

"I just flat loved this! This is a curl-up-and-settle-in delight that pitch-perfectly evokes 1960s Americana."

—JERRY B. JENKINS

author of the *New York Times* bestselling *Left Behind* series



Eden Hill

BILL HIGGS

Advance Praise for *Eden Hill*

“The truth is, Bill Higgs has been writing fiction longer than I have, and his debut novel proves why *Eden Hill* was worth waiting for. The deftness of his humor, the subtlety of his storytelling, and the gentleness of his nature are all on display here, one memorable scene after another. And the nostalgic details? Delightfully spot-on. It’s been fun watching *Eden Hill* take shape from a distance, but to finally read it, first word to last, was pure joy for me. I’m certain you’ll agree!”

LIZ CURTIS HIGGS, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *MINE IS THE NIGHT*

“I just flat loved this! You’ll forget by page two that *Eden Hill* is Bill Higgs’s debut novel. This is a curl-up-and-settle-in delight that pitch-perfectly evokes 1960s Americana. Poignant, funny, moving, and touching without detouring into sentimentality, it’s like an evangelical Lake Wobegon. Higgs is generous with every scene, lingering long enough to deftly decorate every detail.”

JERRY B. JENKINS, AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLING LEFT
BEHIND SERIES

“Every page of *Eden Hill* drips with nostalgic detail, drawing readers back to a time when America moved at a slower pace and people went out of their way to help each other. Life was simple, friendships stayed true, and community ran deep. In this debut novel, Bill Higgs paints such vivid characters that the reader will be thinking about them for months to come. A delightful read.”

VARINA DENMAN, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF
THE MENDED HEARTS SERIES



Eden Hill

BILL HIGGS



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois

Visit Tyndale online at www.tyndale.com.

Visit Bill Higgs's website at www.billhiggs.com.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Eden Hill

Copyright © 2016 by Bill Higgs. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of car copyright © 2012 by Julie Chen.

Cover illustration of gasoline pump copyright © snoopgraphics/Adobe Stock. All rights reserved.

Author photograph copyright © 2015 by Elizabeth M. Higgs. All rights reserved.

Designed by Julie Chen

Edited by Caleb Sjogren

Published in association with the literary agency of The Blythe Daniel Agency.

Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

Eden Hill is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Higgs, Bill, (Christian writer), author.

Title: *Eden Hill* / Bill Higgs.

Description: Carol Stream, Illinois : Tyndale House Publishers, [2016]

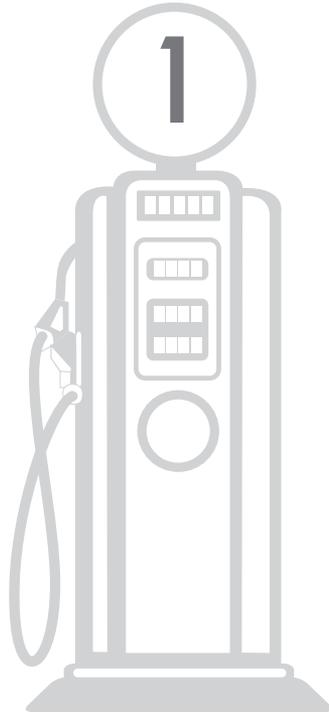
Identifiers: LCCN 2016003220 | ISBN 9781496410832 (sc)

Subjects: LCSH: Service stations—Fiction. | Kentucky—Fiction. | Domestic fiction. | Christian fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3608.I3675 E34 2016 | DDC 813/.6—dc23 LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2016003220>

Printed in the United States of America

22 21 20 19 18 17 16
7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Eden Hill, Kentucky, November 1962

Something was wrong. Definitely wrong. Even he knew it.

Virgil T. Osgood had just poured his coffee from the familiar speckled enamel percolator and said good morning to his wife, Mavine. Rather than a broad smile and her usual “Good morning, Virgil,” he got nothing. Instead, she sat quietly at their little Formica dinette wrapped in her blue chenille housecoat, her reading glasses perched on her nose, perusing a small magazine. Very odd. Mavine was usually hovering over the stove, banging pots and pans around, and was generally eager to engage in some lively conversation.

And even beyond Mavine's silence, the kitchen was far too quiet. The radio on the counter was usually tuned in to WNTC for the 4-H report, which came on just after "The Star-Spangled Banner" and the early morning farm news. This morning, the old Philco sat dark and silent, sandwiched between the flour and the cornflakes.

