

no other country



the green painted concrete out in front of the house, which at first seemed like a novel way to save money on lawn-mowing, was now just plain depressing. The hot water came reluctantly to the kitchen sink as if from miles away, and even then without conviction, and sometimes a pale brownish color. Many of the windows wouldn't open properly to let flies out. Others wouldn't shut properly to stop them getting in. The newly planted fruit trees died in the sandy

soil of a too-bright backyard and were left like grave-markers under the slack laundry lines, a small cemetery of disappointment. It appeared to be impossible to find the right kinds of food, or learn the right way to say even simple things. The children said very little that wasn't a complaint.





"No other country is worse than this one," their mother announced loudly and often, and nobody felt the need to challenge her.

After paying the mortgage, there was no money left to fix anything. "You kids have to do more to help your mother," their father kept saying, and this included going out to find the cheapest plastic Christmas tree available and storing it temporarily in the roof space. Here was something to look forward to at least, and the children spent the next month making their own decorations, cutting paper and foil into interesting shapes on the living room floor, and attaching pieces of thread. It helped them forget about the sweltering heat and all their troubles at school.

But when they went to get the tree down, they found it was stuck to the ceiling beams – it had been so hot up there that the plastic had actually *melted*. "No other country is like this one!" muttered their mother. There was enough tree left to be worth salvaging, though, so the children set about scraping it free with butter knives. This was when the youngest stood on the weakest part of the ceiling, and his foot went straight through. What a disaster! Everyone was shouting and waving their hands: They all rushed down the ladder to inspect the damage from below – a hole that would undoubtedly cost a fortune to fix. But they couldn't find it. Confused, they rushed from room to room. Everywhere the ceiling was fine, no holes.

They went back up to check again where the foot had gone through – surely either in the laundry or kitchen? It was then that they were struck by a scent of grass, cool stone, and tree sap that breezed through the attic. They all inspected the hole closely. . . . It opened into another room altogether, one they didn't know about – an impossible room, somewhere between the others. Furthermore, it appeared to be outside the house.












This was how the family first discovered the place they later came to call "the inner courtyard." It was actually more like an old palace garden, with tall trees much older than any they had ever seen. There were ancient walls decorated with frescoes; the more they looked at them, the more the family recognized aspects of their own lives within these strange, faded allegories.

The seasons in their inner courtyard were reversed: Here it was winter in summer; and later they would come to soak up the summer sun during the coldest, wettest part of the year. It was like being back in their home country, but also somewhere else, somewhere altogether different. . . . And they would ponder this when unusual blossoms floated through the air on still evenings.

It became their special sanctuary. They visited at least twice a week for picnics, bringing everything they needed through the attic and down a permanently installed ladder. They felt no need to question the logic of it, and simply accepted its presence gratefully.



It was decided to keep the inner courtyard a private family secret, although nobody said this explicitly – it just seemed the right thing to do. There was also a feeling that it was not possible to tell anyone else about it.

One day, however, the mother was stunned by a simple remark from an elderly Greek woman. They were talking over the back fence while hanging out laundry, and the neighbor said, "We mostly have our barbecues in the inner courtyard, once we got the barbecue over, through the roof you know," and laughed loudly.

At first the mother thought she had misheard, but when she described the inner courtyard of her own home, the Greek woman smiled and nodded. "Yes, yes, every house here has the inner courtyard, if you can find it. Very strange, you know, because nowhere else has this thing. No other country."

