One of the first Americans Mary Snowfire met in London was a girl named Gretchen, who told her she was doing graduate work on the European Economic Community, and then smiled and smoothed her chic velvet knickerbockers and said she also worked for an escort agency. ‘You have to, here. It’s the only way you can manage financially.’ Gretchen had a Saab Turbo and a big apartment in Fulham. She talked about ‘Saudis.’ ‘I’ve met some really interesting people. It’s not what you think. I’m not a hooker.’

But escort agency meant hookers for hire, didn’t it?

‘You have dinner usually. Or you go to a play. After that it’s up to you.’

Gretchen was also a tennis player. She spoke French. She had a tan. She owned a sun-bed. Some weekends she went to Paris.

‘Do they pay you?’

‘You wouldn’t believe how much! Some of those girls could retire. They make a fantastic amount.’

‘Sure,’ Mary said, ‘but what do they have to do for it?’

She said ‘they’ but she meant Gretchen.

Gretchen said, ‘They do everything.’

Everything seemed frantic, pleasureless, repetitive, exhausting.

Gretchen said, ‘They’re really well paid.’

‘Doesn’t that mean it’s prostitution?’ Mary asked.

‘Oh, no. It’s much more than they’re worth,’ Gretchen said. ‘That’s why it’s not prostitution.’

Gretchen offered to introduce her to the manager of the agency, but Mary laughed and said no thanks, and she did her best to hide her disgust. She was also shocked by the easy way that Gretchen confided this matter. If you had to do these things to live here,

why live here?

Gretchen changed the subject. She began talking about the EEC in a dull and knowledgeable way, and wasn't it a scandal that the French farmers were paid a subsidy to produce butter that was sold cheap to the Soviet Union in order to keep the prices high in the European butter market?

Mary listened to the pretty girl and later got a nanny job, looking after three small children. She lived at the top of the house, which was just off the Fulham Road. She could hear the buses. For this job she was paid ten pounds a week – less than twenty dollars. Her room was part of her salary. Some girls were not paid at all, the woman said: they were jolly glad to have a place to live in return for helping with the kids! And Mary thought: No wonder girls like Gretchen meet Arabs in the Hilton and go to bed with them. ('At midnight you say, "I've really got to go. I've got a heavy day tomorrow at the Institute," and you walk out with three hundred pounds.')

Mary had wanted to live in London more than she wanted a husband or a lover. She was from Gainesville, Florida, an English major from the university there. She had very little spare money, but the standby fare to London was a hundred and fifty dollars. After a month at the Fulham Road house she saw that a bookstore near the cinema had a card in the window saying SALES STAFF WANTED. She was interviewed by the manager, Mr Shortridge, and hired. When she resigned from her nanny job she did not tell the woman that her husband had made an improper suggestion (kept pinching her hard and saying, 'How about it?') and that this was the main reason she was leaving.

In her new job, Mary discovered what many people like Gretchen already knew – that there was a great deal of good will toward Americans in London. We had style, we worked hard, we were full of life, we understood money, we succeeded where others failed. We were associated with luck.

By planning her life and measuring what she wanted against what she could afford, Mary established herself. She had moved to a bed-sitter that was directly over an Italian grocery store. She painted her room; she sewed new curtains; Mr Shortridge gave her Penguin posters – portraits of Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, and William Faulkner. Each one said A PENGUIN AUTHOR. Their orange matched her orange room. She had a bike (five pounds from a junk shop – she fixed it up), a gas fire, and a plug-in radio (batteries made radios expensive). Her geraniums, her small avocado tree, her pots of ivy she had all grown herself. The bright ferny tub of marijuana that thrived in a sunny corner of the room had been left by the last tenant.

She became friendly with the owner of the grocery store and his wife. They knew how little money she had and gave her a discount, and sometimes they gave her packaged food when the date stamp had just expired. This Italian couple, who had English

accents, had relatives in Newark, New Jersey! Mary knew that they looked upon her as another exile, trying to make her way in this city of cold rooms, and hallways smelling of dust and bacon fat, and wet streets and brown skies.

