The Orchard Takes a Husband

Extended synopsis • Naria Khan

Nell Gant once spent twenty-three mornings walking the shore after her husband's ship went down. Seven years later Gil walks into her lambing shed and catches hold of a ewe by the horns. She throws him into the hurdle. Jude, the husband Nell lives with, would have known which side to stand on. But Gil can still put a hand on the nail where he used to hang the rag, and the sight undoes her. By the time Jude comes into the kitchen with their daughter Dilly on his shoulders, Nell knows why Gil is here. Thirza, the woman he loves, and Friday, the boy they're raising, are in the pound at Marrowick.

After the wreck, Nell planted Gil's milk tooth beneath a pear tree with blood from her tongue. She wanted to hear him say her name once more. When a man with his face arrived and said it, Nell bolted the door. Jude built the outside stair in exchange for a room above the cooper's. Weeks later Nell climbed it carrying one of Gil's collars. Jude asked her to stop bringing him Gil's things, then invited her to a play where he worked the wooden moon. She helped him hoist it, nearly spoiled the king's death scene and went home alone delighted to have kissed him. In autumn it was Nell who asked him to move in.

Before Nell can leave for the pound, Jude spits up a pear blossom. By the time she gets Thirza and Friday out, the trouble has spread to the orchard. Binding his branch on the old tree sends the strain into other orchard-born people, whose feet begin to root into the grass. Under the new bark Nell finds a mouth with Gil's chipped tooth. On Wych, where the salt works held him after the wreck, Gil gave up his teeth for Friday's

sake. Cuttings shipped to Harth with fragments of those teeth in them are growing forty new people.

With Wych breaking apart in the water, both families go to the island. They help bring the patients to safety and recover eighteen people the company buried alive to sustain the bodies it grew. A doctor shows Nell how a root can be turned back into its owner's heel so a person can live free. Jude volunteers to try it. Back in Harth, Nell learns what her own orchard has cost. At fifteen she buried what her mother told her was her father. The coffin held part of his left arm. The rest of him is alive beneath the pear tree, where he took another woman's place.

Nell and Gil sign the paper that ends their marriage. When Nell first asked Jude home, the parish simply carried the old marriage forward. Jude wants to be asked for himself. He chose the name of an orchard baby who lived only a day, thinking the boy could use the company. At the wedding Dilly objects. She thinks parents who marry will want a new child. Jude lifts her onto his shoulders for the vows, with Gil as a witness. Then the families set about freeing the orchard. They turn back the roots they can and share the burden of those still too young. Jude takes the branch carrying the forty. When they find the black salt that Nell's father has been keeping out of everyone else's bodies, Jude puts his heel into the opening. Nell loses her father soon after they bring him into daylight. A grey-haired boy is born from Jude's branch, leaving thirty-nine still to come. He chooses the name Fox and comes to live with Nell, Jude and Dilly.

As the black salt creeps up Jude's leg, Nell sees a grieving mother press a dead boy's tooth against a living girl. Getting it out costs the girl the tip of a finger. Nell has kept a chip of Jude's tooth. One night she holds it close to Fox's sleeping face. She

never touches him with it, but Jude takes Fox away for a time. When Nell tells Fox what she did, he asks whether sharing his body would mean watching Jude eat his breakfast. She tells him the truth. He would be gone. At home he asks for the bed by the stair, with a hook inside the door, and Nell agrees to knock.

Floodwater reaches the orchard before the remaining fruit is ready. The villagers bring down the old pear tree, and Nell uses the baths and kiln she built to draw the salt into fired clay. The clay reaches its limit with the smallest baby still caught in her pear. Fox's hand fits where Nell's cannot, so she guides his fingers until the baby turns. Jude can take the last of the salt himself. Nell puts the tooth into Jude's open hand. When Fox offers half his life, Jude admits how nearly he asked and tells him he would have to take the lot. He tips the tooth off Dilly's sums slate into the fire and takes the salt so the baby can breathe. Gil helps carry him home. Dilly has time to say goodbye, and Nell lies beside him until his fingers open.

Four years later Nell is running the baths and raising Dilly and Fox. Gil marries Thirza. Dilly helps her deliver a lamb and clears its mouth before Nell can pass her the cloth. Alone outside the kiln afterwards, Nell whistles the tune Jude always left unfinished for her. Across the dark it comes back with the same little space. She gives him his note.