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the
ZOOKEEPER
of Belfast



S. KIRK WALSH

The Zookeeper *of* Belfast

About the author

S. Kirk Walsh is a writer living in Austin, Texas. Her work has been widely published in *The New York Times Book Review*, *Longreads*, *StoryQuarterly*, and *Electric Literature*, among other publications. Over the years, she has been a resident at Ucross, Yaddo, Ragdale, and Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Walsh is the founder of Austin Bat Cave, a writing and tutoring centre that provides free writing workshops for young writers throughout Austin. *The Zookeeper of Belfast* is her first novel. Find out more at skirkwalsh.com.

The Zookeeper *of* Belfast

S. Kirk Walsh


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With love, for Michael
&
in memory of my parents and my uncle Kirk

And I say, how lucky I was. I was only buried
alive a few hours, you know.

—EITHNE O'CONNOR,
Belfast Blitz survivor

One

ON THAT MORNING OF OCTOBER 3, 1940, HETTIE QUIN KNEW she was lucky to be there, at the docks of Belfast, assisting with the elephant's arrival. One of the other zookeepers had come down with a fever, and Ferris Poole had enlisted her help at the last minute. As she stood next to Ferris at the edge of the crowd, Hettie steadied herself after having sprinted down to the docks from the nearby tram stop; her mother had made her tardy by requesting multiple chores around the house before Hettie finally managed to slip out the door. As she pushed sweaty strands of hair from her eyes, she took in the stunning sight overhead—a young elephant being maneuvered through the air. A crane and a system of chains and pulleys elevated the animal from the deck of the moored steamship. The elephant's trunk coiled up and then unfurled like an opening fist. There was a hollow trumpet call. The crowd—women, men, children, sailors, dockworkers—let out a collective gasp, their gazes following the orchestrated movements of the hoisting operation. Hettie had never seen so many people at the docks: It was as if British royalty or a famous screen actress were among the steamer's passengers arriving that morning. The atmosphere felt festive, bright with expectation.

Here was the three-year-old elephant. Here was her potential new charge at the zoo. Here was Violet. A local poacher had killed the animal's mother with poisoned arrows on a savanna in faraway Ceylon, and Mr. Christie, the owner of the Bellevue Zoo & Gardens, had bought the orphaned elephant for a good price from another animal trader in Ceylon. Standing next to Hettie, Ferris dropped his half-finished cigarette onto the ground and squared his shoulders for Violet's arrival. Mr. Wright, the head zookeeper, stood at the foot of the gangplank. Two reporters appeared by his side and scribbled in their notepads as Mr. Wright kept his gaze fixed on Violet. The elephant hovered, her feet hanging in midair, her flap-like ears pinned against her head. There was another collective sigh as she lifted her trunk and produced a high-pitched whistle. The elephant's cry tumbled over the crowd.

With his ramrod-straight posture and a subtle theatrical swing to his gait, Mr. Wright looked like a cross between a military general and a ringmaster. He wore a pair of jodhpurs, a brilliant red jacket, a fedora, and a pair of polished knee-high riding boots. Two rows of shiny brass buttons trailed down the front of his double-breasted coat, and a golden braid was threaded through the epaulets that rested on his shoulders. Several medals decorated the right side of his chest. Hettie had heard from one of the other zookeepers that Mr. Wright had fought at the Battle of Arras during World War I and saved more than a dozen men's lives. Mr. Wright was always dressed in this outfit, Hettie had noticed, regardless of whether he was training Wallace the lion with a crack of his whip or tossing silver-scaled herrings for the sea lions or greeting visitors at the zoo's front entrance.

The winch raised Violet higher. The machinery rasped and whined. The crowd grew silent. Gulls wheeled overhead. Violet uncoiled her trunk again and released another cry. A commotion stirred on the deck. Several men yelled at one another. The chain attached to the crane's

neck tightened. Slowly the crane swiveled to one side and then began to rise. The air turned electric.

Mr. Christie stood at the top of the walkway, looking something like a campaigning politician, in a three-piece suit with a brilliant yellow scarf around his neck, its tasseled ends flying up in the breeze. He fervently shook hands with one of the ship's officers on deck, signed several sheets of paper, and walked down the ramp to greet Mr. Wright and his new elephant. Mr. Wright cleared away the crowd to make more room for Violet's imminent landing on the dock.

"Ferris," Mr. Wright yelled. "Miss Quin. Over here!"

"Yes, sir," she said, walking over to him and positioning herself next to Mr. Wright.

