

THE SINS OF MADAME ATOMOS

Chapter I

Spring 1972

In a small, darkened room a young man was sleeping on a couch. His sleep was obviously troubled and he let out harrowing groans as if he were in the grips of a terrifying nightmare. He kicked violently at the wet, balled up sheets that were half off the bed, which itself looked more like a battlefield than a haven for a fitful sleep.

All of a sudden the sleeper sat up and screamed in agony. Looking disoriented he wiped his sweaty face with a corner of the sheet and glanced around.

These nightmares were getting the annoying habit of recurring. This had never happened to him before. Richard Tardif, an ordinary young man who had lived 25 years with a pretty positive outlook on life, was feeling the return of old demons that he had tried to hide since he was a child.

“What a bunch of crap,” he said scrambling out of bed as if it were infested with evil entities. “Nothing makes sense in these dreams!”

Bare-chested before the mirror in his room Richard was totally awake now. Ready to get back to real life, he watched his reflection answer his every whim. He often played at striking poses in front of the mirror and nowadays was spending more time than common mortals admiring himself. But he had a good reason to. Soon he would be a rock star. And the dreams that were troubling his nights were maybe not unrelated to his ambitions.

“I must be in a transition period,” he told himself. “I’m becoming an adult and this is obviously what’s giving me bad dreams.”

There was a moment of hesitation when Richard checked himself out, from head to toe, as if the guy in the mirror was a different person.

“The problem,” he went on, “is that I have no desire to grow up. I don’t give a crap about adults. Mortgages, wife and kids, no way! I want to keep pissing in the sink and letting the dishes pile up without any female nagging at me.”

He started to shave while mumbling the lyrics of a song from one of his favorite bands: “Hang on tight to your dream/When you see the boat go sailing off/Hang on tight to your dream.”

This was the message given by almost every rock song: freedom and independence. And Richard had every intention to stick to it.

All of a sudden a particularly hideous nightmare came to mind. The others, the second-rate ones, had completely vanished but this one seemed to be cemented in his memory. In this dream Richard saw his father at his wife’s funeral. Chayton Tardif had allowed the body to be buried but he secretly kept his wife’s head in a bag, wrapped in towels. It was already starting to rot but the old man protected it like a treasure, determined to make Richard pay for missing his mother’s funeral. And Richard heard, in his dream, (or at least he was strongly convinced), his father’s footsteps slowly climbing the stairs up to his room. Chayton was holding the gruesome bundle in his hands and his only goal was to swing it around in front of his son’s face.

And the dream stopped there, of course. At that moment Richard woke up screaming, which was just the continuation of his subconscious shrieking inside him.

First of all he had to “set the record straight.” In truth, his mother was not dead, Richard was sure of this. Or else it must have happened very recently. But if it turned out to be true, he should not feel any guilt over not attending the funeral since nobody had told him about it.

There must have been a deeper meaning to this anxiety. But Richard was no psychiatrist and the dreams were certainly going to go away as suddenly as they had come. There were enough people out there who took a twisted pleasure in making him feel guilty. His subconscious was not going to start on him too!

When Richard had left his native Oklahoma to come to Hawaii, it was not an easy move. First of all because his father, who was very much alive, did not approve of it. Chayton Tardif was a farm worker. He was a man who had never had much luck. But as he liked to say, he was a tireless worker. In the eyes of his only son he was first and foremost a violent alcoholic, and a moron to boot, which seemed to be the norm for a lot of folks living in the cotton belt of Oklahoma.

Many years ago five tribes lived in harmony and shared the Indian Territory. But pooling the lands, a practice borrowed from the Native Americans, was a suspicious system in the eyes of the white colonists. For Oklahoma to become an independent state, the territory could not stay undivided and the lands had to be split up. A small plot of arid soil, therefore, fell into the hands of Chayton Tardif's father who struggle his whole life farming it to feed his family. When his parents died Chayton ended up giving the property away for pennies. Turned into a poor starving Indian he blamed his misfortune on white man's greed and on fate. That was how Richard's father quickly became the slave of a guy who owned more than 1,000 hectares of land and who was kind of enough to give a roof over their heads in exchange for the inhuman work on his farms.

