

# Ready to Remember

Jeremy's Journey  
of Hope and Healing

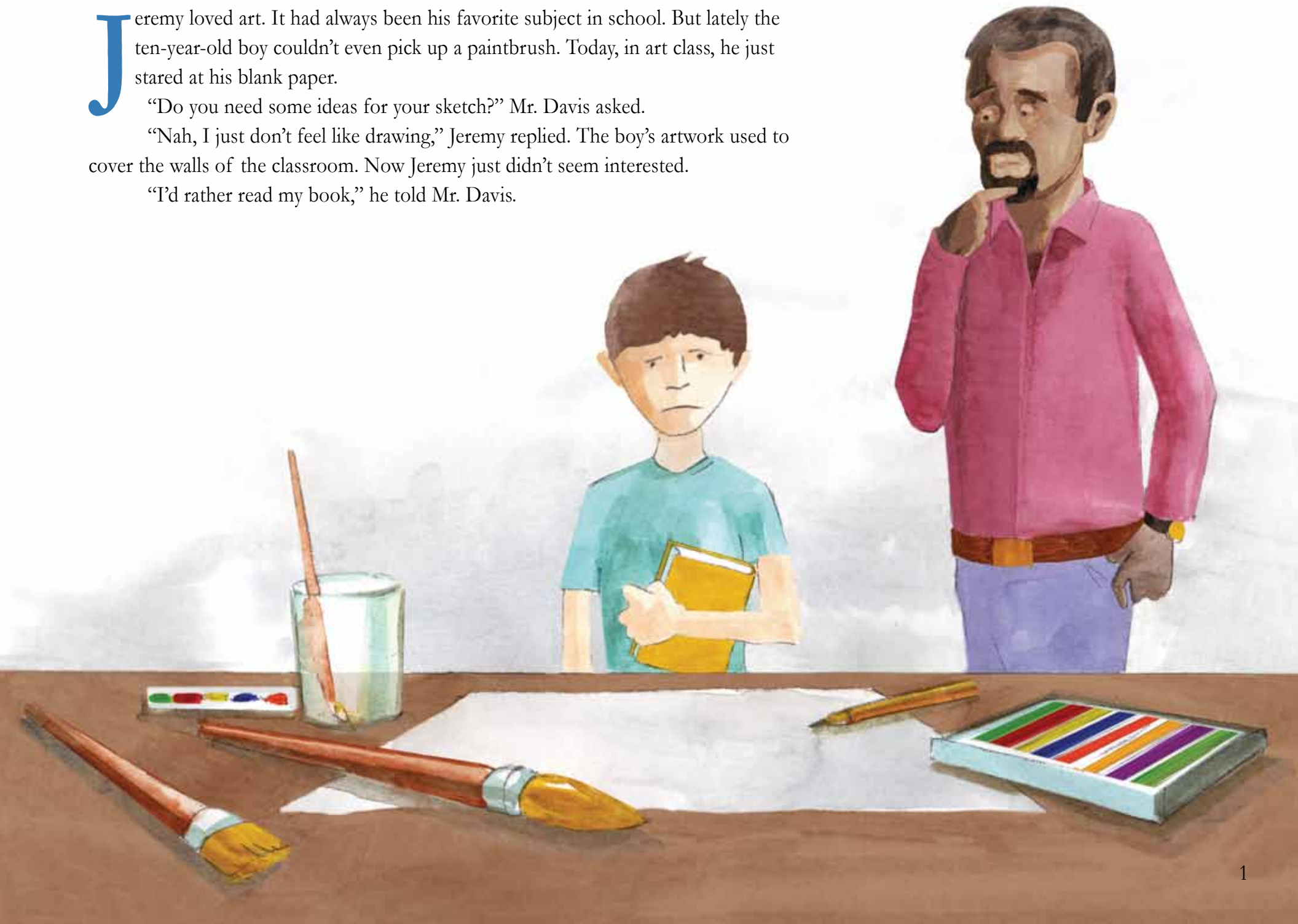


Jeremy loved art. It had always been his favorite subject in school. But lately the ten-year-old boy couldn't even pick up a paintbrush. Today, in art class, he just stared at his blank paper.

