

With John Darwin finally coming clean about his faked death, Sarah Freeman talks to a man who makes a living from making people disappear.

John Darwin was no master criminal.

However long it took him to dream up the idea of faking his death in the hope of profiting from the proceeds from his life insurance, it wasn't long enough. The whole plan was littered with clues that things weren't exactly what they seemed.

When his red canoe was washed up off the Cleveland coast, a member of the emergency services, who helped with the 14-hour fruitless search, remarked the sea had been "as smooth as a mill pond" and when he turned up at a police station he couldn't have looked less like a man who had spent the previous five years suffering from amnesia and wondering who exactly he was.

Initially joyous stories of his miraculous reappearance were shortlived and when a photograph of Darwin and his wife Anne appeared to show them in Panama with a property agent, the plot, which will almost certainly be turned into a film, began to unravel.

The couple's two sons insisted they had no idea their father had faked his own death, but yesterday the 57-year-old former prison officer, who pleaded guilty to seven charges of obtaining cash by deception and a passport offence, finally owned up to a daring, but spectacularly badly planned fraud.

Anne, who has denied six counts of deception and nine charges related to using criminal property will face trial later in the year, but the whole sorry saga in which Darwin turned from hero to villain overnight showed just how far some people will go to escape.

"What John Darwin did was extreme, and let's not forget he was a criminal, but most of us have daydreamed at some point in our lives about being someone or somewhere else," says Frank Ahearn, who describes himself as a privacy expert.

"I know when I was married I spent a lot of time thinking 'how can I get out of this situation?'. It was totally overwhelming, you worry about losing the house, about being taken to the cleaners, and often the simplest thing would be to do a Reggie Perrin.

"Humans are emotional beings and while for most of us, the day dreaming is as far as it gets, there is something romantic about the lone person who walks off into the sunset. It is a fascinating thing to leave one life behind and start another."

While Frank carefully selects his clients and won't help people fake their deaths – known in the trade as "pseudocide" – or evade prosecution, the number of people, mostly men, seeking his help has increased by 10-fold in the last five years and, of the 210,000 people who go missing in this country each year, a significant number will have deliberately decided to disappear beneath the radar.

"A lot of women who come to me are trying to escape stalkers or violent husbands, a lot of men who come to me are wanting to leave behind a bad marriage or a bad business," he says. "I probably only take on 10 per cent of the people I speak to. It's easy to sense when people are lying, but we do check, for example, who has custody of any children and, if they claim to have been a victim of abuse I will always ask to see the police report."

Originally an investigator who helped track down people for law firms in America, when Frank spotted an unremarkable looking man browsing through a bookshop he realised his skills had other uses.

"It was five years or so ago when I saw this guy buying one book about off-shore banking and another about living in Costa Rica," he says. "It didn't take a genius to work out what he was doing, but the ridiculous thing was that he paid for everything with his credit card.

"Afterwards he went to grab a coffee and I told him I knew exactly what he was doing and if he didn't want whoever it was who was looking for him to find him he should perhaps think about getting rid of the plastic. He was totally shocked, but a couple of weeks later he gave me a call.

"It turned out he had testified in a court case against his former employer. His identity was supposed to be a secret, but somehow it had slipped out. When he began to get threatening phonecalls, he didn't feel he had any option but to disappear."

Frank, who uses a PO Box number and doesn't have a landline telephone, believes the sense of freedom which comes from disappearing can't be underestimated.

The man who helps people disappear

By Sarah Freeman - the Yorkshire Post - 3/14/08

Success is dependent on following a strict set of rules and, despite increasing technology storing huge amounts of personal information, he insists it is actually now easier for people to reinvent themselves than ever before.

"It definitely seems like more people are wanting to disappear," he says. "A lot of people just reach a time in their life when enough is enough and for those that take that big step, technology is much more of a friend than a foe.

"There's pay as you go phones, even pay as you go credit cards. The days when you had to go into a bank with an account book to withdraw money are long gone.

"My job is basically to go through a checklist with the client and ensure that all loose ends are tied up. The other thing I do is to create false leads, so if someone does come looking for them they will be faced with numerous options, all of them leading to a dead end."

The million dollar question of course is how much does it cost?

"I try not to charge those women who are desperate to escape an abusive relationship," he says. "Somehow that just wouldn't seem right, but in other cases it could be anything from \$15,000 to \$50,000.

"It might sound a lot, but I think it's a small price to pay for a new life, but those who think disappearing is an easy way out need to think again.

"The mistake people make is that they forget it's a complete lifestyle change, you can't do anything you used to do before.

That was the thing with John Darwin, he almost committed the perfect crime, but that photo was just, how can I put it, totally dumb.

"People get complacent and that's when they put themselves at risk of being discovered."

After five years in the disappearance business, Frank finds it difficult to imagine doing anything else, but he puts pay to any romantic notion that it's anything other than a job.

"I get the occasional call from people about what's the best way to visit their friends and that kind of thing, but I don't keep in touch with any of my clients in terms of a lasting friendship," he says.

"At first it was kind of exciting, but now it's just like any job, it's how I pay the bills."