

## MY BROTHER WALTER

My brother Walter is depressed. My wife and I visit him every night after work. We buy something to eat—he's partial to chicken and french fries—and ring his bell around nine. He comes to the door right away and asks, "Who is it . . . ?" My wife says, "It's us!" and he says, "Oh . . ." and lets us in.

He has a dozen people a day call him to see how he is. He always picks up the phone with effort, as if it weighs a ton, and says:

"Yes?"

And the people talk as though my brother fed off stupidity. If I ask him who it is or what they want, he's incapable of answering. He's not interested in the slightest. He is so depressed that it doesn't even bother him that we're there, because it's the same as if he were alone.

Some Saturdays, my mother and Aunt Claris take him to events at the assembly hall, and Walter sits there amid the forty-something birthday girls, the bachelors, and the newlyweds. Aunt Claris, who always looks for the most arcane side of the simplest things, says that the more depressed Walter is, the happier people around him feel. Now, that's really dumb. What is true, though, is that for a few months now things in our family have been improving.

For instance, my sister finally married Galdós. At the reception, among a group of people at my brother's table drinking champagne and crying with laughter, my mother met Mr. Kito, and now she lives with him. Mr. Kito has cancer, but the man has a lot of energy. He's always enthusiastic, and he's very attentive with my mother. He owns a large cereal company, and he's also a childhood friend of Aunt Claris's. Galdós and my sister bought a farm far from the city, and we've all gotten into the habit of spending weekends there. My wife and I go pick up Walter first thing on Saturday, and by noon everyone is at the farm, waiting by the grill with a glass of wine and that immense happiness that comes with sunny days in fresh air.

We've missed only one weekend so far, because Walter had the flu and refused to get into the car. I felt like I should let the others know he wasn't going, and then everyone started calling everyone else, wondering if it was worth meeting up without him. By the time Galdós was serving up the barbecue, we had all backed out of the event.

Now Aunt Claris is dating the foreman at the farm and we're all couples in the family, except for Walter, of course. There's a chair near the grill that he claimed the first day we brought him, and he doesn't get up from it. Maybe he likes it because it's always in the shade. We try to stay around him, to cheer him up or keep him company. We take pains to talk about more or less superficial subjects, and always optimistically. My sister and my wife, who get along marvellously, comment on the week's news. And there is always occasion to raise a glass to Kito for the encouraging results of his

cancer treatment, or Galdós for the profit his farm is making, or my mother because, quite simply, we adore her.

But time passes, and Walter's still depressed. He wears a baleful expression, sadder and sadder all the time. Galdós brings a well-known rural doctor to the farm, and right away he takes an interest in Walter's case. He asks for a chair and sits down facing Walter. He wants privacy, so we leave them alone for a while. We wait on the covered porch of the house. We chat surreptitiously, appetizers in hand, until the doctor comes back from the shade. He looks confident. I tell him he looks young, stupendously healthy, and he tells me the same. He says that Walter needs time, but that he has faith things will work out. So, we all like the doctor. We consult one another on the phone during the week and everyone agrees he seems like a great guy, and we invite him to the farm more often to refine Walter's treatment. He doesn't charge us anything. His wife comes along, too, and she chats with my wife and my sister, and they all agree to meet downtown to go to the movies or the theater together. Then it happens that the rural doctor, Kito, and Galdós get to chatting pleasantly around Walter, smoking and making silly comments to cheer him up a little, and they end up having a long conversation about business. The three of them start a new line of cereals at Kito's company but through Galdós's farm, with a healthier recipe the doctor develops with great "success, over the following weeks. I join the project as well and I have to be at the farm almost every day, so when my wife gets pregnant, we move out to the farm, too. We bring Walter, who voices practically no opinion about the changes. We're relieved to have him here with us, relieved to see him sitting in his chair, to know he's close by.

The new cereals sell very well, and the farm fills up with workers and wholesale buyers. The people are friendly. They seem to be very pleased with how we do things and the prices we charge. We're spurred by an optimistic energy that continues to have its most glorious moments on the weekends, when the meat starts to brown on the grill at Galdós's ever more crowded barbecue, as we all eagerly await the food with our wineglasses in hand. We're doing things well. And by now there are so many of us that Walter is almost never alone for a second. We're comforted to know that there's always someone vying for the seat the doctor left beside him in the shade, always someone eager to cheer him up, eager to tell "him good news, to make him see how happy a person can come to be if they really put their mind to it.

The business grows. Kito's cancer is finally cured, and my son turns two years old. When I put him in Walter's arms, my son smiles and claps and says, "I'm happy, I'm so happy." Aunt Claris travels with the foreman. A tour of the European Mediterranean keeps them entertained for two months. When they come back they feel even closer to my sister and to Galdós, who are coming back from the Mexican coast, and the four of them spend afternoons exchanging photos. Some nights they go to the casino, and every time they go they win a lot of money. That's how we do things. With the

money and some advice from the foreman, they form a company and buy out the cereal lines of the competition. For New Year's, the company invites almost the entire town surrounding the farm—because by now almost everybody works here—and the wholesale purchasers, friends, and neighbors. The barbecue happens at night. No one needs to bring anything; we have everything to give. A live band plays that kind of jazz from the thirties that makes you dance even sitting down. The kids play with garlands, winding them around the chairs and tables, laughing at everything.

For a while now I've been taking my brother aside every so often, when I can find a calm moment, to ask him what's wrong. He stays quiet as always, but he automatically stops looking me in the eyes. I think it'll be hard to ask him right now, because it's midnight on the dot and we're setting off fireworks as we toast, the kind that light up the whole sky, and people shout and clap and ask for more. I see Walter sitting in his chair, Walter's back, and I see my son run past him, dragging his garland. But he lets go and it falls. He notices right away, and he turns around to look for it. Then something new happens: Walter leans over and picks it up. His motion strikes me as uncanny, and I can't move or say anything. Walter looks at the garland, seeming to study it with too much attention, and for a moment everything seems confused to me. Gray. Paralyzed. It's only a moment, because then my son takes the garland from Walter and goes running back to his mother. Although I recognize the relief, my legs are shaking. I almost feel like we could die, all of us, for some reason, and I can't stop thinking about what's wrong with Walter, what it is that could be so terrible.

Mouthful of Birds

Samanta Schweblin

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