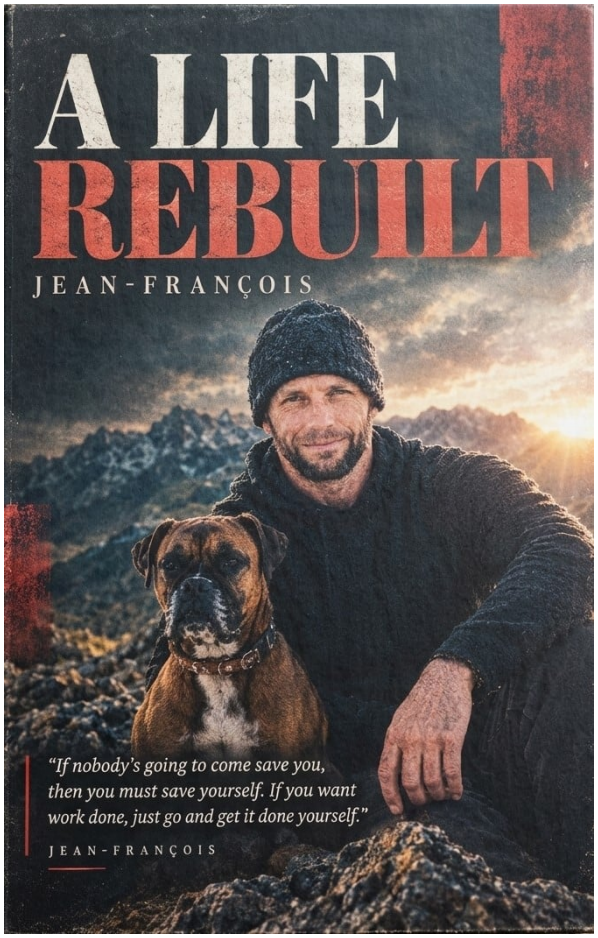


The first four chapters of my life story

JEAN-FRANÇOIS DUMONT — JFD

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CHAPTER ONE

Before Anything Broke

Before anything broke, school came easily to me. I was a strong student across the board. The only class I ever failed was religion, and that wasn't because I couldn't do the work. It was a French school, and I refused to speak French. That was the whole story. I picked that hill and stood on it. I didn't negotiate. I didn't compromise. I just stood my ground.

I taught myself computers instead. While other kids were memorizing things they didn't care about, I was learning how the internet worked. There was no YouTube. Everything was text. Line by line. Trial and error. I watched tutorials, read everything I could find online, and figured out PHP, JavaScript, HTML, C++, Perl on my own. Nobody showed me. ICQ was how we talked. StarCraft was basically the internet. You learned or you lost.

My days were full. I played outside constantly with my neighbor until it got dark, then went inside and played StarCraft with him or online. In between, I learned. That rhythm felt endless, like the world itself had a pulse, and I was syncing to it.

On the first day of school one year, I showed up prepared. Brand-new backpack. New books. Fresh pencils. At the end of the day, I decided this was the year I'd do everything right. Homework. Organization. The full effort.

I went to grab my backpack.

It was gone.

I'd left it on the bus.

From that day on, I never brought homework home again. No backpack. No routine. No second attempt. I didn't spiral or feel embarrassed. I just adapted and moved on, like the decision had already been made.

I was popular. Not in the movie sense, just in the ordinary way where people liked

being around me. I laughed a lot. I smiled all day. Weed was everywhere, and I smoked every day, but I never paid for it. It just showed up. Life had a rhythm and I was part of it.

Even so, I never liked watching people get pushed to the edges. There was one kid who sat alone at the lunch table for weeks. Chubby, goth, different enough that people pretended not to see him. One day I got tired of it, grabbed my tray, and sat down with him. We talked. Nothing dramatic. Over time, other kids drifted over. The table filled up. He stopped sitting alone. He became one of my closest friends at the time.

