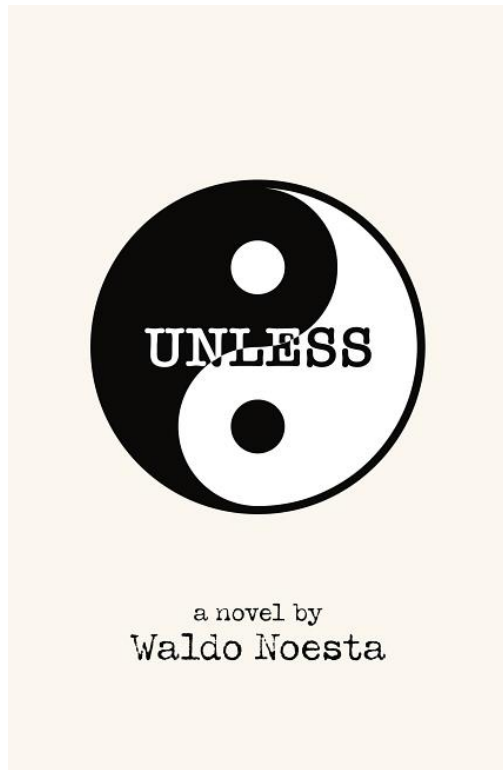


*Coming-of-age drama set in the alt-rock heyday of the early 1990s. A love letter to the twin powers of music and writing.*



## **UNLESS**

By Waldo Noesta

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a novel by  
Waldo Noesta

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The events chronicled in this book are true, but all details and names have been fictionalized. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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First came the blare of a horn like a rude alarm clock and her head sprang upright. Then, the moment that would shroud the whole incident in mystery — a drawn-out *fwump*, the indistinct sound of contact, of two vehicles somehow mingling in one space — and the Voyager shuddered fiercely and swerved hard, while the air inside filled with the stench of burnt rubber.

The first to make sense of oblivion were her hands; they regained their instinctive control of the steering wheel and steadied her shudders. Her eyes, now open and cleared of their spotted waking haze, found their focus on the two broken lines in the pavement. She was no longer between the lines as in her last memory, but now straddled the line on the right. A quick glance behind her showed two headlights and blinking hazards, pulling off into the breakdown lane. Not until then did her fogbound mind contribute a rational thought, a simple sense of place and time.

*Goddammit. Not here...not now.*

Her senses continued to add unwelcome details to her place and time as she slowed to a stop. The dashboard clock, derisively and almost audibly, said 3:30. Just within reach of her headlights, “EXIT 8 Hightstown Freehold 1 mile” glowed like an alien spacecraft in white on green.

She — that is, Estelle Perdue, eighteen-year-old single white female, daughter of Dolores, stepdaughter of Bernard, sister of Charles and Stephane, Caches Notch High School salutatorian for Class of 1992, ambitious young writer, a friend to all, approachable and kind, clinical

depressive with dissociative tendencies – was alone, in a place that no one else put her, and still about five hours from home.

Estelle's hands remained affixed to the wheel at 10-and-2, fingers and arms rigid, eyes now locked upon a crack in the pavement of the breakdown lane just ahead. She was trying to read the mental checklist of road emergency procedures that had been constructed for her two years earlier, but most of the words had fallen out of place and lay in a jumble at the bottom of the page. So she sat, petrified in her Failed Teen Driver death stance, waiting for some sort of clear instruction from her prefrontal cortex.

**OK...never admit fault for an accident. Ever.** That much she could recall without difficulty. Bernard had drilled that into her head so thoroughly during her initial driving lessons that it was almost an inborn response. **They'll use it against you in court and you'll be history.** Easy enough. *Don't say a word*, she said to herself. *Just hand over the information and make it quick.* Alright. It was coming back to her now. It seemed doable. *Accidents happen, after all...*

*...but why now?? Why tonight???*

Trembling more than slightly, Estelle turned on her flashers and stepped out into the mid-August night. The air was still and thick, held in place by one of those heavy summer skies near the shore that blankets the land with heat and the humid perfume of greenery growing wild. Traffic on the turnpike was moderate, given the hour and this rural spot on the main artery of East Coast commerce. It was mostly trucks rumbling toward New York on the graveyard shift. She remembered feeling surrounded by an onslaught of them and in

great danger, like a lost house cat amidst a bison stampede, before the insides of her eyelids made them all disappear.

