

Dryad
by Joanne Harris



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*Joanne Harris was born in Yorkshire in 1964, the daughter of a French mother and an English father. She was a French teacher at a boys' grammar school in Leeds when her first novel, *The Evil Seed*, was published in 1989. Since then she has written *Sleep*, *Pale Sister*, the Whitbread-shortlisted *Chocolat* (now a major film), *Blackberry Wine*, *Five Quarters of the Orange*, *Coastliners*, and *Holy Fools*. She has also written a cookery book, *The French Kitchen*, with Fran Warde. Her first collection of short stories, "Jigs & Reels," has just been published. Joanne Harris gave up teaching four years ago to write full-time and lives with her husband and young daughter in Yorkshire.*

Lesley Cunningham



Lesley Cunningham is 41 years old and is from Liverpool. Lesley went back to school to do her 'A' Levels, including English, as an adult. This is the first writing competition that she has entered and she wrote her ending in two days!

DRYAD: JOANNE HARRIS

IN A QUIET LITTLE CORNER of the Botanical Gardens, between a stand of old trees and a thick holly hedge, there is a small green metal bench. Almost invisible against the greenery, few people use it, for it catches no sun and offers only a partial view of the lawns. A plaque in the centre reads: In Memory of Josephine Morgan Clarke, 1912-1989. I should know – I put it there – and yet I hardly knew her, hardly noticed her, except for that one rainy Spring day when our paths crossed and we almost became friends.

I was twenty-five, pregnant and on the brink of divorce. Five years earlier, life had seemed an endless passage of open doors; now I could hear them clanging shut, one by one; marriage; job; dreams. My one pleasure was the Botanical Gardens; its mossy paths; its tangled walkways, its quiet avenues of oaks and lindens. It became my refuge, and when David was at work (which was almost all the time) I walked there, enjoying the scent of cut grass and the play of light through the tree branches. It was surprisingly quiet; I noticed few other visitors, and was glad of it. There was one exception, however; an elderly lady in a dark coat who always sat on the same bench under the trees, sketching. In rainy weather, she brought an umbrella; on sunny days, a hat. That was Josephine Clarke; and twenty-five years later, with one daughter married and the other still at school, I have never forgotten her, or the story she told me of her first and only love.

It had been a bad morning. David had left on a quarrel (again), drinking his coffee without a word before leaving for the office in the rain. I was tired and lumpish in my pregnancy clothes; the kitchen needed cleaning; there was nothing on TV and everything in the world seemed to have gone yellow around the edges, like the pages of a newspaper that has been read and re-read until there's nothing new left inside. By midday I'd had enough; the rain had stopped, and I set off for the Gardens; but I'd hardly gone in through the big wrought-iron gate when it began again – great billowing sheets of it – so that I ran for the shelter of the nearest tree, under which Mrs Clarke was already sitting.

We sat on the bench side-by-side, she calmly busy with her sketchbook, I watching the tiresome rain with the slight embarrassment that enforced proximity to a stranger often brings. I could not help but glance at the sketchbook – furtively, like reading someone else's newspaper on the Tube – and I saw that the page was covered with studies of trees. One tree, in fact, as I looked more closely; our tree – a beech – its young leaves shivering in the rain. She had drawn it in soft, chalky green pencil, and her hand was sure and delicate, managing to convey the texture of the bark as well as the strength of the tall, straight trunk and the movement of the leaves. She caught me looking, and I apologised.

“That's all right, dear,” said Mrs Clarke. “You take a look, if you'd like to.” And she handed me the book.

Politely, I took it. I didn't really want to; I wanted to be alone; I wanted the rain to stop; I didn't want a conversation with an old lady about her drawings. And yet they were wonderful drawings – even I could see that, and I'm no expert – graceful, textured, economical. She had devoted one page to leaves; one to bark; one to the tender cleft where branch meets trunk and the grain of the bark coarsens before smoothing out again as the limb performs its graceful arabesque into the leaf canopy. There were winter branches; summer foliage; shoots and roots and windshaken leaves. There must have been fifty pages of studies; all beautiful, and all, I saw, of the same tree.

