

MEMORY LANE
G. Wells Taylor
(eBook Sample)

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Table of Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

[Other titles by G. Wells Taylor](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Connect with the Author](#)

For Nikki Nielsen

Chapter 1

There are monsters on Memory Lane. I know, because I've met them. Not real ones, but they're monsters just the same. You never know where they're going to pop up, but they seem to like Memory Lane the best.

Sometimes they look like people from your past. Spooky people bringing smiles at first—they know you, or think they know you, or want to know you. And they take up your time talking, talking, talking, asking questions so they can know you better so they can say things they don't mean, and tell you stuff you don't need to hear. Ugly stuff they picked up in life and don't want and brought to Memory Lane as a gift for you.

We moved to Memory Lane one scorching summer when I was nine, when the sunlight was just getting white and hot enough to burn you through your shirt. We moved there because Ray, that's my mom's boyfriend, got a new job and needed to live closer to the Goodyear Tire Plant because the old truck he drove couldn't get him from our old place reliably and in good time.

My mom wasn't working then. She had tried her hand working for a company in Florida that promised she could make \$1200 a day in her own living room just stuffing and licking envelopes. The boxes of envelopes and flyers they sent her moved with us from the old apartment, and now crowded the new place. They smelled musty and looked like a bulging old avalanche about to break in on us where they were piled against the living room wall.

Ray complained about them all the time—especially when he carried them off the truck on moving day. It was the sort of thing that made him nasty, yelling at my mom to get a job and get off her fat ass—which I really had to agree was getting fatter all the time.

But I didn't care.

Nobody complained about us moving to Memory Lane, or my mom picking me up and taking me from the old school to a new one. No one said a thing—especially my dad.

That was because we didn't know where he'd moved to one dark night years and years before. My mom, the bank and the government were looking for him, but he didn't want them to find him. Ray complained about that and said my mom had to stop being lazy and hunt for him harder so *he* didn't have to raise the S.O.B.'s kid.

That's me, the S.O.B.'s kid.

So as soon as we got settled, he said we'd get Internet for our old computer and she could Google him. Googling was still new back then so Ray acted like a big shot saying it.

He also said my father wasn't going to get away with abandoning his daughter and dumping her on Ray. Things were hard enough.

The only person who might have missed me when I moved away was a tall woman who had long blonde hair and a pretty smile with lots of white, white teeth. It was a long time ago now, and not even at my last school, but I remember her. She had a voice that sounded like singing. And she laughed and giggled when the kids laughed and giggled.

Then she'd put her hand over her mouth and roll her eyes like she wasn't supposed to be laughing, and then she'd laugh anyway because what else could you do?

Mrs. Braun was an educational assistant who worked with kids like me and others who didn't know how to get along or fit in properly. Well, she didn't work with *me*; she

had her hands full every day with a big autistic boy who took his clothes off every time he got scared.

But Mrs. Braun got worried about me being so skinny one time, and she shared her lunch with me when she saw I was eating a half bag of chips and some peanuts in cellophane and a Multimart Yogurt past the “best before” date.

After a week of that I think she told some people because a man and a woman with file folders came to talk to my mom and her boyfriend at the time, a skinny guy named Charlie. He had a ship tattoo on one arm and smelled like cigarettes and mouthwash.

I was in my room but the man and woman came in after the talk and looked at me with serious faces and asked me questions about food and sleeping and stuff and wrote down my answers in the file folders. A week later my mom pulled me out of *that* school and we went with Charlie to a new apartment.

But I know Mrs. Braun must miss me and would wonder from time to time what had happened to me. I liked her, because she always talked to me like there was nothing wrong, and tried to make me laugh like I was just anybody. And sometimes she would push my hair away from my face and smile right at me and look and look and still keep smiling. I didn't mind that when Mrs. Braun did it.

And I did smile back from time to time.

Memory Lane was a half-mile stretch of war houses, built for soldiers coming home from the last Great War. Great, Ray said, because we won it. But the houses were formless little cinderblock cubes that looked melted on their crumbled corners where many layers of thick pastel protective paint had built up over the years.

