

PEACH BLOSSOM SPRING



Folk tales
companion guide

A POWERFUL STORY OF RESILIENCE,
MIGRATION AND ONE FAMILY'S SEARCH
FOR A PLACE TO CALL HOME



'Glorious and tender' Jennifer Saint author of *Ariadne*

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FOLK TALES

companion guide

In *Peach Blossom Spring*, the character Meilin often tells folk tales to her son, Renshu, as they travel across China. With each story, Meilin prompts Renshu to find or recall a particular scene on their most prized possession: an intricately illustrated hand scroll. Once Renshu has found the detail, the storytelling begins. Meilin draws on the tales for inspiration, solace, wisdom, and humour. They are a way to escape the bleakness of their situation as well as find the strength and perspective to persevere. All the folk tales are told while Meilin and Renshu are still in China. Though Meilin tells no new ones after they leave, the stories stay with them to the very last page.



Map of Folk Tales in *Peach Blossom Spring*

THE OLD MAN AND THE HORSE

This is the first fable Meilin shares with Renshu. They have just survived a perilous situation and have been separated from the rest of their family. Surrounded by destruction and wreckage, Meilin is desperate to find something good, something hopeful, to hold on to. She can't let her young boy think that desolation and sadness is all life has to offer. And then she comes up with the idea of telling him a story from their scroll.

‘There was once an old man from the frontier who had a great stallion,’ she begins. ‘It was dark brown, glossy and strong, with a long black mane and a wild look in its eye. It was known to be the most gallant horse in all the neighbouring towns and villages.’ As she tells the story, she feels herself relaxing into its rhythms, letting the images carry her away, however briefly, from her own despair.

‘Everyone said he must be the luckiest man to have such a noble beast. It was the envy of all. But one day, the stallion ran away. Of course, everyone said this was a great tragedy. What terrible luck!’

Renshu groans in sympathy.

‘But the old man didn’t despair. Instead, he said, “What makes you so certain this isn’t a blessing?” A few weeks later, the stallion came galloping back home, followed by a beautiful wild mare. Soon, there was a colt. The three magnificent creatures brought pride and prosperity to the man. Everyone said this was cause for great celebration. But the old man said, “What makes you so certain this isn’t a curse?” The villagers couldn’t believe he’d say such a thing, but a few days later, the man’s only son fell while riding the stallion and broke his leg. With the harvest coming in soon, this doubled the old man’s work in the fields. “Oh, such misfortune!” said the villagers. But the old man said—’

‘“What makes you so certain this isn’t a blessing?”’ Renshu finishes.

‘Yes, that’s exactly what he said,’ Meilin smiles. ‘Not long after,

a battle broke out between neighbouring warlords, and all the men in the village had to go to fight. Except for the old and the infirm. Because of his broken leg, the man's son was spared. The fight was bloody and vicious. None of the men who went came back. It was only because the man was old and his son was lame that they survived to take care of each other for many years.' Meilin pauses for a moment. 'Within every misfortune there is a blessing, and within every blessing, the seeds of misfortune. And so it goes, until the end of time.'

'But Ma, what's the blessing in all this?' Renshu stares at the swarms of people, the wagons, and the tired donkeys and oxen trudging along.

Meilin is quiet for several moments as she rolls up the scroll and reassembles her basket. They both get to their feet. She rerolls the bedroll and helps Renshu put it on his back. She dusts off her trousers and picks up her basket.

'I don't know,' she says, finally. 'I'm still looking.'

LI CHI SLAYS THE SERPENT

Meilin tells this story to Renshu and his cousin, Liling, just after another character has told them tales about the valour and bravery of the legendary military strategist, Zhuge Liang. In Meilin's story, the heroine is a young girl. Meilin wants the children to know that just because they are young and small, there is no reason they cannot be heroes, too.

'I can tell you a story about bravery. Real bravery,' Ma says to the children, as Uncle strides to the edge of the boat and joins a group of men smoking cigarettes and sharing a bottle of brandy.

