

# Alegria

*Emi Wright*

**MADVILLE**  
P U B L I S H I N G

Lake Dallas, Texas

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# 1.

When Alegría was born, no one in the little town of Prudent smiled. Not the mother, too tired to control her facial muscles; not the father, worried about the future cost the new baby would incur; not the unprepared delivering doctor, seeing a new face pop out for the twentieth time in his life; not the attending nurses, just holding on until the break at the end of their shift; not even Alegría herself. In fact, she came out with eyes wide open as big as the saucers Grandma Tracy had given her mother for Christmas and a countenance as red as Aunt Mary's worn Santa sock; her eyes looked on frightened under hairless furrowed eyebrows as a white nurse took her like a sack of flour and wrapped her in a pink blanket.

The nurse said "She looks rosy." And the anxious father took that as a sign that his daughter's name should be Rosie. But the fatigued mother interjected with a "NO. Her name will be Alegría, after my sister." The father thought naming a daughter after a sister drowned before she turned four bad luck, but not wanting to fight with his wearied wife, said nothing. As for the mother, the name Alegría meant she'd done her penance. Marisol had always felt a slight guilt at having egged her sister to go into the water when neither of them knew how to swim. At her funeral, she'd promised to name her daughter after her if she ever had one. Having lost her resolve with her first daughter, June, she'd pushed her husband for a second pregnancy to fulfill her once-broken promise. As she looked upon Alegría wrapped up

like a taquito, Marisol hoped she would bring her family plenty of laughter and joy—as well as the removal of a thorn from her heart. It was with this hope that she smiled the first smile since Alegría's birth, and seeing her smile, Alegría's puffy face smiled also, her eyes becoming moon crescents.

Leading up to Alegría's birth, Aunt Teresa had advised Marisol to eat bananas for a quick and clean delivery, and the whole family had shrugged their shoulders and concurred. Knowing the wishes of Aunt Teresa could not be ignored—lest a curse fall on his progeny—Daniel Cana bought two big crates of ripened bananas. Along with these yellow spotted packages of potassium, Alegría's mother had balanced her diet with pomegranate seeds, *pan dulce*, grilled cheese sandwiches, and goldfish crackers dipped in everything from peanut butter to *cajeta*. And indeed, just as Aunt Teresa had said, Marisol had not been in labor for more than eighteen hours when Alegría came out headfirst on the sixth of January, the bluest month, at 6:03 p.m.

Once the nurses and doctors perceived that everything was in good order, they shipped Alegría and her parents out first thing the next day with a complementary teddy bear. For the next hour, Marisol hugged her daughter protectively to her chest as they passed the ice-cold Mipared River, the blonde fields where the hard red spring wheat would be planted come late March, the familiar flat beige houses on their way to Pinnacle Street in soporific southern Prudent.

It might be said that no one in the family was as excited for Alegría's birth as her big sister, five at the time. For as soon as June saw the old jean-blue sedan parked, she slipped out of the house, where she had been entrusted to the care of her Aunt Mary. "Can I see her? Can I see her? Does she look like me?" June's questions bombarded her mother as soon as the car door opened with a "Yes, yes, all in good time."

When they entered the house, Aunt Mary was cooing and awwing in Alegría's face and June, being no taller than 43 inches, could not sneak a peek behind her abundant backside. "Let me

see! Let me see!” she said. Once allowed a look at the wonderful gift her mother had brought,

June was disappointed to see a flushed little raisin with eyes too big for its face. With arms and legs tiny as those, the little raisin would be incapable of playing mystery pretend or tag or even hopscotch. The small look allotted June was soon taken away as all three adults in the room cooed and awwed over her. Feeling she was of no more importance than one of the houseflies brought by the ripening bananas, June soon became disillusioned with her new baby sister and hoped her parents were not intent on keeping her.

Much to June’s disappointment, they kept her through her terrible two’s and horrible three’s—even when she cried and wailed and screeched at the top of her lungs and pooped in her pants on a regular basis. All of the undivided attention on Alegría, which she got without doing much else than breathing, made June resent her for taking the love that used to be hers away.