The only sounds were the ticking of the red apple clock over the stove, along with an occasional noise from Vee Junior's room upstairs.

"Morning, Mavine?" Maybe she was engrossed in her reading and hadn't heard him. "Okay, what is it?"

She peered at him over the top of her eyeglasses, unsmiling. "Why don't you feed the hens and bring in some eggs." A command, not a question. And certainly not an answer.

"Good idea." Was she sad? Angry? Upset with him? Mavine, gentle woman that she was, would occasionally become frustrated and flustered, but quiet?

"And Virgil. The chicken coop needs painting."

"Yes, Mavine. I'll paint it."

So it was going to be a guessing game. Virgil pulled on his poplin jacket against the chilly morning, scooped out a tin bucket of chicken feed from the bag on the back porch, and stepped outside. Clearly he'd gotten himself into some kind of trouble, and he could use chore time to think it through.

Forgotten her birthday? No, that wasn't until February. Couldn't be their anniversary. They'd married on the second of May—he wasn't about to miss that one again. Last year he'd overlooked it somehow, and it had cost him a new

washing machine to get back into her good graces. The poker game at Grover's hadn't run *that* late, and had been over a week ago, so he'd have heard about it long before now. For all his pondering, he had few answers. Well, he'd find out soon enough. Whenever Mavine was ready, she'd tell him. He'd just have to wait it out.

He tossed handfuls of meal into the trough until the pail was empty, and then collected several nice fresh eggs. Quickly. The brisk air cut right through his flannel pajamas, sending shivers down both legs.

A full plate of buttermilk biscuits and a jar of Mavine's strawberry preserves sat on the table when he returned, and the radio had warmed up and the sports report was on. Bacon sizzled and crackled in Mavine's cast-iron skillet, its smoky scent seasoning the room. Without a word, she took the bucket from his hands and cracked the eggs into a clear glass mixing bowl. Vee Junior had finally found his way downstairs and was reading a *Fantastic Four* comic book as he waited for his breakfast.

Maybe Mavine was just in a quiet mood. He could hope, anyway.

"Morning, Vee." He studied his son, a younger and smaller version of himself. Their son did not return his gaze. "Where's your Sunday school quarterly? You promised Mrs. Prewitt you'd read your lesson before school."

"Dunno. Maybe left it in the car."

Virgil leaned across the table. "Vee, you're ten years old now. It's time you showed some responsibility and took on a few chores of your own." Like feeding the hens and fetching the eggs. He hung his jacket back on the hook and took his

own chair. "I'll think of a few things you can get started on this Saturday."

"But I've got homework to do."

"On the weekend?"

"Maybe." The boy turned back to his questionable reading—hunting down Dr. Doom, from the looks of the cover. At least Vee seemed his usual self this morning.

"Vee, put that thing down. You know how your mother is about those comic books. We'll talk about this later."

Nothing on the radio gave Virgil a clue to Mavine's unusual demeanor, just a news report about something going on in Cuba—wherever that was—and a weather report about the current cold snap. *Community Calendar* included a story about the university, as well as something about the new interstate highway being planned.

Monday morning blues, maybe? He hoped so.

Mavine selected clean dishes from the drainer and served them each their breakfast. She waited while Virgil said grace and then filled a plate for herself. They ate quickly with little in the way of conversation. The radio was still playing when he finished the last biscuit, and the announcer gave the time at the station break.

"Six thirty, Vee. Isn't it time for you to catch the school bus?" Virgil nodded toward the road.

"Yeah." The boy did not move.

"So?"

He mumbled something before stuffing the comic into his book satchel and starting for the door.

"Vee! Your lunch!" Mavine handed him a small tin box

adorned with a picture of Zorro, his sword pointed high in the air. “And don’t you dare trade your cheese sandwich for Twinkies again!” Vee grabbed his forgotten meal, muttered something else, and started out.

“And leave that comic book here!”

“Aw, Mom.” Vee sighed, tossed the comic onto the couch, and left.

Mavine collected the plates and glasses from the table and refilled Virgil’s mug with the last of the coffee. With a deliberate twist, she silenced the radio and returned to her seat across from her husband.

Then Mavine, his beloved wife, looked straight at him. She’d been crying. How had he missed that?

“Virgil, do you still love me?”

“Do I . . . what?” This had nothing to do with Cuba, Vee’s lunch, Dr. Doom, or anything else from the morning’s conversation. Whatever he’d been expecting, this wasn’t it. He was mulling this over when she repeated herself.

