# **Generator** Rinny Gremaud

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I was born in 1977 at a nuclear power plant in South Korea. I never thought about things that way until that day in the summer of 2017, when I learned from a press dispatch of President Moon Jae-In’s intention to wean his country off nuclear power, starting by pulling the plug on its oldest reactor, Kori One. My reactor. It was the symbolic end of a cycle. South Korea, which forty years earlier, had entered into the nuclear age and thus a period of modernity, was now going to invest exclusively in renewable energies. The end of a chapter, the start of a new era, curtain.

South Korea was not the only country to question its relationship with atomic energy. Nor was it the first. Fukushima in 2011 had created a groundswell in many ways. But forty years is the life expectancy for a nuclear power plant.  
  
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Forty years earlier, Kori 1 had been officially commissioned and my mother, who had worked on this industrial feat along with thousands of other people of a dozen different nationalities, was not part of the celebrations to toast to the future. On the third floor of one of twelve identical blocks of flats that had been hastily built and furnished in the Western style – which meant manifestly progressive in terms of ideas and customs – she was sitting in a rocking chair with an infant only a few weeks old, rocking the child to sleep.

Babies can be contagiously soothing, and I wonder to what extent the anxieties, legitimate anxieties that must have been assailing her at that particular moment in her life, were momentarily drowned in oxytocin thanks to the sensation of my tiny self asleep at her breast. With Kori complete, her professional mission was coming to an end. Was she worried about her economic future? Certainly not. South Korea was in the midst of a period of development driven by the Cold War and drip fed by the United States. It needed women like her, perfectly fluent in English, to assist the teams of occidental engineers passing through the country.

Her fears lay elsewhere. What would become of her baby, after the father’s scheduled departure? What would become of her, a single mother of a wide-eyed girl whose father would never acknowledge his paternity? With Kori complete, the child’s father, a British engineer, would leave South Korea for another continent and disappear from both of their lives.

As she rocked back and forth in the chair, the air humid as the summer prepared its ambush, perhaps she allowed herself to succumb to reverie. What good does it do to burden yourself with sadness? When it’s impossible to read the future, it’s better to let yourself be lulled by illusions that lighten the heart. Behind the misted glass of her desires, she would not be the disgraced mother of an illegitimate child, but the proud embodiment of a love rendered impossible by convention.

I grew up not knowing why this man, despite having loved my mother, despite having held me in his arms and felt the full extent of our fragility, had not done more to protect us.

In a time and country that simply would not permit a situation like ours, everything that was to follow would require courage and tenacity. Everything was also contingent on a chance encounter with a generous man willing to open his heart, not only to her, but to a child with another man’s blood running through her veins.

I was born forty years ago, to a resilient mother and a man I barely know a thing about, in a nuclear power plant in South Korea.

I was born in Kori 1, to a proud, determined mother and a man who’s a bastard for all I know.

I grew up on intimate terms with the hypothetical, metabolising shadows. Half of me is made of the unknown, every strand of my DNA is braided with questions to which I’ve never sought answers. Silence is at the core of my very being.

The word “generator” inhabited my childhood, echoing from far and wide, a word which, for reasons I never quite managed to put my finger on, fascinated me. It seemed to mean many things at once: generator as in progenitor, birth and spark. Generator as in father.

For forty years, the ambivalent energy generated by this absentee seemed to propel me as much as it inhibited me. Is it dangerous to have a reactor in the heart? They say that failure of the cooling system can lead to core meltdown. And what about the people around me, the people I love, would they ever survive the toxic radiation?

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What remains in you, bitter old man, of the bitter cold sea, the rocks and the heaths that shaped the days of your childhood? Does your body remember the waves, the feeling of weightlessness, holding your breath as a game, a challenge? And the smell of charred potatoes on the fire when you set off on your expeditions, just a group of kids? Do you remember the swell of the streams in spring that revive the land and make the brambles quiver, the bleating of sheep and the barking of dogs, the companies of gannets clinging to the rocky peaks surrounding South Stack lighthouse? And that reassuring light, coming and going, the roar of the storms, the wind that fells the trees, bending bodies in two, the prodigious procession of clouds racing across a fretful sky? Do you remember, old man, all the things I see as I look for you?

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*Tall and dark.* That’s how the people of Holyhead remember that family of unfortunates, striking as they were in their appearance. Two days after my arrival, I was left feeling shaken when an old woman pointed out the resemblance. For the first time in my life, in this foreign land, in this country that is not mine, this language that is not my own, she looked me in the eye and said: “I can see him in you.”

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When I say his name, my interlocutor’s face lights up, and he tells me with a broad smile that the man I’m looking for was one of his childhood friends. There were three of them, Jim, Ken and John, always out on the moor, ransacking birds’ nests and making fires to cook potatoes in.

