

Evan Morgan Williams
Giveaway

This evening sure different. First time all month the smoke washes away and the sky shows its true blue self. The wet air floating up from the river smells like honey. The wind's cool hand rattles the cottonwood leaves. I'm reading Italo Calvino on the trailer step, glad to be off the fire line, and I'm thinking this guy got it right, the bittersweet taint to joy—let's just say I've had my share. I'm in the middle of "The Adventure of a Poet" when Isabelle Magpie skids up in a shiny purple Nissan truck, and I'm thinking, "Oh no." See, Kenny Real Bird, he's prying loose tribal money before the vote, spreading his stink around, and now a whole mess of Indians be driving new rigs with slanty headlights. They're laying down fat cash, more cash than this nigger ever earned playing Smokey Bear. Dealer plates say *Rice Motors, Billings Montana*. Fucking love that. Folks up here are so white they can't spot racism when it spouts from their mouth same as their pale lily ass. They cannot discern it. *Indian special, you betcha, we make'm deal for pretty girl like you.*

Isabelle climbs out of the truck, and she's all girl, tall and graceful, one of those crane birds. Yellow dress and cherry lipstick. Sunglasses dangling from her fingers. She points the toe of her sandal into the BIA gravel, finds a pebble, and rolls it around. She lets me take her hand, and I spin her, and her dress lifts, and she's warm, she's hot, and I catch scent of her shampooed hair. The truck motor ticks down like it feels pain.

"Well, Justin?"

"What you need a truck for, Isabelle? You ain't hauling stuff. And purple? No."

"By the way, the color's called plum. And it's two-wheel drive. Just a half-ton, okay? The salesman said it's a girl truck. Don't you think?"

"I can't comment on such matters. Maybe you need a purple bow on the antenna." I return to my book.

Isabelle puts on her sunglasses, hiding her pretty brown eyes. That's her trick. "As a matter of fact I do have some hauling, and you're going to help me." Her voice is flat. She always be holding back. But she smiles and tugs my hand like time is flying. She drags me compliant enough. "This won't take long."

The first stars are twinkling in the eastern sky. I never did learn their proper names. Back in LA, with all the city lights, you couldn't see no stars—anyway, let's just say I spent a lot of time indoors.

We climb into Isabelle's pretty-girl truck and drive away. I got some serious business to do. *You betcha.*

The frontage road squeezes between the Little Bighorn River and the Union Pacific tracks. Interstate 15 whispers a little ways off. We're pulling onto the frontage road when a black pickup zooms past. Four wheel drive, high clearance, fat tires wailing angry. And guess what: dealer plates. *Rice Motors.*

"That's my cousin Robert."

She keeps her eyes on the road, but she pats the book on my knee. Calvino. *Difficult Loves.* What the hell I bring this for?

"You and your books," she says. "It's quite endearing. People talk about you."

“Always wanted to be endearing.”

“It’s cute.”

“Even better. Listen, a man does enough time... on a fire line, resting his ass on his Nomex jacket in where-the-fuck Montana, he starts reading. Fat books. Garcia-Marquez fat. *Moby Dick* fat-assed whale fat. *Invisible Man* fat. So you see how it goes.”

I’m blathering on. Then comes the silence, my fool speech spent. It wasn’t nothing but noise pollution on account of me and this girl having too much quiet to bear. I reach over and lift Isabelle’s shades—can’t stand those things—and as my fingers touch Isabelle’s face, she takes a trembling breath. Her eyes stray from the road to my hand. I stroke her hair, and she takes no breath at all. My fingers follow her hair down to the tips. Her shoulders tense a moment, then loosen, an exhalation. A girl got to breathe.

“Justin, how much longer is fire season?” She’s back to business. Eyes on the road.

“Couple weeks.” *You betcha.*

“And then what?”

“Go back to California, most likely.” I feel tightness in the muscles of my face. I didn’t figure she likes me that much. She always be playing it cool.

I elaborate. I clarify. “I got five thousand coming to me. Uncle Sam takes his share. My ex takes her share and then some.”

She don’t say nothing. Her face is perfectly still.

“Girl, if you asking can I stick around...”

Isabelle pulls the truck over where the river makes a slow bend away from the road. Cottonwoods crowd the river bottom. A round hill nudges the river back. Isabelle unbuckles, slides my way, fixes her cherry lipstick in the mirror. Takes her sweet time.

“Maybe I could,” I say.

She slides closer.

Crow Indians got this thing called a give-away. Kind of a party, let’s just say. I been to a few. They be giving out blankets and sacks of flour. Maybe you got a daughter who graduates college. Maybe your son comes back a hero from Desert Storm. It’s your turn to feel joy, your turn to partake. Life has blessed you, and you give to the people you love. The way I see it, Isabelle blowing ten grand for that new-car smell, she’s in a position to give something away. But I know it don’t work that way. Fact is, takes a man with fat dollars off a fire line and muscles in his back and a sting in his lungs. And willing. Sweet girl in the yellow dress breaks my will easy as grass. I’ll give her the shirt off my black man’s back.

(Giveaway continues in *J Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 2, fall 2012)