"Where have you been?" he asked curtly.

"My mum—" Hettie started to say, and then stopped.

"Take this," instructed Mr. Wright, handing her a metal bucket of carrots, the feathery tops brushing her hand. "Here she comes."

"Look," Ferris said, glancing over at Hettie. There was that familiar clear blue flash of Ferris's eyes, the dimple in the center of his left cheek. Hettie's hands pricked with perspiration. Ferris turned his attention to Violet. The crane groaned and wheezed as it continued lowering Violet to the ground. Hettie stood mesmerized by the strange sight of the elephant suspended, like an enormous anvil, in midair. The cranking of the winch was paused while the sailors on deck adjusted the controls and yelled at one another.

For a moment, Hettie was afraid the mechanism would fail and the elephant would come crashing onto the dock. Violet would break through the weathered planks, and multiple civilians would be injured, some might even drown. TRAGEDY STRIKES BELFAST DOCKS, the *Telegraph's* headlines would read the following day. COUNTLESS INNOCENT CIVILIANS AND CHILDREN KILLED. The chains tightened and creaked. Two men cranked the winch on the ship's deck—and

finally the animal's feet touched down onto the dock to a thunderous cheer. Violet shook her torso, sending a nimbus of dust and dirt from her skin. Mr. Christie walked over to Mr. Wright, his scarf fluttering as he took in the eager crowd.

A girl stood at her mother's knee, gaping up at the elephant, her small face open with wonder. A young couple in matching school uniforms tittered, the boy's lanky arm draped around the girl's shoulder. The crew on the neighboring oil tanker paused to take in the unusual sight. On the other adjacent vessel, a Royal Navy ship, the captain prematurely ended his drill instructions and allowed the men to peer over the ship's railing at the spectacle of Violet and the rest of the city below.

Belfast was alive with activity that morning. The hum of life and industry was everywhere. The docks, the streets, the factories. Lorries, cars, and buses streamed through major arteries of the city. Pedestrians hurried along the pavements to their jobs. At the York Street Flax Spinning Company, pairs of rubber-aproned women oversaw the electricity generators in the enginehouse, which drove the shafts of the machines that powered the spindles and looms that spun and wove the threads into cheap utility clothing and fabric for airplanes and other myriad purposes. Armies of men sat at their drafting desks at Short & Harland, sketching designs of Sunderland flying boats and Stirling bombers. The Linfield Football Club had begun its morning practice on its pitted playing field at Windsor Park, not far from the Lisburn Road. Dozens of Poor Clare nuns sang "How Great Is Our God" at their convent's chapel on the Cliftonville Road, their voices coalescing into one celestial sound that drifted beyond the chapel's stained-glass windows. To Hettie, it felt as if the entire city were awake and ready for Violet—and her auspicious arrival in Belfast. There was a freshness. An opportunity. Something was about to happen.

The crowd clapped and cheered for Violet as passengers filed down the ship's ramp. Hettie noticed the rolling dollies of luggage, steamer trunks, and bags being ferried down another plank that extended

from the ship's belly. One man carried a terrarium with a hooded cobra pressed against the box's translucent sides, its thin tongue flicking against the glass. An elderly woman held a wired cage with a pair of chickens; a few loose feathers floated up like rings of smoke.

"Carrots, Miss Quin," Mr. Wright ordered. "Now."

Hettie handed him a pair of carrots, and he held them out for the elephant. Violet grabbed the carrots with the fingerlike end of her trunk and swung them into her mouth. Bits and pieces fell to the ground. Violet suctioned them up, thrusting the tip of her trunk against the uneven boards of the dock.

Mr. Christie held a stick with a long handle, like a bullwhip, with a note tied to one end. He inspected the handwritten message more closely. "Lead me with this," he read aloud to the crowd. "Did you hear that, everyone? 'Lead me with this.'"

Cameras flashed. Mr. Christie handed the stick to Mr. Wright, who offered another carrot to Violet in the palm of his hand. The elephant deftly picked it up. Behind her, Hettie felt the heat and crush of the swelling crowd. She looked around for Ferris. He stood on the other side of Violet, awaiting further instructions.

"Let's see her do a trick," called a boy from somewhere.

"Don't be an eejit," Ferris yelled. "Poor animal has been on a ship for almost a month."

"Where did she come from?" asked another young boy.

"From the wilds of Ceylon," Mr. Christie said proudly. "I'm lucky I got her."

"How much does she weigh?" an older man asked. "Looks like she could crush someone to death."