The translucent humidity hung within her headlight beams as she walked along toward the impact side of the minivan. Pictures of the worst possible damage flipped through her mind like a sadistic driver's ed slide show. She hesitated, then turned away, wincing, face covered by both hands. Bernard's ruddy, bloated face filled the space between her and the imagined damage. There were holes in the walls of the house that could testify to the lack of safety she felt around that ticking time bomb of a man. Too much to take in at once.

She peeked between her fingertips, facing away from the Voyager. Beyond the breakdown lane was a twisted guard rail where a similar, perhaps more tragic accident had occurred, and the state had neglected to return the rail to working order. A gully, maybe six feet down a steep decline, ran along the other side, fringed by a thicket of reeds.

She moved closer, with almost involuntary shuffling steps, until her toes bumped the metal corpse where it lay on the gravel beyond the pavement. Leaning slightly over the edge, she peered along the border of her known universe and into the darkness beyond it. A warm tingle grew along the length of her spine, like the slow return of sensation to a numbed but waking body part. It simmered for a moment, then swelled and suddenly raced across her skin in all directions, setting off an instant twitch of her entire body.

Under less grim circumstances, this experience might have briefly snapped her out of the doo dreaming sleepwalk the last few years

of her life had become, and its electric presence would linger and hold her, at least for some fleeting period of time, in a state she once described in her journal as “almost fully alive.” She cherished these moments, infrequent as they had become, and almost always stopped to record her breathy reflections upon them in the wire-bound pocket notebook that was never far from her person. This time, with so much at stake, the voice was unrelenting, and it pounced before she had a chance to breathe.

**You idiot. You are so dead. Might as well have gone off the road. You'll never be there on time now. Justin will have a goddamn flying fit when you come in late again. He told you he'd fire you. And Bernard will kill you after he does. You shouldn't have gone to that damn show. You knew it too and you did it anyway. Everything you've been planning and worked so hard to do is over now. This is when it all falls apart. Why do you keep letting them do this to you??**

Thus doomed to a fate worse than death, she closed her eyes and sighed, then turned to inspect the vehicle, with images of a mangled side panel and door lodged in her mind.

When she opened them, the vision her eyes provided defied those pictures, and her mind briefly chose the preconceived image over reality. But the image faded as the vision beckoned her faith. She beheld the passenger side of a black 1984 Plymouth Voyager minivan, perfectly shaped, unharmed.

She walked closer, scrutinizing her eyesight for unseen details, then running her fingers along the side of its night-colored body for the unseeable.

Not a single dent.

The only blemish she found was a round patch of white paint on the front door, no bigger than a baseball. The sidewalls of both tires were scuffed, leaving thin dark rings over the weathered gray rubber.

Other than that, the Voyager looked exactly as it had a few minutes before, when a collision with this particular vehicle behind her in the breakdown lane was only one of the many possible outcomes of falling asleep at the wheel.

“...Huh.”

She remained still. Her heart wanted her to stay there longer. There was, for this rarified moment, the chance for all these images to start piecing together, beginning there and then with the happenstance of standing in the breakdown lane of the New Jersey Turnpike at 3:30 on an August morning — and from there, far beyond, back through eighteen years of moments that brought her there and beyond even those, and it could have become one seamless flow in all directions that would all make sense. Her heart, beating faster yet somehow projecting calm throughout her body, knew the potential of that moment and hoped it would come to pass with a little more stillness. But the voice seized upon this lull and resumed the glum narrative to which her mind was committed.

**Great. The other car must have taken all the damage. You could've maybe handled a little dent in the van, but you can't afford higher insurance rates. Especially now that you are going to lose your job.**



**You blew it. You blew everything. You had it all set and you let them ruin it for you, again. *When will you learn?***

With that, Estelle began a slow walk, or procession, toward the lights of the other vehicle. Her mind was now in such fast and deep spin that moving her feet took extraordinary concentration. They handled the task on their own, clumsily, as they were prone to do even beyond the breakdown lane, but without incident. Meanwhile her mind turned and fired like a crazed gunman on a turret, spitting out stories it must have constructed from newspaper headlines or television crime dramas. **God, what if this guy's one of those psycho serial killers who drives around and bumps into cars and murders the drivers and stuffs their bodies into the trunk? Or maybe he's a rapist; look at you, you're not even prepared. Where are your keys? No pepper spray? Goddammit why do you get yourself into these things? Go back and get your purse before you're the next crime statistic...**

She arrived to find the vehicle, a white Nissan Pathfinder, idling softly. The headlights and flashers were on, but the interior remained dark, and the muffled din of thrash metal from the Pathfinder's stereo was the only sound. As if in response to a formal protocol regarding what to do under such circumstances, she waited within the headlight beams so the driver could see she was there.

