

April 2004

# The KaleidOscope

## A Literary and Art Publication of New Directions

Art knows no boundaries. Self-expression, from all artists, is what we seek. Names of artists, in a perfect world, should not even be necessary for the heart to be touched or the mind opened to new ways of seeing.

We invite artists to submit your poetry, prose and art to us via email.  
[Compass123@comcast.net](mailto:Compass123@comcast.net).

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# Kaleidoscope Interview:

## ELAINE RESTIFO: RIVER POET RADICAL

Lambertville, New Jersey is a three traffic light town. It's crammed with art galleries, antique shops, expensive clothing stores, a Baptist church, a Catholic Church, and Elaine Restifo, 71, white-haired and beautiful, and her gang of poets and artists. The life of art is a-roar in this small town along the brown Delaware River.

The artists live by the river and die by the river. Their paintings and sculptures hang in each others' homes and in the art galleries. They love each other madly and gossip endlessly about this one or that one and do small sweet things for one another. One time when Judy was sick in bed with the flu, Elaine and a couple of her cronies went over to visit. They came in puffing "pretend cigarettes" as a way to protest Judy's refusal to give up smoking.

It didn't work. But they raise their voices anyway in all things they believe in. Silence is not golden. They go to protests and marches, in town or in DC. They back up their art work with deeds, these soldiers of human-kind.

The name Elaine Restifo is synonymous with "The River," a poetry journal she publishes every nine months. The devotion is total. She gathers up poems and publishes them as religiously as Johnny Appleseed spreading his apples across America. A believer in God and love, Elaine and the other poets gather at her proud Lambertville rowhouse with porch and rocking chair for Collating the River Parties, sitting at the kitchen table or on the floor smoothing and stapling the unpaginated half-inch thick white sheets. Out back, a tiny Buddha sits among the grass and soon-to-bloom flowers.

The River sells for \$8 at the Michener Museum in Doylestown, Farley's Book Store in New Hope, and the Lambertville Trading Company, a 10-minute walk from home.

Total democracy is practiced within the pages. Big names mean little, as long as the poetry's good. A poem by Gerald Stern, who lives in the neighborhood and is former poet laureate of New Jersey, is squeezed in between poems with titles such as "Journal Fragments for Naomi's Johnnie" and "I Know the Secret Now, Denise" and "Little White Hairs Falling Away."

Elaine Restifo, the mother of poets in Lambertville, New Jersey, across the clunking chain link bridge from New Hope, is putting together Issue Number 43. Announcements of the collating party coming up soon.

### How would you describe yourself?

I think of myself as a creative person. My poetry and my paintings. I'm this tall older white haired lady. That's what I say if I want somebody to find me somewhere and they don't know me.

### When did you start being a creative person?

I think I was always creative.

### Do you come from a creative family?

My father was an insurance salesman. He wanted to be a conductor of the symphony orchestra and he used to pretend he was leading the orchestra. He taught me you learn something new every day of your life.

### Do you?

Oh, yeah.

### You have a knack for making friends and having people really like you. What advice would you give people on how to make friends?

I would just say, Don't underestimate yourself. Don't try and be friends with someone who's not worth it. True friendship is

when people can play and have fun and some people don't want to do that and just whine. They don't want to be involved in the growth of the friendship or the group.

### You've created such a wonderful loving community of poets in Lambertville.

To me that's the only way the world is going to survive. Through love.

### Were you loved when you were a child?

I had a horrible childhood. It was like living in a nightmare. My mother's best friend took my father away from her. This woman took him over and told him when to breathe in and when to breathe out.



Elaine Restifo

My mom ended up in a psychiatric institution in Trenton. She had electric shock treatments. We used to go up to see her. I've written a poem about it called "Everything I Know About Elephants." She made stuffed elephants in the hospital for my sister and me and she packed them so hard.

I think it was a couple of years she stayed there. We lived in foster homes.

The woman who took my father away, I saw her pulling my mother by the hair out of the woods. And I told the woman about it and she said, "I'm sorry, dearest."

I decided to practice what I would say to the woman if I ever saw her again. I would practice when I was behind the wheel of the car. Each day I'd add a new word. And the minute I got it right the phone rang and I just repeated the statement I'd come up with. And she said, "I'm sorry, dearest," just like she did 50 years before. So I said, "Don't you ever contact this household again."

And for 50 years I had kept that inside, and when I said it my little corpuscles were so joyous, they jumped up and down and said, "I don't have to hold that in! I don't have to hold that in!" I could just feel them jumping around in my arms, jumping around for joy.

