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Opening extract from

Tape

Written by

Steven Camden

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TAPE

STEVEN CAMDEN

In 2013, **Ameliah** moves in with her grandmother after losing her parents. There, she finds a tape in the spare room. A tape with a boy's voice on it – a voice she can't quite hear, but which seems to be speaking to her.

Back in 1993, **Ryan** records a diary on an old tape. He talks about his mother's death and about his love for a new girl he just saw who doesn't even know he exists.

Ameliah and Ryan are connected by more than just a tape.

This is their story.

TAPE

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For Yael

Half of me is you

X





Hello? Is it on? Yeah, I can see the light. It's on. I'm starting again. I'm recording.

That just happened. That actually just happened and the crazy thing is it didn't even feel weird. I think I get it now, Dad. I think I understand.

It's probably best not to think about it too much, right?

The universe and everything.

I'm here. That's what matters. I'm here doing this and it happened. Just like you said, so I guess the universe is happy.

Was it always meant to be now? Sorry, I'll leave it alone.

Everything happens when it should.

This is what you did, sitting down and pressing record, and now it's gonna be what I do.

I'm talking into the speaker — how does that even work?

Everybody always said, 'It's important to get stuff out, Ameliah, put it down, it's part of moving on.' I never really listened.



I guess I just didn't want to do it their way. Maybe I wasn't ready, I dunno.

This feels different. This feels right.

So much has happened. There's so much to say, so I'm gonna say it.

It's half twelve now and I'm recording my voice on to this tape.

Just like you.





Ryan wiped the condensation from the small circular bathroom mirror with his fingers and imagined he was scraping ice from the window of a dug-up frozen submarine. A World War II sub discovered near the North Pole years after it was lost at sea. He pictured seeing the solid face of some old naval officer, frost in his moustache, eyes wide, staring out, frozen in the panic of realising he was about to be stuck forever.

He lowered his hand and saw only his own face, thirteen years old, flushed from the heat of the bath, his thick dark hair slicked back from getting out of the water.

Whenever Ryan looked into the mirror he felt an urge to slap himself in the face. Not because he was angry with himself and thought he deserved it, more because he'd seen it in a film once. The private investigator character staring at himself in the mirror after a crazy night of action and danger and slapping



himself to make sure he was focused for a new day on the job.

Ryan lifted his hand level with the side of his face. He tensed the muscles in his arm, pulling his hand back ready to strike. His eyes narrowed as he prepared for the slap. Then he froze, staring at himself.

— Come on, you chicken, do it. Do it!

He let out a sigh, puffing out his cheeks as his arm moved back down to his side, and thought about how much space there was inside his mouth. How you could probably fit half a good-sized orange in each side between the teeth and your cheek.

— Yo!

The voice from outside the door came with a bang that shook the hinges and popped the air out of Ryan's face.

— I said yo! You better hurry up, weed, or I'll fold you in half.

Ryan stared at himself as the banging carried on.

He pictured Nathan's face on the other side of the door, getting more and more angry, twisting into shapes like some kind of mutant monster stepbrother. He reached for another towel and threw it over his head and shoulders like a boxer, getting himself ready for the title fight.

It was just over six months since Dad sat him down and told him that Sophia would be moving in and bringing Nathan too. Dad



had asked him what he thought and he'd said it was a good idea because he'd seen the hope in Dad's eyes. They moved in the next week, which made Ryan realise it really didn't matter what he thought.

At least he didn't have to share his room. Dad's gesture to turn his office into a bedroom for Nathan meant Ryan at least got to keep his own space, although Nathan didn't seem all that clued up about the rules of privacy. He never knocked. He just barged in like he owned the place.

He was four months younger and yet a couple of inches taller and, truth be told, a lot stronger, although Ryan put that down to the fact that he seemed to eat non-stop. He even slept with a sandwich next to his pillow.

A month later Dad and Sophia got married in a small grey room in the council building. Ryan wore the same suit he'd worn to his mom's funeral. Back then it had been baggy; this time it fitted like a glove.

The night of the wedding Sophia had cornered him in the kitchen, when Ryan was trying to find more cherryade, and told him that she wasn't trying to replace his mom. That she loved his dad very much and wanted this to be a new start for everyone. Ryan had seen the look on her round face as she stood there awkwardly in too much make-up, her dark hair tied up, wearing

her peach dress with frilly edges. Ryan had smiled and said that's what he wanted as well and Sophia had hugged him slightly too tight and the pop bottle had fallen out of his hand.

