

***Staggerford.* Jon Hassler. New York: Atheneum, 1977.**

**Friday, October 30**

"Sunday clothes on a weekday was the sign of a funeral." [8]

Twelfth year as Staggerford's Senior English teacher. [9]

"... so compelling was the call of a crow from across the river." [9]

"... he would read the same errors over again." [9]

"... vague sense of futility." [9]

Guilt. [9]

First mention of Agatha McGee. [9]

"... hidebound appearance" ... "he cultivated." [10]

"... the last frantic days before grades were due." [10]

*Losing* as theme of What I Wish compositions. [10]

First mention of Badbattle River. [10]

Nadine O.'s paintings of cancer. [11-12]

Quick pretty girl "emerged" from a "hopeless" form. [12]

The Bone-woman ... on the river. [12]

He was at his worst when confronted with other people's grief... beyond the borders of consolation... her helplessness rendered him helpless. [12]

Anguish – despair. – Miles spoke words of consolation that he didn't understand... "...the wonder of it!" ... "she smiled at him through her tears." [13]

"Last hour" [13]

Desks carved on by three generations of students. [13]

Age old smells: sweet; manure and soil; "hot lunch being converted into air." [14]

Study hall gave him the blues... "tomorrow's classes being too distant to imagine"... "they dreamed daydreams so dull that they fell asleep." [14]

Wondering if life was worth living. [14]

Fire siren = sign of vitality. [14]

"... the perfume of dying leaves." [15]

Agatha McGee: "The Dark Ages are beginning all over again."

Her reasons for saying this differed day to day. [16]

Agatha's 41<sup>st</sup> year teaching. [16]

Miles had been living in this room 12 years; Agatha had been born in this house.  
[16]

"Few could remember a time..." without Agatha. [16]

She had been teaching in the same classroom at St. Isidore's, and occupied "a place somewhere between Moses and Emily Post." [16]

When Agatha was a first-grader, Joyce Kilmer visited her classroom. Her class recited *Trees* each day "between the Apostle's Creed and the Pledge of Allegiance." On the day of the visit, there was "more laughter than... permitted on ordinary days." [17]

"Priests and poets melted her severity." [17]

"... the poet telling stories, some without lessons." [17]

Kilmer's visit was "like Christmas, a joy undiminished by anticipation." [17]

Sister Rosie, 26 years old and with pierced earlobes, as light-hearted and light-headed. [18]

The poet's "business is beauty." [19]

Agatha didn't permit divided attention, slang, eye-shadow. [19]

Dark Age dyspepsia. [19]

"... haunted by the specter of a man in his fifties sent out by his wife to do battle for nylons." [20]

The modern notion that teachers should never burden a child with a book written earlier than the child's date of birth. [20]

"... the spreading plague of dark and crippling ignorance." [20]

"Untidy" = Agatha's first impression of visiting poet. [20]

Agatha sets off fire alarm to get rid of visiting poet. [25]

Goths and Visigoths. [25]

Every Friday as a renewal of Good Friday. [25]

Miles had lost his faith at age 25, "the whole works"; it "evaporated." [25]

"Being holier than Rome is no fun since they made it so easy." [26]

Miles's Father has MS, and is in a 'home' in Duluth. [27]

Agatha: no one's size is written in the stars. [27]

The smell of Agatha's garden. [28]

"There was little to love about Imogene Kite" – she had a respect for "pure knowledge." [30]

“... a loud belch took her by surprise.” (Mrs. Stevenson at last year’s faculty Christmas dinner.) [33]

Mr. Stevenson – ill – hunched over – faulty heart. [34]

Absolute standstill. [34]

Carpet “deadened all sound.” [34]

Indians [35]

“... you know yourself better than other people know you.” [36]

“I... fell flat on my face.” [36]

“... his [Stevenson’s] life was a lullaby.” [38]

Description of Sandhill Reservation. [40-41]

Miles has toothache. [40]

The Bonewoman called up “a sense of the end of things.” [42]

“Shadows and frost and the end of things.” [42]

Mrs. Stevenson: “What possible harm?”

