

# RAISING CJ

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## Grief to Gratitude

"The Down Syndrome Advantage"



**FREE  
SUMMARY**

**By Eden McAmes**

I N T R O D U C T I O N

# RAISING CJ

## GRIEF TO GRATITUDE

*A Memoir Summary*

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If someone had told me years ago that becoming a father would be the very thing that brought me back to life, I'm not sure I would have believed them. Not because I doubted the power of love or family—but because I didn't yet understand how profoundly a single life could reshape my own.

Raising CJ – Grief to Gratitude is a memoir built on two pillars: profound loss and extraordinary love. I lost both of my parents before I reached adulthood, and those early experiences left marks I carried silently for many years. Like many who learn early to survive, I became good at keeping things contained and focused on moving forward.

Then I became CJ's father. Born with Down syndrome, he introduced uncertainty and fear into my life—but also a light I hadn't known was missing. In raising him, I was given the rare opportunity to reimagine what strength looks like, what success means, and what it truly takes to show up for someone every single day.

This is not a how-to book. I'm simply a father telling the story of how I grew as my son grew—through moments of joy, challenge, heartbreak, and hard-won hope. Grief and gratitude, I've learned, aren't opposites. They're companions. And CJ taught me how to hold both of them.

## THE FOUNDATION OF LOSS

My story begins with grief. I was seven years old when my mother died, her weakened body unable to survive pneumonia after losing a lung to cancer two years earlier. A violent storm during a family camping trip pushed her fragile health past the breaking point. Then there were three—my father, my brother, and me.

Six years later, on Mother's Day, my father suffered a fatal heart attack. His last words to me as paramedics loaded him into the ambulance were, "I'll be ok. See you tomorrow." I believed him—because he was my dad. At 2:58 a.m., my brother woke me with the news that changed everything. I was thirteen years old, a teenager with no parents and no roadmap.

The years that followed taught me about witnessing. A childhood friend died by suicide. A neighbour killed his brother in a violent argument—I climbed onto a garage roof and watched the aftermath, needing to make it real. My step-sibling was paralyzed in an accident. By seventeen, I had learned to pay attention differently—not just watching the world, but absorbing it. I didn't have tools to fix anything, but I learned how to be present, to witness pain, and to keep going.

## BUILDING A LIFE

The decades after my father's death were marked by relationships that didn't last and a persistent question: would marriage and fatherhood ever be part of my story? At fifteen, I found my first love—both of us carrying emotional baggage, finding shelter in each other. Two years later, she left me for a close friend. In college, I spent four years with someone I thought I'd marry, only to have her walk away when I was ready to start a family.

I redirected my energy into work, rising from shopping mall security guard to regional supervisor and private investigator. The job took me through every kind of environment in the urban core—testing my nerves, instincts, and humanity. One moment stays with me: a man who jumped from an office tower, crashing through the mall's glass roof onto a kiosk below. The scene revealed how fragile everything is, how close we all walk to things we don't understand.

By twenty-eight, I stood on solid ground professionally, even if it wasn't where I'd imagined I'd be. Then I met her—reviewing new employee files after a vacation, one photo caught my eye. When I returned to work, there she was. We became fast friends first, then something more. Eighteen months later, we were married. Fourteen months after that, she became pregnant.

For me, that moment felt like an arrival. After years of loss and uncertainty, I would finally become a father. Everything I'd walked through had been shaping me for this. I was ready.

At least, I thought I was.

## THE DIAGNOSIS

The pregnancy was textbook. We were eight months and two weeks in when my wife's water broke. Labour was unpredictable—a long night ahead. I even walked into the wrong delivery room initially, sharing an awkward but meaningful exchange with another soon-to-be father in the hallway.

Twenty-five minutes after I arrived in the correct delivery room, CJ was born. We'd spent the final minutes deciding on his name, not yet knowing the gender. But I wasn't allowed to cut the cord—some unexplained complication. The doctor and nurse spoke in hushed tones, deliberately avoiding saying certain things aloud. Something was wrong.

Then came the question that took all the wind from my sails: "Is there any history of genetic imbalance in either of your families?"

The pediatrician wasn't scheduled until 9:30 a.m. It was 5:25 a.m. I wasn't going to spend four hours in my head. When a different nurse came to administer the APGAR test, I seized the moment. "Please tell me what's wrong," I said, looking her in the eye. "You don't have to say anything. Is it Down syndrome?" Her eyes went to the floor. When she looked back up, I knew. She walked away before I could thank her. We never saw her again.

CJ passed his APGAR test with flying colours.

I stood there, realizing everything had just changed. As my wife held our son, I held my breath. The most significant information, for the most important person, at the most impactful time, was on the tip of my tongue. She needed to know—from me.

We were incredulous. How could this be? The pregnancy was normal. My wife was healthy and followed all the advice. When we met with the pediatrician four hours later, he explained the diagnosis and left us alone. We cried together. Through tears, my wife said, "It's my fault," at the exact moment I was thinking the same thing about myself.

## THE TURNING POINT

When 11 p.m. came, I had to leave the hospital. That first night, I visited the friend who would be CJ's godfather, needing to tell him in person. Then I went home alone. I sat in our armchair, cried, and waited—not just to return to the hospital, but for the breakthrough I sensed was coming.

On Day 2, we met with a geneticist who explained Trisomy 21, phenotypes, inheritance, and mosaicism. His calm demeanour was comforting, easing some of our fears. He arranged for us to speak with genetic counsellors.

On Day 3, those counsellors visited. After discussing family backgrounds and health history, they offered the key that unlocked everything: we had to grieve the loss of the child we expected and embrace the child that was delivered to us.

I knew grief—I'd grieved my parents years before. But this was different.

Over the following days, something shifted. By Day 4, CJ looked healthier after time under the bili lights, my wife was rested, and we had welcome visitors. I was feeling more like myself. On Day 5, we brought CJ home.

As we drove, I looked in the rearview mirror at my wife dotting on CJ in his car seat. Ironically, the first thing that came to mind was that I was looking behind me to see my way forward. If there had ever been a time and a way, this was it.

When we got home, my wife went to shower and change. Then I sat in the armchair with CJ, and we waited—together this time, not alone. The armchair that had witnessed my solitary grief now held both of us, father and son, ready for whatever came next.

This is where our story truly begins—not in the grief I'd carried for so long, but in learning to hold grief and gratitude as companions. CJ didn't erase my losses or make the pain. Instead, he taught me that the journey from grief to gratitude isn't about leaving pain behind. It's about letting love expand around it.