#### **Are the memories of your childhood alive today?**

Yeah. Oh, definitely. But I have a quotation I carry around in my wallet. (It's pretty bad when you start quoting yourself.) "The more one suffers as a child and survives, the greater one's chance to avoid, in later life, becoming a f—g moron, because it just gives you empathy for those others who are suffering." It can be a gift in that regard.

#### **Do you still suffer?**

I've had depression but I'm happier now than I've ever been. I've taken St. Zoloff and it helped me to be happy. And I wish everybody could find happiness.

My mother was a wonderful person. We were very poor. One time we were walking to the grocery store to buy a quarter pound of cheese for our bread. There was a kitten that had been run over in the road. We went to the drugstore and bought chloroform and put the baby cat to sleep. I always remembered that kindness. It was a wonderful lesson to me in humanity.

#### **Well, you're known as a very kind person.**

In what way?

**You exude kindness. If I say who is a kind person, I would say Elaine Restifo.**

Really? In what way am I kind.

#### **First of all, you have the kindest voice.**

It's so soft people can hardly hear it.

#### **Yes, but it has no malice in it.**

I can almost sense malice coming. That's why I like poets and artists. There's an anti-semitic in town and I told them I was a Jew. If someone calls a black person a bad name I say my great grandfather was a black man.

#### **You've transformed the terrible experiences that you had as a child into something beautiful. Was that conscious?**

I did have people that loved me - both my grandfathers and grandmothers - and they taught me so many things. My grandmother also almost hypnotized me and told me, "You're a very strong child." She used to tell me that every day.

I worked my way through college. I never had a cent, sometimes I slept through classes because I had an 8-hour a day job, and once I had a friend who would take notes for me while I slept under his chair, on the floor in class.

I graduated from Tyler School of Art. Taught art and three-dimensional design and black and white still photography for the Central Bucks School District.

#### **How did you meet your husband?**

I went with a Jewish man and he was so important to me. I wanted to marry him and he said, Don't worry, we'll be married in 5 years. One day I reminded him of this. He left me sitting on a bench in Columbus Circle in New York and said, Wait here I'll be right back. He was gone for hours. He came back crying, his face was red, and said he'd talked to his parents, and they said they'd sit shiva if he married a gentile.

So we had a split-up and I married his best friend on the rebound. I didn't even know who he was. I wanted to have kids. We had three kids. The first born was Chrissy, but she suffers and I think it's a problem that comes from the female side of the family and the men seem to skip right out of it. My son graduated from Harvard Medical School as a surgeon. Oh, they have a great life. He has three kids. They live in Connecticut. My other son teaches school and lives at the seashore.

#### **How did you feel after the breakup?**

I was decimated because I felt betrayed. I had never had anyone demonstrate to me how to demand proper treatment. My Scotch-Irish grandmother and her husband of German extraction were devoted to one another.

#### **Oh, I always thought you were Italian.**

A lot of people think I'm Italian. But Italian women aren't as big as me. I used to be six feet tall. I've probably shrunk. I was in Spain and they would just call out "Amazono, Amazono" when they saw me.

### **What does it feel like to be tall?**

You don't need ladders. In 71 years I've sort of gotten used to it. It used to bother me as a kid because I was taller than everybody else. Now it doesn't bother me.

### **You live what seems to be a very serene life. How did you accomplish this?**

I protect myself and make it that way. I don't answer the doorbell. I stay out of trouble. I don't answer telemarketers. I keep my eye on the sparrow. I keep working on my River and painting. I don't get involved with people who are out to use people and just want to take.

### **I'm not as familiar with your paintings as your poetry.**

I did a series of condor paintings. I read that there were only 87 condors left in California. They're beautiful. But they're actually ugly birds. They have red skins. Red heads. Just amazing birds. They're raptors.

I decided to honor the remaining 87 condors by painting a series of 87 condors, but I only got as far as five. I named the paintings, "Please Forgive Me, Mr. Condor, No.1" and "Please Forgive Me, Mr. Condor, No. 2." Etc. I sold all but one, which is hanging in my bathroom.

They're coming back. Naturalists steal the condor eggs and teach them how to hate people so they won't get killed, and then release them into the wild again.

### **Do you feel you've lived a lot of lives in one?**

I believe in reincarnation. I took est training once where we had to sit knee to knee with a stranger, look eye to eye, not laugh or giggle, and look them in their eyes for an hour. It was one of the most amazing experiences in my life. There were hundreds of people in the room doing this.

