Taming the Beast

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Please note that this extract contains scenes of an adult nature

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Part One

1

Sarah Clark felt like a freak for two and a half years. It started when she received a leather-bound copy of *Othello* for her twelfth birthday and ended when her English teacher showed her exactly what was meant by *the beast with two backs*.

In between, she read every one of Shakespeare's plays and then moved on to his sonnets, before discovering Marlowe, Donne, Pope and Marvell. With peers who read nothing but *TV Week* and parents who were inclined towards the *Financial Review*, Sarah was forced to conceal her literary leanings. She hid poetry anthologies under her bed and read *Emma* by torchlight, the way boys her age read *Playboy*. For the first two years of high school, she came top of her English class without opening a single school book. It wasn't necessary since the curriculum consisted of a few familiar texts, plus comic strips and newspaper clippings.

Then on the first day of the third year of high school, Sarah met Mr Carr. He was unlike any teacher she had ever encountered. For the entire forty minutes of his first class he spoke about why Yeats was relevant to Australian teenagers in the year 1995. In the second class, Sarah put up her hand to make a comment on something he had said about *Hamlet*. When he called on her to speak, she started and could not stop. She stayed in his classroom all through lunch, and when she re-emerged into the sunlight and the condescending stares of the schoolyard cliques, she was utterly changed.

Mr Carr began an active campaign to keep Sarah's love of learning alive. To prevent boredom, he brought her books of his own from home and gave her a note that allowed her to access the senior section of the library. Every novel and play and poem was discussed

in depth. She had never received a better compliment than when he told her that he knew she would love a particular piece because it was his favourite too.

While Mr Carr was shaping Sarah's mind, her body was changing of its own accord. Small, painful breasts appeared overnight, as did ridiculously placed hair. She kept waking up in the middle of the night to find her blankets tossed to the floor and her hands tangled up in her pyjamas. Whenever the School Captain, a lanky blond boy named Alex, walked past, Sarah had an inexplicable urge to press her thighs together. She started to daydream about how to become more beautiful.

One day in June, Mr Carr asked Sarah's advice on how to make Shakespeare more exciting for the class. The sonnets studied so far had failed to ignite a spark of enthusiasm in anyone except Sarah, and he thought she could help identify where he was going wrong. The problem, as Mr Carr saw it, was that many of the sonnets dealt with themes that couldn't be understood by your average fourteen year old kid. Sarah told him that the average fourteen year old understood plenty about love and lust and longing; it was the language that put them off. After all, she said, every second song on the radio dealt with the same themes as old William, albeit with more grunting and less wit.

He laughed a throaty laugh and reached across the space that separated them. His hot, damp hand settled on her bare knee. Sarah noticed, all at once, that his forehead was shiny and the blinds were lowered and the door was closed and her heart was racing. She didn't move or speak. Breathing was all she could manage.

Mr Carr leant forward in his chair and moved his hand to Sarah's shoulder, then let it slide until it rested on one of her never before touched, brand new breasts. She felt like she might cry, but

she also felt a sick kind of excitement. She sat very still with her arms at her sides and watched as he stroked and kneaded her breasts through the cheap polyester. His gold wedding band caught the light, and she wanted to reach out and touch it, but didn't. He was saying her name over and over, so that it no longer sounded like her name at all, but like one those mantras that Buddhists used to go into a trance.

Sarahohsarahohsarahohsarhohsarah.

One of his hands slipped inside her shirt, under her bra, and she was shocked by the thrill she got when his fingers caught hold of her left nipple and squeezed. *Ohsarah*. He moved forward, right to the edge of the chair, his head lowered to her chest, his shins pressed hard against hers. She had to bite down on her lip to stop herself from laughing. How strange that a smart and accomplished man could be reduced to such an undignified state just by touching her breasts!

Mr Carr stopped chanting her name, and the room was silent except for his rasping breath and the rustle of her shirt as he unbuttoned it. Then Sarah felt his tongue sweep across her nipple; she let out a surprised gasp. This excited Mr Carr even more, and his head all but disappeared into her half open shirt as he fell to his knees in front of her. A giggle escaped her, which Mr Carr obviously interpreted as encouragement. *OhSarahohSarahohohohohsobeautifulSarahoh*.