"Do you need some ideas for your sketch?" Mr. Davis asked.

"Nah, I just don't feel like drawing," Jeremy replied. The boy's artwork used to cover the walls of the classroom. Now Jeremy just didn't seem interested.

"I'd rather read my book," he told Mr. Davis.



After school, Jeremy's mother picked up Jeremy and his younger brother. Brandon jumped into the back seat. Jeremy's brother was in second grade. He turned eight three months ago, just a few weeks before that horrible day.

"Woo-hoo, it's the weekend!" yelled Brandon. "Fridays rule!"

"It's finally warming up," said their mother. "Do you boys want to go to the skatepark tomorrow?"

"Yes!" said Brandon.

"I can't," Jeremy said, looking out the window. "I need to study."

"But it's the weekend. You can take some time out for a little fun, can't you, honey?" asked Jeremy's mom.

"NO!" Jeremy snapped. "I have a math test coming up. Don't you remember that I got a C-minus on the last one?"

Jeremy's grades were way down. Until recently, he always got straight As in school.

"That's okay, Jeremy," said Brandon. "We can skateboard another time."



When they got home, Jeremy went straight to his room.  
His brother followed him.

“Hey, Jer, do you want to play a video game or something?”  
Brandon asked.

“Um . . . maybe,” said Jeremy.

Brandon was excited. “Cool! Let’s play the one Dad gave me for my  
birthday! Let’s go downstairs!”

“Hold on!” Jeremy said, changing his mind. “I’m not in the mood.  
I really want to finish my book.”

Brandon looked at his big brother. He loved hanging out with Jeremy,  
but lately he felt like a big pest. Jeremy always wanted to be alone.  
His friends didn’t even come over anymore.