Staring into this man's eyes I saw the incarnations of this man. I saw him as many different figures. His face turned into an old Chinese man. I was really stunned by it. Not everybody who did it could see it but many did. It was dynamite.

In my different incarnations, I was once a very strong big black lady, kind, loving, with little grey curls on her head. I just have a feeling that I was. I think I was bitten by a dog because I'm terrified of dogs. I just wrote a story called "How to Tell a Dog from a Refrigerator."

### **I can't imagine staring into someone's eyes for an hour. It could make people crazy, make them break. est is known for doing that to fragile people.**

It could make you crazy. It got me into therapy. Then I got into the 12-step program for adult children of alcoholics - my dad was an alcoholic - and CODA - they helped enormously. I really feel I've held onto my life with my fingernails to stay

sane, to stay conscious. And I feel very grateful that I had to claw my way up the cliff.

I feel strong. I feel sensitive, but I'm learning how to live with sensitivity and be kind at the same time. We have to protect ourselves.

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## **THREE WORKS BY ELAINE RESTIFO**

### **Mutton On The Bounty**

Years ago I was having trouble with my left leg. I had to pick it up with both hands after getting settled into my car, sort of like dragging the rest of myself in before closing the door. I would swing it over, like a huge mutton and set it down in its place near the brake pedal. Whatever nerves or muscles or combination of those things were involved had stopped doing what they usually did. This hefting process was strange but I got used to it and did it automatically. I planned to adjust my life to this small mystery, and move on.

Ignoring the problem was not possible. Pain began to shoot down my leg, on the inside. I visited a doctor. According to him, nerve conduction studies were required. I had something called reverse sciatica. Unbridled sciatica. I had no idea sciatica could be so bold as to choose the inside of the leg as well as the outside. Quietly, as I left the office I questioned the nurse about these studies.

"Are they painful?" I asked. At first she said nothing but put her arm tenderly around my shoulders, grimaced as if in agony, audibly drew in her breath through her teeth and said, finally, "All I know is that there's electricity involved and they're no damn picnic." I thanked her and crept away, my mind racing, my cowardly self wondering what I had done or had NOT done to deserve to be, as I saw it, electrocuted. I could hear the clang of a cell door and someone with a deep voice intoning, "Cowardly dead woman with white hair walking."

What I had NOT done turned out to be, in fact, more to the point. I looked back over my entire life but got no clue until watching Molly Shannon one night on Saturday Night Live. She did one of her classic skits and in the end did her famous backwards crash into the stage set, legs akimbo, pure white panties with elastic around the legs on display, the exact kind I'd always worn.

In a brilliant flash I asked myself what size panties I'd worn when I was twenty. The answer came, "Seven and a half." Age thirty? Oh, vanity, thy name is woman, "Seven and a half."

Currently? After bearing three children and gaining thirty pounds? "Same size! Oh thank you, thank you, thank you, Molly Shannon!" Next day I rushed out and bought a dozen size ten panties with no elastic around the legs.

Within two weeks, the “hefting of the mutton” was no longer necessary, the unbridled sciatica was gone and so was what remained of the deification of the doctor. Doctors ask a lot of questions but have you ever heard one ask, “Checked your panty size lately?”

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## Give Me Old People

I am nearly fifty years old and I am not frail.

The voices of babies in the Springtime are becoming more delicious  
And I can bend down to touch a violet without swooning or creaking.  
What am I doing here, could you give me a damned sign?  
My heart pounds when I run along the river in the sunset.  
It likes the exercise, my big, biggest heart  
In the twilight - running against a Valkyrie sky.  
When I walk with friends my age, I favor them as if they'll melt.  
They are so frail and their heels turn in and they limp in pain  
And sometimes their knees ache.  
They've taken to whining and railing, a tremendous bore  
against a Valkyrie sky.  
Give me older people who've survived.  
They know when to stop feeding the birds in Springtime.  
They can skin an eel  
And mend a net  
And rock a baby.  
Closing in on that unknowable, they are so brave I could wince.  
They can clean a fish in the darkness  
And lead a nation  
They can talk to God.

*Read and dedicated to my dear friend of much inspirational value, Mary Bye, on the fine occasion of her 75th birthday celebration at Pebble Hill Church, April 23, 1988.*

## My Life Among Feet (Adventures of a Foot Fetishist)

“Every beetle is a gazelle in the eyes of its Mother.”

