MONKERY BOTTOM

…when I say a house, I mean it was just a decaying old bus, but it was a house to us…

In the fall of 1950, we moved to Monkery Bottom. This was where Tony, the tallyman from the hop fields, had directed my mother to go to see a friend of his by the name of Jake Fuller. He might have a caravan for us to rent.

Leaving the hop picking fields of Cobtree with an old suitcase filled with all our earthly belongings, we caught a bus to Canterbury. There we transferred to the Ashford bus. My mother enquired of the bus conductor if he could point out where the Faversham and the Canterbury roads crossed so that we might be able to find our way to Monkery Bottom. He told her that the stop she needed was at the top of Charing Hill. He would let her know when it was time for us to get off. As we approached our destination, the bus pulled to the curb and the conductor directed my mother to the other side of the road.

"It's about a mile down that road, luv, just past the Plough Pub." My mother thanked him, and we were on our way. It was a warm fall afternoon as we leisurely strolled down this country lane for about a mile, arriving at a small dirt lay-by which was occupied by a couple of gypsy families. With campfires burning, the gypsy's horses grazing the edge rows, and the sun glinting off their brightly painted wagons made for a romantic picture. Looking around my mother saw nothing that resembled what she was looking for, just an old dilapidated looking bus parked in one corner. Questioned by one of the gypoes as to her business there, my mother told him she was there to meet a Jake Fuller to see about renting a caravan.

"No caravan here for rent, luv, just that old bus and I don't think you want to be a-renting that. It's had a few old tramps spend the night in it, and I wouldn't be livin'it rent free!"

Thinking she might have the wrong place, she questioned whether this was Monkery Bottom.

"Yeh, this be it, spend most our winters here every year, but that old bus ain't bin lived in for the last two winters, full of mice and crap, yeh. Care for a cup o' tea whiles ya waitin', Miss?"

He introduced himself as Steve and his wife, Jill. He threw a handful of tea leaves into a large black pot by the fire, and invited us to sit down. My mother introduced herself as Tillie and my sister and me as Karen and John.

"Are nice ta meet ya."

As we sat drinking tea into the late afternoon, the fall air began to chill us and with no sign of Mr. Fuller, my mother started to become quite anxious as to what she should do. She told Steve if that bus was the rental, she wasn't interested. If we left right away, we still had time to make it into Ashford and check in with the Salvation Army. At that point, a car pulled into the lay-by and a rather large, rough looking middle-aged fellow emerged.

"Tillie?" he asked. "I'm Jake, Tony's friend." Making his way toward the fire, he commented, "I'm here to rent the bus to you."

"You must be jokin' !" exclaimed Steve. Jake, shaking his finger in Steve's face, said, "You stay out of this or I'll have the lot of you out of here in no time flat!"

"How much ya gonna rush her for that shit hole?" Ignoring the comment, Jake took us over to the bus. As we approached, it was obvious that this ancient means of transport had been sitting here for some time. The wheels were missing, half the windows cracked or broken and a young chestnut tree was growing out of the engine compartment. By the door, was a large metal drum with a makeshift gutter for catching rain water and set back in the trees was an old wooden shed, which was the outhouse. There was more rust on that corpse of a bus than paint. The over-powering stench of mildew and mice droppings could be smelled even from the outside of the bus. Kicking the weeds from the front entrance and giving the corroded door a good boot, he went inside.

"Come on in, Tillie," he said beckoning to my mother. Inside the smell was almost over-whelming. Soot from the old wood stove covered the sparse furnishings, and mice droppings

littered the floor. Broken windows patched with cardboard had blown in and left the curtains hanging in tatters and covered in rust stains.

"A little spit and polish, it'll look like new. Five bob a week. What ya say, Tillie?"

With not a lot of options left and trying to look on the bright side of things, my mother took it. She must have seen some potential in the place. So opening her purse, she handed him the five shillings. He told her he would be by each Saturday morning for the rent, and if she could be there at that time it would be appreciated. With a tip of his hat, he bid her a good night.

After he left, I remember my mother sinking into the old wooden chair and weeping until there was a knock at the door. Looking through the smoke stained glass door of the bus, my mother could see that it was Jill standing there. Pulling herself together, she opened the door.

"What's the matter, luv? We can hear you howling all the way out here. Why don't you come have another cup o' tea and a fag. Tell us all about it, hon."

This was to be the beginning of a friendship that would last throughout the winter. After tea and a good chat and few more tears, my mother set about cleaning house. Her first order of business was to throw out the old rotting mattress. Next she gave the kitchen area a good clean, removing all the old curtains and replacing as much of the cardboard as possible to keep out the cold. Jim, an old woodcutter from down the road, had heard of my mother's plight from Steve. He brought us a load of firewood and offered to get a fire going. It wasn't long before things warmed up. The kettle began to whistle and tea was on. Jill brought over bread and jam. Soon doorstopper-sized sandwiches were on the table ready to fill the hole in our bellies. After tea, mum went to work on the backend of the bus. Buckets of hot, soapy water and couple of hours of hard labour, she finally stopped. Feeling the place was clean enough, she called it a night.

Laying an old blanket out on a bare bedstead, curtsey of Jill, and coats over us to keep warm, my mother blew out the candle and Karen and I slept the first night in our old bus. This was the place we would call home for the next six months. During the night, unbeknownst to my sister and me, my mother had spent most of the time swatting mice as they ran over our bed.

In the morning, the bus was a cold and damp place to be. When my mother got out of bed that first morning and went to put on her shoes, she found a mouse in the toe of one of them. This set her off with a few choice words as she tried in vain to clobber it with her shoe. While my sister and I lay in bed still, quite amused by the episode, she got the fire going, made a hot pot of tea and more bread and strawberry jam sandwiches.

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Excerpt from *Journey to Terrace*

Written by John Roders