

Our Spoons came from Woolworths 9 (by Barbara Comyns)

Parenthood in poverty caused trouble between Sophia and Charles. He wanted to have the baby, Sandro, put into a home. Feeling very cut off from friends, Sophia found a flat to rent in Abbey Road, close to their friend Francis.

Episode 9

One evening when I'd gone to bed quite early, a sculptor who had seen a painting someone had done of me, 'phoned and asked me to sit for him. About half an hour later there was a great ringing of the bell and knocking of the door, so Charles went and there was the sculptor.

He was an enormous man, called Bumble Blunderbore. He was carrying two large bottles of what I thought was beer, but it turned out to be champagne. We all sat on my bed and drank it. It was the first I had ever had and made me feel so happy.

Then he walked round the room and looked at Charles's paintings and drawings. There was a small framed drawing of a woman's head and he said, 'How much do you want for that? Would a fiver do?' And when Charles said Yes, he wrote out a cheque straight away. All this seemed like heaven and a fairy godmother and Christmas all in one. When the champagne was all gone he left, but it was arranged I should sit for him the next day.

That first summer in Abbey Road was the happiest and most carefree time I ever had. Our acute money troubles seemed to be a thing of the past. Bumble Blunderbore put quite a lot of work in Charles's way, but in the autumn he went to New York to have a one-man show. He stayed away for six months and when he returned he had rather forgotten us, although he did ask us to some rather grand parties.

One evening a man we had recently met at Francis's studio asked us to dinner. His wife was away and he was the kind of man who thinks he can cook. Men are often like that. They say they can cook and it turns out to be an omelette, scrambled egg or sausages. They never can cook jam or Christmas pudding and proper things like that.

We had to meet our host in the foyer of a theatre for some reason. All the people came surging out and there was our host accompanied by a tall, dark, sinister man, who looked as if he might be a Warlock; but when we were introduced to him his face looked quite different when he smiled. His name was Peregrine Narrow. Our host's name was Mr Karam. He hustled us into an underground train and in due course we emerged at Belsize Park and went to his flat, which was simply stiff with Chinese Buddhas and goddesses of Mercy. That is how he lived – selling Chinese works of art to art dealers. He asked me to help him in the kitchen and I was disappointed, because I wanted to talk to the sinister man, but consoled myself by the thought I could ask Mr Karam all about him while I worked.

As I expected, it was sausages. There was some spaghetti too, but nothing to make a sauce with, not even an onion, so I opened a tin of baked beans and grated a piece of dry cheese I found. I asked Mr Karam to tell me Peregrine Narrow's life story, but he said all he knew about him was that he was divorced or separated from his wife and earned a living as art critic and

journalist. He had also written one or two rather unsuccessful books on painting.

By the time I had learnt all this, the meal was ready. It wasn't really a nice supper, but I enjoyed listening to Peregrine and looking at him as well. His dark face became full of animation when he talked, but when he was silent it became all bitter and sinister again, and his back was rather humpy. When I talked he listened most intently to every word I said, as if it was very precious. This had never happened to me before, and gave me great confidence in myself, but now I know from experience a lot of men listen like that, and it doesn't mean a thing; they are most likely thinking up a new way of getting out of paying their income-tax.

Although he was quite old, forty-five, he asked me to call him by his Christian name, which suited him very well. I didn't like the Narrow part much. When we left he walked home with us and came in and saw Charles's paintings, which on the whole he seemed to approve of. He picked out two that he thought might be accepted for an exhibition. When he left, he left his telephone number in case he could be of any use to us at any time. I put it in a safe place so that it wouldn't get mislaid.

As the winter came, that beastly poverty came too. I had forgotten how sad it was being poor, and the rooms were so large we couldn't keep them warm at all. Although Charles's paintings were improving all the time now, no one seemed to buy them, partly because he suddenly got the idea they were worth an awful lot of money. If anyone asked the price of a painting he would say it was fifty or a hundred pounds, and hardly anyone we knew had as much money as that.

