

Trailing Ghosts

The author tracks her mother's encounters with a Tamil town

Mary Bowers

“I never want to get married,” said 12-year-old Geetha, looking for shooting stars. We were on the roof in a meteor storm, staring, agape, at the sky. “I’m going to be a nurse, and look after people with no arms and no eyes.” It’s a specific vocation, even for a 12-year-old.

My mother would have approved. And were it not for her sudden death three years ago, she would still be principal at New Creation Bilingual School in Tamil Nadu.

I was on her trail.

It had been a surprise to me when my mother announced that, at the age of 61, she was going to India to become principal of a school in the obscure Tamil town of Kulapalayam. Anna Bowers was too old for a mid-life crisis, and too vital to be suffering from dementia. She was a London schoolteacher and a single mother. She certainly wasn’t a traveller and had hardly been abroad save for the odd hop across the English Channel to France.

Tall, wiry but elegant, she had a huge bonnet of curly brown hair which made her visible wherever she went. She wore huge silver rings on long elegant fingers and carried a waft of perfume wherever she went. Her eyes often flashed with wry humour but could as easily switch to stern, fear-inducing indignation in a classroom of rowdy, inner-city London children.

Three years after her death, an ennui-stricken, thumb-twiddling journalist in London, I opened my email inbox to find an advertisement

for a three-month job with *The Times of India*. I applied, and promptly forgot about it. Two weeks later, I was given a month to pack up my belongings – and my mother’s diary – and fly to New Delhi.

“God has sent a heavenly missile into my life and blown it all to bits,” my mother wrote. “There are many times in India when I will be on my own and feeling alone. I can deal with that.”

I wondered if I could. I was following her through the crater, and feeling just as solitary.

A series of coincidences had catapulted my mother into spending the last year of her life running New Creation School. My sister Laura, who had been working in slums in Gujarat, had gone travelling and stumbled across the small school near the village of Kulapalayam. She’d been in the local shop when she caught the overtones of a British couple’s conversation. The wife’s mother was ill, and they needed to return home. But there was no hope of finding a replacement. They needed someone with extensive head teaching experience and who was also willing to leave her life back home. Laura tapped them on the shoulder. “I’ll send you my mother,” she said, and hopped to the nearest Internet café in time to write an email home. “Go!” it said, “And remember who sent you.”

Now my mother had sent me, and I arrived in a taxi.

The school consisted of a scattering of small concrete classrooms. In three dimensions and five senses, the place still held the

strange mythology of objects only seen in photographs. The humidity here was my mother’s, the smell of recently cleared monsoon rain on grass, the enormous insects bumbling by. I suddenly felt enveloped in her, like the last hug I’d so longed for after her death. Here, she held me.

I remembered my own daily preparation for school. My mother packed me off with a lunchbox and chided me for breaking the backs of my shoes down when I wrenched them on to avoid tying the laces. She ignored my squeals as she tied ribbons around eye-poppingly tight french plaits in my hair.

Here in New Creation, those beribboned plaits were on the heads of hundreds of little girls, disappearing around the corners of classroom buildings, others buried in books written in Tamil and English, one younger child on each side as they read aloud to each other. They wore little purple and green checked uniforms, by far the smartest clothes they owned. The boys were perfectly attired in little shirts and trousers, the girls in summer dresses similar to the ones I wore with long white socks to my West London primary school, more than 5,000 miles away. I smiled to myself.

A peek inside classrooms showed multicoloured decorations lovingly coloured in and labelled: parts of the body. Wobbly hands drawn around and rendered with crayon, alphabets decorated with apples and books and cows and ducks. It was my mother’s classroom in London, relocated:



The handiwork of New Creation's students

there, the same brightly coloured labels in her round, bright primary school teacher's handwriting, drawn on red and green and blue sugar paper, and cut out in the shape of clouds. Poetry on the walls, which had not space to show bare plaster – perhaps the only poetry her London children had read, but words they absorbed with enthusiasm. Here in India, little work folders were labelled 'Priya', 'Tarundeep', 'Rakesh'; not 'Daniel', 'Eugene', 'Hannah'. The round English vowels were replaced with the curlicued letters of the Tamil language.

A 10-minute walk to Kulilalayam after the school day, and all of a sudden the children's other world loomed into view. A collection of ramshackle huts made up the little estates where the day students lived. Outside, a stick-thin mother raked the mud, a small baby tied to her back with a grubby rag, its head lolling behind her. She couldn't have been more than 25-years-old,

but her weary gait suggested otherwise. The huge green palms and lush cashew trees that grew around the village seemed to ignore these settlements. They came in textures of stick and slush, and various shades of brown. But from behind the huts hurtled little purple and green figures, having somehow spotted us earlier on arrival. They jumped up onto the walls, brandishing sticks they had been play-fighting with, demanding that I take their pictures. They jumped and shouted, full of energy. Looking behind at the tired, bony woman with the baby, I wondered if any of these children belonged to her.