- Moorish Proverb

Oh toes! I'm learning to wrap you up  
In gauzy stuff, each of you standing stiff and smart,  
A row of small mummies. You tell exquisite tales:  
You speak of vanity and wear, improper shoes  
And love and pain, problems of weight and posture,  
Dreams unfulfilled. Toe-y attempts at redemption.

Do you remember when you were fresh and new,  
Each nail almost invisible? Now you love your  
four minute twirling whirlpool bath, temperature  
One hundred degrees. Is it heaven among the suds?  
“The doctor's late. Want to stay in a little longer?”

Long feet, short feet, fat and wide, strong feet  
Newly out of husky boots, swollen feet,  
Frail and tender tiny feet, you come my way,  
Mostly bones, and tell your secrets.  
The rest are average, careworn, common feet  
With simple stories. A foetal goddess, I see them all.

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## The Anniversary

By *Phyllis Lewy*

There won't be cake, candles, champagne. There won't be a party or guests. Yet tomorrow is an anniversary. Eight months ago, my mother said, “Enough.” Three days later, she died. Her death has become my death. The part of me that knows peace and serenity no longer exists.

Eighteen months ago, life stopped. My mother was my best friend and confidante. Her non-judgmental, unconditional love was the best I'll experience.

Eighteen months ago, life changed. Her death tolled the end of childhood and the beginning of an emptiness that can never be filled.

Eighteen months ago was the last time I heard her delicate voice and touched her cool, soft skin.

Eighteen months - not much in the passing time, but an eternity.

# TWO BY CYNTHIA MARCOLINA

## Pain

That windy November one hundred suffering came to a quiet private place for safety, comfort or contact. Connections were made by our eyes, hands, words, or silence. The distance between us was shortened by the bridges of compassion, encouragement and hope. Outside my window we see the geese fly over the pond. A new sacred space forms when vulnerabilities are revealed and secrets shared. Depression has no numerical value and can't be represented by a number or a symbol and anxiety knows no color. I am a guide through their grief and growth and they are my emissaries of society.

## Bones Of Acknowledgment

John the dogs are back.  
You know the ones.  
They're growling for my  
attention and affection.  
So what shall I feed them today?  
Which bones John?  
The bone of affirmation?  
The bone of fairness?  
The bone of objectivity?  
Or forgiveness John forgiveness?

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## Light

Fires Intertwine  
Dampen my wick  
Put a chill to my flame  
Burn to a sizzle  
Quiet my pain  
To the string I grip  
The wax hides the pretend  
Dipped into my living skin  
My being is not clear  
The soul is but spice  
Be by me always  
And, see my light  
Even through the days I melt  
You allow me to see who I really am  
..a candle  
..a flame  
..a soul  
..and spice

All I see is my best friend.

- Danielle H.

## Time

What we've accomplished yesterday, disappears today  
We may win today, but it fades away  
The castles we build, are washed away in time  
And time marches on, it isn't on our side

Time, it tears a building down, and someday a mountain too  
It's indifferent to our wishes, it won't wait for me or you  
Each magical night, is destroyed by the newcoming day  
Moments, like jewels, are lost, as time washes our  
memories away

Poets come and poets go, attitudes will change you know  
Who knows which way the wind will blow, or if it will  
tomorrow?  
Although revolutions can change nations, there may be no  
trace of a civilization  
We may be here just a moment, you see, in this planet's  
history

We may look back from where we've come, but the future  
isn't ours to see

The only constant here is change, and time remains a  
mystery  
Our lives, they seem to pass us by, in the blinking of an eye  
Everything's just passing through, on its way to something  
new....

- Lawrence E. DePietropaulo

# THREE POEMS BY STEPHEN BONNELLI.

*"I learned to write poems in prison. I was  
there for sixteen years."*

## My Gait

My gait, I can move  
I walk with speed  
Sometimes I don't walk alone  
I walk with a cane.

Come walk with me.  
Walk my gait.  
First we have to walk  
Through my grey gate.

Are you ready!  
Shall we go North, or South.  
How about North.  
Walk with my gait.

I have someone to show you  
Walk one step  
then two  
my gait  
Where are we!  
We are in front of the  
Mountains.

Walk with me.

## The Window

I look from the attic  
My diamond window  
I can see the mountains  
The window

Cut glass of many colors  
Is my window  
I can see the water  
Flowing from the mountains  
The window

I can see the sun shine  
I see the colors beneath the sea  
The window

Look out the color full window

What do you see?  
The window.

