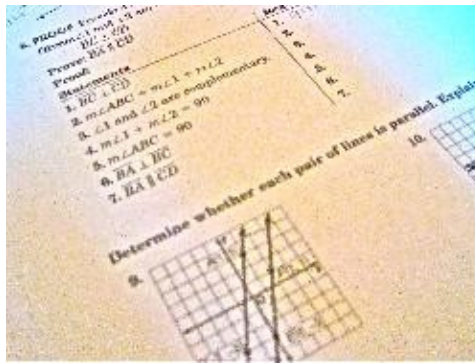


A Loss for Words

By : Sierra Shapratski

It's been fifteen years since Alana Shapratski's parents saw her last. Now an opportunity to meet her comes to them. But will Alana live up to their expectations?



Published on
Booksie

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A picture says a thousand words, but that has worked against me in the past few days. Ever since that picture of me was published around the world, everyone is clamoring to come and get me. I now wear a bulletproof vest for my own protection. Before I continue, I should explain.

My name is Alana Shapratski and fifteen years ago, my mom smuggled me out of North Korea and gave me to a nice charity worker named Sierra Shapratski who happened to be working along the Chinese border. She became my adoptive mother and renamed me Alana to protect me from any North Korean agents who might want me back. Sierra told me all of this much later in my life of course; I was eighteen when I knew the whole truth. It worked perfectly until some idiot took a picture of my adoptive mother and me at a Korean reunification rally and published it in the Korea Herald. It took about two seconds for someone at the North Korean government to recognize me and get the whole country upset. You see, I am not just your average defector; I am Kim-Jong Un's long lost daughter. My mother smuggled me out so I could have a life away from my violent father and the entire North Korean regime. According to Sierra, in order to protect herself from going to a labor camp, my mother made up some story about Americans kidnapping me and holding me hostage. Imagine, American soldiers bothering to kidnap a four year old! My mother, Ri-Sol Ju, must have been a great actress because it worked and ever since then, North Korea has had a yearly festival to celebrate the lost princess. So you can imagine the uproar that ensued after the publication of my photo and the discovery that I was alive and well in Seoul all this time. Now North Korea wants me to come back to my childhood home so I can be groomed for the position of leader of Korea while the South Koreans are saying that since I am a legal adult, I can decide that for myself. So far, I have decided to stay in Seoul and work for my degree in Anthropology. However, I did agree to go for a weeklong visit to help keep things calm between the two Koreas and avoid a third world war, something that most nineteen year olds rarely ever have to do. My adoptive mother and several South Korean soldiers will be there for my protection; we don't want an accident to befall anyone while there. As I am sitting in the Beijing airport waiting for a charter flight to Pyongyang, Sierra is sitting next to me, picking her fingers nervously. As a supporter of Korean reunification and a loud critic of my father, she feels less than welcome in North Korea. When the plane finally landed, Sierra looked like she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Nevertheless, she walked down the steps holding my hand tightly the whole time. At the bottom of the steps, past the reporters with their cameras and questions, past the bodyguards, and past a very large flag, stood the father I had no memory of and the mother who handed me off at the ripe old age of four. I tried to keep calm as we pushed our way past the media and marched to my parents and the siblings I never met. My father stood there proudly and said

“Welcome home, Kim- Kyung Song.”

Of course, I forgot about the name my parents gave me. No one ever called me that over the course of my life. At least, no one I remember anyway. “Please, call me Alana.” I was already uncomfortable with being here; I didn't need any more weirdness while I was spending my first, and hopefully last, trip here. My father didn't really respond, he just looked disappointed for a minute and then ushered Sierra and myself into a waiting car that was ready to take us to the house I grew up in. The ride there was beyond awkward. Every few minutes one of my parents would try to defuse the tension by asking questions such as:

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â Howâ s school?â

â Who are your friends?â

â What do you want to do when you graduate?â

Of course, since Iâ m too polite for my own good, I responded with â Great, Iâ m friendly with a few girls I met at school. Their names are Elizabeth, Holly, and Maya. And I want to be an anthropologist after graduating.â I felt like the whole ride was scripted from some messed up sitcom. I kept expecting a laugh track to pop up and some well-dressed gentleman with greasy hair to tell the audience â Weâ ll be right back after these messages.â Instead, I got a very silent car ride with two strangers who happen to be my parents. We finally reached the house about a half hour after landing. Sierra went another part of the estate to give my parents and myself some privacy. As soon as I walked into the house my mother started to cry.

â I canâ t believe youâ re home. Itâ s so good to see you all grown up.â She sobbed

I snorted with laughter and disbelief; I was not going to fall for this act. I knew damn well that she got pictures of me on a regular basis from Sierra and the charity that she worked for. Iâ m not sure if my father knew about my momâ s little plan but I sure as hell did and I was none to happy about this scripted dinner party. So I did a stupid thing, I opened my mouth and proceeded to ask

â Mom, didnâ t Sierra send you letters from time to time? And Dad, didnâ t mom describe you as violent? I thought she communicated with you for years after I left North Korea.â My mother just looked at her hands for a long time before answering that question.

â Song-â

â Call me Alana.â

My mother pursed her lips and sighed before resuming her reply in a tone that implied she was trying very hard to keep herself calm. â Fine, Alana. Youâ re right. I was in contact with Sierra, she knew who I was but kept quiet about it to everyone. As for why, we sent you across the border for politics. Your father was losing support among the people and we had to rally the public. So we sent you to live with Sierra. I lied about the back story, the less people who knew the truth the better.â

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I just stood there before finally replying, "I don't know how to react. I don't even know what I should be doing here. Even if you hadn't just told me what you did, I would still be at a loss for what to do. Why would you send your first child to live with the nearest stranger?"

Mom started crying, and my father looked pissed.

"Look what you've done!" he screamed. "You've caused us enough pain already, we suffered for you for fifteen years. You come back and it's clear that all you want is to be a little material whore back in South Korea and visit Sierra's family in America whenever you want. You don't even want to be our daughter. I was going to teach you how to be a leader. You could have been a queen, but now you're just the village idiot."

Without thinking, I said, "Screw you too. I was fine without you for fifteen years. Based off of this interaction, it seems like you don't need me either."

Needless to say, I was on a plane out of there within hours of arriving. I haven't contacted my parents since then, and they haven't even mentioned me. Both of those things are probably for the best. Looking back on it, nothing good could have come out of meeting them even if I was polite and had kept my mouth shut about my disapproval of their governing tactics. It's been years since that ill-fated trip to North Korea and I've never looked back on it, even to mourn the loss of my mother who took her own life just days after I left that wretched place for good. She sent me a note that I received just days after her suicide. It said, "Sweetie, you have shamed me. I can't live with the humiliation of everyone knowing you are a defector." I guess when she saw my picture in the Korea Herald she thought I would be something entirely different than what I was. She wanted me to be the person she romanticized about during my fifteen-year absence, but the hope of meeting this fantasy she created set her up for the disappointment of the reality. It crushed her fragile spirit and sent her into a suicidal state, causing her to hang herself in her closet soon after I left. Maybe the phrase "every picture says a thousand words" should be changed. Maybe it should say instead, "Every picture says a thousand words that can be interpreted in a thousand different ways".

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