The street that ran between the evenly split rows of houses was crumbling just as badly and led from one awkward exit on a super highway to a dead end, where it butted up to a guard-railed road block.

There was a big sign left there by the developers, and it screamed the name MEMORY LANE CONDOMINIUMS in big faded red and blue letters. There was even a scorecard on it saying that they had sold three units.

I don't know what happened to the people who bought them but they don't live on Memory Lane. At least not anymore.

Ray said that developers had planned to bulldoze all the houses and put up fresh new ones. But that was before prospective buyers strolled to the end of the lane and looked past the sign. Then they saw the beginning of the Genol Chemical Plant property.

Just past a rusty chain link fence you could see this huge flat and torn-up piece of land with yellow grass where there was any grass at all. There was a multicolored wall of barrels and boxes that ran across from left to right, and you had to look over that for a glimpse of the Genol Chemical Plant's chimneys—there were three. They chugged along day and night letting white smoke into the air like clouds.

But it wasn't clouds.

The chain link fence was supposed to keep trespassers out, but it bulged inward and outward. There were holes under and through it, so the fence served little purpose at all.

The kids, there were lots, played on a tufted patch of grass behind the sign. There was a swing set with only two swings, *used* to be two; and a long wooden slide that didn't slide much at all and should maybe have been called an “ouch” for all the slivers the kids got from it. But years of bouncing baseballs and flipping Frisbees had created a need for the fence's many holes. And the kids had been only too happy to make them.

Memory Lane was still for sale, Ray said, but nobody wanted to develop a tract of dried-out land beside a chemical plant. It was still for sale, he said, and the greedy Italian who owned it and rented a house to us wanted too much for it anyway.

Ray said that was why the Italian would only sign a six-month lease with us. He might sell the land any day.

“Yeah right!” said Ray.

We moved there in the summer between school years and schools. And it was still early enough that my mom was in no rush to phone a new school and enroll me and transfer my records if they could find them.

That was something that Ray had yelled at her about already and we’d only been moved two days. When he got tired of yelling at her about getting a job, my school records was another one of the things he’d yell at her about.

I thought he was wasting his time yelling at her about that because anybody who knew her would know she wouldn’t get around to enrolling me until September—after I was already in a school, standing with her in the principal’s office while she cried and told him how hard life was for her.

So one morning I sat out on a cracked slab of sidewalk that ran from our front door and cut our parched and rocky lawn in two. I had my doll Norma with me and had only just finished combing her hair when Ray and my mom’s yelling reached a peak.

He exploded out into the early morning sun like an angry cannonball and I almost imagined him on fire. He gave me one slit-eyed and muttering look before climbing into his truck.

After more swearing and some thumping sounds, his old clunker fired up noisily and he pulled away with tires squealing without so much as a wave goodbye. He used to blame such lapses of manners on my mom, but he no longer wasted his time explaining.

I already knew.

I sat on the sidewalk and played with Norma, trying my best to cover up for Ray’s rudeness, saying little pleasantries like: “It looks like such a lovely day.”

I had climbed out of my bed early and moved out into the sun before anyone else got up. The rays were still yellow at that time of day and warmed my face instead of burning it.

But I also liked being outside before Ray got up and started in on my mom about breakfast, because I had learned he would not let me leave if I was there when the yelling began. He said it was a chance for me to learn something.

So I got up early, teased an apple Multimart drink box free of its vacuum wrap and set myself at the edge of the property as Ray got ready for another day of working a job he hated at the Goodyear Plant. When he started yelling, I was already deep in conversation with Norma.

Ray’s truck backfired a couple times and I watched him from the corner of my eye when he stopped at the end of Memory Lane, working up the nerve to plunge into the roaring steel river on the highway beyond.

I spied this with my head down, the long frizzy locks of my hair brushing Norma’s face. This was the way I usually looked at things, so I only heard the sound of movement and the dull clink of metal to announce the approach of two new neighbors.

Boys on bikes, one white and one black—the bikes too—rode up to me and stopped at the curb just past the last tattered fringe of lawn.

“That your daddy?” the black kid asked, his heavy hands playing with a length of colorful plastic streamer that trailed from one handlebar.