“Virgil, do you still love me? We’ve been married fourteen years now, and . . .” She leaned forward and looked deep into his eyes. “Well, do you?”

Virgil T. Osgood, husband and father, raised an eyebrow and scratched at his chin. The question—was it a question?—was baffling, and he was about to say so when some deep wisdom stopped him, and he considered things for a moment. He needed time, and he needed clues. Anything. He knew the answer, but he wasn’t sure that it was the one she needed to hear.

“Why in the world would you ask such a thing as that?” Certainly not the right response, he realized immediately.

She hesitated a moment. “Because I need to know. When I was at the beauty shop last week . . .”

The pieces of the puzzle fell into place like the letters in the Sunday crossword. Every other Friday was Mavine’s beauty parlor day, when she would visit Gladys’s Glamour Nook on Front Street. She would return with a restyled hairdo and fresh gossip, especially if Gladys had learned a new and juicy tidbit. And these tidbits usually had a romantic angle to them one way or another.

Come to think of it, she’d been acting strangely all weekend, especially during Reverend Caudill’s sermon yesterday. The pastor was in the middle of a sermon series called “Godly Marriage”—straight out of the book of Ephesians—and all the married folk in the congregation were a bundle of nerves. “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands,” the preacher had intoned, and all the women looked at the ceiling. “Husbands, love your wives,” he’d continued. Women were nodding—including Mavine—and most of the men were looking at their shoelaces. He should have seen something coming.

She pulled the magazine from the pocket of her housecoat and placed it in the spot where her plate had been. “I was reading an article in *Pageant* about married men losing their love for their wives after they—the married men, that is—turn forty. Some even look—” she blushed and hesitated—“elsewhere.” She slid the small periodical across the table. “Gladys let me bring it home. I took the quiz on page forty-six.”

So that was it. Virgil felt a chill, the memory of his fortieth

birthday two months ago still fresh in his mind. A paper clip pointed to an article called, “Has Your Husband’s Boiler Run Out of Steam?” by Betty LaMour, PhD. A small but fetching photograph of Dr. LaMour was featured with a caption describing her as a famous marriage counselor in New York City. Virgil stared at the photo and turned the page, holding his place with his thumb. He flipped through the rest of the issue, which included full-page ads for Glamour Stretchers and Swedish bust developers. It didn’t take long to figure it out: more was better, according to *Pageant*. But more *what*? None of this made any sense.

“This is foolishness.” He closed the magazine and pushed it across the table. “You’re getting all worked up for no good reason, Mavine. They write this stuff just so they can sell magazines. Besides, don’t I take good care of you and Vee?”

“Yes, you do, Virgil, but women want more than that. We need our husbands to be heroic.” She placed the *Pageant* right back in his hands. “Dr. LaMour says that a good husband is romantic, and—” she squirmed—“he also pays, how shall I say it, closer attention to his wife.”

Something welled up within Virgil that he didn’t quite understand, a mixture of sorrow, regret, and anger. Clearly he’d disappointed his wife, and he was sorry for that, but what could he do that he wasn’t doing? Had he failed as a husband, or had this sensational magazine misled his wife?

He’d done all he knew to do in life. His schooling ended after the eighth grade because he needed to help support his family, but he’d served his country during the war. With honor, and he had the discharge to prove it. With a veteran’s

loan and his father's help, he'd built Osgood's, the service station that proudly bore his name. He and his father had built it by hand, one concrete block at a time. His business was stable and secure as well, for the most part. And while it wasn't going to make them rich, he'd never ended a month in the red. He was married to his childhood sweetheart, and they had a wonderful son, Virgil T. Osgood Jr. And a good marriage, as far as he could tell. Even Reverend Caudill couldn't fault him that.

All that ought to make him a hero. Vee Junior thought so, anyway. But it looked like Mavine didn't see it quite the same way.

"Mavine, you shouldn't be looking at this kind of thing. Not a word of truth in it." He started to return the *Pageant* again, but she held up her hand.

"How do you know? You haven't even read it." She crossed her arms and gave him a look that suggested he'd better keep it this time. He did.

