

10-27-2022

## Trouble in Bibleland and Other Stories

Jordan Hill  
johill@fiu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hill, Jordan, "Trouble in Bibleland and Other Stories" (2022). *FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 5148.

<https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/5148>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the University Graduate School at FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dcc@fiu.edu](mailto:dcc@fiu.edu).

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

TROUBLE IN BIBLELAND AND OTHER STORIES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Jordan Hill

2022

To: Dean Michael Heithaus  
College of Arts, Science Nices and Education

This thesis, written by Jordan Hill, and entitled Trouble in Bibleland and Other Stories having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

---

Vernon Dickson

---

Les Standiford

---

Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

Date of Defense: October 27, 2022

The thesis of Jordan Hill is approved.

---

Dean Michael Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

---

Andrés G. Gil  
Vice President for Research and Economic Development  
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2022

## DEDICATION

For Veronica and my parents.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis director Lynne Barrett for her attention to detail and encouragement throughout this process. Vernon Dickson has also been supportive of my creative endeavors during my time in his literature courses. And I wouldn't be at FIU if it wasn't for Les Standiford, who has consistently been in my corner.

I would also like to express my gratitude for receiving the Lawrence Sanders Fellowship, which made this collection possible.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS  
TROUBLE IN BIBLELAND AND OTHER STORIES

by

Jordan Hill

Florida International University, 2022

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

TROUBLE IN BIBLELAND AND OTHER STORIES is a collection of fourteen short stories that focus on characters confronting tests of their resourcefulness, relationships, and beliefs.

As in George Saunders' "Tenth of December," circumstances challenge characters' faiths, with unexpected results. In the title story, when convicts employed at a theme park enact roles in the crucifixion, the protagonist, playing a Roman Centurion, learns a lesson in self-sacrifice. A pastor questions everything he's believed after his wife's death from Covid in "Reformation Sunday."

Point of view and tense are used for focus. "Deliver Us from Evil" uses second-person present tense to make the protagonist's trauma more immediate, while in "Camp" the past tense and first-person plural depict high schoolers navigating their group and individual identities.

TROUBLE IN BIBLELAND AND OTHER STORIES shows characters finding unexpected beauty and wisdom, even on the worst days of their lives.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. MARCHING TOWARDS GOLGOTHA .....	1
II. OFF.....	13
III. TROUBLE IN BIBLELAND .....	21
IV. THE CAPTAIN'S LADY.....	41
V. PRAGUE.....	51
VI. FORTY-FIVE MINUTES BETWEEN PLANES .....	54
VII. DAWN PATROL.....	62
VIII. REFORMATION SUNDAY .....	73
IX. TEXT ALERT .....	99
X. EUROPA.....	107
XI. CAMP.....	112
XII. PYTHONS.....	116
XIII. MEET AND GREET .....	135
XIV. DELIVER US FROM EVIL.....	151

## CHAPTER I. MARCHING TOWARDS GOLGOTHA

Interior. Toyota Camry on the 84 West. Dusk. Grandma was smoking one of the Backwoods cigars she stole from a Gas-Mart earlier. It was her first one in twenty-seven years.

My parents believed that Elle, my grandma, was treating me with a trip to Portland as a sort of high school graduation gift. That part was true. I had just graduated, and I was excited to get out of Idaho. But of course, I couldn't tell my parents what Grandma and I were really up to. After all, they believed "pro-life" values extended even to old women with encroaching Alzheimer's.

We reached the Jacobs Bridge and climbed skyward, heading straight into a low-hanging cloud. Wisps of illuminated vapor lingered at our windows, and for a moment the misty tendrils seemed to dance like tongues of fire. After a few hazy seconds, we burrowed out, free to see the sparkling Snake River beneath us and a green *Welcome to Oregon!* sign on the opposite bank.

Grandma shifted in the passenger seat and pointed the lit end of her cigar at the fading sun. "Lily, did you know in *Draw*, James Coburn kills himself? He lights a keg of dynamite with his cigar."

"Why'd he do it?" I asked. I knew better than to correct her. A few months ago, she never would've confused *Draw* with another one of her favorites, *Duck, You Sucker*.

"Must've been from Idaho." She took another puff. I knew if you smoked you could end up with a robot voice and gaping throat hole, but when Grandma slowly exhaled it just looked... *cool*. The smoke spiraled up before drifting through the cracked passenger window.



She saw me looking and shrugged. “Just getting my smokin’ hot bod ready for the crematorium.”

I snorted. Anyone else in the family would’ve been horrified by her joke, but I always appreciated Grandma’s sense of humor. We also shared the same nose crinkle when we smiled. Grandma said it was what had first attracted Grandpa, all those years ago. He died when I was five, but sometimes, if I focused hard enough, I could remember reaching up to pull at his bushy eyebrows.

