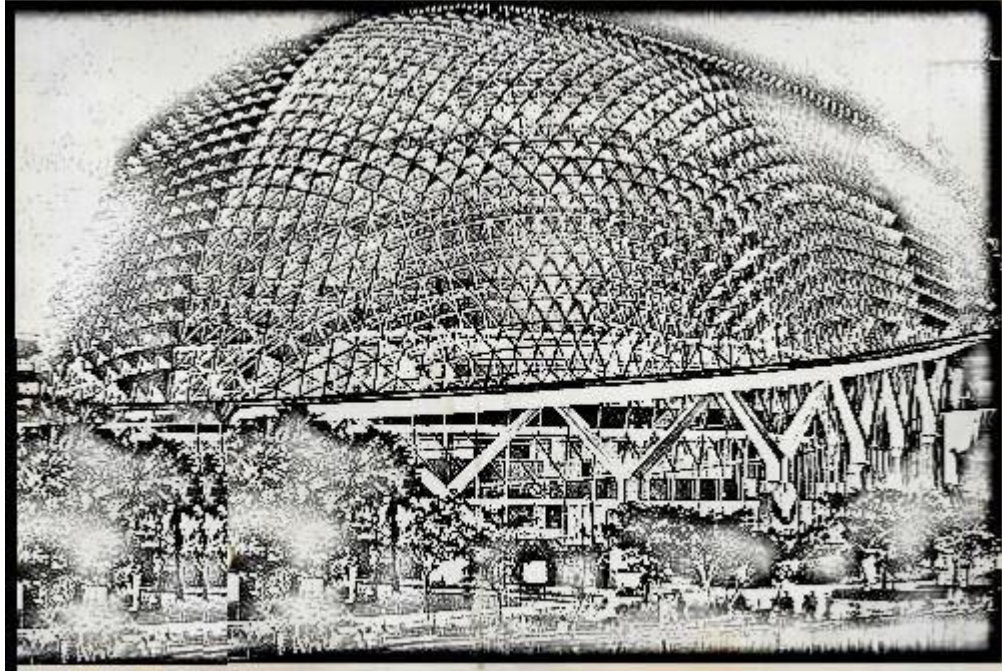


The Crystal Palace

A Novel By Ty Keenum



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Up From The Grave He Arose

The ride back from the Nunsuch jail was filled with questions fired at a machine gun pace followed by stretches of painful quiet. As the two males pulled into the parking lot of the Little Church in the Valley there was just one reminder of the mayhem that had occurred a couple of hours before. The large Union County SWAT truck was still loading its equipment and personnel for the ride back to Blairsville. Perhaps the lack of opportunity for fieldwork caused the specialized members of the Union County Sheriff's office to tarry a bit longer than usual. Perhaps it was the arrival of the beautiful red headed woman who was now watching the activity from the front porch of the parsonage. Elder Cheattle pulled his Cadillac into his reserved spot on the side of the church and turned to his passenger.

"Bubba, you've been gone for twenty years, a lot has changed," the Elder said as he rolled down his window, "I don't know what you are aware of or how much you remember. We're going to have to work together to get you back up to speed."

"I think the first thing we're going to have to uncover is where my teeth are," Bubba responded angrily, "you tell me I was in an accident and that is where I lost my teeth, but that doesn't explain why I'm dressed like some migrant worker. It's Sunday, why am I not in a suit?"

"I guess you dressed how you were comfortable dressing," the Elder replied, "now before we get out of the car, tell me, do you know who Reverend Helena is?" The Elder nodded in the direction of the parsonage.

Bubba turned his head towards the little house where he was born. He returned his gaze to the Elder. "She preaches here sometimes, I like her." "Why's she sitting on the front porch, is she waiting for us?"

"No, I don't expect she's waiting on us," the Elder replied, "She lives there now. She is or I mean 'was' the pastor here."

"Well if she's not the preacher here no more, why's she living there," Bubba inquired, "even if she does preach here, why is she living in my house?"

"We'll get to that in a minute, but first I want your promise that you're going to put your faith in me to make everything alright. It might take a few weeks, but I need you to believe that I'm going to set things right."

Bubba looked at his father's best friend and said, "I trust you Uncle Buster, it's just all wrong. Daddy and Momma should be sitting on that porch. Where are Momma and Daddy?"

