**She's Back to Sleeping by**[**Ryan Blacketter**](http://www.eclectica.org/v21n1/contributor_notes.html#blacketter)

Church women brought pizza and root beer to Cory's house. It was after mass, and they came without any warning. While his mom stood at the sink looking out the window, Mrs. Hogan touched her shoulder, praying aloud. "I feel your hand steering this family, Lord," she said. "Marty's adventure will end wonderfully, like St. Paul's at Damascus. I know it will."

"He went to Las Vegas to get drunk," his mom said.

Mrs. Hogan said, "Shh, the children," an edgy chuckle falling on the last word. She began another prayer. The gutter dripped on the tarp-covered freezer out back. Cold air leaked in the windows.

Cory and Bill Hogan sat under the kitchen table. Cory looked at the kid's chest, telling him which guys at school were ugly and poor.

"You can come swim in our indoor pool," Bill told him. "It's so warm and great. Everybody's welcome. Anybody."

Cory dipped a finger in his friend's cup and flicked root beer on his denim jacket. Bill touched the buttons, as if he was embarrassed for him.

"We'd like to invite you for Thanksgiving," Mrs. Hogan said.

He gave Bill a few more sprinkles of root beer.

"Stop that, right now!" said Cory's mom.

"It's okay, Mrs. Shane," Bill said. "Don't be mad at Cory."

"Now there's a sweet, good boy," one of the church women said. Bill smiled.

Cory felt his heart beating. The women and their children were shapes in the corner of his eye.

He went out the back door and crossed the side road to the muddy hill and climbed it, kicking toeholds and grabbing weeds. His back was to the kitchen window. In case his mom didn't see him climbing, he tossed a rock that scraped and clattered on their road. When she heard the rock she might run outside, holding her elbows in the cold, and say, *Don't go to the cliffs!* But when he finally glanced down, the kitchen window was a light nobody stood in.

The view opened at the top of the hill. Fields rose to high cliffs and far, tiny-looking trees. You could walk ten minutes over the fields, even run partway, and the trees hardly got closer. They were small and round. They were perfect winter trees in the sky. He watched the path to make the trees come faster. His breath misted. His hands were numb, but the rest of him was hot, and the cold wind felt nice in his clothes.

When he did reach the trees, they were just trees—dripping, full of wrinkled berries. He stood near the edge of the cliff. Even the Snake River appeared small below. The night before, his father had dropped his old army bag in the living room and said he was going to visit Spike Beezhold in Las Vegas. Spike's wife had left him. Cory's mom crocheted on the couch next to Matt, and Cory was on his knees. His father spoke to the TV.

"Spike needs me," he said. "Besides, no vacation in two years."

His mom said nothing. On the picture wall was a photograph of Dad and Spike, in the Army many years ago, the two of them grinning in T-shirts. They looked ready to hug one another one-armed, but then you saw that each of them held a cigarette and wanted to burn the other guy's shoulder. It was a funny picture. Even his mom thought so.

Cory did five pushups on the floor. "That was ten," he said, "but I can do twenty. Dad!"

"Pretty good, buddy," Dad said to the TV.

"And you're taking a vacation now, right before Thanksgiving?" she said.

"Spike says he's on the edge of... doing something. I just talked to him."

"Boys, get up to your rooms," she said.

"Do we have to, Dad?" Cory asked. He didn't say.

"For two weeks?" she said. "Why not a weekend?"

"Boss cleared me for three weeks. I figure two weeks is a halfway compromise. Then I'll have a week with you and the boys."

"Can't you at least wait till morning?" she said.

"I told him in high school if he ever needed me, let me know, I'd be there. Gave him my word."

"Yes, he was your best drinking buddy. He sure was."

"Just because you quit, doesn't mean the rest of us have to. But I'm not going there to drink."

"Look, Dad!" Matt yelled. "I can stand on my head for one hour!"

"I have to get out of here," he said. "I have to get there before, you know—something happens."

He swung his bag out the door and warmed the truck engine, popped the brake, and drove away.

