

# Fading Away Jay Lake

Aaron was sent to the park while the visiting nurse helped Momma. Momma coughed a lot more lately, but quieter, while Daddy prayed harder and harder over her. There was nothing Aaron could do but be in the way. Outside it was easier not to think about Momma — Aaron liked the hot Nevada summer days. Sometimes the other moms at the park were nice to him, too.

He saw the fat man sitting on the swing. The stranger had dark glasses, shaggy dark hair down over his ears, a white suit with spangles all over it, and a big cape like Superman's. Except the cape was white, and shorter. Aaron could see the park right through the fat man's white suit, kind of the same way he could see things when he walked around with his t-shirt over his head.

Aaron was a little afraid and a little curious all mixed together, so he went over to the swings. "Hey, mister, you gonna sit there all day?"

The fat man looked at Aaron, his eyes hidden behind the big dark glasses. He seemed surprised. "You can see me? Sorry, son. I'll move on." He gathered his weight and stood. The bottoms of his boots floated slightly above the ground. The fat man looked lost and lonely.

Aaron knew how that felt.

"You don't need to leave," Aaron blurted. "I don't mind you being here."

"That's mighty nice of you, son." The fat man had a rich voice, like listening to chocolate cake talk. He settled back on to the swing. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Aaron knew the fat man was a ghost. He'd never seen one, but everyone knew you could see right through ghosts. He wasn't scared now — his Momma had become more of a ghost than this fat man. Aaron tried to remember what he'd heard about ghosts. "You're supposed to help someone before you can go to Heaven, right?"

The fat man looked disappointed, as if he'd expected Aaron to say something else. "That's not quite it, but near enough, I reckon."

Aaron imagined money, candy, Disneyland. "Cool. What can you do for me?"

"Not much, son. Show myself, sometimes. Talk." The fat man tried to smile, which made him look even sadder than before. "Sing."

That sounded so stupid to Aaron. "Sing? What good is that?"

The ghost glanced away from Aaron for a few moments before meeting his eye again. "Some folks love music, son. It lifts up their hearts."

"Momma loves music," Aaron blurted. She had, before she got sick.

The fat man smiled. "Who does she like?"

Aaron couldn't remember the names, but Momma had had albums everywhere. "Lots of people," he said, scuffing his shoe. "But she can't listen no more."

The ghost frowned. "Why not?"

"She's real sick." He scuffed his shoe again. "I'm not supposed to talk about it."

The fat man squatted down in front of Aaron, looking him face to face. "What's the matter with her, son?" He sounded like he really cared about Aaron and Momma.

Aaron's voice caught in his throat. "Got the cancer. In her belly. She can't get out of bed, she can't eat, she can't do nothing." His chest shuddered. "Nurse Simmons says Momma's lost her heart."

"Son..." The fat man's voice sounded like he was going to cry. He started to pat Aaron's shoulder, then pulled his hand back to smooth a wrinkle out of his white suit. "Let's go see her."

Aaron cut off his sob. The fat man seemed to mean it. Aaron figured Nurse Simmons was gone by now. "I ain't allowed visitors at the house. But if Daddy's out, I can get you in. Maybe your music can help Momma find her heart." Aaron didn't know how to help her, and it seemed no one else would.

They came in through the kitchen, past the old round-shouldered refrigerator. The house was quiet.

"Here," Aaron whispered to the fat man as he eased open the door to Momma's sick room. The nurse was gone. Everything smelled like pee and mold, not fresh and warm like Momma used to. Followed by the ghost, Aaron moved to the foot of the bed, clasping his hands behind his back so he wouldn't bother her. Aaron's eyes had that peppery about-to-cry sting they always got around Momma. The fat man touched him lightly on the shoulder, like the brush of a bird flying by in the woods, then moved to stand alongside the bed, where Daddy always sat.

In the dark room the fat man glowed, each little sparkle on his suit flashing like a star in the sky. He took off the glasses, which showed his glowing brown eyes. The fat man reached out and brushed Momma's lips with his fingertips.

"Frank?" Momma's voice was more of a gasp than a whisper.

"No, darlin'." The fat man's teeth glowed as he smiled in the dark. His chocolate cake voice was stronger. "It's me. You know who I am."

"The King." Momma sounded relieved, almost happy. "But you're gone..." She sighed. "It's really you, isn't it?"

The fat man looked down the bed at Aaron. "You sure you want me to do this? She needs to go on."

Aaron was so pleased Momma sounded happy, so pleased he had done something to help, that he couldn't bring himself to stop the fat man.

"No sir, go on. Sing to her. Please."

The fat man took Momma's hand and starting singing in a low, rich voice. He sang a song Aaron had never heard before, about how the fat man couldn't help falling in love with Momma. Momma cried —

real small, quiet tears. Aaron wasn't sure why, but it made him happy to see Momma cry like that. It meant she forgot about hurting long enough to care about something.

After a while, Aaron realized the fat man wasn't singing any more. Aaron wiped his eyes. He could see Momma smiling in the glow from the fat man's suit.

"Why'd you stop, mister? You were helping her."

The fat man stared at Momma, and brushed his fingers over her lips one more time. "She's found her heart, son. Your Momma just needed someone to tell her it was okay to go on."

"Momma?" Aaron ran to the other side of the bed and picked up her hand. It felt like a bundle of sticks wrapped in tissue. He looked at her mouth real close, put his fingers near her lips. She wasn't breathing, not even a little bit. His heart seemed to fill his throat, so he couldn't breathe either. Aaron wanted to scream. He'd told the fat man to sing, and the fat man had killed her. "No, Momma..." he gasped.

Aaron felt a bird brush on his shoulder once again. But the fat man was still across the bed from him, now growing fainter. Aaron could see the dresser real clear right through the fat man, even in the dark, like he was less and less there.

"I'll watch over my boy for a spell now," said Momma from behind Aaron, her voice strong again.

Aaron's fear drained away like dishwater from the sink. He'd done Momma right by bringing the ghost to her. "Thank you," he whispered as the fat man faded away.

Then: "I love you, Momma."