London was not the London of her Gainesville dreams. It was sadder, darker, stranger, narrower, newer, dirtier, more oppressive. Now she understood why Gretchen had become a prostitute in an escort agency. But Mary felt that London was teaching her how to live against the odds.

She knew she could not have a boy friend or a lover. They required too much time, they demanded favors, they crowded her and made her careless. In her first weeks in London she had gone out a half a dozen times with men she had met. She went to pubs, to the movies, and once to a disco. She insisted on paying her share – it was expensive! One drink in a pub was around two dollars! The British seemed easier about money – no one had any. But Mary could manage only by living narrowly. It was hard and comfortless and sometimes very lonely. It was a delicate balance, but friends could be unpredictable, and everything depended on close planning, because she had so little.

She had never smoked; she stopped drinking; she became a vegetarian. She began to dislike cats for being meat-eaters. She had never felt healthier or tougher. It was a satisfaction, this kind of survival. She didn't care that it made her seem a little selfish. She had started with nothing. She had discovered how to be independent, and she was glad, because she was a woman, and they weren't expected to be loners. When she thought of Gretchen or saw a woman with a rich man who was obviously keeping her, Mary Snowfire smiled and thought: She lays eggs for gentlemen.

Mary was twenty-four, and slim, and had long legs. She could run five miles. She told the truth. She became so angry when someone lied to her that she couldn't sleep. Occasionally, customers in the bookstore lied to her: 'That's what I said the first time,' or 'I gave you a ten-pound note and you gave me change for a fiver.' She wanted to hit them.

After six months she considered that she had won her freedom. It was then that she became friendly with the fellow Brenhouse. He worked as a delivery man for Howletts, the book publisher, but Brenhouse also supplied books from the Blackadder Press, a publisher of Trotskyite literature. This bookstore reflected Mr Shortridge's political views. Mr Shortridge had been to Cuba.

Brenhouse was extremely thin, in his early twenties, and from Whitby, in Yorkshire, where the Blackadder Press was. He had hair to his shoulders and a drooping mustache and a long nose. He looked like Robert Louis Stevenson. His hands were skinny and usually dirty, and he bit his fingernails until they bled. But Mary regarded him as sort of romantic, because he lived outdoors, in a lean-to on Mitcham Common.

It was perfectly legal there – it was common land: men lived there like savages, squatting near smoky fires, and boiling soup in black kettles. In cold weather they wore socks on their hands and lined their coats with old newspapers and stuffed them up their pants. They carried their belongings in baby carriages twenty miles or more. Brenhouse told her these things. Mary thought: The poor kid sleeps in a Surrey ditch with hoboes and homeless men and he still works every day! He had built his own shelter and had a sleeping bag. He said he was better off than many people in this country. Mary admired him for saying that.

She had once thought she was living the life most men led, until she met Brenhouse, who slept on the ground. There was sometimes a cloudy droplet at the tip of his nose. He offered the information that he kept clean by using public baths. London was full of bath houses for people who didn't have tubs at home. This was 1981! His talk made her grateful for what she had.

Some nights, in her warm room – the warmth brought the scorched smell of new paint off the wood – she thought of Brenhouse and shuddered, feeling faintly ashamed. Though she knew there was no virtue in living outdoors like that, she felt it was beyond her capabilities. Shouldn't women be able to endure such hardships? If you had to do it, you could, Brenhouse said. But Mary thought: If I had to do it, I would die.

The cold London winter was colder even than the predictions. Snow fell in big white crumbs and made the streets simple and small. It was not plowed, no one shoveled it, it did not melt. After a week it was still on the ground, but dirtier, and the temperature dropped. Walking down the Fulham Road was treacherous. Mary saw dead sparrows in snow holes, where they had fallen and frozen. Cats walked in the soft snow in a high-stepping tentative way, making spider legs. Strangers spoke to each other in worried reminiscing voices. This London weather was remarkable, almost unbelievable, and everyone had something different to say about it. The first week of storms was exciting, but the city was changed and the next week similar storms were cruel.

And one night, the coldest night so far, there was a rapping on Mary's door.

It was Brenhouse. Five minutes ago she had been thinking of him! He did not ask to come in. He did not speak. His skin was red and gray, his cheeks looked bruised, but after an hour in the room he became pale. His breathing was harsh. He stayed the night, sleeping on the floor. He did not take off his clothes, and though he was wrapped in two blankets he smelled of dirt and oil smoke.