Maybe all the paternal violence and mental debility came from this! Richard, however, had good reasons for thinking that his father was a born loser and that he really had no desire to pull himself out of it.

Richard never knew what exactly happened to his mother. He was too young at the time and he had no clear memory of his childhood. His mother's name was Kirina Chisato. She was Japanese and at the end of the war had started working for the rich land owner. Like his father she was born on the wrong side of the tracks. And like his father she was a farm hand, surviving and suffering with 50 other exploited workers. Richard's father offered her a little more decent housing and she got pregnant right away.

According to what Richard had heard, his parents did not even last one year together. A life scarred by alcohol and violence. By sex, too. All in a more and more sordid environment. The neighbors saved Kirina on the verge of giving birth. When Richard came into the world the circle of friends agreed that he was the product of an umpteenth rape rather than the fruit of love.

The owner, a rather understanding Indian, tried to deal with the problem but this was not the first time he had faced a violent, two-faced worker. He gave him one last chance to straighten up if he did not want to lose his job.

But Kirina had already made up her mind to leave and she abandoned the child who was passed back and forth between the father and the neighbors who tried to take care of him for as long as they could. Farm workers, at least some of them, are people who stick together, who have not been made bitter and mean by poverty.

Strangely, as time passed, Richard's father gradually changed his attitude, becoming more humane, even though he still hit the bottle. Richard could even remember a few happy moments they spent together.

But he was growing up and he could not stay on the farm forever. First there was school and hanging out with other kids. Then there was the army, one year in the Marines, which allowed him to discover other horizons before heading back home and getting the feeling that he was going to start from scratch.

At that point in his life Richard felt like he was running around in circles. He had gone back to his father's house but their relationship had fallen apart again. He had to leave. He did not want to do farm work. In fact, he did not want to do any kind of work. Because working was following in his father's footsteps and he could not stand the idea.

Over the years a good number of workers died and others replaced them, but the family that had sheltered his mother and raised him was still there. When he asked for news about his mother he always got the same answer: Kirina Chisato had completely vanished from the area. Maybe even from the land of the living. She had left a son and this son should not kid himself about her coming back.

Richard had struggled to interpret his dream or rather his nightmare, but he could not figure out what it meant. His father had certainly been violent but he did not kill Kirina. Witnesses had seen her leaving the farm very much alive. As for him, he had no reason to feel guilty about anything.

He threw on a t-shirt and started shuffling around the room looking for something to eat for breakfast.

Through his father Richard had Indian blood and from his mother Japanese blood. This mix gave him a very nice body. He looked a little more Japanese but in a subtle, delicate way, as if he were always looking toward the rising sun. His eyes were slightly slanted and his hair very black, which he cut short. This might seem strange for a young man in the 70s but Richard, like some time traveler, seemed to have stopped in the 50s. He had picked up some strange habits, as much in his taste in music as in his clothes. And he did not care if this made him look like a Martian or a square to the other young people his age. When he left Oklahoma he had sworn that no one would ever tell him what to do.

Coming out of the army he stayed a while dragging his heels around the bigger cities in the state where he was born. He wandered from one to another, left to his own devices. He was not the kind of person to get in fights or break the law and he sometimes had to beg on the street, especially in Tulsa, a city where he lived for a few months. He was going downhill fast, aware that he had to do something with his life or else he would end up in the gutter. So, he made up his mind to go back home. During this period the relationship with his father had got a little better because his old man had damn near calmed down, even though he still took a shine to alcohol. But things could not go on like this forever and Richard felt like he was going nowhere fast.

