

## TO WRITE A ROMANCE

Sarah Domet

*Visualize your hero. Think about real men you know or have seen whose characteristics you can blend to model him.*

The hero is strong. Muscles bulge from him like tumors, in shapes you would think impossible—bananas, rope, guitars. His hair is wavy; his name is Sandy. You'd think that'd be the name of someone girlish—but such is not the case with this Sandy, not the case with our hero. In fact, his breath smells like testosterone. Testosterone smells like a mix of musk and seaweed and sweat so sweet you could put it in your tea.

Sandy is my boyfriend. No, no, my lover, or soon to be. He lives on a distant shore—Chicago. Near Lake Michigan. He sees me in a bar, drinking a martini, dirty. Or rather, a museum. It is a museum, and I am pondering a Pollock piece.

“Looks like puke,” he says, only funny. He is standing behind me, talking to my shoulder. “Actually, they say it has no beginning and no ending,” he adds.

His voice feels like a hundred pin pricks in my back. His voice is acupuncture. I tilt my head to the side in a way that says, I'm thinking, and I am thinking—just not about Pollock or his painting. I'm thinking about the voice and the pinpricks. Then I think about a documentary I saw in which Pollock left his wife and took a lover. I hate the word lover, sounds so canned. Carl left me for his lover.

“I love her,” he said. And I knew he did.

“I'm sorry,” he said. And I believed he was.

“I find the aesthetical qualities of vomit simply fascinating,” I say, but do not turn around. It's a dumb thing to say, and I'm afraid the voice has moved on to another painting, another woman. But then I hear a creak on the wood floor. I feel his breath on my ear; my ear has a fever.

“Quite fascinating,” he says. His voice sounds like a rolling

bowling ball, deep, an almost-growl. I turn around. Strike.

He looks like someone who should be in a gladiator costume. Someone get this man a sword, I think. Someone get this man a chain suit or a helmet—one with the thin nose guard that extends from the forehead. Get him sandals with straps that criss-cross around his bulky calves—I presume they're bulky. He is wearing pants, but I imagine them bulky. Are bulky calves a good thing?

Carl, my husband, is sinewy and tall. He looks like someone who would wear a lab coat. And he does; he is a scientist. But Carl left me for someone else, my Lamaze instructor. Carl left me for this someone-else-Lamaze-instructor five months after the baby was born. Carl took the baby with him, and I image he and Ms. Lamaze and the baby sitting around a table, all breathing in and out in syncopated beats, communicating through short and long breaths, their words the sound of empty air.

But this story isn't about that, not about Carl. I mentioned him only to say that, by comparison, the hero is much better looking.

"I'm Sandy," the hero says, and the room suddenly feels quiet—so quiet it seems that if I swallow, the sound might reverberate off the walls, tilting the framed art at thirty degree angles. With one of his hands, he shakes mine; his other hand cups my elbow, gently, as though it were a breast.

"Hi, Sandy," I manage to say, the words wrapping themselves around my tongue like a snake. I avoid looking directly in his eyes, or at his hands lingering on my elbow, my hands. Instead, I stare at his mouth, his lips, his slight hint of a mole below his right eye, which I have the sudden and uncontrollable urge to touch. And I touch it, lightly at first, with my thumb. The moment isn't as weird as one might expect it to be. It feels natural, actually, like dabbing a blob of mustard from the corner of someone's mouth or picking a strand of hair off someone's sweater. It feels necessary, a courtesy. A necessary courtesy.

"I've just moved here from Montreal," Sandy says. Canadian. Perfect. Already I'm in love.

*Imagine yourself the heroine. You can make yourself anyone you want to be, anyone at all.*

I am the heroine of the story—the hero’s heroine, Sandy’s heroine. I’ve always wanted to be a heroine, but just because you want something doesn’t mean you can have it. I want a winning lottery ticket, for instance. I want a summer home in Belize. I want perky breasts that don’t sag from the weight of dried milk. I want all of these things, but I have none. Desire is not synonymous with reality. Not at all.

