

A night scene with a full moon, a pine tree, and lanterns. The background is a dark blue night sky with a large, bright white full moon. In the foreground, there is a green field. A large, gnarled pine tree with green needles is on the left and right sides. Several red and orange lanterns are hanging from the tree branches. The title 'BRIGHT MOON' is written in large, yellow, serif capital letters across the top.

BRIGHT MOON

by Brian Conroy
Illustrated by Catrina Milner





BRIGHT
MOON

明月

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Bright Moon

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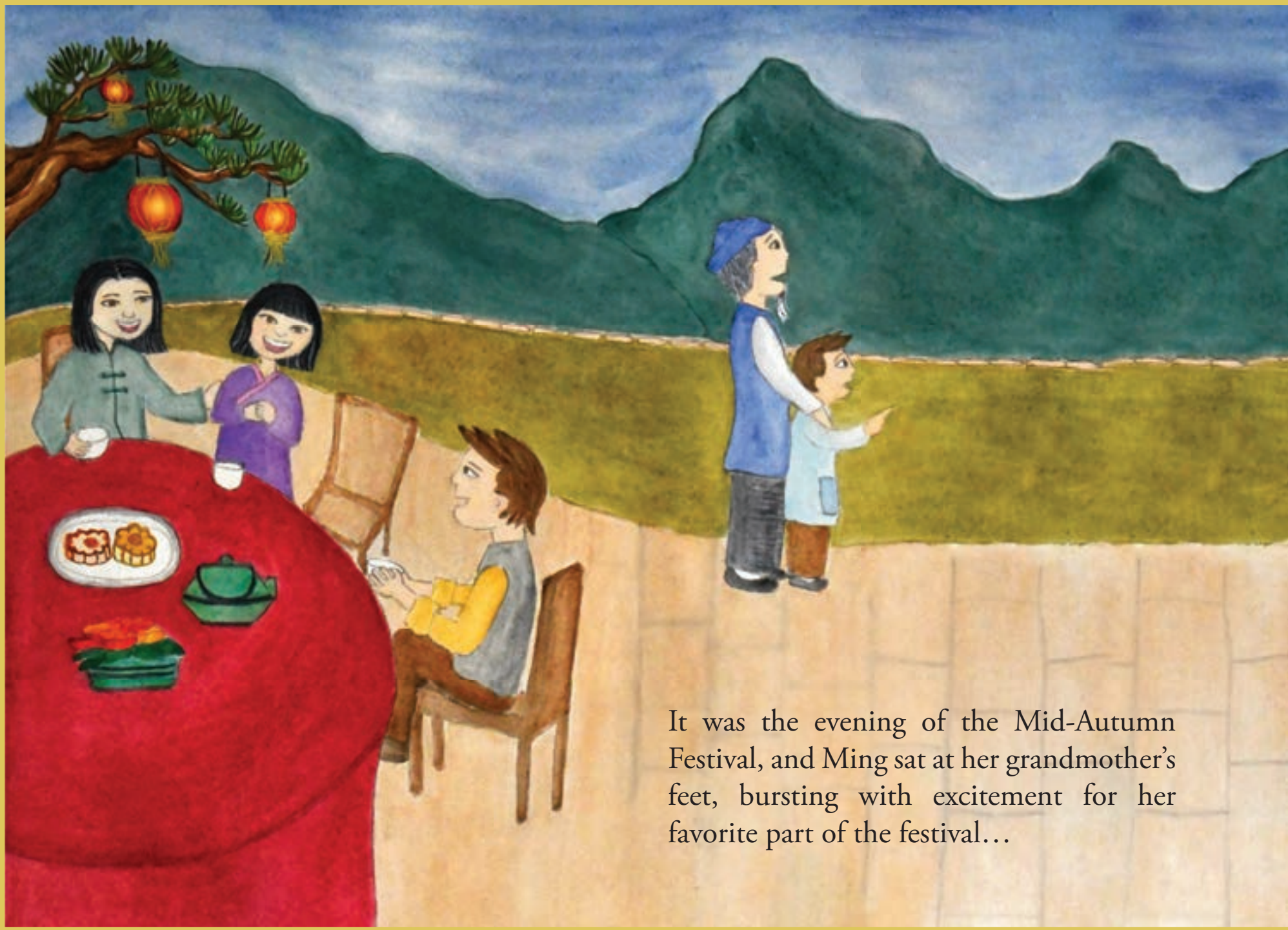
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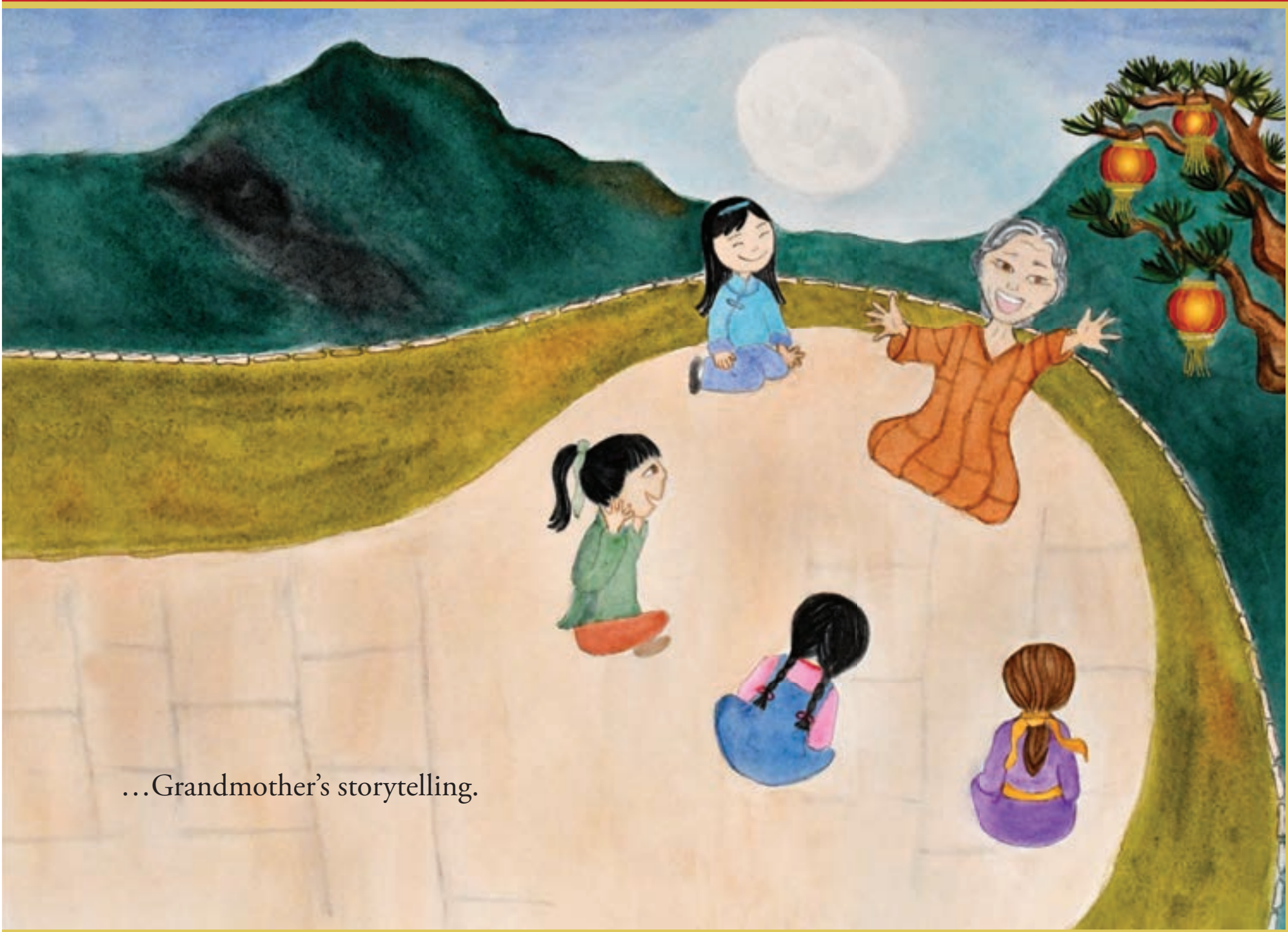
This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to locales, events, business establishments, or actual persons—living or dead—is entirely coincidental.



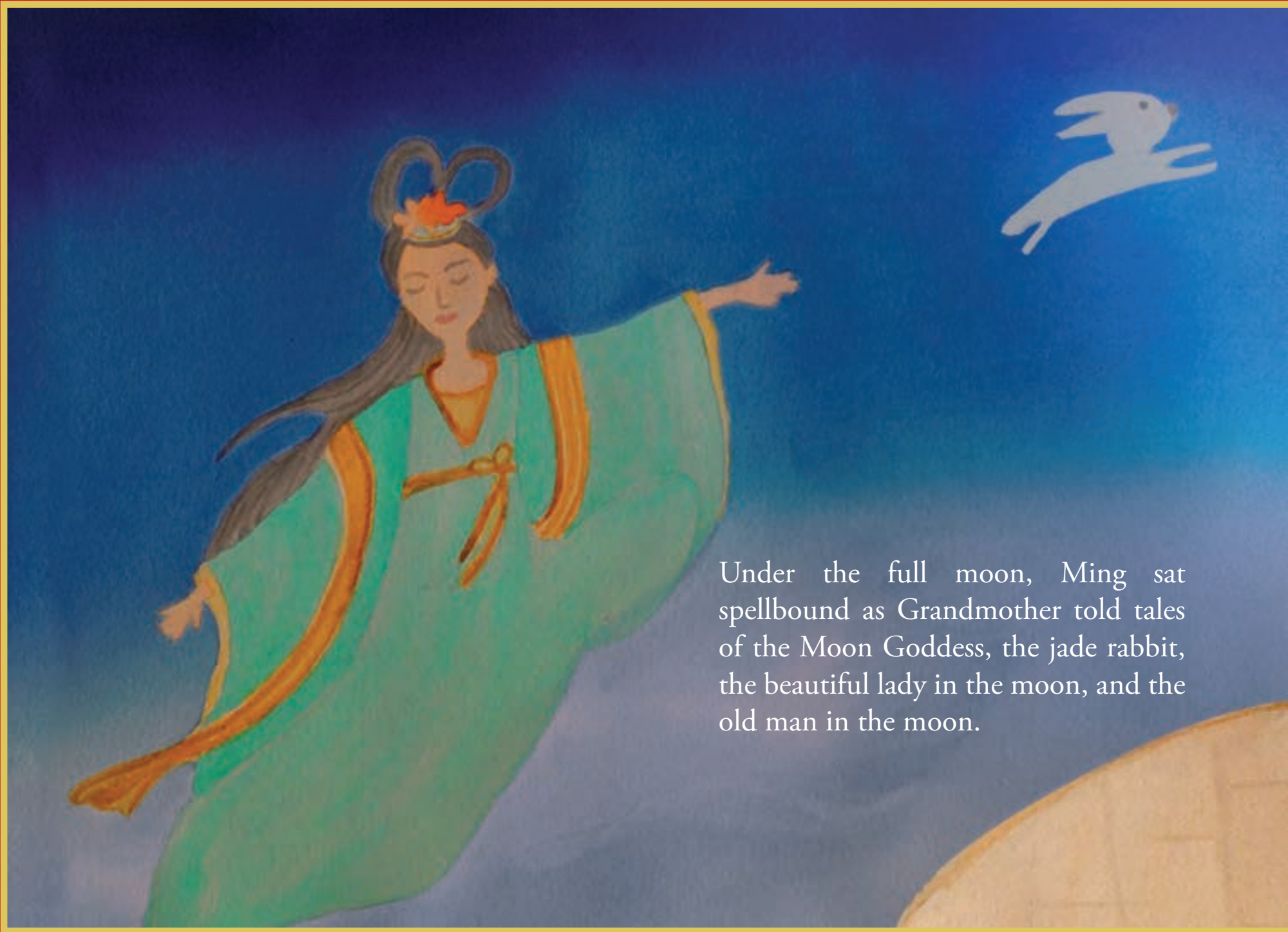
The lanterns were lit. The mooncakes were baked.
And the moon rose to the top of the sky.



