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.

Rosie Walker

Rosie Walker is a 33-year-old drama teacher from Norwich. Married with a 13 month-old daughter, Rosie has written short plays in the past, but has never entered a writing competition before. She wrote the story very quickly and enjoyed trying to match Joanne's style.

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…

ROSIE WALKER'S ENDING TO DRYAD

I confessed all. I furnished Stan with the answers to all the usual questions; he didn't even have time to ask. It came pouring out of me like thunderstorm rain from guttering. I gave him the grisly details: the nocturnal visits, the nakedness, the caresses. I lost myself in the relief of the release, to tell and be honest at last, and heard.

"But," Stan stammered, once I'd paused for breath. "Who? Outside Beech?"

"*The* Beech." I answered, calmly.

"The *tree*?" His face contorted with the effort of understanding. "You've been having it off with the tree in the garden?"

"If you want to call it that, yes. I love him." His smutty comment had made me doubt myself, but only for a second.

There was a long pause, and we stood there, barefoot on the landing carpet, looking at each other. Then the tiniest of smiles started to twitch the corner of Stan's mouth. His shoulders dropped. "I know what this is," he said, "it's the change isn't it? Some women have it early don't they?" I stared at him, speechless. "I've heard some women go a bit odd, but this takes the biscuit, all this carry-on, over a tree!" He laughed out loud then, and I felt he was mocking me. I kept silent though, as a thought formed in my brain. If he didn't believe me, or thought me mad, or at least temporarily hormonally unbalanced, there was a chance the whole thing might just blow over. There would be no divorce, no shame, and I could stay in the house and be near my love, and Daniel.

"The more I come to think of it the more it makes sense," Stan continued," nipping outside in the middle of the night to cool down, it's them hot flushes isn't it."

I nodded, still silent.

"You should get yourself down to the Doctors', see if they can give you something for it. Honestly, you silly mare, you should have told me you weren't feeling well." He snorted gently and shook his head. "Running around in the dark in your nightie like some mad old witch, you had me going too, some other fella indeed." He chuckled, turned and went back into the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

Left alone I had only to turn my head a fraction to see him, my brave, bold boy softly outlined against the first wash of a May dawn. I smiled at him and sent him the thought that everything was going to be all right. Then I went into the bedroom, to Stan, and to a marriage that lasted another thirty years.

I was more careful from then on, of course. I told Stan I had been to the Doctors' and that they'd given me some pills, new ones. I was to be part of a trial that could last for years. He seemed to accept this readily enough, not interested in details regarding my 'women's problems.'

I convinced Stan we should stay where we were. I told him a move would be stressful, and might interfere with my treatment. I added that Daniel was settled, with friends in the neighbouring houses. That was the truth at least.

Daniel grew and Stan and I continued in our routines. He seemed to soften, as he grew older, and we were kinder to each other.

We still had out nights together, The Beech and I, though as time went on they became more infrequent. My ardour, whilst not cooler, went dormant for longer periods. My desire for him was less frenzied, more comfortable, and I was often content to reach out and feel the heat of sun on his flanks momentarily as I walked by to hang out the washing or water the pots. In winter, sometimes just looking was enough.

When Stan died I wept in a heap curled up in the hollow between The Beech and the wall. I stayed there even when it started to rain. I rolled onto my back in the dark, damp mulch and howled as the beech dropped tiny kisses of rainwater to dilute the stinging tears. I bashed my head against his trunk again and again, calling Stan's name, until my movement became a rocking and finally I fell asleep.

I awoke the next morning knowing that soon I would leave the house, and him, for good. Daniel was long gone, married with kiddies of his own. The house was too big for me alone, and The Beech was still young, whereas I was an old woman. It was time I handed him on to someone who could match his energy, for a while at least.

I sold the house to a young family. When they came to view the young woman walked straight up to him, stroked his bark and murmured, you're lovely, aren't you. I'd be lying if I said there wasn't a twinge of jealousy, but I knew it was the right thing to do.

So I moved down here to be near Daniel and the grandchildren. I've got a nice little flat. Living alone was strange for a while, I even found myself missing Stan. I'm the first to admit there wasn't a lot of love in our marriage, but there was no real malice. We rubbed along all right. People give up too quickly these days.

I never went back to see The Beech. It would have been painful, peering over the wall at his new life, remembering the past.

Mrs Clarke turned to me, smiling. It felt naughty to start with, coming here, making these drawings. It felt like cheating on him with one of his brothers. Then suddenly she turned her head away, and shut her sketchbook. I suppose you think I'm a batty old woman, she muttered.

No, not at all, I said quickly. I didn't want her to get embarrassed, or worse, tearful. She was still turned away from me, putting her drawing things away in her bag, and then suddenly she was standing. She was smiling brightly and offered me her hand. I took it. It was warm and dry. It was lovely meeting you, dear, perhaps we'll meet again. I do hope so she said.

We never did meet again. I found out she'd died when the local paper ran a story about her drawings. Daniel had found hundreds of them when he came down to clear out her flat, and

organised an exhibition. I went along and stayed for as long as I could, until Poppy got hungry.

David and I divorced soon after our second daughter, Emily, was born. I took Mrs Clarke's words to heart and I really tried to make the marriage work, and I think David did too, but it wasn't enough.

Mrs Clarke's story had no lesson in it, but it had hope. She opened me up to the possibility of small, every day passions making life worth living; honeysuckle in the evening, droopy acid green horse chestnut leaves at the start of spring, a mackerel sky.

I haven't had a love like hers. Not yet, but I'm keeping my eyes open.