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.

Alison Kerr

Alison Kerr is 32 years old and lives in Glasgow. A civil servant for the Scottish Executive, Alison is an English graduate from the University of St Andrews and writes regularly, but is renowned amongst her friends for starting stories and never finishing them!

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…

ALISON KERR'S ENDING TO DRYAD

"What do you care?" I whispered fiercely. "You never listen. If I told you it was that tree out there you would just ask me how long it had been going on. Ask me then!" I started to laugh, I couldn't help it. The whole situation was insane. Each word pushed me nearer the brink: I could imagine his step back, his growing horror, the doctors and the years in an asylum, my life over. It didn't seem to matter. I simply didn't care. There were no certainties, there was no way to retreat or go forwards.

Stan stood completely still. His rage had vanished as quickly as it had surfaced.

"That damned tree" he said, and sat down on the ground. "I told him to stop years ago. He clearly didn't listen, which has its own irony." He drew a hand over the top of his head and rubbed the thinning hair until it stuck straight up, giving him the appearance of a harassed professor. I must have been staring at him with God knows what expression on my face. Stan actually snorted a half laugh as well.

"It's a moot point, isn't it? Which one of us is the craziest? You fall in love with a tree while I've been threatening it every day with my axe to keep it away from you."

This was a Stan I didn't know, couldn't even imagine. "Why do you think I put my workshop upstairs where he could see what I might do to him?" he said. "Why do you think I wanted us to move?" He looked out towards The Beech and suddenly raised his voice. "You want to take her over?" he yelled. "Well, why don't you walk over here and get her! Why not talk to her? What – no legs to do the job? No voice to persuade her?" The Beech stood silent, his branches swayed indifferently in the night breeze. Next door a light flicked on and a curtain twitched. A few seconds later the light was cut off again, abruptly. Nothing was rushing to my defence. There was no presence in the garden to help, it was just Stan and me.

He turned back to me and of a sudden his voice was tired, almost contemptuous. "You think you'd rather be with something that can't understand, can't move to protect you, can't love you even at your – your *stupidest?* If I decide to take a hatchet to that thing, do you think it'll take any steps to defend itself? I've tried so often to show you how unsafe it would be. I carve for a living. I'm a craftsman. Trees are living things and I respect them, but they're not human and they don't love back and so *I don't need to care.* I've shown you the results in the hope you would realise it yourself, but you never did. In your book I'm just insensitive, aren't I? You say I don't listen to you. I know I'm no good with words, I act rather than talk. Have you ever listened to my actions? I'm not perfect, but there are other things I *can* do. Things *we* can do. We have a son, remember? You think your beech does anything *but* listen? How will that give you the life you want? Snap out of it Josephine, before I cut the damn thing to pieces to prove a point and lose you forever."

"I'd never had Stan's attention so directly focused on me before. It was the most he'd ever said at me, to me, for me. He was no good with words and yet I was the one struggling to work out his meaning seconds after he finished speaking. An eternity of seconds."

My companion stopped talking. Her thumb moved over the page of her sketchbook, absently caressing the drawn line of a branch that dissolved into delicately delineated green leaves. Her eyes were shining with nostalgia. I was terrified of breaking the silence, sure I'd say

something inane. She was an elderly lady, but when she glanced at me then and saw my expression she gave what could only be described as a giggle. ”I think that was the best of my life” she said succinctly.

I started to laugh with her, I couldn’t help it. Some raindrops had collected in the leaves above and were now dripping wetly on the bench between us, rolling and pooling before trickling chaotically down to the grass. I started to brush at them and instead diverted their path straight into our jackets. We both jumped up at the same instant to shake ourselves down, like wet dogs. The sun emerged for a few seconds in what seemed a direct response to our lightened mood. The green leaves of the beech tree in front of us glowed like emeralds in the brief glare of the sun’s attention.

“I still love my beeches, obviously” Josephine said, and her eyes were on the dappled, translucent leaves. “But it’s a question of proportion. And I never loved what Stan did for a living – but he was doing it for us. And much as I care about this tree here, I know that when I’m drawing it, I’m using chalk encased in wood and a sketchpad made from wood pulp. Sometimes you have to hit rock bottom to get your priorities sorted out in your head.”

Here was my story again, in all its stripped down format. Told by – surely? – an old fraudster who simply loved to talk, who had no idea of the echoes her words were creating in my own head. I had a sudden pleasing desire to drag David out of work and – I don’t know – throw objects at him, probably, until we actually started sorting things out, one way or another. It could be done. But I would need something extra, some kind of back up, a little extra support from somewhere. Everybody did. Of their own volition, my hands slowly clasped themselves over the comforting bulge of my stomach. She couldn’t possibly have just switched off the past and moved on that abruptly. Life didn’t work that way. Surely she must have –

“I’ll let you into a tiny secret” Josephine was saying. She had closed the sketchbook and was patting her pockets carefully to ensure the safety of her pencils. Rain had mixed with the chalk and left a pattern of smudged green lines on her jacket, mimicking the grass stains which incriminate lovers every day. “We moved in the autumn of that year. It was the richest, most glorious October and The Beech looked so handsome, still sexy. It was a pang to leave, however happy Stan and I were becoming. So I took one with me.”

I must have looked confused, for she explained quickly, a roguish grin on her face. “One of the beech nuts that split and fell. And I planted it here for safety. So this beech tree here is – well – in a way, I suppose you could call him my second son.” She winked, and walked off.