

## IPO Fever

Just because this was the big day, it didn't mean there wasn't work to be done. Linda Harmon picked up her note pad and walked to Rex Scatena's office, hesitating at the open door. The vice chairman finished his phone conversation and waved her in.

"Hi, Linda," he said, smiling. "Three more firms want to partner with us." As he rummaged through the papers on his desk, he grabbed his mouse and clicked the refresh button, as he'd done a dozen times this morning. Rex glanced at his screen. Linda's eyes followed.

This time, his Yahoo! Personal Finance page came alive. This was it—the very first public trade of Value America's stock. Linda had no idea what to expect as she squinted against the morning glare. Then, there it was. "Four and a half million." she said, genuinely pleased for her favorite boss. She smiled at Rex and then looked back at the monitor. "No, wait a minute. That's not right." Linda peered at the screen. "It's forty-five million!" she screamed. "Rex, you're worth forty-five million dollars!"

Rex, just north of fifty, was having a little trouble focusing on the screen without his glasses, which he'd misplaced again. But that still didn't look like it said \$45 million. He squinted, and then remembered that they were pushed back into his hair. Linda leaned in for a closer look. There were an awful lot of zeros there. As they started counting them, the truth hit them both at the same instant.

Rex Scatena's shares were worth four hundred and fifty million dollars.

He sat back in his chair, his eyes glazed over, partially from utter fatigue and partially from the seductive mathematics of the morning. Rex was no stranger to money; in his former life he had been a prosperous environmental lawyer. But now, it appeared, he had attained wealth beyond the dreams of avarice. Rex was finding it surprisingly hard to comprehend.

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IT HAD ALL started three years before when Craig's improbable dream had been born in my little design studio on the other side of the country. As of 10:47 this morning, that dream was worth over three billion dollars. If I hadn't lived through it, I wouldn't believe it myself.

Today Value America had become a public company, the latest tech sensation making national headlines and creating instant millionaires. We had become the world's second largest online store by using a revolutionary blend of practical solutions and inspiring ideals. It had been Craig's brainchild, innovative from top to bottom.

His office was right down the hall from mine, and I wanted to thank him. But I caught myself smiling at the thought. Thank him for what? For doing exactly what he'd said he'd do? No, that wasn't it. It was more for giving me the most exciting three years of my life. I had given up my own California design company to join Craig Winn. Ken Power, CEO, had become Ken Power, Creative Director and Vice President of Marketing. I now created the ads that presented Value America to the world. Craig and I, along with Rex, Joe Page, and Bill Hunt, were its founding fathers.

As I stood up, I was confronted by a familiar face. Doug Schatz leaned on my doorframe, grinning. He had come to congratulate me. "So, Ken, how does it feel to be a

bazillionaire?” He naturally assumed I had a boatload of stock options. They came with the territory.

I didn't answer right away, but took a long breath and gazed out the window. Somebody was mowing the lawn across the street. It looked like any other bright Virginia spring morning. But today was different.

“Feels great,” I said at last. “Strange, but great.” I wasn't making much sense. “I mean, yesterday I was just a working stiff with a wife, kids, and a mortgage, doing okay but not gettin' rich. Today, I'm that same working stiff, but with stock worth millions. You've got shares, too, Doug. We can't sell 'em yet. So you tell me: are we rich, or not?”

Doug wasn't about to get sucked into a philosophical discussion. “Well, Ken, nobody deserves it more than you.” I could never tell when he was being serious, because he always sounded earnest, always had a sincere mien, even if he were telling me that NASA had announced that the moon was made of mozzarella. “I mean that, Ken. I really do.”

I was sure he did. Doug and I had been working together for what seemed like an eternity—about a year, which was tantamount to a decade in Internet time. Kind of like dog years, but you grow old even faster.

I was about to do the obligatory “You deserve this as much as anyone” speech (which in Doug's case was perfectly true) when Nikkii, my advertising traffic manager, popped her head in the door. “Have you seen it, KP?” she asked, as if I were the only one who had an interest in the price of Value America's stock. Nikkii was always looking out for me. “It's sixty-nine!” she gushed. “Congratulations!”