When Alegría was taking her first steps, helped by the edges of the coffee table, June secretly hoped that she fell, would be deemed a broken product, and taken back to the baby store for a refund.

Alegría grew up pampered with a love for sweets, especially *cajeta*. However, advised by Aunt Teresa that too much sugar would stunt her growth, Marisol decided to make *cajeta* sandwiches off-limits to her. But rules couldn’t stop Alegría’s cravings and so it was on these crack of dawn-trips that Alegría would find herself in the kitchen, climb up on the kitchen counter, slide open the breadbox for a slice of whole-wheat, and squeeze half-a bottle of the readily available caramelly goodness on the bread, fold it in half, and stuff it into her salivating mouth.

Upon finding the remains of the *cajeta* bottle on the kitchen counter and Alegría passed out on the couch in the living room, her parents decided that Alegría’s room needed to be locked from the outside-in every night.

When the prospect of preschool every Monday, Wednesday,

and Friday of every week was introduced to Alegría, she accepted it with all of the good-heartedness with which she accepted mandatory bathing. On the first day of preschool, she held on to her mother's warm hand as fiercely as if it were the only thing keeping her from falling into a pit of slimy sea monsters.

However once she saw that no one was going to try and eat her, Alegría good-naturedly released her mother from her captive grip and walked into her class by herself on every consecutive visit that followed.

Once she turned five, Alegría attended kindergarten with Miss Gables. Independent and confident in her abilities, Alegría would walk the half-block to her school singing half-coherently to “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” and *E-I-E-I-O*-ing to the tunes she would hear her mother hum in the shower. Arriving at school, she twirled and waved to all of her classmates, for she believed the world was her friend.

Such was the idea implanted in her by Grandma Susana, who was a very wonderful grandmother to her thirteen grandkids. Were it not for the distance, she would've cooked and baked for them all day. Grandma Susana had the twinkle of a secret in her eye and a quiver in her lip that would often turn into laughter. And boy could she laugh! Everything about her was musical: the lilt with which she spoke, the perfect pitch in which she hummed, the steady tempo with which she handled her kitchen—in short, everything but her laugh. Her laugh was one to make new acquaintances wonder how such a laugh could come from someone who was otherwise so graceful; it was a mixture of chortles and gurgles that would build-up into what Uncle Tim had rightly described as the sound a witch-donkey hybrid emits when kicked in the rear end. The laugh, when it built up inside Grandma Susana, would take over her youthful body, bending it forwards, then backwards, then forwards again. When she found something really funny, Grandma Susana would stomp her feet and clutch at her aching belly and exclaim “Oh dear!” (Thankfully) not one of her four daughters had inherited her infamous laugh,

which she believed was the cause of all but one of them managing to keep a husband.

Grandma Susana had—as she called it—salt-and-pepper hair, a drooping bosom, and a slim figure that made the other grandmothers on her street jealous. Her face was the shape of a peach and the color of a date; in it were two chocolate-brown eyes framed by prominent eye bags and a round nose resembling a pear. Her teeth she still had, pearly white as the day she received them, and was quite proud of them. Although perfectly at home in her face, when she laughed her lips pulled back to reveal them so they seemed too big for her face, like horse teeth.

On the first day of spring, Marisol received a phone call which brought her hand to her lips and red to her eyes. Alegría, who had been playing with Legos on the kitchen floor knew that something was wrong and instinctively got up to hug her mother. “Mother passed away?” she repeated in dismay, now stroking the top of Alegría’s head. Alegría knew that mother’s mama was Susana, and that Susana was her grandmother, and that passing away was something people said when you couldn’t visit a person anymore. The thought of not being able to go to her grandmother’s house every month for a cooking lesson made Alegría stretch her arms around her mother tighter. “Okay, I’ll stop by later this afternoon ... You too.”

“Mama what happened? Is Grandma Susana alright?” Alegría interrogated her mother with a deepening sense of foreboding as she sat down at the kitchen table.

“Your grandma was really sick, Alegría.”