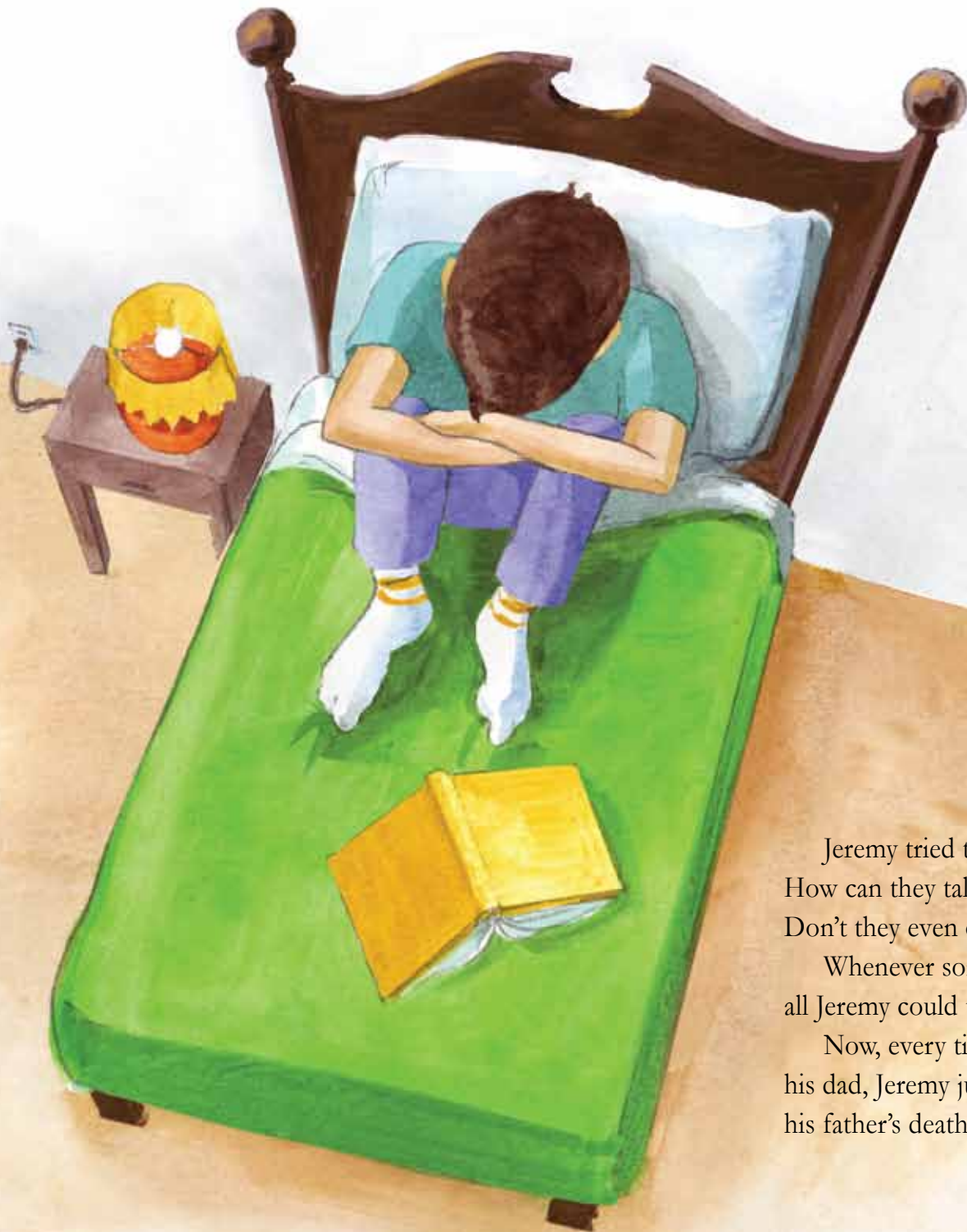
At dinner that night, the boys' mom served homemade pizza. "Can I have another piece, Mom?" Brandon asked, popping a piece of pepperoni into his mouth. "Do you guys remember that time last year when Dad was making one of his super-duper pizzas? He threw the pizza dough in the air like real pizza chefs do but it landed on the toaster!" Brandon laughed at the memory. "And he just scraped it off and used it! GROSS!" Their mom laughed along with Brandon. Jeremy jumped up from the table, knocking his glass of juice onto the floor.

"Why do you two keep talking about Dad?" he yelled. "Haven't you noticed? HE'S NOT HERE ANYMORE! Who cares about some stupid pizza he made?"

Jeremy didn't want to hear stories about his dad, he missed him too much. Why couldn't his mother and brother understand that?

"Jeremy . . ." his mother called out.

"I'm not hungry! I'm going upstairs to read," Jeremy said as he dashed to his room and slammed the door behind him.



Jeremy tried to read his book but the words just blurred together. How can they talk about Dad as if nothing happened, he wondered. Don't they even care that he's gone?

Whenever someone mentioned his father, even a happy memory, all Jeremy could think about was the awful way that he died.

Now, every time Brandon or his mom brought up a story about his dad, Jeremy just felt scared. He had so many awful dreams about his father's death that he was afraid to go to sleep.

When Jeremy was seven, his father gave him his first set of colored pencils. There were 64 pencils in the set, more colors than he had ever seen. He and his dad loved to draw pictures together. They used to make funny portraits of each other.

His dad also taught Jeremy and Brandon how to skateboard. He may have been the oldest person at the skatepark, but he could do an ollie-jump and kickflip better than most of the kids.

Whenever Jeremy saw the colored pencils or his skateboard, they reminded him of his father and the terrible way he died. His stomach started hurting and he often felt like throwing up.

Jeremy thought it was his fault that his dad died. He should have known something bad was going to happen and warned his father. It was easier to just stay away from anything that reminded him of his dad.



Jeremy's mom came upstairs to talk to him. She sat on the edge of his bed.

"I know how much you miss Dad, sweetie," his mom said. "We all do."