The Elder opened his door, which forced Bubba to follow in kind. They waved and nodded at the parsonage. From a distance the two men looked like Pete and Repete. Both were 6 feet 4 and thin as rails. Only the gray hair coloring gave away the age of the Elder. The men walked around the front of the church to the cemetery on the other side. Buster Cheatle strode directly to a big double head stone. The tombstone read:

Helen Dingle Hawker	Daniel Hiram Hawker
01/04/1950 – 01/30/1995	10/13/1940 – 07/14/2013
Devoted Wife And Mother	Preacher of the Gospel
Shepherd To His Flock	

Bubba looked at the tombstone. “Mama was too young to die, how did she go?”

The Elder breathed a deep sigh, “I think she just kind of gave up after your accident. We tried to stay close, to help out, but she just seemed to lose her interest in life.”

Bubba was quiet for a few minutes and then remarked, “Well the old man lived longer than he should have, was it the booze or the cigarettes?”

The Elder raised an eyebrow but let the slight pass without comment. “He got the cancer and couldn’t eat. Towards the end he was so thin you could have read a newspaper through him. I know you’ve got lots of feelings for your Dad, but let me just tell you, it’s a hard way to go.”

Bubba raised his head from his reverie and looked his uncle by marriage in the eyes, “Good.”

The Elder took his nephew’s arm and started the walk down the path to the little cabin where Bubba had been living since his Dad's retirement from the pulpit. When they arrived at the door Bubba asked, “What are we doing here?”

“This is where you’ve been living,” the Elder replied, “Let’s go in and talk some about the future.”

As he sat down at the table the Elder spied the solution to one of Bubba’s major concerns sitting in a glass of water by the sink.

“I’ve found your teeth,” he said, nodding towards the sink.

“Well saints be praised,” replied Bubba as he retrieved his teeth from the glass and placed them in his mouth. The experiment lasted about a minute.

“These things hurt, I can’t wear these,” Bubba declared as he returned the prosthetics to the glass.

Both men surveyed the room that was riddled with bullet holes from the earlier firefight waged by Georgia’s finest with themselves. The fact that no innocent lives had been taken was just one of the miracles that had occurred that day.

“How did I wind up like this,” Bubba said as he surveyed the room.

“Well, a little bit at a time, I guess,” responded the Elder, “Your accident was back in ’92 and it’s 2016 now. You’ve been lost to us for twenty-four years. I imagine those teeth you were fitted with after the accident don’t fit at all now. No matter, they’ve got better teeth now, they call them implants. I’ll call first thing tomorrow to set you up for an appointment.”

Bubba looked around the Spartan surroundings and queried, “How quick can I get back into my house?”

“Well that’s going to take a little longer than your teeth,” replied the Elder, “Let me fix some coffee, we’ve got a lot of catching up to do.”

For the next two hours the Elder related church business for the past decade. Bubba had flashes of memories of the revival of 2010 and the theatrics of the keynote speaker Hap T. Johnstone. He remembered someone dressed in Tux and Tails but had no frame of memory for the occasion. Bubba was unaware that Reverend Dale E. Bannock had won the competition to replace his father in the pulpit. He had vague memories of children living in the parsonage. He had

wanted to ask why they were there, but never remembered to bring it up to his father.

Memories of Reverend Helena were closer to the surface. "She was 'pretty', 'nice', and said hello." Bubba remembered a hot summer day when Reverend Helena had invited him in for a Popsicle. Upon entering Helena's house, Bubba walked directly to the freezer compartment of the refrigerator and helped himself. Reverend Helena had not asked him back so that he could remember.

Elder Cheatle didn't know whether to file Reverend Helena's interaction with Bubba as charity or curiosity. No matter, it would wait.

Along about the third cup of coffee, Elder Cheatle gave Bubba the current situation with the churches. The viewpoint was from about fifty thousand feet, through dense clouds. When he finished, he leaned back in the hard backed wooden chair for the peppering he knew was coming. To his surprise, Bubba's overriding concerns were when he could return to the pulpit and to his house. Of course, he reminded his uncle, getting his teeth fixed was a prerequisite to returning to the pulpit.

Buster Cheatle reached in his pocket and pulled out ten one hundred dollar bills. "This is for your inconvenience," Buster said, "I can take you to town and put you up in a motel, or you can stay here and save your money. I'm going to be right by your side until we get this sorted out to your satisfaction."

