

Salma Khoury's Immaculate Seduction
by Ed Miracle

When Salma Khoury first opened her bookstore, she yearned to call it Literary Seduction. That's what readers want, she said, even here in Colorado. They want to be seduced. But if the name doesn't say *book*, her husband argued, the search engines, the GPS pixies, and the mobile apps might not direct anyone to our door. So they exiled Literary Seduction to a second line beneath the name, Sal's Books. Later, when financial necessity elbowed her precious books to the rear of the store, and brought coffee, tea and scones to the front, Sal's Books and Coffee knocked Seduction clear off the letterhead, off every official document. Still, Salma sneaked it back, before Chuck could object, as a flourish on their new marquee. Without seduction, she said, we're just a couple of caffeine pushers nursing a cellulose habit.

She didn't expect her sentiment to take on a life of its own.

Wednesday, October 23rd, was Author Night at Sal's Books and Coffee, and this one was busier than usual. Call it slammed. For tonight's mid-list scribbler, a novelist she had booked to fill a late cancellation, Salma placed ten chairs. But seventeen women and three men showed up to hear the guy read. Twenty people. For science fiction. Salma stuffed more chairs into the narrow room, ordered a second gallon of decaf from her barrista, and fretted that she had stocked only ten copies of his book. Until last week she'd never heard of Garrett Chastain.

When she picked him up from his hotel earlier this evening, he presented himself as trim and hale, clean and white, wearing jeans and a straw-colored corduroy jacket. Also a black flat cap that never left his head. He seemed polite and grateful, and did not smell, but Garrett Chastain had at least sixty years on his clock.

Now in her store, he read from the imaginary future he had written, while Salma watched. He engaged his audience as if they were conspiring together, to save the world through a clever subterfuge involving matter and energy. They smirked and fidgeted, and leaned close for the conclusion, which

had to do with the evolution of moral sensibilities, not death-rays or dystopias.

The male contingent—two computer types and a twitchy teenager—seemed to grok his message. But the women were interested in Chastain, not his book. Except for two high-school dollies in the last row, the ladies had dressed uncommonly well tonight, including tidy hair and actual makeup. Not very Colorado-ish. Most were in their forties or fifties, Salma's generation.

Chastain closed his talk by thanking Salma, then his audience, and he stood for their applause. He acknowledged them with a nod and a smile, then decamped to a tiny desk Salma provided. Nobody ducked out with free coffee or cookies under their jackets. They all lined up to meet the author.

Chastain greeted each admirer by taking their hands. The men got handshakes and signatures, either in his new novel or an old anthology they had brought along. He engaged each woman with a little bow, closing his hands gently around hers. Loose fingers then traced a promiscuous path down her forearm to arrive at the wrist, whereupon he smiled.

The first woman nearly swooned. Salma feared she might collapse, but the faker was just pretending. The others acted much the same, though with less drama, when their turns came. Chastain charmed them with deft words, petite touches and unwavering attention. Once he took a woman's hand, she became the only one in the room, the only woman alive.

“Thank you, Sal,” said one of them, in throes of delight. “This was your best Author Night ever.”

Salma blinked, said you're welcome, and returned to business. When she looked again, the high-school girls, last in line, had reached him. There were no copies left of his novel, and the girls hadn't brought his other book, yet the blonde—on some sort of mission—was towing her friend to the desk.

“Hi,” she said, and she grabbed Chastain's hand. “I'm Dawn Peller. This is Marsha.”

Chastain ignored her fervid grip. “Hello, Dawn. Hello, Marsha.”

“We read your short story,” Dawn said. “And we lovvvved it.” She dipped and giggled. Her

friend giggled, too, but backed from the desk. “We just had to meet you in person,” Dawn said.

She rounded the desk still holding his hand, and lifted it for her friend to see. When she drew it toward his shoulder, Marsha laughed and retreated further.

“I’m going now,” Marsha said. “Are you coming?”

“What do you do after you read, Mr. Chastain?” Dawn fluttered her lashes like a silent screen diva.

“Usually, I’m hungry,” he said, and he pretended to chew her knuckles.

“Yikes.” Dawn jerked free. Marsha laughed and bumped into a chair.

“Does your mother know you’re here?” Chastain said.

“I’m eighteen,” Dawn said, “and Momma didn’t read it.”

“We wouldn’t let her,” Marsha called.

