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# RAINMAKER BY SCOTT LESLIE

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Duncan doesn't know what brings him out here anymore, out onto the front porch of the old farmhouse to watch the stray cicadas tap and skitter along its dusty windows. Listen to the night, the tall grass of his yard moving bent and black in the wind.

Or wonder how long it'll be now 'til he makes that call.

He lowers his burly frame onto the steps, a bulky shadow following his moves as he swirls the last of his Export into his mouth and sets his beer aside, the silvery ring on his left hand pale in the light. Duncan eases into his usual place, feeling that dull ache in the small of his back like it's about to rain. Max, his old Chocolate Lab, wanders over from his place in the corner and Duncan gives him a quick pat, the dog sitting alongside him, then changing his mind before settling in on the third step down.

It would be better if he wasn't out here, he thought, picking out the faults of his little plot of land like he's taking inventory. There's that rust damage to the gas well out back. Or the lingering crack that just keeps widening as it makes its way up the drive. He knows—he doesn't have to see them. But there's no use walking the walls of his old place tonight, pacing his empty rooms like a caged animal.

In the dark moonless night, he studies the tattoo halfway up his right arm. The one he got on a dare when he was in Cadets back in Trenton in '83. It's a crested maple leaf, the tattoo, once crisp, now nothing but a tattered red. He moves it in the glow of the porch light, hoping to make it shine. He remembers how his niece Katie always used to marvel at it when she stayed weekends, back when his sister Leigh was busy working shifts at the Manor House over in Dain City. Back when Katie's two shit father went and split town on her. Katie would sit out on the porch with him and just stare at his tattoo, looking the crest over like it was some kind of faded treasure map with a secret to unlock.

Duncan takes the empty at his side and hurls it into the dark, watching it land with a heavy splash in the middle of the old duck pond. Max lifts his head at him.

And Duncan looks straight ahead, rubbing his hand, turning the ring over and over in the darkness.

He couldn't miss Katie when she came in that afternoon. Her shadow spread across the gravel into the pole barn, reached for him as he worked back behind the tractor tightening up the hitch.

“Dunc! Hey, Dunc!”

She wandered inside in her white denim jacket and matching jeans, that little ponytail moving blonde behind her. She had the yellow Tweety pin on her that Leigh bought her a couple weeks back—and the Tasmanian Devil kite she’d got for her ninth birthday bounced in her hand, rustled in the air. Duncan had surprised Katie with it the minute Leigh pulled up in her Dodge Daytona.

The smile hadn’t left her all morning.

“Hey! Dunc!”

Duncan stepped out and pulled off his gloves. He watched Max spill past the little girl and make a beeline for the hay mound, sizing it up for a few renegade mice.

“Hey—look at you. Whatcha got there, Tweety?”

“Let’s fly Taz,” she cried, bouncing the kite in front of him for emphasis.

Through the window, Duncan studied the open fields cresting into a dark line of trees. And the small fringe of clouds lying just beyond it.

“Dunc!”

Duncan threw a wrench onto the workbench behind him. “Can’t Tweets... You and Max go.”

He didn’t have to look over to know the air had been sucked right out of her. This morning she’d had her arms around his neck, threatening not to let go. But that moment, she just stared at him from the doorway, the smile all but gone.

“What...I can’t-”

“Sure you can! Max is a kite flying dog from way back...”

“I don’t want Max—I want you!”

“Hey now...you’re gonna hurt his feelings...” Max barked his reply over in the corner. “See! You tell her, Max.”

“But you said-”

“I didn’t say I’d take you out-”

“You did! You did too!”

“Look, honey—I’ll be back by five. We’ll throw on some cartoons, break out some pizza pops...we’ll-”

“You said that *last* weekend.”

Duncan got down on his knees beside her, but she wouldn’t look at him. She just stared at the ground, turning her head away like he didn’t even exist. He moved to tussle her hair, but she squirmed away at the last second.

“Hey. Your uncle’s gotta job to do, ‘kay?” He gave her a playful shove. “Now get outta here, you little heartbreaker. Get!” Katie didn’t move, her shoulders tight, bristling. “Go on now...” The little girl didn’t look up, ran off weepy like she’d just been winged by a stone.

“Ah—Tweets!”

Duncan looked into the gray blue skies, the bits of cloud moving like the stir of cold water. How could

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he? How could he explain to a birthday girl he just had to get out there before the rains hit, drenched the hay, matted it into one holy mess. One hell of a load of cash drained right out of his pocket, right down the crapper. If only he could make it rain...