“Anyways, what’s the worst that could happen?” Grandma was saying through another black cloud. “I die a day early? Smoking is a part of Westerns, as American as apple pie and boob jobs. In *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, Clint Eastwood gives a dying soldier a drag off a cigar as he dies. Now *that* was a movie. Give me an old-fashioned shoot-out over a special effects extravaganza any day of the week.” She narrowed an eye and looked past her upturned thumb and extended pointer in the direction of a motorcyclist down the road as if lining up a shot.

The image of Grandma outside a Western saloon came to mind: a whistling Morricone tune scoring her entrance; a closeup on her boot stomping up wooden stairs and kicking down flimsy double doors; a pan around the room reveals huddled, terrified townsfolk giving money to a masked robber; the robber turns around to see—freezeframe!—THE OSTEOPOROTIC OUTLAW! The sound of a whip cracking. “Make my day, sweetie,” Grandma drawls from behind a cocked shotgun. Its muzzle flashes.

Grandma lowered her finger guns and took a final puff from the cigar before flicking it back toward the growing darkness. She yawned and extended arthritis-ridden

fingers as far as they could go. Then she leaned back against her headrest and closed her eyes.

Grandma grew up in Los Angeles, and graduated from Van Nuys High School in 1951, three years before Robert Redford's class ("Don't believe what you see onscreen; he was a wimp"). I always suspected Grandma secretly wanted to be a movie star herself. She'd mouth along to dialogue during movies and bought scripts whenever she could. During family photos, she'd always turn to show her good side, blocking herself under the light-source—a classic Hollywood technique used by actresses to better hide their aging necks.

However, after giving birth to my dad and moving to Idaho to accomplish my grandpa's vision of a new Lutheran church, her own aspirations were sidelined. Silver-screen dreams ceded to Sunday school felt-boards and stories about silver shekels. It was probably for the best. She had too much self-esteem to be an actress.

It was nearly dark now. The high-masted lights of the 84 West flickered above my grandmother. For a moment, the last rays of sunset struck the coils of smoke left from the cigar, creating a phantasmagoric haze, one where her dusty, celluloid dreams could be projected.

Interior. Dolorosa clinic examination room. The next morning. I pressed my nose against the examination room window's cool glass. The clinic was on top of a hill, and from the fourth story window I could see a bridge connecting the city of Portland to green hills. It was sunny for now, but rain clouds were creeping in from the north.

In the distance, beneath the clouds, loomed Mount St. Helens, that once-great lady whose head blew off decades before. After the blast in 1980, clouds of billowing ash reached all the way to Idaho. Grandma said that seeing the darkened sky was the push she needed to give up smoking and, up until yesterday, she had. Behind me, she hummed as she perched on the papered examination room table. She seemed pleased she wasn't required to wear a backless gown, and she happily swung one leg back and forth like a pendulum on a rusty clock.

We had stayed the night here in Dolorosa, a suburb of Portland, at a hotel a short drive away from the clinic. This particular clinic was rumored to staff doctors who prescribed generous doses of a drug called Seconal. Smaller doses carried insomniacs down the gentle current of sleep. The larger ones, like Charon, ferried patients to the other side. It was 2007, and Oregon was the only state that allowed doctors to prescribe Seconal to terminally ill patients, under its Death with Dignity act.

I felt a buzz from my pocket and fished a hand into my worn denim jacket, grabbing my phone. A pang of guilt: I had forgotten to text Megan when Grandma and I arrived at the hotel last night, but before I could read her message, there was a knock on the door and a smiling man in a white, whirling lab coat burst into the room.

His old, blue eyes and tight, lifted face spoke of expensive moisturizing lotions, yoga mats, and a kitchen stocked with things like fresh ginger and dried goji berries. "I'm Doctor Perez," he said. "Now which one of you is the seventy-six year old with Alzheimer's?"

Grandma and I laughed as he shook our hands. He had a strong shake, although he must've cut himself recently, for dead center in his right palm was a circular Band-Aid, a silicon stigmata.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you in person, Elle," he said, sitting down on a stool and removing a pair of spectacles from his coat.

I glanced at Grandma; I didn't know that she had called ahead. I guess I had forgotten that this trip had a purpose.

Dr. Perez finished skimming through a form on a nearby computer and cleared his throat. "Now, Elle, I have your psychiatric evaluation, and, after our conversation with your insurance provider, your first oral request." Dr. Perez turned to me. "You must be Elle's granddaughter, Lily?"

I nodded.

"Perfect, we'll have nurse Billett here momentarily to fulfill the additional non-family witness requirement for your written request—you have it with you, I presume?"

Grandma nodded, and from her bulky purse produced a pink paper. I tried to sneak a look, but Dr. Perez plucked the request from her, and after a skim, he placed it into a folder next to the faxed evaluation.

"Excellent! Everything seems to be in order except for your—" he checked the folder once more. "Proof of residency. Elle, the address that you provided is just a PO box. Can you give me your permanent residential address in Oregon, please?"

I had been wondering about this myself. How had she filed and processed the property transaction? And where did she get the money?

"I have the address right here—"