As I see it, I have two lives—the pre-heroine and the post. Pre-heroine I was reserved, conservative, predictable but not boring; I cooked a lot. I packed my lunch every day, usually a salad, sometimes a sandwich—sometimes a small salad and half sandwich. I wore my seatbelt always, even when parked. I never ran yellow lights. I went to bed by 10:30. I was a wife; I was a mother. I was a good wife—I know this.

I suppose I still am a wife and a mother; I’ll take it on a technicality. The divorce won’t be finalized for at least another month, and I haven’t seen the baby since Carl left holding her like a dish towel over his shoulder. I’ve thought about it, but I still haven’t seen her. Not yet.

Since then, though, I’m spontaneous and fun and adventurous. I wear colors that would never match—purples and oranges. I visited the beach for the first time. I smoked my first cigarette. And I have night caps. I always wanted to be the type of person who had a night cap. And voila, now I am. Now there is Sandy. And I couldn’t be happier. Really.

Looking back, how could I have wanted Carl? Clearly we were wrong for each other. I never did like the fact that he always read during breakfast—anything he could get his hands on: the newspaper, books, magazines, cereal boxes, egg cartons. And I didn’t like the slight curve of his spine, as though his back bent from the weight of holding up his head, which was large. Carl was tall; sometimes too tall. Sometimes when Carl was standing beside me, looking down at me, I felt so very far away. “Hello,

I'm down here!" I'd want to scream, my voice echoing through the distance, and his head was floating somewhere in the sky near treetops and clouds—higher still, stuck in that invisible ozone.

But I don't wish to talk about Carl. Carl is associated with the old me. I want to think about the new me, the heroine. The heroine is much more interesting.

The new me looks fairly similar to the old me. I'm more or less evidence of the law of averages. My hair is medium brown, a medium length. I'm a medium height and a medium build. Medium all around in the looks department. But Carl once thought I was beautiful. And maybe he still does.

"Your eyes are the color of the ocean," Sandy tells me as he is still holding my elbow. We are walking through the corridors of the museum. I am aroused. I've never used that word aloud—aroused. I've never used a lot of words. Carl and I weren't like that. I'll have to adopt a new vocabulary for Sandy.

"I'm aroused," I say, just to be saying it. I feel like I'm not myself but another self who is also myself, but this one a stranger. The good thing about being with someone you don't know is that they don't know you either.

Sandy pins me up against the wall and presses his body against mine.

"Not here," I say and motion toward the American Gothic couple staring at us disapprovingly, pitchfork poised—two angry parents.

"I don't care who sees," Sandy says in one long huff of breath. The room is empty except for one catatonic security guard, an old man slumped on a stool in the corner, his chin to his chest in an artful slumber.

"But I hardly know you," I say. And I don't know why I'm hesitant. Carl doesn't want me; Sandy does. I'm a woman with needs, a heroine in search of a hero, a ying looking for some yang.

"I'm Sandy." And when he leans in to kiss me, I think about many things: the warmth of his lips, the way his tongue lifts mine

as though helping it out of my mouth. I think about kisses in general, so odd the way humankind is attracted to tongues and spit and orifices. I think about how much softer skin is on the inside of the mouth. I think of Carl, not in a vindictive way. I think of Carl sitting in his favorite arm chair doing the crossword puzzle with one hand, holding the baby with the other. Then I edit the baby out of the memory, and there Carl still sits, looking up at me tenderly, his thin whiskers reflecting in the morning sun, his face catching light like water.

“But you hardly even know me,” I say. I wrap my arms under Sandy’s arms and around his shoulder like a harness in a way that suggests that I’d like to get to know him.

“Tell me something about yourself.”

“I was born in Iowa.”

“Fascinating,” he says, and he kisses my forehead.

“My favorite color is blue-green.”

