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.

Prue Steel

Prue Steel is in her early fifties and is involved in various voluntary projects. This is the first writing competition Prue has entered. She is a big Joanne Harris fan.

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…

PRUE STEEL'S ENDING TO DRYAD

What could I say? He'd probably think I was going crazy.

"I'll bloody well make you tell me," he snarled. He twisted my arm painfully behind my back, his face close to mine. I smelt his sour breath.

The thought of The Beech's calm strength gave me courage.

I heard Daniel calling uncertainly from the top of the stairs. The noise had woken him. "Let me go to him," I begged. Stan hesitated. "Please." He released me and turned away. I hurried upstairs, my arm throbbing as the blood rushed back.

When I came down again, Stan was sitting on the sofa, his face hidden in his hands. The bottom stair creaked and he looked up at me. "If you want to keep the lad, you'll have to give your fella up, ' he said flatly. "We'll move away."

"No!" the word escaped me like a cry of pain.

Stan looked deflated. I thought of a picture I had once seen of Rodin's Burghers of Calais: strong men bowed down helplessly under the weight of their manacles.

I felt a twinge of pity for Stan, but I couldn't help but compare him unfavourably with my magnificent lover.

At last he said "we'll talk about this in the morning."

He disappeared into our bedroom and came out with an armful of blankets.

"I'll sleep out here, " he said.

I lay awake for hours in our cold bed, torn between anxiety and elation, my fingers twisting the blue candlewick bedspread. I knew that I should feel guilty, but I could hear the whisper of leaves against my cheek and feel The Beech's smooth trunk clasped in my arms.

Stan and I didn't talk the next morning, or the one after that. He became morose and withdrawn. He watched me like a hungry dog at the butcher's door, but he left me alone. My serenity seemed to baffle him.

We agreed to stay together for Daniel's sake. After a while, Stan started to go out most evenings after supper. I never asked where he went, but the way Brenda Whitely, who ran the Post Office, avoided my eyes when I went in to buy something and the pitying looks of our friends and neighbours told their own story.

When he died I didn't' marry again. I already had everything I wanted," she concluded.

The rain stopped and the pale blue sky looked newly varnished. I felt stiff and hungry. "I'm so sorry," said Mrs Clarke, noticing my discomfort. "I shouldn't' be keeping you here talking like this." She looked at me quizzically, but I just murmured a polite nothing. I didn't

want to discuss my problems with a stranger, even a kind one. Yet afterwards, I thought a great deal about her strange story. There was something inspirational about it. S he showed me that happiness can be found in unexpected places.

Years later, happily married for a second time and asuccessful freelance journalist, I had almost forgotten Josephine Clarke.

Then one wet Sunday afternoon, I was glancing through the papers when I noticed a photograph of an elderly lady who looked familiar. The article was about an exhibition of her work at a Bristol gallery. The writer described her drawings as exquisite and sensuous; food for the soul; an oasis of clam in a frantic world. There were a couple of illustrations of her studies of trees; they had the delicate strength of Leonardo Da Vinci's drawings of nature. The artist' name was Josephine Clarke.

I planned to visit the exhibition but I had a deadline for a magazine feature and never made it.

One the evening of 15th October 1987, hot winds moving up from Africa collided with the glacial air of the Arctic and were forced upwards, creating a drop in pressure. By six o'clock, the pressure gradient had risen steeply. Perhaps, said the Met Office, a strong jet stream, caused by a hurricane moving up the east coast of the USA and across the Atlantic, had reacted with exceptional warming over the Bay of Biscay. Vapour condensed into clouds and released enormous energy, which drove the storm winds towards Britain.

At first it seemed as if the storm would track along the English Channel but unexpectedly, it veered north and swept through southern England, leaving devastation in its wake. By morning, fifteen million trees had been uprooted.

Three years later I noticed in the paper that the Bristol gallery was mounting another exhibition of Mrs Clarke's work. The article said that she had died in 1989. When I walked into the gallery, the drawings were not what I had expected. There was no serenity; only turmoil and despair.

Then I saw that the e work had been done between 1987 and 1989. Of course! The October Storm would have been cataclysmic for her.

One drawing in particular exuded so much raw emotion that it was painful to behold. It showed a beautiful tree torn from the earth its sinewy roots snapped like matchsticks. The grain of the bark had been meticulously delineated; when the trunk had split at the bole, I could almost imagine that the markings were shaped like a heart.

In the last room was a graceful figure, about eighteen inches high. It was carved of polished, honey-coloured wood. The figure was of a woman in flight from an unseen pursuer.

As I looked more closely, I saw that her torso was fashioned as if it were partially covered in thin bark and at the end of her streaming hair, tiny leaves were forming. Her nimble feet were entangled in thick, fleshy tree roots. The caption read 'Daphne fleeing Apollo."

The girl in charge of the gallery came over smiling.

"Quite a relief after those earlier drawings isn't it?" She said. "Apparently she suffered a nervous breakdown in late 1987 and never really recovered. She carved this at the very end of her life. Very beautiful don't you think? As far as we know, it's her only work in wood. It's made of beech."

When I got home, I looked up the story. It told how the god Apollo saw the nymph Daphne and instantly fell in love with her, but she, preferring to roam the woods than be in the company of gods and men, fled from him. He had almost caught her when she reached the banks of the river Peneus, her father. Terrified, she begged her father for help. As Apollo was just about to seize her, Peneus transformed her into a tree.

I bought the figure. It still sits on my desk and reminds me of Mrs Clarke. She probably never knew how much she helped me that day.

When I applied for permission to put a bench with a plaque in the Botanical Gardens, the Keeper was very helpful. I could choose a place, but the bench must be made of wood or metal.

On a cool autumn afternoon, I walked around the Gardens for hours until I found the right spot: a quiet place, hidden among Mrs Clarke's beloved trees.

The bench I ordered was made of metal. Naturally, she wouldn't have wanted wood.