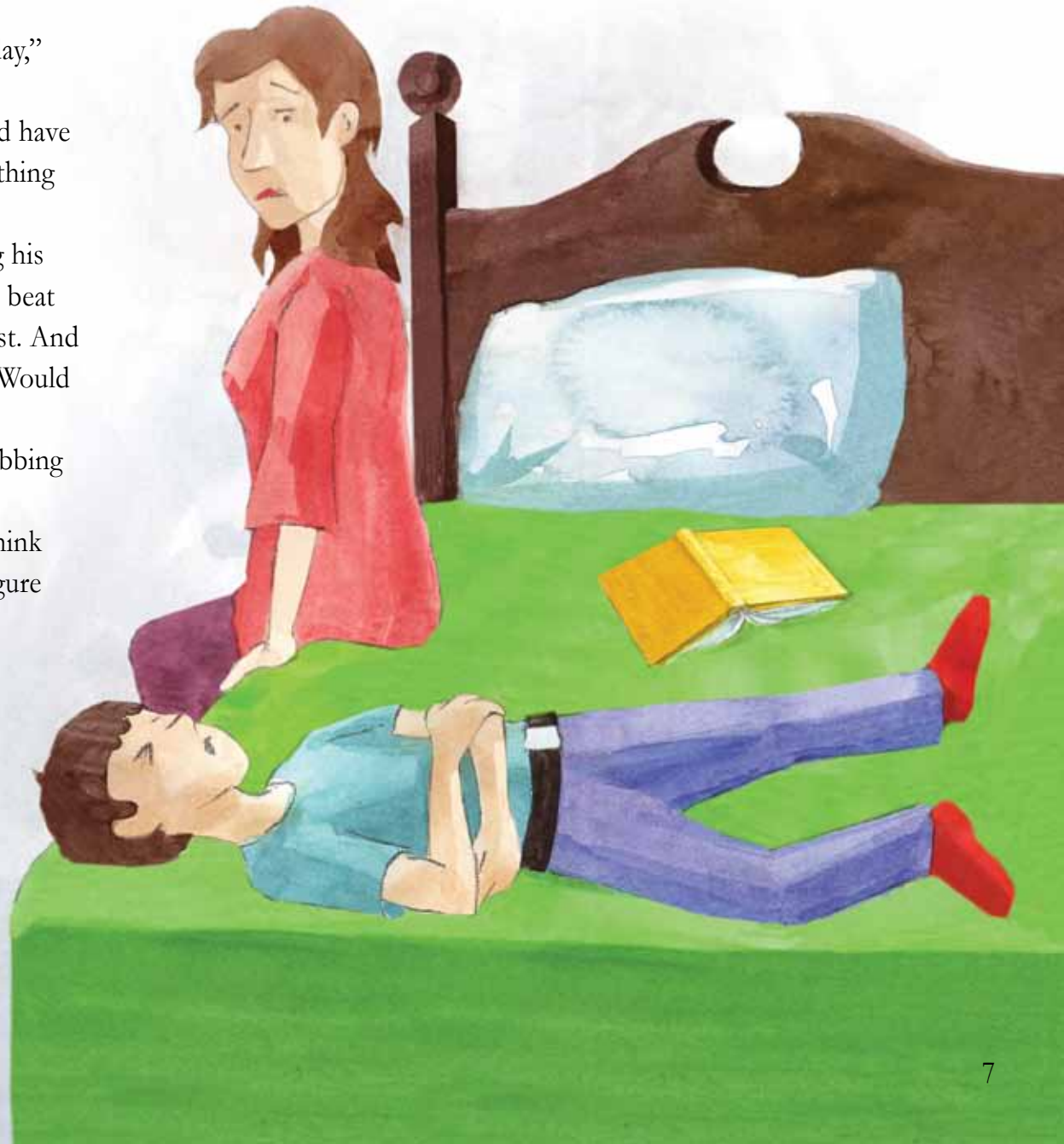
"I should have stopped him from going out that day," Jeremy said, still staring at the pages of his book.

"Oh, honey, there's nothing you or any of us could have done. Sometimes bad things just happen. You had nothing to do with it!"

