

MISS ATOMOS

Chapter I

Kanoto Yoshimuta, alias Madame Atomos, had been dead for four months. She had murdered thousands of Americans, caused panic in New York, Dallas and San Francisco and more or less terrified the entire world. Alive she had been a monster. Dead she should have been buried in the middle of the desert in a location unknown to everyone. Instead of this, Madame Atomos lay in an extraordinary mausoleum built right in the heart of the San Francisco cemetery.

Americans are curious people. After the death of Kennedy, Mrs. Oswald received so much money that she could live the rest of her life without working¹. In this strange country where the wives of criminals receive a pension, the same phenomenon occurred in the case of Madame Atomos: there was a constant flow of gifts to the headquarters of the Preservation of the Memory of Kanoto Yoshimuta. America was riddled with organizations like this, proof that it truly is a free country and that all lunatics are not systematically locked up.

Nevertheless, sane Americans—and fortunately they are the majority—forced themselves to forget the terrible blows inflicted by the sinister Japanese woman.

At the head of those who could not forget was Smith Beffort. Along with Yosho Akamatsu, who had since gone back to Tokyo, he had been with Madame Atomos during her final moments. And the words spoken by the dying woman with her final breath were still present in his mind: “I poisoned myself. But nothing is over, Mr. Beffort. I have prepared for the future in case of this. Catherine Lomakine will become Miss Atomos... do you remember, Mr. Beffort²?”

He remembered. Catherine Lomakine was the daughter of a naturalized Polish-American couple whom Madame Atomos had kidnapped in order to make them obey her. So, the house of Lomakine, located at Lake Whitney, had lately been one of the last refuges of the sinister Japanese woman³.

“When you are dead,” Beffort had shouted, “Catherine will be free!”

“Brainwashed, Beffort! The girl is my daughter in mind. She is smarter, more terrifying and more ambitious than I... I wanted to bring down the United States... Miss Atomos wants the world! In two or three months when I’m rotting in the ground, Miss Atomos will attack humanity... Her ways will be 100 times stronger than mine, but less direct... Fear will reign on this planet that will be invaded by monsters. Babies will be born blind, deformed... It will be agonizing, Mr. Beffort... Agonizing!”

“Where is Catherine Lomakine now?” Smith Beffort had asked

“In the Pacific. Atomos City is a huge floating island that can disappear under the waves in case of an emergency. You... you don’t have the slightest chance of finding it.” A minute later Madame Atomos continued, “I’m about to die, Mr. Beffort... you can be sure that in what I just said, there are as many lies as there are truths! Catherine Lomakine is dead. Atomos City doesn’t exist. And... I was only following orders!”

Then Madame Atomos had died, leaving Beffort and Akamatsu totally confused.

Now Beffort patiently dissected all the information. He knew that the last round of Madame Atomos’ operations dated back six months. The Japanese woman had been dead for four months and nothing had happened, but the embers could very well be smoldering under the ashes.

If Atomos City was real, if some Miss Atomos was being secretly prepared on the island, it was to be expected that it would not take long for a new act, and preferably something that looked insignificant, to appear in the newspaper columns. And that was the whole problem. There was always weird news: three unidentified objects sped over Miami, houses had mysteriously collapsed in Colorado, a field suddenly turned yellow in Arizona...

¹ True.

² See *Madame Atomos Strikes at the Head*.

³ See *Madame Atomos Sows Terror*, q.v.

And besides this, President Johnson had the flu, as well as most of the members of the government, but since the Russians did too, it was nothing to fuss about, that is to say to make Miss Atomos responsible for.

For Beffort it became a phobia—never was a man more vigilant than he was. His work suffered. Section 4 of the FBI got shaky and the Boss got sour. “Forget all this!” he barked, chewing on his cigar. “Mrs. What’s-her-name told you a whopper before giving up the ghost.”

“She had a motor-brain in her skull,” Beffort said.

“Okay, but no new island has been detected in the Pacific!”

“Madame Atomos said very specifically that we didn’t have the slightest chance of finding it,” Beffort persisted.