## The Runner

The runner starts fresh  
They take long strides  
Would you run with me  
"The runner"

I have a handicap  
I run with one leg  
I am blind  
"The runner"

I have a number  
I carry my water  
I heard the Starter's gun  
"The runner"

There are 250 runners  
I feel proud  
Each runner is blind  
Would you run with me?  
"The runner"

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## Everything You Eat

Everything you eat looks delicious.  
I've savored every morsel that your mouth has graced.  
And, yes, you have good cause to be suspicious  
That it's your lips I truly yearn to taste.

I love it when we have a date,  
A fig, a prune, a raisin.  
My jaw drops as you masticate,  
My poor tongue scarcely stays in.

Your cheeks are beautiful when stuffed  
and then returned to hollow.  
I simply cannot get enough;  
Your every bite I follow,  
And I relearn the depth of love  
Everytime you swallow.

I envision a kiss, but who am I fooling?  
Our mouths just aren't meant for meeting,  
For mine's preoccupied with drooling,  
And yours is always eating.

- Mike Cohen

## Self Portrait

There was a young woman who had  
lots of promise,  
but she preferred to live in a lonely solace.  
She pretended to be superior,  
but inside felt inferior.  
She held on to a lot of baggage,  
which many times made her act savage.

If only she could see the big picture,  
she wouldn't be so quick to judge  
herself and others  
with such stricture.

- Janice Haage

## Untitled For My Infant Granddaughter

I fear for her life  
from the depth  
of my darkest place  
I wonder if she'll survive  
the last surgery  
and the next  
just one week old  
a new child bleeds  
from steel blades cutting  
her dying leg  
dying from inside out  
so they must take it now  
and there will be burial  
paid mourners and candles  
stained glass  
hymns and prayer  
paper to sign  
phone calls to make  
groceries to shop  
appointments to keep  
parking validation, validation  
and a sacrificial lamb  
as the medicine  
goes through your blood  
you lie still  
apparatus around you beeps  
and you jump  
we jump  
at the thought of it

your belly is red  
the tubes are clear  
your arm taut  
from needles and tape  
and cotton

and your mother  
like cotton  
comes to you religiously  
she stands over you  
and sings

she touches you  
and you feel her softness  
she holds your hand  
and you feel her gentle fingertips  
she comes closer  
your pain disappears  
she is near  
and your world changes

- Joanne Leva

## Bipolar

Bipolar - the state of two endedness.  
The high and the low, a yin and a yang, the skin or the fang.  
Up follows down, the oval, the round, the outlawed and  
straight,  
too early, too late.

Arriving unnoticed I lotus'd relaxing,  
surmising that little would happen exciting.  
It seemed an eternity folded like that  
but 'twas only decades,  
believe it or not.

East through a tunnel o'erlooking the bay.  
So much to take care of, so what: seize the day!  
Plans to go over, blueprints to view,  
dimensions to measure,  
too much for too few.  
Ever undaunted, nor veering from course,  
rides the arranger, the stranger, the boss

BIPOLAR..... My molar!  
My Sancho, my Panza.  
Oh conscience, oh pretense.  
On Dasher, off Donner,  
On Flasher, soft Trixie,  
On Waxy, who's happy?  
The sinner is: skin'm  
Then lock him away.

Just maybe this once,  
Would you open your mind up  
To someone who's different?  
Cope with it, be with it  
Believe in it once  
Perhaps you'll want seconds  
The bipolar crunch.

- Don Green 2003



# 5 POEMS WRITTEN WHILE JANICE WAS IN BUILDING 50

*It was a painful part of my life. I seriously have no idea where Jenny is now. I wouldn't even know how to start to try and find her. But I want her to be remembered.*

## Janice 1

May song bronze river  
shifting carelessly  
across whispering deserts  
blooming

Deep fright strong roots  
clenching soil  
in turmoil  
unwinding

Fade March sun cold  
give ask  
flowers on paper  
drying

Underneath, wild  
gropes like a  
child

Carelessly strong

Unexpected

Found

## Janice 2

Break blue from within  
nourish life  
soul, body, mind

Preen  
prepare for the sky  
your sky

Too soon to fly  
hidden in tall grass  
always above  
the sky

The sky

Darkness enfolds  
chill of dawn  
where  
am  
I?