It was the evening of the Mid-Autumn Festival, and Ming sat at her grandmother's feet, bursting with excitement for her favorite part of the festival...

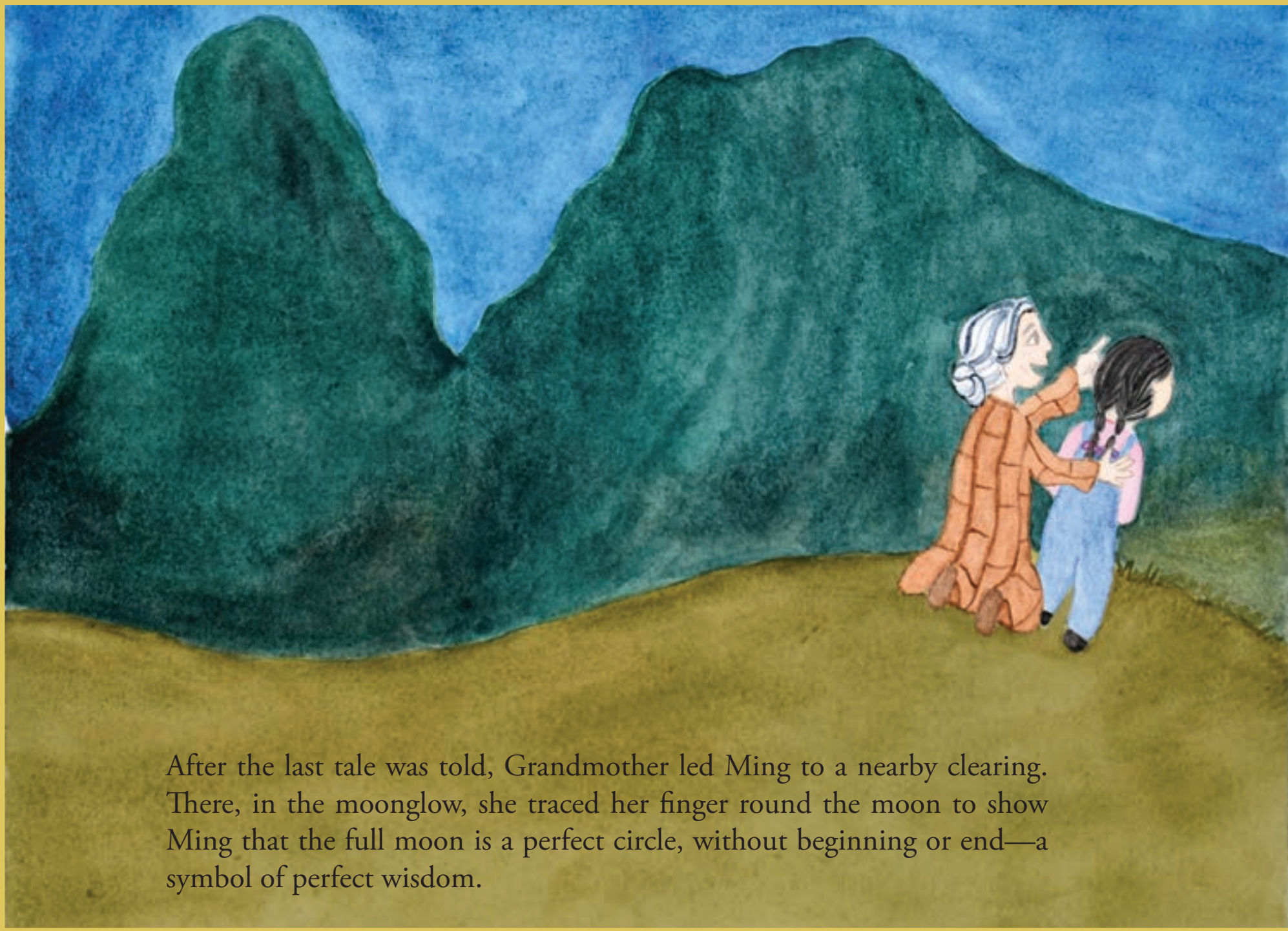


...Grandmother's storytelling.



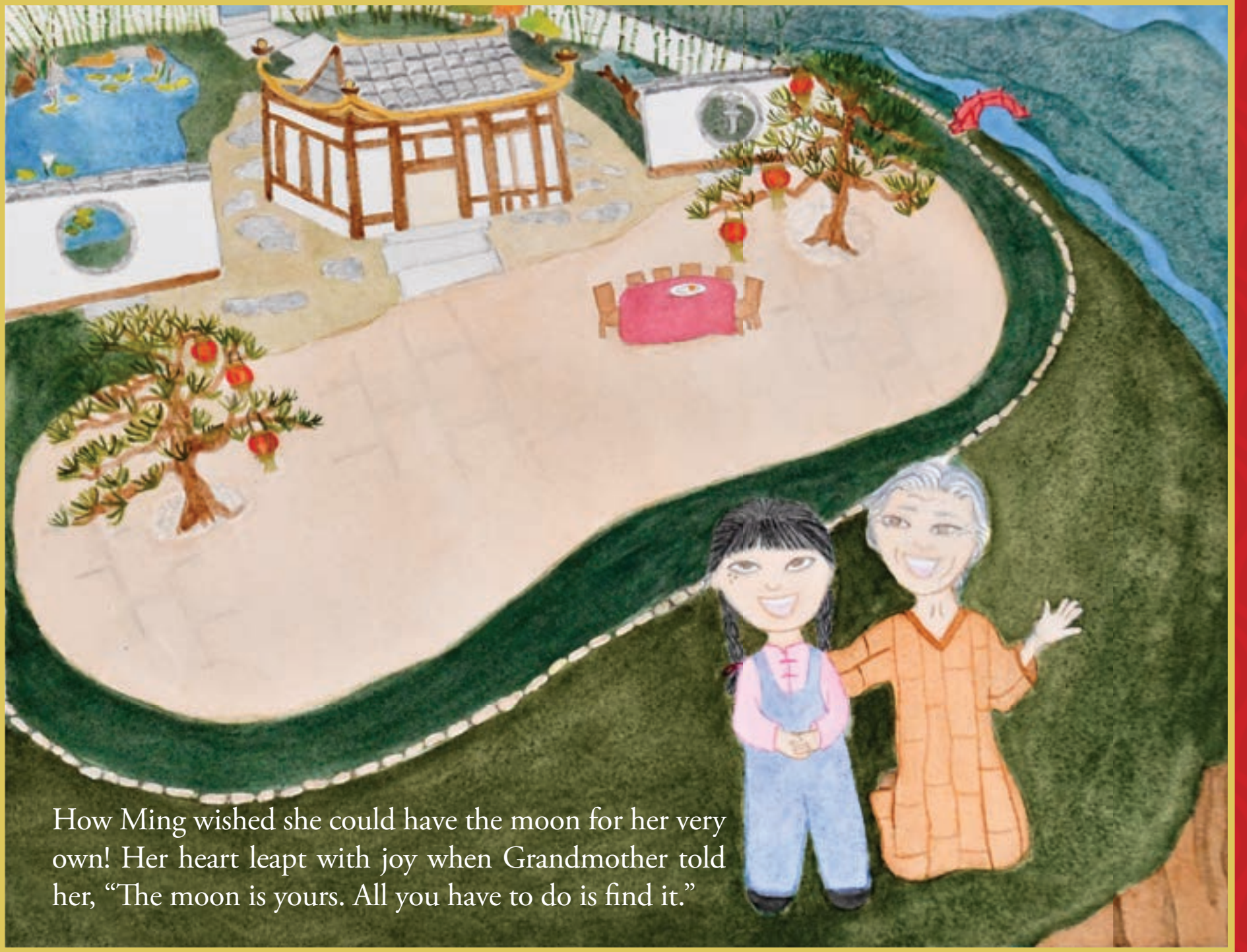
Under the full moon, Ming sat spellbound as Grandmother told tales of the Moon Goddess, the jade rabbit, the beautiful lady in the moon, and the old man in the moon.