Congratulations, indeed! When I had joined Craig on this improbable journey, he had predicted that if all went according to plan, someday my shares would be worth as much as five million dollars. At \$69, they were already worth three times that much. The stock was supposed to have opened at \$23, but the start of trading had been delayed because there were no sellers, only buyers. Now that public trading had actually started, there was a feeding frenzy going on out there. It was dot-com fever, and we were the flavor of the week.

It was a glorious moment in time—a giant economic bubble, a euphoric aberration, and we were among the fortunate few in a position to capitalize. Dot-com was everywhere you looked, the lead story on the nightly news, on the front page of every newspaper, on the cover of magazines, the topic of discussion around every water cooler. The nation, the whole western world, was consumed by dot-com fever. The laws of economics had been suspended. What went up no longer had to come down. And we were where the whole world wanted to be.

One of my ad writers ambled by. “Seventy-one,” was all he said, and poured himself a cup of coffee. I grinned and grabbed a mug. Might as well join him. Nobody was getting much work done this morning.

You couldn't blame us for pausing to do a little mutual backslapping. We were all in on it, all three hundred or so of us. We all owned stock, right down to the guy who shuttled our interoffice mail between eight buildings scattered all over Charlottesville. Some of us had a lot of shares and some comparatively few, but every single employee had a piece of Value America. Maybe that was why there was always electricity in the air. An indefatigable optimism seemed to permeate the place. Or maybe we were just

excited about what we were doing; for once in our lives, we were doing something that actually seemed worth doing, something special, maybe even revolutionary.

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Value America had grown too fast for Charlottesville. In a mere three years we had grown from five people to the fifth largest employer in this quaint little university town, this cultural oasis in the middle of rural Virginia. At least half of us had moved here from somewhere else to be part of the excitement. For those of us who had actually read Craig's business plan, this wasn't just a job; it was something more, something deeper. We were believers. We sensed we were making a difference, making the world a better place.

The city itself was part of the draw. Charlottesville was invariably rated among America's top places to live. Though the town was small, it was big where it counted: in history, charm, and culture. But unlike Georgetown or Annapolis, C'Ville was immersed in the lush, green foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, not surrounded by big-city clutter. Seemingly endless hardwood forests stretched out into the hills to the west. Pristine farmland punctuated by thick stands of evergreens reached out toward Richmond on the east. A hundred miles north was the world's most powerful city, Washington, D.C.

Charlottesville is Jefferson country, and the third President's presence is still revered here. Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's magnificent home, sits on a hill just south of town. The University of Virginia, Jefferson's beloved "academical village," dominates the western third of the city. The place is steeped in history. Jefferson's two friends, Madison and Monroe, lived here, too. Meriwether Lewis called C'Ville home before joining Clark on their epic journey of discovery. The town was so old, it had been named in honor of an English queen, Charlotte, the wife of King George III.

None of this was lost on Craig. He saw Charlottesville's small-town values, its genteel southern charm, as a cocoon for our embryonic company, sheltering us from the distractions of big-city life as we endeavored to become the dazzling butterfly he had envisioned.

Ready-made office space for a company of three hundred people growing at the rate of ten souls a week was not to be found in this part of the world. So Value America was situated in a motley collection of buildings scattered all over town.

Our call center was getting ready to move downtown. Fifty employees strong, it was humming today, thanks to Candy Clifford, the queen of sales. A tall, heavy-set woman with jet-black hair and piercing eyes, she had a souvenir from another life hanging on her office wall that said it all. It was a vanity license plate that read "CLOZER." She lived to sell.

Just for a moment, Candy leaned back in her office chair, laced her fingers behind her head, and closed her eyes. A few months, that's all it had been since her move to Value America. She had been recruited by her old friend at IBM, Glenda Dorchak, who was now—can you believe it—president of the company; a far cry from her middle management roles at Big Blue. How had she managed to pull that off? Candy wondered.