Wings soon will carry you  
soaring beyond shadows  
blue morning light

Patience, little robin  
look inward now  
find strength to  
carry you upward

## Janice 3

Black caves, hideaways  
secrets whispered along  
nighttime highways

Voices within, without  
command your soul  
behind locked doors  
indifferent

Reign of despair  
will unravel  
revealing light

Light of truth  
truth unleashed  
rescues you  
truth

Oh, God  
let me live  
wholly

Forgiven child

Just ask

## Janice 4

Aimless thoughts skim the surface  
hiding turmoil, repressed  
rip-tides of anger  
dragging  
down

But you won't sink  
keep your cool  
strong girl  
suffering  
lost

Let go. I promise you  
won't drown. Let the  
current take you  
releasing fear

Dance under stars  
sing beneath sky  
explode from within  
torrents of emotion  
don't whisper

Shout

Loud

## Janice 5

Sunday blooms brightly  
stirs sap blood flow  
cadence of spring  
slow warm

Spring  
renewal shaded  
memories float away  
purged soul lightly rises

Soon you will be out  
there. Thick jungle of  
strangled emotions  
and  
what do you crave?  
Loosen the bonds that  
bind you. All is new.

New you blossoming  
new light shines your eyes  
glimmer playfully don't let  
yesterday crush you

You are newly born  
woman child rise up beyond  
needless pain  
hold your soul  
tenderly  
love  
your  
self

- Craig A. Slingluff

# Bernadette, Pray For Me

by Ruth Deming

My back had begun to ache something terrible. And there was no reason for this to happen. And the pain wouldn't stop. I would wake up in the morning and the pain would be waiting, like the devil at the foot of the bed. And the pain and I did a real slow cheek to cheek to get me out of bed, just tiptoeing through the pain, the best I knew how.

And it was on account of the bed that there was pain. If I could just figure out a way to sleep in it without truly lying down, but it was the lying down and the staying there all night that did it.

The bed had masterful significance. I'd try to make that bed work if only for the story that came with it. And the still smooth feel of the fresh pine he made it with. For me, he made a bed.

And now it was killing me.

That must, I figured, be why my mother couldn't part with things. They were the stories of her life. Her history.

So I hung onto the bed and tried to save myself from buying a new one. The mattress was one of those big ones, a queen, with a blue background and fluffy red and white roses on it. It was so clean and pretty you could have used it as a living room couch if you were a sharecropper.

"The last thing I wanted to do," I said to Ada and Ricky over breakfast at the mall, "was get rid of that damn mattress. You'll never know how bad I wanted to keep it."

I told them how I flipped it over, put a board underneath, bought some foam padding, put a pillow under my back. You name it. I did everything I could think of to keep that goddam mattress.

Finally, there was nothing more to try. I just sucked in my stomach and put it out on trash night. A mattress, leaning against the telephone pole, blue, under the almost full moon.

I was having the time of my life telling this to Rick and Ada. Wasn't it me who always exclaims to people, You've got to tell your story to the exact right person! Don't go wasting your fantastic stories on people who don't understand!

So, here we are, the three of us. Sitting at a table for four at the mall. Ada's the gal whose smile lights up rooms. Ricky is the new guy whose parents were in the camps in Hungary. He wears bright white sneakers that gleam.

And I'm telling them I go into the guest bedroom and lug the futon out of the room, dragging it, by sheer will, across the carpet, taking small steps like an ancient Chinese woman with bound feet, so as not to strain my back, dragging it through the door into my room, an empty room now, without the massive bed. I push it against the wall where the old bed was.

It was as old as the hills. And covered with an elaborate pattern - burgundy, navy, and gold stripes - gorgeous, picked from a swatchbook long ago. At one time, a very long time ago, the futon was the love thing of my life. A person can love objects in an entirely different way, yet eternally important and meaningful, as they can love each other or the sky. Why, if I told you I love the Marine Corps decal and have them in practically every room of my house and 6 of 'em in my top drawer in case I run out, and one in the car for good luck, you'd think I was nuts. Just call me love-crazed, that's all. Did you ever take a good look at a Marine decal? It shines. A mirror effect. If you don't have a mirror, you can hold it in your hand and see the reflection of your blue blouse in there.

The decal. It's all I have left of my dad.

What else was there to do, I was a girl of 34 with two grandfatherless children, but went into the Hatboro recruiting office and saluted. "I'm the proud daughter of a US Marine," I said. "I'd like a decal for a souvenir."

The guy in the Marine cap reached into the desk, pulling out a three-inch high stack.

"Wow!" I said saluting. "I'm in! Off to Parris Island I go."

But, the futon, alas, lacked give. It was like sleeping on a slab of raw clay.

So then I started to get to work on it in earnest. I bought one of those foam egg crates for bed-ridden people, put some blankets on top of that and even dragged my down comforter out of the closet, to sleep on top of it like *The Princess and The Pea*.