We’ll meet again the following day. He’ll drive me to the places they used to go as children, summoning memories that, at his age, are clearer in his mind than the things that happened just yesterday. He’ll introduce me to his cousin, who in turn knows someone who knows someone else who remembers the man I’m looking for. That someone will then dig out an old notebook from the bottom of a drawer, containing the following crucial piece of information: a mail address in Michigan. An address from almost thirty years ago, but an address nonetheless.

Modern technology works its magic, online directories that cross-reference old addresses with new ones, interactive maps. I thought I was following the tracks of a dead man. But the object of my investigation turns out to be very much alive, the owner of a house visible on satellite images.

I decide to write to him.

No reply.

\* \* \* What if I made a fiction out of you? What if I made you into a ghost, or rather condemned you to the shadows, forever trapped in the web of my imagination?

In the same way constellations are drawn by tracing imaginary lines, I’ll constitute a progenitor for myself based on the little information I have: your apprenticeship as a mechanical engineer at the Port of Holyhead, those years at Trinity House, the UK lighthouse authority, a marriage in Taiwan, where your first two children were born, a stint in South Korea for the now defunct GEC Turbine Generators, where you met my mother, your departure for Monroe in the United States, the birth of two more children with the same mother as the first, and finally, your last known address in Michigan.

With these milestones as a guide, everything else is mine. I’ll do a little digging, I’ll find the power plants on your curriculum vitae, some nuclear, some thermal, equipped with turbines from GEC and English Electric, a company which was eventually absorbed by the former, both of which must have employed you at some stage. I’ll match the commissioning dates with the birthdays of your children. I’ll travel across all the landscapes you’ve known and paint a backdrop for you. I’ll take my investigation to the places and industries that were once yours. And, if need be, I’ll use my imagination as water for the paint, I’ll knead you a life as if out of clay.

It doesn’t matter whether or not you find it resembles your own, it doesn’t matter if you protest. If you didn’t want it to be this way, all you had to do was tell me the story yourself. All you had to do was reply to my letter. It was your cowardice that gave me my omnipotence.

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What did I come to Taipei for? There’s nothing left of you here now. The wife you met here is still living by your side, according to the online American land register, the bonds of your marriage practically unscathed by the love of another woman and the birth of another child, in another country. Really, we were nothing more than a passing fancy.

I came to Taipei to walk through the streets, to inhale the smells in the air, to scour the thick humidity with my eyes until I can make out the tops of the skyscrapers, to revel in the rainy season, and to walk my hypotheses through the ancient meandering alleyways where potted plants overflow from low buildings with barred windows and flat roofs. I came to slurp noodle soup at the night market, indiscreetly scanning the Asian faces, searching for an epiphany, searching for a woman. Just as I imagine you did, almost half a century ago.

This is where you first experienced foreignness, that intoxicating feeling of complete deracination known as exoticism. This is where I’ll recompose your Western, male gaze on an Asia I never knew, underdeveloped as they used to say back then, newly freed from the yoke of the Japanese, assisted and instrumentalised by the victors of the Second World War, prey to the great global redistribution of powers. I’ll search for traces of a time when flights from Europe to Asia cost $6,000 and had to bypass the Soviet Union, a time before automatic washing machines and cable TV, before the whole world had been converted to taking their coffee with frothy cow’s milk, before salmon and avocado bagels and monogrammed handbags were considered universal essentials of a life lived to the full.

In Taiwan, bathed in the aura of whiteness, you were noticed and courted. Your lofty stature and economic status suddenly made you desirable in a way you never had been in your homeland. Here, men would try to win your trust and woman seek out your gaze. This position of dominance in the public sphere would come as a shock at first – in Britain, you were nothing, the son of a nobody – but soon enough, it would become normal to you, soon enough, you would even delight in your new role and the eye-catching costume that comes with it, a costume sewn together with racism and preconceptions, a costume that was once worn by colonialists and continues to be worn, albeit in a more modern iteration, by expatriates on their economic missions.

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It makes me angry, to put it mildly. The realisation that you probably reproduced later on with my mother what you first experienced in Taiwan. The idea that you took the liberty of seducing her, with her eminent uniqueness and singular qualities, and even allowed yourself to believe that you loved her, exactly as you had loved the woman before her, the other Asian woman.

Deep down, I would rather have discovered that the woman you married in Taiwan was a former prostitute who took advantage of a timely pregnancy to worm her way into your life. If I were to truly grant myself use all the license I lay claim to in writing about your life, I would reconstitute the marriage as follows: forced by some form of guilt, accidental, compromised by dubious origins, doomed to eternal bitterness. But I suppose that, at this point at least, I still have too much respect for reality.

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What was your state of mind, what kind of mental arrangement did you have with yourself that enabled you to smile at my mother, she behind the camera, you in a brown tracksuit in that flat in Haeundae, holding the child she had just given birth to? Those two little girls you’d fathered were in Taipei with their mother as you struck a relaxed paternal pose, holding a baby you would never acknowledge.

