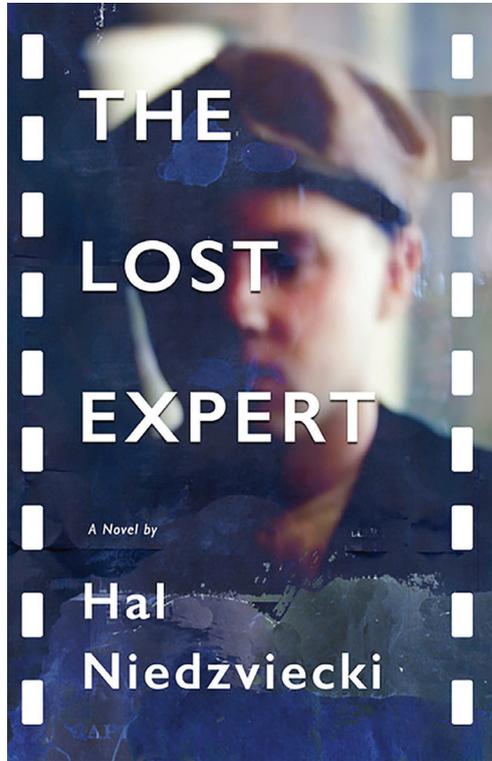


**Excerpt from *The Lost Expert*
by Hal Niedzviecki**



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Chris woke into the usually soothing cloud of sound: Laurie's breaths, the laboured hum of the kitchen's ancient refrigerator, the murmur of the next-door apartment's always-on tv. But he was tense, his body tight. He'd been out with Krunk last night. Laurie had been long asleep when he'd staggered home just before three. Laurie didn't like Krunk. She didn't like the drinking and the late-night greasy Chinatown snacks. She especially did not care for the way Chris's best friend since third grade lived his life: hand to mouth, getting by on small grants and odd jobs — his primary energies focused on screening movies no one had ever heard of.

At her mostly unspoken behest, Chris had been cutting back on his Krunk outings. But it had been Midnight Madness at the Royal, and he'd promised Krunk he'd definitely go this time. He'd cancelled the last two months in order to avoid, maybe even put off altogether, what he knew would be coming: Laurie, annoyed, pointing out once again that Chris needed to get serious about his "life choices" and stop "wasting so much time messing around." Serious people did not get Thursday-night drunk with a basement-dwelling self-proclaimed video anarchist. But there were only so many times you could say no to Krunk before you'd find him standing outside your apartment throwing empty beer cans at your second-floor window while chanting, "Pusseee whipped. Pusseee whipped."

Scooping up yesterday's clothes from the floor, Chris clicked the bedroom door behind him as quietly as he possibly could. He tiptoed to the kitchen, which also doubled as the living room. He

dressed quickly in the dark. A sudden image: His girlfriend un-hurriedly scrubbing out a small soup pot. The scene pained him. Laurie's kitchen, with its tiny stove and ancient buckled floor illuminated by a single bulb set in a dulling light fixture of dusty, brownish glass. Laurie, meticulous, rubbing the soup pot until it shone silver despite the gloom. She could afford a nicer place, but whenever something went wrong with the apartment's clanging radiators or spotty internet connection, she dismissed it, reminding Chris that she was saving for a down payment on, maybe, a small condo ... She usually trailed off at that point, looking just past him with a half wistful, half pained expression.

Even Chris, who Laurie said was "on cloud nine half the time," got the hint. If he could just figure out his shit, they would, as Laurie liked to say when one of her coupled friends bought a place or got engaged, "progress to the next phase."

Progress. Chris struggled into his black waiter's pants. They were getting too tight. His thighs pushed against the fabric. He had muscles now.

At first, he'd resisted Laurie's workout regimens. He'd always been a bit on the scrawny side and had never really been much for sports or exercise. But Laurie's urging bordered on insistence. He started doing push-ups and sit-ups and going for the occasional jog. That had been enough to convince Laurie that he was all in on the plan. Without further ado, she presented him with a weekly regimen to follow.

