



*Josh's childhood has always been fuelled by the need to escape, from his car obsessed Dad, his fed-up Mum, and the assortment of crazed neighbours littering his Sussex childhood. When Josh meets F at Highgate Ponds years later he knows she is his last chance. They travel to America, but their desperate journey fails to deliver the carp-filled dream continent Josh had imagined. Joyride... is a unique and poetic, anarchic tragedy.*

### **Extract**

I was laying on my bed Wednesday dinner time when the phone rang and the old lady shouted upstairs, You're wantid . Atlanta was in a phonebox in Hawkhurst, out shopping on her own. Said she'd pick me up outside The Library if I liked, pronto. As we drove out to Sandhurst I could hear muted bottles rattling in the back under a travel rug. Ashley was standing in the driveway sucking his thumb. Atlanta wound the window down.

-Darling, go count ten minutes right down the bottom of the orchard, honey.

He stooped away in silence. There were two crates of booze in the back. She told me to carry them upstairs to the top landing then go wait for Ashley:

-I gotta hide these bottles now and he only counts five, the liddle shit.

Ashely hadn't even bothered counting five. He was standing on the back lawn ringing his hands. Atlanta came right down.

-Shove Ashley, like I toldya, okay?

We watched him walk all the way to the bottom of the orchard.

-Doesn't he know? I asked.

-Who, *him*? Ashley?

-No, yes. I mean anyone...

-Neither of em know. You don't mean James fa chrissake? Haw, my husband, James. Christ! Doan leddit getya down. Listen, my vintner keeps his mouth shut, right? I pay. *I* pay. Pay pay pay pay. So you-know-who ain gonna know. It easy comes out the nine dollars housekeeping.

-What? Nine quid? Nine quid a week?

-No goddamit. You think we starve? I doan know how much. Nine quid a stinkin day, what else?

I said my old man only earned £40 a week.

Atlanta said:

-Well ya gotta drink honey if it takes nine quid a day! Gotta live dam mit.

She finished a cigarette at the orchard table then went upstairs to take her valium. She came down half an hour later with a glazed face and Hardy's poems, slumping against the table sweating yellow.

-Here. Readem loud t' me willya.

Folded between every other page was a sheet of lined foolscap, well pressed, faded and suffocated.

-My anthology, she said. Me an Hardy. You read my half t'yaself.

The two I read were handwritten, blue ink, looped sloping letters in neat ranks about New England glades, sunsets in fall, that old white wooden house by the pond up a dirt track through half blue hills she'd never see again it was all so, so lost. She rhymed Boston with lost'em, deep blue hills with keep new pills. As I read she kept interrupting saying:

-Well? Well? Well? Yeah, poetess me, hey. Ya know, I put maself somewhere between Liz Browning and Emily D...

Eyelids dropping, jaw hanging open, her arm fell over her foot like a baboon. I thought she was dead. But she'd only passed out and slipped off the bench in a crumpled twist, both legs trapped under the table, her face upside down on the sharp yellow grass. Thinking of Mr Fairservice-Frost on the piano, I finished off the verse aloud, you know, hanging on to that final note while you've got it.

*The ancient pulse of germ and birth  
Was shrunken hard and dry  
And every spirit upon the earth  
Seem'd fervourless as I...*

Ashley helped me drag her like a hammock into the house. He was a massive build for his age, fisty, sullen, rock silent. His characteristic movement was a scowled headshake to flick the heavy black fringe from his eyes. Hair which made him look 15, a good man in school mud. We anchored her to the sofa. Ashley was used to her dropping on to the floor, the way he chocked her up with cushions, positioning her head so it was face down. She snored and horsed her teeth each snarl. I found her sandals in the orchard and took some air. She'd made me feel sick. Just the sight of her hammer toes and the hair stuck to the sweat on her face... Then Ashley wedged her sandals back on and she pissed herself. He turned away, both fists tight. Her piss sounded like a leaking hose. The hurt and shame on Ashley's face needed comforting, but I failed him. All I could say was:

-What about you?

-Oh I'll be alright, he said. I don't mind if you want to go home. I know what she is...