His dream had been to buy a record store. A cool business for special customers. Only records from the 50s, rockabilly, really obscure stuff that connoisseurs would snatch up! Unfortunately he had no money and not enough motivation to get into any kind of business whatsoever.

And then one day an opportunity came knocking. It was to go to Hawaii where there was a job as a farm worker. But it was not the same work as his father. There were not cotton fields as far as the eye could see. But it was picking. In exchange he would get a free ticket over there, room and board, so nothing to spend at the outset. It was too good a chance to pass up and Richard gave it a go.

When he landed on the island he did not know anything at all about the place. For him, looking in from the outside, Hawaii was all about easy living and nothing else. Although it was true that there were magnificent natural sites on the islands that Richard thought were paradise, he did not come to admire the landscape. He had other things to do.

When his contract was finished, he managed to find a room in Honolulu. But it must be said that it was one of the worst parts of the city. It did not matter to Richard. He was a “cool cat” and he had just found a job, manual labor, hard, physical work, but it had one huge benefit—he did not have to work every day. He just had to show up at the shop, sit on the curb and wait for them to come get him. A big guy came out of the office and pointed to whoever was going to work that day and they took off right away for the work site. It was work on demand and in fact it was perfect for him.

On this particular day he did not go to work. He figured that he had the right since he had worked hard the rest of the week. The important thing was to pay the rent and be able to afford his records, which he was starting to get a pretty impressive collection of, and the clothes that he took meticulous care of. Having grown up among hillbillies, Richard wanted his city threads to be really snappy. The young fashion was more and more scruffy, with those awful bell-bottoms and multi-colored cotton tunics and other things that the 50s would never have allowed. You could listen to rock and play rock but you had to dress with a little class. That was what made all the difference with chicks.

Looking for some breakfast Richard ended up finding a little coffee but his mind was elsewhere. It was the damned dream that put him in this funk!

Good God, his mother’s head in a bag! But where did he get all this from? What was his subconscious digging up during the night?

But there was worse. He had heard that dreaming of teeth falling out meant somebody was going to die soon. What a bunch of baloney! He dreamed of losing his teeth and it was for the simple reason that one of them really was about to fall out. An incisor to boot, right in the front! He grabbed it between his

thumb and index finger and it wriggled a little. Damn, it was going to come out anytime. He had to go see a dentist. The idea horrified him but it had to happen. Otherwise he would never be able to open his mouth again. Disfigured for life. Okay, he would take care of it today.

Richard stretched and headed for the sink to urinate. It was while he was relieving himself, with his pants around his knees, that the front door swung open.

Susan was bursting into his life but it really was not the best time. She walked in like this pretty often just because he forgot to lock his door. So, she might show up at any time of the day or night. When she saw Richard fumbling with his pants while trying to put on a brave face, a big smile lit up her face.

“You’re already up!” she said, heading straight for the pile of records lying on a shelf.

Richard grumbled a response. He hated these intrusions more and more but he was probably just not bold enough to tell her to her face.

He had met Susan through some acquaintances. In truth it was a gang of drug addicts who hung out in the neighborhood and had ended up at his place one night after a lot of drinking to hold a so-called séance to summon ghosts. They had a good time for a while and then Richard had stopped seeing them because he felt too different: he did not do drugs and he hated junkies.

The mistake he had made with Susan had been to call her one Sunday afternoon when he was feeling a little lonely. The girl was really touched because it was the first time a guy had asked her for anything besides powder. Susan was, in fact, the dope connection in the neighborhood. She always knew who and where to get it from. None of this interested Richard who had immediately regretted the phone call. But Susan came to see him and wormed herself into his life.

They had even made love a few times, but neither one of them was really into it.

At first he found it kind of nice to hang out with Susan. She had the same taste in music so they could spend hours listening to rare B-sides recorded by obscure rockabilly bands from the boondocks of deepest, darkest America.