'Real bravery?' Liling echoes.

'It's a story about serpents.' Ma opens her basket. From the bottom section, she lifts the wooden, rectangular box. The hand scroll. Renshu grasps Liling's hand and jumps about, excited. The two children crowd around Meilin to look more closely. As his ma unrolls from the left and rerolls from the right, the figures on the scroll are even more enchanting than Renshu remembers. He can almost hear the cormorants screeching above the painted fishermen as they dip their oars into the water. In a hunting scene, he is certain he feels the thunder of a stallion's hooves. Liling exclaims again and again with delight at each detail she discovers. The flowers! The birds! The colours of the mountains!

Finally, his ma pauses at a scene showing houses, gardens and temples nestled in foothills. 'Once, in this small village,' she begins, gesturing at the scroll, 'there was a girl named Li Chi.' She looks thoughtfully at Liling. 'Her name was not so very different from yours, Liling. Maybe her nature wasn't, either.

'Li Chi was the sixth daughter of a poor farmer who lived in a village below the Yung Mountains. Way up near the mountain peak, there lived a fearsome serpent. One night, he appeared in all the villagers' dreams and demanded that he be given a thirteen-year-old maiden every year on the eighth day of the eighth month. Otherwise, he would ransack the entire village.

'Naturally, everyone lived in fear of the beast. So the village magistrates took it upon themselves to sacrifice the daughters of

crooks and thieves. Over nine years, nine young girls were given to the greedy serpent. But on the eve of the eighth day of the eighth month of the tenth year, Li Chi went to her parents and said, "Let me be the one who goes to the serpent. You have more daughters than you need and the magistrates will give you a small sum for me, as you are neither crooks nor thieves."'

Liling, listening intently, leans closer onto Meilin's lap.

'Do you see Li Chi?' Meilin asks.

Renshu points to a girl standing apart from where the children are playing. A dog sits by her side. Liling points to a solitary figure in a cape, heading up the mountain path.

Renshu nudges his ma to continue.

'Well, of course, Li Chi's parents said no! But Li Chi, though the youngest and the smallest, was also the bravest and most stubborn of all her sisters. She went to the magistrates anyway. "As my parents are neither crooks nor thieves, will you give them a small sum for me?" The magistrates agreed.

'The next day, Li Chi headed up into the mountains with a sharp sword, a snake-fighting dog, and a basket of sweetened rice balls. She was frightened, but she was also determined. These two feelings always go hand in hand.'

'When Li Chi reached the mouth of the cave, she spread the rice balls on the ground and called out, "Oh Serpent, don't you want to eat these delicious rice balls before you devour me?"

'The serpent, that gluttonous beast, came rushing to the front of the cave and lowered his head to gobble the rice balls. And at that instant, Li Chi released her snarling dog. He leapt and sank his teeth into the back of the serpent's neck. Caught off guard, the serpent reared up in pain and surprise. Seizing her chance, Li Chi drove her sword into the serpent's chest, deep and true. The serpent howled and writhed and moaned, until finally he collapsed at her feet.'

'Hooray!' shouts Renshu.

Liling's eyes are as big as the full moon. 'Then what?'

Ma's voice becomes a whisper. 'After she was sure the serpent was dead, Li Chi crept into his cave. Pew-ee! It smelled terrible! And in the very back, she found nine skulls lined up along the

wall. “Oh my darlings,” she said, picking up each one in turn, “for your timidity you were devoured. How pitiful!” Then she retrieved her sword and her dog, and marched down the mountain, back to her family and the grateful villagers. After much celebration, she was lauded as a heroine for ages to come.’

Renshu and Liling clap, happy with the tale.

‘Oh my darlings,’ says Meilin to the children, ‘whatever serpents wait ahead for us, let us be bold like Li Chi.’ She gives each a kiss on the head and rolls up the scroll, tucking it back into the bottom of her basket.