He pushed her legs open and knelt between them, his head still buried in her chest but his hands pushing up her scratchy pleated skirt. Sarah tried to remember which underpants she had put on that morning. She hoped it was not the pair with little ducks. If Mr Carr saw little ducks on her underwear he would think she was a child, and then he would stop. But he couldn't see her underwear anyway, because his mouth was still latched onto her nipple as if he was a hungry baby and she was a mother with

heavy, milk filled breasts, instead of a girl with hardly enough to fill a training bra.

She liked the way it felt, the sucking. It was gentler and more rhythmic than she had expected. In the movies it all looked so frantic and out of control. Not that Sarah had anything to compare it to, but he seemed good at what he was doing: sucking her nipple and stroking her through her underwear in perfect time. Stroke and suck, stroke and suck.

The tempo changed when he plunged his hot, unexpected hand into her underpants. He seemed to be searching for something, his hands moving quickly, stroking and pressing one hidden spot after another and then moving on. Sarah thought she knew what he was trying to find and wondered why he was having so much trouble. She considered telling him that he had missed it, but found that she did not have any words to describe what it was he had passed over, or what it was that she expected him to do when he found it.

But then a flash of heat shot through her body, and she cried out in surprise as her hips bucked upwards. She felt the flash of heat again, followed by another and another as he continued pressing the secret spot, and she could not stop the noise that rose in her throat from escaping as she felt herself dissolving into his hand.

Mr Carr pulled away abruptly, gasping for air. *OhSarah wrong this is so wrong oh Sarah ohsarahsowrongohsarahoh*.

This was the best Sarah had ever felt. Ever. She wondered what to do to make him keep going. Then she realised her hands had been by her sides the whole time. She placed them on his stooped shoulders, holding him back, and he looked up, his face creased with need and guilt at that need. She slid from her chair, so she was on her knees in front of him, and slowly unzipped his trousers. She felt removed from herself, watching these stranger's hands reach in and take hold of this odd, hard, hot *thing*. It was as if all reason had

left her and the part of her that was just instinct and heat had taken over.

Mr Carr groaned and his chant became frenzied and fast, not even distinguishable as language anymore, just a low desperate growl. He pushed her hand away, and for a second she thought he was angry, but then he said *OhGodohGodohGod* and fell on her. The pain tore through her, and she had to shove her fist into her mouth to stop from crying out. Then the pain stopped, and she felt warm and calm. Mr Carr was looking into her eyes, grunting at her. She touched his face and hair; he grimaced and moved faster. Then with one last, louder grunt, he rolled off her, leaving a warm, sticky mess.

The entire incident had taken less than ten minutes. As she buttoned her shirt, she could hear kids yelling outside the window, the sound of a netball whistle, a car engine turning over. She took a tissue from the box on his desk and wiped away the stuff trickling down her thighs. Mr Carr watched her while fat tears slid down his red cheeks. Sarah finished her clean up, and then she went to him and wiped his face.

'It's okay,' she told him. 'You don't have to feel bad.'

'I don't feel bad, Sarah. That's the tragedy.'

2

Because he was older and her teacher and married with children, Mr Carr could absolutely not allow a repeat of yesterday's incident. 'Oh,' said Sarah, who had thought the point of her staying back after school again was so that yesterday's incident could be repeated. The way he had kissed her as soon as the door was locked, the way he had run his fingers through her hair while he asked her how she was, the way he had begun to stroke her thigh as soon as they sat down, all seemed to confirm her initial assumption.

'I don't care about that stuff. I just feel happy being with you.'

'Oh, Sarah…' He squeezed her thigh. 'I wish being happy with each other was enough, but it isn't. I would lose my job, my kids. I could go to jail. The law doesn't care how happy we feel. You're fourteen years old, and according to the law you aren't capable of recognising what makes you happy.'

'Well, the law is wrong.' Sarah did what she had been thinking of doing ever since they sat down: she leant forward and kissed the crease between his eyebrows. 'It's insulting to assume I don't know what I want. You know for most of history girls my age were expected to be married and popping out babies. It's ridiculous to think that five hundred years ago I would be considered capable of raising a family, but now I'm not even allowed to decide if I like a guy or not.'

'It seems silly, I know.'

'It *is* silly. I wish I lived in the middle ages. I'd have my own damn village by now.'

Mr Carr laughed. 'Yes, and except for the leprosy and bad breath and illiteracy I'm sure you'd be very happy.'

Sarah felt herself growing hot. Hot because she was embarrassed by his laughing at her. Also, hot because of the way he was touching her thigh. His hand was as big as two of hers; it covered a lot of skin with every stroke. She kissed his wrinkle again, then his forehead, then his lips.