Experimentation was just part of the background. Once in high school, I did mushrooms. We were at a skateboarding friend's place, smoking up a sauna like it was a normal afternoon. While I was on them, my brain turned into a movie screen. I saw a full battle scene—Indians on horses charging at each other, arrows flying, dust everywhere. It was intense and completely real while it was happening. I knew it wasn't real, but that didn't matter in the moment. Then it passed. No meaning. No lesson. Just something my mind showed me.

My dad didn't care much what I did, as long as my marks stayed good. That was the deal. I kept my end of it.

I quit hockey and switched to snowboarding. Every weekend I went out with my friend Daniel. In the summer I skateboarded. I also started working young—twelve years old—at the Chinook movie theater. Work felt normal, like another lane running alongside school, friends, skating, and computers.

One time I made a thousand dollars doing a 3D animation for a StarCraft clan. My dad didn't believe me until the money actually came through. When it did, he just stared at the screen. I remember that look. It surprised him that I could build something real out of skills no one had taught me.

Even when 9/11 happened, I didn't really know what it was. We didn't have cellphones back then. They had just started to appear, and only one kid at school had one. Our bus driver mentioned planes hitting towers, and that was it. It felt distant and unreal.

CHAPTER TWO

The Day Everything Changed

The week before the Lake Louise trip, my dad promised we would go. That mattered. Once he promised something, he followed through.

The morning started wrong. The truck wouldn't start. He grabbed the jumper cables and hooked them up the wrong way. The engine caught fire. Smoke, panic, disappointment. For a moment, it looked like the trip was over before it began.

But he had promised. So we didn't take the truck. We took his girlfriend's car instead.

The car was low on gas, so we fueled up and kept going. Banff was still free back then. Fresh snow from the night before. By the time we arrived—around nine in the morning—the morning mess had already been folded into the day, treated as something already behind us.

Earlier that week, my dad and I had argued. Nothing dramatic. The kind of argument that doesn't get resolved so much as linger quietly. So when I wanted to go off-trail and they didn't, it wasn't just a disagreement about snowboarding. It fit a story he was already telling himself. I was being stubborn. I was proving a point. I was getting back at him in the small, childish way teenagers do.

We separated. My dad and brother stayed on the main trail. I went offroad.

A minute or two after we split, he heard me calling. He braked mid-mountain and looked around without knowing exactly what he was looking for. He waited a few minutes. Nothing. That's when he broke. Mid-mountain. Right after hearing me calling, something in him shifted. The explanation that made sense—me leaving with friends—was still there, holding everything together just enough for the day to continue.

I don't remember what happened next. There's no buildup, no warning, no fear I can access. The memory simply stops.

What I know comes from witnesses.

Someone sitting on the chairlift saw me go off the drop. Saw me spin. Saw me hit a tree mid-air. Not on the ground. Not after the fall. In the air. That person is the one who called ski patrol.

From that moment on, the story continues without me.

They lined up for the chairlift. Just before their turn, the lift stopped. A skier came down towing a sled. Soon after, a helicopter landed—maybe twenty minutes after the crash. My dad had been standing at that same first chairlift, having only gone up once, watching everything unfold from there.

Something serious had happened. Clearly serious. Just not serious for us. Not for me.

They kept skiing.

They skied until four. At four-thirty, they waited in the car for me, annoyed now, convinced I'd blown them off. The assumption still held. The day kept moving.

Then the phone rang. His girlfriend told him I'd had a little accident. Nothing to worry about. Winter roads. No rush. Because we had taken her car, she had no way to drive to the hospital herself, so she called a neighbor, Peter, to take her.

"A little accident." That's what stayed in my dad's head on the drive. A broken arm. Something inconvenient. Something manageable. He wasn't worried. He was just driving to the hospital.

When he arrived, doctors and nurses were waiting for him. They needed to explain what had happened. That was the moment he realized something was seriously wrong. No ski patrol briefing. No gradual understanding. Just a room full of professionals waiting for him to catch up to reality.

He never looked inside the plastic bag with my torn-up clothes.

He couldn't enter my bedroom for months.