So, progress. And the occasional sleepovers that had gradually turned into regular weekend stays, which finally turned into Laurie presenting him with a key and suggesting that he give up his apartment to "save money." Chris remembered walking to work that morning with unfamiliar propulsion, a goofy grin on his face as his long, skinny legs slid him toward the future.

Practical, utilitarian, sensible Laurie, drying the dishes, carefully stowing them away in the crooked cupboard, humming to herself all along. He hadn't yet admitted to her that despite the hefty reduction in his expenses (Laurie had asked him to pay only \$200 a month), he hadn't saved a cent. Things like that

were hard to discuss with Laurie. She had plans. Workouts and co-habitations and next-level progress.

Chris padded down the dark alcove to the front door. He tripped over his trusty, battered Blundstones. He froze when he heard Laurie stepping into the kitchen. She turned on the overhead light. Chris watched from the foyer as, humming quietly to herself, she put the kettle on the burner. She looked out the tiny window over the sink with its view of the next building's bricks. She stretched her arms above her head. Completing the habitual gesture, she took the elastic out of her hair. She'd been letting her hair grow. Blond and wavy, it spilled over her shoulders. Chris, watching without being seen, felt like he was spying on a stranger.

"Laurie," he said.

Laurie, gasping, spun around.

"Hey! It's just me."

"Jesus! Chris!"

Laurie had grown up in the shelter of her conservative, church-going parents. She'd attended a Catholic school, been actively discouraged from "cussing," as she still called it. Her parents were polite, even kind, to Chris, though he knew they did not understand why their daughter wanted anything to do with him.

"I thought you'd gone to work!" Laurie laughed loudly, as if seeing him had jarred something loose in her. Chris felt his big smile blossom. Relief, or something else: a warm heat through his chest. He stepped toward her, conscious now of the poor state of his outfit. The black button-down, untucked, still moist with spills

of coffee, beer, and black bean sauce. His black pants, stiff, literally crusted with dirt. And yesterday's socks, so filthy and redolent of rot that Chris imagined he was leaving soiled footsteps, as he padded along the sloped, worn but clean, linoleum kitchen floor toward his girlfriend.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"What are you still doing here?" Laurie didn't give him a chance to answer. She moved toward him and pulled him into her, her arms strong around him. "I thought you'd left," Laurie murmured against his neck.

"Laurie," Chris breathed. "I —"

"It's all right, Chrissie. I know ..." Laurie slid her hands down along his newly muscled abs. "And what's this?" she asked, squeezing a bicep. "So buff now ..."

Laurie pulled Chris into a kiss. Her tongue against his felt strange at first, but then it felt like it always had — her shape, her taste. Chris tried to say something, to explain, to protest, but she just shushed him and pulled him back down the hall. In the bedroom she discarded her pajama shirt, groaning as his hands moved reflexively to her breasts. They kissed again, falling onto the smooth comforter.

Afterwards, Laurie lay with her head on his chest. Chris was going to be late for work, but he couldn't bring himself to move. It was like they'd had makeup sex without fighting first. He lay there feeling awkward and anxious, looking away from her, looking at the top of her dresser, empty except for her phone and a picture of them all dressed up at Laurie's cousin's wedding. Chris gangly in an ill-fitting jacket and tie combo, Laurie floofy in her forest green bridesmaid gown. They were both smiling toothily, out of their element, arms around each other, holding each other up.

“Hey, uh, Laurie.”

“I know,” Laurie said. “You and Krunk.” Her voice hardening, just a bit.

“Yeah. I was going to call, but —”

Laurie was looking at him, waiting for him to continue.

“Laurie ...” Chris said again, starting and stopping. He couldn’t find the words. Something about him and her and Krunk and how he was trying, really trying. “I know you don’t —”

“It’s all right,” Laurie said impatiently. “It’s fine, Christopher.” She got out of bed and pulled on her robe.

“But, Laurie —”

She leaned over, her clean lemon soap smell enveloping him. She kissed him on the cheek.

“You should go. You’ll be late for work.” Her smile was vacant and firm, like a teacher who had already made up her mind to report him to the principal. She tightened her robe. She had light brown eyes flecked with yellow. “Time to go,” she said.