Bubba snatched the money from the table and folded the wad into his pants pocket. "I'm good here for a little while, but I do mean a little while. I know I've lost some time, but I also know that since Momma and Daddy are gone, this

is all mine. From the top of the hill down to the creek, from ridge to ridge, it's all mine. So, I'll stay here while you get things back to normal, but don't take too long."

The Elder reached into his pocket and peeled off another thousand dollars. As he held the money out to his nephew he looked as sternly as he could, "I need you to be as cool as a cucumber for the next few weeks. I know you're impatient to get back to preaching, but we've got a lot riding on a smooth transition. Do I have your promise that you're going to let me give the go ahead before you make any decisions?"

The rejuvenated preacher snatched the money and placed it with the first thousand. "Of course, you're the boss. Besides there's stuff I gotta do. I need new teeth, I need new clothes, I need a haircut. I need a new car. Yep, there's lots of stuff that needs to get done before I take over again."

At this point the eyes that had been dim from unawareness hardened, "Just be aware, I do plan on continuing the Hawker legacy."

The Elder placed the extra cell phone he carried with him at all times on the table in front of his nephew. After a few minutes of lessons and a brief history of cell towers, the student seemed to have grasped the concept and the teacher was ready to depart.

"The Ladies Auxiliary will be around about 6 with your supper. If you need anything else, my number and Mulva Lite's number are already programmed in the phone. Just call the person that can get you what you need the quickest. Got it?"

Bubba nodded his agreement and then unexpectedly grabbed his uncle in a big bear hug. The two men hugged for a moment and then Buster Cheatle threaded his way through the brush back to his car. He was happy to see that the Union County SWAT team had either gotten bored with Reverend Helena, or been called away on another call.

Exhausted beyond belief he warred with himself over whether to update Reverend Helena with the day's events. He knew that he should explain to Helena about her "new" neighbor and calm any misgivings that she might have. The porch light shone brightly even though it was about 5PM. Dark came early in the mountains in the winter. Elder Cheatle decided to regard the porch light as an invitation. He knocked on the door of the rectory. Reverend Helena came to the door looking radiant in jeans and at least one sweatshirt. Declining a cup of coffee, the Elder plopped down on the overstuffed floral sofa and recapped the events that had occurred since he left the Crystal Palace earlier that day. The young Reverend listened with rapt attention. Elder Cheatle concluded his dissertation with, "Bubba's back. I don't know who to give credit to, or if any earthly being deserves credit, but Bubba is back. It's my intention to bring him back to where he would be had he not had his accident. I'm going to need a lot of help from you."

The Elder reached for the Reverend's hands. He looked deeply into the young reverend's eyes as he clasped her hands and asked, "Can I count on your help?"

She answered quickly, "Of course, **'Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done *it* unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done *it* unto me.'** I will help in any way I can."

"Good, I knew I could count on you," the Elder said as he rose to leave, "While we're concentrating a little on Bubba we're not forgetting about you. Just let me know of anything you need as we transition to the Crystal Palace. By the way, how was your first day at work?"

"Exhausting and exhilarating," Helena replied.

"I heard that," called the Elder as he bounded off of the porch and headed for his car.

"I heard that," he repeated to himself as he drove home.

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As promised, Elder Cheatle arrived first thing Monday morning at the little cabin Buster Hawker was now calling home. After a pancake breakfast at the IHOP in Blairsville, Bubba Hawker was presented at the Clearer Choice Dental Implant Center. After an examination of the ill-fitting dentures that Bubba had brought with him, the decision was made to "start from scratch." The Elder stayed with Bubba every step of the way. While Bubba was placed in twilight sleep for the most painful parts of the procedure, Buster Cheatle conducted business with his phone. He had been too tired the night before to update his partners or follow up on any pending deals.

Bubba emerged from the center four hours later with as fine a set of teeth that money could buy. Bubba was warned that there "might be some discomfort"

later and the pair went immediately to the CVS to fill the prescriptions for pain and antibiotics. Whether loopy from the medication or just excited by the world that he was seeing, Bubba couldn't stop chattering on the drive to the drugstore.

“When did we get a Walmart, what happened to Sol's Junk Yard, why are all of these trailers outside of the high school,” Bubba asked. It was all his uncle could do to give one-word answers before fielding the next question. Even the drive through window at the pharmacy was a “marvel” that Bubba had not experienced before.

