

WOMAN

JANUARY 2006

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ADOPTION EXCLUSIVE

SAVING THE CHILDREN OF SIERRA LEONE
A father's moving story

YOU'RE IN LOVE SO WHY ARE YOU CHECKING HIM OUT THEN?

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JENNIFER LOPEZ
'My diva days are over'

GLOBAL REPORT

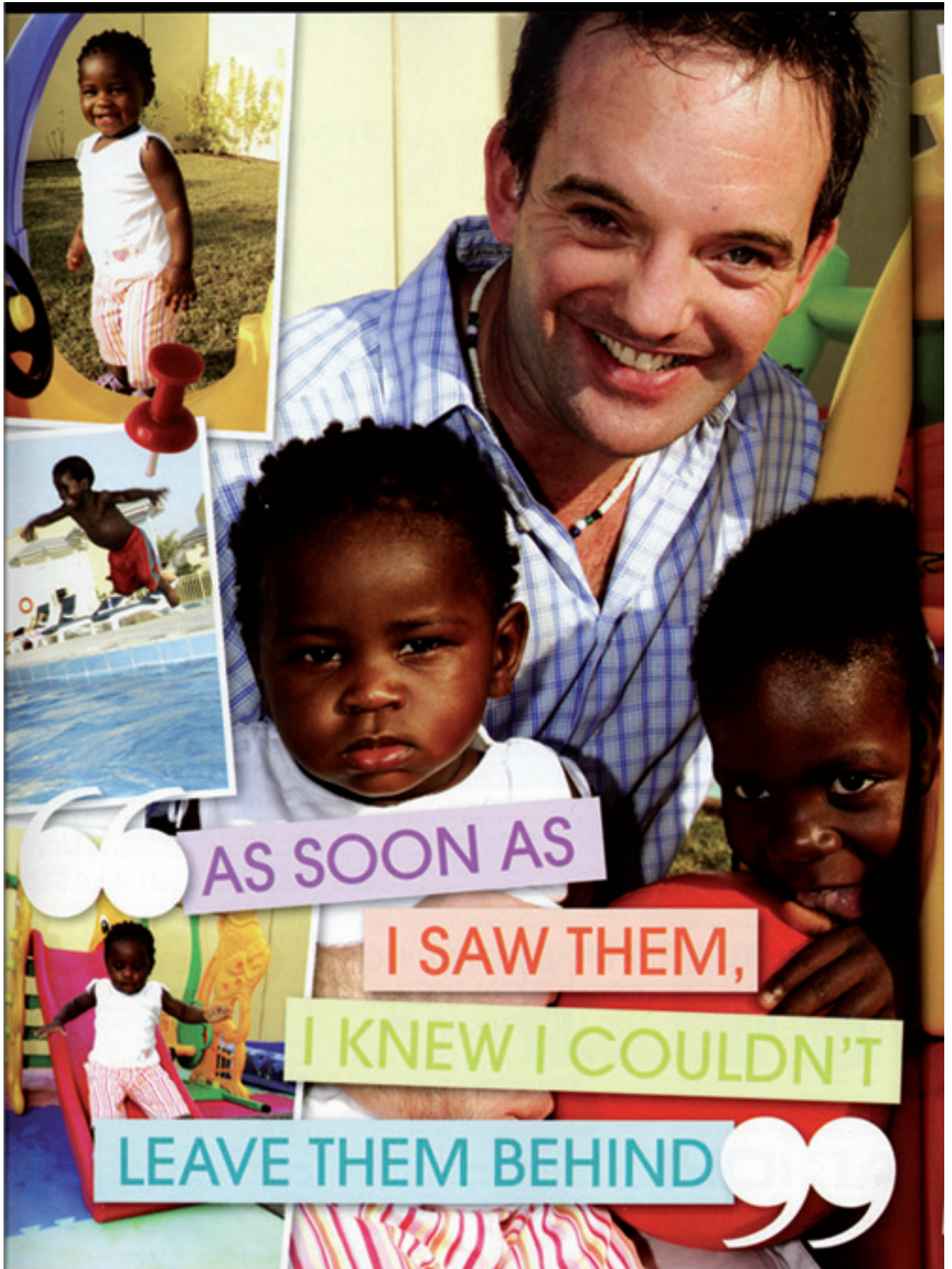
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AS SOON AS

I SAW THEM,

I KNEW I COULDN'T

LEAVE THEM BEHIND



This time last year, Matthew Morgan-Jones was free, single, and enjoying the high life in Dubai. And his two adopted children, Dauda, three, and Magda, 20 months, were still living in desperate conditions in an African orphanage. He told **Anna Wright** about the incredible journey they have all made



Every time I hear my daughter Magda say "papa", my heart melts. Part of it is the usual paternal pride, but mostly it is the incredible realisation that I am now actually a father. I went on such a rollercoaster and there were so many low times that I think I'm still a little shell-shocked that we're all here.

