

# The Day Mum Vanished

It was five long years before a random newspaper article led Annie Bull to discover the truth about her mother's sudden disappearance

**A**nnie Bull's mother disappeared on October 22, 1958. Annie was 17, her brother 15. Five years on a journalist uncovered the surprising truth about her mother's whereabouts but nearly 20 years passed before Annie and her mother, Joan Clent, were reunited.

"My brother, Andrew, and I grew up in Weymouth. Mum was un: she would do silly things like jump over all the dustbins at the end of our road. We were about to move abroad when I was 16, but then Mum discovered that Dad was having an affair.

"Our lives changed suddenly. We left the family home with Mum, who took jobs in various shops. The biggest change was Mum herself. She wore drab colours, gave away her bright



Closure at last for Annie

clothes and began to entertain religious people at home. Mum remarried after her divorce in 1948, but two years into that marriage, she just disappeared.

"I woke that fateful October morning to find the house deserted. I discovered Mum had bought a one-way ticket for the early morning train to London.

which in the 50s was like visiting Australia. There was little we could do to find her. Suddenly I had to learn to cook, clean and care for my brother and devastated stepfather.

"Everyone was supportive. My maternal grandmother became my rock, but she died, broken-hearted, a year after Mum left.

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"Five years after Mum's disappearance I was skimming through the *Sunday Pictorial* when I read an article about 'an amazing woman, Madame Joan', who had cycled, alone, across many African countries to reach Dr Albert Schweitzer at his Lambaréne hospital in Gabon.

She claimed her family had been happy to let her go. I suddenly realised I was reading my own mother's story! First shock, then anger overwhelmed me.

"Shortly after, I wrote to her, having been given her address by the author of a book about Dr Schweitzer and Lambaréne. However there was no reply to

any of my letters.

"Then, in 1976, completely out of the blue, Mum rang. She wanted to see me. At the railway station she didn't even recognise me. All she could tell me was that she'd 'had a calling, a metaphysical experience that you won't understand'.

"After that first reconciliation, I saw Mum only a handful of times. I learned she had told everyone she was a childless spinster; she'd been terrified the truth would come out.

"When Mum returned to this country my brother and I visited her Ilford flat. A young man, her protégé, answered the door and wanted to know who we were.

"'Her son and daughter' we replied in unison.

"Off he went but was quickly back. 'Miss Clent doesn't have a son or daughter,' he replied, but my brother insisted the man let us in. The door opened to reveal Mum sitting in a beautifully arranged room with a small yellow teapot beside her, surrounded by pictures of her 'adopted' gorilla and African children – no evidence anywhere of us.

"On another occasion I went to her sheltered housing flat in Wanstead. Mum wasn't there. Again I was told 'Miss Clent does not have a daughter. She's a spinster.'

"Eventually I discovered Mum was in hospital. As I approached her bed she looked horrified, fearful that I would give the game away. I'd brought her two nightdresses but she didn't want me there.

"Despite all this I was

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proud of her work. In 1986 she was awarded an MBE for services to humanity. She also became a Franciscan nun.

"I hoped that one day somebody would let me know when she died so I could have closure. Eventually a lady rang to say Mum was very ill. This



## Dr Schweitzer's True Calling

Dr Albert Schweitzer was born near Alsace, Germany in 1875 and grew up in a family devoted to the study of music, religion and education.

Schweitzer studied theology initially, gaining a doctorate in philosophy and became a renowned theological scholar, as well as developing a distinguished musical career and attaining international cognition as a concert organist.

However he felt his true calling was to Africa as a medical missionary and he used funds from his professional musical engagements to pay for his medical studies. Having obtained his MD degree, Schweitzer and his wife founded a hospital (Lambaréne in French Equatorial Africa (now Gabon) in 1913.

Central to Schweitzer's outlook was his



"reverence for life" philosophy, whereby he believed that all life other than his own must be regarded with equal reverence and that man should be guided by a feeling of the highest responsibility towards other life.

He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952 and used the \$33,000 prize money

to start a leprosarium at Lambaréne, which Joan Clent helped to establish.

She was so determined to reach Lambaréne, Joan actually cycled the last 1000 miles from Senegal, through jungle and places where no white woman had ever been before.

care for others.

"One day I hope to visit Lambaréne. Today I have a happy marriage, my daughter and two lovely grandchildren. I do believe life has its compensations. Since Mum died I have felt a release – that, finally, we can both rest."