“Will you stop?” Dawn said. “You’re making a fool.”

Marsha bolted for the coffee shop, headed for the door. “You’re on your own, Dawn girl. I’m outta here.”

Chastain draped an arm around Dawn’s white-sweatered shoulders. “Let’s find some hash browns,” he said. “Do you have a car?”

“Of course.” She produced a tiny, heart-shaped purse, very retro, which jingled when she shook it.

Salma doubted Dawn Peller was fully eighteen, or that she fancied fried potatoes. She imagined the two of them back at his hotel, doing things. She rushed to intervene.

“Ms. Khoury, would you care to join us?”

His invitation threw her, so she steered into it. “Why don’t I drive?” she said.

Which is how the three of them wound up at Conway’s Diner, drinking scorched coffee in a red vinyl booth, while Chastain devoured hash-browns dipped in ketchup and Tabasco.

Dawn cuddled beside him, opposite Salma, not eating. Beneath the table she seemed to take his hand. When Chastain laid down his fork to rub his shoulder, Dawn snuggled into him like a puppy.

“How old are you?” Salma demanded.

Dawn stroked a length of Chastain's corduroy sleeve before laying her head on it. She looked Salma in the eye and said, “You didn't read it, did you.”

Chastain cleared his throat. “We owe Salma a debt of gratitude.”

“For bringing us together,” Dawn chirped.

“For inviting us,” he said. “For the coffee and cookies. For giving us a ride. And for the books. If Salma didn't sell books, there wouldn't be as many of mine around here. We owe her a lot.” He rubbed his shoulder. “Don't you think so, sweetie?”

Dawn gasped, laid her free hand on the table and pushed against him from shoulder to thigh. He set his feet and pushed back, as if shoving contests came with the food. After a moment Dawn settled and Chastain tipped his ear to the crown of her head.

“Hold hands,” he said. Beneath the table his arm spanned Dawn's lap, probably achieving a nice, tender thigh.

Salma twitched as Dawn's fingers found hers on the table. Between them passed a tiny current, and Dawn tightened her grip. “Stage three,” Dawn whispered.

“Thank you, Salma.” Chastain put down his fork and pushed his plate. He wiped his mouth, sipped some coffee, and focused on her. “You are a lovely, gracious woman, Salma Khoury. The world owes you.”

Salma inhaled five thoughts, exhaled four. She glanced to the window, where her reflection returned a cold-coffee stare from a late October face. Chastain was changing the subject again, away from his minx, while Salma's toes and fingers warmed. The warmth spread along her arms, flowed up her legs, then plunged to her core.

“Oh.”

She hadn't meant to speak, but her pulse had suddenly boomed, forcing her to inhale. Night air charged heedless into her lungs, where some of it stayed and some departed, but the infusion pressurized her, made her breathing audible. Her nether parts were stirring, too, almost as if

Chastain excused himself to the men's room. Dawn released Salma's fingers and hunched in a corner to watch her. “Stage three is when you tingle,” she said. Salma blinked incomprehension, so Dawn continued. “His wife left him, you know, because of that short story. 'The Immaculate Encounter'.”

Salma *had* read a story by that name, in a collection of erotica, but the author was a woman, wasn't she? Now, the silliness at the book store made sense. The women had read his old story, published under a pseudonym, not his new novel. Salma checked the nearby customers and hoped they could not hear her brain go clunk.

“Is that what you two were doing?” she said. The gizmo in his story worked by stages.

“Did you feel it?” Dawn's laugh tinkled with conspiracy. She was up again, elbows on the table, ready to play.

You little vixen. You were feeding me a signal? All Salma could say was, “You have warm hands.”

“I bet.” Dawn's smirk wasn't buying the evasion. “When he returns, do you want to keep going?”

Salma almost asked if the story was true, but it couldn't be. It was science-fiction.

“When he returns,” she said, “we are leaving.” Whatever Miss Giggle-Wiggles had in mind, it was time to call it a night.

“That figures,” Dawn said, and she drew closer. “What are you afraid of?”

Salma gripped the table so hard her cuticles blanched. If you were my daughter, I'd slap you.

Chastain swung into the booth just in time to save Dawn Peller, though he couldn't know that. He peeled a twenty from his wallet and laid it beside his plate.

“Shall we?” he said. He adjusted his cap and plonked a foot in the aisle.

