

Sold My Soul to the Company Store

Jim Rubart

John Davidson was primed to have the job from the time he was born; he just didn't know the systematic donation of his soul was required to keep it.

On the morning of July 23rd 1992 John strode quickly towards the office of Kevin Martin, Senior Vice President of Cell-On Inc. He had a reputation for being on time and wanted to keep that opinion in tact. Especially when Lars Hanley, the founder of "the Cell" would be there.

He ran into Peter Rudman going up the stairs to the third floor of building 8. Peter was the quintessential nerd, had the glasses, the rumpled dress shirt, no pocket protector but the hair looked like it had never met a comb it liked. But he had graduated Suma Cum Lade from Harvard and held two degrees in Computer Science and another in Bio Chemical engineering, which he called his hobby.

"Hey, Peter! I understand the dry cleaner next to Hannigan's has a special going on this week! Maybe check it out?"

Rudman didn't bite. Just smiled with the corners of his mouth barely upturned. "I understand you're going for a ride in the chair." He paused. "Hope you like it." The smile turned up a little bit more. Rudman turned without waiting for a response and continued down the stairs.

The Adam's family had to be his favorite show growing up, John muttered as he clipped off the last few stairs. Deep breath outside the door and then step in.

"John!" Lars Hanley, on his way to becoming one of the world's richest men was there in all his splendor, perfect suit, perfect tie, shoes reflecting everything, and a big grin from ear to ear. "Great to see you. Jerry will be here in a few seconds. Then we'll get it done."

Most kids grow up getting love from a Teddy Bear or a playmate at school. Some even get it from their parents. Not John. He got it from achieving. Football, basketball, and track in the spring. Twenty bucks for every A, twenty bucks taken away for every B, \$35 gone with every C. Big love for

straight A's which came often. He was constantly pitted against his two younger brothers in memorizing the elemental tables or the capitals of all fifty States. The winner got all the attention. His competitive nature was inborn and the seeds his Mom planted and watered were "Compete! Succeed! And you will be loved."

His Dad? Had a career that was going great. Started out selling insurance, then one promotion after another till he was head of the entire Western US. Didn't leave a lot of time for everyone to be around the dinner table but when the vacations came it was off to see the real European countries, not the pretend ones at Disney World. It made John long for a life much simpler. The Walton's were sappy to many, but for John they seemed like Eden.

Instead it was a daily diet of high expectations, always the pressure to succeed. And climb John did. High school was one success after another. Honor student, class president, All State athlete; leading the school to it's one and only state title in track. Then just before graduation the year was shattered as his senior year sweetheart dumped John for one of his best friends.

A few weeks later he'd met Andrea, behind the counter at the local coffee shop. He was infatuated. She was mildly amused at this 18-year-old, so relentless in his pursuit. How was she to know he was on the rebound? She finally gave into this kid five years younger, just to have some fun for the summer. Lazy days floating on Lake Shasta, romantic movies, flowers, concerts ... John was charming and Andrea figured the romance would burn itself out in five or six months.

But John pursued Andrea with the same competitive fire that he went after everything he wanted. If they had a fight, three roses would show up at her house every day till she gave in. Slowly Andrea's amusement turned to mild liking, then to love. And in Andrea, John had found the family he'd been wanting his whole life.

Growing up, Andrea's Dad got off work every day at 5p and was home at 5:07p. Mom didn't have a career. Andrea and her three sisters spent Saturday afternoon's baking cookies with Mom or playing softball with Mom and Dad. Sunday mornings were spent in church, Sunday evenings watching

the Wonderful World of Disney & Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom. Weeknights were filled with password or cards. It *was* the Walton's.

They were married just a few days past his 22nd birthday. John had his dream. He and Andrea would be a family; Eden had arrived.

College, jobs, getting hooked on cell phones. Playing guitar in the band at church, then the move to an up and coming mobile phone company Cell-On-Trimac.

With his charm and brains, John moved up the ladder quickly. Promoted to Product Manager after only three years. Another year and a half and he was head of the Taymic Product Development Group. Just nine months later a call from Jerry Martin, one of the company's four Vice Presidents.