Armed with their postoperative defenses, the men left downtown for the Blairsville Mall. As they parked in the nearly empty lot, the Elder cautioned his nephew, “Things have changed so much fashion wise, they've almost changed back again. What we're going to do today is to get you some basics, get you looking spiffy for right now. We can head to Atlanta in a couple of weeks and do some real shopping, Right now we'll get you looking good and feeling good about how you look, ok?”

Bubba was having a hard time keeping up with his uncle as he tried to look in every window, review every kiosk on their way to Alex's Men's Store.

“Sure, yeah that sounds good,” Bubba answered as they arrived at their destination. Bubba couldn't resist touching and smelling everything put before him. From shoes to ties, suits to socks, Bubba drank in the experience with all of his senses. Two hours and four thousand dollars later the men left the haberdashery with all that they and two clerks could carry. The finery nearly filled the trunk of Buster Cheatle's Cadillac. Bubba had left the store wearing his

favorite casual outfit from the shopping spree. He wanted to be presentable at their next destination, the DMV.

The long line of aspirant drivers was circumvented by a nod from Uncle Buster to a clerk meandering aimlessly behind the queues setup like teller windows. The pair met the clerk at a window marked with a "Closed" sign. Bubba smiled for the camera and was issued a temporary license.

"You'll get your permanent license in two weeks in the mail," said the clerk, "let me know if there's any problems."

"I'm sure there won't be," said elder Cheatle as he handed the clerk four one hundred dollar bills for a forty-dollar fee. As they returned to their car, Buster looked at Bubba quizzically, "Do you remember how to drive? It doesn't matter, we need the driver's license for identification, but we do need to check out your driving skills before we buy you a car." Bubba didn't answer, he didn't remember if he could drive or not.

The next stop was the Union County Bank where they walked directly into the president's office. Elder Barry Diggum got up from behind his desk and threw both arms around Bubba Hawker. Bubba hugged back, he remembered Elder Diggum; although he remembered a younger less rotund version of the bank manager. Displaying his new temporary driver license allowed Bubba to open a checking and savings account, acquire a debit card, MasterCard and Visa. Bubba chose 2436 for his pin. Matthew 24:36 seemed somehow appropriate for the occasion, "*But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.*"

Bubba left the bank with the knowledge that whatever expenses he might incur would be covered. Elder Diggum would watch his accounts personally and fill in any insufficiencies if they should occur.

The next stop on the Bubba revival train was the barbershop, or men's hair salon as they are called now. Bubba got the full treatment; manicure, pedicure, shave, haircut and facial. If his masculinity rebelled he deferred to the pleasure of the experience. Elder Cheatle used the opportunity to show Bubba how his debit card worked when it came time to pay. Bubba was astounded.

To continue Bubba's reintegration into the modern world, Elder Cheatle let Bubba use his debit card to pay for dinner. Bubba had his first steak in a long, long time. They arrived back at the Little Church in the Valley as Bubba's pain meds were wearing off. Buster reminded Bubba of his doctor's appointment the next day. Nothing to eat or drink after midnight and Buster would be there bright and early to do the transport. It would be another big day.

Holy, Holy, Holy

The unofficial Little Church in the Valley board of directors meeting took place that Wednesday morning as usual in the corner booth of the IHOP in Blairsville. Seated about the table were Elders Wiley, Diggum and Cheatle. Alvin Wiley was perusing that morning's North Georgia Gazette while Barry Diggum was steam shoveling his full stack smothered with three eggs over easy. Both were listening to Buster Cheatle recount his rehabilitation program for Bubba Hawker. "So yesterday, I got there bright and early and picked up Bubba. We've got an 8Am appointment with Dr. Jackson to get Bubba his first physical in I don't know how long. I tried to give him a head's up about what to expect, you know Dr. Jackson likes to take about three quarts of blood."

"Anyway, I guess I didn't mention the prostate exam, or go into it *deep enough*," and here the Elder paused for effect, "but Bubba's face looked like he was going to cry or go full Ninja on someone when he came out into the waiting room. I had to point him to the check out window or he would have left without paying."

Barry Diggum had stopped mid shovelful and Alvin Wiley was looking over the top of the newspaper. Both men were now fully engrossed in the tale. Buster Cheatle took the opportunity to warm his coffee from the little pot on the table. "Anyway, we're about halfway to the car before Bubba says 'Four – hundred dollars, for that?' 'They should pay me if that's what they're going to do!'"

