Dryad
by Joanne Harris

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.

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…

JOANNE HARRIS' ENDING TO DRYAD

"You'll never know."

I spent the rest of the night under The Beech, wrapped in a blanket. It was windy, but not cold; and when I awoke the wind had dropped and I was lying under a glorious drift of purple-green foliage. When I returned to the house, I found that Stan had gone, taking his woodworking tools and a case of his clothes with him. By the end of the week, Daniel had joined him; a boy of twelve needs his father, and besides, Dan had always been more Stanley's boy than my own. All the same, I was happy. I saw no-one, but I was not lonely. Instead I felt curiously free. With Stan and Daniel gone I sensed much more than I had previously and I spent much of my time under The Beech, listening to the sounds of movement in the earth and of grass popping and of slow roots growing, inch by inch, under the dark soil.

For the first time I was aware of everything; of birds high in the branches; of insects tunnelling under the bark; of water half a mile underground. I slept there every night. I forgot to eat. I even stopped drawing. Instead I lay for days and nights under the royal canopy of The Beech, and there were times when I was sure I could have grown roots of my own, sinking softly and sweetly into the ground, leaving no trace of myself. It was blissful. Time had no meaning; I forgot the language of haste and flesh. Twice, a neighbour called to me over the fence; but her voice was shrill and unpleasant, and I ignored her. It rained, but I didn't feel cold; instead I turned my face towards the rain and let it fall gently into my open mouth. It was all the sustenance I needed. As the days passed I understood that at last I was joining him, like the two lovers in the old myth - Baucis and Philemon, I think it was - who were turned into trees so that they would never be apart. I was supremely happy; I pulled the earth over me like a quilt and sank my fingers into the ground. It would be soon, I knew; already my limbs had taken root; even when I tried to move them, I could not. The cries from over the fence were barely audible now; I turned my face into the soil like a sleepy child into a pillow; and all around me was the sound of The Beech; soothing; loving; calling.

But something was wrong; something disturbed us; we sensed it in our roots. A shrill voice, too high for us to hear; a movement, too fast for us to follow. The rats were back; the horrid pink rats; and as we slept and dreamed our cool, slow dreams, they rushed and scurried about us, squeaking and gnawing and harrying and pawing. I tried to protest, but I had lost my tongue. I was uprooted; their faces loomed above me and as *we* became *I* once again, I heard their voices - and that of The Beech, raised for the first time in sorrow and loss - drowning out the sound of the world below.

Oh my dear my sweet my

Call the ambulance she's
Oh my love

I awoke in a bed of clean white sheets to the realization that time had recommenced. Stan, I was told, had sat by my bed for fourteen nights; the nurses were filled with praise for his doglike devotion. It had been close, they said. I had been lucky. Pneumonia had set in; I was malnourished and dehydrated; a few more hours and they might have lost me. Stan, they said, had gone back to the house, but he returned soon enough, and though I tried not to hear him, I soon found that I had lost the knack.

"I'm sorry, love," he told me. "I should have recognized the signs." Apparently it all fitted; the neurotic behaviour; the sexual disgust; the desire for solitude; the obsessive-compulsive studies of trees. A breakdown, that was all; and I would get better very soon, he promised, with good old Stan to look after me. That silly quarrel was all in the past; there never had been a fella; and very soon I'd be right as rain. And there was good news; he'd found a buyer for the house. First-time buyer; no chain; and before I knew it we'd be living in that little semi we'd always wanted, with a nice bit of garden and no bloody trees.

I struggled to speak and found that I could not. Stan took my hand and held it.

"Don't worry, love. It's all arranged. They're very nice people; they'll take good care of the house. Course, that big old tree'll have to go -"

My mouth worked.

"Course it will, love. It can't stay there; it blocks the light. Besides, I don't want to risk that sale. You go to sleep now, and don't you fret. I'm looking after you now."

I never did go back to the house. I don't think I could have borne it, knowing what I knew. I never saw the little semi, either; instead I moved out as soon as I could to a rented flat near the Botanical Gardens. Even so, Stan didn't give up. For almost a year he and Daniel called on me every Sunday. But there was nothing to say. They had saved my life, but I had left the best part of myself under The Beech, and there could be no going back to my old life, even if I had wanted to. Then one day, nearly twelve months after my release from hospital, he brought me a present wrapped in crêpe paper. "Open it," he said. "I made it for you."

It was a wooden dish about two feet across. Roughly heart-shaped, it was made from a perfect cross-section of tree trunk, with concentric circles shimmering through the wood.

"Thought you'd like it as a reminder," said Stan. "Seeing as you were always so fond of it, and all."

Wordlessly, I touched the edge of the dish. It was smooth and cool and flawlessly polished. With the tip of my finger I found the place at the heart of the tree, and it might have been my imagination, but for a second I seemed to feel a shiver of response, as if I had touched some dying nerve. "It's beautiful," I said, and I meant it.

"Thanks, love," said Stan.

I keep the dish on my dining-room table. She left it to me, you know; along with her sketch-books and her drawings of trees. She didn't have anyone else, poor old dear; Stan had been dead for ten years and she'd been living in a retirement home since then. The Willows, it was called. I tried to find Daniel, but there was no contact address. The lady at The Willows thinks he might be living in New Zealand, but no-one knows for sure.

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, except for me. They're all too busy with their own concerns to stop and talk; besides, I don't need them any more. After all, I have the trees.