'Sarah…'

'So society doesn't approve. We won't tell them.'

'Sarah…'

'Yesterday was the best day of my whole life. I felt like Pip does after he first goes to Miss Havisham's house. Yesterday made great changes in me; it forged the first link in the chain which will bind me. I need to find out what my chain will be. Thorns or flowers. Iron or gold.'

Mr Carr withdrew his hand from her thighs and stood up. He went to the window and opened the blind. He looked out on the empty quadrangle, shaking his head. 'In sixteen years of teaching I have never come across a student even half as clever as you. And only rarely have I seen one as beautiful.' He snapped the blind shut and turned back to face her. 'No one can know.'

'I know. That's okay.'

'No one can even suspect.'

She couldn't stop smiling. She went to him and pressed her face to his chest. 'We'll be careful.' She ran her hands over his back, feeling how big he was, how solid. 'Careful and happy.'

He hugged her hard, as though he was afraid, as though he thought clinging to her would save him. She reached up and stroked his face. She kissed the curly blonde hair at the V of his shirt, and he moaned and said her name *ohSarah*.

'What do I call you?' She asked his collarbone. 'Can I call you Daniel?'

'No. You can't get in the habit. If you call me that in class…'

'Okay, that's okay.' She untucked his shirt and ran her hand across his belly. The skin there was so soft; if it wasn't for the coarse hair down the centre, it could have been the belly of a child. His skin was so soft it could almost have been her own.

Mr Carr and Sarah arranged to meet after school at the petrol station around the corner. From there he drove to Toongabbie Creek, keeping both hands on the wheel, both eyes on the road, talking about poetry in such a way that she wished they would never reach their destination. But then when the car was parked beside the creek, hidden from the road by paperbarks and scrub, Mr Carr did things to her that made words superfluous. Fucking was poetry unbound.

At sunset, he drove her home, stopping at the end of her street and warning her not to kiss him, just in case.

'I don't want to go,' Sarah said.

He patted her hand. 'It's after six. Your mother will be worried.'

Sarah snorted. Her mother, who spent seventy hours a week at the university and the rest of the time in her home office, would not notice if Sarah stayed out all night. Sarah's father worked even longer hours than his wife and barely knew he had a second daughter. Her sister, though, had no life and so noticed everything.

Sure enough, Kelly, who at seventeen was already middle-aged, pounced as soon as Sarah walked through the front door.

'I was studying,' Sarah said, because if there was one thing Kelly enjoyed more than nagging Sarah about her whereabouts, it was nagging Sarah about studying. But then Kelly wanted to know what she was studying and where she was doing it and with whom and why couldn't it be done in Sarah's room which their parents had equipped with a corner desk, a study lamp, an ergonomic chair, a computer and well-stocked bookshelves?

'Mind your own beeswax,' Sarah said, pushing past her sister.

'You know you're not allowed to have a boyfriend.'

'So?'

Kelly rolled her eyes. 'So, if you're meeting a boy after school and Mum finds out–'

'How would Mum find out unless someone tells her?'

'So there is something to tell?'

'Like I'd tell you.'

Kelly looked hurt. 'I'd tell you.'

'Like you'd have anything to tell.'

'You're such a bitch.'

'Takes one to know one,' Sarah said, and went to her room to think about Mr Carr until dinner time.

Sarah and Kelly were not allowed to have boyfriends because it would interfere with their academic development. When they started university they would be allowed to date, but nothing serious, nothing too time consuming. Women could not afford to be distracted by romance until they had established themselves in their careers. This did not bother Kelly, who was going to be a lawyer in a few years, and marry another lawyer when she was thirty and give birth to two future lawyers when she was thirty-two and thirty-five. She would not put herself in a position which could lead anyone to accuse her of depending on a man. Like their mother, Kelly would marry based on compatibility of life goals, which all intelligent people understood was the only way to ensure a marriage lasted beyond the honeymoon.

Sarah did not see what any of this had to do with her. She was fourteen years old with clear skin and shiny brown hair down to the middle of her back. She had read more books than anyone she had ever met, could speak French fluently and Japanese haltingly.

She had had sexual intercourse three times, had experienced orgasm twice, and was so in love and loved that her head swam whenever she tried to think about anything else. That was okay; she didn't need to think about anything else anyway. Average thoughts were for average people. Which she was not. Which she would never be.