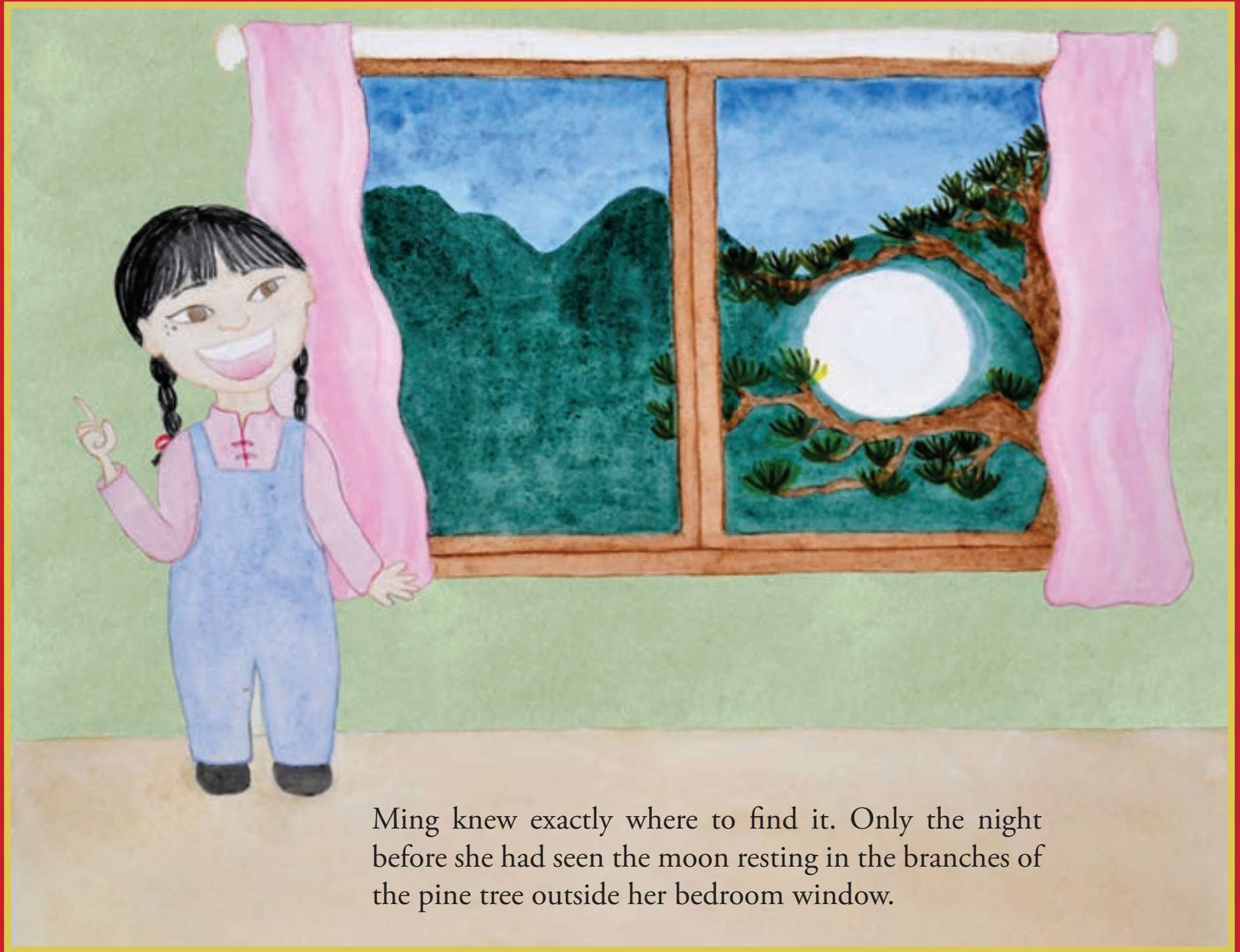


After the last tale was told, Grandmother led Ming to a nearby clearing. There, in the moonglow, she traced her finger round the moon to show Ming that the full moon is a perfect circle, without beginning or end—a symbol of perfect wisdom.





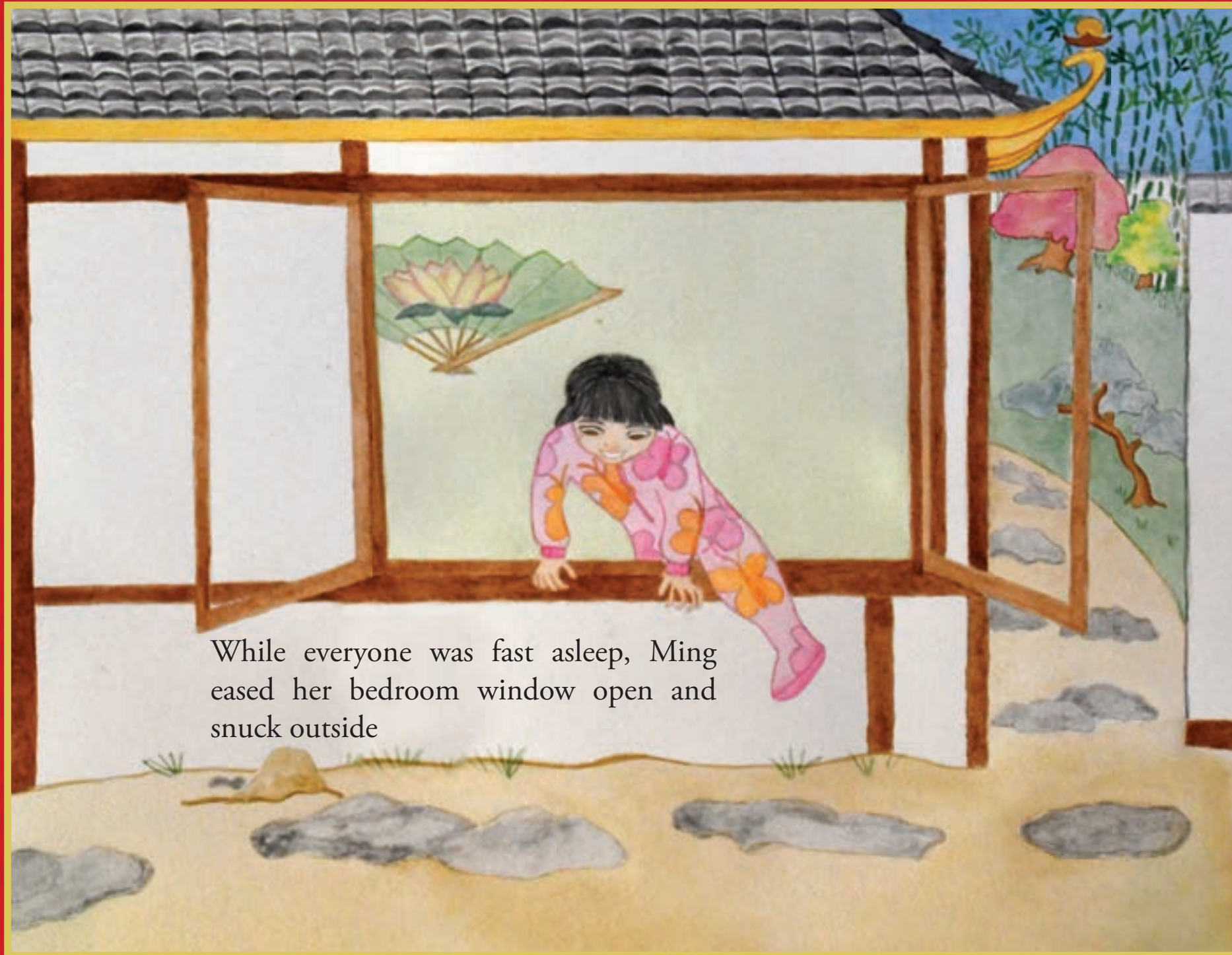
How Ming wished she could have the moon for her very own! Her heart leapt with joy when Grandmother told her, "The moon is yours. All you have to do is find it."



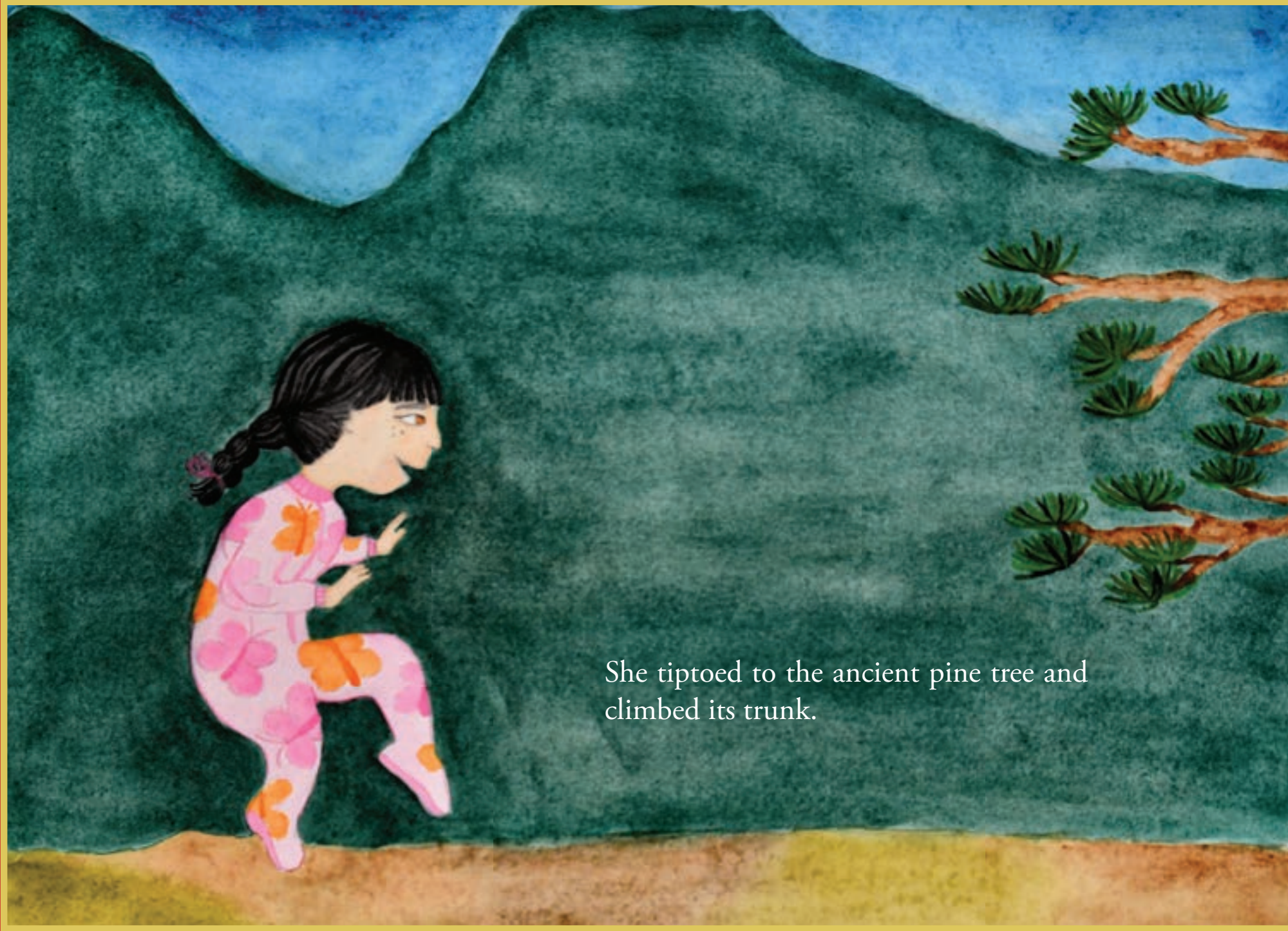
Ming knew exactly where to find it. Only the night before she had seen the moon resting in the branches of the pine tree outside her bedroom window.



