

Betrayed by Mr

Like most women who have been married for the best part of four decades, Gill Hopes viewed her husband's idiosyncrasies not as faults but endearing qualities that contributed to the man she loved. She knew Paul liked spring rolls with his weekly Chinese takeaway but that anything with too much spice or garlic would upset his delicate constitution.

He enjoyed a round of golf and helping his son Mark win their local pub quiz. And after a stressful week in his accountancy job, he relaxed by tending the courgettes in their 200ft garden on the outskirts of Reading.

Although he wasn't the most affectionate of men, for her birthdays Gill had come to expect carnations, a dinner and dance at a nearby hotel



by
Antonia Hoyle

and sometimes even a trip to the theatre in London's West End to celebrate.

After 36 years theirs was not, understandably, a relationship in the first throes of passion. But over time it had developed into something deeper born out of companionship and mutual respect.

At least, that was how Gill had interpreted their relationship until a couple of months ago, when her perception of the man she had married and with whom she had raised two children became

somewhat different. Her husband was in charge of the purchase ledger at High Street giant Toys R Us. He had been with the company for 23 years, building a reputation as a diligent employee. With his greying hair, double chin and dependable manner, he was known to most simply as 'Paul from Finance' – and was the last person anyone expected to digress from his humdrum existence.

Yet three years ago Paul started creating bogus invoices to siphon off money from the company, which he used to fund a secret lifestyle of illicit sex, fast cars and luxurious hotels. He took sums ranging from £101,000 to £350,000 a time, stealing a total of £3.7 million.

Gill knew nothing of her husband's extraordinary double life and when he was arrested on suspicion of theft she believed his protestations of innocence. Even as he awaited trial Paul was determined to keep the most salacious details from her. Unfortunately for him, his solicitor thought she had a right to know.

Gill was called into the solicitor's office in October and informed that her husband had not been in meetings with the Berkshire and Buckinghamshire Football Association – where he was a board member – every Wednesday night but visiting two prostitutes at a massage parlour. He had taken them to £500-a-night hotels, plied them with expensive food and wines and showered them with wads of cash. And, as if that wasn't generous enough, he bought one of the women a Bentley to drive and paid off the other's mortgage.

Gill's initial reaction was one of confusion and shock. 'I sat there in disbelief. I couldn't speak or cry. I felt numb,' she says. 'I simply didn't understand how he could betray me in this way. I didn't have a clue what he was up to. Paul was hoping to retire in a couple of years and we were looking forward to a long and happy future. He had destroyed everything.'

Last month, Paul, 58, pleaded guilty to 14 counts of theft and four charges of money laundering at Reading Crown Court. He will be sentenced later this month. 'I've been married for such a

How dull, dependable 'Paul from Finance' stole £3.7m from Toys R Us to spend on a secret double life – by the wife who is now left to pick up the pieces

accountancy at night school. 'He wanted people to respect him,' says Gill. 'He liked being in charge.'

In 1985 Paul joined Toys R Us when it opened a branch in Reading. The American company has more than 1,500 stores in 33 countries, with its New York outlet the biggest toy shop in the world. Paul worked diligently from 8am to 5pm at his office in Maidenhead, rising steadily through the ranks to middle-management. He took no more than three days off sick throughout his career. By the time of his arrest he and Gill had been treated to a four-day trip to Cannes as a 'thank you' for his long-standing service to the company. He was driving a brand-new black company Mondeo and earning a respectable salary of £56,250 a year. 'Paul was conscientious,' she says. 'He took charge of our finances and had a pension. We weren't overly extravagant but we lived comfortably.'

Gill did the weekly shopping at her local Sainsbury's, paid for from their joint bank account, and bought her clothes from New Look at the local shopping precinct. Family dinners cost around £100 at their local Chinese restaurant, and evenings were spent watching repeats of *One Foot In The Grave* on television.

'Paul had a tendency to be grumpy so we called him Victor Meldrew,' Gill says. 'Sometimes I did wish he'd show me more affection but he's never been romantic. That wasn't his way. I knew he loved me and he was a good dad.'

The family went on annual family holidays to far-flung places like Naples in Florida and Australia. 'We couldn't afford anything five-star but as long as it had a pool, we were happy. I didn't ask for or receive fancy gifts.'