THE EMPEROR AND THE ROOSTER

This is a story that Meilin's father told her at a young age when she was first learning to read and write and she had to spend hours practising her brush strokes. She passes it on to Renshu and Liling when they are at a similar point. Meilin tells this story because she wants them to laugh, she wants them to love learning, and she wants them to know the value of patience and practice.

'Renshu,' Meilin interrupts, hating to hear him complain. 'I cannot change your teachers or their methods. But I can tell you a story.'

'A scroll story?'

'Yes, a scroll story.'

Renshu's face lights up and he goes over to her basket to take out their treasure. Meilin puts away her mending, and Liling and Renshu sit by her side.

'Can you find a hermit in a thatched mountain hut, a busy city down in the valley, and a palace, with horses and soldiers and banners flying in the wind?'

They pore over the scroll, unrolling and rerolling it, section by section, searching for the scene she has described. When they find it, Meilin begins:

'There was once an emperor who loved roosters. One day, he asked his advisors, "Who is the finest artist in the land?"

"Your excellency," they said, "by far the most talented artist of all is Master Wen, who lives high in the hills of Dabashan."

"Bring him here!" boomed the emperor.

'So the emperor's men went into the mountains, searching along old trails almost lost to time until, at last, they found Master Wen. They explained that he must come see the emperor at once.

'Master Wen lay down his brushes and put on his shoes. He wrapped his robes around himself and, without a word, followed the emperor's men down the mountain and into the palace. Such riches! Such gold! They led him along a corridor lined with one hundred soldiers and one hundred glittering dragon lamps. At

the end, Master Wen bowed to the emperor, who sat on a sumptuous golden throne.

““They tell me you are the finest artist in the land.”

Master Wen stood up straight and nodded.

““I want the best painting of a rooster the world has ever seen. Just for me. I commission you.”

““Of course, your excellency. But I need two years.”

““Two years?” sputtered the emperor, turning a bright red. The emperor was not accustomed to waiting two minutes for anything, let alone two years.

‘The one hundred soldiers stared straight ahead. No one blinked or uttered a word.

‘But Master Wen simply held up two fingers.

““Very well, take two years, then return with my painting. If it is as marvellous as I expect, then you shall have all the tea and ink and scrolls you desire. You may spend the rest of your years writing poetry, practising calligraphy and painting landscapes.”

‘There were quiet murmurs throughout the hall.

““But,” thundered the emperor, holding up a hand to make his conditions clear, “should you fail to produce a painting that pleases me, then the painting will be burned and you along with it.”

‘Master Wen nodded and returned to his hut.

‘Two years passed, and the emperor’s men came again to the mountains. Master Wen’s moustache and beard had grown longer and greyer, but his eyes were as sharp as ever. He greeted them at his hut, then picked up a scroll, his favourite brush, his inkstone and an ink cake.

““I am ready.”

‘Back down the mountain, back into the city, to the palace, and down the same long corridor with one hundred soldiers and one hundred glittering lamps. This time, the emperor, who had grown even fatter, sat on silk cushions in robes of red and gold.

‘Master Wen bowed.

““Where is my painting?” boomed the emperor.

‘Master Wen unrolled the scroll, and to everyone’s shock, the silk was blank.

“May I have some water, your excellency?”

A servant hurried forwards with a flask.

Master Wen took the water, poured it in the well at the bottom of his inkstone, unwrapped his ink cake, and began to scrape the cake against the well, mixing ink. A wonderful scent of camphor, pine and fresh flowers filled the air. When he was satisfied with the ink’s consistency, he dipped his brush into the dark pool and lifted it out, careful not to spill a single drop.

He touched the brush to the scroll and the ink began to bleed on to the silk. His hand moved deftly, pausing here, accelerating there, sometimes making the stroke thick, sometimes thin. The brush danced with agility and grace. And before everyone’s eyes, a rooster appeared. With the last bit of ink in his dish, Master Wen added a final flourish on the coxcomb.

For some time, the hall was silent. Finally, the emperor spoke.

“Master Wen, that is, indeed, the most astonishing rooster painting I have ever seen. You shall have your tea and ink. But first, I must know: that took you no more than three minutes. Why did you need two years?”

