

Salma Khoury's Immaculate Seduction

by Ed Miracle

When Salma Khoury first opened her bookstore, she yearned to call it Literary Seduction. Readers want to be seduced, she said, even here in Colorado. But if our name doesn't say *book*, her husband argued, the search engines might not direct anyone to our doors. 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 marquee.

Wednesday, October 23rd was Author Night at Sal's Books and Coffee, and this one was slammed. For tonight's mid-list scribbler Salma had placed ten chairs. But seventeen women and three men showed up. Twenty people. For science fiction. Salma stuffed more chairs into the narrow room, ordered a second gallon of decaf from her barista, and fretted that she had stocked only ten copies of the author's 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 his tale of the future. He engaged the audience as if they were conspiring to save the world together, through a clever subterfuge involving matter and energy. They smirked and fidgeted, and leaned closer 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 thanked them and stood for their applause. With a nod and a smile, he 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 swooned into her cardigan. Salma feared she might collapse, but the faker was just pretending. The others behaved much the same when their turns came. Chastain charmed them with deft words, petite touches, unwavering attention. Once he took a woman's hand, she became the only woman in the room, the only one alive.

“Thank you, Sal,” said one enthusiast. “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 blond—on some sort of mission—towed 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. “Hi, Dawn. Hello, Marsha.”

“We read your short story,” Dawn said. “And we loved it.” She dipped and giggled. Her friend giggled, too, but backed away.

“We just had to meet you in person,” Dawn said. She rounded the desk and lifted his hand for her friend to see. When she angled it toward his shoulder, Marsha laughed and retreated further.

“I’m going,” 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 pretended to chew her knuckles.

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

“Does your mother know you’re here?”

“I’m eighteen,” Dawn replied, “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 to the coffee counter, 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,” he said, “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 catsup and Tabasco.

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

“How old are you?” Salma demanded.

Dawn stroked Chastain's corduroy sleeve before laying her head on it. She looked Salma in the eye. “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 the ride and the books. If Salma didn't sell books, there wouldn't be as many of mine around. 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 while, Dawn settled, and Chastain tipped his ear to the crown of her head.

“Take her hand,” he said. Beneath the table his arm spanned Dawn's lap, achieving a nice, tender thigh.

Salma twitched as Dawn's fingers found hers on the table. Between them passed a tiny current as 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 at the window, which returned a cold-coffee reflection from a late October face. Chastain was changing the subject again, away from his minx, while Salma's toes and fingers warmed. The blush spread into her arms, flowed up her legs, then plunged to her core.

“Oh.”

She hadn't meant to speak, but her pulse had bloomed, forcing a gasp. Night air charged heedlessly into her lungs, where some stayed, and some departed, but the infusion pressurized her, made her breathing audible. Her nether parts began 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 story. ‘The Immaculate Encounter.’”

Salma *had* read a story by that name, in a collection of female erotica, but the author was a woman, wasn't she? Now, the silliness at the bookstore made sense. The ladies had read his old story, published under a pseudonym, not his new novel. Salma checked the customers nearby and hoped they wouldn't 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 fed me a signal? But 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 her if the story was true, but it couldn't be. It was science-fiction. Whatever Miss Giggle-Wiggles had in mind, it was time to call it a night. “When he returns,” she said, “we are leaving.”

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

Salma gripped the table hard enough to blanch her cuticles. *If you were my daughter, I'd slap you.*

Chastain swung into the booth just in time, though he couldn't know it. 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 resume tomorrow. They parked in the shadows near 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 and invited her with his right. “Would you care to dance?”

She laughed but took the hand, mostly to call his bluff. “There's no music.”

“In that case, we make our own.” He sang 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.

She giggled and followed him, 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 backward into the car, and toppled her onto him. She flailed until he guided her upright and beheld her. With appreciation.

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

“Thank you,” Chastain said, “for dancing with me.” He seemed to be thanking her as 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 man, saying hello.

Salma cleared her throat, shooed a wild hot rush 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 and slip behind the wheel. He circled the Jetta, opened the opposite door, and glanced at the sky.

“What a beautiful night,” he said.

She clicked her seat belt and found her key.

“Could we talk, Salma? For a while?” 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, and the dashboard winked to life. A fan exhaled over 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 fingered his shoulder, just at 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.”

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

“Listening to the dark,” he said. “Finding things to say.”

“Don't touch me.”

The gizmo sent pulses through the skin. There had to be contact. Was it stimulating him, too?

“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 her 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. She had no idea how the 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 advantage. But she could drive them into the river if she had to, straight through that rotted fence on 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 beyond his knees, into the

darkness. His chest rose and fell, but his attention had gone elsewhere. Without permission, her right hand descended. She watched it settle and curl in his palm, beneath a coverlet of smooth, white 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 the October chill. She wanted . . . She wanted this divine expansion. 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 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 wave. She strained, she arched, she called out, Oh! Over and over, until the great, rumbling train of moments plunged together in a heap. And a woman moaned.

Salma opened her eyes. *Ohmigod.* Her left fist was strangling the door handle; her right was crushing a man's fingers; and the 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 voice 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 gliding down his cheeks. He kissed the hand that gripped his fingers.

“Thank you for believing me.”

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

“Where is it?”

He rubbed the spot 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. Not ever.”

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

“Then what did you do to me, dammit!”

“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. No one raped anyone, Salma Khoury. You were . . . worshiped.”

She recoiled. Her elbow awakened 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, the sweet taste of a perfect evening, doomed to die at sunrise.

“If you don't care for this—or me—I accept your rejection. But don't call me dirty for wanting you as much as any man has wanted any woman. I gave you adoration, unconditional. You took it. You made it yours. You may soon 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. 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.”