

PASTA CARBONARA

A SMELL THAT COULD COME FROM NOWHERE ELSE

Written by **Alice Ross** Illustration by **Katja Enseling**

Pasta boiling on the stove curls its smell through the flat, steady and solid and comforting. Outside, a hot, heavy evening is falling on Rome; the city is like an old lady fidgeting in the heat. There is barely a breeze to stir the long curtains or to carry the hum of traffic up and into our kitchen. Every window is open, and sounds and smells from other flats drift in like whispers: tinny applause from TV game shows, a clatter of pans, a sudden laugh that dissolves into a shimmering burst of excitable, indecipherable speech. The rusty sweetness of frying onions mingles outside with the chatter of scooters, far below.

Rome in the summertime is a kaleidoscope of food smells: the tanginess of tomatoes and herbs collides off the ancient cobblestones; the brick walls exhale, doughy baking aromas with the day's heat; sudden wafts of fish grilling and veal frying seem to ride above the traffic alongside the beeping of horns. It's like a chorus for the nose with a faint bass note: a human smell made up of thirty centuries of life, as the ancient sewers breathe with the warmth. Right now, my mother is making pasta carbonara and, hungry for the already familiar sequence of smells, I go in to watch her cook.

My mother is happy here: the newness of our life in Rome delights her. It's infectious. She pulls ingredients out of the fridge and shows them off to my father: pancetta wrapped in waxed paper, the old-fashioned butter package, plump cloves of garlic.

I sit at the table with a hunk of cheese that's almost bigger than my hand and grate it into powdery mounds. The parmesan smells sharp and old, delicious and disgusting at the same time. My father leans by the fridge and unpacks his day for my mother as she chops and stirs and breaks eggs. He seems glad to be home and fluent again; my mother rolls her new Italian words around in her mouth. I watch them closely and laugh when they laugh as the bubbling of the pasta fills the kitchen like a promise.

Plumes of steam rush around my father's hands and mist his glasses as he strains the pasta; there is a flurry of tipping and scooping and stirring. All the smells blend into one, smooth and warm as an embrace, blossoming suddenly in the hot, still air. There is no edge to this smell; it is soft and welcoming, round and enveloping. I scurry over to stand near my mother as she stirs, and breathe in as deeply as I can, trying to wrap myself in the smell like a duvet.

It could have been one meal or a hundred, a few short months or a whole childhood. I can almost taste it now. Years later, in a café in Amsterdam, I mention the memory and an Italian girl with a nose-ringer shakes her head with something close to scorn. "Pasta Carbonara

There are some who say that salsa carbonara isn't Italian at all, but was invented by American soldiers in the war. But for an English child in Rome, the warm smell of pancetta and eggs on steamy pasta was just as emblematic as the chatter of scooters

isn't Italian," she snorts. "American soldiers made it up in the war to make their rations last – it's just bacon and eggs and some pasta."

I am pissed off at her for days afterwards, for her certainty about what is and what is not, for revealing my precious little vignette of Italian authenticity as a knock-off. She might be right. But when Rome flits into my mind in the hazy times just before sleep, it comes trailing a rich, buttery aroma in its wake, and I know that it could come from nowhere else.

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