Glenda had descended upon the place like a tornado. Yet on IPO day, the thin blond, along with most of the IBMers she had recruited, was keeping a low profile. "Team Blue" usually hung together, separate from the rest of us, but today it was more obvious

than usual. Perhaps it was because none of them had been included in the IPO process. They may have felt under-appreciated. Or perhaps they were just biding their time. After all, the IPO marked our transition from entrepreneurs to “professionals.”

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ISSAC SALTZBERG was holding a supervisor’s meeting in his cubicle on the third floor of the Yellow House. The tall, slender thirty-something was nothing if not production oriented. As his eyes wandered across his desk, he did a double take at the stock market ticker he, like Rex, had displayed on his monitor. “I don’t believe it,” he said, grinning.

“Sure you do,” one of his writers said. “You’ve been preaching that our stock would go through the roof. Looks like you were right.” He paused for effect. “There’s a first time for everything.”

Saltz was too elated to be annoyed by the good-natured poke. It was IPO day, and he’d been vindicated.

The Yellow House had been our only office for a few magical months back in early ’98. Now it was home to but one of Value America’s many departments, something called Presentation Marketing, a group that created the online demonstrations for the products we sold in our store. Nobody else had anything like them. They were the fulfillment of one of our most fundamental promises: enabling consumers to make better buying decisions.

Saltz had an infectious enthusiasm that ultimately played a large part in his choice as the leader of the forty-five person team when I left to write ads. He had, as the phrase went, “drunk the koolaid,” our corporate metaphor for fanatical devotion to Value America and its mission. He didn’t own a car, a TV, or even a real bed. He had sold them all to invest in the company back when the stock had been worth a small fraction of its present mind-numbing value. He had put his money—about \$40,000 of it—where his mouth was. Today, his \$40,000 was worth a cool four mil.

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DOUG PURVIS had been at the FedEx building since 6:20 this morning, and right now he had no idea what time it was. Scattered on a table to his left were twelve pairs of diamond, sapphire, and opal earrings. On the table in front of him, a gorgeous heavy gold necklace rested on top of a piece of weathered wood from an old barn door, complete with rusty hinge.

The “FedEx” Building, of course, no longer housed the local office of the express delivery company. This modest industrial structure north of town was now home to our small but world-class photo studio and our equally small, equally impressive, sound studio. We were serious about the quality of our product presentations, and we’d found that to do things right, we had to do them ourselves.

Doug picked up the phone to hear Saltzberg’s voice. “Jennifer is all over my case. She needs to get her new earring presentation online. Now.”

“What earrings?” Doug asked innocently. He could hear Saltzberg’s hair falling out.

“She hasn’t gotten them over there yet? I’m gonna strangle her!”

Doug put him out of his misery. “Oh, put a sock in it, Isaac. The shots are done, although they shouldn’t be. I just got the stuff yesterday.”

Sometimes the only thing that held Doug together was his twisted sense of humor.

“You da man,” gushed a relieved Saltz. “Are you watching the stock?”

“No, actually, I’ve been a little busy here. How we doin’?”

“We’re in the seventies.”

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India Hamner couldn’t stop smiling. The excitement of the morning had bubbled over into hugs and handshakes, and she was right in the middle of it. India, our help-desk manager, embodied the ebullient spirit of Value America. She believed in the dream and came to work each day eager to serve.

On IPO day, there were seventy people in Operations and Customer Care. The prevailing mood in this sea of systems furniture wasn’t, “Congratulate me, I’m a millionaire,” although there were a few whose arithmetic worked out that way. Most were younger, more recently hired, with fewer options. What they felt, rather, was a sense of community pride, a sort of corporate patriotism.

“We did it,” they smiled. “We went public.” And when they said “we,” they meant “all of us,” including the nineteen-year-old girl right out of Albemarle High who checked with our vendors to make sure there were enough televisions or toasters to meet the demand. They meant “all of us,” including the twenty-two-year-old college dropout who took care of customers on the phone, answering their questions with a smile.

They were right. Our firm wasn’t all entrepreneurial fireworks and creative genius. It wasn’t all brilliant merchandising coups and techno-wizards doing their thing. A very real reason for the success we were enjoying was the unceasing labor of a lot of regular people just doing their jobs.