Certainly, her surroundings confirm the sentiment. Their stereo is 20 years old, their sofa bought over a decade ago. While their house is spacious enough, it is lived-in rather than luxurious. Perhaps Paul thought that, after devoting his lifetime to deciphering spreadsheets, he should have more to show for his hard graft.

Gill says that in the early years of their romance, they were consumed with passion. 'At first, we'd look at naughty magazines together but nothing kinkier than that. When we first got married we were

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Ordinary



YOUNG LOVE: Gill with Paul at their wedding in 1973. Their early days were full of passion, she recalls

love-dovey and didn't want to be apart. But things change as you get older and we weren't going to be all over each other for ever. The most risqué thing he ever did in bed with me was not wear pyjamas.'

As the years passed, sex was limited to twice a week, in the dark, before bed. Paul, meanwhile, was spending several nights away from home a week. 'He oversaw the finance in new branches of Toys R Us around the world, so he was often abroad for work,' Gill says. 'I got used to it. He was outgoing. I'm boring and prefer staying at home. I never suspected he was having an affair or thought either of us would ever cheat.'

The first inkling Gill got that their life was anything other than ordinary was on December 22 last year. She was doing the ironing when two plain-clothes policemen knocked on her door. They said Paul had been arrested on suspicion of stealing from Toys R Us and searched the house. 'I asked them why he would forfeit his career after 23 years and when he was so near retirement,' she says.

Paul was released on bail and returned home at 8pm that evening. He told Gill he was accused of stealing an almost inconceivable £3.7 million. 'It was such a huge amount of money, and so unlikely, that I thought

he must have been set up,' she says. 'I believed him when he said he hadn't done it. He sat, crying, with his head in his hands, saying he was innocent.'

Paul was sacked that day. His Mondeo was taken away and his bank accounts were frozen. Gill was left to pay their mortgage from her own £30,000 savings and she and their children pledged their support. She says: 'I had slight doubts, and I tried to talk to him about them, but he seemed so adamant that his innocence would be proved that I believed him. Why wouldn't I?'

Knowing his wife would throw him out if she realised the extent of his crime, Paul maintained his innocence, apparently convincing himself he would get away with it. He may well even have continued his trips to the prostitutes. But while he presented a confident front, he was, inside, beginning to crumble.

He was due in court in Reading on October 22 to enter his plea. Yet he told Gill he did not need to be there. 'I said he was being stupid but he didn't listen. He left the house and didn't answer his mobile. I grew increasingly worried.'

It was not until the next day that he returned – by which time a frantic Gill had reported him missing to the police. She says: 'I picked him up

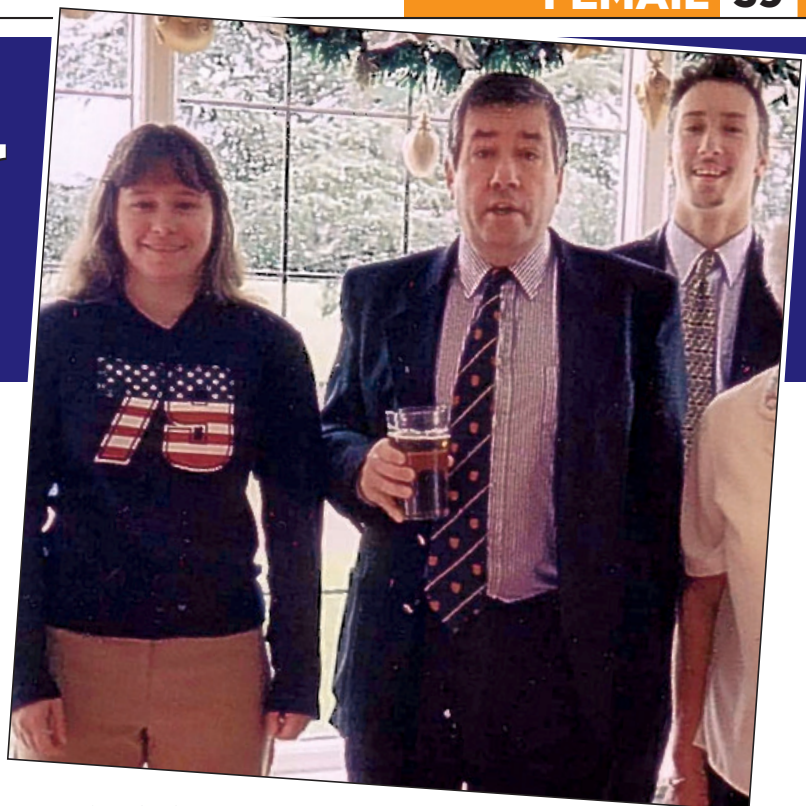
from the train station. He said he'd been lost and confused. He was weak and throwing up and looked pale. We rushed him to hospital and I told the police.' He was rearrested and, when he was discharged the following day, he was remanded in custody at Bullingdon prison in Bicester. Gill thought he had been taken into custody because he had failed to appear in court. It was only when Paul's

