

If every mess tells a story, John Frycek is sitting at the start of a novel. He's behind his desk at his Far Northwest Side office, where the flat surfaces are all tchotchkes and weaponry. Ceramic figurines jam one shelf, cheek by jowl: a screaming eagle, a hobo clown, rearing elephants, a Japanese cat, a tiger—all facing in the same direction, as if regarding a good sunset. On the desk: three cans of pepper spray, one empty holster, and a clutch of files. On the bookshelf: mugs, shot glasses, and telling titles (*Get Even 2: More Dirty Tricks From the Master of Revenge*, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Spanish*, *The Millionaire Next Door*). The credenza is a mass of warning lights: phones, remotes, chargers, and detectors. Thumbtacked to the walls: cloth badges, the kind you'd sew on a uniform. "Chicago Police," one says. Below it: "Truth—Justice—American Way" and "Donut Police." There's also a beat-up fedora, naturally.

Frycek runs a detective agency (Special Solutions), a security company (Total Security), and a self-defense studio (Urban Survival Solutions), all out of a storefront at Milwaukee and Harlem in Edison Park. There's a single parking space out front, the Chicken Inn next door, and a Dunkin' Donuts across the street. Frycek, a large man, has a high, keening voice and a healthy goatee and speaks with his hands folded over his belly. He is a good-spirited Buddha, a student of the human experience, and a private detective to the bone.

This is the guy you come to when you want to find someone who is hiding—someone dodging a subpoena, someone who owes you money. Or to find what someone is hiding—an affair, a bogus workers' comp claim. Frycek, 52, has been doing this in Chicago for 32 years. He started by begging his way into an internship with a local PI and notched himself upward, working as a security guard and a department

store detective, training in hand-to-hand combat and martial arts, getting certified and licensed in everything from small weapons to electronics, and eventually opening his own agency in 1991. The framed 8-by-10s on his wall testify to the fact that he's had some brushes with famous people, as he's bodyguarded for Al Gore, Ben Carson, and Michael Douglas.

"So you're interested in finding people?" he says, sliding a box of Christmas cookies forward on the desk.

Right. No thanks.

He chews, lips out. "What, no cookie?"

No thanks. OK. One.

Decades ago, I worked for a time in a bail bond shop in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. It was not a particularly cool job, except that I got to answer the phone late at night using a punchy trochaic chant: "Bail bonds."

It was old-school. This was before caller ID, call forwarding. Before the internet, smartphones, GPS. Before computers were even useful. I was a night clerk, paid by the bondsman to sleep on a cot in a back office, catching incoming calls from jails all over the state, where stickers listing our 800 number were posted next to the pay phones. The inmates who called had no idea who I was. They only wanted out of jail. I took their information and paged the bondsman, who then phoned whichever one of his brothers lived nearest that jail, so that he could post bail the next morning.

The bondsman was a big black guy, a former cop, the brother of a cook at the restaurant where I worked otherwise. I believe his name was Luther. He wore an empty holster that pulled his shoulders back in a manner that looked painful. The shop had bars on the windows and a gun in the top drawer that Luther told me never to touch. He

paid me in cash. Always something different—\$20 one night, \$25 the next. Sometimes just 10 bucks, if I slept all the way through. I didn't care. Three nights a week I made money while I slept. It felt like I was stealing.

Bail jumping was rare. Only dummies jumped bail, Luther told me. That's what he told his clients, too. Most "skips," as Luther called them, weren't worth much of a reward. No bounty

hunters showed up to look for a drunk-and-disorderly skipping town on a \$400 bond. "You don't need a bounty hunter to find a skip," Luther liked to say. "You just need to know they mama."

Sometimes he'd use a guy he called the Trace to track skips down. The Trace was dogged and cagey. He saw the invisible commerce of secrets in a city neighborhood. He knew the churches, the shops, the parks. He knew

how to strike up a conversation with a stranger or sit hours in a car waiting out a target. "You can't hide from the Trace," Luther would say.

In Illinois, there are no bondsmen. The law here says no commercial entity can post bail money for you. You have to do it yourself or get someone you know to post it for you. It eliminates the middleman in an already fraught transaction between you and the state. But if you are

the one posting the bond for someone else, and that someone else doesn't show up for their next court appointment, you can try to find them yourself. Or you can hire a guy like John Frycek.

Frycek doesn't long for the good old days before the internet. He likes the footprint people leave behind online, which his software taps: work histories, rap sheets, property records, vehicle registrations. He loves social media,



"If you don't understand human nature, you're not going to go far in the business," says Frycek. "Finding someone is an art."