”Well, I just busted up,” Elder Cheatle said as he laughed at the memory, ”there can be no stronger welcome back to the world for a man than a prostate exam.”

Buster’s partners grunted their agreement and returned to their activities. Buster was not done yet.

“So we get to the car and I’m thinking now’s as good a time as any to see if Bubba remembers how to drive a car. I toss him the keys and right off the bat he’s confused by the fob. We work through that; I explain about seat belts and keyless ignition and we’re ready for a few laps around the parking lot. While we’re tooling around, testing the basics I ask him what kind of car he wants. I’m thinking a Caddy like mine or maybe a BMW like Barry’s but out of the blue he says, ‘I want what Reverend Dale’s got.’”

At this point, the waitress interrupted the partners for what she knew would be additional orders. After Barry placed his order for the Italian Cannoli pancakes, Buster Cheatle continued his story. “I explained to Bubba that the Isuzu Trooper isn’t made anymore but we can get him something that works better, drives better and looks better. So we go over to Union County Exotics and Bubba Hawker is now the proud owner of a 2016 Range Rover. I followed him back home just to be sure he didn't have any memory lapses. He kept it between the ditches, so I guess we’re good.”

Buster Cheatle directed his gaze to Barry Diggum, “I put the car on my black card, so be watching for that. We’ll want to finance the car for five years

and add in the insurance and whatever else. Then you can take the payments from the trust.” The banker simultaneously said “ok” as he placed half of a Cannoli pancake in his mouth. Buster turned his gaze from the mastications going on in his partner’s mouth to his personal attorney. “Whatcha’ readin’?” he asked coyly.

Elder Wiley passed the paper to his partner, “It looks like we just gave the paper more news than they could handle. They gave a full page to the ‘Miracle in the Valley’ and just a paragraph to the grand opening of the Crystal Palace.”

Assuming his partner was just being sardonic, Elder Cheatle was surprised to see the headline, “Miracle in the Valley” above the picture of little Devin Bannock. The article was a full page and described not only a full history of the church, but also a fairly accurate accounting of the events of the past Sunday. The blood lust exhibited by the assorted police jurisdictions assembled for the Amber Alert was glossed over, however. The miraculous healing of a “poor toothless functional idiot” by an eight year old was not. The “Christmas birthday boy” was presented as a normal video game playing kid who also liked to tie timber rattlesnakes in knots while bringing back “functional idiots” from the dark abyss where they had resided for the past few decades.

Buster Cheatle had been in the parking lot while the events unfolded, he knew first hand the details, but reading it in black and white sent all sorts of wheels spinning in his head. There was the seed of a plan germinating in his mind, but it would have to take a backseat to the immediate dilemma of having three or perhaps three and a half preachers for two physical locations.

As Buster patiently waited for his banking partner to satiate his appetite he turned full focus on his consigliere. "Today, as soon as we leave, you need to track down every deed, every partnership agreement, every guarantee, every LLC we've done in the last thirty years and separate out any interest that any Hawker might have. Anywhere that we used property as collateral needs to be cleaned up. Tell Barry what to do and he'll fix the docs on the bank side."

At the mention of his name, Barry Diggum finally placed his knife and fork in his plate indicating that he was finished.

"Got it, fix the docs, no problem," the banker said as he picked up the check. "I guess you want me to bring the trust up to date based on a normal growth rate for the past three years," he paused reflectively, "It's hard to think Daniel's only been gone three years."

"Of course, in fact, be a little generous, we can explain it as an indication of your astute market acumen." Buster responded. He chose to ignore the reference to Bubba's father Daniel who had been their friend and preacher for forty-five years.

Barry gave a big grin indicating his agreement, "I like that, 'market acumen' I might have business cards printed up with that on them."

"Don't let your ego forget about our friends in Belize," Buster chastened, "We've got a lot of irons in a lot of fires that need to be watched very carefully. I don't want you running over to Channel 66 to make an infomercial for 'Diggum's Digital Picks' or whatever. Low and slow is the key to success in our business."

"Just like our barbecue," replied Barry.

“Stay low and grow slow,” echoed Alvin, “If barbecue helps you remember the plan, that’s cool. Just don’t do anything that we can’t document with a paper trail.”

The three friends waved and voiced a “see you in church” as they entered their cars and left the parking lot in separate directions.