Tomorrow.

Duncan grabbed his keys from the worktop without a word and headed for the tractor, knowing it wasn't right to shoot a girl down, leave her alone on her birthday like that.

He'd make it up to her. Damn right he would!

He gave the hitch a good quick stomp, then heard her voice shouting from around the corner.

"You better be here by four!"

"...I said...*five!*"

Duncan sighed, pulled down his Dekalb cap and shook his head. "Women!"

Ten minutes later, he steered his old John Deere through the doors, the old tractor chugging and sputtering like a grizzly emerging from a long winter's sleep. He felt the gravel move, felt the hay baler following along, falling in line behind him. Katie was standing off to one side by the gate, the Taz kite still in her hand, Max twirling around her legs, trying to snatch it away from her without success.

She shouted something at Duncan but he couldn't hear over the motor. He geared down for a moment, turned the transmission from a heavy chatter to a passable buzz, and waved her over.

"WHAT'S THAT??"

But the girl just walked away instead, headed up to the farmhouse.

When Duncan rubbed his jaw, finally geared up, and pulled his tractor into the muddy rut of the laneway, Max stood out in the open and barked a few words at him. But Katie was nowhere to be seen.

On the old porch step, Duncan rolls the silvery ring around in the palm of his hand, fits it snugly back into place. He knows better than to speak up any more. And why should he? It's all yesterday's news around here. God knows they won't say what they really think up in Dain City. Won't do nothing. Nothing but look up from their papers and their fresh hot Timmys, point with their eyes as his rusty red pickup pulls through town, circles round to his spot behind the Home Hardware. Look the other way when he passes them in the doorway. All he gets are the polite nods, the clearing of throats. The painted on smile of the check out girl that says: "We know..."

Duncan's eyes blink, stare up into the darkness as he strokes Max's coat, seeing the twin rusted domes of his silos, the bent steel outlines of the barns. He imagines the nights he takes Max through the place, looks into the empty lofts, walks with a dry crunch through the feed room, stares up into the dark cave of the rafters yawning like a skeleton picked clean. He stares up at the ebony sky, knows it's only hours away now. The dawn ticking closer like the shift of a rifle sight.

For if the sun rose again tomorrow, struck the clouds, came down on his modest acreage, it would see the combine, still, mired in weed out by the roadside. The pens empty as a churchyard, doors hanging wide. The fields of hay and canola and soybean his grandfather had worked in '52, bought for a few thou back in '49—the soil left to crack and curl in this goddamned heat. The hum of the hydro towers lurking deep in the knee-high grass.

For a second, Duncan feels his hands and arms start to shimmer. He looks up again as the porch light starts to tremble. But it's not the night that throws a fluttering shape across him, threatens to shut out the light. A giant gypsy moth has floated in from the fields, flickers in the light, throwing itself

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madly, helplessly at the bulb, its wings beating deep shadows across Duncan, his arms, his face.

Duncan stands to his full height, steadies himself to look up at the moth, watches as it wraps and weaves, batting against a heat it can never touch. Max barks in the darkness. But Duncan doesn't respond—only feels himself light-headed, lost in the light of this white hot fury.

5:45 p.m. Duncan wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his arm, turned to look back at the dots of rounded bales left like a trail of mounds in his wake. The sun was beating down now something fierce, the blue-red skies chasing away the rains that never had the courage to show up after all. His body moved with the rock of the tractor, while alongside him, the strands of buttercup and winged thistle shook, fell helpless underneath the giant wheels.

He watched the outline of the barns approaching, mentally counting the pizza pops he was going to need to buy Katie back. He knew it was gonna take a whole boatload to please that little birthday girl now. If only the tractor hadn't seized up on him out in the back pasture. Duncan made a quick note to check the coil on the damn thing—tomorrow.

He pulled his machine up the laneway, guided it into the barn, then scanned the yard over his shoulder as he turned the key, let the tractor hum into silence. He stepped down and out into the light.

“Katie?”

Duncan stood there in the open, studied the muddy trail of water stretching from behind the well, stepped over the new hose he'd left out in the yard that morning. A crow up on the telephone wire made no reply, sailed over the roof.

“Katie..?” He turned towards the farmhouse. “Max... Katie!”

Duncan pulled back the screen door. Inside, the kitchen clock ticked quietly, Katie's bag lying out on the table where she'd left it at lunchtime. Her spare bedroom yawning open. “Katie...” He cocked his head towards the window at the silos, pictured Katie up to her usual tricks, maybe running up the aisles, Max at her heels. Or stopping to feed the cattle, brushing her hand along their rough chewing heads.