He says everything about that day won't leave him alone. Not the fire. Not the promise. Not the moment he heard me calling and stopped without knowing why. Not the assumptions that carried him through the day. The way the truth arrived all at once.

I don’t remember any of that day.

The day had started wrong.

It never corrected itself.

It just kept moving, carrying everyone with it, long after it should have stopped.

CHAPTER THREE

I was in the coma for three months. The last month didn't behave like the first. I drifted in and out, waking just enough to touch the surface before slipping back under again. Like my brain kept trying to restart and failing partway through.

Inside the coma, there wasn't one dream.

There were many. They repeated, rearranged, restarted. Not the same scene over and over, but the same logic. Different places. Same ending. Same reset.

In one, I drowned myself in a pool. The water was still. No splashing, no fight. Just the slow pressure in my chest and the certainty that it was done. Then I woke up somewhere else.

In another, I jumped off a roof. The height didn't scare me. That should have mattered. It didn't. I remember the moment just before impact, the calm of having nothing left to decide. Darkness. Reset.

Poison showed up more than once. Bitter. Wrong. I remember thinking I'd chosen badly, that there must be a cleaner way. That thought came back in different versions, like a line of dialogue my brain couldn't stop reusing.

The locations changed. Empty houses. Schools. Buildings that followed the rules of the real world without belonging to it. Sometimes they felt familiar. Sometimes they didn't. It never mattered.

What never changed was the structure.

I would decide to die. I would succeed. And I would wake up again.

There was no relief in it. No ending. Just relocation.

The dreams weren't emotional. I don't remember fear or sadness. They felt mechanical, procedural. Like my brain had reduced existence to a single solution and kept testing it, even though the outcome never held.

I didn’t know I was injured. I didn’t know I was in a hospital. I didn’t know there were people waiting.

For the first ten days, I wasn’t breathing on my own.

A respirator did it for me. In and out. Steady. Unconcerned. While my mind was busy cycling through endings, a machine handled the most basic requirement of staying alive.

I don’t remember those days directly. I only know them because they were explained to me later, carefully, like information you give someone when you’re not sure how much they can carry.

Ten days is a long time to exist without participating.

When the dreams began to thin, they didn’t disappear all at once. Reality leaked in slowly. Sound came first. Pressure. Weight. The sense of being held in place. The dreams kept pulling me back, then loosening their grip, then pulling again.

By the time I was waking up more often, I was unbearably thirsty.

Not dry mouth. Not mild discomfort. It was total. Like my body had been asking for water for weeks and had finally gained the awareness to notice it. I couldn’t drink. I couldn’t eat. I had a tracheotomy. Everything passed me by instead of into me.

My parents tried to help in the small ways they were allowed to. They brushed my teeth. They brought ice cubes so I could rinse my mouth. I didn’t understand the rules yet. I swallowed everything.

Toothpaste. Melted ice. Anything that felt like liquid. Anything that hinted at food. Hunger and thirst weren’t emotional. They were biological. Urgent. Stripped of dignity.

They would panic. Correct me. Tell me not to swallow. I didn’t know how not to. My body recognized relief and took it wherever it could get it.

I remember their hands near my face. Careful. Apologetic. Like they were afraid even kindness might hurt me.

I couldn’t tell them how thirsty I was. I couldn’t tell them how hungry. I couldn’t tell them anything.

Eventually, I was awake enough for questions.

Simple ones. Yes or no. Squeeze this. Look here. Follow my finger. Every movement felt like it had to pass through layers before it reached my body. I remember feeling oddly accomplished for cooperating, for doing what was asked of me.

Then the doctor asked if I recognized the people in the room.

I turned my head. Faces were there. Close. Arranged carefully. I could see clearly enough to know they mattered. I just didn't know why.

I shook my head no.

It felt neutral. Accurate. The only answer I had.

The room changed after that. I didn't understand it at the time, but I felt it. Silence stretched. Someone inhaled and held it too long. The doctor's voice softened, adjusted, like something fragile had just been confirmed.