I knew in my twenties that I wanted to be a father. I had these really strong paternal feelings but, like most people, I thought I'd wait until I was in a long-term committed relationship. It got to a point, though, where I realised I didn't know if that was ever going to happen, and when I looked at friends in their forties who had waited and were having to accept they'd left it too late, I knew if that were me that would be something I would really, really regret. So I started thinking seriously about adoption.

When I did a search on the internet I stumbled across details of an orphanage in Sierra Leone. I'd spent time in South Africa so I knew a bit about the scale of the problems in Africa - there are more than 12 million AIDS orphans alone - and also that it is one of the last places people look for international adoptions. The statistics were heartbreaking. This was a place that in 2004 the UN ranked absolutely bottom of every country in the world for the standards of living, life expectancy is 34, which is my age now - I find that absolutely staggering - and three out of five children born do not survive past five. The relatively few people who find employment earn an average of US\$1 (Dhs3.7) a day. Even for a child with a family and an education, there is no future and, largely because of the devastation of years of civil war, many have neither. The more I read the more I wanted to help. So I took the plunge and started the adoption process...

DECEMBER '03: WAITING FOR THE CALL

I was a bit of a swot through the home studies. A social worker has to assess your suitability to be a parent and talk you through all the issues and questions you might encounter as a non-biological family, as ➔





an inter-racial family - I turned up to every meeting with all my notes and lists of queries! It took five months to get everything approved and stamped by the British Embassy, and then I could send the paperwork to Sierra Leone and sit by my inbox, waiting.

It was May when I saw pictures for the first time and the children went straight into my heart.

You are sent details of the children for you, based on the ages and age gap you'd like, whether you're prepared to take on children with known problems - which I wasn't because I really didn't think I'd be able to cope - and other criteria. They tell you their history, or what they know of it, a bit about their personality, how they're interacting with the others, their size and weight, and that's it. A lot of people ask me how you can form such an attachment to a child you've never met, but you do. I remember getting the second set of photos of Dauda, where you could see that he had a cold, and I just had this unbelievable yearning to be there. There's this fiercely protective feeling - who's looking after my baby, who's wiping his nose and cheering him up if he's down?

They can't celebrate birthdays in the orphanage because they have no funds for extras and they don't even know when some of the children were born. I thought I'd have Dauda home for his second birthday but in June 2004 I got the horrible news that Sierra Leone had called a halt to international adoptions. There was no explanation and nothing I could do.

The courts didn't even start considering applications again until January 2005, so all that time I was in Dubai and my children were in a place I'd only seen pictures of, where the conditions were at times desperate. And I had no way of knowing if I would ever be able to get them out. That was a really difficult period. I couldn't give up. I promised myself

that I would stick by Dauda and Magda until I had my time in court, but I knew if the judge said no, there'd be nothing left I could do.

At the same time, I was thinking about the future. It was dreadful. I was already walking past kids' clothing stores and buying things.

And I'd have these lovely moments when it would suddenly dawn on me that, wow, I'm going to be a father, I might have grandchildren one day, perhaps I'll get to walk Magda down the aisle. And all the while, they were growing up. Dauda was just walking when he arrived at the orphanage but I knew he'd started talking and I was constantly wondering what he was saying, what he sounded like.

When the call finally came in May 2005, and my mother and I got on the first plane we could to Freetown, it almost caught me unprepared.

MAY '05: MEETING MY CHILDREN

I knew what to expect but the orphanage was still a shock. Everyone there is doing an amazing job, but daily life is just such a struggle. The running water only comes on for an hour or two a day and often not at all. With 70 kids, you can imagine what the place smells like when toilets can't be flushed and there's not enough water to wash properly.

The toddlers have two linked rooms - one for sleeping and one for playing - and that's it. There are a few toys but they all spend a lot of time sleeping. It's like with no stimulation they shut off a bit. On the first evening when Dauda was dressed up in his best clothes and brought up to the parlour to meet us, he just howled. He'd been taken away from his friends, into a room he didn't know, with two white strangers and he spent the first few occasions clawing at the door to get out and screaming. It was awful. I was asking myself what on earth I'd done, but all the 'aunties' who work at All As One were saying it was normal.

Magda was completely different. She was still in the baby room, which is lined with cots with a mat in the middle where they play. From the moment we walked in, she would just sit with her arms in the air, waiting to be picked up.

