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REX (ME) AND UNCLE DERM

First I was born, and then they called me Rex, which I'm still not happy about. There are three main reasons I don't like being called Rex:

1. It's an eighty-year-old's name.
2. Or the name of somebody sitting on a horse in 1657 with a feather sticking out of his hat.
3. Or a dog.

It's the third one that bothers me most. There's a new thing every day.

‘Hey, did you say your name’s Rex?’ somebody will ask. ‘I’m afraid we have a no-chasing-cats rule in this library! Haha!’ And then they always laugh for ages, like they’re the first person ever to think of it and it’s the funniest joke in the entire history of jokes.

‘Your name’s Rex? Please don’t chew our shoes or pee on our carpet! Haha!’ Usually with the *Haha* part going on much longer than that. More like *Hahahahaha*. And I feel my cheeks get hot and sometimes I panic and run away.

But I’m getting sidetracked already. My name is Rex, and that’s not interesting, and we have a lot of *very* interesting stuff to get to. I’m called Rex because my granddad was called Rex. That’s the entire fascinating story of why I’m called Rex.

YOU

ARE

WELCOME.

And, before you ask, NO, he wasn’t a dog either.
NONE OF US ARE DOGS! We’re just regular

humans, with eyebrows and thumbs and occasional fluff in our belly buttons.

I'm from Dublin, a city in Ireland, which, if you don't know it, is an island towards the top left of Europe that looks like a squashed-sideways teddy bear. The bear's legs stick out into the Atlantic Ocean, where the waves smash and wallop and the wind goes *hooooowwl*. But Dublin is on the opposite side, where everything's a lot less dramatic. The waves ripple gently against the teddy's back and the wind barely ruffles his fuzzy fur.

None of what I'm about to tell you would have happened without two people:

- Kitty
- and
- Uncle Derm.

Let's start with my uncle. I'm told that I first met Uncle Derm when I was two, but I don't remember it so I'm not counting it. He lived in

various exciting-sounding places around the world – Rio, Madagascar, Braintree. Then, when I was eight, he came back to Dublin.

Mum and Dad had always talked about Derm in an unusual way.

‘That reminds me of my brother, Dermot,’ Mum once said when we saw a rickety car with a door missing and a worn-out sofa tied on to the roof with string.

‘That looks like somewhere Derm would live,’ Dad would say when we passed a kind of homemade-looking house – one with bits stuck on to other bits and no overall plan. Maybe with an old satellite dish for a bird bath and a fence made out of radiators.

They must have tried every other possible baby-sitting option before calling him that evening. I didn’t like babysitters, but especially not new ones.

‘Anything could happen!’ I said to Dad. ‘Like what if he locks me in the attic or makes me fight a snake?’

‘Rex, he’s your uncle. You’re being silly.’

So when I heard the doorbell, I did the thing I used to do when everything got too much. I lay, frozen stiff, on the stairs with my eyes clamped shut.

‘I’m sorry about this, Dermot,’ Mum said as she let him in. ‘Rex is doing one of his shutdowns.’ Then she leaned over me. ‘Now, Rexypoos, be very good for Mummy and Daddy, won’t you? If your tummy is hungry, there are some snackies in the fridgey.’

She went on, ‘Dermot, can you make sure he’s in bed by eight? This meeting ends at nine so we’ll be back from the school by nine thirty.’

‘Nine *twenty* if you let me drive,’ Dad grumbled.

Mum snapped back, ‘Your stupid brain probably doesn’t remember, but the last time you drove you got us a flipping speeding ticket!’

Dad shot back, ‘Maybe I couldn’t concentrate because of you!’

‘Maybe you were going the wrong way.’

'I'm surprised you could see what way we were going because you were yelling in my ear.'

As usual, their argument continued as the front door slammed shut behind them.

There was a moment of silence in the house, and then the first odd thing of the night happened: my new babysitter began to sing.

*'There is my nephew Rex,
Lying there
On the stairs.
Will he say hello?'*

I didn't make a sound.

'No.'

It wasn't really a song, in that songs are supposed to be planned and written down somewhere. This was just him warbling away about whatever happened to be in front of him. I still hadn't reacted, but he kept going.

*'I used to do this exact thing
When I was the same age as him.
But I think I can make him open his eyes
By giving him a big surprise.'*

See what I mean? It was sort of funny, but mostly just annoying. Also, no way would I open my eyes now. NO WAY. Especially as he'd made the number-one mistake when trying to give somebody a surprise, which is to warn them that they are about to receive a surprise.