"Three thousand pounds," Mr. Christie responded, "and she isn't going to hurt anyone. Remember, our animals are about entertainment, not stirring up fear."

"According to the paperwork, she weighs three thousand four hundred and eleven pounds," Mr. Wright added. "A little below average."

Hettie took a few steps closer and stared at Violet. Her circular feet were bordered with half-moon nails. The elephant's tail, with a paintbrush-like tuft of hair, swished from side to side, and her large-lidded sepia eyes popped a bit wider. Mr. Wright lifted the stick in front of Violet, and Hettie noticed the elephant's eyes following the end of it. Hettie imagined her older sister, Anna, standing beside her, whispering into her ear, *She's your elephant. She's the one for you.* Violet was about five feet tall, smaller than the Clydesdale horses Hettie used to ride with her father along the rolling knolls of the Cavehill in north Belfast.

"Steady feet," Mr. Wright said in a neutral voice. "Steady."

He raised the stick higher, and Violet slowly started to lift her front feet from the ground. Soon, she stood only on her hind legs, strong and unmoving like the columns of an ancient building. Her broad torso cast a shadow. The faction of reporters positioned themselves in front of the crowd and aimed their lenses up at Violet. Light bulbs went off again.

"That's my girl," Mr. Christie said, revealing a wide smile. "My number one girl."

He clasped his hands together as if in prayer.

"You can visit Violet at the Bellevue Zoo on the Antrim Road," Mr. Christie declared. "We're open every day. Rain or shine."

"There, there, Violet," Mr. Wright said as the elephant shifted on her hind legs.

He lowered the stick, and Violet returned to all four feet. The crowd whistled and clapped.

"Show us the way, Wright," Mr. Christie said, tipping his hat.

"Up the Antrim Road?" Mr. Wright asked, patting Violet on her side.

A cloud of dust rose from the deep folds of her skin. With the end of her tail the elephant swatted the spot that Mr. Wright had just touched.

"Up the Antrim Road," Mr. Christie repeated with zeal.

He shook hands with Mr. Wright and the ship's officer. Then Mr. Christie gave a wave to the layers of enthusiastic spectators before making his way around to the rear door of the polished Ford Prefect Saloon

that Hettie now noticed had been waiting for him all along. The driver closed Mr. Christie's door and seated himself behind the large steering wheel. With a mechanical sputter, the car disappeared into the thrum of the dockyards. Violet raised her ears and unfolded them like two large fans. She released another trumpet call and nudged her forehead into Mr. Wright's chest.

"Easy, lovely," he said softly, patting her side again. During her time at the zoo, Hettie had noted this about Mr. Wright: He often spoke with more kindness to the animals than he did to people. "We're gonna take you home."

Mr. Wright lifted the stick in front of Violet's trunk and guided it forward. Violet stomped her feet against the dock, flurries of dust flying up around her legs. Then she lowered her head and proceeded to follow the curled end of the stick. Her movements were slow and gentle. Hettie walked to the right of Violet while Mr. Wright and Ferris stayed on the left side of the elephant.

"Everyone, give Violet some room," said Mr. Wright.

The crowd parted as Mr. Wright led Violet away from the steamship. Ahead, the cranes of Harland & Wolff were visible amid the sprawl of warehouse hangars and buildings now devoted to producing military vessels, aircraft, and tanks at an ever-increasing rate. Before Hettie's father, Thomas, enlisted in the Merchant Navy, he had worked in the assembly shops of Harland & Wolff for more than a decade. One afternoon, seven years ago, when Hettie was thirteen, Thomas had brought her to the shop where he had worked as a joiner. He gave her a tour of a gantry, where one of the larger ships was under construction. What she remembered most vividly of that afternoon was the deafening sound of the countless machines in persistent motion and how the vibrations shook the concrete floor, traveling up into her legs. It felt as if her entire body were rattling along at the same clip as the propulsive machines. Then her father led her into one of the gantries where the colossal skeleton of a hull in progress was obscured by a high tower of scaffolding;

a dozen men stood at varying heights, welding, which sent up sprays of sparks into their faces.

Violet whistled, the high-pitched sound returning Hettie to the important task in front of her. She positioned herself behind Ferris, to the left of the elephant, with the buckets clutched in both hands. Violet's forehead was flecked with pale spots, like a scattering of petals. A fine coat of dust veiled the bony curve of her broad back. Whiskers peppered her chin. She swung her trunk like the needle of a metronome.

"People, let this girl through," Mr. Wright said in a booming voice.

