

2016

## The Mist, excerpt

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### Recommended Citation

Kristal, Jen (2016) "The Mist, excerpt," *Exile*: Vol. 62 : No. 1 , Article 22.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol62/iss1/22>

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## **The Mist, excerpt**

by Jen Kristal

Adam watched the steam from the shower curl off his body and up through the ventilation system. It came off of him in small strands, weaving themselves through the air as if they played some part in a universal tapestry. Being a piece of art, of course, would mean that someone would have wanted to really look at him. He cringed at the thought, annoyed that there was even a hint of exhibitionism left in his sack of blood and bones. Some things weren't meant to be on display. He'd felt this way since he was very young, protesting whenever his parents wanted him to pose in pictures with his younger sister. He'd always done it of course, and looked solemnly at the lens of the camera, his long hair in pigtails. Years later, his parents began to listen to his reasoning as to why he'd rather not be in the forefront of any of their holiday cards. One holiday season, Adam's mother let him sit out of the family photoshoot. The year after, the family stopped sending them altogether.

After staring at the ceiling while dragging soap around his stiff body, he fumbled for the faucet. He pulled the towel off of the command strip hanger and yelled to his roommate that he'd be a bit longer. Wrapping the towel closely around his hips, he touched the face of the mirror with his palm and wiped off the steam that accumulated during his shower. At first, he only wiped away enough of the steam to see his face. His dark eyes looked back at him out of the shadows staining his skin from sleepless nights. Even the luster of his naturally tan complexion seemed to have been washed off in the shower. His pulse quickened in response to his reflection. He moved his hand against the glass again, wiping away more of the condensed steam. He stopped at his shoulders, took a deep breath and continued on, revealing his torso, all the way down to the towel wrapped securely around his waist.

The doctors had told him what sorts of things he could expect after the procedure: his chest would be tender, his scars would fade as the months went on and that he should apply some healing cream if he wanted to help his skin recover. His chest expanded and contracted with each breath that he took. The scars still stained his chest, though the swelling seemed to have gone down. He removed his hand from the glass and ran his hand down the front of his torso. For the first time since his mother had allowed him to get a buzz cut at the age of 13, he smiled. Though he'd never be a male model, his twig-thin body was getting closer to looking the way it was supposed to, his muscles developing in the right places and hair growing in places that were absolutely unladylike. He touched his chin, admiring the small amount of scruff that had gathered. He didn't feel like shaving today. He kept his towel tucked closely to his waist and called out, "Kasey, the bathroom's all yours."

Adam walked out of the bathroom, chest bare against the warm air circulating in his shitty apartment. Magazines, textbooks and a suspicious looking pizza box littered the floor of the small apartment common room. He'd have to remember to clean it after he restocked the fridge this afternoon. His roommate lounged on the shabby chair they'd picked up off

the side of the road a few months ago, saying they'd replace it when they had time. Between band practice, class and the occasional odd job, it seemed that they never wanted (nor actually had) the time, so the chair had stayed through the end of summer into the mid-fall weather.

Adam stood, shoulders back and relaxed, waiting for his roommate to notice him. After a few seconds, Adam cleared his throat and Kasey finally looked over, "Hey, Adam. Dude, you look great! How long's it been again?"

"Since the surgery? Uh, a few months I guess." Adam crossed his arms over his chest, still feeling awkward without a t-shirt serving as a body of armor.

"Cool. Let's hit up the gym tomorrow. We can start working out to impress the ladies," Kasey smirked. He was wearing the screen-printed shirt Adam designed based on their band's logo, a replica of the shirt that Adam had refused to wear before the surgery, as it had been too tight on his chest.

"Yeah, yeah, I would but we have class. Hey, I'm going to head out soon to pick up some groceries. You need anything?" Adam had already turned his back to his friend, fidgeting to fasten the towel more tightly against his hips.

"I'm good. I'll see you when you get home." Kasey went back to staring at the television as he'd been when Adam entered.

Adam strolled into his room and headed towards the window, cracking it slightly, feeling the cool wind slip into the space around him. The sky was littered with clouds, but there was no sign of rain on any of the weather radars today. He stood there for a few minutes, basking in the cool fall air, then made his way over to his dresser, pulled open the first drawer, and clutched onto an ace bandage. He gripped it tightly in his hand, and stared down at his chest for a second time.

He remembered his high school routine of tightly securing his breasts in these bandages, sometimes so tightly it was hard to breathe, leaving angry impressions in his skin when he'd remove them every night. He'd bound his breasts as long as he could remember, watching videos online about the best techniques, or struggles that others in his community had with binding. It had always seemed like a natural solution to an unnatural problem. So, he'd wrap the parts of himself that he was ashamed of having tight enough, almost as a punishment. He hadn't wanted to burden his parents, they already believing he was some butch lesbian.

The tan bandages felt light, weightless. This second skin was one he could finally shed, and he did so neatly, discarding it in the garbage bin in his room after ripping them in a few places. He went back to his dresser and shifted around the contents of his top drawer, the space he'd always set aside for his bandages. He looked down at his towel. There were things that would be much harder for him to fix.

He grabbed a pair of boxers from his drawer, slipping them up his legs, as quickly as he could manage, before removing the towel. The remnants of his female identity were still there, in between his legs. Small steps. Maybe in a few years medicine would catch up to his anatomical needs. For now, he'd make do with what he had. He quickly found a pair of jeans

and shirt, threw on a pair of Chucks and gazed at himself quickly in the mirror. He was fairly confident that he'd pass today. He hadn't been the center of unwanted attention from strangers in a long while. Grabbing his wallet, he made his way out the door, shouting that he'd be back soon.