He nodded, smoothing at the creases in the comforter. Decisively, Laurie moved to the bathroom and shut the door. Sighing, Chris got out of bed. For the second time that morning, he pulled on his clothes. He hurried into the kitchen, hunting around for the keys to her — their — apartment. He found them in the foyer, on the rickety side table. He paused for a second, holding them in his palm, gauging their weight. Should he say something? Goodbye or something?

Chris walked past the still-slumbering row houses of Beaconsfield Avenue, feeling the chilled air on his forehead. It was still mostly dark, morning a distant gleam over the Great Lake. He ran a hand down his face, the pads of his fingers catching on his stubble. He was hungover. He smelled of sweat, stale popcorn, and sex. Luck-

ily, he was working the breakfast shift, and the boss didn't stumble in until he was long gone. Later, after he worked out following Laurie's program, he would take that much needed shower. He would shave. The wind blew. Chris shivered. It was fall now, time to dig out his coat. That's the way it happened: suddenly and unexpectedly, though it was the same thing every year.

Shoving his hands in the pockets of his tight black pants, Chris pushed on. But he came to a full stop where Argyle hit Ossington. The Vietnamese restaurant, the pho place on the corner, seemed to have been replaced overnight. There was a new shop, apparently called Motzie's Bagels. The Motzie's sign was cracked and faded, the raised cursive letters weathered and slightly buckled. It was as if the bagel shop had always been there, a recalcitrant holdover from some other era. Chris rubbed at his eyes. Then he noticed the corner Portuguese bakery he was standing next to had also transformed. The display window was piled high with golden breads twisted into elaborate braids. Painted on the window were letters from a foreign alphabet he vaguely identified as Hebrew.

ענעש ןיא עטיג רהאז
 תבש ףירא תולח
 תולח רעייא ףירא

Two new Jewish bakeries? Mechanically, Chris pulled out his phone. He saw the time and hesitated. It was far too early to consider calling Krunk, who was always talking about how he was half Jewish on his father's side. "Which, technically, means I'm a goy," he liked to say. "But I can feel it" — he'd thump his chest — "in here." Anyway, he had to keep moving or he'd be late.

Hurriedly, he put the coffees on to brew — Colombian Supremo

Organic Dark Roast. Antigua Caribbean Smooth. Kenyan Jungle Fair Trade. Then Chris laid out the baked goods: muffins, cookies, fudgy gluten-free paleo brownies. The door opened, letting in a cold breeze. In his rush, he'd forgotten to lock it behind him.

"Hey, sorry, we're not —"

Turning, he saw it was Krunk in his greasy trench coat. Krunk marched in, dramatically kicking up the bright yellow high-tops he'd found — brand new! — hiding on a street corner in the waning darkness of a long, hot August night bordering on morning. Chris had been with him. It had been just before he'd moved in with Laurie. A few months ago. An eternity.

"Seen that fricking film shoot?" Krunk demanded. Krunk hated film shoots. As soon as he identified one setting up its ubiquitous fleet of trailers, he immediately began agitating for the fire-bombing of craft trucks, the stealth removal of pylons reserving blocks of parking, and the pie-ing of Hollywood poseurs pretending to be actors. Krunk claimed that as a committed guerilla filmmaker, part of his job description included actively opposing the "brain-dead corporate studio idiots that teach people how to chew their cud." He thought big and respected no compromise. He had yet to complete a project longer than six minutes.

Krunk helped himself to an extra-large takeout cup of the organic dark roast. He reached for a fancy brownie. Chris slapped his hand away.

"No way. Those always sell out. You can have a raisin muffin."

"Raisins," Krunk moaned. He took a huge bite.

"What are you doing up?"

"Never went to bed," Krunk said, muffled through the muffin and large slurps of coffee. *Figures*, Chris thought. Krunk had no gainful employment, no Laurie, no structure. "I saw them setting up that abomination in the park and decided to stake it out for

future action.” Krunk spoke like he chewed, with enthusiastic intensity, spewing muffin crumbs and stray raisins.