The crowd stepped aside, creating a wider path for Violet as she walked by. Mr. Wright directed her along the Sydenham Road, which intersected the dockyards and munitions and shipbuilding factories. Clouds of smoke spilled from the redbrick chimney stacks. A young boy pushed a wooden handcart piled with onions, eggs, vegetables, and burlap bags of rice and flour, and three dockworkers hauled oversize pieces of lumber. A half dozen Royal Navy officers, clad in their distinctive mess dress uniforms and dazzlingly white waistcoats, paused to take in the curiosity of Violet and the small parade that followed her. Hettie felt the cold, briny air flush her cheeks.

Together they crossed over the Queen's Bridge. The morning sun brightened, creating a carpet of reflections on the river's uneven waters. As the procession neared the middle of the bridge, Violet veered toward the right; then the elephant lowered her head and trotted into a knot of pedestrians heading in the opposite direction.

"Oh, Mummy," cried a young girl.

The mother whisked the child up into her arms and stepped out of Violet's path.

"Don't let him bite me," said the girl, tears trailing down her cheeks.

The mother glared at Mr. Wright who blew into the brass whistle that hung around his neck.

"Ferris! Hettie!" he yelled. "Where are you?"

Hettie dropped the buckets onto the bridge, ran to Violet's side,

and pushed her foreleg with both hands. Her skin was rubbery and rough to the touch, and she smelled of manure and rotten eggs. Hettie shoved the elephant with all the weight and strength that she could summon. Ferris positioned himself near the elephant's rear, pressing against her hind leg. Hettie could see the sinewy bulge in Ferris's forearms as he attempted to guide Violet toward the middle of the bridge.

"Come on, Hettie," he said, his breath ragged. "Help me."

Violet trumpeted, and Hettie felt the vibrations of her call through her fingertips, up the length of her arms, and into the center of her chest. Hettie pushed harder against Violet. The elephant's acrid smell made her feel momentarily nauseated and weak. Hettie gathered herself—and pushed again.

"Violet," Mr. Wright said in a calm voice. "We're crossing the bridge, not jumping off of it."

The elephant stretched her trunk over the bridge's railing, and for a moment Hettie was nervous that Violet would somehow step over it and plunge into the strong currents below. She leaned farther into the elephant. The flash of a photographer's camera blinded Hettie. Sweat collected along her hairline.

"Will you bloody stop it," she whispered.

"Come on, Hettie," Ferris yelled again. "One, two, three."

Hettie closed her eyes tight and heaved the entire mass of her body against Violet's. She was tall for a young woman, five foot seven, and slender and long-legged, like her sister. Hettie was even a little taller than Ferris, but she wasn't muscular and compact like him. Hettie pushed with more force, and Violet trumpeted loudly again, but she didn't budge. The salty air stung Hettie's eyes. She thought of her father and what he'd say: *You hear me. Give it all ya got, girl.* Suddenly the elephant turned away from the railing and trotted toward the center of the bridge.

"Excellent, Miss Quin and Mr. Poole," Mr. Wright said. "Brilliant, my friends."

He waved the stick in front of Violet's eyes and she followed him across the bridge, her trunk swinging like a velvet rope.

"Miss Quin, the buckets," Mr. Wright barked. "Don't forget the buckets."

Hettie turned to see that the buckets had rolled across the wide expanse of the bridge, carrots spilling over the rims. Pedestrians kicked them farther to the side, sending the bundles into the river. Hettie ran to the railing and spotted several carrots floating, like miniature buoys, on the metallic-gray surface. Anxiety pinched her chest. She grabbed the buckets and caught up with Mr. Wright, Ferris, and Violet, who were now walking along Oxford Street, passing the familiar pumping station that sat on the banks of the River Lagan. Hettie marched right behind them, keeping her attention on Violet and her swaying tail.

At the northern end of Oxford Street, they walked diagonally across the bustling square that fronted the Customs House. Near the stairs of the imposing Victorian building, two men, dressed in dark suits and wool scarves, stood on short wooden boxes and debated the prospects of a German invasion: One fervently supported the war against the Fascists and proclaimed Churchill as "our great leader"; the other man, who had an unruly beard, declared that he would welcome the Nazi troops with open arms, that they would drive the British out of Ireland for good and dump the Unionist junta out of Stormont. During the last few years, Hettie had heard many versions of this argument from her father and others. It was challenging to follow all the different opinions except that it was clear no one could agree about what might happen.

"The working-class people of Belfast would be better off if the Germans came. We have nothing to lose," the man with the beard yelled. "The Germans would end discrimination, give us justice. Get rid of the Brits and unite Ireland."