With a knot in her throat, Alegría thought of her last visit to Grandma Susana’s house. It had been but two weeks ago. “Let’s go sit down by the TV, *mi Grillita*,” had said

Grandma Susana. But Grandma had promised to teach her the secret to her churros, and hadn’t she said that too much TV was bad for the brain? Grandma Susana thought for a moment and replied, True, true. But the Powerpuff Girls were on and surely she did not want to miss the rerun? Alegría quickly

consented and found a spot next to Grandma Susana on her pink and yellow camel-backed couch with the big flowers on it. While the evil monkey with white boots was laughing his abnormally big head off, Grandma Susana had gotten up with many complaints by the old couch and returned from the kitchen with two big blue bowls—one filled with sugar snap peas and the other empty. “Here, help me snap the ends off, if you please,” she’d said.

After a while of snapping the ends and dunk-shooting them in the now partially-filled bowl, Grandma Susana had slid one into her mouth instead, finishing it off with a satisfying crunch. “Grandma, can I try?” Alegría had eagerly taken a sugar snap pea, plucked the end with the white string off, and followed her grandmother’s example. After a few moments of careful chewing and the deliberation of a seasoned wine taster, she’d said, “It tastes like sweet grass.”

Grandma Susana had laughed her infamous laugh and said, “And how would you know what grass tastes like? Don’t tell me you’ve actually turned into a *grillita*? The sight would give me fright.”

Somewhere in the wake of the colored streaks the Powerpuff Girls left behind from their day of fighting crime, Alegría had lost track of time and it had soon been time to say goodbye. At the door to her house, Grandma Susana had said in that bursting way she had about her “Don’t ever stop smiling, *mi Grillita*,” and pinched Alegría’s cheeks affectionately. She had seemed fine then—one hundred and five percent healthy.

“She didn’t seem sick last time we watched Powerpuff Girls together.”

“Sometimes people are sick in ways that are not so visible to others. They’re sick in here.” Marisol pointed to her heart.

“Can’t you take pills for that? Lily’s mom takes orange-flavored pills when that hurts, when she eats too much pizza.”

Marisol twiddled her thumbs. “No, Alegría. That’s a different kind of sick.”

“Can I go see her now?”

“No, Alegría. She’s—she’s dead.”



Dead was a final word, one that was a gavel in the courtroom of life, one that pronounced the person unfit to live in this world with all its sugary churros and flowery couches anymore.

“What’s going on? What happened to grandma? Did she finally—you know.” June’s sudden appearance made her mother slightly jump.

Alegría jumped from the brown, smooth kitchen chair and went to hug June. “She’s dead,” she answered for her mother.

June slithered out of Alegría’s iron hug and said, “Oh.”

“I’m going to call your father,” and with that, Marisol excused herself out of the room.

When Daniel Cana heard the news of Grandma Susana’s death, he tried to suppress the twinge of relief in his heart. “Mm. I’m sorry to hear that, honey. Are you okay?” Once the formalities were over and he’d done his duty as a faithful husband, he couldn’t help but question, “And the house. Did she say who she left it to?” Marisol said that she did not know, that she was meeting up with her sisters that same afternoon to discuss all the details. The crackle and echo of the telephone line made her seem farther away than the past. With that, she hung up before her husband could get in his last two dutifully comforting cents.

Although Alegría’s parents were not poor, they were not rich either. Her father’s bookbinding line of work was not doing too well in the economy, not that it had ever done particularly well, and maintaining a wife and two daughters accustomed to female comforts was more than he could manage at the moment. That was why when news of Grandma Susana’s illness had reached him, the thought had skidded across his mind before he could fully stop it. What if Grandma Susana did die? Would they be able to get her house? Of course, that was not the proper manner of thinking for a caring son-in-law. But was it entirely wrong if after Grandma Susana’s death, he could hope for the house as a blessing in disguise?

When Alegría was told that she and her family were going to be living in Grandma Susana’s house, she had mixed feelings about the prospective move. She liked visiting Grandma Susana at her house, cooking and baking and smelling her wet-corn-flour scent—but Grandma Susana was not there anymore. She was “passed away,” gone into some other world Alegría could not enter. Marisol had explained that moving into Grandma Susana’s house would mean switching schools, which would mean not being able to see her best friend Lily anymore, which would mean that Lily, in a way, was passing away too. Alegría mentioned as much to her mother. However, her mother did not share that point of view.