Future action, Chris thought, a low-level dread adding to the low-level nausea that had already made camp in his empty stomach. Future action meant Krunk roping him into some asinine scheme under the guise of anarchist aesthetics or guerilla video or DIY cultural resistance or some other sobriquet. Future action meant silly stakeouts punctuated by the draining and crushing of endless cans of Old Milwaukee and Labatt 50 and trying not to think about the pings of Laurie’s increasingly annoyed texts.

“So,” Krunk demanded, “Laurie mad at ya or what?”

“Something like that,” Chris muttered.

Krunk made his usual “whipped” gesture-and-noise.

“Fuck off,” Chris managed. “You gotta get out of here. We’re opening in a few minutes.”

“Me? Your best customer?” Krunk feigned anguish and took a seat at one of the three small round tables. “Man ...” He shook his head half despondently.

Chris grabbed a rag and swiped at the tabletop, somehow already covered with crumbs and coffee dribbles. “You can stay for, like, five more minutes.” Turning deliberately away from Krunk, Chris poured himself a steaming cup of freshly brewed Kenyan Jungle Fair Trade.

“All right, all right, geez ...”

It was just Krunk being Krunk. What nagged at Chris was something else. He’d felt it when he woke up, and he was still feeling it. It wasn’t Krunk and it wasn’t Laurie and it wasn’t another movie shoot taking over Trinity Bellwoods Park. It was all those things. *Motzie’s Bagels*. All those things put together and jumbled up and dumped out like one of those thousand-piece puzzles Laurie liked to do. Puzzles! Maybe Krunk was right. Progress. He watched the

steam wisp up from his mug. And Laurie. Last week, casually asking him, “Are you still thinking of going back to school?” There were basically two people in his life, Chris thought. They didn’t particularly like each other, they were opposites in every way, but both seemed in agreement: It was time for him to do something.

The door opened, and the first customer of the day walked in. He was a regular, dressed for work, chinos and a tucked-in light blue dress shirt accessorized by an upscale take on the peacoat. “Getting cold out there,” the guy said, steadfastly ignoring Krunk. Chris thought his name was Andrew. Andrew rubbed his hands together in mock defrost. Smooth-shaven Andrew, in his early thirties — worked in tech, Chris recalled. Probably figured Krunk for one of those homeless guys who goes from coffee shop to coffee shop asking for handouts. Chris filled a large dark roast and added a splash of oat milk and a single spoon of sugar.

“Brownie today?”

Andrew nodded. “Gotta have it.”

Chris bagged a paleo brownie.

“Thanks,” Andrew said heartily.

“No problem.”

“No problem,” Krunk imitated in an unctuous falsetto as soon as Andrew had departed.

“That’s it,” Chris snapped. “Time to go.”

There was a problem. Chris felt it. A miscalculation in the cosmos, particles separating, dissolving, solute into solvent, another day’s solution — same as the last. Only, somehow, different.

Rachel showed up twenty minutes late, wild-eyed and disheveled, her blond hair frizzy, her pale skin so translucent she looked almost grey. “Oh my god,” Rachel moaned as she tied on an apron. Chris poured her a coffee.

“You’re late,” Chris said to her, smiling sardonically to show that he didn’t really care. Last week, he’d had to stay on for the lunch shift two days in a row. Rachel had been increasingly erratic, drinking and partying, showing up at work complaining of vicious headaches, code, as Chris well knew, for killer hangovers. Rachel came around the counter. She gulped at the coffee then looked up at Chris, managing a grin.

“Sorry ...” Rachel said, sounding anything but.

Up close she looked greedily sensual, her hangover or come down or whatever it was only serving to enhance her gravitational pull. Pretty girls could be late, unkempt, hungover, slow to make lattes, and terrible at cleaning up. They still got good tips, requests for their phone numbers, the occasional leer courtesy of Carlos the owner/manager as he amiably ambled in and took up his position in the back office.

“Don’t worry about it,” Chris said.

“Okay. Thanks for covering for me.” The shorter girl looked up at him with dark eyes shining. Chris didn’t move. Rachel leaned in. For a second, he thought she was going to kiss him. Or he was going to kiss her. They stared at each other.