Of course she could not turn up with her gang of spacey friends. Richard had put a stop to that in no uncertain terms and Susan did not seem to mind. They saw each other like two old friends, two partners in crime. Their friendship gave the young man a little time to breath freely and for her to get away from the junkie lifestyle for a moment.

For, Susan was a junkie, for real. She was a short brunette whose beauty persisted despite her weary eyes. Her body was worn out too from all the abuse. She showed Richard her bruised arms and laughed at his disgusted reaction. The young man did not understand how someone could abuse themselves like this.

He, too, was an outsider. He, too, refused to grow up. But there was nothing in the world that could bring him down so low. It was very important for him to be healthy, so he exercised regularly and figured on keeping his body in good shape.

Susan had remarked that he seemed happy enough with her body when they made love. Richard just nodded. He could find nothing to say to this. Surely just a matter of his sex drive. Susan’s hearty laugh filled the room. They were not about to fight over something so trifling. In fact, they never fought.

And although Richard was not always happy to see her just drop by whenever, things always managed to work themselves out because both of them liked to be around each other.

Susan never went anywhere without her cat, a tiny cat called Iggy, who seemed to never get any bigger. The poor thing was pitched left and right at Susan’s whim, so it looked glad to find some peace and quiet at Richard’s. The cat would squeeze between two piles of records and stay there for hours until Susan decided to leave. Richard had noticed that the little cat was perfectly housebroken. Iggy never wet his room or had any kind of accident. It was not a very annoying animal at all.

“No music!” Richard told the girl who was already putting a 45 on the turntable. “It’s too early in the morning. Let me wake up a little more.”

“Did you party last night?” she looked surprised.

“No. I just had some nightmares. Which is why I didn’t go to work.”

Susan was scrutinizing the record covers one by one. “You didn’t go to work... and what were these nightmares about?”

Richard was not expecting her to be so intrusive. He thought the question was blunt and inappropriate. He answered in a monotone.

“I dreamt that I threw you out a window, you and your cat, and I watched you slam like shit into the pavement five stories down.”

“That’s not a nightmare, honey. That’s what you want to do in reality.”

Still smiling the girl got up and planted a shy little kiss on his mouth. What was really nice with Susan was that he could say whatever he wanted and she never got upset, she always stayed in a good mood.

“Go take your shower,” she said. “In the meantime I’ll fix you something for breakfast.”

Richard said “No thanks” as he headed to the bathroom. He knew Susan too well to know what breakfast meant. While he showered she must have rolled a joint because when he came out 15 minutes later the smell of weed filled his nostrils and made him nauseous.

“Damn! Go and smoke by the window. Your shit makes me want to puke.”

“Pete gave it to me,” she explained, pretending not to hear him. “He grows it himself. The jerk even made special greenhouses for his plants and he...”

She started laughing and her laugh turned into a cough that sounded like it would never end.

Leaning against the window Richard looked at her. He liked her but they could all go to hell with their weed and all their crap. When Susan was ready to talk again she had forgotten what she wanted to say and silence set in... followed by another coughing fit.

“Okay, you didn’t come to see me just to spit out the last of your lungs in my apartment,” Richard said. “You got any idea what you want to do today?”

“I could stay here and listen to your records. We could screw a little and if you’re nice I could even go out on the landing to smoke.”

“I don’t hear anything that turns me on. But you and your cat don’t bother me at all. We can spend the day together if you’ve got nothing else to do.”

“If only you had a TV. We could turn on channel 5...”

Richard wanted to sound open-minded but he was in a bad mood. The cat was still curled up between the bookshelf and a pile of 45s. At least it was not racking its brain. Richard did not especially like animals. He did not hate them either. He wondered, however, what would happen if he wrapped his hands around Iggy’s skinny neck and squeezed with all his might. He had never in his life killed cats. Or it had been a very long time. Anyway, he did not remember. That kind of thing was like a bad dream: he had the ability to forget it after a short time.