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She has travelled with her husband, a Danish engineer, and wrote this book whilst accompanying him in a two-year work assignment in America. They actually lived in a two hundred-year-old converted Presbyterian church in the small New Jersey town of Asbury, which having changed very little from when it was settled, provided the inspiration for this novel.

The Hetherington Women

Part 1

Catherine Andersen

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To Kjeld, my husband, my heartfelt gratitude for the unswerving love and support he has given me. Many thanks, also, to my good friend Josephine, without whose enthusiasm and encouragement this book would never have been published.

Celia 1845

One

Michael O'Malley and his family stood on the dock amidst all the other starving emigrants who had set their sights on the distant shores of the New World, in the year of our Lord 1845, for in August a mysterious blight had wiped out the entire crop of potatoes, just as it was ready to be harvested. This brought about a famine the like of which the Irish had never known, and before it was over it was to take the lives of almost two million of them. They died of starvation, typhus and cholera in this their island home, and it wreaked such misery and despair upon the already criminally underprivileged families of the poor, that they had flocked in their thousands to the docksides of Cork and Galway in an effort to flee their unmerciful conditions.

Nothing but the most dire of circumstances could have forced them to undertake such a journey, for the Atlantic Ocean at the beginning of winter was formidable in the extreme. Its awe-inspiring qualities could instil the most dreadful apprehension in the stoutest of men, particularly when they heard tell of the many poor souls who perished at its mercy whilst being transported across its wide expanse. Of all the migrations across this vast ocean, that from this tiny isle was the most dramatic, for Ireland was isolated and the peasants were left without food, and what was worse, without hope of ever obtaining any. So they were forced to

flee the land of their birth, after having watched their loved ones dying of hunger and disease. Those who were strong enough, or whose very instinct to survive had not yet diminished, made their way to the seaports, while the oldest and weakest simply sat in their meagre one-roomed cottages and waited for death. As the numbers of the dead grew, these same cottages were turned into charnel houses, places in which to lay out the corpses. Row upon row of emaciated bodies were laid in the very houses in which they had once lived, laughed and loved, and for those who survived, the sheer horror of it was never to be forgotten.

“Oh, Michael... Michael, do you think we are doing the right thing?” cried Philomena, as she gazed around at all the gaunt-looking faces that surrounded them.

Her husband looked at her and at his two daughters, Mary and Celia, and nodded his head. “We’ll put our trust in the good Lord Philly. He has seen fit to bring us this far me darlin’ and I believe that he’ll see us safely to the other side of the world, sure he will.” He placed an arm around his wife’s sagging shoulders and drew her close, resting his cheek gently on her head. He knew that she was thinking of her dying mother, who just a few days before had pleaded with them to leave, before they too perished. It was clear that she herself was very near to death, and having already watched her husband die from starvation, she could not bear the thought of her daughter and grandchildren suffering the same fate. In her final hours she had beckoned her daughter to come near, and in whispered tones had divulged to her the secret place where decades before she had hidden a small leather pouch containing three gold coins. Philomena had known nothing of the treasure that had lain for all of her life

in the recesses of the kitchen wall, and her eyes had almost fallen from their sockets as she removed the tightly wedged stone to the side of the hearth and discovered what was concealed there. “Why Mother, where on earth did this come from?” she had asked incredulously. Her mother’s face was wet with tears as she told of how, when she was a young woman, in the first months of her marriage, she had been waylaid in the woods one day by the son of the landowner. She had been collecting kindling for the fire when he had come upon her, and there was no one nearby to heed her cries for help, as she had tried to run from him. She was not the first, and by no means the last, to be set upon by this arrogant youth, and when he was done with her he had flung the leather pouch on to the ground where she lay sobbing. Thus he had bought her silence and salved his conscience, and as he fastened his breeches, he had hissed at her, “Not a word of this mind, or, twill be the worse for you.” Then he had ridden away. Philomena leant forward and took the skeletal form of her mother into her arms. “There, there... don’t cry my poor darlin’, don’t cry, ’tis all over now.”

Her mother gave a shuddering sigh, then went on, “I have carried this shameful secret in my heart all these years, the secret of how you came to be born... but I’ll not take it with me to my grave.”