TALKING ADOPTION WITH ANGELINA

One day right at the start of my time in Freetown, when I was still so high and excited just to be there, I came down for breakfast in my hotel and saw Angelina Jolie. Even dressed down, the woman is stunning! I would never normally approach a celebrity, but it seemed like fate - she's probably the most famous adoptive mum in the world. She was there as part of a UN conference and when I walked up to her, you could see her thinking, "Oh here we go again" but the minute I told her I was there in the process of adopting my two children, she lit up.



She told me to sit down and tell her my story, we talked about Maddox - her son from Cambodia - and about single parenthood, juggling work and feeling guilty. And then she explained that she'd come from Ethiopia, where she'd just seen her daughter for the first time, and we talked about how hard it is to adopt from Africa. I couldn't resist asking for a photo - no one was ever going to believe me otherwise! - and introducing her to my mum. And that's when she used the line that I think I'll be repeating for the rest of my life: "Oh, call me Angie!"

JUNE '05: RATS AND RED TAPE

I didn't realise it then, but that turned out to be the only positive sign in an increasingly difficult time. Obviously I was getting to know Dauda and Magda better, and there were some wonderful moments - the first time Dauda stopped being so rigid and unhappy in my arms and really melted into me, my heart stopped. And I got into lots of trouble for letting him and his best friend David play in the water butt - there's always a shortage, the aunts have to collect rainwater and fill every available bowl or bucket, but they had so much fun!

In the meantime, though, the adoption process was stalling. The courts were clamping down again. The lawyer refused to go through with my case because he didn't think I stood a chance as a single dad, so I spent a depressing week going from one legal office to another, selling myself. And as the weeks turned into a couple of months, I was running out of money. The prices for everything that the richer non-locals might want are pushed artificially high. At one point, I actually moved into a room at the bottom of the orphanage because I could no longer afford the hotel, but I managed to borrow some cash to get out again after I walked straight into a giant furry monster of a rat in the dark one night, I've never run so fast!

THE POOREST COUNTRY ON EARTH

When you're being beaten up emotionally, Sierra Leone is an almost impossible place to be. Everyone has been through so much that I got to the stage quite quickly where I didn't want to hear anyone else's story. It was just too much to deal with when I was already going through constant highs and lows.

Everyone appreciated what I was doing there and several people asked me to take their children, to give them a chance, which was heartbreaking. One of the women working in the hotel was a mother of three, whose two youngest had come down with the same illness. She could only scrape together the money for one lot of medicine so she chose to give it to the younger child, thinking the elder would be stronger and more likely to fight it off. He died.

I heard about a man whose wife had died after giving birth to twins because she retained the placenta - something that would be sorted out instantly in a hospital. He walked for days with his tiny daughters, trying to find someone to help, but they needed milk and became so dehydrated that their heads cracked open. When he arrived at All As One, one of the babies was dead in his arms, and the other had a split head that had been packed with mud because it was all her father could think of to do. Amazingly, she is now doing really well.

One of the hardest things was realising that, difficult though the conditions in the orphanage are, it's often worse outside. Out on the streets of Freetown, I saw a little boy of about eight who was carrying a big pan of human excrement on his head, slopping over the sides onto his clothes. He wasn't even being paid - I was told that he was probably doing it every day in return for a few pieces of bread.

JULY '05: HOME AT LAST

I can't describe my feelings when the paperwork was finally stamped and the children were mine. I'd been so caught up in just getting them, and getting them out of Sierra Leone, that I'd lost sight of the everyday reality of fatherhood. It came back with a vengeance on an endless flight with

Right: Dauda with his toddler room posse of All As One. Many of the children are still at the orphanage.
Below: Dauda and best friend David enjoying the water games that got Matthew into trouble!



Above: The soon-to-be dad talks parenting with the world's most famous adoptive mum.
Left: Challenging kitchen facilities at All As One. Through necessity, most of the meals are bread or rice-based.



one child screaming and the other wetting the seats because his dad hadn't yet learnt how to put a nappy on properly!

My children have adapted unbelievably well. Magda is too young to ever remember a life without me, but it has been harder for Dauda. Sometimes when he is particularly silent or playing up, I'll ask him and he will say that he is missing David or Davina, his partners in crime from the toddler room. We talk all the time about Sierra Leone and the children's home - I don't want him to forget. Obviously there is a legacy. All Dauda's meals there were rice-based because it was cheap, and he is very fussy about trying anything else now. And he's doing well at nursery, but he was about a year behind for his age when he started. But the aunts always said what a serious child he was, and what's really come out here is his incredible sense of mischief and fun. He's just waiting for my back to be turned!

