

admit it.

I moved to Florida because I'm a wimp.

There. Ya happy?

I couldn't stand the long winters up north any more.

Sure, the first snowstorm of the season was magical. It was great to get into snowball fights. That first sled run of the winter was a rush. Nothing made the holidays more magical than a blanket of pure white snow.

And then January rolled around. And there were= three more months of winter to go. And all of that magical snow became slush. Or worse—ice. And it only served to make my commute longer and more dangerous. Oh, and the long, dark nights. And spending the late fall, winter and early spring inside the house, shielded from the bitter cold.

Yeah, give me eternal summer any day of the week.

Why, you might be asking, is Tom talking about Arctic chill in the middle of summer?

I'm glad you asked.

First, I just thought you would like a break from the typical summer forecast of "Hazy, Hot and Humid."

The real reason, however, is this: Have you also noticed that the media is no longer calling Apple the troubled computer company?

I mean, let's take a look at that stock price. What are we talking about here? A two-year high? And, just think, the jump in stock value has nothing to do with a takeover by Oracle, Sun, Microsoft, Disney, or any of the other probable suitors mentioned over the past two years. Couple this with three consecutive profitable quarters. Wow. Could it be that Apple is not as sick as everyone in the media was telling us?

And, the Apple on-line store is breaking records for orders placed. And, believe it or not, Apple has been able to deliver its hardware on time and in quantity—a nasty habit they

picked up from clone manufacturers such as UMAX, Motorola, and Power Computing. Who knows, maybe dabbling with licensing cloners was one of the best things Apple could have done. I'm even impressed that Apple is holding firm to the August delivery date for the iMac. I'm pretty sure with this long build up of publicity, Apple has to be amassing quite a stockpile of these units while tweaking the design to ensure that it releases a winner.

And how about this vision thing? G4 chips on the horizon? A coherent plan to develop a next generation operating system that doesn't completely turn its back on legacy applications? You mean to tell me Apple has a plan for the future that doesn't involve a deus ex machina? This doesn't sound like the Apple of old, when I was sure that Bud Abbot and Lou Costello were running the show in Cupertino.

Even Microsoft, which was holding Apple in a death grip just a mere year ago, has reported that the bombshell partnership struck at last year's Macworld Expo has been profitable. Wow. Internet Explorer and Microsoft Office have been retooled to be more Mac friendly. And—best of all for Bill Gates and his crew—Mac enthusiasts are buying these products. I guess this proves the old adage that you can indeed catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar.

But why bring up winter? How many of you had to read the classic sort story *To Build a Fire* by Jack London? If you haven't, or it's been a long time since your teacher made you read it, here's the synopsis.

This—let's not pull punches here—fool decides that he wants to travel from one town in the Yukon Territory to another in the dead of winter. Why? Who knows? Maybe one of his buddies wants to hold a Doom tournament.

Anyway, he heads out with his trusty dog, a sandwich or two, and a brilliant idea of how to get to the next town—follow a frozen stream. Sheer genius.

Now, the temperature up in this neck of the woods at that time of the year is about 50 below. It's so cold, his breath is forming icicles on his beard. One of the old timers from his little village tells this idiot not to travel alone when it gets this cold. His advice is to use the buddy system and bring someone else along, lest bad things befall him on his journey.

But does our traveller heed this sound advice?

No.

So, we find our traveller merrily skipping through the woods, when he hears the crack of the ice giving way and finds himself knee deep in frigid water. That's a bummer, because at that temperature, you're going to become a popsicle in a real hurry if you get wet. He manages to get himself to the shore, and—amid panicked thoughts of a frozen death—start a fire to dry his stuff out and become warm again so he can continue his journey.

Apple's recent successes seem like that traveller's small flame—a glimmer of hope that grows with each passing minute. While profits in the tens of millions are definitely an improvement over losses in the hundreds of millions, Apple still has a way to go before it gets on completely solid ground in the eyes of the media.

Apple has made great strides in producing for its customers. The G3 chip rocks. OS 8.1 is a far better incarnation of operating software than any flavor of OS 7. The company is finally forking over money to create and run catchy ads which inspire people to go out and buy

Macintosh. Reducing the product base has certainly helped the consumer pick the right computer for his or her needs.

I believe that Apple is probably one round of successful upgrades away from having the threat of a media death watch removed for a long time to come. The first test for this will be the release of the iMac. We'll see this month if Apple can accurately predict sales of this new, trendy computer. If successful, and the G4 and OS X build up and introductions go smoothly, and— this is a big one—Apple can capitalize on this success with a sustained, creative advertising campaign, all of the stories about the “Beleaguered Apple” will be a painful memory we can tell our grandchildren.

But a lot of the optimism isn't based on what's currently out there. Instead, Apple's hopes are pinned on what is to come. And that could prove to be a risky proposition.

After all, what if the G4 chips prove to have a bug? What if the iMac doesn't sell as expected? What if Apple changes its OS plan yet again? The future could be fraught with peril. If any of these scenarios were to come true, the media will be sounding the death knell for Apple yet again. And the stock prices would fall again. And software developers would once again become skittish about producing titles for the Mac. Even something such as a change of the status for interim CEO Steve Jobs within the Apple hierarchy could have a dramatic effect on Apple's future.

I'm sure those of you who read the story *To Build a Fire* know what happens next. The traveller built his fire too close to a snow-loaded spruce tree. When the warm air rose from the fire, it knocked loose a large clump of snow which extinguished his source of heat. Oops. Just one little clump of snow stood between him being warm, dry, and ready to travel and a very cold fate.

The traveller spends the rest of the story—which isn't too much longer— frantically analyzing his dwindling options to save his hide. If only things had gone the way he wanted them to. But it was too late.

I just hope that Jobs and company had the sense to build this fire out away from the trees.

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