Philomena drew back in shocked disbelief. She sat silently for several moments, her mother’s words going around and around in her head. She could not believe what she had been told. “Do you mean that Da was not my true father? But how can you know...? He never showed it, never once. God rest his dear soul.”

Her mother sobbed. "Because he never knew. I couldn't bring myself to tell him. How could I? 'Twas my shame and mine alone to bear. I could never tell him the truth and burden him with it. Sure, 'twas enough that I had been so cursed, and I knew that you were not his child. I couldn't lie with him after what had happened, but he never ever guessed that you were not his own. He loved you more than life itself, so how could I break his dear heart? May God forgive me." She tried to cross herself, but her arm fell limply on to her chest. "Please child, take the money, for 'tis yours by right, and perhaps some good will come from it after all. I hope so... I hope so."

Now Philomena stood looking up at the ship, all four hundred tons of her. The last of the cargo of pig iron had been taken aboard, and now came the turn of the pitiful human cargo, starving, ragged and depressed. Suddenly, this seething crowd surged towards the gangplank, pushing and pulling at one another in their frantic efforts to flee their living hell once and for all. Their eager anticipation was soon dispelled, however, as they came below and saw the small spaces allotted to them, for then they realised that they had simply exchanged one kind of purgatory for another. The O'Malleys looked at their four eighteen inch wide berths, fitted into an area of no more than six feet square, and their hearts sank; they could not believe that they were expected to exist in such confined conditions for the whole of the perilous journey, which could take anything from six to ten weeks if they ran into bad weather.

"Sure you'd think it was cattle they were shipping to America," exclaimed Michael O'Malley, when he saw how closely the emigrants' quarters resembled horses' stalls, or

cattle pens. “How on earth do they expect us to manage, when we’ve to sit, eat and sleep, day after day?”

“And what of our belongings. Where will we put our clothing and provisions?” asked his wife.

The berths were no more than wooden shelves, crudely knocked together, of fir or pine; they were then fastened to the wall with a narrow strip of wood nailed to the outer edge; to prevent the occupants from falling out when the ship rolled. There were no mattresses, so most passengers slept on the bare wood. There was not enough light or ventilation nor adequate toilet facilities, so that the atmosphere was unbearable. Despite this privation, there were many completely destitute who sought to stow away by hiding in barrels and chests, or beneath lifeboats and sails. The crew were coming around to search out these penniless vagrants, before the ship left the dock and slipped silently out to the open sea. Once on the move, Michael O’Malley urged his wife and daughters up on to the deck, so that they could bid their last farewell to their native land. They breathed in the fresh sea air and marvelled as they looked aloft at the sails unfurling. It was good to fill their lungs from clean salt breezes, after suffering the stench of the rotting vegetation that had permeated the whole of Ireland since the blight. It was the sulphurous sewer-like odour that had first alerted them to the pestilence, and it had never abated.

It seemed that the entire number of their fellow passengers had been of the same mind, because now the small area in the waist of the ship was completely packed with people. This lay just above and forward of their living quarters, and as it was the one and only place that they were allowed to use, it was obvious that they would never have

enough space in which to walk. The Captain and cabin passengers stayed aft; they were the only ones privileged to use the rear section of the ship and this was cordoned off to ensure their privacy at all times. Nor were the steerage passengers allowed on the quarter deck, which was the only completely open space on the ship, so their world was suddenly to become frustratingly confined and cramped.

Philomena was filled with dread; already she felt the urge to jump from the overcrowded deck. A feeling of claustrophobia enveloped her. All she wanted to do was escape, but people were closing in on her, their bodies pressing closer and closer as more of them pushed up on to the deck. Her legs felt weak, her head was swimming. She opened her mouth to cry out, but no sound came. Then she was sliding, sliding... down into a black void... down into merciful oblivion.

When she opened her eyes again, she was lying on her back, the faces of Mary and Michael floating above her in the semi-darkness. She felt the soothing effects of a cool damp cloth about her face.

“Philly... Philly... are you all right me darlin’?”

The sound of her husband’s voice brought her back to reality. “You fainted up there on the deck, so we brought you below to rest a while. Are you feeling better now?” Michael was holding her small limp hand between his own two strong ones, gently caressing it back to life, while her daughter bathed her forehead with cool water.