Dr. Betty LaMour, with her feather boa and low-cut blouse, was hard for Virgil to take seriously. A PhD was a kind of doctor thing, and a woman who had one ought to look like Eleanor Roosevelt or Margaret Mead. Dr. LaMour looked more like Marilyn Monroe. The ads in the back for basketball-size radishes were outrageous, and the photo of the couple on a sailboat looking dreamily at each other while the sun went down behind them made little sense to him. Try as he might, he couldn't see where any of this applied to Virgil and Mavine Osgood.

He also couldn't see any way that he was going to win this argument, so he went for a draw.

“Okay, Mavine. I have to get ready for work, but I’ll read it. I promise.”

Ticky wagged her tail and brushed up against Virgil’s khakis. Insightful pondering wasn’t part of Virgil’s toolbox, but he was doing his best as he and his bluetick coonhound walked the short path toward Osgood’s. As promised, he paused to read the *Pageant* article. The light was still dim, so he regretted not having his reading glasses. The task was made more difficult by the chilly breeze, and by the big words he didn’t recognize. Terms like *interlude* didn’t turn up often in *Popular Mechanics*, and *amorous* wasn’t one that Mrs. Wardlow taught in the eighth grade. After a couple of pages, he had the gist of it. Somehow, he didn’t measure up.

Fourteen years. It had been a good marriage, hadn’t it? He tried hard, but he was beginning to understand that Mavine might want more. Ticky nudged his leg, just as he came to the questions on page forty-six.

Question One: Has your husband been working long hours at a boring career? Mavine had placed a check mark by this one. Boring career? He ran a simple but good service station. Of course the hours were long—Mrs. Crutcher’s Buick had needed a full ring job and seals to boot. Welby, his mechanic, had worked with him on the engine, but he’d not made it home until after nine several nights running. Virgil let his finger fall to the line at the bottom where she had kept score. The question was a big one, worth

twenty-five points for the right answer. Mavine's answer scored a mere five.

Question Two: How long has it been since you and your husband have had an intimate romantic dinner together? She had checked (c), "six months or more." This didn't make sense at all, because Mavine had cooked a full meal almost every night of their entire married life. Not counting last night's chicken meat loaf disaster, it couldn't have been more than two days. Three at the most. Five points.

Question Three: How long has it been since you and your husband have had marital relations? This was really puzzling. She'd checked (b), "two weeks or more" and then erased it and changed it to (c), "one month or more." Her mother had spent most of last Sunday afternoon at their house—perhaps Mavine had forgotten. Besides, her other relations visited way too often. Or could the question be asking about . . . *that?*

The rest of the questions all had something to do with romantic encounters or expensive restaurants or the like, and Dr. LaMour's reasoning became harder to follow. A trip to somewhere exotic? Zero. Celebrating an anniversary? Another zero. Mavine had checked off several more questions and come up with a score of thirty-five, which, according to Dr. LaMour, meant "better stir the coals and check the pilot light." Whatever that meant. Pilot lights weren't for coal fires, anyhow. Besides, this whole article came down to Dr. LaMour's opinion, which said Mavine ought to be unhappy with him and who he was. He backed up a step and almost tripped over Ticky. *Who does this Betty LaMour think she is,*

anyway? And what gives her the right to give my wife these kinds of ideas?

Virgil scratched his chin again. He and Mavine had both worked hard at making a life and a family, only to be told by some sleazy woman in a cheap magazine that it wasn't enough. They had a solid marriage, a fine son, and a comfortable life, didn't they? In Eden Hill, that meant far more than caviar and sailboats.

By now, his emotions had all boiled down to one: anger. Not at Mavine, but at Betty LaMour. Let this marriage counselor come here from New York City for a day or two, eat supper at their house, stay the night, and smell the wood smoke and country ham the next morning. Maybe even enjoy some of Mavine's biscuits and bacon. Though she'd have to skip any of Mavine's attempts at new recipes. Betty LaMour would see what life together was all about.

He was a good man, and this was a good place. He and Osgood's took care of decent people, the salt of the earth. The grocery on the corner did the same, with Grover Stacy and his wife, Anna Belle, offering ample provisions to the folks of the community, together with ample supplies of cold-cut sandwiches, ice cream, overalls, and flypaper. There was Willett's Dry Goods with clothing and fabric, and three churches. Three *fine* churches. Filled every Sunday with wonderful country people who'd give a person the high-bibs right off their backs. Farms and stores, tradesmen and everyday folks. Eden Hill may not be much, but it was everything that New York City could only dream about.

With that thought and another nudge from Ticky, Virgil

tucked the *Pageant* into his coat pocket and returned to reality. He'd ask his mechanic, Welby, about it later. Welby and Alma had been married upwards of thirty years; surely he'd have some insight.

