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opening extract from

The Pasta Detectives

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The piece of pasta lay on the pavement. It was fat and crinkled, with a hole right through the middle. Some dried-up cheese sauce and dirt were stuck to it. I picked it up, cleaned off the dirt and looked up past the old windows of 93 Dieffe Street into the summer sky. Not a cloud in sight, and definitely none of those white stripes that jet engines leave behind. And besides, I thought to myself, I don't think you can just open an aeroplane window and throw out your food.

I let myself into my block of flats, whizzed up the yellow-painted stairway to the third floor and rang Mrs Darling's bell. She had large, bright curlers in her hair, just as she did every Saturday.

'Could be rigatoni. The sauce is definitely Gorgonzola,' she declared. 'It's nice of you to bring me the piece of pasta, dear, but *I* didn't throw it out of the window. Why don't you ask Mr Fitz?'

She grinned at me, tapped one finger against her forehead, rolled her eyes and looked up at the ceiling. Mr Fitz lives on the fourth floor. I hate him. Also I don't think the piece of pasta is his. Mrs Darling was my first choice, because she often throws things out of the window. Last winter she threw out a television. Followed five minutes later by her husband, but he came out of the front door. After that she came down to see us, and Mum had to pour her a drop of whisky.

'He has a girlfriend!' Mrs Darling had exclaimed in shock. 'And she's not even younger than I am! Give me another swig of that stuff!'

The very next day, with the telly in smithereens and her husband gone, she bought herself an amazing new flat-screen TV and DVD player. We sometimes watch romantic films or thrillers together, but only at the weekend when Mrs Darling can have a lie-in. During the week she works behind the butcher's counter at a department store. Her hands are always red raw because it's so cold in there.

When we watch television we eat cream crackers with boiled ham and eggs or tinned salmon. If it's a romantic comedy, Mrs Darling sniffs her way through at least ten tissues, then starts complaining about the film: 'As if that sort of thing really happens! When a man and a woman get together is when the misery begins, but of course they *never* show *that* in films. What a pack of lies! Another cracker, Rico?'

'Are we still on for this evening?' Mrs Darling called after me as I ran up to the fourth floor, two steps at a time.

'Course!'

Her door banged shut and I knocked at Mr Fitz's. You always have to knock at

Mr Fitz's. His bell is broken. In fact it probably has been since they built the flats in 1910.

I had to wait, wait, wait.

And listen to the shuffle, shuffle, shuffle behind the old, wooden door.

Finally Mr Fitz appeared, dressed, as usual, in his dark blue pyjamas with the grey stripes. His wrinkled face was covered in stubble and his stringy grey hair shot up from his head in all directions.

What a mess!

A strong smell of mould wafted out. Who knew what Mr Fitz kept in there? In his flat, I mean, not in his head. I tried to look past him without him noticing, but he stood in my way. Deliberately! I've been in every flat in the building apart from his. Mr Fitz won't let me in because he doesn't like me.

'Ah, the little dimwit,' he growled.

At this point I should explain that my name is Rico and that I am a child proddity. That's a bit like being a child prodigy, but also like the opposite. I think an awful lot, but I need a lot of time to figure things out. (Some people find this odd.) There's nothing wrong with my brain, though. It's a perfectly normal size. Only sometimes a few things go missing, and unfortunately I never know when or where it's going to happen. And I can't always concentrate very well when I'm telling a story. I have a mind like a sieve – at least I think it's a sieve, it could be a cheese grater or a whisk . . . and now you see my problem.