When she went back to the living room, Ryan picked up the bottle and watched the bubbles inside fight to get to the top. Nathan came into the kitchen to get more food. He told Ryan his suit looked stupid. Ryan said nothing. Nathan saw the bottle of pop and snatched it. Ryan went to say something then stopped himself, stepped back and watched Nathan twist the bottle lid and soak himself in cherryade.

Ryan pulled on his Chicago Bears sleeping T-shirt and stared at his boom box. The shiny silver panels caught the light. The clean black buttons underneath the little windows that let you see the tape inside. The super bass circular speakers. Perfect. It had been his gift the Christmas before Mom died. He remembered tearing open the paper and seeing the corner of the box, spending the rest of the day in his pyjamas tuning the radio dial to all the different stations he could find.

Ryan pulled open the narrow drawer of his bedside table and took out a cassette box. Its white sleeve was empty of any writing. He ran his thumb along the edge of the box, feeling the plastic edge, then eased the box open and took out the tape.



He looked at the thin white label as he slotted the tape into cassette deck two. In block capital dark blue felt tip, the word MOM.

Ryan pressed rewind and wiped the little window with his fingertip as the tape motor hummed, spooling the tape back to the beginning.

The rewind button clicked up. Ryan moved the boom box to the edge of his bedside table so he could speak into it while lying in bed and, with two fingers, pressed the play and record buttons at the same time. The little red indicator light blinked on as the tape spooled round showing it was recording. Ryan cleared his throat.



Ameliah stares at what's left of her cornflakes. Her spoon makes waves in her bowl as her slender fingers turn it and she imagines each soggy flake is a tiny wooden raft floating in a milky white sea.

She moves her spoon in between them and watches as some sink, while others fight to stay afloat. Morning light cuts across the kitchen floor through the big window.



— Penny for 'em, Nan says from across the small square table through a mouthful of crumpet.

Ameliah knows what that means, she's heard it plenty of times before (mostly from Nan), but only this time does it occur to her that one penny for what someone is thinking seems like a really cheap deal.

— I've never been in a boat.

Nan stops chewing for a second to listen then carries on. Ameliah looks at her.

— I mean in proper water, like the sea.

Nan starts to spread butter on to another crumpet from the pile on the plate between them.

— You're still young, love. There's plenty of time.

She smiles as she pushes the new crumpet into her mouth.

— How old were you? asks Ameliah. When you went on your first boat?

— Me? Oh, now you're asking. It was probably with your granddad, long before you were born. Before I had your mom.

Ameliah looks down. A strand of dark curls falls across her face. She sweeps it back behind her ear with her fingertips.



— Are you sure you don't want a crumpet, love, strength for your last day?

Ameliah shakes her head.

— No thanks, Nan.

Nan takes another crumpet from the pile.

— She wasn't a breakfast person either.

Ameliah looks at Nan and tries to imagine her younger, sitting across a table from Mom, a pile of crumpets between them, Mom daydreaming about school.

— I guess it's genes, continues Nan, although she certainly didn't get it from me.

Ameliah shrugs. Nan leans forward.

— Are you keeping up with your journal, like the lady said?

Ameliah pictures the empty journal pushed under her bed, the light brown recycled cover, the pages clean and new. She looks into her bowl. All but one of the tiny rafts have sunk. She stares at it, clinging on to the surface.

— Kind of. It feels weird.

— It will do, love, for a while, but trust me, it's—

— Important to get stuff out.



Nan smiles and lets out an old-lady laugh through a mouthful of crumpet.

— That's my girl.

Ameliah stares at the last flake clinging on to the surface of her milk as it bobs alone, refusing to sink.



Ryan stared out of the classroom window across the school playing fields. The grey sky heavy with rain ready to fall. He saw a group of girls jogging in a loose pack, doing laps of the pitch, too far away to see faces. He focused on one girl, near the back, her dark hair bouncing against her shoulders as she moved.

— Ryan!

Miss Zaidel was standing in front of his desk. Everyone else in the class was watching.

— Do you have any thoughts?

Her voice was angry. Ryan looked across the room and saw Nathan smiling his smug smile.