I looked up to see her watching me. She had very bright eyes, bright and brown and curious; and there was a curious smile on her small, vivid face as she took back her sketchbook and said: "Piece of work, isn't he?"

It took me some moments to understand that she was referring to the tree.

"I've always had a soft spot for the beeches," continued Mrs Clarke, "ever since I was a little girl. Not all trees are so friendly; and some of them – the oaks and the cedars especially – can be quite antagonistic to human beings. It's not really their fault; after all, if you'd been persecuted for as long as they have, I imagine you'd be entitled to feel some racial hostility, wouldn't you?" And she smiled at me, poor old dear, and I looked nervously at the rain and wondered whether I should risk making a dash for the bus shelter. But she seemed quite harmless, so I smiled back and nodded, hoping that was enough.

"That's why I don't like this kind of thing," said Mrs Clarke, indicating the bench on which we were sitting. "This wooden bench under this living tree – all our history of chopping and burning. My husband was a carpenter. He never did understand about trees. To him, it was all about product – floorboards and furniture. They don't feel, he used to say. I mean, how could anyone live with stupidity like that?"

She laughed and ran her fingertips tenderly along the edge of her sketchbook. "Of course I was young; in those days a girl left home; got married; had children; it was expected. If you didn't, there was something wrong with you. And that's how I found myself up the duff at twenty-two, married – to Stan Clarke, of all people – and living in a two-up, two-down off the Station Road and wondering; is this it? Is this all?"

That was when I should have left. To hell with politeness; to hell with the rain. But she was telling my story as well as her own, and I could feel the echo down the lonely passages of my heart. I nodded without knowing it, and her bright brown eyes flicked to mine with sympathy and unexpected humour.

"Well, we all find our little comforts where we can," she said, shrugging. "Stan didn't know it, and what you don't know doesn't hurt, right? But Stanley never had much of an imagination. Besides, you'd never have thought it to look at me. I kept house; I worked hard; I raised my boy – and nobody guessed about my fella next door, and the hours we spent together."

She looked at me again, and her vivid face broke into a smile of a thousand wrinkles. "Oh yes, I had my fella," she said. "And he was everything a man should be. Tall; silent; certain; strong. Sexy – and how! Sometimes when he was naked I could hardly bear to look at him, he was so beautiful. The only thing was – he wasn't a man at all."

Mrs Clarke sighed, and ran her hands once more across the pages of her sketchbook. "By rights," she went on, "he wasn't even a he. Trees have no gender – not in English, anyway – but they do have identity. Oaks are masculine, with their deep roots and resentful natures. Birches are flighty and feminine; so are hawthorns and cherry trees. But my fella was a beech, a copper beech; red-headed in autumn, veering to the most astonishing shades of purple-green in spring. His skin was pale and smooth; his limbs a dancer's; his body straight and slim and powerful. Dull weather made him sombre, but in sunlight he shone like a Tiffany lampshade, all harlequin bronze and sun-dappled rose, and if you stood underneath his branches you

could hear the ocean in the leaves. He stood at the bottom of our little bit of garden, so that he was the last thing I saw when I went to bed, and the first thing I saw when I got up in the morning; and on some days I swear the only reason I got up at all was the knowledge that he'd be there waiting for me, outlined and strutting against the peacock sky.

Year by year, I learned his ways. Trees live slowly, and long. A year of mine was only a day to him; and I taught myself to be patient, to converse over months rather than minutes, years rather than days. I'd always been good at drawing – although Stan always said it was a waste of time – and now I drew the beech (or The Beech, as he had become to me) again and again, winter into summer and back again, with a lover's devotion to detail. Gradually I became obsessed – with his form; his intoxicating beauty; the long and complex language of leaf and shoot. In summer he spoke to me with his branches; in winter I whispered my secrets to his sleeping roots.

You know, trees are the most restful and contemplative of living things. We ourselves were never meant to live at this frantic speed; scurrying about in endless pursuit of the next thing, and the next; running like laboratory rats down a series of mazes towards the inevitable; snapping up our bitter treats as we go. The trees are different. Among trees I find that my breathing slows; I am conscious of my heart beating; of the world around me moving in harmony; of oceans that I have never seen; never will see. The Beech was never anxious; never in a rage, never too busy to watch or listen. Others might be petty; deceitful; cruel, unfair – but not The Beech.

