

ALMOND

a  
novel

WON-  
PYUNG SOHN



# ALMOND

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A NOVEL

WON-PYUNG SOHN

TRANSLATED FROM THE KOREAN BY SANDY JOOSUN LEE



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# Notes

- Alexithymia, or the inability to identify and express one's feelings, is a mental disorder first described in medical journals in the 1970s. Its known causes are lack of emotional development during a person's early childhood, post-traumatic stress disorder, and the smaller inborn amygdalae, in which case, fear is the emotion these parts of the brain are least able to identify and express. Recently, however, new studies have suggested that the ability of the amygdalae to process fear and anxiety can be increased through training. This novel describes alexithymia based on these studies, and with the author's imagination.
- P. J. Nolan is a fictional character.
- The dinosaurs' sizes mentioned in this novel are based on Bernard Most's *The Littlest Dinosaurs*. Their actual sizes may differ based on various studies.

# Dedication

TO DAN

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# Prologue

*I have almonds inside me.*

*So do you.*

*So do those you love and those you hate.*

*No one can feel them.*

*You just know they are there.*

*This story is, in short, about a monster meeting another monster. One of the monsters is me.*

I won't tell you whether it has a happy ending or a tragic ending.

Because, first of all, every story becomes boring once the ending is spoiled.

Second of all, not telling you will make you more engaged in this one.

Lastly, and I know it sounds like an excuse, but neither you nor I nor anyone can ever really know whether a story is happy or tragic.



# Part One

# 1

Six were dead, and one was wounded that day. First were Mom and Granny. Then a college student who had rushed in to stop the man. Then two men in their fifties who had stood in the front rank of the Salvation Army parade, followed by a policeman. Finally, the man himself. He had chosen to be the last victim of his manic bloodshed. He stabbed himself in the chest hard and, like most of the other victims, died before the ambulance came. I simply watched the whole thing unfold before me.

Just standing there with blank eyes, as always.

## 2

The first incident happened when I was six. The symptoms had been there way earlier, but it was then that they had finally risen to the surface. That day, Mom must've forgotten to come get me from kindergarten. She told me later that she had gone to see Dad after all these years, to tell him that she would finally let him go, not that she would meet someone new or anything, but that she would move on anyway. Apparently, she had said all that to him as she wiped the faded walls of his mausoleum. Meanwhile, as her love came to an end once and for all, I, the uninvited guest of their young love, was being completely forgotten.

After all the kids were gone, I wandered out of the kindergarten on my own. All that six-year-old me could remember about his house was that it was somewhere over a bridge. I went up and stood on the overpass with my head hanging over the railing. I saw cars gliding by beneath me. It reminded me of something I had seen somewhere, so I gathered as much saliva as possible in my mouth. I took aim at a car and spat. My spit evaporated long before it hit the car, but I kept my eyes on the road and kept spitting until I felt dizzy.

“What are you doing! That’s disgusting!”

I looked up to see a middle-aged woman passing by, glaring at me, then she just continued on her way, gliding past me like the cars below, and I was left alone again. The stairways from the overpass fanned out in every direction. I lost my bearings. The world I saw underneath the stairs was all the same icy gray, left and right. A couple of pigeons flapped away above my head. I decided to follow them.

By the time I realized I was going the wrong way, I'd already gone too far. At kindergarten, I'd been learning a song called "Go Marching." *Earth is round, go go march ahead*, and just like the lyrics, I thought that, somehow, I would eventually get to my house if I'd just *go go march ahead*. I stubbornly continued my small steps forward.

The main road led to a narrow alley lined by old houses, those crumbling walls all marked with crimson, random numbers and the word "vacant." There was no one in sight. Suddenly, I heard someone cry out, *Ah*, in a low voice. Not sure if it was *Ah* or *Uh*. Maybe it was *Argh*. It was a low, short cry. I walked toward the sound, and it grew as I approached closer and closer, then it changed to *Urgh* and *Eeeh*. It was coming from around the corner. I turned the corner without hesitation.

A boy was lying on the ground. A small boy whose age I couldn't tell, but then black shadows were being cast on and off him again and again. He was being beaten. The short cries weren't coming from him but from the shadows surrounding him, more like shouts of exertion. They kicked and spat at him. I later learned that they were only middle school students, but back then, those shadows seemed tall and huge like grown-ups.

The boy didn't resist or even make a sound, as if he'd grown used to the beating. He was getting tossed back and forth like a rag doll. One of the shadows kicked the boy in the side as a final blow. Then they left. The boy was covered in blood, like a coat of red paint. I approached him. He looked older than me, maybe eleven or twelve years old, around twice my age. But I still felt like he was younger than me. His chest was heaving quickly, his breath short and shallow like a newborn puppy's. It was obvious he was in danger.

I went back to the alley. It was still empty—only the red letters on the gray walls disturbed my eyes. After wandering for quite some time, I finally saw a small corner store. I slid open the door and stepped inside.

"Excuse me."

*Family Game* was on television. The shopkeeper was snickering so hard watching the show that he must not have heard me. The guests in the show were playing a game where one person wearing earplugs had to guess words by watching others mouth them. The word was "trepidation." I have no idea why I still remember the word. I didn't even know what it meant then. One lady kept making wrong guesses and drew laughs from the

audience and the shopkeeper. Eventually, time ran out, and her team lost. The shopkeeper smacked his lips, maybe because he felt bad for her.

“Sir,” I called to him again.

“Yes?” He finally turned.

“There’s someone lying in the alley.”

“Really?” he said indifferently and sat up.

On television, both teams were about to play another round of a high-points game that could turn the tide.

“He could die,” I said, fiddling with one of the chewy caramel packs neatly lined up on the display stand.

“Is that so?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” That was when he finally looked me in the eye.

“Where’d you learn to say such creepy things? Lying is bad, son.”

I fell silent for a while, trying to find the words to convince him. But I was too young to have much vocabulary, and I couldn’t think of anything else truer than what I had already said.

“He could die soon.”

All I could do was repeat myself.