

# The Game

Marielle Tomasic

*For K*

They were not supposed to be happy.

Seeing them walk the streets of this world, you could already read *other* scrawled all over them. But even in their private spaces, happiness was not supposed to associate with them. This message was written everywhere: on their genes, on the ways in which they had grown up, on the state of the world, even on the tongues of their families and in the depth of their bones. Where there should have been love in their lives, there was absence, and where there should have been joy, there was sorrow.

And how was one supposed to be happy, really, when, from their very first breath, they were shown and told that they were not welcome? Not by the world, and perhaps even less so by their family. Even when something good did happen to Alegria, when something excited them, when there was anything good at all, their siblings made sure to nip it in the bud as soon as Alegria made just the slightest mention of it.

As for Radost ... yes, there had once been happiness, even love, but that belonged to a past life, one that felt like it was part of a story (a fairytale really), but not theirs, one they had been told, not experienced themselves. The world was cruel in that way.

And yet. Somehow, through what could only be called a series of unfortunate events, they had ended up in each other's lives. What united them was the way in which life, they agreed, was not made for them, or they for it, really. How wicked a thing to be thrown into this world, they agreed. They could not imagine anything worse. And yet here they were.

At first, they were simply glad to have found someone who understood the ways in which misery can grab your heart and hold it so tight that you walk around with a constant ache in the left corner of your chest. Someone who understood that, despite this, you depended on sorrow. You depended on it because the very minute it decided to loosen its grip on your heart, there would be nothing that could hold together the millions of pieces into which it had long been shattered by then. Without the pain, there would be nothing left but death. It was easy to see which of the two was the better option, they agreed. How frustrating that they were not even granted this. It appeared that they had no choice but to continue going through the motions, to get up each day, regardless, to put on their masks, to live. They understood that, for people like them, simply being alive was an act of resistance. Of course, they did. They just weren't sure if that was a price worth paying. They were not sure if they were able to sacrifice themselves much longer.

And then, something changed. They saw the other's pain and, they were sure of it, it was the most beautiful thing they had ever experienced. To be allowed to witness. To see behind the shiny surface, which had only ever been a mirror for everyone else's reflection, but, in each other's eyes, had turned to glass.

In the beginning, they tried to fight it, each in their own way.

Alegria had always known herself to be incapable of love.

Radost had always had a habit of loving too much and paying for this with heartbreak. Surely, this was the next unfortunate event awaiting them. They would not be able to make this work, so they did what every reasonable person would have done: They tried to smother their love. Their love resisted. After all, it was just as stubborn as they were. They tried harder. Together, they sat down and came up with lists, strategies, plans. But the harder they tried to push love out of their lives, the softer they became.

One night they found themselves lying together on the soft rug in Radost's living room, plans and ideas scattered around them. Taking in the chaos that surrounded them, Radost was the first to break into tears. "Alegria, what are we going to do? I am trying so incredibly hard, but I cannot help it. I know you had different plans. Leaving the world as quietly as you entered it. Leaving it unchanged. But I fear that it's too late for that." Alegria responded to this with tears that started running down their cheeks silently. In the space that was their and Radost's relationship, something had sneaked inside of Alegria's body, and, silently, replaced the hand that had been gripping their heart so tightly for their entire life. In its place, Alegria now found nothing but this: warmth. Nothing but warmth, and, despite the absence of the cold grip of the hand: aliveness.

"You know what, Radost? My family, damn it, the entire world, would be fuming if they knew about our love. Somehow, I really feel like this is the best revenge for everything that we have been put through, don't you think?" and at this, Radost could not help but break into the kind of laughter one usually leaves behind with their childhood. Belly-aching, soul-caressing, ever-lasting, infectious laughter.

This would be their weapon.

When Alegria was yet again insulted by a client at work, they made extra sure to leave everyone they encountered with a warm feeling in their heart and a smile on their lips.

When Radost was spat at by a stranger at the train station, Alegria and Radost took this as inspiration to start a "who can spit the furthest" contest out in their favorite fields.

When the gray days of fall did not seem to end, and the sun appeared to have been kidnapped by another species, they painted their apartment in the happiest shade of yellow that they could find.

When the heating broke in the depths of winter, they built a fort in the corner of their living room, decorating it with fairy lights, filling it with all the blankets and pillows they could find before cuddling up together with their dogs and the cat that had one day shown up on their doorstep and never since left for longer than a few hours at a time.

When they were overcome by anxiety about the state of the world, Alegria danced through their apartment for hours. They were still dancing when Radost came home from work and, without asking for the cause of the joyous whirls, simply joined Alegria until they both collapsed on the bed and fell into a deep slumber.

When Radost's chronic pain became so intense again that they could no longer hold back their tears and Alegria asked, concern in their voice, what the matter was, Radost replied by breaking into a song:

"I am in paaaaain, oh, so much pain. It hurts so muuuuch, I gotta cryyyyy."

"You are in paaaaain, oh, so much pain. It hurts so muuuuch, you gotta cryyyyy," Alegria immediately tuned in, and they sang with the greatest fervor and turned it into a contest of "how beautiful can we make our pain sound?"

Of course, the world did not stop being cruel. There was no way it ever would, and there was nothing Radost and Alegria could do about this. But they discovered that there was something they could do: For every injustice, for every worry, for every pain, for every bit of misery they encountered, they decided to find ways to increase the joy in their lives. Every single time the world told them that they were not supposed to be happy, they answered: you better bet we are!

It was the most radical thing they could have done.

## Author Biography

**Marielle Tomasic** is a master student of North American Studies and holds a B.A. in English and Philosophy from Leibniz University Hannover. Besides being a student, she is also an editorial assistant for a publishing house. In her research, she is particularly interested in literature that crosses the boundaries of fact and fiction as well as those between the personal and the theoretical, and thus focuses on studies of autotheory, autofiction, life writing and liminal studies.