'I thought I was going to die,' he said the next morning, his first words, and he was still pale.

Mary knew that he planned to stay. He was afraid of the cold for the first time. The

snow lay everywhere in London, like black slop.

She said, ‘Don’t you have a friend somewhere?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘Only you.’

How could this be true of a man who lived in his own country when it was not true even of Mary, who had lived in London less than a year?

Suddenly he said, ‘It’s only seven-thirty!’

‘I have to open the bookshop,’ Mary said.

‘In Mitcham I never get up before nine.’

He made it sound like luxury, and he was talking about a scrapwood lean-to on a scrubby common in the dead of winter. The rigid tip of his long nose, which had been very red last night, was pale as gristle today.

Mary said, ‘What about your job?’

‘I’m not going in today. I’ll call in sick. Want to go to the pictures?’

This was why she hated men and boy friends. They recklessly decided to tell lies or turn their back on things. Maybe it was their strength, but it was crooked strength.

She said, ‘You’ll get fired.’

Brenhouse swore. Obscenity was always an ugly foreign language to her and she translated what Brenhouse said as To hell with them.

‘I can find work back home.’ He snorted, pushing at one nostril with a knuckle. ‘Whitby.’

When Mary returned to her room that night, he was wrapped in a blanket and sitting cross-legged on her bed, reading a Blackadder pamphlet, something about wealth and property. He looked contented. His hair was still damp from his bath; his nose was shiny. Where had he found the towel?

The gas fire was hissing, and the room was so warm it raised his soap smell and the paint and the geraniums and some lunch odors – he had made himself a fried egg, the greasy skillet still on the hotplate. Mary began to tidy the room and, seeing her, Brenhouse tried to help.

‘I’m not used to bourgeois living,’ he said.

What about the bath, the meal, his leisurely reading? And he had scrubbed the dirt out of his fingernails.

Brenhouse was at the sink doing his dishes. Mary would have done them: she liked cleaning the room alone, but with Brenhouse doing it too the housework seemed like drudgery. He was talking.

‘We can go up the pub.’

‘I hate pubs,’ she said.

‘Then I’ll go out and get a bottle of plonk,’ he said. ‘It’s the least I can do.’

That was true: it was the least he could do. It was a characteristic of too many Englishmen, Mary thought, this doing as little as possible, and presuming; and some of them lived like pigs. He brought back a two-liter bottle of Spanish wine, and she remembered that she had given up drinking.

She bought cheese from the Italian downstairs and made canneloni and salad. They ate, sitting on cushions in front of the gas fire.

Brenhouse said, ‘There’s no meat in this, love.’

‘I’m a vegetarian,’ she said.

‘I eat anything,’ Brenhouse said. He had a weevil’s nose. He stared at her and smiled, and when she shrugged he filled her glass to the brim with the cheap wine.

She drank it because this bottle was his gift to her. He filled the glass again and she drank that. He began wickedly again with the big bottle. Mary tried to stand up, but couldn’t; nor could she sit. She lay on the floor until the side of her face grew hot. Before she sank completely, she felt his hands on her. He was lifting her clothes in a rough and hurrying way. And then for an hour or more she had little glimpses of herself being pushed and pulled by him. At the end, he shouted at her in a doomed and adoring way.

In the morning Mary woke up in her bed and saw he was gone. The room had been turned upside down. The truth was easy to see in a room so small. He had stolen her money; he had taken her keys, her watch, her earrings, her one bracelet, her Florida paperweight, her radio. His smell was on the bed. It was that, his dreadful smell, which made her cry. Then, remembering the way he had shouted in his passion, she became angry. She ran to the bookstore. It was eight-thirty.

Mr Shortridge was already inside.

‘We’ve had a break-in,’ he said. ‘It must have happened in the night. The till’s empty.’

He was trying not to be cross. He always said that the Tory government deserved crime and that property owners and landlords were thieves. Now his hands were in the empty cash drawer. He said no more. He chewed his tongue.

Mary said, ‘It wasn’t a break-in,’ and explained, and began to cry again, and only her anger stopped her tears.