The speaker's cheeks turned roseate. His forehead glistened.

"This war is against the Germans and no one else," the other man

yelled, shaking his fist in the air. “They’ll enslave us all. Will you please listen to me! We are ill-prepared.”

Strangers booed, hissed, and cheered. As soon as the men noticed Violet, though, they suspended their arguments, united for once in their astonishment at the unusual spectacle of an elephant lumbering across the square. Ahead, on the other side, a band of musicians was performing a folk tune at the foot of the Albert Clock on Victoria Street, the crowned tower leaning vaguely to the left on its sandstone foundation. The whimsical notes of a melodeon, an upright piano, a fiddle, and a double bass stitched the air. A young couple swirled in circles among the parting strangers, their feet moving in synchronized motion on the cobblestoned walkway. Pedestrians clapped along with the music. A ship’s horn sounded in the distance. The smells of tobacco, leather, and petrol drifted through the air, scents that reminded Hettie of home and her father.

“Follow me,” Mr. Wright repeated to Violet. “Follow me.”

Near the end of Victoria Street, Hettie caught sight of the manicured greens and familiar domes of city hall pressed against the dull pewter sky. Usually when she traveled through this neighborhood Hettie was on her father’s bike and rarely took in the sights and sounds of street life, but walking along with Violet meant noticing details that often rushed past her in a blur. As they moved farther up the avenue, they passed a congregation of silver-haired men throwing horseshoes on a parcel of dead grass next to a pub. Next, they traversed North Street, which gave way to the Shankill Road, which was bordered with the linen mills that, along with the shipyards across the river, employed many of the men of the predominantly working-class Loyalist neighborhood.

“Steady,” Mr. Wright said to Violet as they started up the gradual incline of the Antrim Road. “Steady there, me girl.”

Strangers opened the doors and windows of their houses and flats, and gazed down at Violet’s slow locomotion. Random sticks and

branches snapped under her weight. Some people waved; others stared on in silent awe.

“Miss Quin, the carrots,” Mr. Wright said.

Her palms grew clammy.

“They fell into the river, sir,” Hettie said.

“Here, Mr. Wright,” Ferris said, handing him two carrots. “I have a few.”

Hettie glanced over at Ferris, who tipped his cap in her direction.

“Thank you, Ferris,” Mr. Wright said, not looking at Hettie.

She forced a smile. As she often did, Hettie felt a complicated mix of gratitude, betrayal, and jealousy toward Ferris. He was always prepared for Mr. Wright’s every demand or request, but his diligence and readiness often left Hettie feeling flat-footed and ineffectual—and that Mr. Wright would never see her for who she truly was. She pushed these thoughts away, though; she couldn’t afford these distractions this morning.

“Come on, Violet,” Mr. Wright said in a gentle voice again.

As they traveled farther up the Antrim Road, Hettie relaxed into her stride. The buildings became less dense, with many of the homes hidden behind walls or wrought-iron fences. A mother shelled peas into a bucket on a stoop. She looked up from the repetitive movement of her hands and smiled at the unexpected marvel of Violet. School-girls played a game of hopscotch on the white-chalk squares drawn on the pavement and sang rounds of “Three Blind Mice”: *See how they run. See how they run.* The refrains overlapped one other until the girls saw Violet and paused their song, openmouthed with amazement and glee. Up ahead, a police officer stood at the next intersection. As soon as he spotted Violet, he blew into his whistle—and the elephant started to run.

“Violet,” Mr. Wright yelled. “Violet!”

The elephant ran up the Cliftonville Road and then toward the storefront of a greengrocer, and Mr. Wright, Ferris, and Hettie dashed

after her. Modest pyramid-shaped piles of cabbages, potatoes, and turnips were arranged on either side of the doorway. Violet trotted up to the vegetables, looped her trunk around one of the turnips, and lifted it into her mouth. Then another. The rest of the vegetables tumbled onto the street, like a stampede of lawn bowls. The police officer blew his whistle again, and the grocer stepped outside his store. His complexion paled.

“What on—” he exclaimed.

Hettie tried to shove Violet away from the produce, but the animal merely swatted her tail into Hettie’s face. Then Violet dropped several piles of manure onto the cobblestones. The pungent aroma made Hettie feel queasy. She took a deep breath and tried again, and Violet reared into her, kicking her squarely in the thigh. The elephant’s sheer strength pushed her backward into the street as if she weighed absolutely nothing. Pebbles and dirt pressed into her palms. A cold shudder moved through her system. Heat seared her thigh.