"I don't feel so good, Mom," Jeremy said, shutting his eyes. When he thought about his dad, his heart would beat so hard it felt like it was going to jump out of his chest. And now he was worried all the time about his mom, too. Would something happen to her?

"I have that stomach ache again," Jeremy said, grabbing his belly.

"Oh, son, I'm worried that it's not going away. I think we need to go see Dr. Chung again. Maybe she can figure out how to make it better."





The next day, Jeremy's mother took him to the doctor's office. Dr. Chung examined Jeremy and talked to him for a long time. She said that she wanted to send him to a friend of hers who was a different kind of expert, a counselor who helped people with their feelings.

"Jeremy, would you be willing to talk to my friend? I think she'll be able to help you with your stomach ache."

"I guess so," Jeremy said. He was worried that the counselor would make him talk about his dad and he did NOT want to do that.



A few days later, Jeremy and his mother got to his appointment early. A girl and her dad were leaving as Jeremy walked into the waiting room. When Jeremy looked up, he was surprised to see it was someone he knew. Elena was a grade above him, and one of the star soccer players at his school. He remembered that she made the winning goal at the finals last year. The girl saw him and waved.

“You’re Jeremy, right?” the girl said. “I’m Elena.”

Jeremy just looked down at this feet. He didn’t feel like talking to Elena right now. He was thinking about going in to see the counselor. Jeremy didn’t say much during his first session. He was relieved she didn’t make him talk a lot about his dad.



A few weeks later in school, Jeremy was eating lunch by himself when he spotted Elena. The girl came over to Jeremy's table.

"I was so sorry to hear that your father died," Elena said softly. "My mom died last year and I know how hard it is."

Jeremy felt a little sick when Elena mentioned his dad. But he also knew she understood what he was going through.

"I used to be so scared and confused all the time," Elena said, setting her tray of food down across from Jeremy. "One time my dad took me and my brother to a restaurant we used to go to with my mom. I totally flipped out. I refused to walk into the place."

"Yeah, I've done stuff like that, too," Jeremy said.

"Mostly I tried not to have any feelings at all," Elena continued. "It's like I stuffed them all into a jack-in-the-box. Every once in a while the jack-in-the-box would get so full it would explode and all sorts of feelings would come flying out!"

"I know what you mean," Jeremy said.





“I remember one time after my mom died when my dad wanted me to clean my room,” Elena continued. “I don’t know why that made me mad. I slammed my door so hard that a picture fell off the wall! My dad was upset and said, ‘your mother would know what to do.’ That just made me madder. But instead of yelling, I started crying. My dad hugged me and started crying, too. He said that maybe we needed some help to figure out how not to be so mad and scared all the time. That’s when I started going to the counselor.”

“And did it help you?” Jeremy asked.

“Yeah, a lot,” said Elena. “I was finally able to talk about my mom and how she died. I used to blame myself. Now I get that I had nothing to do with it. I learned things I could do to help feel better like pretending I was blowing up a big balloon in my belly. That helped me relax.”

“Yeah, my mom did that trick with me last night at bedtime,” Jeremy said. “It helped me calm down. Sometimes when I go to sleep I can’t stop thinking of the way my dad died.”

“I used to feel like all the scary stuff that happened was superglued to my good memories. Now they’re finally unstuck!”

Jeremy thought it would be great to think about his dad without feeling so scared.



The following week, Jeremy did talk to the counselor about his dad. He saw her several more times and then began to feel better. One day, he realized that his stomach didn't hurt anymore.

A couple of months later, Jeremy started going to the skatepark with Brandon. He even taught his brother how to do his dad's killer kickflip!



In school, Jeremy began drawing again. One day he drew a portrait of his dad wearing the funny tie that Jeremy had hand-painted for Father's Day when he was in first grade.

When he showed the picture to his mother, he saw that she had tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry if it upsets you, Mom," Jeremy said.

"Oh no, honey, I love it!" his mother replied, wiping a tear away.