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Salma's Books and Coffee was dark and closed by the time they returned. Literary seduction would have to continue tomorrow. They parked in the shadows next to Dawn's Mini-Cooper, and got out. Dawn threw her arms around Chastian, but received no response. She seemed to accept the inevitable and kissed him on the cheek. He hugged her then, as an uncle would, said thank you and good night, told her she was clever and wonderful. It would have been sweet if Salma hadn't endured their prior mischief.

“Well, I'm glad that's over,” Chastain said, as Dawn drove away. Before Salma could agree, he raised his left hand, invited her with his right. “Would you care to dance?”

She laughed but took the hand, to celebrate and to call his bluff. “There's no music,” she said.

“In that case, we make our own.” He began softly, his melody dry and moody. “The deep mud of El Cap . . . flows in the spring.”

“What?”

“It's a school.” He rose on his toes, found her waist and drew her leftward. “The deep mud of El Cap . . . where seniors never sing.” He swept her into a waltz.

Salma giggled and followed, clinging for balance in the dark.

“Gone are the days of the Black and the Blue.” He swirled toward her car. “Gone are the days, . . . but still remains the goo.”

“What are you singing?!”

He stopped. “Oh, those were the weekdays that we”—his voice descended—“used to know.”

He waltzed her one final turn, bumped backwards into the car, and toppled her onto him.

Flailing, she encountered arms and hands that guided her back to equipoise. He stood her upright and beheld her. With appreciation.

Oh. Had Chuck ever done that, back in the day? Before he started calling himself Old Reliable, after their nickname for his favorite appendage?

“Thank you,” Chastain said, “for dancing with me.” He seemed to be saying, thank you from an old man in a parking lot, eight-hundred miles from home. He straightened from the car to hug her shoulders. Not an uncle-hug or a sudden farewell, but the much lighter touch of an ageless male, saying hello.

Salma cleared her throat, shooed a wild hot blush from her throat and nearly said, You're welcome; almost said, Thank you, too. If Chuck was Old Reliable, she must be Extra Ordinary Sal, not some special one. Her tongue jammed against more runaways, and she reached for the car.

Chastain stepped aside, watched her open it. As she slipped behind the wheel, he circled the Jetta, opened the opposite side and glanced to the sky. “What a beautiful night,” he said.

She found her key and clicked her seat belt.

“Could we talk, Salma? For a few minutes?” He got in and shut the door, warm and close beside her. The butterfly that flitted across her hand was not a butterfly. Because it took her breath to Utah.

She turned the key. The dashboard winked to life; a fan exhaled onto her ankles. Yet she didn't start the engine. Half-way was no way, of course, and she didn't want to be rude, so she turned the whole thing off again, wondering if this was wise.

He pressed his left shoulder, just below the clavicle, where the gentleman in his story had hidden his clicker.

“I'm married,” she said, recalling the scene.

Stage one brought feelings of warmth and sanctuary, a bracing sensitivity. The cares of the day

would clarify, soften, then fade, through the science of trans-dermal sub-cortical stimulation. But stage two had already commenced, hadn't it? A fullness in the chest, a swelling betwixt the thighs, and a quickening of the nipples. One deep breath could nudge an entire ship out to sea.

“You are safe with me, Salma. So is your marriage. I will not dishonor you.”

“Then what are we doing?” She reached for the key.

“Listening to the dark,” he said. “Finding things to say. May we do that?”

“Don't touch me.”

The gizmo sent pulses through the skin; there had to be contact. Was it stimulating him, too? The story hadn't said, or else she couldn't remember.

“It's about you, Salma, not me. I want to share these few moments, before they are gone, and I want them to be lovely.”

She started the engine, turned up the heater and put the car in gear, simple routines that should not induce tantric agitations into the skin and the follicles. *Ohmigod.*

“My buckle stays buckled,” he said. “My zipper stays zipped.” It was the man's promise, from the story. After which the woman soared into rhythms of pleasure, higher and higher, but to what effect? Salma had stopped reading at that point. She had no idea how their tryst ended.

In her store tonight, those women were so keen for him, so charmed and unafraid. Not repulsed. It wasn't because of his looks, that's for sure. What had he given them that was so dear, so special they would make fools of themselves?

“How does it end,” she said, “your Immaculate Encounter?”