Having landed in Asia a single man, how did you deal with finding yourself six years later the father of three children by two different women straddling two developing countries? How were you hoping to reconcile those two stubs of your family tree, not necessarily by acknowledging paternity, but in terms of moral responsibility? Leave one for the other? Abandon the second to stay with the first? Or, why not, live as a polygamist? After all, that would be the most pragmatic way to economically secure the future of all these women and girls.

Surely there would have been a solution. Your world, your era, was characterised by optimism, confidence in the future. People were making babies in the same way they were building nuclear power plants, persuading themselves that, since the best was yet to come, solutions would eventually be found to the problems they were choosing not to see.

That photo of us together, the baby and her father, was the first time I saw your face. I discovered it late in life, in my thirties, in a box of old pictures belonging to my mother. A box of images that had been relegated to the back of a cupboard, never to grace the official family albums. I stood there for a long time, speechless as I looked at that face, so undeniably similar to my own. It’s a dizzying sensation, to discover as an adult such an obvious resemblance between yourself and a complete stranger.

The image has now been left to lie, relegated once more – and perhaps destined to forever remain – between the pages of an English poetry anthology you gave to my mother. Because you liked gifting books and you liked poetry. The book and its faded cover, after various moves and the occasional solemn bequest, has finally ended up in my library, in the dustiest and most inaccessible corner.

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It was like a scene from a film, though neither my mother nor I had anticipated having the conversation. In her kitchen one afternoon in 2009, we set about making *mandu* together, a kind of Korean ravioli that I particularly like to eat around the time of Lunar New Year, in a soup called *ttoek-mandu-guk*, literally “rice cake and ravioli soup.” We never used to cook together, and we never have since. But both of us, first her and then me, had just read a book by Shin Kyung-sook entitled Please Look After Mother. The book is set in post-war South Korea during those years when the women and men of the country felt as though they had been requisitioned, almost mobilised, to get the national economy off the ground as quickly as possible. As always, when film or literature plunges me back into South Korea, I was gripped by a burning desire to eat its food, a way of metabolising that singular culture that is only tangentially my own. So I suggested making *mandu* together, and as we did, I began to ask her about her childhood, then her experience of entering the South Korean workforce towards the end of the 1960s. She spoke of a country where families were large, resources were limited, and parental decisions were guided by Confucian tradition: boys studied, girls were destined to marry, and since marriage meant servitude to the husband’s family, education was naturally denied to girls, since it was considered a wasted investment. My mother was the fourth of eight children. All of her brothers had studied. She was deprived of an education. But, being curious and persevering as she was, she learnt English almost completely by herself. Armed with this considerable advantage in a country where many Western companies were still securing long-term contracts, she forged herself a career path that took her far, far away from the mediocre existence her feminine condition had destined her for.

We had our hands in the raw *mandu* stuffing when she reached the part in her story about working for GEC Turbine Generators, a British company that had come to equip the Kori nuclear power plant. That’s when she began telling me about her encounter with my biological father. After the conversation – which I won’t recount here because it has since been wiped from my memory, for reasons a psychologist would likely be able to explain – we took the ravioli, all neatly folded into half-moons, sealed them in airtight boxes, and my mother went to fetch the book of poetry for me. On a square post-it note, she’d written the names of a few colleagues from that time and assured me that I would have both her and my father’s support, should I ever feel the urge to go in search of my progenitor.

It took almost ten years, and the pretext of this book, for me to decide to set out on that journey.

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I could have interrogated my mother, but I prefer to make it all up myself.

This way, perhaps, under the title of fiction, swaddled in imagination, my mother will be better protected. He’ll be protected too, the tall, skinny, shy, young man she fell in love with a few years after I was born. The man she followed to Europe. The man who became the only father I know.

I told myself that fiction would provide each of us in the family triangle we’ve formed over the past forty years with our own retreat in the refuge of its shadows. Fiction will preserve the silences in each of our respective histories that have become more constituent than words.

And besides, the act of inventing, embroidering, dimming the light, blurring the contours, closing your eyes, dreaming up your own origins – don’t all children have the same strategy for escaping their parents?

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Where were you, what were you doing as, month after month, year after year, the difficulties, problems and accidents caused by your big English turbine continued to pile up? Like the degenerative and incurable illness of an elderly patient keeps the family doctor in a job, the vibrations of your turbine kept you occupied to the end of your career. You wrote reports that would never be read. You wrote letters that went unanswered, sent out fruitless warnings about the potential dangers of postponing various repairs or part changes, and attended meetings where your warnings went unheeded. And then, you went home each night wondering whether the damaged blades, the busted bearings and unstable shafts would one day end up killing someone.

At the same time, you cashed in your monthly salary, locked yourself away in your workshop, bought vintage cars and motorcycles and sank into a daily silence.

On Judgement Day, you will not only be presented with the things you’ve done, but also the things you haven’t done.