To keep warm at the cliffs, Cory threw rocks high in the air, listening for the plosh in the water. What he wanted to see again was the summertime in winter, like two years before, when his mom called him and his brother out front and they stood in melting snow: icicles dripped, bushes trickled, steam rose off the ground. T-shirt weather, in January. All they did was hang around the driveway for a couple of hours in the sun, their father tuning his engine and their mom reading in a lawn chair nearby, Matt and Cory tossing a muddy stick back and forth and trying to catch the dry end. But it was a good day.

One of the rocks Cory threw off the cliff didn't hit water. He listened for about 20 seconds as if it were still falling. When he remembered the box of Littles in his sweatshirt pocket, he took air through his teeth. The gummy candies were stuck together. He cringed at the sour taste and walked the fields in a sugary hum.

Below him in the distance, he saw his house and some of the other house fronts on Prospect. It was a crooked road above the river. A few of the other houses were peeling. His father had painted their place the summer before, by himself, over a few hot days, while his mom napped.

The church women's cars were gone. Sam ran the chain-link fence, barking. Cory jiggled loose the gate handle, went in and clinked it shut. The dog wiggled in his arms jabbing his wet nose at his face, as if his father were home and sitting right inside.

The Hogans' porch was decorated with straw bales, leaf piles, squashes, and pumpkins. Mr. Hogan opened the door to them in a beard and scratchy cardigan. "Let's put you by the fire," Mr. Hogan told his mom. She had gotten chilled in the car with its weak heater. In the kitchen Bill and Jan helped their mom, stirring bowls at the chopping-block counter under hanging pots and pans, while the half-time band played on TV. Mrs. Hogan turned in a circle, waving a knife and sharpener high in the air like batons.

Cory put up the hood on his sweatshirt. So what if Jan won trophies riding horses? So what if Mrs. Hogan had gotten some inheritance and Mr. Hogan taught at the college and they had their own ranch?

At the dining room table, Mrs. Hogan closed her eyes. "Thank you for our home, our beautiful children, our many friendships, and our good company on this day, and please help those without a home, without friends, without—"

"Okay, okay," Mr. Hogan said. "Amen."

"I was in the middle of my prayer."

"Thanks for the prayer, Meg. Let's eat."

"You thought I was suggesting the Shanes are without? My God, no. You have everything in the world." Mrs. Hogan smiled at them. "I mean that. I count you as being one of the very blessed families. I'm just so pleased you're here."

Bill and Jan moaned to show they liked their food. Cory got a full plate, with good dark gravy and hot rolls that pulled apart easily, and finished before anybody else. Mr. and Mrs. Hogan were drinking a lot of the wine. His mom had embarrassed him when she asked for juice, showing them she used to be a drunk.

He frowned at people's food till Mr. Hogan gave him seconds.

"I was driving by your house last week," Mr. Hogan said. "I thought, boy, must be nice living on the Snake. Water looks so pretty in the morning. Guess you must be big fishermen."

"I'm afraid all the fish are gone, in the Snake," his mom said.

"The fish are never gone," Mrs. Hogan said. "Never, never. Don't you believe a word of it."

"We fish the Clearwater," Bill said. "It makes me feel so alive."

Mrs. Hogan said, explaining in a hushed voice, "Every morning that we have the day together, I try to remember to say, 'Let's be alive today. Let's really live.'"

"But it really does," Bill said, blushing. "I mean, Jesus was a fisherman."

"You, sweet one, are a blessing."

Jan touched the heart necklace at her blue turtleneck. "You wore that hood up at school last week," she said to Cory. "Are you a Dungeons and Dragons guy now?"

"No." Cory swiped off the hood. Jan was two grades above him and Bill at St. Stephen's. The teachers liked the Hogan children, and so did the kids.

"How'd you boys like to see our horses?" Mrs. Hogan said.

"No thanks."

"Cory!" his mom said.

Mr. Hogan laughed. "No bull when a kid's talking. I like it."

"You don't want to see our prize horses?" Jan said.

"I'd like to see working horses," Cory said. "Not prancing-around horses."

"Cory's father grew up on a ranch," his mom said.

"Isn't goat roping something people have to do, instead of want to do?" Jan said.

"I like goats!" Bill said.