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JENNIFER WAS ON the phone with Isaac. Again. She realized that, as our jewelry merchant, she was at a disadvantage because our customers saw her products through the low-resolution world of their computer screens. She even insisted on having her own dedicated graphics specialist, one on whom she could rely to get the most out of any photo.

I was pleased to learn that my daughter Chelsea, whom I had trained as a teenager, had been selected for this dubious honor. Chelsea needed a little aggravation in her life; it builds character. Nepotism, in the sense of hiring your idiot nephew as EVP was, of course, verboten, but family relationships abounded here. We had husbands and wives, parents and children, and several sets of siblings working at the company, usually in different departments. I think I held the record, with five of my kids or their spouses here at one time or another. For a while there, it looked as though I might even gain a son-in-law in the bargain.

“You’ve been here for years, Isaac,” Jennifer said. “You’re vested. You could sell your stock tomorrow!” It wasn’t a complaint, just an observation. “It’ll be a long time before this has any effect on my life.”

She was right, of course, and had spoken for almost everyone. At the rate the company was growing, it was a given that most members of our team were rookies. Half had been here less than six months. A year ago, we had numbered less than fifty; two years ago, fewer than fifteen. Only we old-timers would be in a position to turn our options into cash anytime soon.

Saltz hadn’t even considered selling his stock. For one thing, it would show a total lack of loyalty to bail out now. Bad form. And besides, who said it would stop here? This rocket was just taking off. Sell now? No way! On the other hand, he needed a car in the worst way.

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DOWN THE HALL from Jen’s office, Bill Hunt’s door was closed, his office dark. Bill was miles away, playing golf. It wasn’t that he didn’t care about the IPO. He had committed to be at this member-guest golf tournament at Hilton Head six months before. But as much as he loved the game, that wasn’t where he wanted to be today. There were fires to put out, ruffled feathers to smooth, and congratulations to accept. And then there were all those black flies.

Bill was a VP, the firm’s senior merchandiser. He had been employee number five, which was not surprising considering he and Craig had known each other for over twenty years. Graduating from the University of Virginia before heading off to executive positions with a string of respected manufacturing companies, Hunt had lived all over America, but his heart had never really left Charlottesville. Now in his fifties, he was part hillbilly, part MBA, tall, thin, bald, and thoroughly good natured.

Bill brushed away a swarm of flies as he approached the eighth hole. He glanced at his watch again. A little after eleven. Once again he grabbed his cell phone and hit redial. Every few shots he had checked in—9:00, 9:30, 10:00, and 10:30—but there had been no news. At last came the report he had been expecting: Value America was being traded—as well as the news he had not been expecting: it was trading in the seventies, not the twenties.

Today, all Bill’s diplomatic skills would be put to the test. The day had brought some good news and some bad news—and it was all the same news. His contacts, vendors who were also close personal friends, had wanted in on the IPO. They were believers too. They had taken a chance when we were an upstart nobody in a new and unproven retail channel. And now, reasonably enough, they had wanted the opportunity to buy VUSA stock at bargain basement first-day prices.

A large block of shares had been set aside for “Friends of the Company,” those who had supported us tangibly early on. But it had been clear for some time that there was not going to be enough to go around. Demand had outstripped supply twenty times over.

Bill didn’t control the distribution of these shares. The investment bankers did, and they’d held their cards very close to the vest. Now, however, everyone on the list had been contacted. Everyone knew how much, or how little, stock they were going to be able to buy at the IPO price of just \$23 a share. Craig had successfully fought for many more

“Friends of the Company” shares than the underwriters had wanted to make available, but with demand so grossly exceeding supply, no one had been allotted as many as they felt they deserved.

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Our headquarters was in a modest office complex called Hollymead, just north of town. Although the interiors had been built especially for us, the space was gloriously cheap. Nobody had wasted any time naming the structures, either. They were simply labeled alphabetically counterclockwise A, B, and C going north, then D, E, and F heading back south. Someone had duct-taped their letters on the walls.