That night Ming couldn't sleep. All she could think about was catching the moon.




While everyone was fast asleep, Ming eased her bedroom window open and snuck outside



She tiptoed to the ancient pine tree and
climbed its trunk.



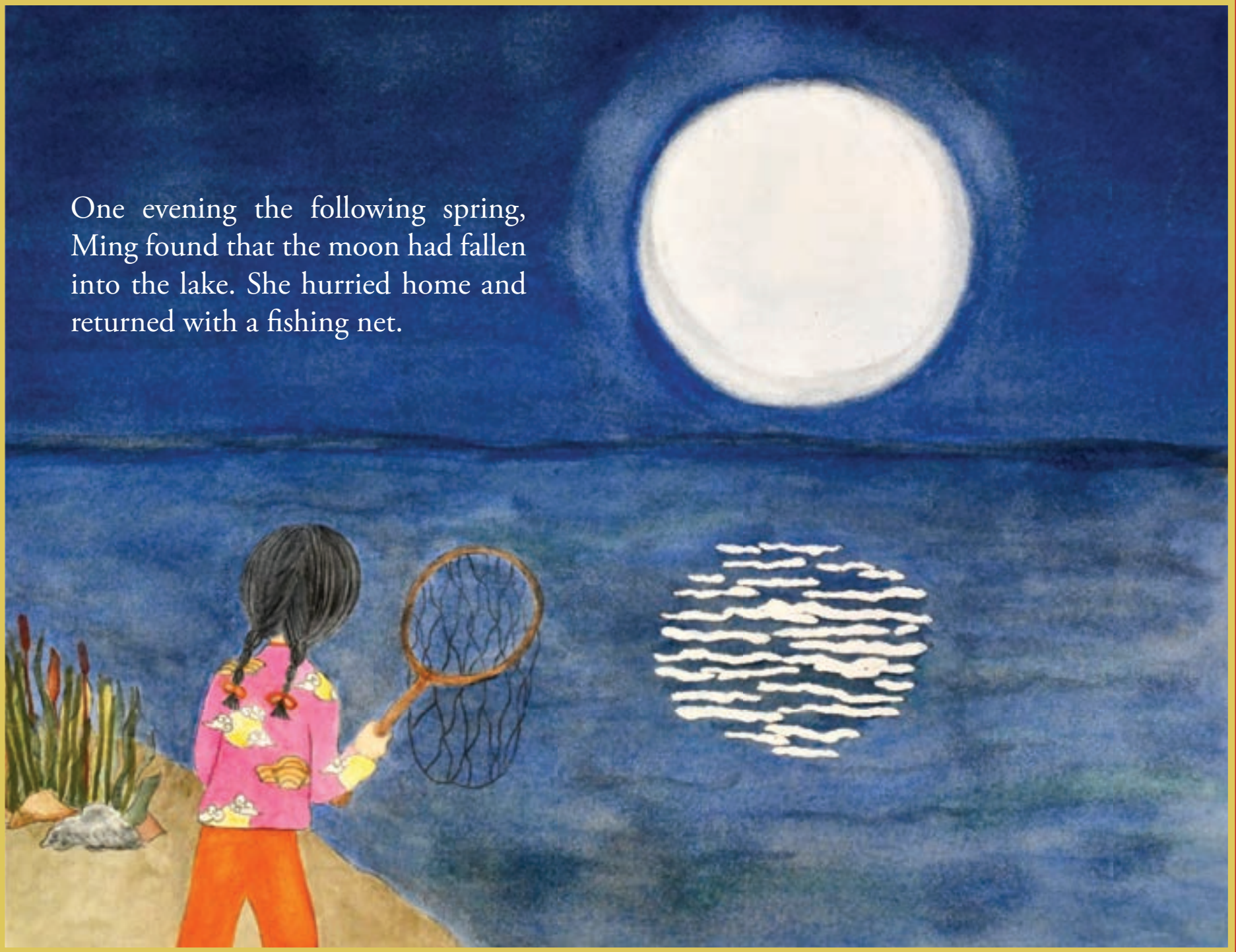
An illustration of a large, gnarled tree with thick, brown branches and green, spiky foliage. The tree is set against a bright blue sky. A person wearing a pink and yellow outfit is visible on the right side, clinging to a branch. The scene is framed by a red border.

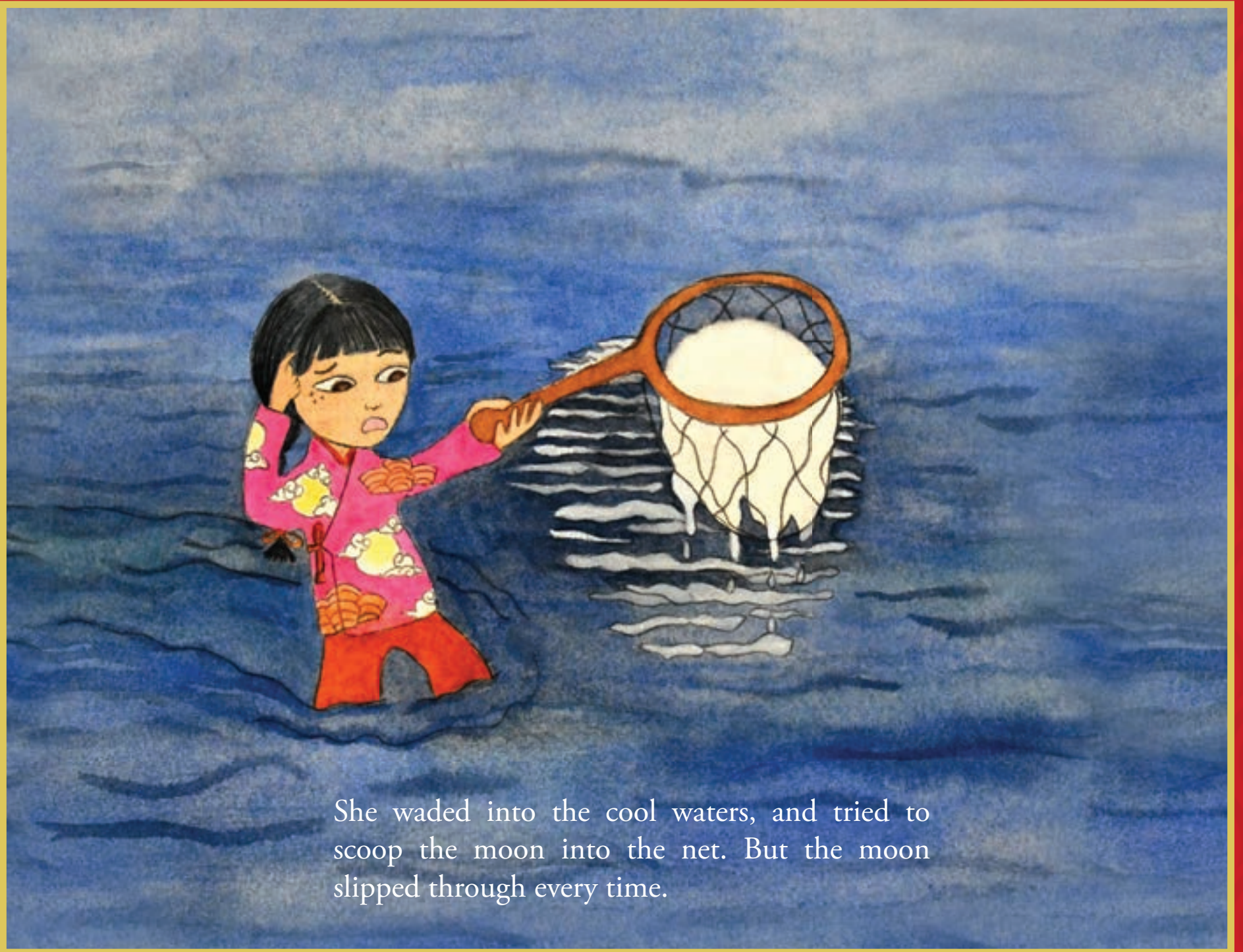
She summoned all her strength to reach the treetop, then inched out to the end of a long, bending branch. Ming drew as close as she could, then reached out her arms.



But no matter how far she stretched, she couldn't wrap her arms around the moon.

One evening the following spring,
Ming found that the moon had fallen
into the lake. She hurried home and
returned with a fishing net.





