

## The Biggest Change

The most far-reaching change of my life came about in sunny California on April 8, 1966—the Friday before Easter. Good Friday, for Christians.

My husband of three years and I had made the move to California three weeks earlier, under the lure of better employment for him. Two of his former co-workers had relocated to the Bay Area from Seattle a year before, and their assurances of his being able to find a high-paying job increased his hunger to "do better".

We shipped our household goods in mid-March and headed south in our brand new red Volvo P1800s Coupe. After a fast and wonderful drive of eighteen hours we were well into the promised land of the 60s: sunshine, date palms, fig trees, the Golden Gate Bridge, ocean beaches, commuter trains and El Camino Real. No more commuting to work in Seattle rush-hour traffic every day. No sports car club meetings to attend. No organ-playing for church. No choir to direct. No evening art classes. No friends or family unexpectedly ringing the door bell. For the first time in my married life I felt absolutely free, and I loved it. We rented an apartment in Redwood City and began the hunt for work.

Mike soon discovered that his job-encouraging friends had moved on and couldn't be contacted. I landed a job with an independent savings and loan company, thanks to my previous employer's letter of recommendation. Two

weeks after our arrival in the Golden State, I started my new job.

That first week Mike took me to work every morning. I would wave goodbye as he drove off to spend the day job-hunting. Friday of that first week was no different, except for his slightly silly demeanor when he dropped me off at the back entrance to the savings and loan. He wasn't having good luck finding work, and I feared that he might get into trouble from not eating enough to cover his daily dose of insulin.

"Promise me you'll go right home and get something to eat," I said.

"Yeah. Okay. I will!" He grinned at me.

"Promise!" I insisted, and got out of the car.

"Yes honey. I will!"

I closed the car door and waved goodbye as our little red car exited the parking lot and turned toward home. I watched until it was out of sight, then reluctantly opened the back door to the savings and loan and headed for my desk.

Half an hour later, I called home to make sure Mike was okay. No answer. My gut churned with worry. My hands grew clammy, my feet cold. Deep down I knew that something was wrong.

Recollections from the past swarmed into my thoughts: the times I had to grab the steering wheel of the car in rush hour traffic because he couldn't keep it within our lane. Those middle-of-the-night insulin reaction episodes I dreaded—the moaning that would wake me, the slurred

profanity, the flailing arms that would often smack into me.

Saliva would bubble from a corner of his mouth and roll down his chin into a slimy smear on his naked chest while his half-open glassy eyes stared into a blankness I could not break through.

"Mike?" I would call, calmly but loudly, hoping for an acknowledgment of some kind. "Mike! Can you hear me? Know who I am?"

No response.

I would struggle to pour a sip of sugar-loaded orange juice through his clenched lips with one hand, while pushing him upward from the back of his neck and shoulder area with the other in an effort to prevent him from choking. Every single time he would slide back down—his skin so slippery with sweat that I prayed to God to help raise him upwards so he wouldn't choke on the juice I must get him to swallow.

"Swallow, Mike. Swallow!" I'd repeat slowly and loudly, multiple times, until finally he would. After several struggles and getting maybe a tablespoon or two into him, I'd check my watch and wait for a change in his behavior. If he didn't come back to himself in fifteen or twenty minutes, I'd struggle with more juice. These episodes were frequent, serious, and potentially deadly. When they were over, he would have no memory of what had happened, only a bad headache. And that's what I was getting now. A headache.

Unable to concentrate on my work, I decided to confide to my supervisor. She was a nice lady, ten or fifteen years my elder, who ran the savings side of the company. Maybe she could help.

"Ethel," I said softly to her so no one else could hear. "Can I talk to you?"

"What's wrong?" she replied, putting her paperwork down on the desk to give me her full attention.

"I need to go home. I need to check on Mike. He's a brittle diabetic, and I think he's probably in trouble somewhere. He's not answering the phone."

"How long do you think you'll be gone?" she asked, putting her hand gently on my arm.

"I have no idea. We live two or three miles away. It'll take me some time to walk home ..."

"No!" She interrupted me, lifting her purse out from under her desk and opening it. "No, you don't walk. Here." She handed me her car keys. "You take my car, and you hurry home. Call me later when you can."