"Sounds good to me," Mr. Hogan said. "The human instinct to live off the land. We can trace that back to Adam—the first roper of goats."

"Yeah, but he had to," Jan said. "God made him do that because he, I don't know, he failed. I mean, wasn't it kind of, I don't know—a shame?"

Mr. Hogan brushed something off his sleeve. "Of course not. I teach people how to farm. That's what I teach."

"Jan was only reminding us that we all share in Adam and Eve's failure," Mrs. Hogan said. "Every one of us. Every single one. Isn't that what you meant, honey?"

"Yeah. I didn't mean anything by it."

The table was quiet. To cheer them up, Bill played "Joy to the World" with his crab dish and fork, while his mom hummed along. Then he walked around to Cory. Big snowflakes floated in his heavy red sweater. He bounced on his toes, holding his arms out from his sides.

"Can I get you an eggnog?" he said.

"No thanks."

He touched Cory's elbow. "Are you sure?"

"I don't want any. I already said so ten times."

"Thank you all so much," his mom said, lifting her juice. "You have so much to be thankful for, really. To the Hogans and their big pretty house!"

Mr. Hogan drank his wine.

They drove the Clearwater River back toward town. The road was dry, but in the sky between the hills, under dark cloud patches, rain fell. It rained only in some places. The heater puffed lukewarm air. In the front seat Cory pulled a blanket over his lap, resting his feet on the tupperware box with turkey inside. In back, Matt had a sleeping bag that kept sliding off the seat in a thin hiss.

"Are you going to go home and sleep?" Matt said.

"No," she said. "But I would like my bed and my book and a hot cup of tea. You boys can entertain yourselves for a while. It's okay to have time alone sometimes. It's okay to sit down and read a book. Isn't it? Answer me."

Matt frowned, the mouth corners tugging. "Yes," he said.

Cory plugged in the cigarette lighter, then moved the hot circle in figure eights at his face, enjoying the heat of it. "Look," he said. He plugged it in for her, and it glowed red on her cheek. She leaned away. "Watch out," she said and took it from him.

"Can we call Dad?" Cory said. "Do we have Spike's number?"

She slowed for a bend in the river. Their headlight swung over the water in a single beam. "Your father can call us. He's the one who left."

Every time the phone rang, Cory thought it was him calling. Later, in early December, his mom was smelling a plate of leftovers from the back of the fridge when the phone rang. Matt and Cory left the table, saying, "Is it him? Is it him?"

"Go to your rooms." She covered the phone. "Go to your rooms or no sweets after dinner." Matt and Cory sat in the back staircase, listening.

"Another week more? Sure, take a month, take a year." She clattered the plate into the sink. "What? For the family? Now you're doing this for the family? Gambling and drinking to save our family. Well, good luck!"

She hung up and turned on the TV in the living room, then turned it off. She was quiet. Kitchen light pooled in the wood floor at the bottom of the stairs. A stack of her magazines in the hall lay slid-over in a long, glossy ramp of feminine smiles and outfits.

"What's gam-bol-ing?" Matt said.

"It's nothing bad."

"Why doesn't Mom like it?"

"I'm going for a bike ride," he said and pounded Matt's leg twice with his knuckle to keep him at home. "You better not follow me."

In the garage, his handlebars were caught in his father's spokes. He yanked on his back tire, dragging the two bikes, peddles scraping concrete, and they wouldn't come apart.

"I want to ride bikes," Matt said from the kitchen door, holding his leg and crying.

"You're too fat for bikes."

Cory slid the garage door to the ceiling. In the yard under the tree, he held onto the lawn mower push bar. Somebody had left the mower outside for two months. The low sun had come out, and the falling snow was full of light, clear to the dark clouds. When a cloud filled the open space, the light seeped out of the day.

All of his father's reasons made sense to Cory—vacation, help Spike, save the family. It wasn't confusing.

That night after a wide-awake hour, he started down the hall for something to drink. The nightlight cast green trails on the walls. "Matt?" came her voice. Their bedroom door was halfway open. "Matt, sweetie?" she said. On his way back up, she said, "Cory?" Her lamp flashed on. She wanted something, he bet. She wanted him to get Matt, who was still babyish and cute.