The Beech was always there, always himself. And as the years passed and I began to depend more and more on the calm serenity his presence gave me, I became increasingly repelled by the sweaty pink lab rats with their nasty ways, and I was drawn, slowly and inevitably, to the trees.

Even so, it took me a long time to understand the intensity of those feelings. In those days it was hard enough to admit to loving a black man – or worse still, a woman – but this aberration of mine – there wasn't even anything about it in the Bible, which suggested to me that perhaps I was unique in my perversity, and that even Deuteronomy had overlooked the possibility of non-mammalian, inter-species romance.

And so for more than ten years I pretended to myself that it wasn't love. But as time passed my obsession grew; I spent most of my time outdoors, sketching; my boy Daniel took his first steps in the shadow of The Beech; and on warm summer nights I would creep outside, barefoot and in my nightdress, while upstairs Stan snored fit to wake the dead, and I would put my arms around the hard, living body of my beloved and hold him close beneath the cavorting stars.

It wasn't always easy, keeping it secret. Stan wasn't what you'd call imaginative, but he was suspicious, and he must have sensed some kind of deception. He had never really liked my drawing, and now he seemed almost resentful of my little hobby, as if he saw something in my studies of trees that made him uncomfortable. The years had not improved Stan. He had been a shy young man in the days of our courtship; not bright; and awkward in the manner of one who has always been happiest working with his hands. Now he was sour – old before his time. It was only in his workshop that he really came to life. He was an excellent craftsman, and he was generous with his work, but my years alongside The Beech had given me a different perspective on carpentry, and I accepted Stan's offerings – fruitwood bowls, coffee-

tables, little cabinets, all highly polished and beautifully-made – with concealed impatience and growing distaste.

And now, worse still, he was talking about moving house; of getting a nice little semi, he said, with a garden, not just a big old tree and a patch of lawn. We could afford it; there'd be space for Dan to play; and though I shook my head and refused to discuss it, it was then that the first brochures began to appear around the house, silently, like spring crocuses, promising en-suite bathrooms and inglenook fireplaces and integral garages and gas fired central heating. I had to admit, it sounded quite nice. But to leave The Beech was unthinkable. I had become dependent on him. I knew him; and I had come to believe that he knew me, needed and cared for me in a way as yet unknown among his proud and ancient kind.

Perhaps it was my anxiety that gave me away. Perhaps I under-estimated Stan, who had always been so practical, and who always snored so loudly as I crept out into the garden. All I know is that one night when I returned, exhilarated by the dark and the stars and the wind in the branches, my hair wild and my feet scuffed with green moss, he was waiting.

“You’ve got a fella, haven’t you?”

I made no attempt to deny it; in fact, it was almost a relief to admit it to myself. To those of our generation, divorce was a shameful thing; an admission of failure. There would be a court case; Stanley would fight; Daniel would be dragged into the mess and all our friends would take Stanley’s side and speculate vainly on the identity of my mysterious lover. And yet I faced it; accepted it; and in my heart a bird was singing so hard that it was all I could do not to burst out laughing.

“You have, haven’t you?” Stan’s face looked like a rotten apple; his eyes shone through with pinhead intensity.

“Who is it?”

What happens next? Over to you...

LESLEY CUNNINGHAM'S ENDING TO DRYAD

"I just walked out and went back to bed. Stan came up an hour later but we didn't talk."

When I looked at her, this time there were no smiles. Just an expression that I couldn't identify. Not happiness, not sadness, just something. Not wanting to pry, I simply smiled politely but it was wasted. I'm not sure she even saw me right at that moment. I shifted in my seat not knowing what to say or do yet not wanting to abandon her. I was curious too and hoped she might tell me what happened to bring on that expression.

She did.

"A few days went by and Stan and I barely spoke, but something about him was different. At the time I thought perhaps he'd accepted defeat, perhaps now he might stop this nonsense about moving house.

