

The Man Who Had Compassion
By Bill Kemp

Taylor's life was changed the day his wife went into labor. She woke in the night and paced the floor seeking to ease her discomfort. She knew to time these first contractions. She knew when it was time to wake her husband. He slept in blissful ignorance. She leaned over him, speaking gently, lest he start from his dream and flail out. He awoke slowly to this new thing and when she touched him, an electric spark passed between them. There was something cosmic in that blue light and Taylor's soul whispered back to that pre-birth memory when we are all neither man nor woman, but simply new life.

Twenty minutes later her contraction came again and Taylor was overcome. He gripped the side of the doorway and gasped in pain. She was down beyond the curve of the walkway and did not turn back to see him; she breathed and felt very much in control of this one. She noted on her watch the interval that indicated the certainty of her labor this day. What was less certain was what was keeping her husband. She opened her own car door.

On their way through the emergency room, he again dropped back wincing in agony. He was useless to her now. Having faithfully coached by her side through the endless Lamaze classes, he now missed the birth. The nurses joked about giving her drugs to the husband. But, Taylor simply faded away in embarrassment, hiding out in the car. In the empty parking lot, no one heard his screams. When his pains escalated and then ended, he knew that it was time to return to the hospital and greet his new son.

Late into the evening, Taylor ran errands. He found the perfect combination congratulations and I'm-sorry-for-not-being-there gift for the new mom. He also was strangely drawn into the hardware store, finding a complicated gismo on an end-cap that he knew would fascinate his son's first explorations of the house. Checking out, he felt in his own wrists the arthritic twang of the clerk.

Leaving the store he was distracted by the strange trace of wetness on his chest. His face flushed. He reached for his shirt pocket thinking that his cell phone must be on vibrate. He felt instead an empty pocket and a sensation he could not describe, as if someone's lips were there. Then as he stood mystified upon the sidewalk, a drunk stumbled into him. The man reeked of cheap wine. Taylor's stomach, recently sensitive to a variety of smells, nearly erupted. In horror he leaned back. The man embraced him, mistaking Taylor for a lost lover. Planting a kiss as he said, "sweetie."

Throughout the night and the next morning, the tea totaling Taylor experienced all the afflictions of alcohol's toxic dregs. It clouded his mind and ruined his appearance. Even close friends would not have recognized him as he reeled through the hospital lobby. Even though he knew the place well, he became lost on the way to maternity. Even though he read well, he stumbled past the warnings and into the restricted areas of the hospital. In intensive care another man lay. Taylor absently waved as he passed the open doorway, for the man was lifting his hand. Then Taylor knew. It was not a wave, but rather a pleading. The man had come to a critical moment. Taylor's chest exploded as the other man had a heart attack. In compassion Taylor slumped to the floor and the code blue team wheeled their cart around him to reach the other man. No one

saw him jump, as the life-saving electricity lifted the other man. Blue sparks laced the inside of his eyelids in terminal frenzy.

Taylor died and the other lived. That day an alcoholic found the courage to enter into rehab. Carla at the hardware store noted that her wrists no longer troubled her, and another woman found the strength to raise her infant as a single mother.