Then she had no time for grief, none for tears; she was falling. She had no job – Mr Shortridge sorrowfully fired her and when she mentioned the week’s pay that he owed her, his lips trembled and he said, ‘You should be paying me.’ Her rent was due. Brenhouse had taken her checkbook – but there was no money in the account. He had taken her Parker pen! Everything shiny, everything of value, the savage had taken. He had stuck his horrible nose everywhere.

Mary had nothing in this dark brown winter-wet city.

Gretchen was glad to hear from her, though Gretchen’s first mood on the phone was a mixture of sex and suspicion – her escort voice. Then her tone was girlish. ‘Have you changed your mind about the agency?’

‘I need some money,’ Mary said. ‘A loan. Would ten pounds be all right?’

‘You could earn two hundred by dinnertime,’ Gretchen said.

Mary said, ‘I’d kill the first man that touched me.’

They met for tea that day. Gretchen handed over some money. It was fifty pounds.

Mary counted it and cried because it was so much. She was aware that she wore a starved and crazy expression, but she couldn’t help it.

‘I’ll pay you back.’

‘Nothing to pay back,’ Gretchen said. ‘Fifty quid isn’t money.’

But to Mary’s mind it was money, but a man had given it to Gretchen, but what had she done in return? But she was really generous. But it was no way to live.

Gretchen talked about her work at the Institute, and the European oilfields, and the

future of Arab oil. Mary thought only of the thief Brenhouse. There was a glut, Gretchen said, and everyone thought there was a shortage. Gretchen said, ‘I could show you the figures – I’ve made an amazing flow-chart. Oh, God, I’ve got to run.’ She made a friendly face. ‘A date.’

Mary was still holding the money, rolled into a tube. She said, ‘I have to get my bike fixed and buy a few things.’

‘You’re funny,’ Gretchen said. ‘But I think you’re right. You’d hate being an escort.’

Mary felt there was a yellow flame of anger in her that kept her alive. She wanted to find this man who had treated her like an ignorant animal. He was the animal – he had the snout for it! She walked to Fulham Broadway and bought a light for her bike. She set off for Mitcham Common, pedaling fast. She knew she was behaving like the animal he had made her. But he had created this rage in her.

Two old men sat on their heels in front of the fire, watching it with pink watery eyes. They didn’t know Brenhouse. Had she been over to the spinney? They sent her to this wooded part of the common, not far, but she noticed they were following her like stupid hungry hounds. There was no sign of anyone else here. They were trying to confuse her or trap her! She hissed at them, and they stood aside, and her bike took her quickly away.

There were fires and camps all over this common. Scraps of snow still lay on the ground, like filthy bandages.

She surprised a pair of schoolboys smoking cigarettes. They guiltily agreed to help her. Perhaps she looked like their teacher? Their search turned up Brenhouse’s ditch and the lean-to and the dead smelly fire. Brenhouse had cleared out. She did not pity him at all when she saw this rat’s nest – she hated him much more.

A man with a gray face and a coat of long rags was watching her. This place was full of tramps! This one was young, about Brenhouse’s age, but heavier, and his weight made him look shabbier and nastier.

‘I’ve got news for you,’ he said.

‘I hate that expression,’ she said. It was a man’s belittling expression, I’ve got news for you. She wanted to hit him.

The young man laughed. He knew she was wasting her time.

‘He’s gone home!’ His gray mocking face seemed to say And there’s nothing you can do about it!

Mary said, ‘Where does he live?’

‘He’s a Yorkshireman, isn’t he?’ But it was not a question. He added, ‘I’ve got no time for Yorkshiremen’ – to insult her, because she was involved with Brenhouse; the fat young man could see that.

She remembered Whitby.

‘Don’t go away,’ she said to the schoolboys who had helped her find this campsite. The fat young man would not touch her while they were around. The boys escorted her to the road, but said nothing, and even refused the tangerine she offered them as a present.

Howletts, the publishers, confirmed that Brenhouse was in Whitby. They were very angry with him, and when she said he owed her money they understood, and in an encouraging way – she felt – they gave Mary his address.

