

## Isobel from "The Passionates"

By, Dave Ulrich

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### ISOBEL

I want to tell you about this day. This one day. I'm driving and it's hot. Not a good hot. An uncomfortable hot. I'm going to my crap job with it's crap pay. It's early and it's already hot. And as I'm inching along in the thick traffic I'm wondering why I didn't go to grad school for something else. Anything but theatre. Anything that would have allowed me to own a home and take vacations at exotic, sunny resorts with a beautiful and brilliant partner. But I'm right here, well aware that I will always have to have a crap job. A crap job to survive so that I may have the chance to do great things. A crap job and I'm already grown up, but I don't want to grow up. I'm not ready to be a grown up. Traffic is stop-and-go. My CD is scratched so I'm listening to some bullshit on the radio. Talk radio. The kind that depresses you because you hear the most unenlightened, insipid callers. But every button I push leads to music that hurts my brain or commercials that are shockingly ridiculous. This one caller is so dramatically offensive that I've got the phone in my hand with the digits pressed, hovering over the 'send' key. All the while stopping and going. Stopping and going. A flash of light shoots off the windshield of the car in my rearview, a billboard confuses me, the car in front of me has no license plate, no anything, and I wonder how you can do that. Is it legal? A truck beside me spews out black clouds of exhaust that smell so awful and so strong that I have to roll up my driver's side window despite the heat. This hot, hot heat. I turn down the volume just in time to hear squeaking during the stop. I'm not sure if it's me, or a car beside me. I time my stops a little later, or a little earlier to see if it's me. I can't tell. I'm going crazy. Stir crazy in my car. I'm feeling angst. Frustration. Alone in a world that disagrees with me. That I disagree with. Something. Like that. Then a car beside me veers over and smashes right into me. Seriously! As if I simply weren't there. As if I had come out of nowhere, as if I had an invisible car. Of course I had been sitting there all along, in a visible car, rolling a few inches. A few inches every few minutes. Yet this jerk-off starts flicking his hand impatiently like I need to hurry up and pull over so we can discuss what I've done. What *I've* done. Like it was me. Like I've inconvenienced *him*! And I'm sitting there going "Who the hell do you think you are to act mad at me? You... fucker." So I pull over and he pulls over ahead of me. Without hesitation -- serious -- I'm barely able to get my door open, and he's at my car screaming, asking what my problem was... why I can't stay in my own lane? "What the hell, mister," I say. "You drifted right into me! I didn't go anywhere." Bullshit. That's all he's got to say. Like I'm the one full of shit.

The cars are only moving inches at a time, so I run up beside a few. Try to get someone, anyone, who saw it to pull over and be witness. Nobody will acknowledge me or roll down their window. Not one. No wait... one. Cracked his window and said, "Hey, sorry lady, I can't be late. Not today." But, whatever. When I come back, defeated, out of breath, pissed off, still in shock, and... well, he's called the cops on his cell and they're on their way. I still can't believe that this guy is such an ass. Really. Talking to him just makes my temperature rise in the sweltering heat and I know my cheeks are flushed. I stutter... well, not exactly. I'm, you know...? Not stuttering, that one word... Dammit. Stammering. Jesus. Anyway, I just can't make my point with him. I can't speak. And I'm mad at myself for it. I'm too emotional. Pissed at myself for never knowing how to behave in the dramatic situations of my real, unscripted life. In this traffic the cops aren't going to get there anytime soon -- even if they cared to hurry. So I fold my arms and lean back on my car facing away from the traffic, as much as I really wanted people to, you know, gawk at me. 'Cuz that's great. And I take inventory of just how much this screws up my life -- just as some guys start laughing at me while their car inches by. The laughter turns to cat calls. It's annoying, but it hits me that these jokers might be useful. So I walk around my car and ask if they saw what happened. There was no "Oh, you need help?" Or "Yes, I saw it... and I won't let that asshole screw you over." No. No, instead I hear: "Yo Ray, this bitch wants to suck our cocks." Because evidently, "Did you see what happened?" translated into fraternity Greek is a sexual advance. Clearly it was my mistake, so I just return to my vast oven retreat, fold my arms back up, and breathe in the burnt oil air while the sun gets all aggressive with me. But then... I just break. My eyes narrow beneath my sunglasses, my teeth clench and I think, "Why the hell do I do it?" Why. Why do I bother struggling in my life just to fight for and sometimes, rarely, get the opportunity to try -- to try -- to enrich the lives of others. I always thought I could handle this lifestyle because deep down I really did want to help people, teach people, entertain people. But it suddenly punches me square in the gut that maybe... maybe.... just maybe... I don't actually like people. Maybe I only exist as an actress to create a distance from myself and my own... humanness. Maybe I'm really just pompous. Doing this to feel superior. Maybe. Maybe it's all ego. Maybe I'm sick, or scared, and yet -- still furious. And I suddenly didn't know anymore. Where I fit. Why those radio callers are so freakin' idiotic. Or why this lying piece of shit had to hit my car. Why men have to be so brash and disgusting. And why I have to care that I'm going to be late for a grease-soaked job as a servant to over-sized Americans. Americans parking themselves at the trough to shove too large portions of food into their gaping lie holes.

Or why I have to endure all of this so that I may, exhausted -- but gratefully -- race to the theatre that night and rehearse for five hours of real usefulness... and take five and ten minute naps every hour and a half -- each time waking up only to debate taking up smoking again so it feels like I really took a break. That's what I'm thinking under the engine rumbles and brake squeaks. That's what I wrestle with as freckles start blossoming on my nose and shoulders and I'm dehydrating. Actually feel myself drying up inside. And then I see it. This flower. This imperfect, little crap highway flower. Probably part weed, cast out of the daisy family many generations ago. It's tiny, slim stalk bent by the weight of a bottle cap, making it lean like it's in a yoga stretch. This was not some impossibly beautiful flower arrogantly reeking perfection. This was just a simple, beautiful misfit -- craning its neck in a sea of trash. Out among gravel, weeds, fry boxes, cigarette butts, plastic bags, shredded tires. Not even able to stand tall, but standing nonetheless. The most hostile environment imaginable, and there she was. Surviving. Offering her little splash of color and organic beauty to a sickly world of sun-stained dirt and patches of gray. And there was another one -- maybe ten feet away. I counted seven in all within, I don't know -- a five yard radius. And I cried. I don't know why exactly I cried in that moment. I'm not a crier. So why so strong a reaction to that? Especially when it took me awhile to unfold my thoughts on it? Why was it exactly what I needed to see? I think -- I thought... I saw myself in her. The myself I forget at work, in traffic, on the dark nights of the theatre. She was not alone. And she was not worthless. Not wasted. It didn't matter that most of the day cars were zipping by not noticing. Days, weeks go by and she's unnoticed. But when she's needed -- there she is. Carrying on. Enduring the heat, the exhaust, the bullying. A symbol of life among the shit. And others like her stand proudly, too, three thousand obnoxious weeds away from her bottle cap embrace. And that... that's what we are. That's what they are. That's what the theatre is. As we climb the chain of life, the patterns remain the same. We are the flowers among shit, resisting the weeds and bringing beauty. Maybe the only ones who notice are just like us. Maybe only the other flowers pay us any attention... but does that make it a waste of time? The weeds could overrun that one little flower easily enough. But something stopped them. Maybe the beauty... or at least the conviction and persistence. So maybe we, too, can pry open a few closed minds. But even if we don't, what's wrong with what we do? What's wrong with the theatre acting as a meeting place for the flowers of the Earth to gather? All of us giving each other strength to go back out there and shine... right in the middle of shit.