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Buster Cheatle entered his office at the WD&C funeral home and immediately pressed the message button on his phone. To his relief all of the recorded calls related to funeral home business. A quick flip through his in box and it became his out box. Satisfied that he was up to date he walked down the back steps to the crematorium. Waiting in the basement for Buster was crematorium supervisor and part-time embalmer Alvin Lee. Alvin was one of about twenty Korean family members sponsored by the partners to work in their various business enterprises.

Each man mumbled a “Morning” and they set about their task. Both men donned protective coveralls from the hooks hanging on the wall. Alvin added gloves and goggles to his ensemble.

Sitting in the corner of the cement block room was a small safe. Although small, about two feet wide by three feet high, it was bolted securely to the floor. The large bolts gave evidence that the safe was more important than its size indicated. Buster entered the combination on the keypad and the safe popped open revealing the treasure hidden within.

The Elder measured out exactly eighty ounces of the loose jewelry from the safe. He then subdivided the pile into fifteen equal piles of six ounces each. Alvin fired the crematorium furnace up to 2,000 degrees and melted the first pile of loose gold into a perfect six-ounce gold bar. Next Alvin popped the gold bar loose from the mold into a bucket of water to cool. He repeated the steps until all of the piles had been smelted.

Buster took each of the bars from the water and polished off any slag left behind. He then placed the gleaming bars in fake iPhone boxes that were printed especially for the ruse. The fifteen bars were laid five across in three rows in a reclaimed Amazon shipping box that was sized perfectly for the job. The box had originally been used to ship beauty supplies to the **Fingers and Toes Nail Salon** where Alvin's wife and daughter worked. There were about a dozen empty boxes stacked on the shelf on the back wall waiting their turn.

The box was carefully resealed using Amazon tape. The shipping label read, "Connect the Children, 1233 Constitution Street, P.O. Box 947, Belmopan, Belize."

The men removed their outerwear and headed back to the main level. Alvin would spend his day cleaning and greeting any walk-in visitors that might happen to wander in. Buster headed directly to the UPS franchise store that he owned with his partners to make his shipment.

The Elder swapped his package for the weekly deposit bag for the store's receipts and drove to the Nunsuch Casket Company. He pulled into his reserved parking spot where Alvin's brother, Bruce, was waiting. Buster popped the trunk

lid and Bruce placed a gym bag in the trunk in the spot reserved for a spare tire. The gym bag contained \$100,000 rescued from the lining of a mahogany casket received that day from the Belize Casket Company. Pricing gold at \$1,000 an ounce, the partners had returned \$80,000 of clean money to their Latin American partners that morning. Buster would transfer the gym bag to his friend and Union County Bank manager Barry Diggum after Prayer meeting. Without a word to his Korean confederate, Buster drove back to Blairsville.

Union County Exotics sat in the northern wedge of the crossroads of Hwy 76 and Hwy 19. The dealership was a great convenience for the clientele that could afford their offerings but would “rather die” than fight the Atlanta traffic. Buster’s shopping trip with Bubba for his Range Rover had uncovered a memory that gave birth to a possible solution for the “what to do about the Bannocks” problem. Sitting prominently length-wise on Hwy 76 was the Right Reverend Hap T. Johnstone’s former tour bus. The bus had been repainted, but Buster knew it was the same vehicle that the former evangelist had toured in so successfully. Now it was sitting proudly waiting to be repurposed as a tailgate party bus, or perhaps, to be called into the ministry once again. Buster envisioned the bus as a chariot to deliver salvation as preached by Bannock the elder and younger. A close inspection of the interior revealed there was just no way the whole family of two parents and seven children could be brought along. Not unless another travel trailer was hitched to the bus. Buster was not comfortable with the insurance liabilities such an endeavor would entail. The package would have to be pitched to all concerned as Father and Son, driver, and maybe an assistant.

A brief conversation with the dealership owner sussed out the "cash only drive it off the lot today" price. As it turned out the gym bag in Buster's trunk contained just enough cash to make The Full Gospel Original Church of God the proud owners of a high mileage, but dramatically appointed, tour bus. Buster congratulated the car dealer on driving such a hard bargain and left him with the proviso that they would take delivery at a later date. The salesman was glad to oblige. The Elder had provided a college education to his kids in just two days. How could he argue?

Buster left the car lot and drove in the direction of Nunsuch again. The Elder drove south on Highway 19 until he saw the cutoff road leading to Birdtown. A couple of hours at the bunker and he was free for the rest of the day. It was looking to be a good day.