I shook my head, slightly cowed. I was new to Memory Lane and had only seen these boys from a distance peering out from a crowd of other kids across the street. They stood there the whole afternoon we arrived, watching Ray take our furniture off the truck.

“He shouldn’t make so much noise,” said the white boy. “Carmilla won’t stand for it.”

I peered through my hair to study the white boy’s face.

He was skinny and about my age and his eyes and lips blinked at the same time. He wore a torn T-shirt with Spider-Man on it and a pair of colorful shorts. His shoes were old-fashioned and were bound in places with duct tape. A battered wooden slide whistle hung from his neck by a string. His hands never stopped moving over it.

His black friend was studying me, twisting his head left and right and shrugging his rounded shoulders at his companion. He was wearing a faded wife-beater—that’s what they called sleeveless T-shirts—that bulged around his fat belly where it hung over his patched blue jeans.

I knew those pants would soon be too hot to wear in the globally warming sun and he already looked uncomfortable in them. He had a pair of sandals on and rode a white bike that was too small for him.

The white boy rode a black bike that was too big.

“Yeah,” the black boy agreed with his companion, “your daddy better not bother Carmilla.”

“He’s not my DADDY!” My voice came out loud and shrill and even pierced the noise from the distant highway. It startled me, and from their faces I saw without raising my head that I had startled the boys too. They looked at each other, back at me and then at each other again.

“Who’s Carmilla?” I whispered, as I composed myself.

The boys’ faces looked somber; their dirty fingers gripped their handlebars as they turned to ride away.

“Just don’t make her angry,” the black boy warned before the pair rode off and left me sitting in the warming sun.

Chapter 2

The first time I saw Carmilla she was killing a kitten.

All the kids were running and gathering up behind the Memory Lane sign in the dusty bowl around the swings. With the new neighborhood came new dangers, but because they had yet to appear, I was safely ignorant.

So I left my sidewalk perch and walked to a bit of dry grass in the shadow of the sign to see what the commotion was all about.

I was about to learn a lesson. I wouldn't be curious again.

Carmilla had a long, flexible stick and she was whacking a little striped kitten with it. She must have just started killing it, because the way she was whacking it the kitten wouldn't last long. I saw the other kids watching, most with blank faces, though a couple of the boys wore eager looks, and one of the youngest girls was crying and saying: "Stop hurting her!"

But Carmilla was having none of it. Whatever the little thing had done to deserve the punishment, she was clearly not standing for it.

Whack! Each time the stick whipped down the kitten would shriek, there'd be a thump and a cloud of dust would rise. A little noise came out of the boys too, something like a grunt or a sigh.

I took a step closer, keeping Norma's little plastic face turned away from the scene. I knew I'd be busy later talking to her about this and I didn't want to add *her* feelings to the discussion. It was nothing for any little girl to see: be she plastic and wool or flesh and blood.

"Bad kitty!" Carmilla shrieked pulling the long wooden whip back with both arms high. There was a harsh whistling *crack* and the impact almost cut the kitten in two. I saw a wide line of red open on its white-striped coat.

Carmilla stood over the kitten. It was clearly dead—a fluffy hunk of meat. She smiled, and looked up at the assembled kids.

Carmilla's skin was pale, and I could see blue-green veins tracing like a tattoo along her hairline. Her arms and hands and legs were pale too—almost white—and the sun shone off her skin with a milky haze. Something about that seemed to make her mad—like most things did—but she kept out of the sun because of it.

She didn't like to give off that misty glow—especially if she had too much skin showing, which was often the case because her mother put her in old-fashioned summer dresses, short with ankle-length socks and pastel pink or green or baby blue shoes—always chosen to match.

You'd say they were "girly" if they were on anyone other than Carmilla.

She wore her hair in loose eight inch braids that ended just past her collarbones where her mother tangled them into frizzy tufts with green, yellow or red elastic bands.

The braids were thick and reminded me of Medusa's snakes the way they whipped and curled about her head with every movement. Her body was like a boy's, knobby at the joints and smoothly muscular in between.

She moved like a boy too, regardless of her little girl clothes. I later found that every kid on Memory Lane had seen her underpants by accident, but not a one would ever confess it.