"Andrea," John whispered into the phone, "you're not going to believe this. Jerry Martin just called and set up a meeting for Thursday after work."

"Does that mean you're going to be late for dinner again, dear?"

"Did you hear what I just said? Jerry Martin. A solo meeting with me!"

"Is he the guy you and Brian always play tennis with?"

"Nooooooooo," John drew out the word between gritted teeth. He felt the pressure rising but it wasn't at a boil yet so he pushed the kettle's lid back down. "Jerry Martin is only one step away from Lars, the owner of the company? You remember Lars, brilliant, on his way to becoming one of the most influential men of this decade not to mention one of the richer men in the world?"

"I know who Lars is ... don't start patronizing me just because I'm not taking off all my clothes and running around the house naked because you're going to have drinks with some co-worker."

"Co-worker! You just love me working here don't you?" John spat with a healthy portion of sarcasm.

"No, honey! What I love is when you're working in New York for three weeks at a time ... and then you're home for a whole day and a half—one of which you use to play tennis with Brian—and then you fly off to Washington DC and try to buy some stupid Cell Site company so Jerry or Lars will notice

you. No, what I love is when you tell me you're staying home for a month straight and three days later they need you in Las Vegas for an 'emergency meeting' and of course you have 'no choice but to go' ..."

"I didn't pick up the phone to get nailed to the wall." The kettle was boiling now.

"Well then you shouldn't keep handing me the hammer."

Spillover. John slammed the receiver down into the cradle. It bounced out and onto the floor.

"Bitch," he muttered to the picture of Andrea next to his mouse pad.

"Now Jonathon, is that an uplifting comment to make about the girl of your dreams?"

He knew that soft voice. New on his team five weeks ago, Brooke Dunning had already made inroads into his subconscious. Her mind was phenomenal. Four languages, degree in computer science from Yale, and well versed on the political posturing necessary to get what she wanted from the programmers. It didn't hurt that she was five nine, about 127 pounds, auburn hair with luscious dark brown eyes.

"Did you see the bounce?" John muttered as he gestured towards the phone.

"Yes, it was certainly a 9.5 on the German's card, but you missed your wastepaper basket by at least a foot."

He looked up. Nice smile. He returned it.

"John, what you need is a little vacation, so what I'll do is get a couple of tickets to Mexico, book a nice hotel down there, not long, just three or four days ... you know just enough time to ... unwind."

That smile again. And the eyes.

John felt his heart rate increasing. "Brooke, wow, I couldn't. I mean ... "

"John! How dare you! I'm teasing of course! You," Brooke pointed at Andrea's picture, then at the phone, "are a married man!" She turned a smart, tight, 180 and walked away. "You guys'll work it out, you always do."

She's been here five weeks, and she's already commenting on how Andrea and I always seem to work it out? Sheesh, usually takes the newbies at least eight.

When he walked in the front door that night Andrea was sitting in front of the TV not watching the ten o'clock news. John stood in the doorway to the family room waiting for her to turn to him. Finally he simply said, "I'm sorry. The plan to go fully digital on the network is coming up in two weeks and I had to go over the timeline with Mike."

"Mike's married isn't he?" Andrea said casually, still staring at the screen.

"Well, separated, but still married, yeah."

"Hmmm."

"Andrea, we are not headed down that path."

"I can't hear you. My ear drum was broken earlier today."

John smiled a little, shuffled in and sat down on the green leather chair that never seemed to warm up quickly enough. "I really am sorry about that. Really. It's just that this meeting with Martin is a big deal to me. It could mean the promotion that puts me over the top ... I called to share the rush with you. That's all."

"John what rush? I'm supposed to get all excited about you going from working 70 hours a week to working 80? Every promotion you've gotten has just been more time we spend apart. I'm just tired of it. I miss you. I miss the fun."

"But don't you see sweetie, it won't be like this forever. With the stock options I'm getting now it means when the IPO hits it'll take off like a rocket ship and it won't take long. I'll be able to retire in four or five years and then we'll just play all the time!"