The artist dried his inkstone with the hem of his robe and wrapped his ink cake in silk, tenderly wiping his brush clean. When he had finished, he beckoned for the emperor to come close.

“Come visit my workshop,” he whispered in the emperor’s ear.

When the emperor and his men arrived at Master Wen’s home in the mountains, they found stacks and stacks of paper, covered with sketches and studies and partially finished paintings of roosters. Roosters and roosters, reaching all the way to the ceiling.’

Renshu and Liling laugh. That is what Meilin hoped for, what she always hopes for, when she tells them a story. If they laugh, they’ll remember it. And if they remember it, they’ll always have this piece of home, of her.

THE MAGIC PEAR TREE

The Magic Pear Tree is about many things: greed, generosity, hope, and the perils of underestimating anyone. Meilin tells this story on the evening of the Lantern Festival, at the close of the New Year's festivities. She and Renshu are entering a period where things are not always what they seem, and people are not always bringing out the best in others. I like to think that Meilin's faith in the possibility of goodness keeps her going. We only need a little seed of hope for a lot of good to take root.

Back in their room, Meilin gets the scroll from her basket. It is her last connection to the future she and Xiaowen once dreamed of. She carefully shuttles the silk from one end to the other, as if enacting a ritual, to the final scene where the traveller rests under blossoming trees.

'This.' She points at the trees. 'This is what I want.'

Renshu smiles. Perhaps now is the time to tell her about the ancient orchard he'd discovered in Yichang, and the seeds he left behind there.

'Have I ever told you the story about the magic pear tree?' Meilin asks, breaking his thoughts.

'The magic pear tree?' He shakes his head. And before he can say another word, she starts.

'There was once a farmer from a town called Bailizhou, not far from where I grew up. One autumn, the farmer had a splendid pear harvest. He filled his cart with fruit and made his way to the market.'

As the music of the story flows from his ma's tongue, Renshu fills with warmth. The cold night disappears and he is transported into the world she conjures. She seems, for once, happy. He will tell her about the seeds later.

'At the market, the farmer was doing a fine business. He spent the morning exchanging those golden globes for silver coins. After each purchase, he imagined what he would buy: strong black boots, a fur coat for winter, maybe even another donkey or a new cart. As the day went on, his purse and his dreams were growing fatter and fatter.

'Along came a monk. The edges of his robes were dusty and

frayed. He had walked a great distance, having come over the mountains on his way to a sacred temple. Although the monk had forsaken most of his worldly desires and earthly belongings long ago, the pears looked so delicious and smelled so sweet that he hungered after one.

‘Approaching the farmer, he said, “Please, good sir, in your benevolence and generosity, will you give a humble monk one of your sweet pears?”’

‘The farmer hesitated. If he gave the monk a pear, people might get idea that he would give his fruit away for free. But he knew he shouldn’t refuse a monk, so he pretended he didn’t hear and hoped the monk would wander away.’

“‘Dear brother,” persisted the monk, “you would honour your family name if you shared a pear. You have plenty. Could you not spare just one?”’

‘At that moment, the farmer was selling pears to a rich family. After pouring coins into the farmer’s palm, the mother gave each of her children a pear. The farmer turned his back to the monk and batted at the air with his free hand, as if swatting a mosquito.’

‘An old tea seller nearby had been watching. She knew something about the ways of monks, so she flipped a coin in the farmer’s direction. “Give the old man a pear! Have you no shame?” The farmer caught the coin mid-air and slipped it into his silk purse. “Very well,” the farmer said to the monk, “have a pear.”’

‘The monk bowed to the tea seller. “Thank you for the kindness.” Then he turned to the farmer’s cart and selected a pear. He sat down in the middle of the market and bit into his pear with his eyes closed, humming with pleasure. In this manner, he ate the whole fruit, stem and all, except for one seed. Then, opening his eyes, he stood and said, “You have many pears, but I only needed one seed.”’