Admitting something like that would make her mad, I decided, as I got to know her. She wouldn't stand for it. In time, I grew to wonder what she *would* stand for.

Carmilla's eyes stood out the most. They were bright white in the whites, just a shade more than her skin, and the irises were lilac, a purple-blue color ringing round black pencil-point pupils that made you shiver when she looked at you. The whites turned red when she got mad, and the pupils opened wide enough to swallow most of the iris. We all came to know the look and ran if we were lucky enough to see it coming.

So she stood over the dead kitten and watched us with those eyes—the red bleeding into them, the pupils contracting. I had expected one of the kids—it always happens—one of them should have piped up then and said: “You're going to get in trouble...” or “I'm going to tell...”

But the look Carmilla gave them all was the same stare she'd leveled at the kitten. It was clear that she wouldn't stand for any tattling either.

Then her eyes moved from the terrified gathering and caught mine where I stood just outside the grouping. A flicker of glee twitched behind Carmilla's features and she drew back her lips to show sharp white teeth. She dropped her whip and walked quickly toward me.

My feet shifted backward a step and were still. The black points of Carmilla's pupils had stuck in me like fangs or claws and held me in place as she approached. She smiled with lavender lips, pale and bloodless—her ill humor threatening. I dropped my face and hid behind a long bang of hair, as I tend to do when pressed or crowded.

But I could still see plenty. I had learned the trick.

The boys had picked up Carmilla's stick and were taking turns whacking the dead kitten's body. They screamed with pleasure and hate and anger—the way I think that monkeys would in a similar situation. And the girls gathered closer, watching—most with empty faces, some with a blush in their cheeks.

“You're the new girl,” Carmilla said, walking close. The swing of her legs was casual—the sway of her skirt hem was breezy and summery. “I'm Carmilla.”

I kept my eyes down, looking at my flip-flops, and the frayed knees of my denims. That's usually what I wore or denim shorts and a T-shirt—and sometimes with shoes. I had a denim skirt somewhere that was too small for me.

“You better not say anything about that kitten.” Carmilla had to bend forward a bit to catch my eyes beneath the bangs. “Because I won't stand for it.”

Carmilla's hand reached out and flipped my hair aside. Her face appeared in the breach, but shuddering, I stepped away and the curtain swung back.

“That kitten scratched me.” Carmilla turned, and pointed to the crowd of children that ringed around a sandy brown twist of wet muscle. “And I was just trying to be its friend.” She took a quick step forward. Her hand came up and twisted Norma's knitted top.

“I like playing with dollies, too.” The tone of Carmilla's voice altered, became playful. “What's your name?”

I didn't want to tell her. I was afraid of what would happen if I did. Then I thought of a way around it. If Carmilla got mad later if she learned different, I thought I could just say I didn't understand. She already thought I was dumb.

“Norma,” I whispered, and my stomach twisted over the lie when Carmilla smiled.

“Norma?” she giggled. “That’s a stupid name.” Then she stepped in close to me, even set one hand on my arm, near the *real* Norma. “You ever tell on me for that bad kitten, and I won’t stand for it.”

She laughed shrilly and skipped back over to the kids where they danced in a circle around the big black boy. He had the kitten’s body on the stick and was trying to fling it over the fence onto the Genol Chemical Plant property.

End of this eBook sample.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

G. WELLS TAYLOR was born in Oakville, Ontario, Canada in 1962, but spent most of his early life north of there in Owen Sound where he went on to study Design Arts at a local college. He later traveled to North Bay, Ontario to complete Canadore College's Journalism program before receiving a degree in English from Nipissing University. Taylor worked as a freelance writer for small market newspapers and later wrote, designed and edited for several Canadian niche magazines.

He joined the digital publishing revolution early with an eBook version of his first novel *When Graveyards Yawn* that has been available online since 2000. Taylor published and edited the *Wildclown Chronicle* e-zine from 2001-2003 that showcased his novels, book trailer animations and illustrations, short story writing and book reviews alongside titles from other up-and-coming horror, fantasy and science fiction writers.

Still based in Canada, Taylor continues with his publishing plans that include additions to the Wildclown Mysteries and sequels to the popular Variant Effect series.