Yes, indeed, it seems Customs Clearance Ltd does what it says on the tin – and I certainly need help with the customs clearance side of things. But they also have links with air freighters worldwide, and they have a warehouse, and they do break-bulk so they can ship my itty-bitty-boxes from China right to the door of each and every customer, and I don't have to be involved – I don't even have to see the itty-bitty-boxes, let alone set aside a room at home to store and pack them. Now that's amazing! *I need these guys!*

I was so thrilled to find them, that when Bob the Builder finally put his head around the door to say "we're off now", I nearly hugged him. *Nearly.*

Peace at last, and I gave the guys at CCL a call. They gave me the heads-up on how to go about my shipments and it all seemed pretty reasonable. They filled in some considerable gaps in my knowledge about VAT and duty, which made me think again about pricing, and I must say, I was glad to have that kind of information to hand before go-live. Now I just need to brave one more call to my web designer... and once again, it's one of those calls that begins with, "I've changed my mind about...."

It's a Stretch

Calm.... centred... balanced.... Lateral breathing, outwards from the chest... *In through the nose, out through the mouth.* Slowly roll down, shoulders loose, hands on the floor, head tucked under.... Feel the stretch.... Hold for a second, then slowly roll back up again. Let your breathing guide the length of the movement. Wind chimes in the distance, ambient vibes on the iPod – those neat white speakers were a good investment.

At just 8.30 am, it's my first class of the day, and the weather is being kind, so we're outside on the deck, me and my five 'sunrise' students. There's a soft breeze and the sun is warming the wood under our feet. It's going to be a hot day, but right now, it's just about perfect for some gentle stretching and strengthening.

It's all about the core, Pilates. (You thought it was yoga, right?) Building your core strength through slow, controlled, carefully executed movements. It does wonders for your posture, and if you're one of the millions who claim to have a 'bad back', it'd do wonders for you too. And I should know, since I was there, five years ago, creaking in the mornings, slumped in my chair bent over a PC for hours, aching by the evenings – still in my thirties and feeling... old. Pilates changed all that – and since I really got the bug and went from trainee to trainer, it's changed my life.

Even now, after five years, I can hardly believe I'm earning my living doing something I love so much. It wasn't easy, and it did take a bit of commitment, but the time, money and sheer hard work I threw at the training and those qualifications is really paying off now. My schedule is packed with classes and one-on-one's – I could maybe squeeze in another couple of sessions but that would be it. And much though I love my job I need my 'me' time just like anybody, so those spare evenings are going to stay spare.

So it's crunch-time. Do I stick-or-twist? Stick with the hourly sessions format with all its limitations, or take a risk and move up a gear? Good question – but I made my decision a few weeks ago, as it happens. I'm going for it, care of a business loan the size of a house and no small amount of support and encouragement from friends and family. I've signed a lease on a small studio down the road and soon, instead of hiring rooms by-the-hour, I'll be working in my own place. Actually, it's mine already, as of last Friday. Now all it needs is a quick coat of paint on the walls, a couple of big mirrors and a new wood floor, and that's all being taken care of over the weekend. We open on Monday – I can hardly wait.

All this means I can get some proper kit now too. Having my own studio means I can move on from a few roll-up mats and rubber bands in the back of the car and get some of the fun stuff, so I've been shopping too. I've a dozen stability balls, same number of Gym-sticks and a big box of small hand weights arriving tomorrow.

Then I went a bit nuts.

There are some amazing pieces of equipment – serious engineering – you can get for a Pilates studio. Reformers, wunda chairs, cadillacs – daft names for brilliant kit. And I've gone for it – my first cadillac and three reformers are on a boat from the States as we speak. You can get basic stuff here in the UK of course, but the Real McCoy? What you might call 'industrial strength' equipment – kit you can use for 15 hours a day, every day

- comes from the USA. And we're talking a few thousand pounds apiece, so thank-you Mr Bank Manager, Sir, and away we go...! I'm feeling a bit light-headed, as it's quite an investment, but I'm also really juiced. I'm confident (yeah?!) (it's a brave smile and brown paper bag to stop me hyperventilating) ... *confident*.... it'll pay for itself in a few months.