Miles: “carrying on an experiment in his mouth.” [42]

“his soothing, meaningless biography.”

Flood of moonlight: Moon 4X its normal size.; the color of a peach. [43]

Wisdom tooth going bad. [43]

Miles kisses Imogene – but thinks of Thanatopsis... he had waited too long. [43]

### **Saturday, October 31**

Tree loses leaves in a night... Geese in a V headed south... Agatha says it’s going to rain, though it’s clear...  
Wind from the East. [47]

“Thanatopsis” = Greek for “view of death.” [47]

Lillian had begun knitting when her husband died. [49]

Walking helped Miles think – “the shape of this thoughts dictating the shape of his walk” [51]

Miles could visualize his lesson plans as far as Christmas. [51]

Beverly is part Chippewa [52]

Miles “fascinated by Indian voices” – “emanating from someplace farther back in the throat and deeper in the soul...” [52]

Beverly’s home is “between the highway and the river.” [53]

Miles advises college for Beverly. [54]

Miles: "What's so bad about a tie with Owl Brook?" [54]

"Conversations with Coach Gibbon seldom took an unexpected turn." [56]

Badbattle River: Footpath walked by Zeb Pike... there had been so many battles that no one knew which it was named after. [59]

"Staggerford was used to losing." [60]

Miles visits his mother's grave... from his angle of vision, the grain elevator read "STAGGER" – he could see St. Isidore's, city hall, elevator, and water tower... View of 4 directions from the "highest point in the cemetery."

S = flat farmland / E = town / N = Woods / W = Sandhill Reservation

Memory of visiting a (now dead) sick colleague: "... It's a terrible thing, this waiting to hear." [64]

Miles was "speechless". [64]

"One can always hope." [64]

Kept his hand on Miles's shoulder "until he was satisfied that Miles understood his terror." [64]

Miles "embraced him tightly." [64]

Forgot to have the sick man sign the form which had been the practical reason for his visit. [64]

Thanatopsis knew "that any party lacking pretense and make-believe might as well be called off." [65]

Journal entry on contrast of this visit and a picnic with his Seniors: "Life, the light and the dark."  
– "Me, without my students' optimism and without Fred's despair." [65]

At the picnic, Miles was pushed into the river. [65]

The faculty gives Fred a watch. [67]

Miles sits on a rock and watches birds (binoculars). [68]

Bird looking at Miles: "I knew you'd come." (It was Beverly.) [69]

Beverly doesn't ever come to the river any more. [70]

Miles: "I like to watch water move." [70]

"... a commercial for contraceptive cat food." [73]

Imogene to Miles: "I wish you wouldn't try so hard to be funny." [76]

Thanatopsis – enjoyment of life – loved the Fall day – just lay on the ground – the only person not to love  
Thanatopsis was her husband – Thanatopsis as a girl. [77]

Wayne Workman "is so serious about everything." [78]

Wayne Workman works on a plan to encourage Indian attendance. [82]

"The alcohol relieved his toothache." [83]

Superintendent Stevenson regrets that he didn't follow in his father's footsteps farming. [83-86]

“... breathing in God's fresh air.” [86]

Stevenson says: “Miles... you're wearing the clothes of a dead man.” – and he leaves the party because of this. [86]

Imogene talking about the atomic bomb. [88-89]

Next day, all Miles remembers of the party is sitting on the toilet “running his tongue over his wisdom tooth.” [89]

### **Sunday, November 1**

Agatha in Church early, alone – praying for Miles. [93]

Prayers for the dead – more and more of them. [93-94]

Miles's subconscious as a “large and careless cleaning woman.” [94]

Liturgical calendar “hanging from a hook in his memory.” [94]

Eucharist: for a moment, Miles believed. [96]

Agatha: “Anyone who believes that the bread turns to flesh is in step.” [98]

Beverly *needs* to talk with Miles. [99]

Miles and Beverly talk about how to get your shit together. [101]

Beverly worried about her mother. [101]

Beverly: “How can a person get alone without a home?” [103]

Agatha's horror at the news in the paper – including priest. [106]