The Boss flopped into his chair and tried a different angle, “Reginald, you...”

“Don’t call me Reginald!” Smith Beffort interjected.

“You’re getting crabby,” the Boss continued unflustered, “and you’re sitting around twiddling your thumbs. Plus you look like death warmed over and you’re losing weight! I have a good mind to send you on vacation...”

Beffort opened his eyes wide and asked nervously, “Are you joking?”

“No. Starting right now you can consider yourself available. Find a nice girl and get to a beach. I don’t want to see my best G-man get sick.” He blew out a huge cloud of smoke and added, “But you’ll give me your address—you never know.”

Beffort chuckled. “Basically you’re as unsure as I am about the whole thing, aren’t you?”

“Possibly, but not to the point of getting sick over it. Go on, Smith. Pack your bags and take the first plane for Palm Beach. I don’t want to see you again for at least a month, okay?”

Beffort labored out of the chair. He was clearly not at all thrilled. “Why Palm Beach?”

“Because Dr. Soblen has been there for 15 days already and I think he’d be glad to see you.”

“In other words it’s a conspiracy.”

“Call it what you want, but disappear! Hold on, here’s the ticket. The plane takes off in an hour. Send me a color postcard. I’m collecting them.”

Beffort left his boss’ office, and slumped back to his own. He was not pleased about leaving behind what he considered his command post for a month, but he had to admit that the Boss was right. Madame Atomos had literally sucked the red cells out of his blood. He cleaned up his desk, pocketed his cigarettes and lighter and put his hat on his suitcase so he would not forget it. Then the telephone rang and he answered, giving his name.

“There was a certain Mie Azusa asking for you,” the operator said.

“Don’t know her. What did she want?”

“I don’t know. She said she’d call back. Hmm...”

“What, hmm?”

“You’re going on vacation, right?”

“You already know about it? News travels fast in this cave. What else do you know?”

“Dr. Soblen went down to the Hilton,” the girl said in strict confidence, “and a car is waiting for you downstairs.”

“Bravo! That’s organization or I don’t know what is. And the Boss asked me to give him my address... I’m sure my room has been reserved at Palm Beach.”

“Of course. Number 300. A view of the sea. Have a good vacation, Mr. Beffort. What should I say if Mie Azusa calls back?”

“That she can go jump in a lake!” Beffort lashed out as he hung up.

He put on his raincoat, donned his fedora, grabbed his suitcase and opened the door. At that very second the telephone rang. Beffort hesitated, but finally went back and answered it. “Smith Beffort is on vacation. Please contact his replacement.”

“It’s Mie Azusa, sir. Hold the line.”

He heard two or three crackling noises and then a melodic voice. “Mr. Beffort?”

“That’s me. Who are you?”

“Mie Azusa. You don’t know me, but I would like to see you as soon as possible. It’s very important.”

A bunch of people always had something very important to tell FBI agents. Beffort was hardened. “Impossible. See the receptionist. I left five minutes ago.” And he hung up the phone without realizing

that, later, he was biting his nails. But his behavior was normal. On edge for more than a year he had just been forced into relaxing by the Boss. The Smith Beffort who left the FBI headquarters a minute later had nothing in common with the formidable G-man who had battled against Madame Atomos.

Destiny is often tortuous, but in this particular case it was absolutely Machiavellian.

Beffort was expecting to find Alan Soblen relaxing, already tanned by the Florida sun and far from thinking about business. The little doctor had held Madame Atomos in check many times and, even though he was a levelheaded intellectual, his nerves had been short-circuited just as badly. Also, Beffort thought that Soblen had earned his stay in Palm Beach and at the other end of the runway he should have been as happy as a lark to see the airplane from New York landing.

Soblen was waiting there, gray, tired, almost drooping. His light clothes were wrinkled, not very clean and one of his shoelaces dragged in the dust.

"Hello," his voice seemed to come from far away. "How are you, Smith?"

Beffort examined him closely and said, "I'm fine, doc, but you don't look so good."

Soblen waved off the remark. "I'm not used to the weather. What's the word from New York?"