"It looks just like Dad! I'm going to frame it and hang it in the living room so we can see it every day!"

Jeremy and his mom hugged each other. He still felt very sad about his father but now he was able to smile when he remembered the good times they had together.





The counselor suggested that Jeremy and his brother think of a way to honor their father's birthday that summer. The boys decided to have a pizza party and to make one of their father's super-duper pizzas with everything on it. Jeremy invited Elena to the party.

Jeremy showed Elena how to toss the pizza dough into the air just like his father used to. She tried to catch the dough, but it fell onto their toaster, making a big mess.

Elena felt bad at first, but Jeremy and his family burst into laughter.

"Don't worry, Elena," Jeremy said, still laughing. "The same thing happened to my dad!"

Jeremy's mom scraped the dough off of the toaster and plopped it in the pizza pan.

They all enjoyed a delicious dinner. Jeremy and Brandon decided to have a pizza party every year to remember their dad.

# CAREGIVER GUIDE

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## Introduction

*Ready to Remember* tells the story of Jeremy, a boy suffering from Childhood Traumatic Grief. When a parent, sibling, or other important person dies, children can have varied reactions. Most children feel sad and miss the person who died, but they also feel comfort thinking or talking about that person. This is typical grief. In *Ready to Remember*, Jeremy's brother Brandon has typical grief. He likes talking about his dad and participating in activities they did together. Jeremy is different. He does not want to join conversations or do things related to his dad because they bring back scary feelings and remind him of the awful way his father died.

Children can develop Childhood Traumatic Grief (CTG) when the death is violent or unexpected, such as from an accident, natural disaster, murder, suicide, or act of war. But they can also develop CTG when the death does not seem shocking to adults such as a death that occurs after a long illness.

When children such as Jeremy have CTG, their trauma reactions interfere with their ability to go through the typical bereavement process. Any thoughts, even happy ones, of the person who died can lead to frightening memories of *how* the person died. Because these thoughts can be so upsetting, the child often tries to avoid all reminders of the death, or of the person, so as not to get upset and overwhelmed. In *Ready to Remember*, Jeremy is stuck on the traumatic aspects of his father's death, making it hard for him to do things with his family, be with friends, and work in school.

## How to use this book

You can use this book in many ways. In this story, we do not describe the specific way that Jeremy's father died because we want children with CTG to be able to relate the story to their own experience. We hope you use Jeremy's story as a starting point to talk about your family's experience. You may read the book with your child, or your child may read it alone. Either way, it may be helpful to engage your child in a discussion about the story and for you to talk about your own feelings too. For example, when parents share that they felt angry or abandoned after a death, or sad or scared when talking about the person who died, this can make it easier for children to acknowledge their own feelings.

It is important to let your child know that there is no one right way to grieve; you can handle hearing about any and all of your child's feelings. A child who does not want to read the book, says "I know all that" or "I never feel that way" may be coping well with grief. Alternately, this may be a sign that your child is trying very hard to avoid talking about the death and needs your encouragement to discuss feelings. A child who is having a great deal of difficulty coping may need the guidance of a mental health expert.

The following more detailed information is provided to help you know if your child might be suffering from CTG and offers suggestions on how you can help.



## What is Childhood Traumatic Grief?

After a death that is shocking, sudden, or terrifying (“traumatic”) many children adjust well. However, some children can develop CTG. Children may also develop CTG even after a death that did not seem traumatic or frightening to you. This can happen for different reasons. For example, a child may be confused about why or how the person died. A child may be surprised by a death or disturbed by seeing a person suffer or physically decline. A child does not have to have been present or to have witnessed what happened to develop CTG. Whether a child was told what happened, saw what happened, or only imagines what happened, scary and disturbing thoughts and images of how a person looked or died may keep coming up in the child’s mind.