The crack-of-dawn class is over and the day begins in earnest. Just time to grab a quick cappuccino-to-go and check my voicemail before jumping in the car and heading across to the other health club for my next class. Yes, I'll be glad when I can stay in one place for the day.

Coffee served, check the phone, and there's a message - they start early at Tilbury but - yesss!! - my shipment has arrived, safe and sound and I need to call and make arrangements to pay the import taxes and clear customs.

Whaaaat??!..... He said the word 'pay'. Then he said the word 'taxes'.... The world just stopped turning. Never mind the kit, I paid enough for the shipping, thanks very much. Now what's all this about import taxes? I'm feeling a bit weak.

It turns out, there's no escape from taxes (is there ever?) and 'I didn't realise' is no excuse. I've got to pay, and it's not pennies either. Just when I've maxed-out my cards on all the fittings for the studio. If I can't pay, they hold my goods until I can, but guess what... yes... then there are nightmare warehousing fees as well. It's clear I need to move fast, but I have a full schedule ahead of me today and it would create way too much of a problem to cancel everything at such short notice.

The guy I spoke to at Tilbury was helpful, as far as he could be under the circumstances. He emailed me a list of customs brokers (quick salute to Blackberry, email on the move) who he said could probably help me and I gave Customs Clearance Ltd a call. They answered my call fast, and answered my questions even faster. I could download the forms from their web site and set up an account for my business that same day. They could sort everything out for me with customs and arrange to deliver my new equipment to the studio at a time to suit me. Is there a charge for their clearance and delivery service? Yes, of course there is! But it's fair and reasonable, and it gets my goods out of customs in record time, avoiding those warehousing fees. It saves me the embarrassment of begging a big loan off a friend and roaring off to Tilbury in a rental van - and it means I can get on with my day, and my week, without having to cancel any classes or sacrifice any fees.

And it means I can breathe-easy again...

Hong Kong Fuey – Superhero!

I had *man-flu* within a day of landing in Hong Kong - but I couldn't let it crush me. I think it was a combination of being stuck in the cheap-seats for 13 hours then forced to queue for a taxi in the drenching humidity of a Far Eastern summer afternoon. Still, they'd booked me into one of the most spectacular hotels on the island, down by the

Macau Ferry Terminal. Amazing – I was 30 floors up, overlooking the harbour, watching the Star Ferry crossing back and forth, and a thousand other boats going about their business. It was *brehtaking!*

I was only supposed to be in Hong Kong for 4 days – hardly enough time to get over the jet-lag. It was meetings, meetings, every morning, so I couldn't give in to crawling back under the duvet. I dosed up with everything I could lay my hands on and did my very best to make the most of the trip – shook a lot of hands, exchanged even more business cards, talked up the business.... and despite a raging temperature, secured a couple of very important signatures on a couple of very worthwhile contracts.

Then there was the whole 'corporate hospitality' side, the evenings awash with crowded restaurants, pounding night-clubs and far, far too much booze. Well, you've got to play the game, haven't you, especially when the ink has hardly dried on the contract and you need to get things off to a strong start. Plus, you don't want people thinking you're a wuss either.

But all that was as nothing, compared to the rising panic I felt at the one other task that lay ahead of me that week....