— Sorry, Miss, I was—

— You were miles away, Ryan. Again. That's what.

— Yes, Miss.



— It's been like this all term, Ryan.

— Yes, Miss. Sorry, Miss.

Nathan pulled a face from across the room. Ryan scowled back at him.

— Right, well, if you've finished watching the girls outside, would you mind coming back and joining us for our last lesson together?

People giggled. Nathan's smug stepbrother smile widened. Ryan felt his cheeks getting hot.

— Yes, Miss.

Miss Zaidel returned to the front of the class.

— Right, so can anyone else answer my question? How long has John Major been Prime Minister?

Nathan's hand shot up into the air.

— I can, Miss. Three years, Miss.

Miss Zaidel nodded.

— Thank you, Nathan, and somebody else? Who did he take over from?

Nathan smiled straight at Ryan as the rest of the class stuck up their hands. Ryan ground his teeth as the sky rolled thunder outside and it started to rain.



Ameliah scans the lunchtime selection in front of her. The dinner lady stares at her. Ameliah doesn't recognise the lady, but she knows that stare. She's felt it enough times. It's the stare people give when they know about her parents and feel they should say something, but don't really have a clue what words to use.

She grabs a ham roll and a carton of juice and moves away before the dinner lady can speak. As she queues up to pay, she thinks about how six months have flown by. She thinks about Dad, how he changed in the months after Mom. How the illness made him shrink.

— Is that everything, sweetheart?

Ameliah snaps out of her daydream. Corine on the cafeteria till smiles her Cheshire cat smile like always. The gap between her top front teeth big enough to fit a five-pence piece.

— No crisps today?

Ameliah smiles back.

— Not today thanks, Corine.

Across the room she spots Heather, sitting with some of the others, flapping her arms like a bird, calling her over. Ameliah sighs.

— Chin up, love.



Corine's face is round and warm like the grandmas in fairy tales and, as she makes her way through the busy lunch hall towards the table of girls, Ameliah decides that Corine would get on really well with Nan.



In the noisy lunch hall Ryan sat staring into space with a mouthful of ham roll. The seat opposite him was empty. He shook his head as he thought about being embarrassed in class earlier.

Liam sat down like a horse crashing into a fence.

— Summertime!

Ryan jumped.

— Got you! Big L strikes again.

— I told you not to do that!

Liam smiled and dropped his Tupperware lunch box on to the table.

— I know, but it's too easy, man.

He rubs his shovel hands together.

— Half a day left, Ryan, then six sweet weeks of freedom.

— Sit down, will ya? People are staring.

— What you got?

— I dunno.



— You're eating it.

— Oh, ham.

— You got crisps?

— Monster Munch.

— What flavour?

— Beef.

— Beef? Forget it. I was gonna swap you, but not for cow.

Liam started to eat, his square face chewing his sandwich like a camel that was in a rush. Ryan smiled. Liam had been his best friend since the infants and he couldn't think of a single day since they'd known each other that Liam hadn't made him laugh at least twice.

— I heard you got caught watching the girls do PE.

As Liam spoke, little bits of sandwich flew out of his mouth on to the table.

— I wasn't watching the girls. Jeez, Liam, can you keep the food in your mouth?

Liam shrugged his thick shoulders.

— That's not what I heard. Tracey said Miss Zaidel properly got you and you went bright red and everything.

— Yeah, well, Tracey's full of it.

Liam peeled a banana and took half of it with one bite.

— You should just pick one.



— What?

— Pick one. Any girl – there's loads of them. Look, there's some.

Liam stuck out his big arm. Ryan slapped it down.

— What are you doing?

Liam pushed the last bit of banana into his mouth.

— I would just walk up to one of them and lay it down.

— Lay it down? What does that even mean? Just eat your food, man.

— I'm just saying I'd do that.

Ryan took another bite of his roll.

— You don't get it.

— What don't I get, Ryan? You choose one and then you lay it down.

— Stop saying that. And you don't just choose one, do you? It's not an auction.

Liam looked confused. Ryan finished the last of his roll.

— And you wouldn't lay it down anyway.

— Yeah I would. I'd lay it down hard.

— Oh really? Big Liam? Mr Smooth, yeah? And what would you say?

— Call me Big L.

— You're an idiot.



Liam slapped the banana skin on to the table and puffed up his chest.

