

What's the story with... Disappearing?

by Marisa Duffy - 2/08/2007 - The Herald (UK)

Bemusement turned to disbelief this week as the tale of "presumed dead" canoeist John Darwin unravelled in the most dramatic fashion. Darwin was launched into the spotlight last Saturday as a missing man from Hartlepool who had turned up at a police station five years after going missing, claiming to have amnesia. The reason for his steadfast refusal to give any interviews or pose for photographs soon became obvious: the former teacher and prison guard appeared to have been in contact with his wife for some time. A photograph allegedly showing the couple in Panama last year led to John Darwin being arrested on allegations of fraud.

Many of the facts of this incredible tale have still to be established. Anne Darwin flew back to Britain yesterday to face the music. The couple's two sons issued an emotional statement disowning their parents and police have confirmed that, at this stage, they are not suspects.

While the audacity of the suspected fraud is breathtaking, the idea of escaping on the first plane to somewhere tropical and leading a wholly different, unburdened life, no doubt strikes a chord with many stressed-out executives. The best known example of starting a new life was that of fictional character Reginald Perrin which led to the phrase "doing a Reggie" when referring to people who fake their own death to start over.

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The programme, which started in 1976, was adapted by David Nobbs from his novel, *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*. It told the story of a man teetering on the edge of a breakdown and desperate to escape his dull marriage, disappointing offspring and the daily grind of his job. Reggie, memorably played by Leonard Rossiter, decides to end it all by walking into the sea, has a sudden change of heart and instead fakes his death.

At the time, similarities were drawn between the programme and the former Labour MP, John Stonehouse, who disappeared from a Miami beach in November 1974. He left his clothes at the water's edge and fled to Melbourne under the name Joseph Markham to start a new life with his secretary.

The idea has proved particularly enticing to individuals with something to hide. Karl Hackett was convicted of sexual assault as a teenager, so left his family and took the name Lee Simm to distance himself from his past.

He used the Paddington rail disaster as an opportunity to kill off his old identity and reported himself as missing in the wreckage. His family attended a memorial service for him but a chance meeting with a nephew revealed his deception.

Even those who are not escaping financial meltdown or a criminal past have been seduced by the idea of a new start. Lincolnshire docker Graham Cardwell, 46, scattered his clothes on mudflats close to his office in Immingham in 1998 and promptly started a new life in the Midlands, leaving behind his wife and three kids. Police caught up with

him eight months later but he refused to go home and police have kept his new identity secret.

While it may appear to be taking the easy option, sacrifices have to be made to avoid detection. There is also the loneliness which comes from having to keep a low profile. For those who feel there is no other option, a burgeoning industry of so-called privacy consultants can help set up a new, untraceable life. Frank Ahearn is a US-based privacy consultant who helps individuals who do not want to be found, including corporate whistleblowers and victims of stalking.

Ahearn's work is legal and he does not help clients fake their own deaths or escape justice or tax. The majority of his clients are male, something he puts down to men's ability to detach themselves. Such services are in increasing demand; Ahearn reports that his business has increased tenfold in five years. He believes the boom in internet-based companies, coupled with the use of mobile phones, has allowed individuals to operate from anywhere.