The way it worked out, I had just one afternoon and one evening free for by far the most *challenging* part of the trip. I'd hardly drawn breath from announcing that I was off to Hong Kong and the shopping list was opened. What 'her indoors' didn't want, wasn't worth having.... She wanted silk... raw silk palazzo pants (whaaat?!), work shirts, lingerie, and what she rather scarily called '*something special*' – heck, I was supposed to know what that was without even the faintest clue. Then she'd heard there were tailors who could make exact copies of existing clothing, so I'd arrived with two ladies' skirt-suits and an evening gown in my luggage – it's a good job I didn't have to explain that to any airport officials. Then she wanted jewellery (isn't it enough that she gets gold every Christmas? Obviously not.).... Opals the stone of choice, apparently, but diamonds would be nice as well. (*As well...?!*) Then my adolescent lump of a son got in on the act. Picking up a pen for the first time in months, he'd produced a list – a full page - of software, widgets, gadgets and other technological bits and bobs which he promised me I could pick up for a mere fraction of their UK cost. Between them, they were determined I wasn't to have a moment to myself – nor a moment's peace if I returned empty-handed.

So my afternoon off, I was a man-on-a-mission. I took the Star Ferry over the water, and trawled the streets of Kowloon, armed with my lists and my bag of women's clothing. Indeed, she was right – there were literally dozens of tailors' shops happy to produce replica garments in 2 or 3 days. This wasn't quite as hard as I thought it would be. The jewellery shops were rather fabulous too – not cheap (never cheap!), but I did manage to pick up something rather nice – let's see what she makes of it when I get it home... I was directed to a huge indoor computer market for my son's demands, and again, it was all pretty straightforward. Triumphant, I nailed it all in the one afternoon, and only needed to return briefly on my night off to collect the new outfits. It was all going to be alright after all, less the weary traveller, more the conqueror returning home with his spoils....

I was at the airport a bit early as I thought there might be some hassle over the luggage – and yes, I was indeed over-weight. But I didn't care – I had everything. I'd even

located that mysterious 'something special' that I was supposed to 'use my imagination' to seek out (and no, I'm not going to tell you what it is), so I figured on getting richly rewarded when I got home.

I must have been radiating success.... confidence... triumph.... at the check-in desk. Or maybe it was the aromatic cloud of vapour-rub and menthol that had been surrounding me for days. I don't care what - for the first time in my life, I got an upgrade!! *Yesss!* Life is good.

I settled smugly into my Business Class seat, and as the freshen-up cloths and champagne began to come round, I nodded politely to my neighbour. "You look happy," he observed, with a cheery smile. Yes indeed, I was happy. And as the bubbly took effect and my tired bones sank deeper into the armchair seat, I couldn't help recounting to him the triumphs of my week.

We chatted on, and I explained all about my business to him - the meetings, the contracts, and the work that I had ahead of me. He asked lots of questions - seemed really interested in the sort of shipments I was going to be dealing with - then he explained; He was from a company called Customs Clearance Limited, and his own business was all about making life easier for people who shipped goods around the world. He had particular experience handling shipments from the Far East and was very familiar with the customs clearance requirements into the UK and Europe. Where I'd been worrying about how to break down container-loads and dispatch them to my retailers across Europe, he had the answers. He didn't give me the hard-sell - in fact, in the end, it was *me* asking the questions, and *me* pressing my business card into *his* hand. But I sensed we'd made a mutually profitable connection in those final few hours of my trip, which made that homeward journey all the sweeter.

T'was the Day Before Christmas...

I'm glad I was the first one to the office that morning - the morning after the night before - know what I mean? I'm the boss (so they tell me), and hangover or no hangover, well, you just have to be at your desk on time, don't you? The morning after the staff party. *Even if it is Christmas Eve*. If only to quietly note who else makes it in on time, and more to the point, who *doesn't*....

Anyway, I pulled up outside at around 10 minutes before 9, and as I rounded the corner aiming for my usual parking space, I had to slam on the brakes. There, straddling no less than ten parking spaces, including my own, was the biggest, hugest, brightest, shiniest, fanciest looking *sleigh*, I'd ever seen. Well, to be honest, I haven't actually ever *seen* a sleigh before in real life - just the odd one on the telly, usually round about this time of year. But it was a pretty spectacular sight. I parked in next-door's spot, hoping they would understand, and climbed out of the car.