His concerned face gradually became clearer to her. “Oh Michael, I’m all right I’ m all right now. I don’t know what came over me... now don’t worry, I’ll be fine in a minute or two. Don’t worry now.” She placed her other hand on top of

her daughter's, as it gently rested on her forehead. "Thank you Mary... that feels lovely, sure it does. I'll be better in no time at all." She lied convincingly, to put their minds at rest, but deep within her heart she knew that she would never have the strength to withstand the rigours of this fateful journey.

*

The long arduous days crept into interminable weeks, and Michael O'Malley prayed as he had never prayed before, but eventually he began to realise that there was a will much greater than his own that had determined his wife's fate. He lifted her head gently and held the cup to her lips; so that she might sip the cool water he had saved for her. He looked at her white translucent face and wondered how much longer she could survive in these fetid inhuman conditions. She had hardly eaten since they set sail, which was little wonder when most of their food was rotten. What provisions they had brought for themselves had long since been eaten, and the meagre rations that were intermittently distributed by the captain, were not fit to feed to swine. He realised, too late, that they had been badly cheated by the agent who had arranged their passage. Gone were two of Philomena's gold coins, and he knew full well that he had not received anywhere near the true value of what they were worth. Although he had purchased only the cheapest tickets, so that they would have a little money with which to start their new life in America, he could never have imagined the deprivation to which they had been subjected on this horrendous voyage. Even the fresh drinking water had run

out long since, but mercifully they had encountered a heavy storm several days before, and when the parched passengers had seen the crew up on deck holding out sails to catch the precious raindrops, they too had rushed to fetch pots and pans, or any other kind of vessel that would hold water. Philomena opened her eyes and looked at her husband. “I love you Michael,” she whispered. “You’re a lovely man, that you are.” Her voice caught in her throat as she retched one last time.

Michael pulled her to him and held her close, his face buried against her neck. He sobbed softly, “Philly, don’t leave me... don’t leave me, not now. I need you me darlin’... I need you.”

His daughter Mary took him by the shoulders and whispered in his ear, “Tis no good Da, she’s gone. She’s at peace now, sure she is, so you come away. I’ll do what has to be done, don’t worry.”

“No... no... I’ll take care of her Mary. You go up and find Seeley... Tell her, will you? I’ll need to see about the burial. Oh, dear God, why... why did it have to happen, why here?” He hung his head and his tears fell softly on to his wife’s face, as he laid her on to the bunk. He used them to bathe her, because there was not enough of the precious drinking water to spare. Then he went in search of some strong rope, to bind around her frail body after he had wrapped it in a cloth.

Mary found her sister looking out to sea, over the ship’s rail. “Seeley... Da sent me to find you.”

“I know Mary, I know. Please don’t say anything.”

The younger girl had been dreading to hear the news of her mother’s passing, but she knew that it would come. Now

she turned to her sister. "When will all the dying stop Mary? 'Tis so terrible I thought we'd be escaping it when we left Ireland, but sure it'll go on and on 'til there are none of us left." Mary wrapped her arms around her sister and the two girls clung together for comfort, wondering what would become of them now that they had lost their beloved mother. Their sobs were muffled by the sound of the harsh turbulent sea, as it pounded relentlessly against the ship's hulk, and the tears that they shed were borne away by the wind, to merge into its fine salt spray.

A well-dressed young man was standing by the rope that segregated the steerage passengers from those in the first-class section of the ship. He was hoping to catch sight of the beautiful young girl whom he had seen day after day up on the deck with her family. Yes, there she was; he could see her clinging to her sister by the ship's rail. He presumed that the two young girls were sisters, because they bore such a strong resemblance to one another, but the younger one, with whom he had become so deeply enamoured, was more strikingly beautiful than her sister. She reminded him exactly of a porcelain doll; her features were delicate and her deep blue eyes, which always seemed so mournful, had completely captivated him. Who was she, he wondered? Despite the obvious fact that the family was poor, she had a look of quality about her. She usually wore a woven shawl around her head and shoulders, to ward off the chill of the raw sea breeze, but beneath it he had occasionally caught a glimpse of her raven black hair, which hung in a thick long braid down her back. How beautiful she was, and how he longed to speak to her, if only for a few moments. In all the hours he had spent observing her during this long and arduous sea

voyage, she had never once become aware of him, or looked his way, but yet she fascinated him. There must be something amiss... he had noticed that her parents had not been up on deck to take the air for the past several days; he supposed that possibly their mother was finding it difficult to withstand the rigours of the voyage, because she had always appeared to him to be extremely unwell.