Virgil's coffee mug was empty again, so he must have paused and pondered for longer than he thought. No matter, Welby would certainly have a fresh pot brewing when he arrived.

"Let's go, Ticky." He bent down to scratch the dog's ears. "Folks'll be coming by to see us soon." The mid-November sun had now risen above the horizon, bathing the fields with twilight. Somewhere a tractor started with a rumble, and a truck stopped on Front Street, its brakes squeaking. Sounds of life—good life. He and Ticky walked the rest of the way down the hill to Osgood's, and Virgil opened the side door just as the sun cleared the clouds and touched the porch of the old house behind him. Another day had begun in little Eden Hill. Farms needed tending, stock had to be fed, and cars and trucks would soon show up to purchase gasoline and service.

He'd get back to the *Pageant* tomorrow, or the day after that. He had work to do.

"Hello, Virgil!" A man in faded khaki coveralls stood up awkwardly from the front tire of a little two-tone Nash Metropolitan, having put the last squeaky twist on a lug nut. "How's the boss today?" A small but sturdy man of fifty-five,

Welby, limping slightly, the result of a childhood bout with polio, crossed to greet Virgil.

“Just fine!” Virgil grinned. At least Welby, fifteen years his senior, seemed to be on his side this morning. The work may be hard, but here at the service station, Virgil always knew what to expect.

Virgil worked his way through the smells of motor oil and Monkey Grip until he located the aroma of fresh coffee drifting from a large pot on the workbench. His thinking was still hazy, and his mug was empty. At least one of these situations could be easily remedied; Welby brewed ten cups at a time. “Is Mr. Willett’s car about ready to go?”

“Yep. Just need to check the brakes. He’ll be coming by at lunchtime to pick it up.”

“That’ll be fine.” Perhaps he and the world were indeed just fine. By now, Welby’s joyful demeanor and a full mug of steaming black java had lifted his spirits.

“Welby, I’ve got a question for you.” He’d just reached for the *Pageant* when a decrepit truck coughed into the front lot, rattling and squeaking its brakes.

“Arlie?” The sound of the ancient vehicle was distinctive and unmistakable.

“Mornin’, folks.” A disheveled but cheerful Arlie Prewitt met them at the front door. He wore a denim jacket over his union-made bib overalls, which looked as though they served as work pants, sportswear, and probably pajamas. “No gas today, just some Nabs.” Arlie selected a cellophane package from the Tom’s rack and dropped his quarter into the small can alongside with a noisy clang.

“Where are you going, Arlie?” Welby wiped his hands on a shop rag. He needn’t have asked. There was only one place the farmer would be going this early in the morning without a hog in the back of his truck: the lake.

“Fishin’. Wanna go?” Arlie had often said he’d rather fish than eat, and he enjoyed eating very much. “Last good day of the year, probably. I got my boy Frank up early to feed the sows so I could go. Sure hope he doesn’t hit anything with the old John Deere.”

“Sorry, Arlie, but we’ve got too much work to do today.” Virgil truly was sorry; he enjoyed fishing almost as much as his friend. “Let us know what you catch.”

“I’ll bring it by and show you! By the way, did you fellows see the sign?”

“Sign?” Virgil looked at Welby, who shook his head.

“Across the road. Sun’s up, so you can see for yourself. Gotta go now, ’cause they won’t be bitin’ all day.”

“Well, have fun. And tell Lula Mae that Vee will definitely read his Sunday school lesson tonight.”

“I’ll do it. See ya.” Without further explanation, Arlie stuffed the package into one of his many pockets and climbed into the truck, which spat forth dark black fumes, ground its gears, and rumbled into the already-smoky morning.

The two stared in silence for a long time as Arlie’s truck growled into the distance. Welby spoke first. “I’ll be. What do you make of that?”

The sign, new and freshly painted, stood in the vacant lot across the road from Osgood’s.

BILL HIGGS

FOR SALE: 1.32 ACRE(S)—
COMMERCIAL POTENTIAL—
150 FOOT FRONTAGE—
WELL WATER—
IDEAL FOR SERVICE STATION
OR STORE

Underneath were the name and telephone number of a real estate firm in nearby Quincy.

Virgil's shaking hand lost what was left of its steadiness, sloshing coffee onto his shoes. Stable and secure had just flown out the window and headed for the treetops.