Hettie closed her eyes for a second. Starbursts erupted against the dark theater of her eyelids. Violet reared her hind leg again and Hettie rolled out of the way. If she hadn’t, the elephant would have stepped on her. The grocer yelled at Mr. Wright, who was on his hands and knees, picking up an armful of potatoes. Hettie held on to her thigh with both hands. The ache in her leg radiated like a beam of a light. Ferris picked up the curled stick and attempted to distract Violet from the bundle of carrots that she now snapped into her soft pink mouth.

“Come on, Violet,” Ferris said. “Let’s go home.”

The elephant’s gaze softened and she stepped away from the storefront. Her feet crushed several beets, carrots, and turnips that had tumbled onto the street, the smashed vegetables looking something like a child’s finger painting. Hettie stood up gingerly, relieved to find that she still could.

“Brilliant job, Ferris. Take Violet to Bellevue,” Mr. Wright said. “Hettie, find a shovel. Clean this mess up!”

Hettie felt her cheeks redden. She shook out her hands as the putrid smell of manure filled her nostrils. Mr. Wright disappeared inside the store and returned with a shovel. He handed it to her without saying a word. Resigned, Hettie scooped up the elephant's manure and deposited it into a trash bin. In vain, she attempted to spit out the foul taste that was forming in her mouth from the persistent smell. Inside the store, she noticed Mr. Wright trying to calm the owner down. The man gesticulated wildly toward the door.

"That elephant," he yelled. "He destroyed my precious produce."

Mr. Wright took out his spiral notebook and began to take notes. He glanced up at Hettie and then nodded, indicating that she should go ahead. She ran to catch up with Ferris and Violet as the pair continued north on the Antrim Road in the direction of the zoo. Her thigh ached and throbbed, but she knew that she needed to keep up with Ferris and Violet, or Mr. Wright might use this as a reason to fire her. After all, if she couldn't do more than shovel shit, what good was she?

"Hettie," Ferris said with a smile. "I thought I lost you. Where's Mr. Wright?"

"Still talking to the owner of the shop," Hettie said, struggling for breath. "That man is not pleased."

"He should be honored that Violet made an appearance at his store during her very first day in Belfast."

Hettie gave a laugh, and Ferris smiled. Hettie quickly realized that it had been a long time since she'd laughed. The past three months had been dulled by the regular visits from extended family, friends, neighbors, and church members. The days and weeks had blurred into each other, and a silent grief seemed to shape most of Hettie's waking hours. With each condolence visit, Hettie sat quietly with her hands folded in the pleats of her woolen skirt, listening to her mother and the other women as their conversation migrated from recipes for fish pie to how challenging it was to manage with the rationing to Mrs. Fitzsimmons's daughter and how she had recently given birth to twins before circling

back to the sudden loss of Anna. How much she had accomplished during her brief life—a brilliant student of modern and classical languages, a talented tennis player and a winner of many local tournaments, and later a wife and a mother. Even a few months after her sister's death, it still felt baffling and tragic to Hettie that Anna wasn't any of these things now; she was merely a memory, an ephemeral apparition that came and went at unexpected moments, both when Hettie was awake and asleep. That morning, Hettie kept expecting to spot Anna in the crowd, calling out her name and releasing a sharp whistle with two fingers pressed against her bottom lip, just how Thomas had taught them when they were children.

“Look, Mama,” a young boy said, pointing toward Violet and pulling Hettie out of her reverie.

Mr. Wright appeared at their side, sweat streaking his rosy cheeks.

“I convinced the man not to press charges,” explained Mr. Wright, wiping his white linen handkerchief against his forehead. “I'll find a way to cover the damages. I'll bet you that he forgets the whole thing by the end of the day. Once he gets a few pints in him, it will be a good story that he'll be telling his chums at the pub.”

“He didn't seem like a laughing sort of fella,” Hettie said.

“We don't want Mr. Christie to find out about this,” Mr. Wright said, glancing over at Ferris and ignoring Hettie entirely. “He wouldn't like to hear that one of his animals is running wild on the streets of Belfast.”

“Yes, sir,” Ferris said as he guided Violet up the winding street.

Within thirty minutes, they were more than halfway up the Antrim Road. The broken views of the River Lagan and the docks were visible through the overlapping rooftops of the rows of houses. Around the bend, there was the silhouette of the Cavehill with its familiar hump along its forested ridge, looking like the crooked nose of a sleeping man.