Building B housed our merchandisers: office supplies and equipment, books, home improvement, housewares, consumer electronics, sporting goods, toys, jewelry, health and beauty, computers, software, and specialty foods. It was all here, although some of the current occupants of B, our consumer merchandisers, were headed to Building D just as soon as Sales, which was overcrowding D, could move downtown, leaving all of B for the computer merchants. It was corporate musical chairs.

Building A housed the company’s executives. Building F was home to Operations and Customer Care. But that wouldn’t last either. Soon they would move into larger quarters near the photo studio, making room for more technologists. Interoffice mail was getting to be a problem.

But on IPO day, Building E was where the magic happened. Technology—the one thing absolutely essential to an Internet store. If it didn’t work, we were out of business.

It was no accident that Value America’s first employee had been a technologist. Joe Page, our Webmaster, referred to himself as the Head Geek, never mind his official corporate designations, EVP and CTO. His genius as a programmer was readily apparent; his depth of character and engaging humility became obvious only after you had gotten to know him. Joe’s Jeep bore a license plate that read “WEB GEEK.” Page wore the term “geek” as a badge of honor, but he was anything but a nerd. Athletic and aggressive, a connoisseur of beer and pinball, Joe had guided the development of Value America’s technology from the beginning.

Our site was dependent on the proprietary software he and his team wrote, and its conception was pure genius. When we had started, most content on the Internet was generated by static HTML, which meant that you had to be something of a techie to put your work online. Joe created an Authoring Tool, so our content could be developed and published by non-technical people—writers, artists, and merchants. The “Admin Tool” was another of Joe’s masterpieces. It fueled the store’s commerce engine. As these tools evolved, they gained some amazing functionality.

Talented Web technologists were in such demand that for much of our history we offered a handsome bounty to any employee who could entice, cajole, or shanghai a qualified computer professional to join us. The group had, not surprisingly, evolved into a combination brain repository and zoo. Yet the tech team knew that Joe was the one person who really understood how the whole thing worked. He was our medicine man.

Today, Joe became a folk hero of sorts, at least in Technology. One of his developers, a fellow with the curious name of Seshareddi Kamireddi—“Sesh” to you and me—wrote

a program that calculated Joe's net worth based on the number of shares he owned and the current stock price. He made the result available via one of our intranet servers. The "Joe Ticker," as we called it, let you check his progress all day long.

Everybody in building E followed the rising fortunes of Joe Page with avid interest. Everybody saw his net worth climb to over sixty million bucks. And everybody in Building E, being in the same field, knew it could happen to them. Go, Joe.

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It didn't have to happen. It wasn't inevitable. Going public wasn't listed in the Bill of Rights. But we had all worked for it. We had all counted on it. We had all watched it happen to other companies we knew didn't hold a candle to ours. We had come to the unshakable conclusion that we deserved this. Many of us conveniently forgot that the whole point of taking the company public was not to make us rich, but to raise the working capital we needed to grow and make our shareholders rich.

We had watched our founders depart, then return days later rumpled and bleary-eyed only to head out again a day or two later. The preparation for the IPO had taken a year, building to a grand climax with a two-week national road show for investors. But for all that, few of us had any first-hand experience with that mythical beast, the Initial Public Offering.

On this bright Virginia morning, though, it didn't seem to matter. Scores of us had instantly become millionaires. Euphoria was rampant. We were all walking around the halls shaking hands, sporting grins we couldn't have suppressed if we'd tried. Value America was now VUSA, one of the hottest Web stocks on the planet, and the world was scrambling to own a piece of us.

And well they should. We were an Internet store—the Internet store—with the vision to shape the future. We were going to give everybody, consumers and manufacturers alike, the things they had always wanted. We were going to be the first to make the concept of virtual inventory work. Of course people were buying up Value America stock like there was no tomorrow. We were tomorrow. We were, as my old advertising slogan had phrased it, "The Marketplace for a New Millennium."

Or so we thought.

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Craig Winn emerged from his office and shared a few quiet words in the corridor with Rex Scatena. Rex had been instrumental in helping get Value America off the ground. Had it not been for their enduring friendship and faith in one another, Value America would not have existed.