Cory went in there. Her bathrobe lay on the floor with its arms spread like a floating person's. She swung her legs over the bed, yawning.

"I can't sleep," she said. "Want to read *The Promise*?"

Cory was too old for Matt's books, but if she wanted to look at it together—okay.

"It's over on the desk," she said. "Let me get hot tea."

After she came with two mugs, they leaned against pillows and he turned pages in the lamp light, snowflakes brushing the windows. There was a picture of Jesus on water, a sunrise behind him.

"Where's *The Book of Weather*?" he said.

"I think we lost that one. I guess this one's silly, for your age." She used a sarcastic voice: "'He is my guiding light. He is my beacon of hope.' I don't know, I'm sorry for making fun of it—I believe, I believe."

He smoothed out a place in the sheets, half listening.

"You used to trust him," he said. "He wouldn't lie to us."

She blew on her tea. "Listen, I don't hate him. I trust him on certain things. He's not a bad man. He can be... gentle. I know I'm not so easy to live with."

When she finished her tea, she lay down, turned away and lifted her knees. "Give me your hand," she said. "I love that moment just before sleep. It's like floating to the stars."

He set his mug next to hers, then lay behind her. She pulled his hand to her chin and folded his hand in her hand. His knees found the place behind her knees.

"Can we call him? Is it too late? Can we visit him?"

She didn't say.

"What if I went there?" Cory said. "What if I just showed up?"

She was asleep—her breathing. He got out of bed with a hot feeling in his chest, turned on the hall light, opened Matt's door. The light slid across the wallpaper of motorcycles, jumping, falling.

"I'm going to Las Vegas," he said.

Matt woke up, sucking air. "Don't drag me downstairs by my feet."

"Wake up. Tell Mom I went to Las Vegas. You tell her in the morning. Not till morning."

He left through his kitchen door and walked alongside the backs of houses in the open fields, stepping high in galoshes, weaving a little under his pack. It was heavy, but he needed everything in it, cast-iron pan and fishing pole, flashlight and compass, clothes and things. He had asked for a backpack one birthday. His mom said for her birthday they could buy her a pack, too, only by then he was bored with the woods idea and didn't want to leave TV for a whole weekend.

He walked many neighborhood blocks, then under the high trees of the college, then through the park where the library was. Here was the edge of the plateau that looked over downtown, where the snowy streets were lighted. Near the park's water fountain, a staircase dropped swerving out of sight. Though he had been told to stay off these stairs—they were for drunks, sluts, crazies—the steps were white and untracked, and the snow whispered as he kicked it on his way down.

At the bottom of the staircase were the brick stores of downtown. Two blocks ahead was the Greyhound, and he went into it. The windows reflected people sleeping in orange chairs. A Mexican lady in a plastic green jacket brought Cory to the hot chocolate machine. The cup trembled as the brown liquid squirted into it.

"Hold this while it cools off," she said. "Where are you going?"

"Meet my dad in Las Vegas. He's in charge of building houses there."

"By yourself? Who would send you by yourself?"

"My mom said it was okay."

She nodded as if she had heard of such mothers. "Sit up close to the driver."

With hot chocolate in him, he lay in a corner with his head on the pack and slept.

The day was light when he woke up. A row of buses waited in the lot out back, two blowing exhaust. He laid two weeks' allowance on the counter for the ticket man, who had red, pimply skin though he was old, near thirty.

"Can I get on one of those buses?" he said.

"Three bucks? Where you headed?"

"Don't all the buses go to Las Vegas?"

A man in one of the chairs laughed. He wore a knitted snow hat that rose like a cone. "One bus," he said, "starting in Laroy, Idaho, winds its way across America—and just three bucks!"

"My dad's up in Las Vegas," he told the ticket man. "I'm supposed to meet him today."

"You'd have to switch in Boise, but you'll need a few more dollars. Who's paying your ticket here? You're lucky—that's one of the delayed buses. If you can raise 18 more dollars."

"Up in Las Vegas?" the man in the hat said. "Nevada, you'll see on any map, is below Idaho. What're they teaching you kids?"

"Nothing," he said.

"Nothing! Ha, ha!"