At a more palatable hour, and aside from the brute fact of having been awake for an extraordinary period of time, Estelle was, according to the standards by which the American teenager is judged, a very pretty girl. (Girl? Young woman? Or perhaps neither; something in between that hasn't a name?) Exceptionally pretty in

fact, with a body that had reached feminine maturity long before it was authorized. Her form and figure had been either envied or coveted by many of her former classmates, and she received rave if often crude reviews in the locker rooms of both sexes. Among her more mature critics, she was revered for her refreshing lack of extravagance, and the way she wore her cover-girl features, sans ornamentation, with the glow of a Christmas tree before it is even cut, let alone trimmed.

(Almost none of these people, it needs to be added, seemed to remember a different era only a few years prior, and the unrelenting, merciless bullying they heaped on the nerdy, gawky, and allegedly fat adolescent duckling who later became their swan. She remembered though. All of it.)

All of these reviews, however, whether verbal or symbolic, or a passing, admiring glance, came to her second- or third-hand, if at all. She was not above self-critique, nor oblivious to the teenage games of attraction and mating ritual rehearsals. But she was almost completely ambivalent about them, and more than a little overwhelmed. When surrounded by the glare of public attention in the fishbowl of teenage life, she often retreated from self-consciousness to the point of ghosting herself. There was of course the social obligation to go through the motions of noticing who noticed her, but caring about what she noticed was an opportunity rarely seized. For instance, while she would indulge any *and-then-she-said-and-then-he-was-like* conversation in her vicinity, she rarely tried to make sense of the words, and while she had logged her share of grooming and gazing and tweaking time in front of a mirror, her gaze almost never left the vicinity of her eyes, or more particularly,

something behind them. In fact, if asked (as she once was, by a puzzled and clearly overmatched psychiatrist, before receiving a Prozac prescription), she could hardly remember a time when, looking at herself in a mirror, she saw anything at all — and when she did, it was someone who wasn't there.

But here and now, she could see herself all too well, reflected in the dark windshield of the Pathfinder. Her face was tense and her skin pulled tight, as if it had been having difficulty containing her for quite some time, and she exhibited a new tendency to grow indigo bags under her eyes. She looked away and tugged at the sleeves of her black-and-red-checkered flannel. (She had taken to wearing long sleeve shirts all summer, no matter how stiflingly hot.)

After a long pause, the driver's door of the Pathfinder swung open in a smooth, deliberate arc. The previously muted sonic contents now poured out into the night, with a hyperspeed double-bass-powered roar that, thanks to her brother and his boombox on the other side of a thin bedroom wall, she recognized as the latest album from his new grindcore idols, Napalm Death (and, unbeknownst to her, a song called "Remain Nameless"). Along with the eardrum assault music came a dense cloud of smoke bearing the unmistakable aroma of cannabis. So thick and pervasive was the flow of smoke that the occupant of the Pathfinder, in the vernacular she had learned just a couple nights prior, had clearly been "hotboxing."

The situation failed to get less strange as she saw the bottom of a dark, almost ankle-length trench coat and a pair of scuffed black cowboy boots emerge from the vehicle, followed by the door closing in the same graceful manner in which it had opened. The staccato

backlight of 18-wheelers flying by behind the driver gave the scene a cinematic sense of presence as she struggled to make out further details. The one other clear feature in the silhouette was a black leather cowboy hat, weathered and well-worn like the boots, with the brim rolled tightly and snapped up on the sides.

He didn't seem intent on joining her in the spotlight, or to notice her at all for that matter, so she shuffled toward him with due caution, peeking past the edge of the headlight beams as though it were the corner of a protective barrier. The details of his face emerged as her eyes adjusted, and with them came the surprise of an odd recognition she couldn't identify. He had a thin horseshoe mustache whose distal points almost reached the edge of his square chin and rugged jaw. Between there and his high cheekbones was a weathered collage of scars and sharp craggy angles, an almost gaunt but clearly strong visage. He looked like he had taken more than a few punches or beer bottles or who knows what else to the face, possibly without flinching. Most peculiar of all given the hour was the pair of round polarized sunglasses with leather side shields, in a style that would later be called "steampunk." Completing the array with a touch of Guns and Rosesesque coiffure was a mane of curly jet-black hair spilling onto and just beyond his shoulders.