In the beginning of *Ready to Remember*, Jeremy does not want to draw pictures because it brings back memories of his dad’s giving him his first set of drawing pencils. He also does not want to go skateboarding with his brother Brandon. Memories and activities related to his dad bring back awful feelings about his father’s death. But avoiding topics, places, and things related to the person who died or what happened doesn’t make the fears and worries go away. Since Jeremy’s problems have been going on for a while, his mom is right to be concerned. In the first several weeks after a death, many children have difficulties as they struggle to adjust to the loss of an important person. But if your child continues to show some of the same signs as Jeremy or Elena a few months after the death, he or she may have CTG. This condition may not be apparent until a year or even longer after the death.

## Common Signs of Childhood Traumatic Grief

CTG reactions may be hard to notice from the outside, but thoughts and feelings on the inside are often communicated by behavior in the following ways.

**Intrusive memories:** These can show up as nightmares, repeated play about what happened, or a child’s blaming him - or herself for a death. Grieving children may have bad dreams or feel guilty, but a child with CTG cannot seem to let go of these thoughts and images. They interfere with the child’s life and do not stop when you try to reassure the child or correct the child’s mistaken beliefs about how or why the death happened. *“He had so many awful dreams about his father’s death that he was afraid to go to sleep”* (page 5)

**Feeling responsible for the death, or as if the child could have prevented it:** Some children may feel inappropriate self-blame or guilt about the person’s death. They sometimes believe that if only they had done something differently, the person would still be alive. Sometimes self-blame is expressed through the belief that there were warning signs (“omens”) that the person would die, and if the child had only seen the warning signs, the person could have been saved. *“He should have known something bad was going to happen and warned his father.”* (page 6)

**Avoidance and numbing:** A child may withdraw from friends, act as if not upset, or avoid reminders of the person or the way the person died. By trying to avoid painful feelings, the child ends up avoiding many other feelings, even positive ones. *“Mostly I tried not to have any feelings at all,” Elena continued. “It’s like I stuffed them all into a jack-in-the box.”* (page 10)

**Physical reactions:** Some children develop physical symptoms or express their upset through their bodies. *Whenever Jeremy saw the colored pencils or his skateboard, they reminded him of his father and the terrible way he died. His stomach started hurting and he often felt like throwing up.* (page 6)

**Emotional reactions:** Children may be irritable, angry, or anxious. They may seem on alert or worried about their own or other people's safety. When hearing people joke or reminisce about happy memories children can get upset. *"Why do you two keep talking about Dad?" he yelled. "Haven't you noticed? HE'S NOT HERE ANYMORE! Who cares about some stupid pizza he made?"* (page 4)

These reactions can make it difficult to do everyday activities like eat, sleep, pay attention in school, or be with friends. In addition, things that remind the child of the person or the person's death can trigger upsetting reactions.

**Loss reminders:** People, places, things, or situations that remind the child of the person who died can be disturbing. *"I remember one time after my mom died when my dad wanted me to clean my room," Elena continued. "I don't know why that made me mad. I slammed my door so hard that a picture fell off the wall! My dad was upset and said, 'your mother would know what to do.' That just made me madder.* (page 11)

**Trauma reminders:** These are reminders related to the way the person died. For example, if the person died in a car accident, a child may be scared or refuse to ride in a car. A child whose special person died in a flood may panic when hearing thunder.

**Life changes after the death that can contribute to Childhood Traumatic Grief:** Other challenges and stresses that occur as a result of the death can put a child at increased risk for developing CTG. For example, a death may mean that a previously stay-at-home mom has to start working full time, resulting in new childcare and afterschool arrangements. A child who witnessed a murder may face legal procedures, media attention, and unpleasant questions from peers. A grieving military family may have to move off base, leave their support network, and make new friends. These types of changes can add to the child's stress and make grieving more difficult.

## How can I tell if my child has Childhood Traumatic Grief?

The following questions can help you understand if your child is having a traumatic reaction to the death of someone special. If your child experiences some or all of these symptoms for a few months or more after the person died, they happen many times, are very severe, or you are not sure, check with a professional.