As Doug and I strolled toward the boss's office, Linda Harmon greeted us. Linda was the administrative assistant to our entire complement of senior executives: she served co-founders Winn and Scatena, plus President Dorchak and our new CEO Tom Morgan. "Congratulations, guys," she said. "This is so exciting!"

Linda's warmth and friendliness added something positive to the place. She was a hard-working single mom who had lived through the entire IPO process in the eye of the storm.

“Can you believe this?” I said. “Everybody’s walking on air.”

She smiled, but oddly, her demeanor changed. “Well...not everybody,” she said softly as she nodded in the direction of Tom Morgan’s closed office door. “What’s up with him? What a grump. He’s acting like he resents the whole thing. Okay, I know he’s only been here a few weeks, but gee! At least he could pretend to be happy for the rest of us. We worked hard for this!”

“Aw, c’mon, Linda,” I said. “It can’t be all that bad. I mean, I can’t say I really know Tom all that well, but he sure looks the part.”

Linda lowered her voice and whispered, “I don’t know. Something’s wrong. It’s weird. He’s been here for almost a month, and I haven’t seen anything come out of his office—no letters, no directives, not even complaints. Nothing.”

“Sounds like the perfect boss,” I chuckled.

That brought a smile. Linda’s tone brightened. “Hey, I’m sorry. I guess I worry too much. This means so much to my son and me. Anyway, it’s been quite a morning, especially for our friends Rex and Craig.”

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WINN WAS a boyish-looking forty-four, but he had already built a resume you could easily divide among half a dozen hyperactive entrepreneurs. He’d had explosive careers in both sales and manufacturing, building several companies from inception to industry dominators. One of them had even gone public. Craig had had his triumphs and his tragedies, but it seemed to me that he was, all things considered, a good candidate for a poster boy for entrepreneurial over-achievement. Value America had not been an accident or a fluke. It was merely the newest pearl on the strand. Craig had invested twenty years of his life enjoying good times and surviving bad to become an instant star.

It wasn’t that he didn’t show any battle scars. They were there for all to see. But it was those scars, the failures in his past as well as the costly victories, that had given us confidence that he knew what he was doing. Despite his relatively tender years, Craig had been there and done that. We saw him as a visionary, a big thinker, disciplined and purposeful, and our industry seemed perfectly suited to his aggressive style. He used to tell us things things like, “E-commerce is the only business where we must sail our ship out to sea with all guns blazing while we’re still laying the keel.”

Oddly enough, on IPO day, Craig wasn’t even in charge anymore. For reasons that didn’t make much sense to me, he had stepped down as CEO weeks earlier. He had, in fact, worked on nothing but raising capital since the previous August. It had been some nine months since Craig had actually run the show. He was still our chairman, but boards don’t run companies, management does. Value America’s top-ranking execs were now CEO Morgan, President Dorchak, and CFO Dean Johnson. The baton had been passed from the entrepreneurs to the professionals, just as conventional wisdom dictates should happen.

Craig had been on the phone all morning, accepting his share of congratulations from major investors and fielding calls from a steady stream of reporters. Terry McAuliffe, President Clinton’s close friend and future Democratic Party National Chairman, had called. So had conservative leader and Baptist minister Jerry Falwell. The callers were as politically diverse as they were uniformly congratulatory.

They had good reason to be. By all accounts, this was starting off to be one of the most successful initial public offerings in history. And the man responsible for its success, the success of the concept to which the market had reacted so positively, was Craig Winn. Value America had been his invention, his baby. When he had conceived the idea, its execution would have been science fiction, but here we were, a reality. In a very real sense, his whole life had been leading up to this day.

But the journalists calling this morning weren't interested in how he'd gotten here or where he was going next. They just wanted to know what it felt like to be in his shoes. They wanted to write, "Winn is jubilant, bouncing off the walls," and they were seeking his corroboration. After all, they thought, he had a right to be euphoric. With ownership of thirty-five percent of the outstanding shares, the arithmetic of the morning made Craig a billionaire. With a b.

He was not euphoric, though. He didn't even appear excited. He was having no trouble keeping his feet on the ground. He had told every reporter who would listen that he was worth no more today than he'd been worth yesterday. "You're never closer to tragedy than you are at the moment of your greatest triumph."

