

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 us. 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 teen—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, polite touches, unwavering attention. Once he took a woman's hand, she became the only one 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 just below his black plastic wristwatch. “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 laughed, too, but backed away.

“We just had to meet you in person,” Dawn said. She rounded the desk still holding his

hand for her friend to see. 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 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 past 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.

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 here," Dawn chirped.

"For inviting us," he said. "For the coffee and cookies. For the ride and the books. If Salma didn't sell them, 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 atop the table. Between them passed a tiny current. "Stage three," Dawn whispered.

"Thank you, Salma." Chastain put down his fork and pushed his plate. He wiped his mouth, sipped his 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 stare from a late October reflection. Chastain was changing the subject again, away from his minx, while Salma's toes and fingers warmed. The blush spread over her arms, flowed up her legs, then plunged to her core.

"Oh."

She hadn't meant to speak, but her pulse had bloomed, provoking a gasp. Night air charged heedlessly into her lungs, and the infusion pressurized her, rendered her next breath

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 because of that story, 'The Immaculate Encounter'."

Salma *had* read a similar story in a collection of female erotica, but its author was a woman, wasn't she? Now, the silliness at the bookstore made sense. The ladies had read his old romance, published under a pseudonym, not his new novel. Salma hoped Dawn couldn'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 Formica, ready to play.

You little vixen. You fed me a signal? But all Salma allowed herself to say was, "You have warm hands."

"I bet." Dawn smirked at her evasion. "When he returns, do you want to keep going?"

Salma almost asked if the story was true, but it was science-fiction. Whatever Miss Giggle-Pants had in mind, it was time to call it a night. "When he comes back," she said, "we are leaving."

"That figures." Dawn drew closer. "What are you afraid of?"

Salma gripped the table until her cuticles blanched. *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.

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 beside 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, and told her she was clever and wonderful. It would have been sweet if Salma hadn't endured their prior mischief.

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

She laughed and took his hand, mostly to call his bluff. "There's no music."

"So, we make our own." He sang softly, his voice 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, clinging for balance.

"Gone are the days of the Black and the Blue." He swirled her 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 swooped low—"used to know."

He waltzed her one final turn, bumped backward into her Jetta, and toppled her onto him. She flailed off-balance 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?

"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 and hugged her. Not an uncle-hug or a sudden farewell, but the much lighter touch of an ageless male enticing a maiden.

Salma cleared her throat, shooed a 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 groped for a door handle.

Chastain stepped aside, watched her slip behind the wheel. He circled the car, 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, sat 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, awakening the red-eyed dashboard, and a fan exhaled. 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 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 certain 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 here, Salma. So is your marriage.”

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

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

“Don't touch me.” The gizmo worked through the skin. There had to be contact.

“This is about you, Salma, not me. I want to share these moments before they fade, 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 their tryst ended.

In her bookstore tonight, those women were so keen for him, so charmed and unafraid. Not repulsed. It wasn't his looks, that's for sure. What did he give 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 tapered off. But she could drive them into the river if she had to, straight through that rotted fence. That would stop him.

“How do you want it to end?” He laid his arm between them, his black plastic watch-face daring her. “Take my hand,” he whispered.

She shifted 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 eyes and found them staring past his knees, into the darkness. His chest rose and fell, but his attention had gone elsewhere. Without permission, her hand descended. She watched it settle and curl in his palm, to be enveloped by coverlet of

smooth, white fingers.

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

And shut her eyes instantly, against October's misery. She wanted . . . she needed . . . to explore this divine expansion. Which seeped from her lungs into her throat, then flowed inexorable, indomitable, toward her secret folds. *Stage three is when you tingle* did not begin to describe it.

The expansion found its mark and triggered a wave of pleasure. She floated free from her place on the Earth, absorbed by a weightless train of luminous moments, coupled in exquisite, rolling surges. Each interval built and built, trembled to an impossible pinnacle, then crashed with a whoop into the next moment. She strained, she arched, she called out the name of her lover, Oh! Oh! Oh! Over and over, until the great, rumbling train plunged to a heap in her lap. And a woman moaned.

Salma opened her eyes. *Ohmigod.* Her left hand was strangling the door release, her right was crushing someone's fingers, and the Jetta roared like a ballistic missile. She was standing on the brake and the throttle, mashing them together.

Chastain switched off the ignition. "Thank you, Salma. Thank you so much."

His words reeled her back to Colorado, to her darkened car, and to him. She heaved four great breaths before noticing she had remained seated. What had he done to her? She turned, primed with accusations, but found streaks of tears. His lips kissed her hand.

"Thank you for a lovely evening," he said.

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

"Where is it?"

He rubbed the spot. "Pressing here reduces the pain," he said. "of bone impingement. The clicker, if that's what you want, is in my watch."

Salma strained against the lap belt to launch her indictment. "What did you do to me, dammit!"

"I held your hand."

"You tricked me!" She screamed at him. "You raped me!"

"Omigod," he said. "I thought you knew." He held the watch up to her eyes. "I kept my word, Salma. No one raped you."

As she recoiled, her elbow struck the horn, which honked stupidly.

"Didn't you see us at the restaurant?" he said. "Didn't Dawn tell you?"

Salma clenched and stared an angry hole in the dashboard.

"It's not the clicker from my story," he said. "This one's real, and it doesn't click. A Pleasure Bomb, they call it. Fifty bucks from Amazon. Black is for women, chrome for men. I thought you knew." He rubbed his face.

"I can't give what I want to give you," he pleaded, "because that's forbidden. By law, by custom, by your own request, which I honor. These few moments are all I have for you, Salma. A little song, a little dance, before we say goodbye."

She waited, head bowed, not looking. Gradually, he stepped out and closed the door. A muffled *I'm sorry* deleted him from her life.

She drove home without noticing the empty streets, the naked intersections. She parked and went in, undressed and crawled into bed. Beneath their California duvet she found Old Reliable, and hugged him fiercely, still trying to extract a coherent thought from her head.

"I love you," she whispered. "I love you so much."