Sandro was growing so active Charles found it difficult to look after him while I was away from home working. He didn't sleep much in the daytime now and got very bored with being in the pram; but if he was running about, Charles found it most difficult to work. I wished so much I could stay at home and look after him myself.

Then I had to stay at home because I caught 'flu; I think it was because it was so cold at home and in the studios where I worked it was so hot and close I often used to faint. As soon as my temperature went down I was able to work again, but still felt rather wretched and fainted quite often and my periods went all wrong. I felt very tired because I had to sit on Sunday too, to try and make up the money we had lost by me staying at home.

We both felt depressed. Charles said the best thing we could do would be to have a party. We would just buy some beer to start with, and if everyone brought a bottle, we could take the empty ones to a pub and get quite a lot of money in return. So Charles drew some amusing invitations which we sent to our friends and we had a party. Lots of people came, and some brought whole crates of beer. When all the people had come, I thought how nice it would be if Peregrine Narrow was there too, so I went into the hall and phoned him. I was scared to because it was a long time since we had met him, and I thought he wouldn't remember who I was, but when I got through he said he would be delighted to come, so I went back to the party and didn't tell Charles. I hoped he would think he had come by accident.

He came very quickly in a taxi and it was a lovely party. Peregrine and Mr Karam stayed after everyone had gone, and we made tea and talked and talked.

After that Peregrine often came to see us, and we went to his studio. I was disappointed in his paintings. They looked rather as if they had mud mixed in the paint, but I did not say so. I always felt the days we didn't see Peregrine were wasted.

Peregrine said he would like to paint a portrait of me. I didn't want to be painted looking all muddy, but thought it would be nice to sit in his studio and talk to him, so I agreed to go twice a week. As I had hoped, I heard a lot about his previous life and marriage. He used to put his head in his hands and say how unhappy he was, and how he loathed his wife, who wouldn't divorce him.

They had married when he was twenty-one and his wife (who was called Mildred) was twenty-seven. He said she simply smothered him, and after two years of married life he ran away. All these years he had been married to her, even before I was born, but still he couldn't get free. I felt so sad for him. He got so worked up when he talked about all this, so it was no wonder he looked so bitter and sinister.

But when Peregrine wasn't thinking about his awful wife, he was a charming companion. When my sitting was over he would take me to a restaurant to have lunch. I used to eat a lot, and sometimes when I got home I felt awfully sick.

I seemed to be feeling sick quite a lot lately, ever since I'd had 'flu. Then a great dread came in my mind. I couldn't face it at first, but eventually I had to tell Charles I was awfully sorry but there seemed to be another baby coming. He was simply horrified and said he just couldn't bear the idea and I must do something to get rid of it. It wasn't fair to him to keep having children like this.

I was very scared about this idea – getting rid of babies – but there was still a chance it might be a mistake, so I went to a woman doctor who lived quite near. She said there was a baby inside me, and it was nearly three months old. I told her all about Charles hating babies and how we depended on the money I earned. I told her I'd always hoped to have a simply enormous family, and although I couldn't help rather loving babies, I realised now it wasn't right to have a family unless you were rich. All the same, I didn't want to get rid of this one. It seemed a sordid and wicked thing to do. She said it was also a dangerous thing to do. She offered to attend me and to bring the baby into the world for nothing. She was awfully kind, but said I must make Charles get a job, any job, even if it was nothing to do with painting.

I went home and told Charles all she had said, and he looked quite terrified and said he wouldn't give up his painting for beastly babies and ran out of the house. He didn't come back till late in the night, but I was still awake. He said he was sorry he had been so angry with me, but I must promise to get rid of this extra child. So I cried a bit and said I would as long as I didn't have to do anything too alarming.

The next morning Peregrine 'phoned to say he was going away for about six weeks on a lecture tour. He was excited about it, and said he would get in touch with me as soon as he returned. I was pleased he was going to be away now I felt so unhappy, because I knew men hate women when they are unhappy.