- 1) Does your child have nightmares or problems sleeping?
- 2) Does your child keep playing out, drawing, or dreaming about what happened?
- 3) Does your child have more physical complaints?
- 4) Is your child having difficulty in school?
- 5) Is your child having trouble concentrating when reading or even when doing fun activities like video games?

- 6) Is your child jumpy or easily startled?
- 7) Does your child avoid talking about the person who died, going places, or engaging in activities that are reminders of the person?
- 8) Is your child more withdrawn and less joyful or not doing activities he or she liked to do?
- 9) Does your child have excessive worry about something else bad happening or worry about being away from you?
- 10) Does your child talk about being responsible for the death?
- 11) Is your child more angry or irritable?

## How can I help my child or teen?

You are critically important in helping your child or teen with CTG. The first step is to recognize when your child is having difficulty. Keep these points in mind to help your child.

**Children are different.** Not all children who experience a death as sudden or shocking will develop CTG. Reactions can vary according to a child's age, developmental level, temperament, and prior history of learning differences, emotional challenges, and traumatic experiences. CTG may appear differently in different children.

### Help your child understand Childhood Traumatic Grief.

If you are concerned that your child is having a traumatic reaction, let your child know that you realize that he or she is struggling. Reading this book together and talking about it can validate a child's feelings and be a relief that help is available. You can ask if your child ever feels like Jeremy or Elena.

**Pay attention to reminders.** Keep an eye out for reminders that may be difficult for your child. A child who gets overly upset or angry, indifferent, or shuts down when seeing things associated with the person or the way the person died, or shows difficulty on important days that were special with the person such as Thanksgiving, may be having a traumatic reaction.

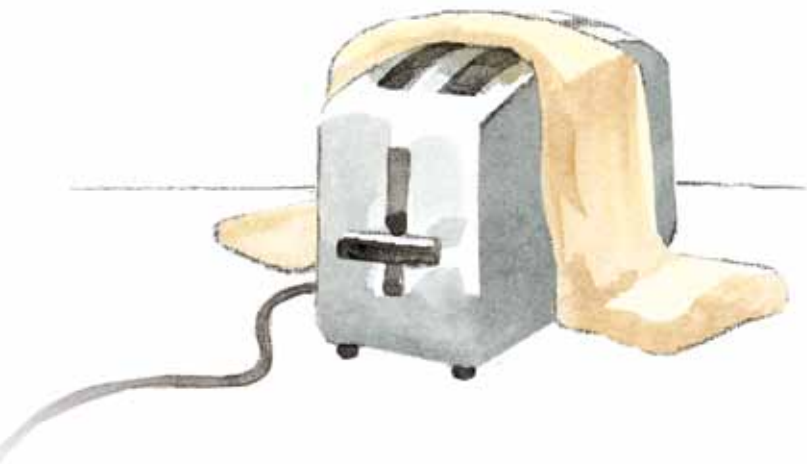
**Get more help.** Reach out for professional help if you're concerned that a child's reactions are affecting his or her daily life. Children or teens experiencing traumatic reactions can benefit from getting the right kind of help. Working with a mental health professional or counselor can help children learn how to express and manage strong reactions, develop healthy stress reduction strategies, tell their stories in a safe way, learn positive ways to cope with their reactions, learn not to be afraid, and recall and share happy memories of someone special. *"I used to feel like all the scary stuff that happened was superglued to my good memories. Now they're finally unstuck!" "Jeremy thought it would be great to think about his dad without feeling so scared . . . The following week Jeremy did talk to the counselor about his dad. He saw her several more times and then began to feel better. One day he realized that his stomach didn't hurt anymore." (pages 11-12)*



## Help is available

More information about Childhood Traumatic Grief and how to differentiate CTG from typical childhood grief is available at [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org).

Go to <http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/traumatic-grief> for books and resources for children, teens, caregivers and professionals. There is also information about such specific situations as death related to military service and the loss of a sibling. There are materials geared to different audiences, such as teachers, and in Spanish as well as English. For additional help, you can send an e-mail to [info@nctsn.org](mailto:info@nctsn.org).



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