Hettie was relieved when the raised letters of BELLEVUE appeared

around a corner, stretched across the face of the low concrete wall. They had finally arrived at the zoo. A dozen employees—young and middle-aged men dressed in dull green coveralls and caps—were assembled there. Still wearing his dapper top hat, white gloves, and yellow scarf, Mr. Christie stood at the foot of the grand staircase, a series of fifty steps that led into the heart of the zoo.

“Welcome, Violet,” Mr. Christie said, removing his hat and tipping it in the elephant’s direction. The small crowd of onlookers snickered.

“I’ll take her through the rear entrance,” said Mr. Wright.

“Yes, yes,” Mr. Christie said, replacing his hat. “Of course.”

Violet released another nasally trumpet call. A large flock of songbirds lifted up from the autumnal treetops, the fast beats of their wings sounding like a collective whisper in the morning breeze.

“I hope you enjoy your new home at Bellevue,” Mr. Christie said to Violet as he rubbed her speckled forehead. “We are happy to have you here.”

The zoo staff gave a polite round of applause as Mr. Wright guided Violet onto the narrow dirt path that traversed the hillside to the zoo’s rear entrance. Ferris and Hettie followed. Mr. Wright unlatched the rear gate and together they walked in the direction of the Elephant House. Bellevue had already been open for a few hours, and a handful of visitors—mostly mothers with young children—lingered on the pavements. A volley of shrieks rose up from the monkey enclosure. A dense cluster of pale pink flamingos stood along the border of the lily pond. Up ahead, Hettie saw Wallace the lion stretching his forelegs out and arching his back. Wallace yawned, his tongue lolling from his mouth like a soft pink ribbon. His majestic head swayed with each step he took across the sandy ground. On the far side of the enclosure, Victoria, the lioness, slept along with her two cubs in the shifting shadows.

Farther down the path, Rajan, the elderly bull elephant, and Maggie, a ten-year-old elephant, stood like watchful guards near the edge of the giraffe exhibition, where the pair had been moved a few days

ago. Rajan swung his long trunk high in the air and released a rolling roar. Two of the giraffes poked up their necks, stiff as pipe cleaners, above the trimmed hedges. Since Hettie had started working at the zoo six months ago, Rajan had always been her favorite: He maintained a formidable presence as the largest mammal of the zoo. A sort of king of Bellevue, with all the other animals bowing to him. Rajan trumpeted another cry and this time Maggie joined in his bellowing refrain. Violet flicked her ears up like a pair of small sails.

“What a darling,” said Helen McAlister, one of the women who worked at the ticket kiosk. “She’s a beauty.”

Eliza Crowley, a young woman about Hettie’s age who worked in the canteen, stood next to Helen. Eliza wore a soiled apron and her shirtsleeves were pushed up to her bony elbows. Her auburn hair was tied back with a red paisley bandanna, looking like a wild spray of flames. She had a narrow nose and a pointy chin.

“Where’s she going to sleep?” Eliza asked.

“Violet is going to live alone for now,” Mr. Wright said, lifting the stick a little higher, “until she gets used to her new life here at Bellevue.”

Ferris had already explained to Hettie this temporary arrangement: Violet’s home was going to be in the Elephant House, a simple twelve-foot-by-twelve-foot structure, with a fenced-in yard and a three-foot empty moat surrounding its enclosure. Rajan and Maggie would reside with the giraffes until Mr. Wright thought it was prudent to bring the animals together. He said it could take up to a year before this might happen, that one had to be careful about timing, or the elephants might not get along and end up attacking each other.

“Won’t she get lonely?” Eliza asked.

“Violet will have lots of visitors,” Mr. Wright said. “I assure you, Miss Crowley, she’ll never be lonely at Bellevue.” He unlatched the gate to the Elephant House. “Here you go, Violet.”

Violet lumbered through and Mr. Wright followed her, securing the gate behind him. Ferris and Hettie looked on, completely absorbed

in Violet until a sound at Hettie's elbow startled her. Hettie spun round and saw that Eliza was still standing next to her, also gazing at the elephant.

During her time at the zoo, Hettie had exchanged a few monosyllabic greetings with Eliza—and not much else. She had heard from one of the other zookeepers that Eliza had left school at age fourteen because her family needed her to work to keep her younger sisters and brothers fed. Hettie glanced at Eliza for a second and noticed that dirt smudged her pale forehead. Freckles dotted the thin bridge of her nose. Eliza popped a pear drop into her mouth.