I heard Uncle Derm go outside to his van and then a sound like big plastic sheets being unfolded around me. All very strange, but I still didn't open my eyes. This was a shutdown, and shutdowns ended when I decided to end them.

Next, I heard long bits of tape being stuck to the walls and floor. Whatever this person was doing, Mum and Dad would NOT be happy. We lived in an INCREDIBLY tidy house. It looked like those fake rooms you see in the windows of big furniture shops.

I heard something being squeezed from a bottle and landing on the plastic sheets. What was it? Ketchup? *Yuck*. No, wrong smell, thank goodness. This was more lemony . . . washing-up liquid, maybe? Then came the sound of the bath filling in the bathroom at the top of the stairs.

There isn't a word in this or any other book for the level of surprise I felt at what happened next, so I'm going to have to invent one:

s h o c k s p l o s i o n

NOUN: the highest of all levels of surprise

The **bigger** the **s h o c k s p l o s i o n**,
the further apart the letters in it are.

First, I heard the unmistakable sound of whatever the backwards version of a belly flop is called – a butt flop, I suppose – into the bath upstairs.

BLOOOB.

A moment later, my eyes sprang open because a wave of warm bathwater had picked me up and slid me along the washing-up-liquidy plastic sheets, out

through the open front door to under the hedge in our tiny front garden.

I considered going into another emergency shutdown right there, but for once I was too shocked for a shutdown. WHAT HAD JUST HAPPENED?

WHO

WAS

THIS

MONSTER?

My first sight of him came a few seconds later – his big face beaming out from under a mop of brown curly hair as he slid, feet first, through the front door on the temporary waterslide he had turned my home into.

‘T-REX!’ he bellowed as he came to a halt in the hedge beside me.

Ugh. T-Rex. That was the most annoying thing I’d EVER been called, and it was still only the fourth or fifth most annoying thing about this whole situation.

I tried to speak, but no sound came out, which is what happens when you’ve just been involved in

a **shocksplosion**. Thinking back now, it might even have been a

s h o c k s p l o s i o n .

‘Great to see you!’ Uncle Derm jumped to his feet, his clothes dripping. As he offered me his hand to shake, a stream of soapy bathwater flowed down his sleeve and directly into my open but still-speechless mouth. I coughed and, I don’t know how, made a sound like a baby sheep: ‘*Mbaaagh!*’

Now he was trying not to laugh. He could see how angry I was, but the harder he tried to hold it in, the more his eyebrows twitched and his mouth started moving like he was sucking a very sour sweet. Soon his whole body was rocking like he was twirling an invisible hula hoop. He stumbled back a step, slipped and, as his wet bum hit the ground, it made a squelchy sound as if he’d landed on a pillow filled with jelly. And that made me smile, which made him giggle, and soon we were both rolling around in the wet, roaring with laughter.

‘You can’t do this!’ I gasped, when I’d regained the ability to speak.

‘Fair point,’ he said, tears running down his cheeks. ‘Maybe a bit late, though?’

‘We’re going to be in huge trouble,’ I went on.

‘Well then, let’s tidy it all up right now!’ He turned to go back inside.

‘Wait!’ I said, and my uncle froze in mid-stride. It seemed like a waste to have set all of this up and not to have another go. I mean, this was the same boring flight of stairs I shuffled up to bed every night and back down for school the next morning. ‘Maybe I should try it one more time.’

‘Now that’s an excellent idea!’ said Uncle Derm. ‘And then I might have one more go too.’

We spent the first half of the rest of the evening taking turns to fill the bath and then slide down the stairs, and the second half trying to make it look like that’s not what we’d been doing. We removed all of the plastic, then mopped, towelled

and hairdryered the house and ourselves, right up until the moment Mum and Dad got back from the meeting. Then we both jumped on to the couch and switched on the TV.

‘Sorry we’re so late,’ said Mum. Classic Mum – it was 9.32 p.m. ‘*Somebody* took a wrong turn.’

‘*Somebody* gave me terrible directions,’ Dad huffed as he stomped up the stairs.

‘Rexypoos, you’re supposed to be in your beddy-bye-byes,’ Mum said when she saw me on the couch.

‘Oh sorry,’ said Derm. ‘That’s my fault. I wasn’t paying attention to the time.’

‘What have you been doing?’ Mum asked as she hung her coat and briefcase on the coat stand in the hall, which a short time before had been a dangerously pointy outcrop in our fast-flowing rapids.

‘Mostly nothing,’ Derm said. ‘Just watching this.’

He pointed at the nature programme on the television. A shark was chasing a seal.

‘Dermot, I don’t like him seeing stuff like this. It will give him nightmares! We really don’t like anything to do with water, do we, Rexypoos?’