He headed outside for the shade of the barns. He was about to open the double doors, slip back the bolt, when something hit him, made him swing around.

He could barely notice it at first over the roar of a jet moving slow across the sky.

Then he heard it in the distance—no, closer—fading somewhere...*there*. Just beyond the thin blades of corn shifting in the breeze.

The hoarse cry...of-

Duncan plunged into the corn, their green leafy stalks tearing wild at him as he dashed along the uneven roots, stumbled through their dark ranks, his face burning like it'd just been set alight. At the far end of the field, he could make out the low drainage ditch along the edge of the farm, then the hydro towers just poking into the sky. When Duncan finally broke through the corn, reached the gravel bank of the ditch, the cry was so close he knew he was almost there.

That's when Duncan noticed something. He looked up. Stared high into the hum of the tower. There, coiled and limp among the wires, the little Devil kite moved, swinging like a blackened rag—a denim jacket hanging dark and curled to one side.

He could see it just a few yards away, waiting in the gravel ditch below. Max was there, still barking at her. And the only screaming Duncan could hear was his own.

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The moth rolls, tumbles against his fingers as Duncan scoops it up into his hand, snatches it back from the light bulb like the Hand of God. He pulls it away and holds it for a while, feeling its soft beating wings, then lets it fly, his hand opening, the moth rising up over the eaves through, vanishing like a spark into the night.

Duncan studies his hand for some trace of the moth, but finds nothing, seeing only the broken plastic ring. He straightens it with the barest sparkle in his eyes, hypnotized, like he could still imagine the deserted lobby of Percy's Roadside Market. Katie's mad squeal for his loose change. And his quarter dropping into her open hand.

"Make it happen!" he said.

He could see the turn of a knob, hear the rattle, roll and clatter of a gumball machine, the silvery ring falling globe-like into her hand. When he'd cleaned out his roll-top desk this morning, her ring had appeared to him in the exact same way—its plastic glint rolling between addresses and invoices, finally tumbling out into the light like a newborn. In the dimness, he doesn't have to read the inscription with its thick raised letters. He knows it. The word is LOVE.

Minutes later, Duncan moves from his place in the light, slips the ring into his t-shirt pocket, and steps inside the house. He returns with a baseball bat, its blackened paint starting to flake, and coils it tight in his hands. Max's head perks up, but he makes no move to follow as Duncan steps into the tall grass and walks to the drive at the far end.

A simple white plywood sign stands in the dark against the rough-hewn fence, its red arrow and "FOR SALE" lettering pointed back up the drive. Duncan studies the wood in his hands, weighs it like a weapon—then strikes. The sign goes down for a moment, a savage blow ripping off its corner. Duncan waits, then brings the bat down, again and again, his breath laboring, the sweat beading on his face. When he lets up, there's nothing left standing. Max appears at Duncan's side and sniffs the remains, probing the red letters and bits of shredded wood. Duncan examines the curve of his shoulder where a shard of wood caught him and stares on up the driveway.

That call...he would do it tomorrow. Call up Doug Paladin with his darting little eyes and bird cackle of a laugh. Tell him to take the whole damn auction with him. No more talk. No more rich sonofabitches from Toronto tramping up his lawn like it's a fucking freak show.

Another sign waits at the end of the gravel drive and Duncan turns, walks for the road. The bat turning dark in his grip. The hydro towers just beginning to take their shape in the hazy distance.

Some days, when Duncan is barely seconds from waking, he can see the tower from his room upstairs, glistening far off in the 6 a.m. sun, see her little figure like she's scaling the sky. And tomorrow, when daylight hits and the fields are all but still, he'll sit there, and watch her rise.

Duncan takes a deep breath, then touches the side of his neck. He looks into the circle of clouds. It feels like a little rain.

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**Scott Leslie** graduated from the University of Guelph with an honors degree in English and History before specializing in media writing and book & magazine publishing. An executive member of the Canadian Authors Association, he has held several positions in the publishing, theater and communications fields. His writing has been featured in dozens of print, online and audio publications. Some selected short fiction credits include *Grimm Magazine*, *Fiction Warehouse*, *Blue Murder Magazine*, *Ascent Magazine*, *Opium Magazine*, *Synapse Magazine*, *Feathertale*, *Twilight Times* and *The New Quarterly*. His work was also published recently in *Mountain Man Dance Moves: The McSweeney's Book of Lists* by Vintage Books.