Andrea was smiling, the way she always did when John started into what their life would be like when he retired.

"We'll get that place in Whale Cove on the coast and buy motorcycles and spend our summers there. And ..." He stopped. "What's so funny?"

Andrea said softly, "Just you. When you start into one of your little speeches I see such passion in your eyes. I do love you Jonathon T. Davidson."

They were both silent as John came over to the couch and snuggled down next to her. She pushed her mouth up against his ear and whispered, "How would you like to show me some more of that passion in a non-verbal mode of expression?"

"I believe that can be arranged ..."

On Thursday Martin and John met for drinks a bit after seven at a small but stylish bar just a few blocks from the company. Never one for small talk, Martin got right to the point. "John," said Jerry Martin as they settled in at a corner table made of dark mahogany "we've had our eye on you for a while now. You seem to be fitting in very well here at the Cell."

No one who worked there ever called it Cell-On-Trimac. It was always just "the Cell." John debated between saying something appropriately humble, something witty, or nothing at all. He chose the last option.

"I think you're ready to hear about going to the next level," continued Martin.

Jerry Martin was a short man, maybe five-five, but didn't struggle with the Napoleon complex most five sixes and under did. John guessed his age at 42, maybe 43. His graying, thinning hair was in contrast to an athletic build and grace. He had more than a passing interest in clothes and his casual yet always impeccable dress gave Martin a sense of quiet power.

John wondered if the chessboard would come out now, or if this was simply an invitation to play. Instead of rooks and pawns it was stock options and perks, but it was chess all the same.

"Next level?" questioned John as he tried to put his best, 'Gosh for a Guy from the Sticks Like Me?' smile.

"Maybe next level isn't the best way to describe it. I don't want to mislead you that this is a promotion talk. I wouldn't want to mess up my reputation as a straight shooter." His smile was genuine. "My aim is always true and will stay that way with you."

Again John took the route of using his ears instead of his tongue but held Martin's gaze. Martin took a deep pull from his beer and paused, then said, "What do you want John?"

John sighed internally. His goals? That's what this meeting was all about? He couldn't believe it. He hated his "goals." Hated the games it created. Why drag me down to this bar to ask me about my goals? It would be a better use of both of their time for Martin to just pull them up on the computer and look. But just to keep the peace ...

"Well Jerry," John started, "it's pretty simple, I hope to do the best I can for the Cell by keeping my team on schedule for the Beta testing this spring and then focus on meeting sales projections when we launch version One of the new phone software and on the personal side I have a goal of ..."

"John." Martin had a faint smile and shook his head.

"Yeah?"

"We are fairly intelligent men. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Sure." John shifted his beer to the middle of the table.

"Do you really think I'd pull you away from the office, just you and me, and ask you about your goals?"

"So the stories about you painting a thermometer on the bathroom door and making the salespeople fill it in hourly aren't true."

"Of course not! It was only twice a day."

Both men smiled and together downed another wash of beer.

"Now let me ask the question again, but with a bit of a preface. I don't want B.S. that you think I'll like hearing, I don't want false modesty, I don't want any that crap they teach you in business school about climbing the ladder. I much prefer the truth." The sparkle of mirth that was in Martin's eyes a moment before was now gone. "What do you want?"

John wavered. He could try the calculated approach but knew deep down Martin would see through it anyway. *What the hell ...*

"Within the next two years I want to be a Vice President. I want to have total control over the European Expansion and Internet interface. And I want to be fully vested in a minimum of 1.5 million shares of stock by the time the IPO hits."

"Thank you for not adding the requisite b.s. about being willing to work long hours and be dedicated and follow the rules. You're doing that already." Martin seemed to be talking to himself as he said. "You're ready."

The rest of the time was spent talking about tennis, golf, skiing, Martin saying how they ought to get out on the slopes together and John feeling like he really meant it, and two more beers each. John had never really liked beer, but it was a small price to pay for the time with Martin.

Nothing more was mentioned about what "you're ready" meant till they were saying goodnight.