Beffort took his suitcase and walked to the bar. "Let's have a drink first, doc. I'm as dry as a burnt wick."

They sat on the bumpy stools and Beffort offered a cigarette. Against his habit, Soblen accepted and then ordered two whiskies. "So tell me," Beffort asked cheerfully, "have you been on a little binge?"

Soblen smiled sadly and his eyes gleamed briefly behind his thick glasses. "I'm too old for that, Smith," he said in a strange voice that was unfamiliar to Beffort. "Besides, people aren't too sociable down here."

Beffort sipped the Gilbey's, tinkling the ice in his glass. He suddenly had a weird feeling that he could not explain. Around him life was moving in slow motion, in muffled silence, soothing but unnatural. True, the sun beat down hard and the heat did not encourage humans to be overly active...

"It's hot, isn't it?" Soblen said slowly.

Beffort nodded and looked at him more closely. The small man looked drawn. His eyes were dull; his pale lips were cracked; his pasty ears looked like butterfly wings; and his cheekbones jutted out under his dry, tight skin. "What's wrong with you, doc?"

Soblen sighed. "I'm not eating much, Smith."

"Damn," the G-man said, "if you can't take the weather, why are you staying here? You're not under house arrest, right?"

Soblen stared at him in astonishment and scolded, "Don't yell like that." Beffort noticed that the bartender, the waitresses and the few clients in the bar were watching him curiously. But he had barely raised his voice.

"I'm fine down here," Soblen continued, "because nobody cares about what I do or say. You see, I've been here for 15 days and I don't have a single friend. Another drink?"

"No, thanks."

Soblen snapped his fingers and the bartender filled up his glass so slowly it was irritating. "You should be drinking," Soblen said indifferently, "because this heat will dehydrate you. When I first got here, I acted like you. It's very bad for the health." He took a sip and put his glass back down. "Why didn't you come sooner, Smith?"

Beffort flicked his cigarette ash in the empty air. He felt uncomfortable for no particular reason, like he was a fly in a room full of spider webs. It was preposterous.

After a pause he said, "I wasn't planning to take a vacation, but the Boss insisted. Did he send you here, too?"

"No. I came up with the idea all by myself."

"Have you been to Florida before, doc?"

"No. Never. It's someplace I've always hated even though I've never been here. You know I'm a simple man, Smith, and I don't like places that are too ritzy. Whenever anybody talked about Miami, Fort Lauderdale or Palm Beach, it made my skin crawl. But now I'm very glad to be here. Overall, the people are pleasant."

"You were just saying that they were a bit unsociable."

Soblen finished his whiskey, gave a little smile, as if the act of moving his cheeks was extremely tiring, and said, "That's probably why I think they're pleasant." He clicked his tongue. "I'd like another drink, Smith. How about you?"

Beffort furrowed his brow. Soblen had undergone a staggering change since coming to the coast. "Drink if you want. What room are you staying in at the Hilton?"

"302," Soblen laughed. "You think maybe I'm going to get drunk and you'll have to carry me back? Well, think again, Smith. For 15 days I've been drinking a lot and I haven't had any trouble whatsoever. You have to fight against dehydration! Bartender!"

Beffort gritted his teeth and waited for the bartender to refill the doctor's glass. "Just now you told me you didn't like Florida. If that's true, why did you decide to spend your vacation here?"

Soblen shrugged and mumbled, "Originally I planned to take a trip to Bermuda. I went to a travel agent by my place and bought a ticket for a month-long package tour. The next day a young lady from the agency called to make an appointment and she came to see me. She told me that the trip to Bermuda had been canceled, but that the agency could offer me a stay in Palm Beach. To compensate me and keep its clientele, they offered me a whole month at the Hilton here at half-price. Isn't that wonderful, Smith?"

"You were lucky as hell," Beffort admitted. "What was the name of this agency?"

Alan Soblen rifled through his pockets. He pulled out a wrinkled business card and gave it to Beffort, saying, "It's not the agency's card, but the young woman's who came to see me... pretty much the same thing."

Beffort took the card and winced when he saw printed in delicate font, *Mie Azusa. Public Relations Manager. Southern United States...*

"Was she Japanese?"

