# The Orchard Takes a Husband

*Short synopsis • Naria Khan*

Nell Gant knows Gil is alive when he walks into her lambing shed seven years after his funeral. He still reaches for the rag on the nail he put up himself. After the wreck, Nell planted his milk tooth under a pear tree, hoping to hear him say her name. When a stranger with Gil's face came to her door, she bolted it. Jude took rooms above the cooper's, refused the collar Nell brought him from Gil's clothes and made her laugh working backstage at a play. By autumn she asked him home. Their daughter, Dilly, is six when Gil comes looking for help finding his partner, Thirza, and the boy he's raising with her.

By the time Nell sets out to help Gil get his family out of the pound, Jude has started coughing up pear blossom. A salt company on the island of Wych used chips from Gil's teeth to grow people, and some of those grafts have reached Jude's tree. Nell and both families help rescue the islanders, including eighteen people buried alive to feed the roots. At home, the same work has fallen to Nell's father. At fifteen she attended his funeral. Only part of his arm was in the coffin.

Gil and Nell sign the paper ending their marriage. The parish had let Jude inherit Gil's place, but he wants a wedding where Nell gets to choose him by name. On Pear Sunday they have one. As the families free the people whose bodies sustain the orchard, Jude takes the salt that was poisoning Nell's father. A boy who chooses the name Fox emerges from his branch. Thirty-nine more people still depend on it.

Nell discovers that a piece of Jude's tooth could carry him into Fox's body. She brings it close to the sleeping boy's cheek, then stops. When she tells Fox, he asks for a bedroom with a hook on the inside. Nell agrees to knock. When floodwater forces the

last births at Nell’s kiln, Fox offers Jude half his life. Jude knows he would take all of it. He tips the tooth into the fire and draws the last of the salt through himself so the youngest baby can live. Gil helps carry him home, where he dies beside Nell.

Four years later Nell and Dilly deliver a lamb together. On her way home Nell whistles Jude’s kitchen tune. It comes back across the dark with the usual space in it, and she sings her note.