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For the real Anthony Coleman.
A most magical man.

The events in this story happened some years ago, at a time when the internet was new, and people were still working out what it could do.

Some of those people were remarkably young . . .

'In my experience, all businesses start with one person and an idea . . .'
Anthony Coleman



Chapter One

The Idea

If you ask Felix – and a lot of people do – how it all began, he will probably tell you that it started the day he tried to buy a birthday card for his mother.

He had called in at the shop in the Crescent on his way home from school, but been shocked to find that the cheapest card on the racks was £2.15, and all he had in his pocket was £1.73. How anyone, thought Felix, could charge £2.15 for a bit of stiff paper and an envelope was a mystery, but it was while he was wondering what he should do, that he remembered Mo.

Mo made her own birthday cards. Usually, she drew

them individually, but a few days before she had scanned some of her designs onto the computer, so that she could print one off whenever she needed. If she could print one for him, Felix thought, he would not only have a birthday card for his mother, he would still have his £1.73.

Mo lived in the same road as Felix, three houses further down, so calling at her house was simple enough, but she had been off sick the last two days, and he had to ring the bell several times before she eventually answered the door, dressed in pyjamas, and with a duvet wrapped around her shoulders.

'I know you're not well, and I am *really* sorry to bother you' – Felix held up his hands in an apologetic gesture – 'but is there any way you could print off one of those cards you did? It's for Mum's birthday.'

Mo stared at him through red-rimmed eyes. 'What . . . now?'

'Well . . . fairly soon.' Felix made an apologetic face again. 'She'll be home in about an hour, you see.'

'It's her birthday today?'

'Yes,' said Felix. 'And I know I should have thought of this, like, yesterday or something, but Dad only reminded me this morning, and—'

He stopped, because Mo had turned on her heel and was walking back down the hall and into the living room.

Closing the front door behind him, Felix followed her.

The computer was at the far end – this was still a time when most families only had one computer, which everyone shared – and Mo picked up a pile of disks. Shuffling through them, she selected one and passed it to Felix.

'If I give you this, can you print it yourself?'

'No problem. That's great.' Felix took the disk.

'Look . . . is there anything you need? You know . . . anything I can get for you?'

'Short of a magic potion, I'm afraid not.' Mo was already heading back out to the hall. 'But thanks for asking. If you don't mind, I'm going back to bed now. Just print whatever you want.'

His mother liked the card every bit as much as Felix had hoped.

The one he had printed from the five that Mo had given him was a pen-and-ink drawing of a class of school children playing in the woods. They were busily starting fires, falling out of trees and throwing home-made spears at each other, while their teacher, an elderly man in a suit, lay sleeping on the ground. Underneath were the words: *Halfway through a Nature Walk, Mr Wilkins always insisted that 5FW lie down and have a rest . . .*

‘I remember Mr Wilkins!’ said Felix’s mother, chuckling as she studied the card. ‘He took you on his Nature Walks every Friday, didn’t he?’

Mr Wilkins had been their Year Five teacher at Junior school and had indeed, weather permitting, taken them out into the woods every Friday afternoon. And he had always insisted they take a rest halfway through, though everyone knew that the only person who actually needed it was Mr Wilkins himself. On one famous occasion he had fallen asleep so deeply that he had had to be woken up and told that it was past going-home time.

‘He was quite a character, wasn’t he?’ said Felix’s father, when his wife passed him the card. ‘Whatever happened to him?’

‘Miss Tindall persuaded him to retire,’ said William, Felix’s older brother. ‘He does birdwatching tours with old age pensioners now. He makes them have a rest as well.’

He passed the card to his grandmother, who studied it admiringly.

‘It’s beautifully drawn, isn’t it!’ she said, and then peered at the back. ‘Where did you get it?’

Felix explained that it had been drawn by a friend, and then printed off on the family’s computer.

‘Would your friend mind if you printed some for me?’

asked his grandmother. 'Only when I try and buy a card in the shops these days, they're all either too rude or everyone's already seen them.'

Felix remembered that Mo had told him to print whatever he wanted.

'Yes, of course,' he said, and went back to the dining room where he printed off one each of the five designs, folded them, found some envelopes, and brought them back to his grandmother.

She was delighted and, reaching into her purse, took out a five-pound note. Felix assured her it wasn't necessary, but she insisted he take it.

'They'd cost me twice as much in a shop,' she said, 'and they wouldn't be half as good. You take the money.'

So he did.

After the weekend, Felix's grandmother rang to say she had been having tea with two of her friends on Sunday, and had shown them the cards Felix had printed for her.

'They were so impressed,' she said, 'that they'd like some for themselves. Could you do ten each for both of them? And I'll have another five myself if that's all right.'

She called in half an hour later to pick up the cards, and gave Felix twenty-five pounds. Again, he tried to tell

her that the money wasn't necessary, but his grandmother pushed the notes into his hands.

'When you get to my age,' she said, 'you're sending out cards all the time. And it's wonderful to have some that you know nobody else has seen. As far as I'm concerned we're getting a bargain.'

So, again, Felix took the money.

Two days after that, as he was leaving school, Felix was stopped outside the main gates by the mother of one of the boys in his class.

'Is it you that's been selling these?' she asked, holding up one of Mo's cards.

Felix had no idea where she had got the card from, or how she knew he was the one who had printed it, but he admitted that, yes, he probably was.

'You do them in packets of ten, don't you?' said the woman, reaching into her purse and taking out a ten-pound note. 'Could I have them tomorrow?'

Felix did not hesitate. 'Sure,' he said. 'No problem.'

And he took the ten pounds.

Which is why, if you ask Felix how the idea of setting up in the card business first came to him, he will tell you the idea never really *came* to him at all. It more sort of jumped up and grabbed him by the throat.

After all, when people kept coming up to you and *giving* you money . . .

It was a no-brainer, really.