And then one morning I woke up and the back pain had spread. I couldn't walk.

I did a sort of roll out of bed. It took half a day to straighten up. I mumbled quietly, madly, under my breath, "I refuse to be a person who suffers from back pain."

And yet, oddly, the thought of forking out money to buy a new bed was nothing short of horrific.

You see, I am what they call a cheapskate. I mean, a really really bad cheapskate. I mean so bad you wouldn't believe how I hate to spend money. This is a very unattractive quality in both men and women alike. I come from a family of cheapskates on the female side. I follow dutifully in their footsteps. You find this quality in other people and you detest it. But let me tell you something. When I spend money, my heart breaks. And plays a sad melody, the wind whistling through the bamboo.

I am a woman of great contradictions. I am a simple person, really, but all people have their quirks. For instance, though I tell you I am a cheapskate, when I go to the MAC machine at the Wawa, I withdraw \$200 at a time. I had the good fortune only yesterday, when no one was looking, to scoop up a handful of bank receipts and take a cursory look at them. The man who had gone before me had \$5.86 left in his bank account.

Other people had 3-digits plus change. The runner up had something like \$580. And, I of course, always come in first because I am the queen of cheapskates and had, still, \$1,280 left in my savings.

So when it came time to buying the new mattress, I just gave myself a good talking to: Look, Ruthie, you're fifty eight years old, you could drop dead tomorrow, you've got enough money in your savings and your retirement account to last you until you're 64, your friend Judy Diaz will let you move in if you're penniless, if she's still alive, so start parting with your money now, joyfully.

From hereon in, I was to spend money like there's no tomorrow. I'm to be cautious certainly. I'm to continue my cheapskate ways. But now, this time, I will spend money joyfully.

And out into the world I went. And loaded up on my favorite things: At once I bought four rolls of name brand Scotch Mailing Tape, a box of four highlighters of different fluorescent colors, a fifth address book, 10 pair of look-alike black socks from the Sox Lady in Furlong, scissors for every room in the house, boxes of Bic pens, Elmer's Carpenter's Glue, a Merck Manual, a swiveling Replogle. I bought a new couch for napping for \$25 at Impact Thrift, and a curio cabinet for my clay sculptures.

If you're gonna live, I said to myself, you're gonna live right.

So I went to a large department store to buy a mattress. I took into account all the names of department stores I could think of - Strawbridge, Macy's, Bloomingdales, Sears, Boscov's - and I said to myself, Where do you go if you want to buy a good mattress? I closed my eyes and thought a moment. The first name that came to mind is where I went. On the way over, I started doubting myself. "Shut up!" I yelled. "Don't give me no lip!"

And I went to the department store and I couldn't find the mattress department. It was as if they were in the process of discontinuing it. Did you know, for example, that furniture departments and rug departments have been discontinued in many of our fine department stores? Things like this happen. For no reason at all. One day the rug department is there, the rugs swinging vertically on those special rug-hanging racks that are sooo heavy to push, and the next day the copper pots 'n pans are hanging from the ceiling.

I told Pastor Ron when we were sitting in his living room during our book discussion group and he was promoting Christ, I said, Look, Ron, I'm a Jew. To me, the whole world is a manifestation of God. Everyone at the book club loved me. They thought I was sensual and exotic because I'm a Jew and a free-thinker and a manic depressive, besides. They were doing their best to follow my line of thinking about everything being a manifestation of god, but wow they had so many constraints!

It's like this, I said to Pastor Ron. I have this little bitty window way high up I look out of from my office. (I talk with my hands big time and was gesturing the shape of the window.) All I see

are the backyard trees. The branches. It's kind of like a monk's cell. Just this little swatch of branches of the backyard trees. Sometimes I look up and there's a squirrel dusting off its tail or Mr. or Mrs. Cardinal standing before me proud on a branch. Manifestations of god.

He looked at me in wonder while I was expounding. Well, let's put it this way. It was a look of "corrected wonder."

Once, he'd been a boy of eight standing under the starry skies of Oklahoma looking up at them stars. So so far away. And wondering who he was and where he fit in. And what the heck was going on on the surface of all them stars. And wondered how can it be true like the science book said that the sun was hotter than anything he could ever imagine, hotter even than mama's griddle when she cooked the corn fritters, so hot in fact he'd burn to a crisp if he ever got near.

And I imagine he couldn't stand the feel of what it felt like to be a boy of eight standing alone under the stars. It must have been a feeling that was intolerable. And accepted Christ on the spot on account of that feeling. In other words, Pastor Ron is a man who doesn't take gladly to mystery. Can't tolerate a little mystery in their lives, makes them squirm.

