

The human comedy

“I’ll be writing to him myself”

“I was only wondering if you had Johnny’s address.”

“What d’you want with Johnny?”

“Just to write him a letter, Mrs Lysaght.”

5 “My son wouldn’t like his address given out to all and sundry¹.”

“It’d be all right giving it to me, Mrs Lysaght.”

“I’ll be writing to him myself. I’ll tell him you called in.”

10 His mother knew who she was: she didn’t say so, but Felicia could tell. She knew her name and that her father worked in the convent garden, that his grandmother was still alive, almost a hundred years old. You could tell just by being in Mrs Lysaght’s presence that she was a woman who knew everything

“He wouldn’t mind you giving me the address.”

“Why’s that?”

“I know he wouldn’t.”

20 “He didn’t give it to you himself then?”

Felicia began to stammer². Mrs Lysaght sat down. A hand touched the lower part of her stomach, as if some pain had begun there.

25 “I have things to do,” she said, not rising at once but doing so a moment later before Felicia could collect herself. She moved towards the passage that led to her front door.

“I know he wouldn’t mind,” Felicia said again. She felt a burst of heat in her face that tingled to the roots of her hair. “I need the address badly.”

30 “Johnny has his own friends here, Cathal Kelly, Shay Mulroone, boys like that. I don’t recall anyone like yourself mentioned.”

35 “I need the address, Mrs Lysaght.”

Felicia’s predicament³ dawned⁴ in Mrs Lysaght’s features then. Her mouth sagged⁵; distaste crept into the coldness in her eyes.

40 “Leave my son alone.” She spoke without emotion. “Leave him.”

“All I want to do is to contact him.”

“You’ve had contact enough with him.”

But Mrs Lysaght didn’t move out of the kitchen, as she had begun to do. [...]

45 Felicia shook her head, trying to find something to say but unable to do so. On the mantelpiece, pushed between an ornamental china box and the wall, she could see a bundle of letters and postcards, and guessed whom they were from.

50 The address would be there.

“I knew it,” Mrs Lysaght said, “the first time he went out with you. ‘I think I’ll get a few lungfuls⁶ of air,’ he said, and when he came in again he said he’d met Cathal Kelly. One time in Dublin,

55 on his way back after being over to see me, he was seen with a girl coming out of an ice-cream parlour. That came back to me and I mentioned it. He laughed. ‘Mistaken identity,’ he said. “They’d do anything,” Mrs Lysaght added, as though she had forgotten whom she was talking to, “once they have their clutches round a boy. Sweet as sugar, and then they’re working like adders⁷.” [...]

60 Mrs Lysaght turned and left the kitchen [...], and Felicia followed her.

65 “If I gave you a letter would you send it on for me, Mrs Lysaght?”

The front door was opened, and since no reply had come Felicia repeated her request. She would stamp the envelope, she promised. All that was necessary was that it should be addressed.

70 “Very well,” Mrs Lysaght agreed at last.

But when ten days, and then a fortnight, passed without a reply Felicia knew that the letter had not been sent. It had not been sent because his mother hated her. Johnny was being stolen from his mother, in the same way as a woman had stolen her husband: that was how his mother saw it. She’d have read the letter and probably burnt it.

William Trevor, *Felicia’s Journey*, 1994.

1. **all and sundry**: *tout le monde, n’importe qui*.

2. **stammer**: *bégayer*. 3. **predicament**: *situation difficile*.

4. **dawn**: *apparaître*. 5. **sag**: *s’affaisser*.

6. **lungfuls**: *(ici) bouffées*. 7. **adders**: *vipères*.