He felt concern for them, but it was common knowledge that these poor emigrants, in their inadequate, inferior accommodation, suffered abysmally. He had heard that conditions were appalling in their cramped, vermin-ridden quarters below deck, so it was to be expected that many of them would perish on the relentless journey. As he watched, there was a sudden subdued disturbance and an uneasy silence fell over the crowded deck. The people drew back respectfully in an awkward shuffle, to clear a narrow passageway. The men removed their hats in deference and bowed their heads; the women crossed themselves and moved their lips silently in prayer. Then he saw the girls' father, deeply distressed, being helped to carry what was obviously a corpse securely wrapped in a heavy cloth and tightly bound with rope. He realised with horror that this must be the mother, who had met her sad demise... yes, he could see the girls pushing to their father's side to comfort him. The young man was very much moved at their sad plight and the distress that they were so obviously suffering, and wished that there was something he could do to help them. Why, he wondered, should this family in particular cause him such concern, for he had witnessed all manner of similar heart-breaking events on previous voyages? In his heart he knew that it was because of the young girl that his

interest had been aroused on this occasion, and he was to find it impossible to forget her. He remained still as the brief burial service was carried out by the captain, who was always called upon to perform this unhappy task, then as the body descended into the fathomless depths of the ocean, he turned away slowly and made his way back to his cabin.

Two

As the voyage neared its end, the restlessness and tension aboard ship was growing into open hostility, and when at long last a cry was heard that land had been sighted in the distance, the excitement among the passengers reached fever pitch. There was loud shouting, joyful singing and much hugging and kissing; even the rowdies among them, who a few hours earlier had been threatening to murder one another when their frayed tempers raged out of control, grabbed one another by the shoulders and danced the Irish jig, old grievances forgotten now that they were about to plant their feet in the 'promised land'. There was frenzied activity and much hustling and bustling, as belongings were gathered together, accompanied by loud exchanges when certain missing items were traced to those who could not give a satisfactory explanation of how they came to be in possession of them, but finally the ship drew alongside the dock at the Battery, on the southern tip of Manhattan, and there discharged its boisterous, foul-smelling, ragged, unkempt human cargo. Once again the naïve and ignorant peasants were forced to run the gauntlet of the rogues and scoundrels who lay in wait for them as they stepped from the gangplank on to the dock. Here they found cheerful sharp-eyed natives from the 'old country', sporting shamrock in their hats or buttonholes, anxious to assist them with their

baggage and guide them to the cheap boarding houses that waited with open doors to receive them. The exploitation of these 'greenhorns', as they were known, was notorious, and there was no shortage of villains only too ready to relieve them of what little they had in the way of possessions.

"Now you stay close by me girls," warned Michael O'Malley. "And keep hold of your bundles, for in this unruly mob you're likely to lose them before you know where y'are." They were swept forward, at times their feet barely touching the ground, then gradually the crowd dispersed, spreading out slowly at first, a little apprehensively, unaccustomed as they were to the freedom of movement, after their long term of incarceration on the ship; then gradually thinning and drifting away into the wide open space for which they had all been craving throughout the voyage. It felt mightily strange, but it felt so good, to stand once again upon solid ground that was not pitching and rolling beneath their feet; to be able to extend their arms to either side, without touching anything. The young children were ecstatic, spinning around like tops and jumping up and down, shouting and screaming hysterically, unable to believe that they had at last arrived at the fairytale place, that until now had been but a mere figment of their imaginations.

A small foxy-looking man appeared from nowhere and grasped the largest bundle that Mary was struggling to carry. "Here, let me help you mavourneen," he said, eyeing her from head to toe. "Do you have anywheres to go, or would you like me to take you to a good respectable house just here nearby?" Mary tightened her grasp around her belongings and pressed closer to her father for protection, but before he had time to open his mouth and blurt out a warning to this

oily little character, a highly polished walking stick was thrust against the chest of their aggressor. "These people are well taken care of Patrick. Now you be on your way, there's a smart fellow." The little chap had already released his grasp upon Mary's bundle, and realising that there were to be no easy pickings for him from the 'greenhorns', he diverted his attention elsewhere, but not before aiming a tirade of colourful invectives at the gentleman who had 'queered his pitch'. "All right... all right Mr Forbes, I' m going. Sure there's no need for you to be getting on your high horse. I was only trying to give a helping hand, that I was."