Cory leaned through double doors and walked up and down Center. A heavy truck went by, spilling gravel. With sun glaring on the white sidewalk, he squinted, jogging, not sure where to go, when a car parked at the curb, a long Jeep.

Bill Hogan reached out the back window, wiggling his fingers. "I asked God to lead us to you, and he did."

"Your mom called," Mr. Hogan said. "Where are you going with your pack?"

"I'm supposed to talk to my dad."

"We'll be late for mass," Mrs. Hogan said. "We were late last time. Let's take the boy with us."

Mr. Hogan stepped out. "You don't have his number?"

"He's in Las Vegas."

"Hotel?"

"No. Spike Beezhold's."

Mr. Hogan said a Beezhold shouldn't be too hard to find.

"Honey," Mrs. Hogan said. "Mass. Father will think we—"

He swerved around. "Just go. Take the kids and meet me at the pancake place after church."

She got in the driver's seat and drove. Mr. Hogan went in a coffee shop and came out with a handful of change, took him up the street to a phone booth, asked the operator for Spike Beezhold's number, dialed it, and handed the phone to Cory.

"Put in quarters when it tells you to," Mr. Hogan said. "I'll call your mom at the next phone."

A tired man breathed hello on the line.

"Is my dad there?" Cory said.

"I ain't your dad," Spike said. "Don't think so. What color's your eyes?"

"Let me talk to my dad."

"What dad? No dad here."

"Please give him to me."

His father answered. His voice was hardly there. He'd just woken. In the background bottles fell, clinking together. While he talked about football for ten minutes, Cory made listening noises, watching for his mom.

"Going to be a hell of a game, buddy," he said. "You boys got the TV on?"

"Are you coming back?"

"One more week. Spike should be okay by then." Spike laughed, and his father covered the phone and spoke to him. His mom parked at the movie house down the block.

"Mom said half of this is pretty much her fault," Cory said.

"I doubt she said that. What did she say?"

"I heard her telling Mrs. Hogan."

His mom and brother came down the sidewalk, and she put her arms around him, crying at his neck. "I imagined you walking on the highway."

She said hello to his father, listened, whispered. "I've missed you, too... Of course I want you to come back. But everything's not going to be suddenly so different. Yesterday you were taking another week." She shut her eyes a moment as though to rest them from the hard sun they stood in. "What's going to be different? Tell me one thing."

She let out a pent-up breath that was nearly a laugh. "You're a bad man, Marty. Oh, yes, you're very bad." While she listened, she grinned at the flower store across the street. The store window lay in shadow.

"Tell me one more thing that will be different," she said, and after a minute, "Okay, all right."

"What did he say?" Cory asked when she hung up.

"He said he wanted to learn more about my interests. Which I thought was a very good thing to say. He's getting on the road now. He'll be home at ten PM at the soonest, if the highways are clear."

Her face ruddy and awake, she stepped out of the booth and waved at Mr. Hogan, who waited for them down the street. She lost a tennis shoe in the snow and laughed.

In the living room, Matt and Cory jumped out of their seats to watch for him. Pine tree shadows lay on the river and crumbled in the dusk, and he wasn't here. When past midnight his truck finally rattled to rest outside, their mom glanced at the long mirror, smoothing hands on her dress.

His father opened the door a crack. "This the right place?"

Cory twisted the side-window curtains in his hands. Matt pulled on the door while their father opened and shut it for a game. She tried not to cry, holding her breath.

"Shh, pretty lady, shh." He hugged her till she was all right. "You said you were sorry for your part, and that's all that matters. Me, too." He whistled in his teeth. "Wild trip toward the end. Sleet started at Fruitland. I saw a slow-riding minivan spin on the highway. I jumped out and commandeered that sucker to the shoulder, and waited for a tow truck. It was a lady and her kids, traveling alone. She said she had no man to call. She was damned thankful—poor gal—and I kept on. Twenty miles up the highway, it was clear sky, like passing through a curtain. The roads were clean from there."

She was stiff a moment, while he moved his hand on her belly. She went in the kitchen, turned on the light, slammed two cupboard doors, sat at the table, and came into the living room.

