Under the Weather

Mom's precision household came to a halt in short order.

By Helen Foster Santa Rosa, California

WHEN MY HUSBAND, Jacob, was a practicing neurosurgeon, in the early 1960s, our home life, like his practice, revolved around precision.

Being a nurse accustomed to doctors, particularly surgeons, and their perception that the world revolved around them like clockwork, I didn't think precision was anything out of the ordinary. We learned to live with it.

Our family, including three children and three dogs, arose every morning at exactly the same time set by the clock. Showers were closely timed. While the family dressed, I went downstairs to the kitchen in my bathrobe to let out the dogs waiting dutifully by the door. They understood the meaning of precision.

On schedule, I set to work preparing breakfasts—in the plural—because each family member had a preference, often no two alike, and each morning it was a different menu.

Jacob and the two older children drank plain milk; the youngest invariably wanted milk flavored with Quik.

The dogs ate their usual food without complaint; that part was easy.

Following starters of fruit juice or fresh or stewed fruit, the choices were hot breakfast cereal, flaked cereal out of a box, bacon and eggs, French toast, pancakes, waffles with pure maple syrup, homemade scones, rolls, orange muffins, omelets, eggs in a well (a poached egg set in a hole in a slice of toast) or banana toast.

In those days, we had a large country-style kitchen with ample work space.

Everything was well organized. We sat down around the table no later than 6:30 a.m. Our traditional family togetherness, though measured by time, was unhurried. We shared our thoughts while we ate.

This fortified the mind as well as the body, so we were ready to meet the challenges of a new day and go our separate ways.

Exact timing was always a factor. After breakfast, Jacob left for his scheduled surgeries in town. I filled three lunch boxes in time for the children to start their trek leading to the school-bus stop at the main gate.

Of course, there were times when the circumstances dictated a different approach, called breakfast on the run. That happened when Jacob received an emergency call from one of the hospitals as he sat down to eat.

He'd grab his coat and, as he dashed out, I'd intercept him with a glass of orange juice that he gulped down on his way to the door.

Our family, precision-oriented, was well adjusted to the daily schedule and accepted it as how life should be.

I was happy with the idea that each day, I was the essential provider of a good breakfast that my husband and children enjoyed. They were healthy and had good, sound teeth.

Those thoughts warmed me as much as the coffee I sipped while filling short orders, pouring milk and setting down the dog food.

But one morning, precision was put to the test; I was too sick to get out of bed as my head throbbed from fever and I ached all over.

Confined to bed, I worried about what the family would eat while left on their own.

To complicate matters further, Jacob had an early-morning surgery and didn't have time to fiddle.

But he said not to worry, and he gathered the children in the kitchen.

"Mother is sick this morning," I heard him say. "Now make it easy for Daddy and tell him what you would like to eat."

They quickly complied. Unhesitatingly, our son said he wanted French toast, our older daughter opted for hot oatmeal with chopped nuts and raisins and the youngest chose "eggs in a well, just like Mommy makes it."

It was akin to a thunderclap, followed by a silence.

When Jacob spoke, it was a moment of decision.

"Fine," he said. "We'll all have cornflakes."

He knew what to do—precisely.