She did not sleep that night. The room was no longer hers. Brenhouse had robbed and ruined her. Her life had depended on a delicate balance. Brenhouse had stumbled into her little room and betrayed her, all the while looking down his nose at her. She had never once asked anything of him. He was a pig; he deserved worse than death. She cried, feeling trapped in a ditch where he had thrown her and tried to smother her. Why are men thieves?

Each night after that she cried again. But she was crying because it was dark and she could not travel in the dark. Her tears were fury.

She had sold everything that she could sell and bought an Army sleeping bag, arctic model. She had then dressed herself in her warmest clothes (bleak-brown February had turned the snowfields to dampness and mud) and set off on her bike for Whitby. In this small country of four directions she had taken the longest one.

She was fighting the wind as soon as she left London. Her head was down and her body bent double and braced over her bike frame. She had rejected the train, the bus, or hitchhiking. She needed this effort so that she could use her fury. Each day on her bike her anger gave her strength. It was food, it refreshed her, it kept her warm. She did not sleep easily beside the stone walls of villages and farms, but her fury enlivened her when she was awake. And sleep that was too deep was dangerous on cold nights: you could freeze and not know it.

The roads were clear; the thaw was general and filthy. And even with the rain pelting against her, she flew. Some days in high winds she screamed curses at him. She hated the thought of his beaky face.

She had become possessed. Fury made her a demon, but it also made her efficient. She saw nothing unusual in this speeding along back roads on her bike, but her throat burned with shrieks as she beat uphill toward Yorkshire. Men stood in muddy fields or against high brambly hedges and watched her. They were curious, but after they had had a good look at her they were afraid. She went fast; the effort strengthened her; she felt she was being flung toward Whitby by black winds.

From Ely and the Fens, she skirted the Wash and made for the Lincolnshire Wolds, then across the Humber to York and the long hills of that dark county to Scarborough. She was in Whitby the next day; she knew it by the ruined abbey – her gaze continually traveled up to it.

She did not stop. She had by now memorized Brenhouse's address and the roads to it. Hunger had increased her fury: she had not eaten since morning. It was now a cold windy midafternoon, muffled by cloud.

She had imagined him alone in an empty room and defenseless. Her mind had simplified the imagining and made it helpful, and had tricked her. The truth was a tiny brick house in a bottled-up lane, with no view of either the moor or the sea. There was no answer to her knock. She drank a cup of tea at a café. She had four pounds and sixty-seven pence left, but once this was done nothing mattered.

Her dirty face and red hands frightened the woman at the tea urn.

Leaving the café, she saw him – she was sure it was Brenhouse – walking down the road. And he saw her. But he smiled and looked away, probably guessing that he had imagined her in this distant place, and smirking at his mistake. How could she have got here so fast in the winter with no money?

Furiously, she followed him. She was impatient. Now, hearing her rapid steps, he looked again. This made her eager. She held her weapon up her sleeve. No: he had not recognized her.

He had pushed through the door of a pub, but when Mary entered she could not see him. There was smoke and chatter; nearly all were men, some staring at her. She saw her own scarf around someone's neck! It was one she had bought in London. The person's head was turned, but she knew whose it was. Two strides took her to the chair and then she had his long hair in her hand and was yanking his head back so that he faced the ceiling.

Brenhouse tried to stand up. He shouted. His look of horror filled her unexpectedly with pity, and it frightened her, too. No one made a move to help him, or to restrain her in her swift movement. The cloudy light came through the painted pub window

with gulls' nagging squawks. Brenhouse was clutching his face; blood streamed from his hands. Then Mary was seized from behind.

'His throat's cut,' she heard.

And 'She never cut his throat.'

She hadn't touched his throat, but she had cut him with the scissors she surrendered to the men.

All this she told me on the train south from York, after her two weeks in the hospital. She was treated for exhaustion and dehydration, and Brenhouse was there, too, in another ward – severe laceration of the face, as the newspapers said. She had scissored a little more than half an inch from the end of his nose.

But there were no charges laid against Mary Snowfire. The London Embassy was involved because she had no money – and I was sent to escort her back to London and arrange her repatriation. We flew her to Florida. She said she would repay every cent. I felt sure she would keep her word.