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.

Stephanie Percival

Stephanie Percival is a part-time podiatrist and a mother of three from Rushden. A keen reader, this is the first writing competition she has entered. Although married to an English teacher, Stephanie didn't let her husband see the story before she entered it!

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…

STEPHANIE PERCIVAL'S ENDING TO DRYAD

"It's not a man," I stated simply.

"Don't play games, Josephine. Just tell me the truth!" He snarled, spittle spraying the air. I hesitated before I said the words, not because I was scared of affirming my feelings but because I knew they would sound foolish.

"I'm in love with the tree." I looked towards the window and although it was too dark to see an outline of him I knew he was there, and it gave me the strength to continue.

"I know it sounds unbelievable but it is true. When I go out at night I just go to the garden to be with him . . . .The Beech." I added quickly in case Stan had any doubts. Stan had gone quite pale and still, as if I had dealt him a blow so heavy that I had winded him. He was slumped, his elbows on his knees, his face cupped in his hands. I thought he might be crying and that moved me slightly; I had never seen him cry before. I left him quietly and slept downstairs.

In the following days Stan and I hardly spoke. I made sure his dinner was on the table, the house clean, his shirts ironed but it was a deceitful charade; the pretence of normal life covering a void.

The war in Europe raged on but it was our own cold war that consumed our thoughts. I futilely tried to figure ways of escaping my marriage, and later I knew Stan had been plotting my chastisement. At least I still had my love waiting each night and I felt safe knowing that he would not be marching to war.

I was blind. I supposed Stan had accepted our empty relationship. I never suspected the revenge he would exact. I had not envisaged that was in his nature to be so deliberately cruel."

Mrs Clarke became quiet gazing out through the drizzle so intensely she could have been looking into another time. She was silent so long I asked quietly, "What happened?" She jumped as if she had forgotten I was there and I wondered whether she had really been telling her story to the nearby tree rather than me.

She continued softly, "I was walking back from school with Dan. He held my hand; skipping and swinging along beside me. In my basket I had two chops and so was feeling rather pleased with myself. It wasn't until we got to the front gate that an ominous thudding penetrated my happy thoughts. I ran through to the back garden and saw the execution, they were killing my love. Limb by limb they dismembered him; the branches dangling on noose-like ropes in a tortured dance. That was the only time I truly thought I could hear his voice. He was screaming. Sometimes I hear it still; it is the saddest sound in the world."

A single tear slowly meandered down the weary creases in her face.

"I knew then that I would kill Stan."

At least that's what I thought she said, so quietly were the words spoken. At that moment the baby gave me a sharp kick under the ribs and as I adjusted my position, I realised just how

uncomfortable I felt with numb thighs and cold feet. Mrs Clarke was still sitting insentient to the world and when I got up and said "Good-bye" she didn't respond.

However, after that first meeting I returned to the garden regularly and often Mrs Clarke would be there. We found that we enjoyed each other's company. I told her about my trouble with David and worries about child-birth and she listened intently but never interfered. She told me about her son Dan, now a photographer, of whom she was obviously proud. She never again mentioned Stan or her first love.

That summer I pushed the baby with me and left her in the pram looking up at the canopy of leaves dancing in the breeze. The patterns of light and shade seemed to soothe her even if she was not sleeping. I even began taking my own sketch pad. I sketched Josephine and she feigned embarrassment.

My marriage to David ended as I suspected it would, and accelerating years passed, marked more surely each year my daughter blew out candles on her birthday cakes. It was not really a surprise when in the winter of 1989 a week passed and I had not seen Josephine. In the local paper the obituary announced her peaceful death after a short illness.

The service at the crematorium was a small affair. Her son was immediately recognisable and likeable. He had the same dark, lively eyes that lit up when he spoke. He didn't look it but I supposed he must have been about fifty.

He and I walked slowly and companionably back to his apartment after the service. Framed pictures dominated the sparsely furnished sitting room. They were the most exquisite photographs I had even seen. The mossy, damp hollows of trees and roots, the delicate sparkle of dew on newly formed buds, a filigree of frosted skeleton leaves; reminding me of Josephine's sketch book.

"Do you like them?"

Dan's voice made me jump so entranced was I by their radiance.

"I think they're wonderful." I replied inadequately, although I added that they reminded me of his mother's sketches.

He replied with a smiling, "Yes, she had a thing about trees, didn't she?"

I nodded wondering if he had any idea about how much of a thing.

"My mother often talked about you. If I'd have known what a charming companion you were I'd have insisted on meeting you sooner," he said with a grin. "I gather you're a bit of an artist too."

I explained I just doodled really but I promised I would show him the sketches I had attempted of his mother. I was glad of a reason to visit him again. He asked if I had any ideas where we should scatter the ashes, which was quite easy. I also suggested that the wooden bench under the tree should be replaced with a metal one. He nodded his agreement. "You seem to have shared so much with her," he said quietly and rather sadly, his hands clasped, uneasily together.

“Perhaps she found it easier to confide in someone who wasn’t family.”

“Perhaps,” he echoed. “I just wish she’d talked to me more. I remember begin so close to her as a young child, but then everything changed.” He paused. “I suppose it was the war and my father, of course.”

I asked quietly, as I had once asked his mother.
“What happened?”

“There’s not a lot to tell,” he said. “One day my father was there, the next he wasn’t. Everybody thought he must have been killed in a falling building during an air raid, but his body was never found. There were hurtful rumours of him running away to avoid conscription. It’s a terrible way to grow up, not knowing if your father’s dead or alive, a hero or a coward.” He sighed, wistfully, “Mother would never talk about my father. I suppose it was just too painful.”