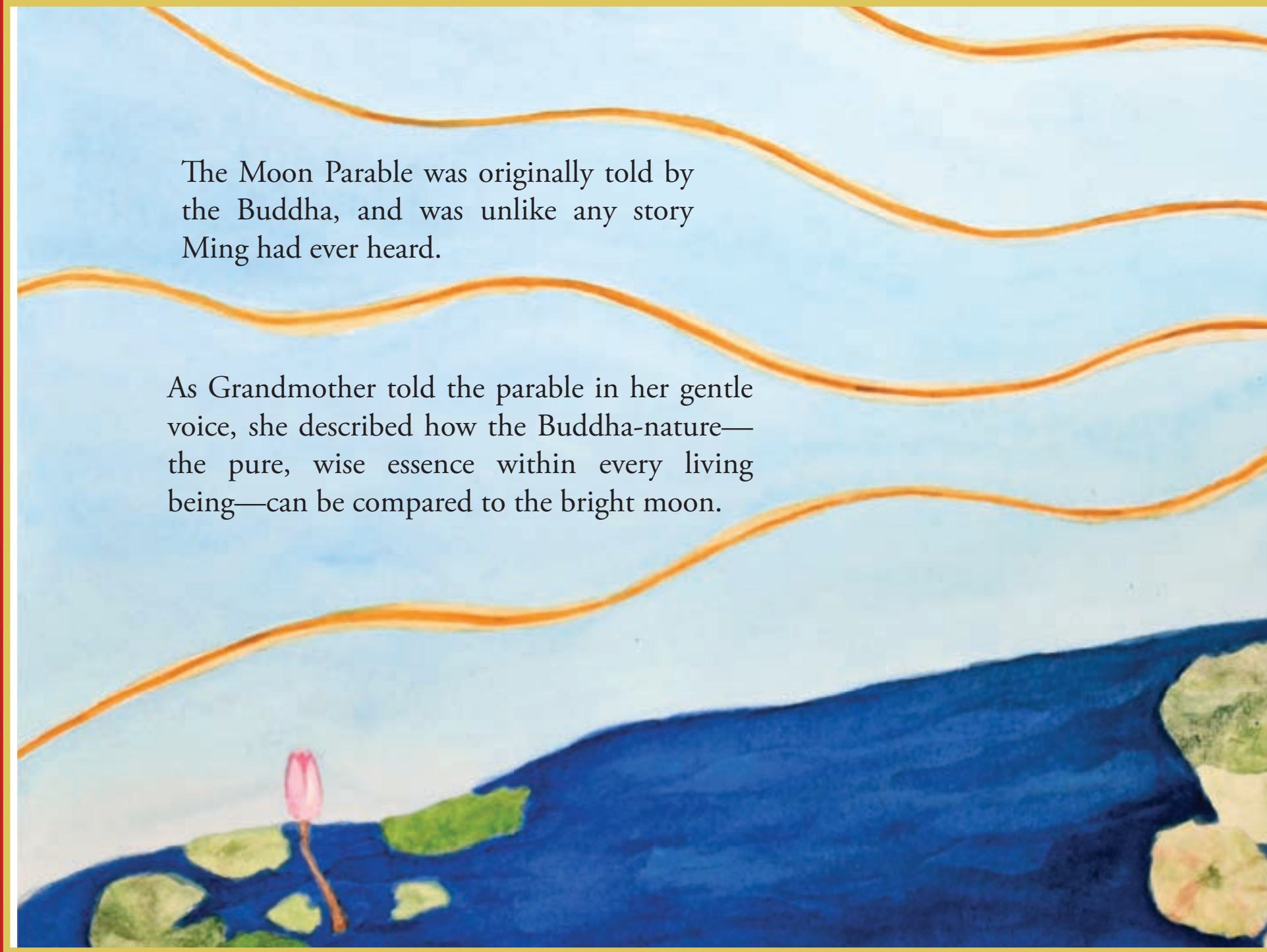
She waded into the cool waters, and tried to scoop the moon into the net. But the moon slipped through every time.

When Ming grew to be a young woman,
Grandmother began calling her *Mingyue*,
which means Bright Moon.



During that year's Mid-Autumn Festival, Ming enjoyed the familiar moon stories Grandmother told each year. But this year Grandmother told a tale Ming had never heard before—the Moon Parable.

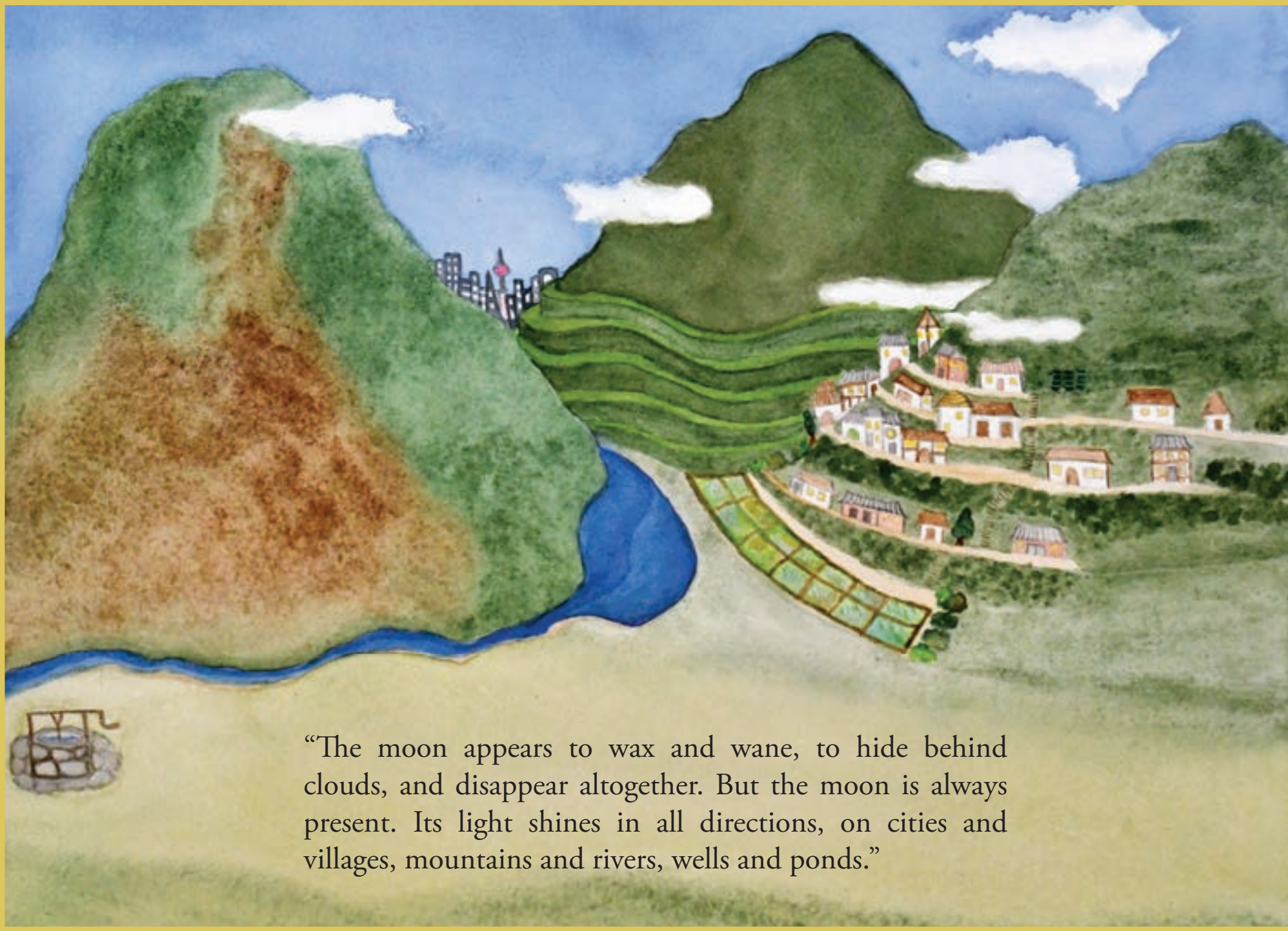


The background of the page is a watercolor illustration. It features a light blue sky with several wavy, horizontal orange lines that resemble clouds or stylized waves. Below the sky is a dark blue body of water, likely a pond. In the foreground, there are several green lily pads of various shapes and sizes. A single pink lotus flower is in bloom, rising from the water. The entire illustration is framed by a thin yellow border, which is itself set against a solid red background.

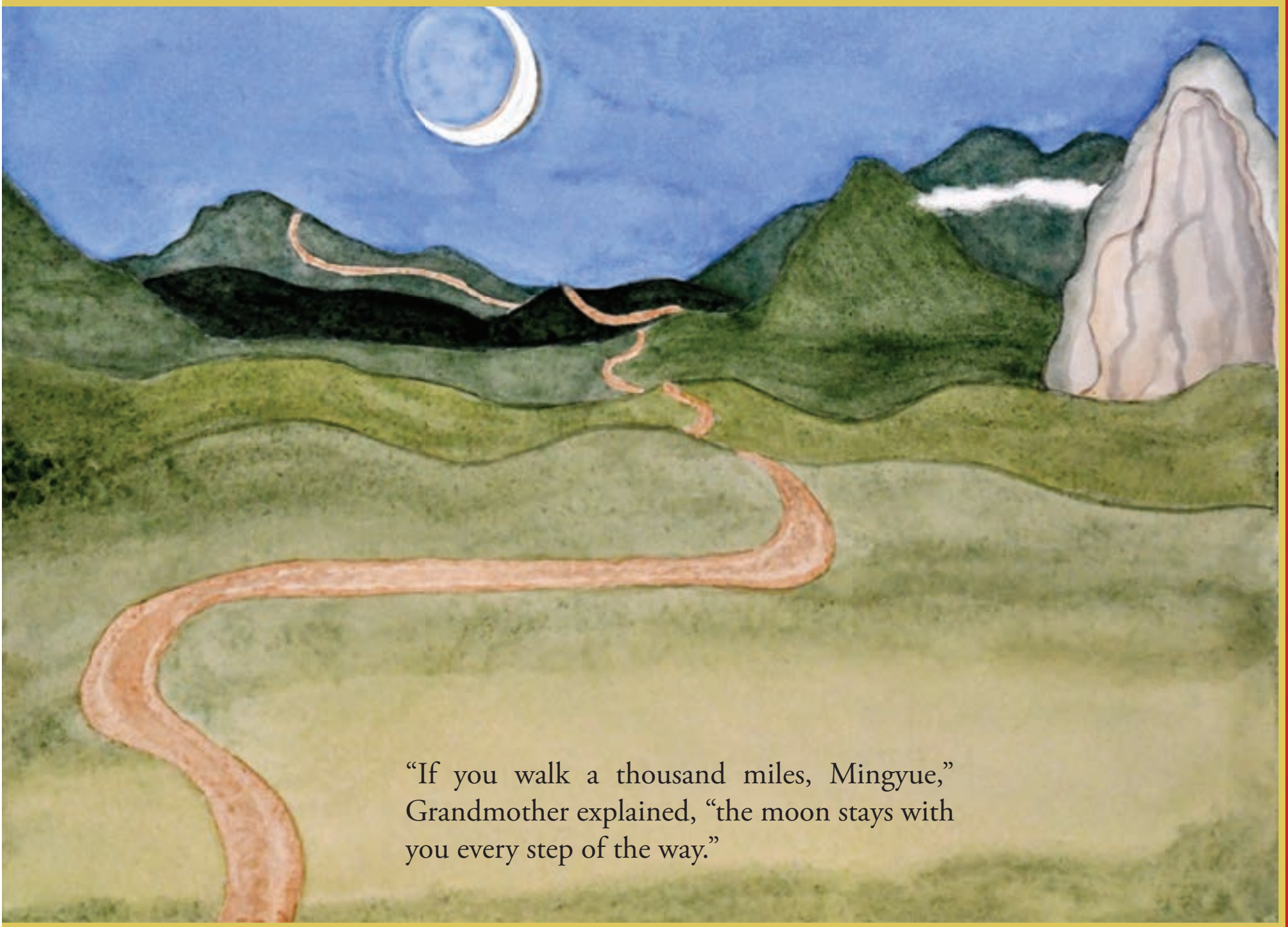
The Moon Parable was originally told by the Buddha, and was unlike any story Ming had ever heard.