— I'd walk straight up to her and be like, look, baby, it's me and you, yeah? You can be the I S P to this Big L. What you sayin'?

Ryan shook his head and smiled. Liam looked offended.

— What? That's good. Big L. I S P, lips, like kiss.

— That spells lisp, you idiot.

— What?

Ryan watched Liam's face as his brain worked out the spelling.

— Oh yeah. Yeah, well, you know what I mean.

— Yeah. Big L can't spell.

Liam smiled.

— Big L can't spell, but you smell, like beef, you've got cow crisps in your teeth.

His big fists started to knock a beat on the lunch table. Ryan smiled and tried to think of a comeback rhyme.



Ameliah watches the girls around the table talking about things everybody expects girls to talk about. Their fast lips motoring through sentences.



Heather gives her a look that says 'Stop being so quiet' and Ameliah tries to say with her eyes that she's only quiet when she's around people talking about things she doesn't care about, that she's not interested in the fact that Simone has taken some of her older sister's foundation and eyeliner and is going to do makeovers for people after school on the field. Mom always said that foundation was what you build houses on and, if your face needs to be built on, then make-up isn't really going to make a difference, is it?

But Heather already knows.

Ameliah looks at her. Pretty without trying. The freckles scattered across her nose and cheeks making her seem that little bit more special. Thank God for Heather. The bridge between her and the others. Heather knows how to let Ameliah be in the group without having to do or say too much. She's always done it, since the infants.

— You OK, Am? Half a day left then freedom.

Heather smiles. Ameliah smiles back. She thinks about the two of them sitting inside Dad's tent in her room by torchlight, Heather hiding her face in the neck of her jumper as Ameliah tells her Dad's ghost stories,



Heather screaming as she gets to the end and the big shock about the old man with no head.

— You wanna try it?

Heather holds out the little eyeliner pencil and smiles. Ameliah smiles back and Heather lowers her hand.

— I'm coming back to yours after school, right?

— Yeah?

— Yeah. We're gonna make a start on those boxes.

Ameliah looks around at the other girls, all engrossed in talk of makeovers and brush technique.

— We don't need to.

Heather reaches out for Ameliah's hand.

— Yes, we do. New summer chapter, Am. It's time to make it your room.



Ryan shook his head and tried to see straight. The warm pain in the back of his neck was starting to spread round towards his face. The football lay on the floor next to the front door of the house. He could feel grit in the palm of his hand as he sat up on the short front path. He looked up at Nathan standing over him, laughing, and felt a knot forming in his stomach.



— You should've ducked. I shouted duck. It's your own fault, weed, always daydreaming.

Nathan stepped over Ryan's legs and took out his key to open the door. Ryan got to his feet, the knot in his stomach growing and starting to move up inside his chest. He stared at Nathan's back and imagined doing some kind of flying karate kick, sending his stepbrother flying through the front door. The knot made its way up along his throat into his mouth, ready to scream.

Nathan pushed open the front door and disappeared inside. Ryan breathed deeply and swallowed the knot, feeling it melt into nothing in his throat.

Inside, Ryan sat down on the sofa in a spot where he could see out of the front window. The pain in the back of his neck had weakened to a dull ache. He rubbed his eyes with his knuckles and looked round the room.

He tried to remember before Nathan had moved in. Before Dad got together with Sophia. Before Mom.

He stared at the big rectangular mirror above the fireplace, its heavy wooden frame like something from an old castle. It looked completely out of place in the room, but had always been there. Sophia had tried to move it out when she moved in, saying it didn't belong there. Dad had got serious and said it was going nowhere, anything else could go, but the mirror stayed.



Ryan liked that Dad had said that. He knew the story. Mom had chosen the mirror when she and Dad first bought the house. It was really heavy and, as they carried it into the house, Dad had slipped and dropped his end and the mirror hit the floor but didn't break, and Mom said it was a sign of good luck. Mom believed in luck.

Ryan stared at the mirror and thought about how she loved old things and, even though he found it harder and harder to picture her face, he knew that the mirror was a connection to her.

A heavy thud hit the ceiling above his head. Ryan imagined Nathan falling off his bed or tripping over his stupid weights and lying flat out on the floor of what used to be Dad's office. He smiled to himself and waited for the sounds of his stepbrother getting up and stamping around, but nothing came, only quiet. Ryan's stomach dropped. He jumped to his feet and ran upstairs.

