

She carefully placed the papers and the files in pile in the centre of the extensive lawn. They made a considerable pile. She added an old photograph album, which she tried to tear apart, but couldn't then a USB memory stick, a passport, a birth certificate and various other documents. When she was satisfied, she set fire to them, then sat back in a garden chair and watched the flames. Occasionally she leant forward and stirred in any papers that threatened to escape. She watched images from the album curl and scorch and then disappear. When everything had been consumed, she stared at the pile of black and grey ashes. It began to rain.<sup>1</sup>

Mary sat down on the wet grass and started to sob. How had it come to this? Paul had been so charming when they first met on that walking holiday. He had opened his heart to her – and that was genuine – or so she believed then. She begun to question her sanity. Now she asked herself how could she know if anyone she'd ever known had not been deceiving her?

'Pull yourself together,' she tried telling herself, but lapsing into the uncontrollable sobbing again. 'I ... I just can't live like this,' she decided. 'But I loved Paul. I welcomed him into my home.'

She had been so happy and given herself so completely to him. He had been so open so gentle so caring. He had made love to her so fully respecting her and thrilling her. They had shared so much and talked so deeply about their dreams.

'No, it was no use going there,' she mused. He had shattered her the day the police arrived accompanied by an MI5 officer and taken him away. She hadn't believed it until the closed trial ended and all the evidence that Paul was in fact Pavel a Czech national - a spy in the employment of the Russian state – whose story was carefully choreographed but total fiction. Yet they had loved together - laughed together - slept together - for three years!

She felt used and at the same time deceived. She knew she would never see him again. And now she felt so foolish. She wept again, then stared at the pile of ash. 'Well, where are all your dreams now, my girl – just a pile of ashes in the middle of my lawn?' She got up and went indoors and deliberately ran the bath to nearly full. 'You might as well,' a voice spoke to her mind. She stripped off naked, carefully dropping her cloths in a neat pile on the floor. 'You won't need any of them again.' She stepped into the bath and pulling her knees up, she decided she would wash all her hurt away. She submerged her head and torso and breathed out as far as she could. Then in despair she forced herself to breath the water into her lungs.

What happened next, she did not remember as she involuntarily and desperately tried to breath the water out. In the five seconds before she passed out, she had forced out half the water she had breathed in and collapsed over the side of the bath with her arms, head and shoulders hanging to the floor coughing violently.

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<sup>1</sup> This first paragraph was written by M Crocket as a challenge for U3A short-story writers to continue with.

Later she woke shivering uncontrollably and very cold: as she opened her eyes, at first all she could see was the bath mat. For a few seconds she wandered what was happening, before the memory slowly returned. She had tried to drown herself and must have failed. She started coughing again and with great difficulty clambered out of the bath and stumbled to the sink and took some sips of water. She was still shivering so she grabbed a towel and went to the study turned on the fan heater and sat down with the towel round her shoulders and the warm air soothingly blowing all the front of her naked body. After a while she began to feel better and questioned why she had trying to kill herself. 'Was that really the way out?', a more positive voice spoke to her, 'Why should her life be decided by Paul? Whether he was a criminal or not, surely her life was not going to be dictated by him or anyone else!'

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