'He's a selfish coward who is still in denial'

solicitor called her into her office, asking her to bring daughter Carrie, that she realised the truth.

'I knew it must be serious because she'd asked me not to come alone,' Gill says. 'As Carrie and I sat down I asked her if Paul had been having an affair. She said it was worse than that and that she was only telling me because Paul refused to.'

She read out a statement Paul had given to the police. In it he said he had met a prostitute in 2005 after reading an advert for a Reading massage par-



HIDING A SECRET: Paul with daughter Carrie and son Mark at Christmas 2005, the year his double life started



FACING LIFE ALONE: Gill at the £400,000 family home she might now lose

lour in the local paper. The woman had later introduced him to a friend who was, in all probability, another prostitute. He saw at least one – and sometimes both – women on Wednesdays or Fridays, when he had told Gill he was at football meetings.

Gill refuses to give the names of the prostitutes, saying only that they live in Didcot, Oxfordshire, are in their 30s and that one was married.

He had told the women he was buying their 'food, drink and entertainment' with money he had received from his company bonus scheme. He had chosen a Bentley, he said, because 'every woman loves a Bentley'. It is that sentence that strikes Gill, who does not drive, as the most nonsensical, revealing the mindset of a deluded middle-aged man.

Paul's double life was uncovered after police grew suspicious of one of the women's newly lavish lifestyle and the Bentley outside her house.

Gill says: 'If he'd had an affair I might have forgiven him, or simply not known about it. But why steal for them? I can only conclude that either he was infatuated or he was being blackmailed into funding a lifestyle he'd never shown any desire for when he was with me.'

'I expect he'd only gone to see a prostitute in the first place because he'd had some kind of late midlife crisis. I can't bring myself to think about what he did in bed with them.'

She went to see Paul in prison the following week. 'I demanded answers. All he would say was that he'd made his bed and he had to lie in it, and that he had let everyone down,' Gill says. Paul told her that one of the women made him spend money on her, warning that otherwise she would tell Gill about their relationship. 'Then he started to cry,' she says. 'I just wanted an explanation. But I didn't even get an apology.'

'He is a selfish coward who is still in denial. I don't know how many

women there were. It wouldn't surprise me if he'd slept with more.'

She had taken Carrie – who has taken time off from her job at a local book shop because of stress – to prison with her for support. Her daughter is less hesitant than Gill in expressing her feeling of betrayal. 'It's as if he is dead. I have lost all respect for him,' she says. 'I think he is having some sort of a breakdown.'

Mark, who is now an accountant himself, has yet to visit his father.

On November 17, Paul – who is undergoing psychiatric testing in hospital – pleaded guilty at Reading Crown Court. It was revealed he had four separate bank accounts in which he made payments to fake Far Eastern companies he had invented between June 2006 and November 2008. It is not yet known how much of the money is left in them, nor whether Toys R Us will be successful in its reported attempts to retrieve the money in civil proceedings from the Hopes.

Gill, meanwhile, has taken over all the family finances and is down to her last £1,000. She faces losing the family home. She is aware that those around her are gossiping but refuses to apologise. 'I'm not incriminated and I'm not ashamed,' she says. 'My friends are angry for me. Now I keep thinking of the nights he was away and wondering if he was on work trips, or seeing other women.'

She is expecting him to be sentenced to eight years in prison. He wants her to continue the visits. 'I hate the thought of him being in jail but he needs to pay for what he's done,' she says. 'Maybe afterwards I'll begin to accept it.'

'There was nothing at all to suggest he was leading a double life, or that he didn't love me. I feel totally betrayed and bewildered by how he can throw away everything we had.'

*Additional reporting:
Lauren Taylor*