“Oh, *that.*” His chuckle stretched for some advantage, but she could drive them into the river, if she had to, straight through that rotted fence at the edge of the lot. That would stop him.

“How do you want it to end?” He laid his arm between them, inclined his head and whispered, “Take my hand.”

She shifted the car into Park but left the motor running. “Just tell me.”

His stillness matched the passing silence. Only the motor's purr intruded.

She dipped her fingers to his palm and jerked them away, as if a trap could be tested without consequence. She checked his face and found him staring into the darkness beyond his knees. His chest rose and fell, but his attention had gone elsewhere. Without permission, her hand descended. She watched it settle and then curl in his palm, beneath a coverlet of smooth fingers.

Oh. She had to stop saying that, but every prior feeling rushed through her again: the warmth, the pulse, the breathless anticipation. An electric glissando rocketed down her spine and burst into tingles so bright they must be visible. She forced herself to look.

And shut her eyes instantly, against October's dark chill. She wanted . . . she wanted this divine expansion. She dared not move for fear of relieving its pressure. Which seeped from her lungs into her breasts, then flowed inexorable, indomitable, toward her secret folds. *Stage three is when you tingle* did not begin to describe it.

The pressure found its mark and a wave of pleasure surged through her. She floated free from her seat in the car, free from her place in the world, absorbed by a weightless train of luminous moments, coupled together by exquisite, rolling surges. Each interval built and built, trembled at an impossible pinnacle, then crashed with a whoop into the next moment. She strained, she arced, she called out, *Oh!* Over and over, until the great, rumbling train of moments plunged together in a single screeching heap. And a woman moaned.

Salma threw open her eyes. *Ohmigod.* Her left fist was strangling a door handle; the right was crushing someone's fingers; and her Jetta roared like a ballistic missile. She was standing on the brake and the throttle, together, mashing them to the floor.

Garret Chastain switched off the ignition. “Thank you, Salma. Thank you so much.”

His intrusion reeled her back to Colorado, down to her darkened car, and back to him. She

heaved four great breaths before discovering she was still in her seat. What had he done to her?

She turned, primed with accusations, but found tears moistening his cheeks. He kissed the hand that gripped his fingers.

“Thank you for believing me,” he said.

Salma grabbed his lapel, peeled the jacket from his shoulder and found only a shirt, flat and pale, unruffled.

“Where is it?”

He rubbed the shoulder now exposed. “Pressing here reduces the pain,” he said. “of bone impingement. There is no such thing as a trans-dermal sub-cortical stimulator.”

“But I felt it. Dawn felt it.”

He shook his head in delicate, twisting denial. “She was playing with you, Salma. Teasing a tiger, being a brat.”

Salma strained against the lap belt to launch her indictment. “Then what the hell just happened? I was . . . You must have done something, because I never felt like that before. Not like that. Ever.”

He nodded, apprehension welling in his eyes. “I believe you,” he said.

“Then what did you do to me, damnit!”

“I held your hand.”

“You tricked me!” She screamed at his face, pounded his chest. “You raped me!”

His response, when it came, trembled with fury wrapped in discipline. “I kept . . . my word. You were not raped, Salma Khoury. You were . . . worshiped.”

She recoiled. Her elbow mashed the stupid horn, which honked stupidly.

“I can't give you the love you deserve,” he cried, “because that is forbidden. By law, by custom, by your own request, which I honor. Moments are all I have to give, Salma: a little song, a little dance, a brief seduction. Yes, I seduced you. Because it is my pleasure, my immaculate reward, to reveal the

engines of passion that reside within you.” He poked her shoulder. “Within you, Salma, not in some drug or magic gizmo. Not even in a lover. It's you, Salma.

“If you don't care for this—or me—I accept your rejection. But don't call me dirty for wanting you. It was just a slice of the evening, doomed to die at sunrise, but during our time together I wanted you as much as any man has wanted any woman. I gave you adoration, unconditional. You took it. You made it yours. I doubt you will forget it. Yet I am the monster.”

He growled his way out of her car and slammed the door.

Salma drove home without noticing she'd done it, through blank intersections and empty streets, dizzy-drunk on sheer amazement. She parked and went in, undressed and crawled into bed, struggled to extract a coherent thought from the mush in her head or the ache in her heart. Beneath the covers she found Old Reliable and hugged him fiercely, for fear he would never love her again.

“I love you,” she whispered. “I love you so much.”