"Yes," Soblen answered innocently. "She was very pretty."

Chapter II

Beffort gulped down his drink and right away asked for another.

“Hey,” Soblen observed, “you’re taking my advice. Bravo!”

Beffort smiled at him. Now he knew that the doctor was not responsible. Something was going on. He did not yet know what, but he was certain of it and would be no matter what happened. It was no use coming at Soblen head-on. In his present state, he could not understand. So, he lit another cigarette and asked, “Was she really so pretty, doc?”

With an incredulous look the doctor grumbled with that kindness that only the totally drunk can have, “Come on, Smith, don’t put words in my mouth. It’s not because she came to my place that you have to suspect me of hatching up this rendezvous...”

“That’s not what I mean, doc. I know that in this you are beyond all reproach, but since we’re on vacation and we have to do something, why not talk about this Mie Azusa?”

His tone should have intrigued Soblen. At least, the Soblen who had battled against Madame Atomos would have been alerted instantly. It was not the case here. The little doctor played along with him as unwittingly as a newborn puppy.

“She was a young lady,” he spoke devotedly. “How could she not be pretty? Do you know, Smith, only the Japanese are so delicately beautiful?”

He burped a little and Beffort asked, “Was she at the agency when you got your ticket to Bermuda?”

“No,” Soblen was more dignified. “She’s not the kind of young lady who hangs around a shop all day. They keep her for the house calls. Didn’t you see her card?”

Beffort stuck it under his nose and grumbled, “Look for yourself and tell me if you see agency’s name.”

“So... what am I supposed to do about that? The room was reserved at the Hilton and half my accommodations paid for? What am I supposed to do about that?” He was starting to get drunk. His speech faltered and he was repeating himself.

“You’re not too suspicious anymore,” Beffort said calmly.

Soblen sat up straight on his stool, wobbling a little. “Why would I be? Who would be of a young lady who got a discount stay in a luxury hotel? Huh? You’re not jealous, are you Smith? No, I’m not suspicious! Why don’t you just... just...”

Beffort gave up. He slipped the card furtively into his pocket, paid the bill and said, “If it’s all the same to you, doc, I’d rather check into the Hilton as soon as possible. Are you coming?”

Soblen winked. “You think I’m going to ditch an old friend like you to get drunk in Switzerland? No, Smith, no...” He took out his wallet. “I’ll just pay and I’ll be right with you.”

“I’ve already paid.”

“Oh. So, we’re going to have another drink!”

“No.”

“To celebrate your arrival, Smith. Just one more, eh? A quick one...”

He was clinging in a friendly way, hanging on gently but stubbornly to Beffort’s lapels. The bartender and the other people in the bar watched them nonchalantly. Beffort had already noticed that they were all too busy drinking to care about anything else. Even the bartender was dodging behind the cash register to wet his whistle behind, but it was not big enough to hide his tipling elbow.

In fact, only the women were not drinking to excess.

Beffort gently freed himself from Soblen’s grip and spoke smoothly, “In the hotel we’ll drink as much as you want, doc. Come with me.”

Soblen lightened up. “The Boss made sure that we would stay together,” he was satisfied with himself. “Our rooms are next to each other. We can play cards every night before going to bed. You can play cards, can’t you Smith?”

“I can,” Beffort confirmed. “Are you coming, doc?”

Soblen finally let himself be dragged away. He staggered a little and his soles scraped the ground, sounding like sand sifted through a sieve.

Beffort hailed a taxi, helped Soblen into the backseat and told the driver the name of the hotel. The vehicle bolted off, got into the middle of the road, veered off to the right, swung back left and

went on its way continuing to zigzag between the other cars that were also zigzagging between each other. Many men were stumbling along the sidewalk and all the bars were full.

He turned to Soblen and asked, "Did you know that everyone in Palm Beach is a lush?"