“I should go.” Chris looked at his watch. As if he had an appointment or something.

Rachel raised her hand and did a slight wave.

“Bye,” she said.

On the street, the day had brightened. Where there had been shadows and fog, there was now revealing sunshine. Chris moved aimlessly along Queen. At the steps leading to the park, he hesitated. Maybe he would go around, skirt the perimeter, take the long way? No. Why take the long way? What was he avoiding? He loved movies. His best friend was a filmmaker of sorts. Lately, he had been

toying with the idea of getting into the business himself, taking a course, becoming a sound man or a lighting grip, something like that. He could ask his mom to help him out with the tuition money. Tell Laurie that he was getting serious about a career. Progress. Or something.

At this hour, Trinity Bellwoods was mostly patronized by dog walkers and stroller pushers. If Chris noticed them, he pitied them. The moms looked desperate, and the dogs looked ridiculous, dressed more often than not in an array of sweaters, jumpsuits, and booties, as if they were extras from some failed *Best in Show* sequel. Chris picked up the pace, warily keeping watch for signs of the film shoot. Just past the playground, he stumbled and almost fell. Surprised, he looked down. A bundled snake of cables stretched along the path. He followed the clustered cords. The wires twisted along the paved walkway then split apart at a colonizing huddle of trailers, abrupt fungi glowing white against the dark grass. Chris edged toward this sprawl of lunar flora. There it was again — that feeling. Unease and disruption, growing inside him.

Down the slight incline toward the bottom section of the park, a lone security guard lolled against a trailer set slightly apart from the others. Through shadows and beams of sunshine, Chris caught flashes of the man's teeth masticating a wad of gum. Beside the security guard stood a tower of orange pylons awaiting ubiquitous deployment. It was just another movie shoot. The same slovenly, disinterested security guard eyeing passersby, the same ragamuffin band of headset-wearing crew, the same hurriedly scrawled signs pointing to the catering truck and the gathering point for extras. The shoots were so common in the summer and fall months that most people barely even noticed them, let alone bothered to find out what masterpiece was soon to grace screens big and little or

see if there were any stars hidden away in the giant buzzing trailers that narrowed already narrow streets, blocked alleys, and crushed random slabs of urban parkland grass. Motzie's Bagels! And that other shop with the Hebrew writing. It was part of it. It was part of the set. How could he not have seen that straight away? Some kind of old-world Jewish village. A shtetl? It hadn't looked particularly *Fiddler on the Roof*. More of a retro vibe, modern nostalgic. Krunk would know. Just another movie set . . .

It was almost noon. The intermittent sun had just about burnt off the last of the glistening morning dew that clung to the white walls of the trailers. Krunk often claimed he could tell what kind of piece of crap was in production with a single glance. Cop cruisers next to a gritty alley off Queen meant a crime procedural for TV, fake NYC taxis driven straight out of that warehouse where they keep everything you need to turn Toronto the Good into the Big Apple. Trucks and trailers outside ivy-encrusted University of Toronto halls meant a college boys gross-out comedy, the perfect setting for fraternal high jinks aimed at disrupting a corrupt university president presiding over middle America's youth with the earnest zeal of the well-fed kleptocrat. And, of course, if they were filming on Bloor Street, that meant a hotel penthouse rom-com scene offering panoramic skylscapes evoking the limitless possibilities of love — but watch out for the CN Tower! Ah, no worries; make it disappear in post.

"Ah, there you are! Finally!" Chris felt a hand on his forearm, strong fingers circling. "I won't even ask where you've been. Boys will be boys!"

The speaker barked a laugh. She held a clipboard and wore a headset. She seemed frazzled, relieved, and pissed off all at once. "I've got him," she blurted into the headset. "He's here. No, no, he just showed up. I don't know. I *don't know*. We're going to make-

up.” The woman pulled him along through the park. Chris noted passersby eyeballing him. He felt his legs moving. He heard the woman’s chatter, a kind of passive-aggressive non sequitur babble. “You had us worried. Beautiful day out. Bryant’s meeting us. He just got here too. How does he do that? It’s like he knows. How does he know? Oh, you boys!”