World's evil, like rain, mixes with good to nourish life? [106]

Sin is “as real as rain.” [108]

Beverly's plea for help was “like a quick kiss.” [111]

The 3 women Miles has loved. [112-113]

Wayne Workman's legalism – faculty handbook was his Bible – wouldn't let Thanatopsis off for a funeral. [136]

Miles: “Do you believe this Handbook covers every exigency in life, Wayne?” [139]

Hank (Indian student) was “a good-natured Stoic.” [140]

Being punished by Workman for skipping school. [140]

Miles talks to Hank, and asks how much punishment he has left: “Till I'm sixteen.” [140-141]

Miles's lesson plans are “sketchy.” [141]

Stevenson: absenteeism = “The Staggerford Curse.” [144]

Stevenson: "We can't control our involuntary reactions..." [144]

Stevenson "warmly shook (Miles's) hand" – loneliness. [145]

Miles at dentist: wisdom tooth. [146-147]

Workman: "Ignoring rules is anarchy." [148]

Miles is "an obstacle in the road to progress." [149]

Faculty meeting – everyone talking but not connecting. [150-151]

Thanatopsis: "... Any enlightened faculty should be able to get along with fewer rules and more common sense." [152]

Workman unveiled "his new idea for Indians." [153]

"Befriend an Indian." [153]

"Tell him to be like everybody else." [154]

### **Tuesday, November 3**

Miles was "so distracted by the beauty of the morning " that "he nearly left the road." – "Every twig on every tree." – Imogene slept. [159]

Miles visits his father, who shows a picture from years ago. [160]

Duluth: "an urban-renewal neighborhood" – the new buildings resembled ruins." [161-162]

"It appeared to Miles that he was rather far along in life to be visiting a wisdom-tooth specialist." [162]

Dental assistant: "I'm Joy." [162]

"Joy's hands, surprisingly strong." [162]

Miles... "staggered through the waiting room." [163]

As novocaine wore off: "... building to a crescendo of full, rich pain." [164]

Agatha to Beverly: "Would you like to come in?" [165]

Agatha's library: Belloc's *Path to Rome*, Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*, Kilmer's *Catholic Poets*. [165]

Also Hawthorne, Merton, Bernanos, Mauriac. [165]

Agatha to Beverly: "If you see anything you want to read, you may borrow it."

Beverly: "I don't recognize anybody but Hawthorne." [165]

Agatha to Beverly: "Come and have some nectar." (Grape) [166]

Beverly sat where the Governor and Archbishop had sat. [166]

Agatha wore "the most ruffled, ornamental blouse Beverly had ever seen." [166]

"The old lady's eyes, like her own, were blue." [166]

“... the odor of cigars in the confessional.” [169]

Agatha: “Old attitudes are not necessarily bad attitudes.” [169]

“doom was about to crack,” but Beverly “couldn’t understand.” [169]

Agatha had developed an “intemperate bias” against young people. [170]

“Self-consciousness” was not a familiar feeling to Agatha. [172]

“... the smile of respect that a small town pays to forty years of virtuous example.” [172]

Agatha felt “odd and old.” [173]

Jennifer “had crowned Mary Queen of the May’ in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and was now vulgar. [173-174]

They “had been brought up to know better” but were “reverting... to the perverse savagery” from which the human race had been liberated long ago. [174]

Agatha “despaired” and decided to retire. [174]

Agatha: “I have seen my teaching come to nothing.” [176]

“Unspeakable things. The world is in ruins.” [176]

Fr. Finn: “I’ll tell her the truth... we’re desperate.” [177]

LBJ’s “Great Society had come to Staggerford” – community center. [177]

A “maze” to “demoralize” her. [178]

Mock wedding: “... by the power invested in me by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.” [180]

Agatha “felt trapped between the moral wasteland of the younger generation and the stale slough of senior citizenship.” [181]

Fr. Finn “was a prayerful man.” [181]

### **Wednesday, November 4**

Re: Wayne Workman: “On the telephone it was so easy to have the last word.” [186]

Doc Oppegaard: “a small-town practice depends on a painless reputation.” [188]