‘Taking a small shovel from his sack, he dug a hole. He placed the seed in the hole and carefully covered it. He then took his begging bowl and went over to the tea seller, holding it out. Without comment, the tea seller filled the bowl.’

‘The monk poured the water where he had buried the seed.’

By now, a crowd had gathered to watch. From the moist spot on the ground, a shoot broke through the earth. In front of everyone's eyes, it grew and thickened into a trunk. Within minutes, the trunk divided, and branches sprouted and began to wind their way up, like arms reaching towards the sky. Cries of astonishment rang out as buds burst forth, then blossomed into full splendour. Amazement followed unfurling leaves, the blossoms folding in on themselves so that fruit began to swell and ripen. When the tree was heavy with fruit, a strong, sweet fragrance tickled everyone's noses and newly sprung limbs bowed down under the pull of plump pears. The monk turned to the crowd and, with open arms and a deep bow, invited everyone to eat.

'Once everyone had enjoyed a pear or two,' Meilin continues, 'the monk clapped his hands twice. The pear tree's leaves began to change colour, then wither, dry and drop. When they had all fallen and the branches were bare, he took a small axe from his bag, chopped down the tree, put the trunk over his shoulder, and walked out of the market, his robes dragging behind in the dust.'

'Throughout these antics, the farmer stood aghast, his back to his cart. When everyone rushed to eat the monk's miraculous pears, the farmer was stunned, at a loss for words. Once the monk was gone, the market resumed its usual hubbub. The chickens, who had gone quiet in their wicker cages, began to squawk again, the vegetable sellers began bargaining once more with the thrifty old women, and dogs went back to their scampering. The farmer was about to continue selling his pears when the realisation struck him like a fist in his stomach.'

'He spun around. Sure enough, his cart was empty. Examining the front, he saw that the cart handle had been hacked away. Shouting and red-faced, the farmer ran down the street after the monk, his overfull purse spilling coins as he went. A trail of children followed behind, collecting the riches he left in his wake. When he rounded the corner where the monk had disappeared, the only thing he saw was his cart handle lying in the middle of the empty road.'

Renshu laughs. A thunderous boom breaks the air.

'Renshu, look!'

Fireworks! Beyond the rising lanterns, high up in the sky, a dazzle of sparks and spirals. Then another, and another. Again and again, the thump of the launch, the whoosh of the rockets, then a bloom of colour, lighting up the sky.

They watch until the final flash shimmers and only smoky ghosts of fleeting brilliance remain.

TWO MONKS, A WOMAN AND THE RIVER

This is the final story Meilin tells Renshu. Although she tells it just as China disappears from their sight, it may well have been one of the first stories she drew strength from as they fled their burning city. When she first introduces the scroll to Renshu, her words echo the story of the two monks: *Renshu, have you noticed that none of the travellers face backwards? They move forwards through the landscapes and never look back.* She tells this story knowing that in order to go on, they must be able to leave much behind.

This is Meilin's last story. She has been saving to tell when the time was right.

'Two monks were walking through the countryside on a spring day.' She feels Renshu's shoulders relax.

'Deep in conversation about what it means to become truly enlightened, they came to a roaring river. A peasant woman sitting on the bank called out.

"Please, dear brothers, will you help me cross? I cannot swim and I'm afraid of the rapids."

'Without a moment's hesitation, the older monk bent down, lifted the woman and walked into the river. The waters swirled and tugged at his robes, but calm and sure-footed, he brought her to safety on the other side. He set her down on the shore and bowed.

"Thank you, dear brother!" she said, bowing back. Then she gathered her slightly wet bundle and continued on her way.

'The whole time, the younger monk followed behind without saying a word.

'They continued walking down the road, now in silence. After some time, the younger monk began to sigh and wrinkle his nose. He became more and more agitated until he could contain his frustration no more.

"Brother, how could you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Carry that woman! You know it is against the rules of our

order to have any contact with females. Why did you break that rule?”

‘The older monk stopped and looked the younger monk straight in the eye.

