

The Mixed Tapes  
**by Kameron Riley**

My mother used to make mixed tapes. Not like the ones my friends and I made. We would pool our baby-sitting money to buy blank CDs in a large plastic tower for \$19.99. Then we would carefully divide them up between us.

We would meticulously select our songs and name the finished compilations things like "School Dayz." We used sharpies to draw large black irises in the o's to look like eyes. Sometimes we'd cover the small sketches we drew on the tops of the gold CDs with black inked hearts when the drawings were of a quality below our 7<sup>th</sup> grade standards. Then we'd proudly take the finished products to school, and place our index fingers in the holes to wear them like futuristic jewelry. This kept the undersides from scratching while we traded them in the hallways between third and fourth periods.

My mother did not make mixed tapes like these. Rather, she would find a single song that she liked, and record it end to end, multiple times, on one cassette tape. When she played the cassette in the tape deck of the family Sentra, the song would end only to begin again moments later. She had a habit of selecting only the most irritating songs for her tapes. Or maybe it was just that any song became irritating if you heard it enough times. I was never really sure. One tape contained only

the song "Zoot Suit Riot," which my mother sang as "Zoot Suit Ryan." And the first time she played the tape in the car we all sang at the top of our lungs, my mother, my sister and I. And we laughed every time my mother sang "Ryan" instead of "Riot." We sang with less enthusiasm on each play that followed. Until my sister stopped singing. And then I stopped. And only my mother continued.

Another tape contained only the song "It Wasn't Me," by Shaggy.

"Mom!" my sister exclaimed in horror. She took off her softball cleats in the passenger seat and tossed them casually in the well behind her seat, where she would be sure to forget them later. "Do you even *know* what that song is about?"

"Of course!" My mother said, her smile exposing both rows of large white teeth. "Shaggy was on the counter, and the sofa, and the shower. And he said it wasn't him, but it *was* him!"

"I am not singing this with you," my sister announced, before focusing her gaze out the window.

The worst of my mother's tapes, by far, was "Mambo Number 5." For months, it was the only song that played in the tan Sentra. My sister and I began by protesting. My mother turned up the volume to drown us out. I pressed the radio button to change the stereo to 102.7. My mom changed it back. Once, while my mother was inside the gas station, my sister ejected the tape

and threw it into the gray plastic trash can between pumps 5 and 6.

"It's for her own good," my sister said solemnly, as she climbed back in the car and quickly re-buckled her seat belt. In a rare show of sisterly solidarity, we both swore that we had no idea what had become of the tape. We both were grounded. A new "Mambo Number 5" tape appeared the next day.

A few months later my mother forgot about the "Mambo Number 5" tape. A few years later, she started forgetting to turn off the stove when she finished cooking. Then she started forgetting the name of our street. And the year. And the name of the current president.

"Alzheimer's. Early onset," the doctor told us. "Rare to see in someone so young." He shook his head, while my sister cried silent tears in the corner.

Eventually, my mother forgot my sister's name. And then my name. And then where she was. She spent most of her days in a faded brown recliner, staring silently out the window. One day, after my mother hadn't spoken a word in several weeks, my sister pulled me into an empty doorway.

"Do you hear that?" She whispered, nodding toward my mother in her faded chair by the living room window. I turned my head, my breath tight in my chest. And there she was, my mother, smiling as she sang softly to herself, *it was a zoot suit Ryan*.