She pushed Chris up the stairs of a trailer. The interior was dominated by a giant vanity mirror of unforgiving high-wattage light bulbs. Chris blinked against the glare, and when he could see again, a guy with aggressively blond highlights was attacking his face with an oversized powder puff. Chris felt his feet. They hurt from five hours of pouring coffees and bagging buttered multigrain bagels. Suddenly tired, he leaned back into the chair and closed his eyes.

“I’ve got to do something with the hair,” the makeup guy said to the clipboard lady.

She shrugged. “He’s already been to wardrobe, I guess.” Chris felt cold spray dew his scalp.

“Leave it!” a commanding voice insisted.

Chris jerked upright. Makeup guy froze, his finger on the trigger of a squirt bottle filled with liquid shine.

“It’s perfect!” the voice said again. “Doing your own hair now, huh, Holmes?”

The man laughed a big, booming laugh. The makeup guy’s eyes narrowed. The voice put hands on Chris’s shoulders and leaned in. Chris surveyed the new arrival in the mirror. He was short and stocky, his wide forehead deeply furrowed. A faded Pittsburgh Penguins cap was pulled over what was most likely a serious case of male pattern baldness. He was smiling, but his brown eyes, absorbing the blinding hot lights, exuded cold.

Bryant Reed, Chris thought or said. The director.

“At your service,” the man boomed, laughing again.

He was one of Krunk’s heroes. Well, it was kind of a love-hate thing. Krunk hated Reed’s later work, ranted about how he had lost his edge and was cozying up to the establishment. But he loved his earlier movies and still talked about him as one of a handful of American directors who had once managed to “get something real” into the theatres.

The movie, Chris thought. It must be his.

“Holmes! Your little disappearing act cost me, what, sixty grand? Probably more! But, hey, what’s a few lost days between friends? Beggars can’t be choosers!” Reed boomed another murderous laugh. “At least he looks the part,” he said to the clipboard woman. “It’s like he just did a stint at the local diner.” Reed waved the smell from Chris’s hair into his face, inhaled it as if he was contemplating the bouquet of a fine wine. “He even smells like it.”

Clipboard lady sniffed, made a sour face.

Chris shifted his gaze from Reed’s reflection to his own. People said he was handsome. He had short blond hair, blue eyes, straight white teeth, a square jaw, and stood just a sliver under six feet tall. Krunk said he’d have been perfect in *The Great Escape* — “Nazi or canny Brit pow with a knack for tunnelling, take your pick!” Take your pick, Chris thought. He cultivated no particular style, made no attempt to either blend in or stand out.

“Holmes?” barked Bryant Reed. “Earth to Holmes?”

Holmes. He keeps calling me Holmes. Then it came to him. Thomson Holmes. An A-list action star Laurie liked to claim he resembled. Laurie went to his movies with her girlfriends. She admitted they were predictable, juvenile, meaningless — the kind of movie Krunk hated more than anything else in the world. “We don’t go for the plot,” she said coquettishly. *They think I’m Thomson Holmes.* What was Holmes doing in a Bryant Reed movie?

Wait until Krunk found out. He'd go ballistic.

Maybe he did look like the guy? A skinnier, paler, infinitely more disheveled version. In the mirror, his face and his blue eyes stared back, clear and hopeful.

"Ready?" Reed said.

"They're on their way to set," clipboard lady announced into her walkie-talkie.

"I, uh —"

"Don't talk, just listen," Reed growled, ushering Chris out of the trailer and into the early afternoon sunshine. "You've wasted enough of my time already. As of this moment," Reed half hissed, half whispered, "you're someone else. You're a young man with an astonishing gift. You're a penniless waiter with a gorgeous new wife and baby. You're a visionary about to discover your nascent powers for the first time. Your whole life is ahead of you. So don't speak. Don't *say*. Just *feel*. Feel what it's like to find yourself as you really are, as you were really meant to be. From this moment on, you're not Thomson Holmes. You're him. You're that guy. The Lost Expert."