"John," Martin seemed to toss out off handedly, "let's not delay this thing. Meet me in my office tomorrow at nine. We'll get it done then."

"So how was the meeting?" Andrea rolled over in bed covering her eyes as the light from the hallway spilled across her hair.

"Interesting." John mumbled more to himself than to her.

And now he stood at the door of Martin's. Deep breath and walk in. Lars, owner of the Cell was there with his exuberant wide grin. A little too eager John thought at the back of his mind. He grabbed Lars hand and tried to shake casual.

"Great to see you, really great to have you here, John. Come in, come in."

John said thanks and glanced around the office. He'd never been there before but had heard it was unusual. Bizarre was a more apt description. There were windows but all three of them were painted over with the Cell-Trimac logo. One of the things the Cell prided itself on was that everyone, even the secretaries, had some sort of window view. But Martin apparently had his reasons for covering a view that included The Golden Gate Bridge.

Over Martin's desk was a bookshelf. It was filled with books that looked identical. All of them black, all small, none with titles on the spine. And against the south wall was what looked like a collection of CD's, inside a plain cabinet. It too black, a dull, soft, waxy black that looked like it absorbed more light than it reflected.

Martin stepped through the door as he waved two fingers towards John with a slight smile on his face. John motioned back without saying anything.

In the middle of the room sat what was obviously the Chair. It was not big and not ornate and looked ancient. It was wooden, looked fragile but John knew it wasn't. It was a dark wood, maybe mahogany but he couldn't tell. Two tiny electrodes rested on the seat of the chair—like the ones attached to his chest during the treadmill test he'd had a few years back. There was nothing else.

After a few pleasantries Lars offered Martin and John a seat.

"Now, John, normally I'm not in these session myself, but since I think, and I've heard from others, that you have a very promising career with my company, I wanted to answer any questions and give any assurances you might need myself before we get started."

John looked at Martin who leaned forward with a knowing expression on his face.

"What do you mean by assurances? Is there something I need to be aware of that I don't know already?"

A small ripple of concern spilled onto Lars' features but quickly vanished. He glanced in Martin's direction who shook his head no.

"Ah, I see. You'd probably want to know exactly what it is we're doing here today. Or should I say what we are requesting of you."

John grinned his wining Tom Cruise smile and said with the slightest tinge of sarcasm, "Yeah, I'd like that!"

"OK!" Lars responded, clapping his hands together softly.

"John, what we've found, and I doubt this will come as any surprise to you, is that to fully enjoy living, there needs to be a dedication, a commitment, a complete surrender to the things in that life. This is something all of us struggle with from time to time. What is the meaning of life, what do I want, where do I want to be in five years, ten years, twenty years, etc, etc. But to be blunt ..." Lars laughed and threw his hand out from his sides, "we don't have time for this kind of thinking at the Cell!"

“Why? Because it causes indecision, softness, weakness. Not for business only mind you! This is not a talk on taking over the cellular phone industry blah, blah, blah, although we want to do that too.”

Another soft laugh.

“This is a talk on living life to its fullest. It's about taking that trip to the outback of Australia or visiting the ancient Mayan ruins, about going to that golf school and lowering your handicap by ten strokes, about playing Pebble Beach, Spanish Head and Spyglass in three days just because you want to.

“It's about buying that ski boat you've always wanted. It's about starring in the local community theatre play. It's about having that cabin in the mountains, about following all your dreams however small or big they are. It's about fulfilling all those fantasies you never though could come true. It's about the house you've always wanted, with the weight room and home theatre, and pool out back, its about making more money than you could ever imagine or spend, its about traveling to Paris for a long weekend just because it strikes you on Thursday night. Buying those matching Jag's and getting a Mercedes while you're at it!

“It's about squeezing all the juice out of life and drinking it on top of the world with all your desires at your feet. It's about fulfilling who you truly are destined to be.

“What we are asking here is not for ourselves. It is a gift to help you free yourself from those last few strings that could prevent you from reaching your highest dreams and using your talents to their greatest potential. It is a gift that I gave to myself many years ago now, one that many others here at the Cell accepted.”