"Well, you're out of luck this time Patrick, and they can well do without the kind of help that you're likely to give them, so be off with you."

"All right, all right. I've said I'll be on me way, and may the curse of the devil be upon you, an, all, an, all. 'Tis a sorry day, that it is, when a man can't be giving a little help where it is needed." He was still muttering as he disappeared into the crowd and was gone.

"Please allow me to introduce myself. Ian Forbes." The well-dressed gentleman raised his hat and inclined his head. Michael O'Malley was struck dumb, not knowing what to say or do.

"I thank you for your kindness," broke in Mary.

"Oh, I know Patrick Casey too well to have left you at his mercy. He's a first-class rogue. There are many of them in New York, as you'll soon learn. They work for the boarding house keepers who charge exorbitant rates to any unsuspecting newcomers, such as yourselves, and once you fall into the trap, or accept any help from those thieves, you'll never break free again. They'll take every penny you

could ever earn... and you'll still be in debt. Something should be done about their criminal exploitation of the innocent. In fact, I believe there are moves afoot right now to set up some kind of Commission, to take care of all new immigrants and help them to establish themselves when they first arrive. That will put pay to all this racketeering. Something has to be done to stop it."

Michael O'Malley found his tongue at last. "'Twas good of you to help us sir, indeed it was... and I thank you kindly. I'm Michael O'Malley and these are my daughters Mary and Celia." The girls bobbed a curtsy. "Now, could you be after telling me where I'm likely to find somewheres decent for the girls and meself to stay, just until I can find a job? I have some money to start us off, sure I do, but I've no notion of how to go about getting us lodgings, or the like."

Ian Forbes looked from one to the other of them sympathetically. Their bedraggled appearance would have evoked the sympathy of even the most hard-hearted of men. For the past few weeks on the ship, he had been constantly trying to formulate ideas of how he might help these poor unfortunates, and now he was to put his ideas to the test. "Well, I hope you'll forgive me Mr O'Malley, but I could not help noticing your sad bereavement during the voyage, and I was most touched by the distress it caused you, all three of you. It set me to thinking that there might be something I could do to assist you when the ship docked, for in your vulnerable state you would be an easy prey for the likes of Patrick Casey; maybe even more than most, I daresay. Now I do have a suggestion to make, that I think may be acceptable to you, here is what it is. I rent a small storehouse not far from here, where I keep my goods. I'm a merchant, you see,

and I frequently travel back and forth between New York and Europe, trading whatever there is to trade. It occurred to me that I ought to find a store-keeper to take care of my stock now that New York is growing so rapidly. I shan't be able to leave my property unattended, as I used to, now that the city is becoming so over-crowded... I know that, for there are so many villains afoot these days, and if they see that there's no one about, then it is bound to attract the attention of the worst sort eventually. Now what would you say to becoming my storekeeper? I'll explain to you exactly what I'd want you to do. There are three rooms above the ground floor storage area, they're only small, and have never been used, but I think that maybe the young ladies could make quite nice living quarters of them. What do you say?"

Michael O'Malley's mouth dropped open.

"At least let me take you there, so that you can see what the place looks like. I have a carriage waiting, would you like to accompany me?"

Mary and Celia looked at their father and saw the look of amazement on his face. He simply could not believe that he was to be the recipient of all this bounty, particularly after all the bad luck that had befallen him of late.

"Say something Da. What do you think?" queried Mary, tugging at his sleeve. She had taken over her mother's role since her death, for he seemed so lost without her.

"Er... um... why yes, of course, of course. Thank you, sir, 'tis most kind of you," was all he could stammer.

"Right then, come this way. My carriage is just over here... it won't take long to get to the storehouse. At least you'll have somewhere to stay for a day or two, until you

find your way around. Then if you decide not to take my offer, you can move on.”