But certainly, even with his Jesus Christ ways, Pastor Ron ought to have understood when I said everything is a manifestation of god, oughtn't he've? I didn't go so far as to tell him mattresses are a manifestation of god, that would have been a powerful waste of time, but I tell you the woman in the mattress department where I finally ended up, she was a woman of god and I'll bet she knew with every fibre of her being that mattresses were a manifestation of god.

The mattress woman took one look at me and knew me through and through. Her face was impassive. She moved like a shade. I could tell she was on psychiatric medication and had made peace with it. I watched her slow motion movement and marveled at her sureness.

I spoke.

"I have a bad back and want the best mattress for the lowest price you can give me." I was holding my lower back as we spoke.

She nodded.

"Can we sit down here and talk about the mattress?" I asked. "My back is killing me."

We both sat down on the edge of a big bed with its innards revealed showing the different layers of comfort underneath. She knew everything in the world about mattresses but I wasn't in the mood to listen. I was frightened about how much a new mattress would cost. Three hundred dollars? Five hundred? I was trembling with fear. Except then I remembered: You have enough money to live in the style you're accustomed to for four and a half more years. Think of it as unending rain. Jump rope underneath it, let your feet walk through the wet grass and the rain splash like a bath on your wet face and feel the good feel of rain on your face.

She spoke quietly. "My mother used to have back pain," she said looking at me. I didn't say a word but I kept it in my mind as she was telling me about the mattress sales. I stopped her because I didn't think my mind could absorb any more information about mattresses. I asked the only question that mattered: "How did your mother's back get better?"

"We prayed over it," she said softly.

I thought a moment. And looked around.

"Will you pray for me?" I asked.

She looked at me. A faraway look. I'd written a six-page poem one time about Bernadette of Lourdes, a poem lost, of course, among the rubble. God was I in love with that Bernadette girl. Did massive research on her at the Hatboro Library. She, the mattress lady, could have been Bernadette of Lourdes with the water come pouring out. It was a terrific poem. I could find it if I needed to. I passed it one day not long ago, written on the old Apple with the paper with the holes on the side.

She looked down shyly. "I don't know if you'd want me to pray with you," she said. "I'm studying to be a Jehovah's Witness. Some people think that's a cult and that we don't believe in the true God."

"I don't mind," I said. "It's all about being in the presence of God and it doesn't matter how you get there."

We bowed our heads. She closed her eyes and I closed mine. I let myself sink into the depth of the prayer. I didn't know what I was doing. But I just closed my eyes and followed her words and tried to enter them, inhabit them, suck them into myself, and I thought, "She is doing a wonderful job praying for me."

After that, we went over and picked out a mattress. My back was still hurting. I said I have to get a drink of water because I'm having a powerful experience. She walked me over to the water fountain. The water came shooting out higher than you'd expect, falling onto the floor. I took my water bottle out of my purse, filled it up three times and three times downed the water.

She watched me as I drank it down. I am nothing if not thirsty. It felt fantastic to drink it and to have someone watch me drink-

ing it. I was very relaxed as if I were putting on a show: "Ruthie Drinks the Water Down."

We went over to the cash register to pay for the mattress. It was half price. It was cheap. One hundred fifty dollars with one of those good names attached to it, Serta or BeautyRest. It wasn't a Stearns and Foster. She told me those were too expensive and not what they were cracked up to be.

I paid with my credit card and I watched her closely as she entered my order into the computer. She did it effortlessly. I thought to myself I wonder if it was hard for her to learn to do this sort of thing.

She told me the men would deliver it on Saturday and remove my futon.

She gave me a long snake of a receipt which I stuffed into my purse. We nodded our goodbyes.

As I started to leave, she said softly, "I'm a schizophrenic."

"Really!" I whispered, and touched her arm. "Let's go over there and talk."

We went back over to the mattress and sat back down. We talked some more. I told her I had manic depression and she felt really sorry for me. I told her not to worry, it wasn't so bad anymore. And she told me about her voices. That she took Zyprexa and they'd mostly stopped. She said it wasn't until she joined the Witnesses and learned that no human being is perfect and that only God is perfect that she knew it was okay to hear voices.

It was the one thing that made her feel she wasn't a bad person.

And I looked at this woman. I never asked her a single question. She just talked to me.

And she gave me peace, that schizophrenic woman, she gave me peace. She and that mattress she sold me. White and patterned as a snowflake.