Re: Annie Bird: “Her eyes spoke of storms.” [193]

Agatha showing Beverly what bleach is for. [195]

Agatha = “a shrewd judge of how much learning a pupil could stand in one session.” [195]

Lillian researching Miles, looking for “clues.” [196]

“He had never apologized for anything before.” [106]

Thanatopsis: “I seem to have this great capacity for loving people.” [197]

How much Miles’s hug of the Vandergars meant. [195]

Thanatopsis: why didn't the rest of us do that? [195]

Agatha refers to Miles's "native sense of justice." [199]

Stevenson posits two kinds of Indians: happy and unhappy. [200]

Rumors of Indian invasion. [203]

#### **Thursday, November 5**

Wayne Workman was "paralyzed with fear" of Indians; he called the Governor and the Sheriff. [208]

Miles led the way to talk with the Indians. [209]

A Patrolman "swore in the name of God and the governor" – and lied. [216]

'Negotiations' between Chippewa and whites: "It isn't the first time." [218-219]

Agatha chews out Workman – in defense of Miles. [222]

Agatha's house = a "curious oasis of order and peace on River Street" to Beverly. [223]

Miles's briefcase heavy because of the weight of sadness of the "What I Wish" essays of his students. [229]

Why a tie was as good as a win. [229]

#### **Friday, November 6**

Student oral book report quotes Stonewall Jackson: "Let us cross over the river and rest under the shade of the trees." [235]

Beverly reviews *Gone with the Wind* – "a combination of love and disaster." [237]

Promise the Indians anything they want. [253]

#### **Saturday, November 7**

Of trooper searching her house, Agatha says: "the poor man, he looked hungry. I should have thought to offer him a sandwich." [258]

Miles "walked out into a slanting mist thick as fog and wetter than rain." [259]

Mrs. Norquist would only be coming back to Staggerford to be buried. [259]

The Indians knew where Jeff was, but cops didn't [262]

Miles "had forgotten about his tooth." [265]

Wayne to Miles: "... your life is at stake" – "a disquieting perturbation." [266]

"The joke was on all of them: red man and white." [273]

"... the Badbattle carried their piss away." [273]

Mayor: "In town we have laws against places like this." [275]



Miles is shot – Wayne shouts “Holy Christ.”

The other men run – Wayne driving. [275]

Beverly runs to Miles and drops him back in the mud. [276]

Beverly’s cry of grief “from somewhere further back than her birth.” [276]

Cop assumed the Indians had done it. [277]

Fr. Finn: “he’s a Catholic?” Agatha: “Of course.” [277]

Fr. Finn was slow. Agatha clasped her rosary so tight she broke it. [277]

Agatha takes Beverly in. [279]

Agatha: “I *am* the fern of goodness and sin.” [280]

### **Epilogue**

Dale and Carla had been divorced for 3 years. [285]

Carla’s father barbers Miles’s hair at the funeral home. [286]

Thanatopsis walked home from the funeral home “alone.” [286]

In a “fine, driving snow that stung.” [286]

It snowed on the day of the funeral. [286]

“Just what was Miles to Miss McGee?” [287]

“When someone in your household died you were left for the rest of your life with less to do with your hands.” [287]

Beverly didn’t attend the funeral. [287]

Fr. Finn’s prayer at the cemetery. [287-288]

Thanatopsis’s arm around Agatha’s waist. [288]

Dale hugged himself. [287]

Holy water froze. [288]

Faith united him with the body of the faithful. [288]

Gravediggers talk about snowmobiles – “horseshit machine.” [288]

Agatha cleans Miles’s room – sends his clothes to the missions. [289]

Saved his journal. [289]

Imogene’s grief followed advice from a book, *Happy Me, Happy You*. [290]

Carla’s daughter: “Who’s Uncle Miles?” [293]

Superintendent Stevenson “began to revise his opinion of his heart.” [293]

“... he might have in his breast a better heart than he had thought.” [293]

“... he went home and put his arms around the heavy softness of Mrs. Stevenson's middle and lifted her, astounded, three inches off the floor.” [294]