John's body pumped with adrenaline. Lars was kind enough not to point out that he hadn't truly been living his dreams. A 10th of them maybe. But so many of the things he mentioned seemed just out of reach. He'd only scratched the surface of his dreams.

“What will happen exactly?” John asked.

“We're going to remove a small psychological block. We sometimes refer to it as the Inhibitor, the hand brake that holds us all back from gaining what we truly want to gain.”

John frowned. “English please.”

"Your soul."

"My what!?" John laughed nervously.

"What some people refer to as the soul will be removed. We simply—"

"He's kidding, right Jerry?"

"John," Jerry stood up and shoved his hands in his pockets, "you have to understand, to hear it described as "Your Soul", sounds a bit weird and so dramatic. A better way to explain it, and frankly one that is much better understood, is to say a part of your psychological makeup is going to be removed. A part that is a hindrance to you reaching your fullest potential. A part that restricts you from gaining much more of what is out there. If it was a physical problem we'd be here talking about removing a cyst or corn from your foot to help you walk and run better."

John was silent.

Lars leaned back in his chair. "The reason I use the word soul is that I don't like to play games and I don't expect anyone else to play them either. Soul is an accurate description but you could just as accurately call it the "I Can't Do It" or the "I'm Guilty" part of you. Soul is a word that stirs up all sorts of images from an antiquated worldview, from an antique set of beliefs. But I used that word to make sure you understand what we are doing here. And what 378 people at the Cell have already done so far." John stared at Martin.

"Of course I have, John. If memory serves I was number 16."

"How will I feel afterward?"

"Wonderful," Martin said softly as he stepped forward and then paused for a moment. "And a bit empty. Both at the same time actually. The emptiness typically lasts for three to four days. But don't worry, that void will only be at the back of your mind. The exhilaration at having the breaks taken off the quest for your true destiny will quickly fill in any sense of loss. Plus we'll be distracting you with some very enjoyable activities. We recommend you let us call your wife, tell her you're going to have to travel for a few days ... can't be avoided, leave right away, all that kind of stuff. That way we can ease you through the stage we call climatizing or the final letting go."

John thought the timing on this was actually quite good. Since he and Andrea had just enjoyed one of their better evenings together in a long while, she would be more understanding about his leaving.

"Now John," Lars slowly stood up and Martin moved over next to him. "If you need to think about this a bit more, we understand."

"No, I'm ready."

He stepped over to the chair, took a deep breath and sat down. A warmth immediately spread through him. It felt right. Very right. As if the chair itself was welcoming him to sit, to relax to be free. To be free. TO BE FREE! He closed his eyes and breathed again deep and slow.

John felt Martin pick up the electrode next to his left foot and move it underneath John's shirt. He thought about opening his eyes to watch the process, but it felt so good to just bathe in the warmth coming from the chair. Jerry Martin then placed the electronic patch right over John's heart. It rested there lightly without any adhesive.

A thought started to echo faintly in a distant part of his mind, "gain the world and lose your soul ..." Some verse from Sunday school long ago ... so long ago.

Lars seemed to read John's mind.

"Fairy tales from a fascinating but ancient book. And even if it was true, don't you think putting your soul on temporary ice is a pretty good exchange for gaining the world."

John turned and opened his eyes. He stared at Lars who chuckled. "When we're young we believe things that turn out to be false. It would be wonderful if Santa Claus was real, but he's not. Same thing for the Easter Bunny. Emotions that are sown in those early years are often difficult to shake later in life. This isn't to say there aren't truths in the Bible. I myself am a believer in the major tenants of the Christian faith and I'm sure you realize we use many of those principles at the Cell. The moral fiber in some of the church's beliefs is very strong. But that doesn't mean we take them literally.

"And as I just mentioned, you are not 'selling your soul'. It's not as if we're taking it forever. We're simply putting your soul on pause, on hold if you will."

"On hold?" John murmured.

"Oh, my boy! Forgot to mention the best part did I? Anytime you want it back, you can. It's why we store your core on CD."