Some of these children were only washed at school. Their parents were sometimes abusive. At best some children were neglected, and at worst they suffered physical harm.

Back at school, they were all given medical care, including Polio vaccinations. A brand new building, recently given as a one-off gift by a

Western donor, had been polished until it shone in the sunlight, making it slippery for the bare feet underneath. It was there that the children received their midday meal and their snacks, piles of rice soaked in yellow *daal*, scooped up eagerly by tiny sticky fingers. For some, it was the only food they would eat.

I was staying in what had been my mother's room. A mug of sweet coconut water was waiting inside. Outside, huge flying beetles buzzed outside the screen door, and inside, the dim hard beds were covered with vibrant, patterned sheets. I entered in the middle of a power cut and the ceiling fan was slowing gently to a halt as I felt around for candles and matches. The room was sparse, the shower cold. I thought back to our London house, crammed with cushions and gold and red furnishings. My mother's love of decoration was a long-running family joke. I thought back to her diary.

"Lights continually flicker or go out

due to faulty wiring, plugs, or the ever-present power-cuts," she wrote. "The few needles of water descending from the shower are lukewarm. But these are trifles. The things that bring real comfort are in the place."

I was disturbed by a call to dinner. The kitchen was a riot of activity as 12 children from the school, who lived in-house, banged on pots and queued up with big tin plates to receive Everest-mountains of rice. Gingerly, I picked a seat among them. They were gabbling in perfect English. An open workbook, discarded in the middle of homework, showed the evidence of their Tamil classes. Fourteen-year-old Dinegar decided to demonstrate the new sentences he'd learned in Spanish. The others pointed enthusiastically to a map of the world they were painting in primary colours on the facing wall. One boy, his arm in plaster, was being teased by the others for having 'believed he could fly.' When he was older, he wanted to be an astronaut.

The next day, I was shown around the classrooms, the new computer suite, the special needs department, the new kitchens, and the plot that had been set out for the new library. Everything had moved on.

When my mother died, I thought the world would stop; she was the essential component to making it turn. I had been shocked as the normalcy of life callously continued: the people on the bus who looked as if nothing had happened, doing their shopping, going to work, playing with their children in the park. I wanted to jump up and down and scream and stop them. Did they not know that she was gone?

Today, the new principal, Shankar, showed me to the woodwork department where two boys were finishing some wooden toys. Children at New Creation who do not show a natural academic aptitude are taught practical skills: cookery, carpentry and masonry. Shankar explained that their skills would then be highly in demand in nearby Auroville and Pondicherry.

He called for one of the boys in

Tamil. Obediently, he put down his file and appeared.

"Who do you think this is?" Shankar asked him, pointing at me. The boy cocked his head and looked quizzically in my direction. "She looks like Anna," he replied, a smile of recognition lighting his face.

I thought back to my mother's diary. "In raising children on my own, God taught me a great deal about what it means to be a mother," she wrote. "It



Students in uniform

may be what He has made me 'good at', even over and above teaching."

I knew from that moment in the workshop what had brought my mother to India. When she couldn't be mother to me, or my sisters, any longer, she had come to be a mother to a school of children. And I also knew that the world had to go on without her. Without the world moving on – without them ceasing to need you – children would never grow up.

India, I realised, prepared my mother to leave the world. "There is a grasp on reality here," she wrote. "An acceptance of the fragility of the one life, and the certainty of death, some unspoken understanding that there is more beyond our need for high

achievement, that there is a past and a future as important as the moment, and that we are not to take ourselves so very seriously."

The following morning, I was up early to catch a taxi into Pondicherry. But already a hundred or so small children were gathered in the dining area, legs crossed, backs straight as they sat to attention in little lines. I crept past the assembly, but Shankar soon caught me, and I was called to the front. I remembered watching my mother's assemblies from the back of the gym: a Bible story, a hymn with actions for the little ones, and always a tale that left the older ones collapsed in laughter and rowdy for their first lesson. Today, 200 eyes peered at me curiously.

"Does anyone know who this is?" asked Shankar in Tamil, courteously turning behind to translate for their monolingual visitor. The boarders' hands punched the air eagerly; the others looked confused. I wasn't surprised. But then a small hand shot up. "She looks like Anna," came a voice, and suddenly the silence and composure was broken as the older ones flapped their arms and turned to each other in amazement. I was taking in what she had not lived to see: these children, a couple of feet taller, many words more knowledgeable, many experiences older, but still remembering the mother we shared.

Geetha had decided exactly how her plans were going to come to fruition. She was going to grow wings, she said, and fly to London where she would be a successful (and presumably single) woman. She's going to have a big house and own lots of books. Apart from the wing-growth, and maybe the singledom too, it all seemed totally plausible for her: the little girl wearing a jingling anklets and a *bindi*, who was born under a thatched roof in a Tamil village. Suddenly she saw a shooting star, shrieked, and collapsed in giggles. Perhaps she was her mother's daughter, too. □