As Grandmother told the parable in her gentle voice, she described how the Buddha-nature—the pure, wise essence within every living being—can be compared to the bright moon.





“The moon appears to wax and wane, to hide behind clouds, and disappear altogether. But the moon is always present. Its light shines in all directions, on cities and villages, mountains and rivers, wells and ponds.”



“If you walk a thousand miles, Mingyue,”
Grandmother explained, “the moon stays with
you every step of the way.”

“It is the same with your Buddha-nature. Your Buddha-nature is always there, shining inside of you. When you sweep away the clouds, everything is bright and clear.”

Ming gazed up at the sky and noticed that clouds had covered the moon entirely. “How do I sweep away the clouds, Nai Nai?”



“I will show you the practice the Buddha taught, so that the bright moon of your Buddha-nature will shine.”

And Grandmother taught Ming how to sit in meditation. As the two of them sat in silence, observing their breath, a patch of dense clouds drifted away, revealing a tiny glimpse of the moon.



Ming never forgot Grandmother's lesson, or her wise parable. For not long after the Mid-Autumn Festival, Grandmother joined the ancestors.

The Moon Parable was the last story she ever told.

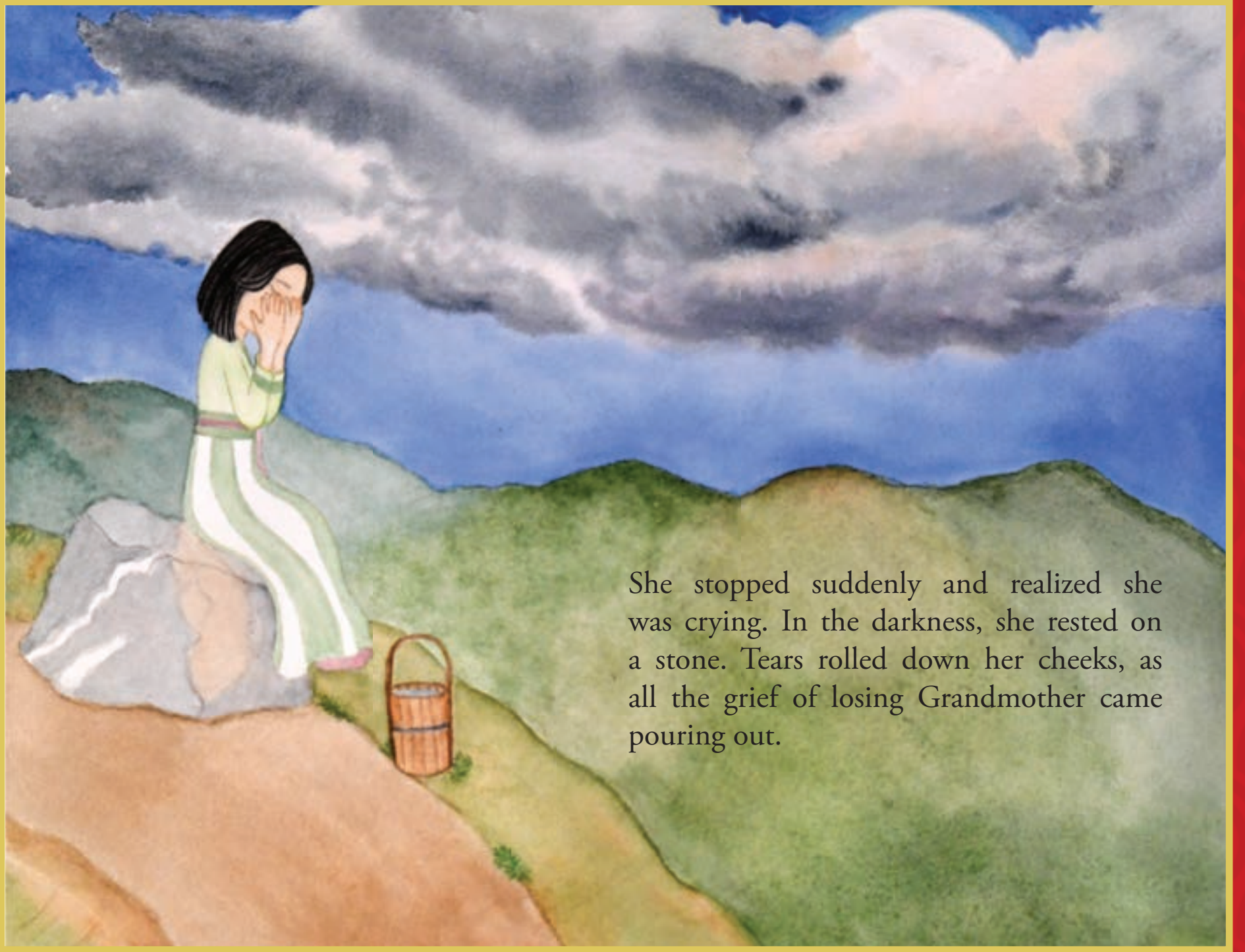


Ming honored Grandmother's memory by lighting incense and making offerings. But autumn turned to winter, and the heartbreak of losing her guiding light made Ming feel that her bright moon had disappeared.



One bleak, bitter evening, Ming walked along a narrow path, returning from the lake with a bucket of water. Dark clouds swirled around her, and a blast of wind kicked up dirt and leaves, clouding the water in her bucket.