I didn’t say anything, but Derm gave me a wink.

Just then Dad called out from the bathroom at the top of the stairs: ‘Why are all the towels wet?’

The towels! The one thing we hadn’t dried.

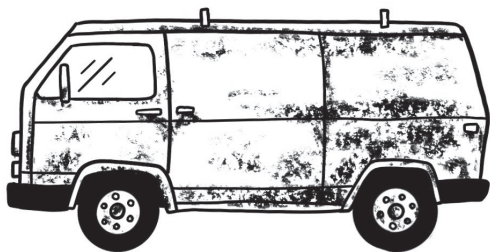
While I spluttered, trying to think of a possible reason, there came the ominous triple *rat-tat-tat* on the front door of Complaineey Delaney, the world’s complainiest next-door neighbour. Let’s just say he never called in with wonderful news of wonderful things I had done.

I could only hear bits of what he was saying to Dad, and they were all bad.

‘...water gushin’ outta the house like a fountain ... the two of ‘em flappin’ around like dolphins ... and me, WORRIED I MIGHT BE DROWNED.’

That evening was the one and only time Uncle Derm was asked to babysit. But it was also the

evening he became my favourite person. Are you allowed to have favourite people? Your parents are your parents, and I didn't have any grandparents or brothers and sisters. But there was something about my uncle – he made extraordinary things happen. And things were about to get really extraordinary.



3

PARTNERS IN CRIME

I'd see Derm every few weeks. Sometimes he'd pick me up from school or we'd meet at a family thing – you know, New Years, new babies, new homes.

'Rexypoos, please make sure you and your partner in crime don't get into any trouble,' Mum once said as she caught Derm and me sneaking out of my perfect twin cousins' school graduation/every academic and sporting award/aren't-they-so-perfect celebration.

My partner in crime. I liked that.

One time, we climbed over the wall into the park and canoed round the pond in an inflatable paddling pool in the dark, till Derm fell in and got covered in swan poo.

Around most people I was shy and awkward. In school, I always ate lunch on my own. 'You need to come out of your shell, Rexypoos,' Mum would say, like I was a snail or an almond. But whenever I was invited to a party or a sleepover, she'd tell me I wasn't old enough. 'You'll just get scared and want to come home.'

I never felt shy or awkward with Uncle Derm. Sometimes we'd take his rattly old van on to the beach and he'd make me drive.

'Look at that dreary blob,' he said once, nodding over at the grey outline of Dublin City. Derm was at the back of the van, trying to push it out of some gloopy sand I'd driven us into. 'It needs people like us to give it some colour . . . GO!'

I put my foot on the accelerator and the wheels spun round so fast that they coated my uncle in a

thick layer of sandy fudge. We laughed so hard we had to lean on things.

What was Uncle Derm's job? It seemed like he could do most things. He had trained as a carpenter, and then for a while ran a business that put huge inflatable things on top of other things – an enormous inflatable car on the roof of your garage, a giant croissant on your cafe. That was until a very large spaniel detached itself from the roof of a dog groomer's during a storm and landed on the railway track. On the news, the train driver said she'd thought it was a dinosaur and hit the brakes so hard that the train nearly came off the rails. That was the end of that particular spaniel and Derm's huge inflatable things business.

My uncle could make anything. Inside his van was every kind of tool and spare part. He'd go off to build a barge for somebody in Luxembourg, then he'd fix a windmill in France. He lost the tip of his left forefinger working at a zoo in Amsterdam.

‘I’ll tell you one thing I’ve learned, Rex,’ he told me the next time I saw him. ‘Never wrestle a panda. They look cute, but they can turn savage.’

‘Really?’ I said, shaking my head. I could always tell when he was making stuff up. It was the way he jutted his chin out just after he spoke.

‘Well, it had climbed into the crocodile enclosure,’ he went on. He knew I wasn’t buying it and was trying to change his story.

‘So hang on, was it a panda or a crocodile? Or maybe a panda riding a crocodile, like a horse and jockey?’

‘OK, OK, you got me, Sherlock Holmes.’ It turned out to have been an accident with a bench saw while he was building shelves in the zoo’s gift shop.

Then Derm moved away again.



4

LOTS OF BAD NEWS AND THEN SOME GOOD NEWS

I want to get to the interesting part of this story, so I'm going to fly through the next bit. Also, it's pretty miserable.

I knew Derm hadn't been well. He didn't collect me from school for a while, and then wasn't around at Christmas. The next time I saw him was when he called over for my twelfth birthday in February. He looked a lot paler than before and his mop of brown hair had all gone.