Both my children love water. Bathtime at the orphanage was not a pleasant experience - there was such a shortage that they squooped up, were scrubbed down with a thing like a loofah and then washed off with just a splash of cold water. Now they'll spend hours in the →

bath and the pool, and Dauda dives and swims underwater. It's amazing to watch them, and I harbour this secret desire that they'll one day be entering the Olympics for Sierra Leone as swimmers!

JANUARY '06: NO MORE LATTES!

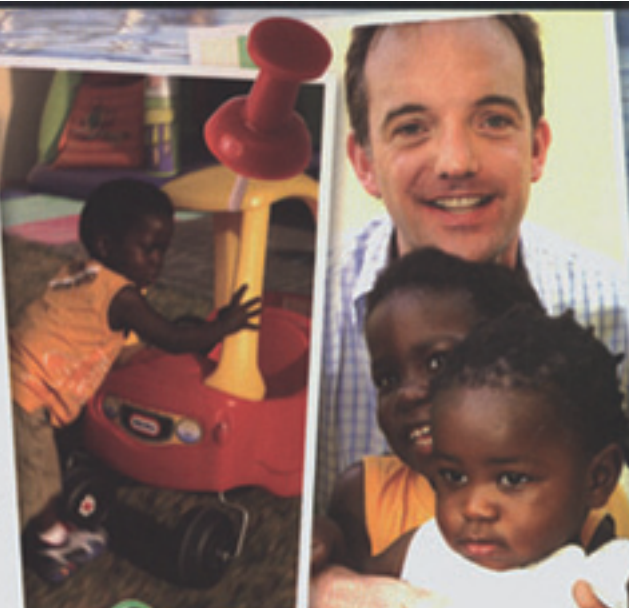
My life has changed beyond recognition. You think you're one of these people who will still go to all the same haunts and be sociable, but just take your children with you. Then you try it once and your three-year-old climbs on everything and you end up in the plastic seats beside the creche like everyone else! But I cannot imagine my life without them.

I've been so lucky both with my nanny and her husband, who are here six days a week and make my life possible, and with my job. I work in training and brand development for Home Centre and when I was stuck in Sierra Leone, refusing to leave until I'd had my day in court, I kept having to call and say, "Sorry, I won't be back this week". My boss was fantastic. He said, "I thought about what I'd do for my children, and I wouldn't expect anything else of you", which was a phenomenal boost at a very low time.

Not everyone is so understanding. I've got used to people saying things just because it's an unusual situation that they wouldn't say to anyone else. I get "Are they yours?" and "Where's their mother?" quite a lot, to which I reply "I'm their mother and father!"

I'm very conscious, too, of making sure Dauda and Magda grow up around other children of all nationalities. We already chat about how they have lovely black skin and I have lovely white skin, but I'd love them to have other African children to play with. I've already decided that at some point we'll spend a couple of years living over there - which is probably something I'm looking forward to more than they will!

I do think about the situation in Sierra Leone all the time, and I've had a few emotional moments wishing that I'd tried to adopt David too. He's still at the orphanage, and the government has banned international adoptions again for the time being, but it is certainly something I'm thinking about. Our family may still grow yet. ●



AN URGENT NEED

The All As One Children's Center in Freetown currently has around 70 children in its care, and employs 50 Sierra Leonean nationals, allowing them to support their families too. Their monthly bill comes to US\$12,000, covering wages, rent, food, clothing, and the costs of the classroom and vital medical clinic. However, they are currently so desperate for funds that they are struggling even to pay their staff.

Executive director Deanna Wallace, who set up All As One in Sierra Leone in 2000 and has nine adopted children of her own, says, "There are no government-funded social welfare programmes for children and if our orphanage closes, they will be turned out onto the street. There is nowhere else for the children to go."

You can help by sponsoring a child for US\$40 a month, or by donating clothes, old mobile phones, other goods or money. See www.allasone.org for more details.



ADOPTION IN THE UAE: THE FACTS

There is no word for adoption in Arabic - the concept is not traditionally part of the culture - but "permanent fostering" of children born in the UAE has just been legalised. The first couples have had their paperwork finalised in the past few months, but it is strictly an option for Muslims only.

Non-Muslim expats living here and wishing to adopt from abroad have to be approved by their own embassy or consulate. All parental studies - required before you'll be given the go-ahead - are carried out through the Comprehensive Medical Centre (call 04 331 4777 for more information).

Vietnam and Cambodia have been the most popular places to adopt from, but the legal situation in many countries changes all the time. For the most up-to-date facts and advice, contact the Adoption Support Group in Dubai. The next meeting is on 1 February; email pwholmes@emirates.net.ae