I didn't know those people were my parents. I didn't know I was supposed to.

That came later, explained to me like background information from a life I hadn't reloaded yet.

At the time, all I knew was that the recurring dreams had finally stopped recycling me. I wasn't dying anymore. I also wasn't returning to anything familiar.

The world had continued without me. Now it was slowing down just enough to let me step back in. But I arrived without memory, without recognition, without the internal map everyone else assumed was still there.

I was awake. I was alive. And the people who loved me most were strangers.

That was the real beginning.

Not the fall. Not the coma. Not the survival.

This was when I came back, and everything that mattered had to be learned again.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rehab started before I understood what recovery meant.

While I was still in the hospital, my days were scheduled around therapy. Speech therapy. Occupational therapy. Physical therapy. Different rooms. Different goals. Same exhaustion. My body was being asked to relearn things it had once done without permission.

There was a pool in the hospital, and we went swimming. Not for fun. For resistance. For balance. For the simple act of moving without gravity punishing every mistake. The water held me together when I couldn't do it myself.

Speech therapy was the hardest.

The tracheotomy had changed my voice. I didn't sound like myself anymore. Worse than that, I couldn't find words at all. English wasn't gone completely, but it was scattered. I had to relearn it piece by piece, like a language I once knew fluently and had suddenly been demoted to beginner.

We used cue cards. Pictures. Simple phrases. Pointing. Repetition. It was slow and humiliating in a quiet way. I knew what I wanted to say long before I could say it. My thoughts were intact. The connection wasn't.

Every word felt earned. Every sentence took effort. Progress hurt, not physically, but in the way that reminds you of what you've lost while pretending to give it back.

When I left the hospital, rehab didn't stop.

For a year, I went back every day. I rode a short bus with other people who were also labeled handicapped. Some of them were more severely affected than I was. That wasn't comforting. It was clarifying. This was where I belonged now, whether I liked it or not.

The place was called the Gordon Thomson School.

It wasn't a school in the way people imagine school. It was a holding space between

who we had been and who we were allowed to become. Therapy rooms. Computers. Staff who spoke slowly without being patronizing. Other kids and adults learning how to live inside bodies that no longer followed instructions.

Being there stripped comparison of its usefulness. Everyone had something wrong. Everyone had something working. No one fit neatly into categories.

After that year, I volunteered.

For another year, I pushed other patients in wheelchairs to their appointments. I sat with them at computers. I played games with them. I retranscribed documents, slowly, carefully, teaching my hands and brain how to cooperate again.

I worked at summer camps too. I accompanied patients. I stayed close enough to help without hovering. Responsibility came back in small doses. Trust, too.

We played wheelchair hockey. Volleyball. Basketball. Actual games, not demonstrations. We even played wheelchair hockey with the Calgary Flames. We went rock climbing. Not as inspiration. As participation.

None of it felt heroic. It felt necessary.

Rehab wasn't about getting better. It was about becoming functional enough to re-enter the world without constant supervision. It was about proving, quietly and repeatedly, that I could be relied on again.

The strange part was that helping others helped me more than therapy ever had. Not because it made me feel lucky. Because it reminded me that usefulness still existed. That I still had something to offer, even if it didn't look like what I'd planned before the accident.

By the time rehab ended, I wasn't fixed. I wasn't cured. I wasn't even close to who I'd been.

But I was no longer suspended.

I could move forward now, even if the path was narrower. Even if it took more effort. Even if it required constant adjustment.

Rehab didn't give me my old life back.

It gave me a new baseline.

And from there, I had to decide what to build.

THE STORY CONTINUES

These are the first four chapters. The rebuild that followed — the discipline, the training, the coaching — is on my site, and the story is still being written.

Coffee Chat — a 20-minute conversation, for the price of a coffee ($3). Book it at jfd.life.

The full story and the God Tier — my top tier, with a personalized song built from your own story — are on my Ko-fi page: ko-fi.com/jfdumont.

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