‘They stood like that for a long time, neither speaking a word.

‘Finally, the older monk said, “Brother, I set that woman down on the other side of the river. Why are you still carrying her?”’

Meilin takes her arm from Renshu’s shoulder and turns to face him. ‘Renshu, let’s not carry anything that we’ve already left behind.’

PEACH BLOSSOM SPRING – TAO QIAN'S VERSION

Of all the stories Meilin tells, Peach Blossom Spring is the only one attributed to a specific author, the poet Tao Qian (365–427), also known as Tao Yuanming. All the other fables are part of an oral tradition, and as such, there is never just one version of the story. Every storyteller can adjust or embellish the tale with each retelling. Meilin tells the story of Peach Blossom Spring when she and Renshu are, once again, in search of a place to call home. Below is Tao Qian's version, but in the novel, Meilin, like the best of storytellers, gives Renshu a version of her own.

During the time of the Jin, there was a fisherman called Old Zhu from Wuling. One day, having had no luck with the fish, he lay down in his boat, closed his eyes and fell asleep. He floated down the river and when he woke, he discovered a wondrous sight: a grove of peach trees in full bloom! Wanting a closer look, he dragged his boat ashore. Their beauty drew him forwards and he walked deeper and deeper into the forest. The bloom was so abundant that the ground was covered in fallen blossoms. He picked up a handful and inhaled, the soft, silky petals tickling his nose.

At the end of the grove, there was an opening in the mountainside. Curious to see where it led, he entered. At first, the opening was big enough for him to reach above his head, and to stretch out his arms and not touch the walls. As he walked, however, the cave became smaller and smaller. Though it felt like the walls were closing around him, he still went forward.

Finally, when the cave was so small that there was just enough room for the height and width of a single man, he stepped out the other side. Before him lay cultivated rice and tea fields, people working and laughing, children and dogs playing. Old Zhu thought he must be dreaming. He hadn't seen such harmony and calm in years. Nevertheless, he continued down into the village. If he was dreaming, he hoped not to wake any time soon.

He approached a group of people dressed in a style he had never

seen. They asked where he had come from. As he explained, he learned that the people of this plentiful valley had never heard of the Han or the Wei, let alone the Jin. Their forefathers fled the chaos during the age of Qin and had lived in this valley ever since, cut off from the outside world.

The villagers brought out wine to toast their guest and killed a chicken for a feast, entreating Old Zhu to stay. There was singing and merry-making into the night.

After several days and several feasts, Old Zhu began to miss his life back in Wuling.

As he prepared to go home, his hosts said, *Don't bother to tell the others about us, and don't try to come back. It is impossible to return.* The fisherman thanked them for their kindness and left. As he went, he marked the path carefully. At long last, he reached his home village. Everyone asked where he had been, and of course, he told them all about his discovery. But when they went to seek this miraculous land, even though his markings were clear, the trees, cave and land had disappeared.

For years and years, many searched for Peach Blossom Spring, including the wisest and the eldest of scholars, but no one ever found it again.

