Coping With The

If Onlys’

By Sue Grant

For my mother, it was a pottery hedgehog. All her life, she had been magically attracted to every pottery, china and cut glass shop that crossed her path. Once inside, (“Oooh, I must have a look in here, won’t be a minute.”) she would inspect shrimp glasses and serving platters, admire lamp pedestals and porcelain coffee cups, while whoever happened to be with her, normally my long suffering father, would shift restlessly from one foot to the other. He, for one, certainly did not share his wife’s passion.

Except on one occasion. My mother had done her usual dive into a local craft shop and while she was lovingly fingering some more glass bowls, he idly turned his attention to the pottery knick-knack section. There it sat. A cheeky, bristly, little hedgehog. For some reason, it appealed to him. “You must be joking,” scolded my mother. “You cannot be serious, wanting to buy this junk! It is absolutely awful! For goodness sake, put it back on the shelf!” He fought valiantly for his hedgehog, countered that, well, he liked it, even if she did not, but she would hear none of this nonsense. To avoid the situation from escalating any further, he gave in. The hedgehog stayed in the shop.

Three days later, aged 44, and without warning, he suddenly dropped dead of a heart attack. People thought my mother had completely lost hold of her senses, as she talked incessantly about hedgehogs.

“If only I would have let him buy it,” she wailed, “at least he would have had it three whole days and derived some pleasure from it. It was only a small, inexpensive thing, but I would not let him buy it. Why oh why did I stop him? If only…”

Welcome to the ‘If Only Syndrome’. There are not many of us who manage to escape its torments. We squirm with retrospective remorse at the memory of those occasions when, it now occurs to us, we failed to supply material comforts, big or small, when we should have supplied emotional comfort or more of it. Somehow, we did not; we should have been firm and decisive, but were weak and wary or should have been conciliatory and instead sought conflict. The list that, strangely, did not plague our conscience much before, now grows by the minute to sheer overwhelming dimensions.

In fact, it does not take us long to conclude that we are utter failures, miserable creatures, selfish, mean and downright insensitive to the very tiniest of other people’s wishes. We deserve to go through hell for our many shortcomings.

Friends and family tell us we are crazy. “But nobody can get it right all the time”, they try to comfort us. That of course is the crux of our pain: we realize, suddenly, appallingly, and finally, that there are no more opportunities to rectify past mistakes. We had but the one chance – and we made a mess of it. It seems those pottery porcupines will prick us for evermore.

Fortunately, we do seem to come equipped with a number of intuitive strategies for dealing with the ‘If Onlys’. Like all grief coping techniques, they might be effective for five minutes, or two
weeks or a few months. The important thing is that they work at all, in any form and any order that suits us.

Remorse in bereavement is a human, normal reaction. The very fact that we do suffer from it is proof that we cannot be the cads we make ourselves out to be. However, it can take a while to grasp that. In the meantime, many of us find some relief, immediate or permanent, from embarking either on the self-denial path or the defiant ‘then-I’ll-do-it-for-you-now’ road. Some people discover they can switch between the two.

In the early, raw days of her bereavement, my mother swore she would never, ever buy another piece of pottery, glass, or china. She saw this drastic measure as a kind of penance for having deprived her husband eternally of the pleasure of a small decorative animal. Yet another person might have decided, with the same conviction and with equal justification, to have returned to that craft shop and purchased the hedgehog, keeping it (and three more besides to make quite sure) forever on the mantelpiece to make amends.

True, some *If Onlys* come back to haunt us at regular intervals. Mine lurks in my recipe book. Whenever I open it, it has a habit of falling open to exactly the page where my nine-year-old son painstakingly copied down a recipe for a cinnamon cake I had once made and that he liked very much and wished me to bake again. I never did. It was fiddly and I simply could not be bothered. What a rotten mother. Now it is too late. Recipe remorse still needles me, but less so since I found a displacement solution: I made the cake, following my son’s spidery instructions, and donated it to a children’s festival. At least other kids benefited from the treat.

Therefore, at some stage, we are ready for the shaky transition to a new realization: forgiving ourselves for not being perfect. Actually, it is just what our friends and family told us at the outset, namely, that we cannot always get it right. Indeed, that is true. We find it hard to accept at the beginning. After that crucial phase of denial or penance or displacement activity or whatever other coping technique we employed, we find we can slowly begin to reevaluate our behavior within a larger framework.

Bit by bit, we are able to recall the odd occasion when we actually did do something worthy and loving, and, what is more, we can allow ourselves to feel grateful for the memory. (If you are still unconvinced, making a physical list can be an eye-opener.) We might even be surprised to discover that after a while, our crimes appear less heinous – the wish for a clay hedgehog was probably no more and no less than a passing whim, forgotten the next day – which does not exonerate us completely, but can help to put things back into perspective.

After a while, my mother resumed her pottery collecting, although on a slightly reduced scale, which occasionally included the odd decorative animal in honor of her husband. Now, I treasure my son’s childish handwriting in that recipe book and am more at peace with my shortcomings: after all, I did make him scores of his favorite chocolate cake.

So remember...A dog’s bark might be worse that its bite, but a hedgehog’s prickles are no sharper than its grunt.