Each part of his appearance screamed familiarity — she hadn't just seen or known of this guy, she *knew* him — but her mind wouldn't cough up the who or the why. Thanks to her best friend Mimi, the flaming extrovert, she had met about a hundred people over the previous four days, and seen at least a thousand others who provoked some level of interest or intrigue, if not an outright sense of being part of her wandering tribe. Even this level of knowing, given

the hour and her state of unrest, had to penetrate a dense wall of equal parts whirlwind and brain fog for which all of her usual tools were unavailable. Still, there was enough evidence to suggest that he was the new kind of familiar, not one of her brothers' leering friends, or the handsy divorcees who were her most frequent customers, or Bernard's cadre of drinking buddies from the Loyal Order of Moose lodge etc. This tempered what surely would have been a terrifying anticipation of having to speak with an unidentified social object, down to her customary level of petrification.

Looking away from her still, toward the flow of traffic whizzing by mere feet away, he craned his neck and sniffed deeply, as though he hadn't seen her yet but had caught a whiff of her scent. Then, having identified its source, he abruptly turned toward her and...*smiled?* Yes indeed, a so-glad-to-see-you smile, at 3:30 AM in the breakdown lane. His greeting seemed sincere enough, but she couldn't rule out that he was just severely stoned.

"Good morning," he said, or rather reported, without a hint of irony. "I hope you are having a pleasant journey."

His voice, as it turned out, was the most unexpected item on the long list of surprises. It was a soft, melodious vibrato, clear and almost patrician, as if he were a prep school classmate of a James Spader character. But it was also elongated into a slight country drawl that sounded Texan — an academy in Fort Worth perhaps.

"Hi," she replied, unconsciously backpedaling a few inches toward the guard rail. She fumbled over what to say next, leading to, for her, an awkward silence. "...um, I'm like, really sorry. For the accident. Ya

know, I guess I was just...I wasn't thinking," she added, not quite aware that she was blowing her cover.

"Oh, no cause for alarm. These things happen," he said, then turned his head in a slow looping motion, with a nearly imperceptible twitch in the middle, before smiling at her again. "We both seem to be unharmed."

"Well, I mean your car, it might not have been as lucky. Mine's ok really, I seemed to get some of your paint, but that's about it. I have insurance and all, so there's no problem with that."

He rubbed his chin and looked toward the sky as he mulled it over, then shrugged and shook his head with a more pronounced jolt.

"Alright. Let's have a look."

She shuffled cautiously toward the driver's side, taking a wide arc around him as he remained still by the left front panel, seemingly disinterested in what she would find. Upon her first serious inspection of the Pathfinder, she noticed that it was brand new and spotlessly clean, like it had just left the showroom in a plastic bubble. Despite traveling through the same clouds of flying insects holding court above the roadway that peppered the Voyager with splatter, there wasn't a trace of bug residue on its windshield or side-view mirror. Her eyes scanned the side panel and doors, and all the way around to the back.

Not a single scratch.

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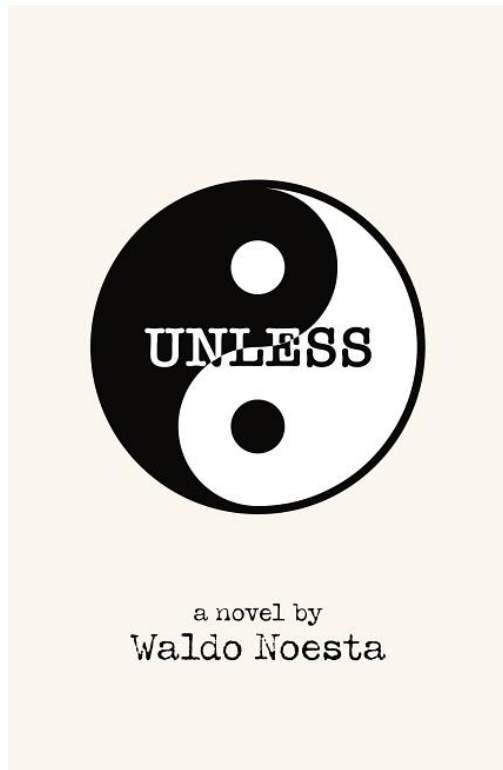
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