"Yeah, yeah," they all said, and rushed off to write their stories.

Craig was happy, of course, but it wasn't an "I won the lottery" kind of happiness. It was more an "I survived the plane crash" sort of thing. There was a downside to this.

This morning, he seemed to be the only one who remembered that a mere six months earlier, we had been written off for dead, the victim of a failed IPO. Eighteen months ago, our backs had been against the wall. We couldn't raise a dime at even one percent of the current valuation. Yet we had recovered, like a Phoenix rising from the ashes, and since those dark days, we had set records for raising private equity and for the scope and quality of our IPO. But the offering was not the goal. It was only a qualifying heat, a necessary step toward getting us into the final race—a race that Craig would not run with us, although his shadow, we were about to learn, would keep pace quite nicely.

This morning, he was concerned. He had survived a year with investment bankers and analysts. Yet they still didn't appreciate our business, what made it different, what made it valuable. The same bankers who were gushing congratulations today had, just a few months earlier, been embroiled in a bitter fight with our founder. Their conflict had left each side wary of the other.

This morning, Craig was worried. He knew our stock wasn't worth \$70 a share. It was worth \$23, \$25, maybe as much as \$30. If it were actually worth \$70, we would have gone public at \$70. What would happen tomorrow, when reality dawned on thousands of investors who had pushed the price so high? Sure, he knew that our first quarter's performance was much better than the analysts expected, but it would be five long weeks before he could share that good news with anyone.

And this morning, Craig was annoyed. He had turned over the reins to "professional managers" but had seen little professionalism, not much management, and precious little reason to expect that anything would change.

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SOMEBODY SHOUTED, “SEVENTY-FOUR! It’s gone to seventy-four!” from one of the little offices that lined the hallway as Doug Schatz and I made our way toward the boss. Craig saw us coming and grinned.

“Dougie!” He extended his hand. Doug, whom no one ever called Dougie, was one of his favorite merchandisers, one who understood and appreciated our early achievements as few others could. But it was Craig who was doing the honors. “Thank you!” he said. “You and the brands you’ve brought to us are a big reason we’re celebrating today. You have endured ‘the test of a thousand noes.’ I’m grateful.”

Doug wanted to thank the man who had conceived all of this, who had recruited him, and truth be known, had lured most of the best brands to the company. But before he could get a word out, Craig turned and focused his attention on me.

He placed one hand on each of my shoulders. Craig and I are about the same height, just shy of six feet, so I shouldn’t have felt small, but I did. I somehow knew he was about to single me out for praise, and I felt uncomfortable. We had come to know each other well and had done marvelous things together. Yet all this time we had never exchanged one harsh word, though we had gone toe to toe hundreds of times over issues great and small. Craig knew my strengths, and he’d found ways to make me even stronger. He knew my weaknesses, and hadn’t held them against me. The more comfortable I grew in challenging him, the closer our relationship became. For a man who knew my business as well as I knew it myself he was remarkably accessible, even vulnerable. He displayed his emotions openly. He wasn’t just my employer; he was my friend.

This morning he spoke slowly, deliberately. “Ken, there is no one I’m happier for than I am for you. We began this journey together, in humble beginnings, not so very long ago. We’ve come a long way.”

That we had.

“I have always said that you are our patron saint.”

It was true. He had said that, although I hated it when he singled me out as if I were someone special. Maybe I was in his eyes. But just because I had adopted a few kids (okay, nine of ’em) and didn’t make a secret of my faith, there was no particular reason to start envisioning a halo around my graying brow.

But Craig continued, “I knew God would never let anything bad happen to our company so long as you were here. Thank you, my friend!”

I mumbled something totally inadequate and shook his hand. Craig knew what I was thinking, even if I couldn’t find the words to express myself. He smiled warmly. But his was not a smile of triumph, though he was uniquely entitled to one. Nor was it a smile of giddy greed-induced euphoria like the rest of us were wearing.

Craig wore the pensive, determined smile of a priest whose ministry it was to give encouragement to the parents of a dying child.

What did he know that had somehow escaped the rest of us?