— Nathan! Are you OK?

He burst into the office, panicked. Nathan was on the floor in his pants and vest doing stomach crunches. Against the wall behind him, a Casio keyboard drum machine lay across a small desk next to a small black TV. He stopped and stared up at Ryan.

— What are you doing? What's wrong with you?

Ryan looked round the room. He saw a poster of the solar



system, a couple of footballers torn out of magazines and, on the right, one huge picture of Bruce Lee doing a high kick. On the floor, a plate held a half-eaten doorstop sandwich.

— I thought I heard a—

— A bang? And what? You thought I was hurt? Man, you're such a girl.

Nathan scoffed and carried on with his crunches. Ryan spotted a small bookcase behind the TV, full of science books. He felt his nose wrinkle up.

— Since when do you read about science?

Nathan sat up, his arms resting on his knees, and frowned.

— What? I can't be into science?

Ryan shrugged. Nathan shook his head.

— Ryan, I probably know more than you, I just don't have to be a weed with it.

He lowered his body back to the floor ready for more crunches.

— Now get lost, yeah?

Ryan backed out of the room and pulled the door to. He stood on the landing, listening to Nathan's grunts, and told himself the science books were just for show.

Ameliah and Heather stare at the machine. It's faded black, the silver panels battered and worn. The large clunky buttons look like they were designed by a toddler. The plastic of the little windows for the tape decks is cloudy with scratches.

— It looks like it should be in a museum or something.

Heather touches the chipped circular speaker on one side.

— How old is it?

Ameliah shrugs.

— I don't know. I found it in the spare room.

— Where your nan's keeping all that stuff?

— Yeah. I'm gonna go through it all.

— Maybe it's worth something? You see things like this on those TV shows.

Heather fiddles with the large silver tuning dial, making the tiny orange frequency indicator move left and right along the black strip.

— I mean it doesn't even have a CD thing. It's prehistoric.

— It's not for sale.

Ameliah picks up an old shoebox from the many that lie spread across the floor among black bags full of



clothes and two old suitcases. The shoebox is packed full of cassette tapes, some with sleeves, some without.

— It plays these. There's boxes of them.

She pulls out one of the tapes and dusts the cover with her sleeve. *James Brown – Greatest Hits*. She feels herself smile.

— My mom used to go on about James Brown.

She hands it to Heather. Heather smiles.

— She loved music, right?

— Yeah. They both did. I used to hear them playing stuff and giggling through the wall.

— How cool would it have been if she'd been the music teacher at our school instead of what's-his-face?

Ameliah pictures Mom, sitting on the sofa covered in sheets of music, trying to plan her lessons.

— Yeah.

She taps her hand on the box of tapes.

— I'm gonna listen to them all.

Heather inspects the cassette in her hand like evidence at a crime scene.

— Why is it so big? Look, this one only has eleven tracks! Is he a rapper?

Ameliah runs her finger over the spines of the other



tapes in the box, wiping a clean line on the dusty plastic like a snowplough.

— They're all jumbled up now. Some of them are blanks, I think. You wanna listen to some?

Heather stands up.

— Nah. It's all so old, Am, it's gonna take you weeks to go through it all.

She drops the tape on to the bed and moves to one of the black bags. Ameliah stares at the tapes.

— Yeah, well, I've got six, haven't I?

— You can't spend the whole six weeks' holidays digging through dusty old stuff like a mole.

Ameliah smiles at Heather.

— A mole?

Heather nods.

— Yeah. A mole. A little scruffy blind mole scared of the sun.

Ameliah laughs.

— Shut up.

Heather smiles and starts going through a bin bag full of clothes.

— I wonder if any of this would fit you, you should—

— Leave it.



Ameliah's voice is sharp. Heather stops what she's doing. Ameliah looks down.

— Sorry, I mean I want to go through it myself, to start with I mean.

She looks up to where the ceiling meets the wall, noticing a thin crack running along the join. Heather walks over to her.

— It's OK. I get it.

Ameliah nods her head in the way she's perfected.

As Heather looks at the box of tapes, Ameliah pictures the spare room, along the landing, stacked ceiling-high with bags and boxes, and wonders how much everything Mom and Dad left behind would weigh.