Soblen's look was not friendly. "You just arrived, Smith, and you can still stand the heat. At the beginning I was like you. If I weren't so reasonable, I would have packed my bags right away and gone back to New York. But by the end of the fifth day, I understood that the air in this region is dry and the sun burns too hot for a normal man to stay sober. But I'll say again that it's not really bad because everything we absorb is immediately evacuated by sweating. Of course, it's something that can't be done safely anywhere else but here and when my vacation is over I'll stop drinking, naturally..."

Beffort nodded so as not to upset him. Soblen could talk about nothing but drinking. He was a leading expert in science; he had chaired the proceedings of the last Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy; he had defeated the Pooley—the terrifying mushroom of Madame Atomos; and now he was so saturated with alcohol that his physical and mental health were threatened.

But, even admitting that Dr. Alan Soblen had lately given in to this vice, was it normal for an entire population to take to drinking so deliriously? Beffort tossed his cigarette butt just when the taxi miraculously finished its race and pulled up in front of the entrance of the Hilton.

"My name is Beffort," he said. "I have a reservation..."

"You have to see the front desk," the bellboy piped up. He was very cheerful. Too cheerful. His pants and shoes were dusty, his hands dirty and his long hair curled over the collar of his shabby shirt. Beffort followed him into the lobby. The front desk clerk was a big, ruddy fellow who looked like an overblown balloon that the slightest poke could pop. He, too, was not very clean.

"Room for Mr. Bradford," the bellboy squealed.

"Beffort," Smith corrected.

The front desk clerk opened the register. His index finger went down the column until his dirty fingernail stopped at a name. "Beffort," he boomed, "room 304."

Smith leaned over. "There's a mistake. I know I'm in room 300."

The fat man looked up at him worriedly and said, "Someone called to change your reservation and we gave room 300 to someone else this morning. But 304 is just as comfortable and also looks out on the sea."

"I don't care. Who called and when?"

"A woman called us first thing this morning, sir."

"From New York?" Beffort pressed him.

"Certainly not. The call surely came from Palm Beach or somewhere very nearby because the person used direct dialing. If it was a call coming from New York, they would have used an operator." Seeing Beffort stay quiet, thinking, he added, "I can assure you..." (he covered his mouth as he burped discreetly) "...that your new room is excellent. Almost better than the other."

"It's true," the merry bellboy squealed. He and the front desk clerk started giggling silently, for no apparent reason, and Beffort started getting irritated. Since his arrival he had been running around in a deranged world. The women were on one side of the fence and the men on the other. Alcohol towered up between them.

"Who's staying in room 300?"

The two of them stopped giggling. "The chief of police," the clerk answered solemnly. "His house collapsed last night. Luckily he wasn't in it, but his maid was crushed under the wreckage. It's the first time that a house collapsed in our city!"

At that instant Dr. Soblen arrived. From his breath Beffort surmised that he had passed through the Hilton's bar. The doctor must have reached an obvious limit of his power to absorb alcohol because now he was in a very bad mood.

"What!" he shouted, swelling his chest. "You're still here, Smith? I hope you haven't had any problems." He was ready to risk his life to defend the rights of Beffort. It was so unreasonable that it was almost ridiculous. At any other time, Beffort would have laughed, but he, had reached a kind of saturation point that allowed him to sort out, very perceptively, the drama from the melodrama. Tragedy pushed too far often borders on the burlesque and the worst situations can make you laugh instead of panic or become disturbed. Beffort remembered that Madame Atomos had had a special gift for stirring up this kind of confusion. The United States had burst out laughing when old Pooley's land

disappeared under the giant mushroom. The laughter did not stop until the same mushroom was stretched out over the entire Dallas area and had killed almost 800 Americans.

At the moment Soblen's drunkenness and the people of Palm Beach were funny. It remained to be seen what underlying menace was hiding behind the bawdy façade.

"Don't get your hackles up," Beffort said. "They just changed my room."

Soblen puffed out, staring angrily at the front desk clerk, and shouted, "What right do you have? Who took Mr. Beffort's room?"

"The chief of police," the clerk replied.

"Perfect!" Soblen blasted. "I've got something to say to him!" He was so determined that Beffort did not have time to hold him back. Soblen bounded off at full speed and jumped into the elevator, which shot him straight up to the third floor.