**A beautifully written story of love,
loss, loneliness, courage
and endurance...**

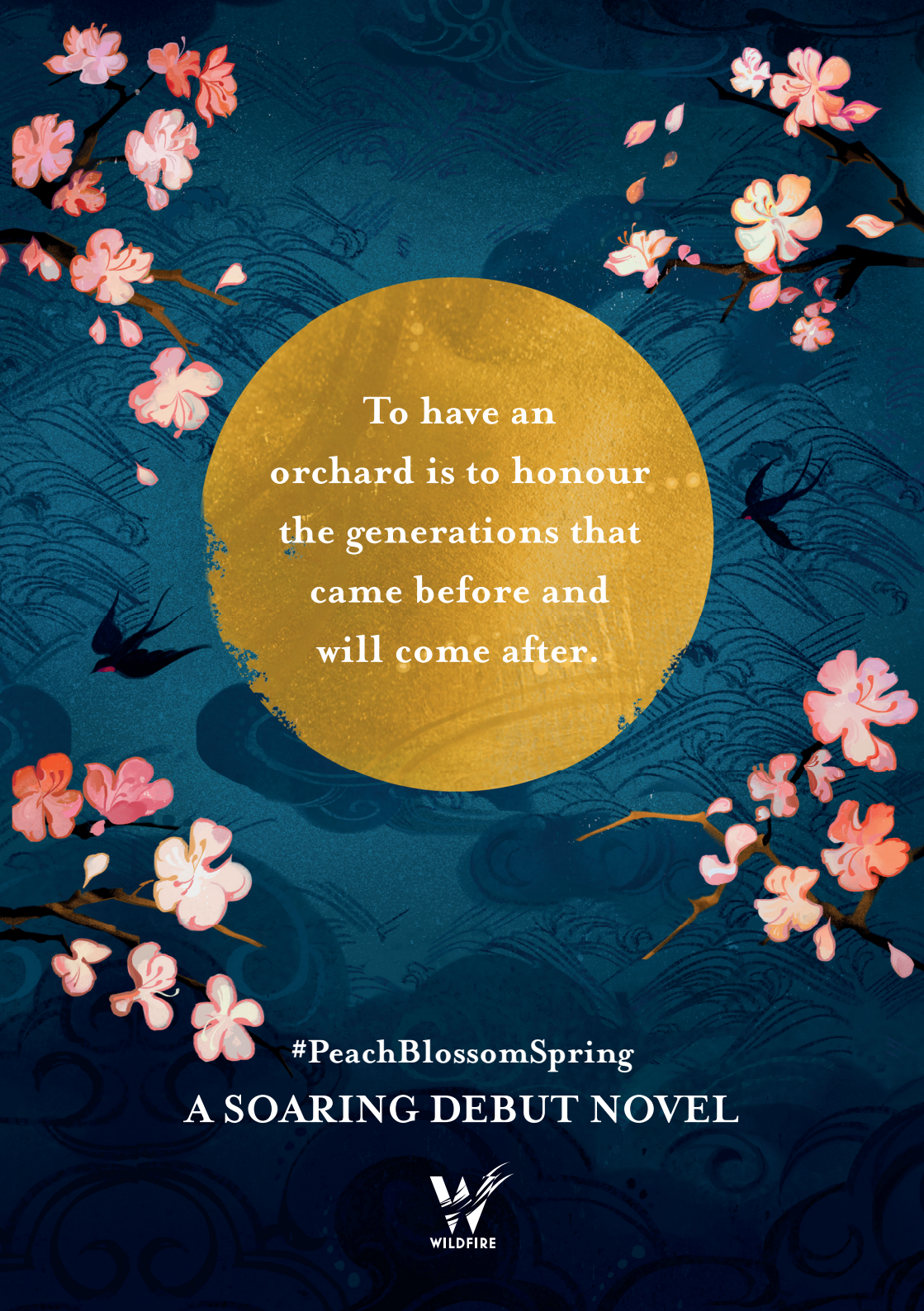
It is 1938 in China, and the Japanese are advancing. A young mother, Meilin, is forced to flee her burning city with her four-year-old son, Renshu, and embark on an epic journey across China. For comfort, they turn to their most treasured possession – a beautifully illustrated hand scroll. Its ancient fables offer solace and wisdom as they travel through their ravaged country, seeking refuge.

Years later, Renshu has settled in America as Henry Dao. His daughter is desperate to understand her heritage, but he refuses to talk about his childhood. How can he keep his family safe in this new land when the weight of his history threatens to drag them down?

Spanning continents and generations, *Peach Blossom Spring* is a bold and moving look at the history of modern China, told through the story of one family.

'Glorious and tender, exquisitely written and beautifully nuanced. I finished it with tears in my eyes'

JENNIFER SAINT, AUTHOR OF *ARIADNE*



To have an
orchard is to honour
the generations that
came before and
will come after.

#PeachBlossomSpring

A SOARING DEBUT NOVEL