John looked at the black hard drive over by Martin's desk. Jerry made a grand sweeping gesture towards it in concert with Lar's words and smiled briefly.

"It's as simple to restore as it is to take away," Martin said.

"John, there's no risk." continued Lars. "Anytime you want it back, you can. So be at peace my young apprentice. I would recommend closing your eyes. It seems to help most people."

John paused for a moment wondering if he wanted to go through with this. Actually that was a lie he told himself to ease the little voice way down deep inside his head. He thought it only because it was appropriate to this little drama to have a last minute "What am I about to do?!" type emotion. He didn't wonder at all whether he should go through with it. Of course he wanted to go through with it. He had given most of his soul already. Little steps he'd taken for the past four years. That was when it was hard. This? Just a formality.

Gain the world! **AND LOSE YOUR SOUL!**

Gain the world! And Lose Your Soul!

GAIN THE WORLD! and lose your soul ...

GAIN THE WORLD! and lose your soul ...

GAIN THE WORLD! and lose ..

GAIN THE WORLD! and

GAIN THE WORLD!

GAIN THE WORLD!

At first John felt nothing. Then a slight prick at his chest where the attachment was. But the prick was gone with a soothing feeling, a flowing feeling as if something swirled from his shoulder down to the top of his stomach and back again. If he didn't know better he would have thought a massage on

his chest with just a hint of oil was taking place as he sat with his eyes closed. Then there was pressure ... then an easing, then pressure again then easing. And warmth, always warmth. Time was slipping by, but it was hard to tell how much.

A moment later he tensed involuntarily. "Ahhhhhhggggh!" It was like a piece of ice stabbing into his heart. Slowly being plunged in, pulled out and then plunged in again deeper. He strained to get out of the chair, but his hands, his arms were ... he couldn't feel them. Couldn't open his eyes. So tired. And the time just went on. It was hours by now. The cold was gone now, or so cold it felt like heat.

The tearing at his mind was worse. "No!" he screamed from a great distance, somewhere deep down. It was if a hand was squeezing his mind, twisting, tiny fingers reaching down inside his head. Another hour at least.

He heard himself, again and again calling out to everyone, no one, then silence. Finally the warmth again, filling all of him, washing over him like waves.

His eyes flew open.

"There!" Lars exclaimed. "Nothing to it."

Martin stood nodding his approval, then moved towards John and extended his hand. "Welcome to the Inner Power of the Cell, and the road to your wildest dreams."

John looked at the clock behind Martin's desk. Three minutes had passed. He tried to put words to the sensations he was feeling, but struggled. It was like a small voice had been thrown off a cliff, always growing more silent but never quite fading away. Like breaking up with a girlfriend back in Jr. High, a hollow feeling in the pit of your stomach never knowing how it will be filled. Like gorging on cotton candy at the fair, and not being hungry any more, but not feeling full either.

The emotion faded and he felt wonderful, then horrified again. Back and forth.

"Hey, easy. Talk to us ..."

John murmured unclearly, telling them about the feelings of ecstasy then despair, then joy, then overwhelming sorrow, slowly the words began pouring out of him, till tears trickled down his cheeks. "I ... I gotta get it back." A moment later he added, "Now!"

Martin and Lars laughed in the same instant.

"Now you're really part of the team!" cried Lars. "Most people just say, 'I think I want it back!'

Only one other person has ever added the 'Now' part. Jerry Martin."

John looked at Jerry.

"Let's get out of here," said Martin as he helped lift John out of the Chair. One quick slap on the back from the grinning Lars and Martin and John walked out the door to the stairs.

A Helicopter picked them up from atop the Cell's main building and rushed them to a small private airstrip just east of Livermore.

"Where are we going?"

"Don't worry, I'll have someone call Andrea for you." Martin offered as they settled into the flight on the company's Lear jet. "We're just going to take a few days to have a few laughs and relax a little with you new state of mind."

"How'm I going to tell Andrea about this?"

"Rather than think right now about what happens next or what you're going to tell anyone, just focus on the moment and enjoy the next few days. We're going to have some fun."