Beffort shrugged his shoulders and said, "Can you give me my key?"

The front desk clerk gave it to him and Beffort left, followed by the young bellboy who was still carrying his suitcase. They climbed into the second elevator and went up to the third floor. When Beffort stepped out onto the landing, he handed the bellboy a coin and sent him back downstairs. The elevator descended and Smith Beffort found himself alone in the long, deserted hallway. He was expecting to hear a fight because it was likely that the chief of police would not take kindly to being insulted by Soblen and that he would react. But the building was cast in total silence.

Beffort went to look for room 304 and all of a sudden a door opened and Soblen appeared. He was not far from Beffort who could see that he was pale. When Soblen saw the G-man, he came up and stuttered, "Smith, it's awful. The man who took your room is dead."

It looked like he sobered up. Beffort grabbed his arm and shook him rudely. "Don't talk nonsense, doc!" he snarled. "If the guy is sleeping..."

"He's dead!" Soblen cut him off with renewed energy. "I may not be very clear-headed, but I still know whether a man is dead or alive. This guy's been dead for more than two hours. Come see for yourself."

Beffort followed him to room 300. Soblen had not closed the door and from the hallway you could see the body lying in the tiny entranceway. The chief of police had apparently not had time to settle in. His suitcase was still against the wall and his hat had rolled a little farther. Beffort went in and leaned over him. He could tell at first sight that Soblen was right.

"He's been strangled, hasn't he, doc?"

"It's undeniable... We have to inform the police."

"Go down to the front desk. The Hotel management will take the necessary steps... How can you strangle a man so easily?"

Soblen did not answer. He was sweating bullets and seemed to be having a hard time staying on his feet.

"You want me to go down instead of you?" Beffort offered.

"Please, Smith. I don't feel very well."

"Is the sight of a corpse upsetting you all of a sudden?" Beffort said ironically.

"You know very well that that's not it."

"Well, you're starting to have too much alcohol in your blood. In 15 days, you've let out all the stops. Why are you drinking like this?"

Soblen flicked his hand and snapped, "I don't drink! And I'm not as sick as you think."

"Great. So go down and tell the front desk if you can."

Soblen rose to the challenge, went out into the hallway and staggered to the elevator. When he was on his way down to the ground floor, Beffort left room 300, closed the door behind him and looked for his own room. He found it at the end of the hallway. As soon as he entered he picked up the phone and asked for New York. After waiting a moment, he was put through to the FBI headquarters.

"Hello," the Boss said. "What's going on, Smith?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to know why you sent me to this dump."

"You ought to know if you've seen Soblen."

"So that was it!"

The Boss snickered. "Did you really think that I was going to send you on vacation when all of Florida is drowning in alcohol? You have to clear up this mystery, Smith, otherwise we're going to be forced to declare Prohibition all over the state!"

“Damn,” Beffort moaned, “how have the newspapers...”

“Censured,” the Boss stated coldly. “The government doesn’t want the whole world to know that Florida is dead drunk. And mind you, all this coincided with Soblen’s arrival exactly 15 days ago.”

“Are you saying that Florida’s been boozing only since Soblen got here?”

“Exactly! Anything else you want to know, Smith?”

“Yes. Did you give orders for the Hilton to change my room?”

“No. What else?”

“Do you know where Soblen bought his ticket for Bermuda?”

“No, but that’s easy enough to find out.”

“Okay,” Beffort said, “find out and check if a Mie Azusa is working there.”

“Done,” the Boss replied. “Stay where you are. I’ll send you the information in ten minutes.” He hung up. Beffort did, too. Then he hung his clothes in the closet, put his toilet set in the bathroom and started shaving. He was just finishing his left cheek when the telephone rang. It was New York. In no time Beffort learned that Mie Azusa was unknown to the Star and Co. Agency and that Soblen’s place had not been filled on the trip to Bermuda, which was going on at the moment.

Beffort went back to mirror thinking deeply. He started shaving again when a thought came to mind: if they had not changed his room, he would be the one lying on the floor right now instead of the chief of police.