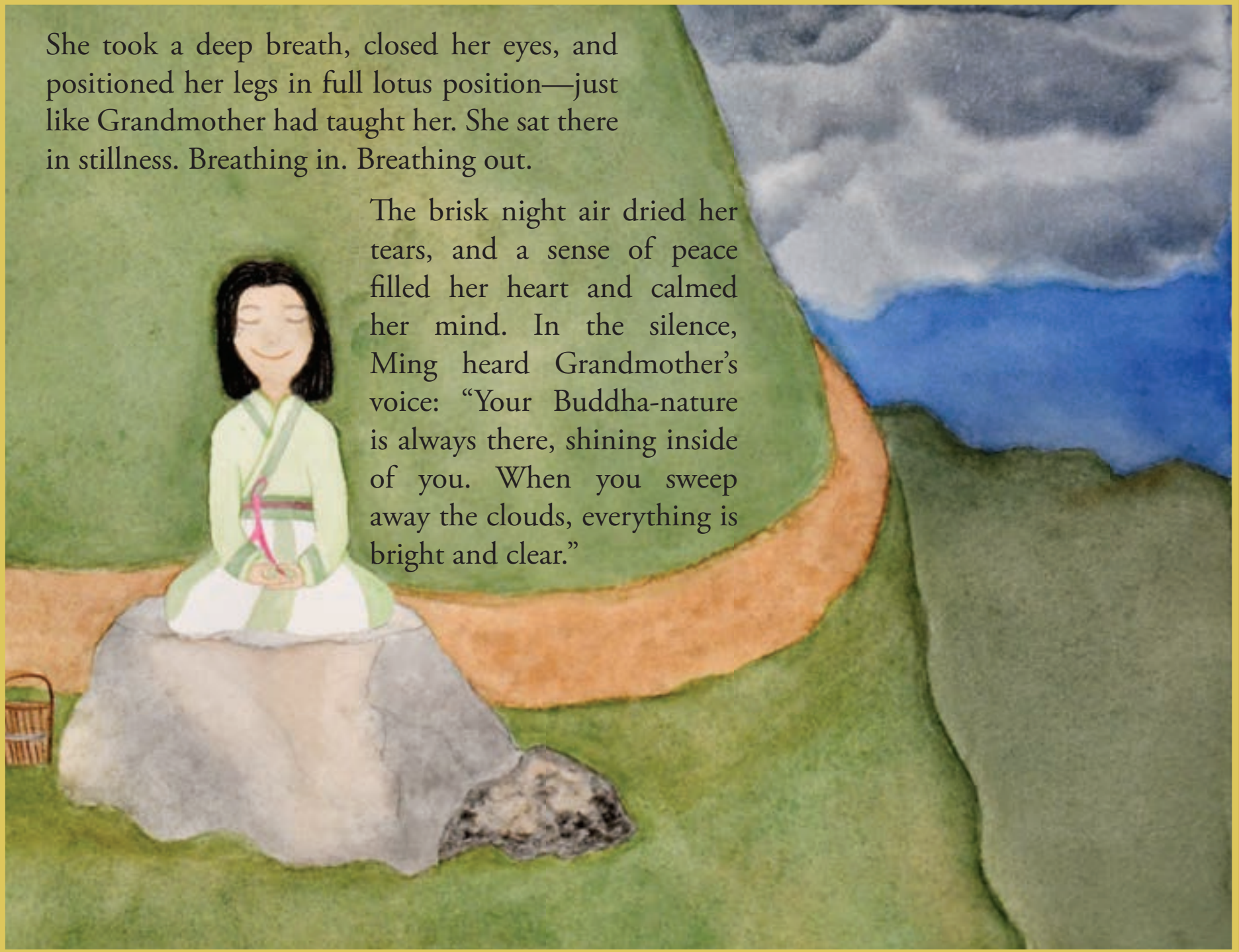


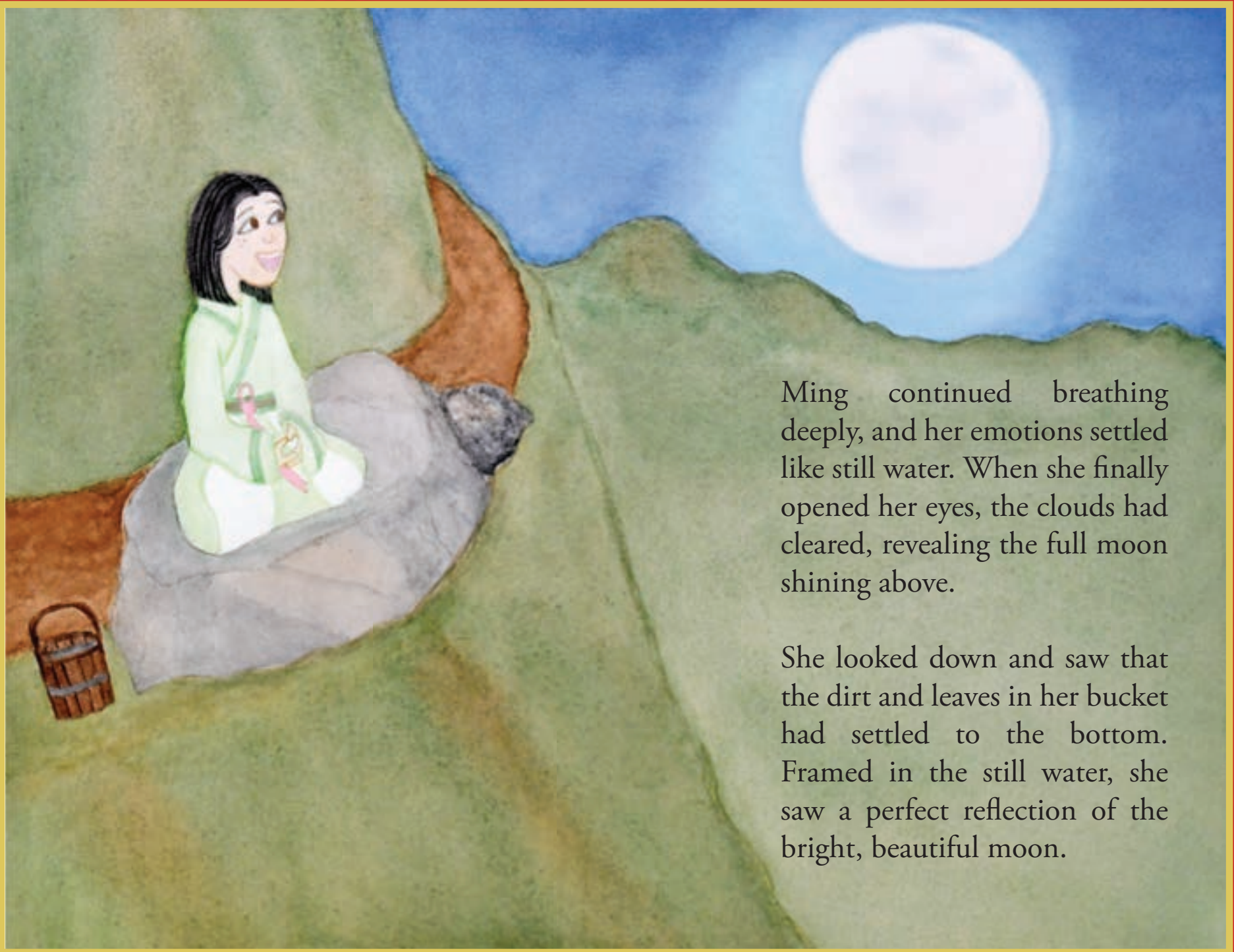


She stopped suddenly and realized she was crying. In the darkness, she rested on a stone. Tears rolled down her cheeks, as all the grief of losing Grandmother came pouring out.

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and positioned her legs in full lotus position—just like Grandmother had taught her. She sat there in stillness. Breathing in. Breathing out.

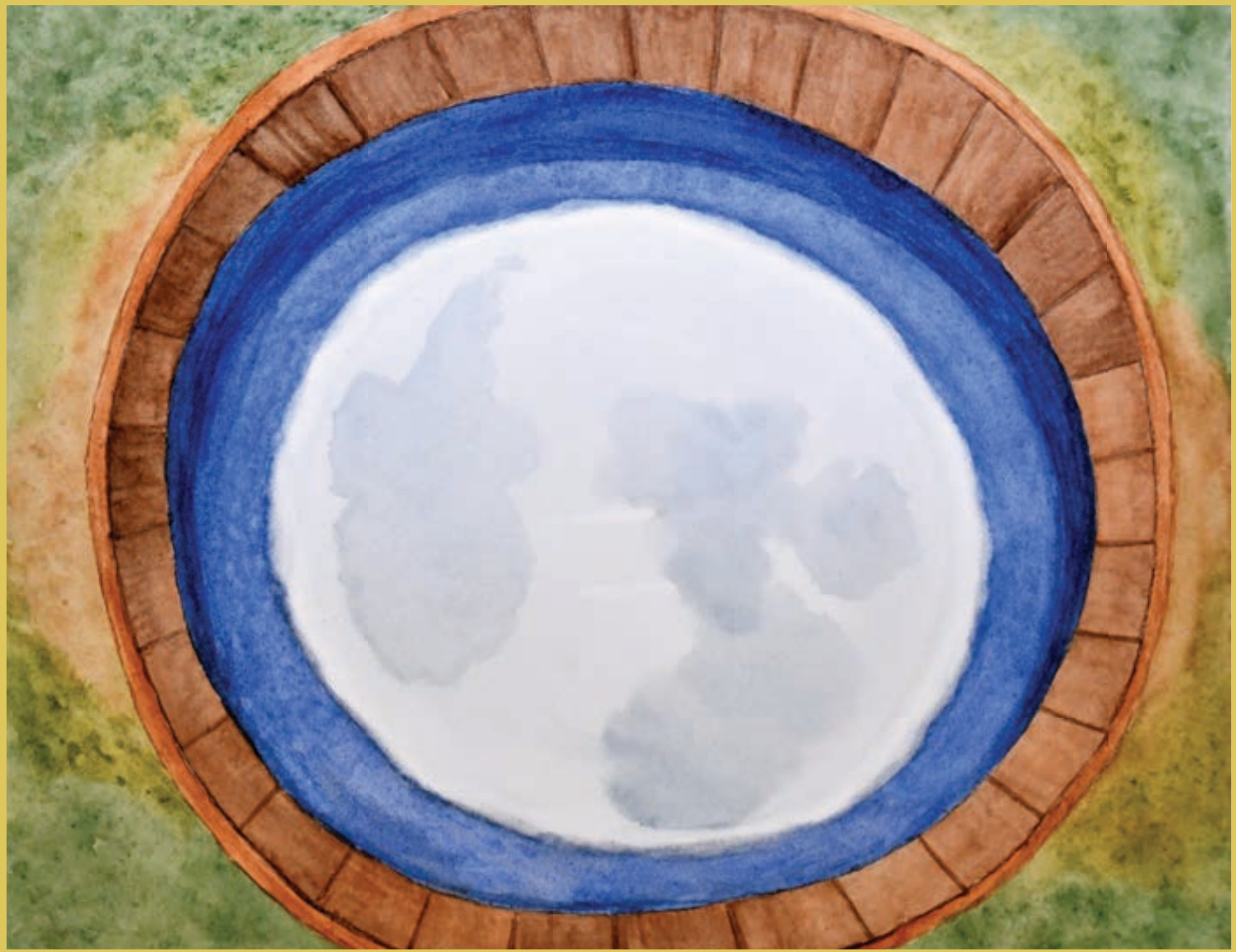
The brisk night air dried her tears, and a sense of peace filled her heart and calmed her mind. In the silence, Ming heard Grandmother's voice: "Your Buddha-nature is always there, shining inside of you. When you sweep away the clouds, everything is bright and clear."

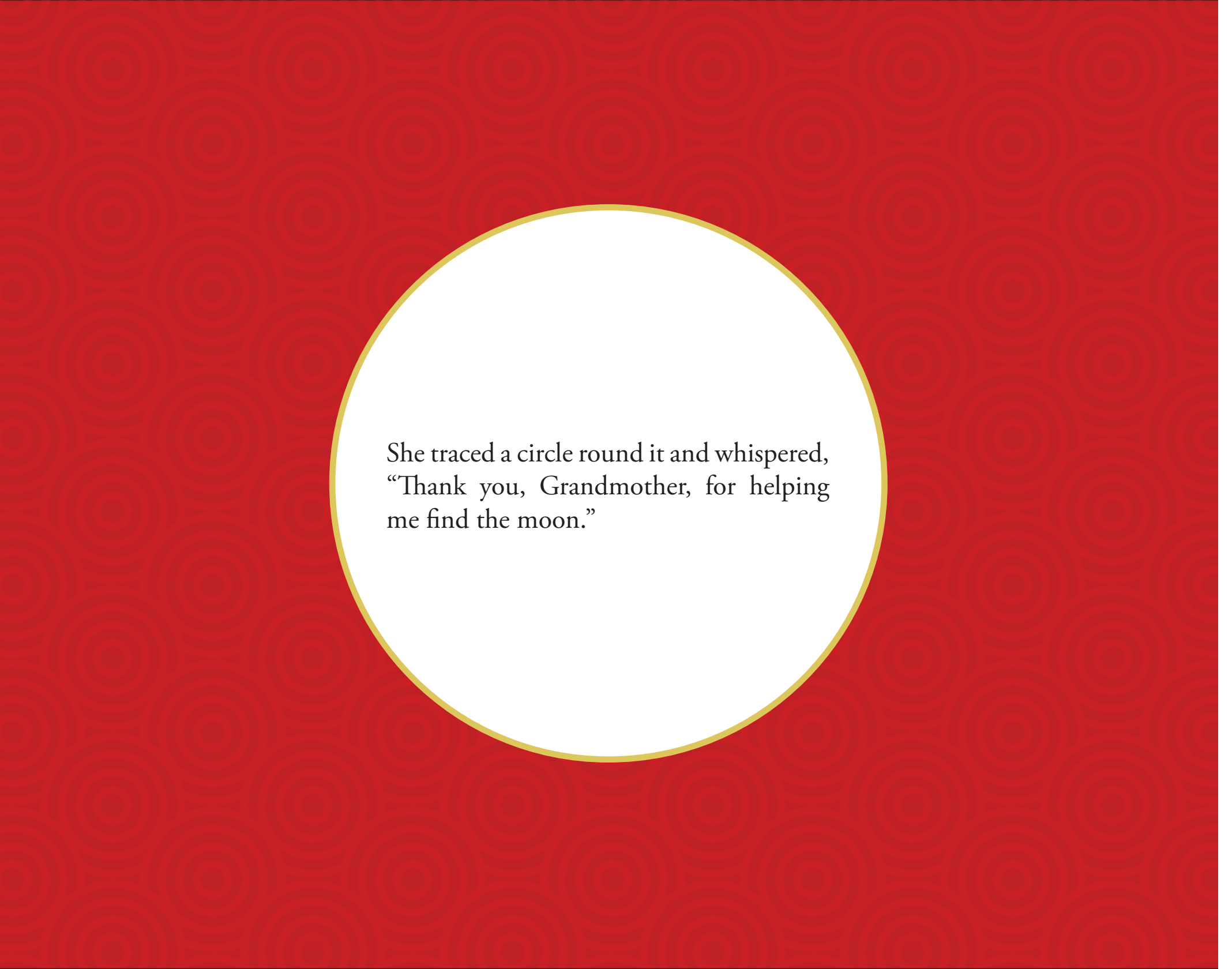




Ming continued breathing deeply, and her emotions settled like still water. When she finally opened her eyes, the clouds had cleared, revealing the full moon shining above.

