

'I rediscovered myself in the world's DANGER ZONES'

When her marriage came to an end after three decades, Alison Criado-Perez was crushed. But she found new happiness saving lives in some of the world's most dangerous places

I've only ever written one letter to my children to be opened in the event of my death. I was working as a nurse on the border between Tunisia and Libya in 2011, when the city of Misrata came under siege and 14,000 people had to be evacuated. I was one of the team sent in by ship to help get the most severely wounded out of the heavily shelled city.

As I prepared to leave my camp, I wrote to Sebastian, now 39, Nicholas, 37, and Caroline, 35, telling them not to be angry with me, asking them to understand why I was doing this and that, if they were reading it, I had died doing something I loved. I felt I was putting myself in more danger than I ever had before – and I needed them to know that it was my choice to do so. Fortunately, they never had to read it.

I see my adult life almost in two halves. In my early 20s, after enjoying my single years travelling and then working as a nurse, I met my husband, Carlos. His job with a Dutch retailer took us all over the world; we enjoyed a privileged life and moved home at least every three years. It sounds idyllic but, while I was devoted to my husband and children, I struggled more and more with not being able to carve out a meaningful career for myself.

After we moved back to the UK in the 1990s, I renewed my nursing qualifications and began working in a busy A&E

department. It was exhausting and exhilarating. I was approaching my 50s and, for the first time in a long while, I was a person in my own right, rather than simply a wife or mother.

I felt like I was really finding my feet when Carlos dropped the bombshell that he wanted to end our marriage to start a new relationship. Our youngest, Caroline, was 15. It came completely out of the blue for me, and I was utterly shocked and devastated, a shell of myself. The next few years were very dark. With my children leaving home, I felt like I had nothing and was no one. Having spent two decades following someone else around the world, I had no idea who I was, or how I'd cope, on my own.

FACING NEW CHALLENGES

A chance meeting with a director of the non-governmental organisation Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), or Doctors Without Borders, rekindled a dream to use my nursing skills in humanitarian aid work. I never thought I'd have the guts to go through with it, but in 2007, having taken

a diploma in tropical nursing, I found myself agreeing to work with MSF in the Central African Republic, right in the middle of a war zone.

I was terrified, with warnings about being held up by militia with AK-47s ringing in my ears. But once I'd negotiated the eight-hour journey through countless armed roadblocks to get to where I was working, I felt like this was something I should have been doing my whole life. I loved being able to help others, working with people who had the same outlook, and experiencing life in one of the most remote places on earth.

Over the 18 missions I have now completed for MSF, my life has changed wholly. I try not to dwell on the horrors

I have seen but, sometimes, when I'm pottering around my garden or drinking a cup of coffee at home in Rutland, I let my defences down and memories of the incredible people I've met over the past 13 years flood my mind. One of the most painful to remember is the Ebola outbreak of 2014, when I volunteered to set up a clinic in Sierra Leone. Because there is



Alison administers a blood transfusion on the evacuation boat from Misrata



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Personal journey

no cure for the disease and we were only able to do 45-minute shifts in the stiflingly hot protective suits we had to wear, I was unable to always be with people when they were dying. I still feel guilty and find it very painful to let those memories in.

I hadn't been allowed to touch or be touched by anyone for two months in Sierra Leone and, once back in the UK, I pretty much had to stay at home for a month, avoiding public transport or crowded places in case I had picked up the disease and might spread it to others. Whenever I return, I find it hard to adjust to the comparative riches of our UK lives and need time alone to process what I have witnessed.

I usually refuse invitations for a few weeks and often go to the coast; watching the waves soothes my mind, allowing me to pick up the threads of my life again.

LIFE IN CONFLICT

On missions ranging in length from two to nine months, I have worked in refugee camps on the Syrian border and in South Sudan, run measles-vaccination programmes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and been part of search-and-rescue missions helping those fleeing across the Mediterranean Sea. I've seen young girls arrive with terrible wounds from their traumatic treatment at the hands of people smugglers.

We always work alongside local medics, and I remember one Syrian nurse I worked with in a refugee camp on the Turkish border who had escaped with her children, a phone hidden in her son's nappy and nothing else. She lived in the camp and arrived for work looking immaculate each day, but what was her future and where is she now? Questions like that haunt me. Yet for all the horror I have seen, people's resilience continues to amaze me. I remember refugees in Uganda who had been living in very basic camps for years; they would get up and dance whenever there was music. I have also seen the best of human kindness in my MSF colleagues. Although most are the same age as my children, we have fun together, watching a film or sharing a beer. When you're hoping you don't meet a snake on your



Above: With a nine-month-old Eritrean boy rescued from the Mediterranean. Right: Treating patients in a refugee camp in South Sudan



way to the loo in the middle of the night, you need people you can laugh with.

People assume that I must find the living conditions hard. Sleeping in the rat-infested hut I encountered on my second mission, in Uganda, is not something I'd like to repeat, but neither do I balk when I see my home for the next few months, which is often little more than a mattress on the floor and a bucket shower. I pack very lightly, but always take a small down pillow

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as a little comfort. Alongside cargo trousers and T-shirts, there's usually a little chocolate and a small bottle of gin, which is sipped and savoured on the rare occasions that I can actually get hold of any tonic to go with it!

Many of the missions I have been on have been very dangerous, but we're well trained and, once I arrive and I'm rushed off my feet, the adrenaline kicks in and the risks get pushed to the back of my mind. However, I know it's not easy on my children. I try to email or Skype them often, to keep in touch

and reassure them that I am fine. I was at home to celebrate Caroline's own victory of getting the image of Jane Austen on British bank notes and I was around when her first book, *Do It Like A Woman*, was published. Sadly, though, I missed the unveiling of the statue of suffragist Millicent Fawcett in Parliament Square, which she'd campaigned for, and instead watched it on YouTube from Nigeria, where I was supervising a clinic for people who had suffered lead poisoning while mining for gold.

I hope, though, that my work has had a positive influence on my children's lives. Caroline dedicated *Do It Like A Woman* to me, acknowledging on the first

page of the book how proud she is of me for taking the opportunities I have had in the second half of my life, after the devastation of my divorce.

TIME TO REFLECT

I've started to slow down a little now, only taking on missions that last less than three months, partly because of my two wonderful grandchildren, aged three and one, and also because, now I am approaching 70, my body can't bounce back as perhaps it once did.

Each trip leaves an indelible emotional mark. I feel guilty about all we have in the UK when the people I come across have so very little. I keep thinking it may be time to stop and saying that each mission is the last one I will do, but my need to address that unfairness keeps me going back for more. I can't really say when I will finally give it all up. Instead of travelling so much, I hope I can continue the work here in the UK, giving talks about the work of MSF and lobbying political parties about the plight of refugees.

In some ways, my work with MSF has made me an outsider, sceptical about a lifestyle that I once barely questioned. But it would be wrong to slot back into life here as if nothing has happened, and I welcome that change and the more confident and caring person I have become.

• *Médecins Sans Frontières relies on charitable donations. Find out more at msf.org.uk* □