"So, why am I sorry, exactly?" she said. "What I heard on the phone was that you were sorry. Boys, get to your rooms, now! My God, it's two in the morning."

Cory took his brother by the hand and hurried to the back staircase. They'd think they went upstairs.

"So you're not sorry?" his father said. "For your side of it?"

"I might be, sure, but I'd like to have a chance to say it myself, instead of you telling me I should be—when you were the one who left town. Tell me why I'm sorry. Tell me."

"Well, for being so damn depressed all the time, one thing. I got a hospital patient in my bed, weak as a kitten."

"Go away. Back to Las Vegas, if that's all you care about."

"I didn't say I played no part. Course I did. Halfway."

"Go on. Spike needs you."

"Know what? Soon as I got there, I found him in the bathtub, a razor at his wrist."

She snickered.

"That's funny, huh?" he said.

"Yeah, like something on TV."

"It wasn't so funny when you were in that state of mind. When you wanted to clock out and be finished."

"I wouldn't have known what you thought—you were drunk. Besides, I wasn't like somebody on TV, because it was real."

"So you get to decide what's true and what's not."

"When I know the difference? Yes."

"You're talking crazy. Spike's life is TV-stupid, but yours isn't, because you're the only one entitled to hard times. Anybody else gets in trouble—Spike, or me"—his voice broke, and he coughed. "Anybody else has trouble, they're on TV. You think I'm on TV?"

"No," she said. "I don't."

Cory went to the open kitchen doorway. They were quiet now, watching the Chinese rug under their feet. "Mom," he said, "Sam's sick. He's been sick for two days. Haven't you even noticed he won't eat his food?"

She squinted as if there was a bad smell in the house. The skin between her eyes was pinched, making the dark line.

"Look at us," his father said. "Home ten minutes and already fighting. What happened to that angel's face I saw when I walked in here? That's the face I want to see. Don't pay attention to anything I just said. I don't believe any of it—you know that."

He lifted her near the ceiling, with a cigarette in his mouth. He set her down, kicked twice at his bag. She went into the front stairwell, heading up to bed.

"Where you going?" he said, but she was already gone.

They bought a tree, and it stood in the living room undecorated for many days. Then one morning his father dropped tinsel on the branches and plugged in the manger. It played "Silent Night." In the windy front yard, Santa and Frosty had fallen on their backs, their plastic bodies trembling. Matt ran to their father's chair, asking for help.

"They keep falling," Matt said, "and people are driving by."

"We'll stand them up against the tree and put a rope around them. First go tell your mother whose birthday it is."

For the second time, Matt ran up the front stairwell to their bedroom. "Mom, what about presents?" he said.

"Thirty minutes, baby." Her voice echoed in the room. "I'm so tired, you don't understand."

Later, after cartoons, their father stretched in his chair and covered his face, making funny, tired growling noises.

Matt went to her again. "Thirty minutes," she said. "Thirty more minutes."

He ran into the living room, his Santa hat jingling. He stepped behind the tree and crouched there, in the corner.

"What's news from the North Pole?" their father said.

"She won't ever come down," Cory said. "She's back to sleeping."

"Let's get out of here a while."

Matt whined, "No, Dad. Presents. Presents."

"All right, we'll go out back. Let's go see what Sam can tell us."

In the backyard, the three of them stood together, taking in the cold air and long sights, the ground patched with snow and mud and frozen puddles. On a hill a tall pole blinked a warning to planes. There was a blue crack in the far sky, under the gray.

Sam danced at their feet, barking.

"What's the problem, Sam?" his father said. "If you got something to say, say it now. Taking her side again, huh?"

"Make her get up," Cory said. "Tell her what she's going to do."

"It's always the man who has to be sorry. A woman's never sorry for a thing."

"We could say the cat got run over," Matt said.

"You wouldn't want to hurt your mom like that."

"But who's going to hand out presents? Who's going to make breakfast?"

His father turned around, sipping his beer. Cory watched the house. The clouds moved fast with her lying under them, and the oak scraped its branches on the roof, and bits of flying ice tapped their bedroom window. As if the day itself disapproved that she was in bed and gathered new anger in the thickening hail.