The flight took them over the top of Mount Shasta on their way to Shadow Creek golf course just outside of Las Vegas. Two thousand dollars later they had put in 18 holes on one of the best and most beautiful golf courses in America. The next stop was San Diego for a two-night stay aboard a private sailboat. Scuba diving, deep-sea fishing and lots of young, gorgeous female crewmembers to make sure everything was perfect.

From there they jetted off to a small island in the South Pacific where they met a few familiar faces from work including Brooke.

He and Brooke walked on the beach, watched dolphins cavort in the water and shared some of the finest wine in the world. A little flirting, some volleyball on the beach and stunning sunsets. She raced into his thoughts every moment they were apart.

“John,” she said softly to him one evening as day slipped into evening, “you want to talk about what went on ... um ... with Lars?”

John laughed, “You know don’t you?”

“It was part of my coming to the Cell. So yes, I know and I’ve been through it and Martin knew we were becoming friends, so he invited me to be here, just in case you wanted to talk about it.”

The feelings John had in the first few hours after the “removal” were muddled memories. It had been a glorious week of sun and sand and laughter, with each experience topping the last.

“Intellectually I know it was hard at the time, but emotionally it’s the best decision I’ve made in my life. It’s like I’m ready to grab the world and take it to places it’s never been.”

Brooke stood up to leave, but leaned over and put her cheek close to John’s. “It’d be nice to go there together.” He watched her as she walked away till she disappeared into the brush.

The final stop on this five-day tour was at the Jaguar dealership near company headquarters where John was given the keys to a brand new Jaguar convertible. Just a small “thanks for the dedication present from Lars,” Martin explained.

As soon as John walked through the oak doors of his house we knew the thermostat was going to be reading 30 degrees below zero even though it was summer.

"Hi Andrea," John volunteered as he walked into the kitchen.

"Hello, John," she replied without looking up.

“Hey! What about welcome home! Good to see you! How are you?”

"When they called to say a trip had come up last minute I asked how long. They told me a day and a half, two days tops. What happened? Someone cut it short?"

"It was an important trip. Probably the most important of my life."

"You know, most poets have a third line that's different than the first and different from the second. Just once I'd like you to come home and say, 'It wasn't the most important trip of my life, and it was stupid for me to have wasted my time on it, instead of being with you.' Would that be so tough?"

"Thanks for the balloons and flowers. It's great to be back," he muttered as he walked into his den and logged on to catch up on email.

There was no asking about his trip. That had stopped years ago. It was no secret she loathed the company. This time John was thankful she didn't inquire. What would he say? "Hi honey! How you been? I just gave up my soul for the company but the past five days have been the biggest party of my life, I'm thinking about an affair with someone that works for me and there's no doubt in my mind I made an excellent exchange."?

As the weeks turned into months the frequently brought up subject of children became more frequent. So he gave in. He figured having a child would turn Andrea's nagging into silence. At least it would keep her busy. Have something to keep her occupied while he continued to add more parts of the world to his portfolio.

Getting her pregnant wasn't tough. Must have been the seventh or eighth try. The tough part was going through the motions without thinking about Brooke.

Work wasn't work anymore. It was intense play. He had control of 170 people and he used them like chess pieces to win the game of business.

"You're on your way to the top," Martin said to him over drinks a few weeks into the New Year. "I knew all you needed was to get freed up, but I've never seen someone take off after doing it like you have. I like the sound VP makes next to your name."

He relayed this to his best friend Brian a few days later who laughed. "I'm sure you'll get it John! I think you're the only one at that company who doesn't think charm is blasphemy, not to mention has a decent taste in clothes."

He hadn't told Brian about his, "transformation." And as time went by it seemed less important to mention it.

The years flowed by. Slow at first and then more quickly. The kid was having birthdays, two years old, three; John missed both of them.

"Do you know what your son said to me today?" asked Andrea. "I told him Daddy was going to be home tomorrow and he said, 'Daddy's already home! And ran and pointed to your picture! I'm done. I'm filing on Monday."