Alegría thought long and hard about her house, the one her family had lived in since before she was born. The important rooms were the ones with the dining room table, the TV, and the bathroom. But her favorite room was her own. It was a nine-foot-by-nine-foot square with walls the color of fresh sourdough bread. Facing the only window in the room was a brown canopy bed her father had found on the side of the road a few years back with a “free” sign taped to its dismembered frame. She liked laying on the pink butterfly bed covers overflowing with her collection of stuffed monkeys and pretending she was trapped under the wooden bars by the evil monkey Mojo Jojo, having to figure out ways to escape his evil schemes. The small desk flush against the right side of Alegría’s bed held her princess coloring books and Crayola art supplies. It was here that she’d spent countless hours coloring and playing house with her stuffed monkeys like she’d seen in the movies her mother liked. It was in this room that Señor Monkey had married Señorita Monkey and they’d had seven monkey children: Bob, Joey, Juan, Jorge, Jimena, Matilda, and the most-recent, Mon-mon.

Even with all these memories, Alegría decided she was okay with moving homes—as long as she was still able to attend her

old school and play with her friend Lily, and she said as much to her mother.

“Ha! That’s not how moving works, *Grilla*,” said June, over-emphasizing the e sound enough for Alegría to see her sister’s tongue trying to escape against the prison bars of her bottom teeth.

Alegría liked the nickname her grandmother had given her because it had love when she said it. “My Alegría when you visit, the questions you bring! Every two seconds you chirp them up like how the crickets sing. When you talk, the sounds they flock and flutter around the room, filling it up like crickets’ sweet serenade before a monsoon. My Alegría, I think I’ll call you my *Grillita*.”

Alegría couldn’t quite put her finger on it, why her nickname sounded so dissimilar when pronounced from two different mouths. Maybe without the *-ita* at the end, “little cricket” turned into a plain, mirthless “big cricket.” Whatever it was, when her sister said her special nickname, it was like she was violating some deep bond between Grandma Susana and her. Now when June said her nickname, it was like she was mocking Alegría’s naïvete and lack of knowledge.

“Why not? Why can’t I go to school like normal?” Hit with the sudden spark of an epiphany, Alegría shouted, “I could take the bus! Mama, mama, I could take the bus! You wouldn’t have to drive me to school, I could go by myself.”

“You can’t take the bus,” said June, matter-of-factly. “The bus doesn’t go that far. Grandma’s house is in Manteca. You know where that is, right? Across the river.” June gave Alegría the same look that the worker at Loony Lottie’s Amusement Park had given Alegría when she’d told her she was too short to ride The Zipper.

“Well then I can take a boat,” said Alegría, crossing her arms and sticking out her lips.

“You can’t take a boat.”

“Why not? Mama.”

“Mother, she can’t take a boat.”

“Mama please, I can go by myself.”

“Mother, tell *Grilla* over here she can’t take a boat, she’ll fall and drown.”

“Why do I have to fall and drown? Mama please—”

“Mother—”

“*Basta. Cállense.*” Their mother silenced the two girls’ chatter. “Alegría, you can’t take the bus or a boat to your old school.”

“See? I told you.” June’s voice died down as her mother silenced her with a look audible as silver slicing through air.

“But going to a new school will be fun, you’ll see. You’ll make lots of new friends and get a nice new teacher to start off your second year. It’ll be like an adventure. You like adventures, don’t you?”

A half-hearted “yeah” was all Alegría could muster. Had she opened her mouth a tiny bit wider, a flurry of bitter words at her sister would’ve ensued, but these had to be avoided in the presence of her mother.

In two weeks’ time, Alegría’s family had packed up all of their belongings in garbage bags and cardboard boxes and thrown them inside a white delivery van borrowed from a close friend of Daniel’s. Themselves they jammed into their jean-blue sedan. As the car drove away, Alegría scooted up against the window to see the house in which she’d grown up. It was as empty as if she’d never lived there.

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