It was a Tuesday afternoon when I got the letter. My brother-in-law wrote to me about my sister. Pregnant for the second time with her husband at work all day and a toddler running round her feet, she was becoming tired and emotional. She needed me so I told them I would come and stay for a while, two weeks if I could manage it. Of course I could manage it. I would take Daniel with me and Stan could manage perfectly well without us for a while. But what about 'him'? How would I be, staying away from him for so long? What would I do each night laying there thinking about him, wanting to hold him and knowing he was over a hundred miles away. I know this must all sound ridiculous to you but it was just how I felt.

Sylvia looked so happy to see us when they met us at the station, I knew I had done the right thing by going. She looked so tired and weary my heart sank. I realized how much I had been neglecting. My family, my friends. This obsession had taken hold of me more that I had realized. Now being so far away from him and seeing how much I was needed gave me some perspective.

The first few days I was fine. I thought about him, all the time in fact. But I was focused on my sister and her family. Each morning I woke the children, washed them, dressed them and got them ready for the day. Sylvia would sleep in late and I would take a tray up to her with her breakfast. George could concentrate on himself and get off to work. I tidied the house, entertained the children, cooked and made sure Sylvia took things easy.

After a few days I started to feel a bit restless, mostly at night. About the time that Stan will have begun to snore. About the time that I would slide my feet in to my slippers and glide downstairs slowly, quietly and in to the garden to be with him. Now I was the one becoming weary. I was hardly sleeping at night and my mind was a hundred miles away in my garden, my beautiful garden...with him."

Listening to her now I began to feel a bit uneasy. Not because I thought she was mad. Because it was all so believable, feelings and emotions I started to relate to. What happens to a person that drives her to yearn for a tree? What happens in a marriage that allows a perennial to become grounds for divorce for God's sake?

My thoughts turned to David.

David, who didn't seem to talk to me much any more. David who sometimes bored me and when he didn't bore me he made me so angry.

David, who I loved dearly.

Josephine continued with her story and I listened intently.

"After two weeks with my sister and her family I was glad to be going home. I often wondered if things were different, if I didn't have 'him' in my life, would I have gone home at all.

Stan was at the station to meet us and Daniel was delighted to see him. He came over and took the suitcase from me and he smiled. I remember thinking as I saw him smile, "my, you have been lonely".

On the way home Stan was much more attentive than usual. He asked about my sister and her family, asked how I was feeling, laughed at Daniel's antics in the back of the car.

As we pulled in to our road, Stan told me that he had a surprise for me in the house. It was obvious he wanted to be the first in, apparently to set the scene, have everything ready for my surprise.

I expected to smell something baking in the oven. I assumed that the surprise was a meal cooked by Stan for our homecoming. There was no smell.

I was ushered towards the sofa where I sat down and Stan disappeared in to the kitchen. When he returned he was carrying something covered with a sheet. He had a beaming smile and I was very curious at this point. Placing the object on the coffee table in front of me he asked, "ready?"

I nodded; he pulled the sheet off carefully and exposed the most beautiful creation. A model of our house, our garden, even the car in the drive. The whole thing carved out of wood. The detail was amazing, he'd obviously spent a lot of time on it. Much better than anything he'd made before."

She looked at me and tears were welling in her eyes and I saw such sadness on her face.

Carved out of wood...my heart lunged... because I knew. I stood up from the sofa and went to the window. My heart beating hard in my chest, my hands shaking. I just knew.

As I stared at the stump at the bottom of the garden everything seemed so still. I heard no noise, I saw no movement, I just couldn't take my eyes off 'him', what was left of him.

I had no words for Stan. He did, in bed that night as I lay as silent as I had been since our arrival home, he explained to me that he knew how much I loved that tree, but he couldn't possibly have known. He said this would be a way of keeping it with us forever. We could have this model, this beautiful monstrosity on display in our new home. I didn't unpack my suitcase that night. I waited until Stan left for work the next day, got Daniel ready and left. I

never went back. It was too painful, too complicated for Stan to ever understand so I never even tried.”

Twenty-five years on I still sit here and think of her. How deep, how passionate but how misdirected her love was. I still think about Stan...poor Stan. I wonder if he knew what he was doing when he made that ‘gift’ for Josephine?

And I still smile when I think of David’s face when he came home that night to a welcome he hadn’t had for quite some time.