The grateful trio followed close on his heels as he made his way to the waiting carriage, and they felt exactly like royalty itself as they stepped up into the fine vehicle and drove off through the hotchpotch of narrow streets that led from the docks. Their eyes stared in wonderment at all that they saw as they drove the short distance to the storehouse. New York was teeming with life. There was continual hubbub. They could hear languages and accents that were completely unknown to them, coming from strangely dressed people who crowded its unmade roads and spilled out of its shabby ramshackle buildings. They bore no resemblance to anyone they had ever before seen in their lives. It was obvious that this New World into which they had come, was a place very far removed from their own small green island home, and they were filled with apprehension as all three realised that they were now to become part of this strange, foreign community.

In less than fifteen minutes, they pulled up in front of a small wooden building, which seemed sturdily built and very well-kept. It stood along a short narrow street in a row of similar buildings, most of which showed distinct signs of dilapidation and neglect. However, Mary and Celia nudged one another hopefully as their benefactor unlocked the strong wooden door that secured the property, and ushered them into its darkened interior. He quickly made his way to the bottom of an open wooden staircase in the middle of the room and lit a large oil lamp that was suspended from an oak beam across the ceiling. They found themselves in what appeared to them to be an Aladdin's cave. There was a

numerous variety of boxes and crates, all shapes and sizes, stacked along the walls; barrels and casks one on top of the other, bearing strange markings, and bundles of skins and furs lying in haphazard piles everywhere. They had never before seen such an array of merchandise, and there was a strange aroma pervading the atmosphere, unknown to them, but not entirely unpleasant. “Come this way, will you?” said Mr Forbes, leading them into the centre of the storehouse. He ascended the stairs and they followed him to the upper level. The girls gasped with delight as they saw what was soon to be their new home. There was one large room, with two smaller rooms leading from it; these were directly above the storage area, and had several windows overlooking the front and rear of the building. It was far superior to the poor one-roomed mud and wattle cottage that had been their home in Ireland. “Well, what do you think?” asked Mr Forbes.

“Oh, I think, ’tis grand... just grand. Sure I can’t believe it at all, at all,” replied Michael O’Malley. “What of you Mary... Seeley? What would you say to living here then?”

“Oh yes... ’tis lovely Da,” whispered Celia shyly. Ian Forbes noticed that she very rarely spoke, and he found her shyness most appealing.

“Yes, we could fix it up in no time at all,” said Mary, turning around and taking it all in, her eyes wide in admiration. “It’ll be just fine. Thank you... thank you Mr Forbes.”

“Right then, that’s settled. Now I should imagine that you are all ready for something to eat. You must be starving, after the way you were deprived of food on the ship. I’ll

show you where you can get a good meal at very little cost, so just follow me.”

Michael O'Malley immediately began to rummage around in the inside pocket of his jacket. “I have a gold coin here Mr Forbes. I'm not without money to start us off.”

Ian Forbes laid a hand on the older man's arm and said kindly, “You keep that safely hidden Mr O'Malley. There may come a time when you'll be needing it far more than you do now. I'll give you some coinage to buy the things that you'll be needing, and you can pay me back gradually from your wages. That's fair enough, isn't it? Mind you, not many coins change hands here. The usual way to trade is by barter, but you'll soon become familiar with all that.”

Michael O'Malley grasped the hand of this benevolent young man between his own and pumped it up and down. “Oh, thank you, sir, thank you... that's more than fair, sure it is. God bless you, sir.”

The daylight was fast fading as they stepped out into the street again, but the glow from the lighted windows that they passed, threw welcoming beams to guide their feet between the shadowy buildings. “The place is just here along the street. You'll be able to get a good meal.” Ian Forbes escorted them a short way, pointing out the establishment in question. “Don't worry about your baggage, the driver can take it into the store for you. Just go and get something to eat now.” He turned to walk away. “Oh, I almost forgot... here, you'd better take this key, so that you may let yourselves into the place, when you go back. I'll call to see you in the morning and we can discuss everything then... and until you're able to get some furniture, you can make use of anything you might find among the stock. The skins and furs will make

warm beds to lie on, until you find something better. I'll wish you good-bye now, and I hope that you have a comfortable night." He raised his hat and walked away.

"Good night to you, sir... and may the good Lord shower you with his blessings," said Michael O'Malley. Then, jingling his newly acquired coins lightly in his hand, he proudly escorted his daughters into the delightful establishment that stood beckoning them with its warm welcoming atmosphere, and there they sat, each one of them savouring the luxury of the first wholesome, nutritious meal they had eaten for what seemed to be an eternity.