She looked down and saw that the dirt and leaves in her bucket had settled to the bottom. Framed in the still water, she saw a perfect reflection of the bright, beautiful moon.





She traced a circle round it and whispered,
“Thank you, Grandmother, for helping
me find the moon.”



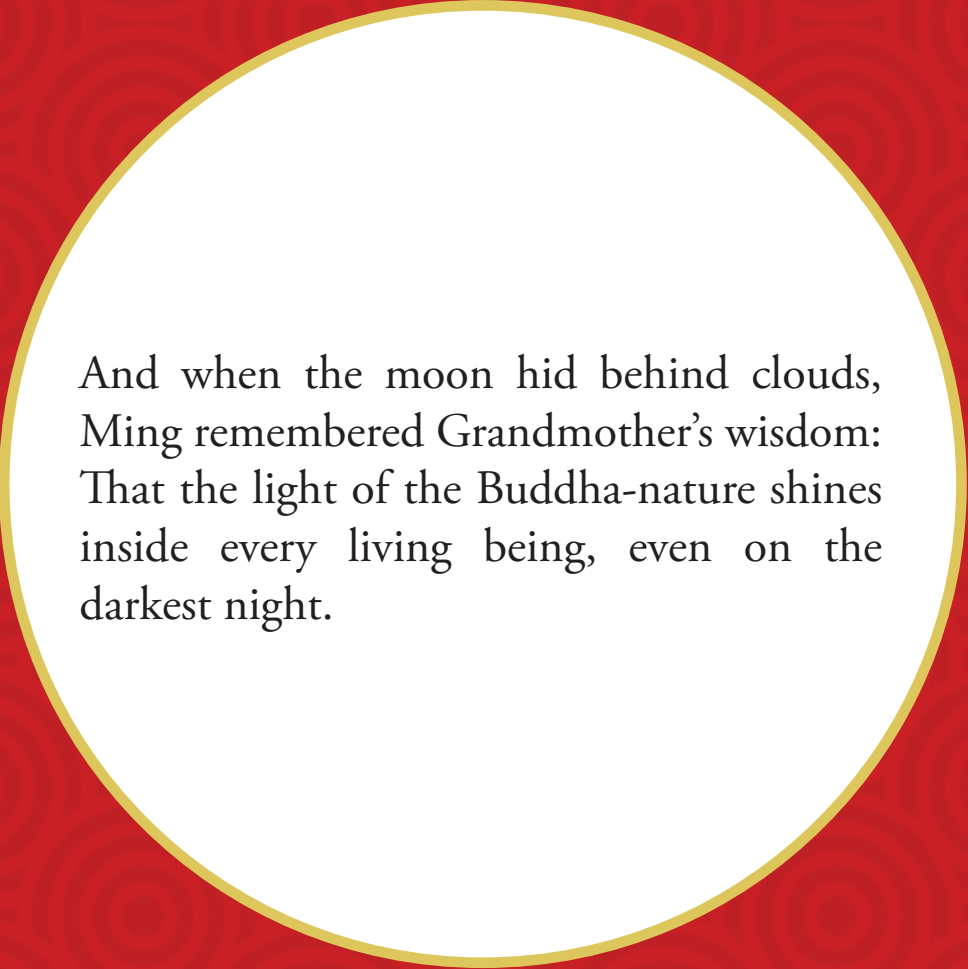
The following spring, Ming planted a cherry tree on the spot where Grandmother told the Moon Parable.

Year after year the tree stretched its branches to the sky until its blossoms bloomed as brightly as Grandmother's smile.



Ming kept Grandmother's stories alive by telling them to her own grandchildren. As she told those stories under the full moon of the Mid-Autumn Festival, Ming felt Grandmother's spirit, watching over her.





And when the moon hid behind clouds,
Ming remembered Grandmother's wisdom:
That the light of the Buddha-nature shines
inside every living being, even on the
darkest night.



REFLECTIONS ON BRIGHT MOON

Bright Moon draws inspiration from multiple sources. The backdrop for the tale is the Mid-Autumn Festival, a Chinese celebration that takes place each year on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month. Using the Gregorian calendar, the festival generally occurs in mid-September and celebrates the Harvest Moon. Historically, the Mid-Autumn Festival is an outdoor festival of thanksgiving following the hard labor of growing crops through the spring and summer.

The use of the moon as a metaphor occurs frequently in Buddhist scripture and folklore. Several Buddhist parables utilize the moon motif. Allusions to many of these parables appear in *Bright Moon*.

There is the well-known Zen parable of the “finger pointing at the moon.” In multiple versions of this teaching tale, the finger symbolizes a teacher pointing to the wisdom of the Dharma, while the moon represents wisdom itself. This parable illustrates that a wise teacher can point a student toward wisdom, but that wisdom can only be realized through direct experience and practice.

A variant of this parable includes a dialogue between the nun Wu Chin Tsang and Hui Neng, the Sixth Buddhist Patriarch in China. The parable is based on a conversation found in the *Sixth Patriarch's Sutra*. As the two engage in discussion, the nun discovers that Master Hui Neng is illiterate. Wu Chin Tsang questions whether the Patriarch can understand the subtle wisdom of the Buddha if he cannot read. He explains that wisdom has nothing to do with words. That wisdom is like the bright moon in the sky. And that words are like a finger—the finger can point to the moon; however, the finger is not the moon. In order to realize the wisdom of the bright

moon, one must gaze beyond the finger and experience wisdom first-hand. (The image of the finger pointing at the moon does not appear in the original Sutra, and must have been added to the parable at a later date.)

Ming's moment of realization upon seeing the reflection of the full moon is borrowed from a tale about the Japanese nun, Chiyono. Despite studying Zen for many years, Chiyono is unable to achieve awakening. Then, one moonlit evening, she's carrying a bamboo bucket filled with water. As she walks along she sees the reflection of the full moon framed in her bucket. Suddenly the bottom of the bucket falls away. All of the water rushes out, the moon's reflection vanishes, and Chiyono attains enlightenment.

In another version of this tale, Chiyono is walking with her bucket and sees the moon reflected in it. This triggers her discovery that one can only see the moon's reflection when the bucket is held steady. Her revelation seems simplistic on the surface, but what she's actually realizing is that when the passions in the mind are stilled, one sees clearly, and wisdom emerges. Like Chiyono, Ming experiences stillness in meditation. Her mind and emotions settle like still water. That stillness leads to a moment of clarity, as she gazes down and sees the full moon reflected in still water.

When the mind is pure,

The moon appears in the water.

The act of carrying water is itself a metaphor for Buddhist cultivation. The phrase “collecting firewood and carrying water” (now better known as “chop wood, carry water”) was originally written in verse by Tang dynasty poet Layman Pang. It refers to the “nothing special” aspect of everyday Buddhist practice that involves engaging in mundane tasks such as gathering firewood and fetching water with the same mindfulness one would employ during meditation.

The Moon Parable that Grandmother tells Ming is from the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*. In chapter 15 of the Sutra the Buddha uses the analogy of the moon to explain the Buddha-nature to Kasyapa. Portions of Grandmother's telling of the Moon Parable, such as the full moon appearing in cities and villages, mountains and rivers, wells and ponds; and the image of the moon following someone who walks a thousand miles (a hundred thousand yojanas in the original—approximately eight hundred thousand miles), are taken directly from the Sutra.

The planting of a cherry tree in honor of a deceased elder can be seen in the Japanese folktale *Ubazakura*. After the funeral of beloved family caretaker O-Sode, a cherry tree is planted in remembrance of her. Her spirit lives on in the tree and blooms each year on the anniversary of her death.

In Buddhism, cherry blossoms symbolize impermanence. Due to their brief, yet brilliant blooming season, the blossoms remind us of the ephemeral nature of living things. At the same time they encourage mindfulness, inviting us to pay attention to the beauty all around us.

The tradition of perpetuating stories by passing them from one generation to the next is as old as language itself:

Mother to daughter, mouth to ear, drawing from the ancient well;

We are teaching our children with the stories that we tell.

THREE BOWS

Much love to our dear friend, Cynthia Chang, for bringing us together to collaborate on this project. Thank you Cynthia, for your big heart, and most importantly, your friendship. Profound appreciation to our spouses Steve Milner and Wren Conroy for their valuable feedback and ongoing support. Deep gratitude to kind friends and family members Luke Milner, Dani Milner, Renee Cassidy, Carradine Dagostino, Jean Chen and Aurelia Macri for their encouragement and thoughtful input. Thank you to Valentina Arenas for her artistic direction and guidance. Special thanks to Martine Van Der Laan who gave honest feedback and encouragement every step of the way and offered expert assistance with photography and digital imaging. If you're in Berkeley stop by Blick Art Supplies, whose staff was extremely generous with their advice and expertise. A big shout-out to Glendon Haddix and the team at Streetlight Graphics for their infinite patience, consummate professionalism and creative vision. And finally, three bows to Reverend Heng Sure, who twenty-five years ago planted a seed by pointing out the need for more Buddhist stories with females as central characters. May this book be a flower from that seed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Conroy is the founder of the Buddhist Storytelling Circle, a group of storytellers from the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery. For thirty-five years he taught theater and public speaking in the public schools of San Jose, California, and storytelling for ten years at San Jose State University. Brian is the author of two collections of Buddhist parables, *Lotus Petals* and *Stepping Stones*; and the children's book *Prince Dighavu*.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Catrina Milner is a practicing Buddhist who follows the teachings of Venerable Master Hsuan Hua. A graduate of La Verne University, she has engaged in multiple interior, floor plan, and landscape design projects. Catrina began painting as a means of maintaining her health during an illness. She views painting as a form of meditation, which has brought to life the watercolors that adorn the pages of *Bright Moon*.

An illustration showing two figures from behind, standing on a red wooden bridge. They are looking down a river that flows between green hills. A large, bright full moon is in the dark blue sky above the river. The style is painterly and soft.

Every year during the Mid-Autumn Festival, Ming listens eagerly as Grandmother tells fanciful tales of the moon. When Ming grows to be a young woman, Grandmother tells her the Moon Parable, a tale originally told by the Buddha. For the rest of her life, the story's wisdom serves as a guiding light for Ming, illuminating her path like a bright moon.