His affair with Brooke had been in full swing for almost two years and most of his free time away from work was centered around seeing her, or figuring out excuses to see her. It wasn't that tough. Andrea had stopped arguing about time together a long time back and he'd started sleeping in the den a year ago.

When the end of the marriage came it wasn't a shower of fireworks. More like a dud trying to be lit by a punk that was barely burning. The divorce went through like clockwork, she got some stock options, they sold the house, he moved into an apartment and it was done.

He and Brooke went to Europe, took cooking lessons from a Master chef, bought a three-million dollar home and worked on their tennis game.

Five years into the new freedom it started itching. Only at the corners of his mind, and only in the quiet moments, and there weren't many of those. But it still bothered him.

The Country Club membership was nice, but it was frustrating that he and Brooke couldn't have kids together. He had enough money now to buy anything he wanted, but he already had it all. VP next to his name was nice, but what now? The lies that had become standard business and personal arsenal bothered him more and more. The little ones mostly, because they were the ones that reflected his true life back to him like a mirror. His emotions, his heart, his subconscious had all undergone a transformation.

The posturing, the hidden perks, the phony parties were just tiring now. Any vicarious thrill from meeting Senators or Hollywood types was long gone. Thanksgiving '98 was the turning point. Brooke was trying to make small talk with some friends that were with them in Hawaii. The turkey dinner didn't look so appetizing to John.

"John," Brooke tried, "the zombie impersonation is good, but it makes your conversational a little limited."

John didn't answer; just got up from the table and walked to the TV. The football game was much easier to contemplate than the nagging thought of that computer disc secured in a vault 2,500 miles away. He had gained the world, but it wasn't enough. The trade began to feel one sided again, but he was now at the wrong end of the negotiation.

Deep down John always knew the day would come. He just didn't think it would come so soon. The trips, the promotion to VP, the glory of moments in the light, the accolades from so many. It was intoxicating. It was wonderful. But it was empty. Not in the moment. The moments were a rush. He wanted them to go on and on. But it was like sandcastles at the beach. They always washed away to nothing at the end.

The sound of the Jag's engine was little more than a purr as he pulled into the parking lot just past his building. He looked up toward his office window at the Cell. His window, and the rest of the office was blanketed in shadows. A light breeze ruffled his hair as he approached the front door. It was near one-thirty in the morning. Even the die hards so zeroed in on the quest for the top would be gone. He realized he'd be forfeiting his job, next year's stock options, probably even the cover story next month in Hot Stock. But it didn't matter. He was tired. Exhausted. Time to fill the hole.

As he approached the inner vault where the soul discs were stored these days, he felt a touch of remorse for what he was about to do. But only for an instant. Then a sense of hope washed over him. Peace and relief. So far away. But close. The money, the houses, the boat the golf membership, his mind wasn't filled with them anymore.

He didn't bother to turn the lights on as swiped his security card through the door key. The soft click was muted by the hum of the computers on the inside of the vault. John went directly to the disc storage carousel and started the machine towards D. As he watched the discs spin past he became a bit nauseous. There were hundreds, had to be thousands of discs now here. He thought of the souls he had helped get here.

Finally he found his CD, used his security card again, and drew his CD out of its case. Just like hundreds of others he'd handled over the past fifteen years. But this one contained *his* soul.

The instructions on how to perform the restoration weren't hard to follow. Just hook up two electrodes to his temples and one to his heart, pop in the CD, hit RUN and wait.

The whirring of the disc was like thunder in the stillness of the office.

He waited.

Finally something began to appear on screen. A blue background filled the monitor as he closed his eyes and waited.

"Fill me!" his mind screamed. "Now!"

Then softer, "Please."

Then silence. He opened his eyes.

Tiny letters—the font couldn't have been bigger than 7 point—read:

THE CD YOU ARE TRYING TO ACCESS IS EMPTY. WOULD YOU LIKE TO FORMAT THE CD NOW? ABORT? OR RETRY?

There was no sound except the second hand ticking away on his Rolex and the noise of John's mouse as he clicked on RETRY again.

And again.

And again.