Anyhow, this sleigh - think of it a bit like a very large horse-and-carriage, but with runners instead of wheels. And.... well... *reindeer* instead of a horse. Actually, I counted them, and there were twelve in all, resplendent in fine polished tack, each one bearing

reins weighed down with line after line of little golden bells. The noise was quite extraordinary – jingling bells, snorting reindeer, their breath freezing in the cold morning air, their hooves clattering against the concrete - and the gentle hum of rush-hour traffic in the background.

Anyhow, this *sleigh*... those reindeer (I noticed the one at the front seemed to have a very rosy nose), were just quietly resting, and I looked around for the driver (is that what you call somebody who steers a sleigh?). I didn't see him at first as he was under the porch. But then he turned around and spotted me and with a big, booming "Ho!" he smiled broadly and waved in my direction.

My, he was a big fella, there's no doubt about it. And he wasn't exactly *quietly* dressed either. I imagine he makes a bit of an entrance wherever he goes. I know it was a bit nippy this morning, but even I could see he was just a little *overdressed*. A big red jacket, all flumped up around the collar and cuffs with the whitest fur, matching red trousers (all a bit showy in my opinion but my wife and her friends would probably call it 'over-coordinated'), tucked into the glossiest pair of wellington boots I'd seen for a very long time. A wide, shiny black belt was doing its best to keep a line of bright gold buttons from popping right open. For goodness sake, he even had a matching hat – a great floppy thing with a bobble! He was a massive, beardy giant of a man, with rosy cheeks and a huge smile, but he bounded towards me like a puppy and embraced me in a huge warm hug.

He was too fast for me - I had to go with it. There really wasn't time to stick out my arm for a professional *handy-shaky* moment. So there I was in the car park, being literally *embraced*, by this bubbly, laughing, larger-than-life chap in a red suit.

"Boy, am I glad to see you!" he boomed, when I finally managed to extract myself from his grip. "I've got myself into a bit of a pickle and I need some help."

I unlocked the front door and showed him in. I offered him a mug of coffee, which he gladly accepted, then sat him down. He seemed to fill the room, and he chuckled and grinned as he explained his predicament.

It seems he had an important shipment in progress and the deliveries all had to be made that night. He had packages for just about everywhere in the world, all piled up on the back of that sleigh in the car park. They were for children mostly, and that's why he didn't want to let them down. But he'd been speaking with HM Revenue and Customs and they'd been insisting on him completing a mass of forms before he could move these packages around the world. He didn't look like the form-filling kind to me, and indeed, it seems this task was proving to be something of a nightmare for him. He handed over a file bursting with crumpled sheets of paper. It was obvious he'd lost the plot a bit with the forms but the customs guys weren't going to let him get away with it, even though he was apparently doing all the deliveries himself.

He asked me, could I help. Well of course! It's what we do, here at Customs Clearance Ltd. No job too small – no job too big. Customs clearance for imports and customs clearance for exports too. I crossed my fingers though – because he kept on saying how really, very, vitally important it was that he could get all the paperwork processed today, so he could make his deliveries that night.

He was a really lovely guy – quite bubbling over with enthusiasm and good cheer. Even considering the urgent nature of his job, he wasn't fretting – in fact he kept chuckling quietly to himself and muttering something under his breath. When I asked him to repeat himself, he simply said, "That plane you got from me when you were six must have made quite an impression!"... I didn't understand what he was going on about, so I let it go.

Anyhow, with his warmth and joviality, he made me want to help him, and I quite forgot my hangover. And as the staff slowly drifted into the office (ok, I'm minded to be generous, do I really want to be making an issue about a few minutes lateness on a day like this?). In the end, everybody pitched in and we got all the forms on the system and processed. The big fella in the red outfit was thrilled to bits. He rustled up a tin of mince pies for the workers and dispensed rather too much mulled wine for my liking, but he made a lot of friends that day and put a smile on all our faces. And when he went on his way as it began to get dark, there was a definite twinkle in his eye.



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