“Bloody hell,” Ferris said, his eyes widening. “Where’d you get that?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know, Ferris Poole,” Eliza said. “Want one?”

“Of course, I want one.”

Eliza reached into her pocket and tossed a boiled sweet to Ferris and then another one to Hettie. She couldn’t remember the last time she had eaten a pear drop. The fruity flavor burst in her mouth. It tasted like the sun and the ocean at once. With the tip of her tongue, Hettie tucked the sweet into the warm pocket of her cheek.

“Thanks, Eliza,” Ferris said.

“My brother—”

“That’s all right,” Ferris said, winking at Eliza. “I’d rather not know.”

Eliza smiled a sly smile. The pale yellow of the boiled sweet stained the tight corners of her mouth.

“Back to work, everyone,” Mr. Wright said. “We have a zoo to run here.”

“See you, girls,” Ferris said, tipping his cap. “Thanks again, Eliza.”

“He’s a handsome fella, don’t you think,” Eliza said to Hettie as they watched him walk away.

It was the first time Eliza had ever spoken directly to her.

“He’s all right, I guess,” Hettie said, sucking on the pear drop.

“He likes you, you know.”

Hettie defiantly crossed her arms over her chest.

“Why do you think Mr. Wright hired you,” Eliza said sharply. “Ferris wouldn’t quit asking him. He wouldn’t give up.”

Despite the delightful taste of the sweet, Hettie wanted to spit it out onto the dusty ground before Eliza’s feet. She felt flattered by the notion of Ferris’s potential affections, but wanted to believe that Mr. Wright had hired her based on her own merits and promise. Despite not having a significant amount of experience with large animals, she had groomed and fed her uncle’s farm animals—the goats, pigs, chickens, and horses. Ever since she could remember, Hettie had preferred animals to people. They were always happy to see her, grateful to be fed and given some attention, whenever Hettie made her weekly visits. The life at her uncle’s farm provided a reprieve from her own household, which had revolved around her sister, all her success and brightness. Violet whinnied and lifted her trunk into the air.

“You’re the lucky one, you know, being the only female zookeeper,” Eliza continued. “I’m stuck washing dishes in the canteen. At least I can still say that I work at the zoo. Men like that, don’t you think?”

“It’s not something I’ve considered,” Hettie said loftily, even though she had, on more than one occasion since being hired part-time by Mr. Wright. Her fictional conversations with young men always went better when she mentioned her responsibilities for and care of her animal charges. The young man would pepper her with questions and compliments, marveling at how unusual it was for a woman to be a zookeeper, how most girls worked in offices as secretaries or typists, longing to get married, or didn’t work at all. In her mind, her future boyfriend frequently visited her at the zoo, told his friends about her, and around Belfast, she would become known as the zookeeper at Bellevue rather than merely Anna Quin’s younger sister.

“If I were you, I’d go on a date with dear Ferris,” Eliza said. “If you let him touch your private place, I bet he could get you the job of taking care of that elephant.”

Hettie spluttered and coughed. Gray spots flickered along the margins of her vision. The ground tipped slightly and then snapped back.

"I'm just telling you how it is," Eliza said. "You need to apply your ambition in the right way. That's the only way you're going to get ahead."

Hettie took the pear drop out of her mouth, holding it between her finger and thumb. Suddenly it no longer tasted sweet.

"I'll take that if you don't want it."

Wordlessly, Hettie handed the sweet to Eliza.

"Thank you very much," Eliza said, popping it into her own mouth.

As Eliza walked away, Hettie clenched her damp fists. What did Eliza know about Ferris? And what did she know about Mr. Wright? Hettie noticed that her shoulders were scrunched up and tried to release them. The pain in her thigh pulsed again. Violet paced across the yard.

"Is there something I can help you with, Miss Quin?" Mr. Wright asked, offering a fistful of hay to Violet.

"No, sir."

"Well, then, attend to your morning assignments, please."

"Yes, sir. I'm going, sir."

Hettie headed toward the aviary where she would fill the assorted feeders with seed and refresh the water troughs for the finches, thrushes, parrots, and macaws. Before she turned onto the pathway, she glanced back at Violet one more time: The elephant was now lying down, her gray legs folded underneath the furrows of her body. Mr. Wright carried a bucket of water in one hand and a leafy bundle of celery in the other. Violet lifted her head as Mr. Wright walked toward her. He broke off a stalk of celery and the elephant raised her trunk, gingerly curling it around the pale green stick. Mr. Wright looked up again.

"Miss Quin," he said. "Have you suddenly become deaf? Return to your work."