“Fascinating.” He kisses my neck.

“I have . . .”

“Fascinating,” he says, cutting me off, his mouth covering mine.

Why fascinating? I think for a moment too brief to be counted. Why fascinating? I am kissing back. Why fascinating? The heroine’s loins quiver.

*Fall a little bit in love with the hero, so you can write about him with passion. He is strapping. He is good. He is yours, yours, yours.*

Sandy’s fingers are tangled in mine. He is massaging my thumb with his own. His hands are soft. I massage his hand back until our thumbs are twiddling together in rhythm, as though our thumbs were tongues, our hands are one.

He is leading me through corridors of paintings, ornately framed; sculptures of cracked, headless bodies line the room, and I imagine their heads, chipped and misshapen, buried somewhere beneath the ground—forgotten heads that feel phantom pains

where their bodies must have been. Or maybe it is the bodies that feel the uneasy weight of headlessness, a naked shame.

At any rate, the statues stare at me from where their eyes must have been, stare as though I'm doing something wrong, as though they've seen this before, and they already know the outcome. And I half expect to follow Sandy's arm up to his neck, then to his face only to discover it has been Carl all along. But this is not the case. Still Sandy, which is a good thing.

If Carl were here, we'd no doubt be walking on opposite ends of the room. We'd leapfrog from exhibit to exhibit, never standing together longer than a "huh" and a "hmm . . ." which would be the extent of our conversation. Or, Carl would prattle on about the baby. "But the baby," he might say. "We better check on the baby," he'd say. "Is the baby hungry?" or "Should we change the baby?" or "Is she tired?" or "I hope the air quality is good in here. Seems like a lot of people are sneezing, which isn't good for the baby," or "Don't you want to hold her? You should hold her. Why won't you hold her?"

Baby, baby, baby. I never want to hear the word again. Except, maybe, from Sandy.

"Do you want to go to the miniature room exhibits, baby?" We've known each other for such a short time and already it feels right for him to call me baby. I'm okay with the word baby now; really, I am. "I'd like to see what a 17th-century bedroom looks like," he says, and we both look at each other, our cheeks lightly brushed with a flush at the mention of bedroom, as though to say it is to imagine a bed and to imagine a bed is to imagine bodies on the bed and to imagine bodies on the bed is to imagine us as the bodies on the bed.

"I'm aroused," I say again, and this time I mean it. He swings me out like we are ballroom dancing, and then pulls me back close to him.

"What do you do for a living?" I ask.

"I'm in real estate" he says.

"You buy houses?" I ask.

"I own houses." Sandy puts his forehead to mine and rocks it back and forth.

“I love houses,” I say. I place my palm to his cheek and look directly in his eyes, squinting for intensity so that he knows I’m serious. “Can I see where you live?” It sounds a bit forward, even for the new me, but I’ve already said it, so it’s too late.

“Of course,” he says without hesitation, and for the first time I think that maybe love can be easy, two dimensional, uncomplicated—like a children’s puzzle where the pieces are dramatically large, shaped and colored in obvious ways so it’s easy to make connections. I wonder if it was this easy for Carl and Ms. Lamaze. I wonder if there was a moment of thought or doubt or hesitation that caused thought or doubt or hesitation. I wonder if I was on Carl’s mind at all, just once. Just once, I hope.

“Then take me to your house,” I say, my heaving chest heaving. Sandy squeezes me taut against his body, so tight I can’t breathe. The hero has taken my breath away.

*Give your characters flaws, something the reader can relate to. These flaws should be subtle, not overdone, and never detracting from their levels of attractiveness. Note: They should not be flaws that cannot be forgiven.*

Sandy grins at me through his wide smile. I just noticed he has a mustache, thin but visible, which looks like two wings sprouting from his upper lip. Nobody can be perfect. But it will have to be shaved if the relationship is to continue. “But don’t you want to see the miniature rooms first?” he asks. His teeth look like flat pebbles; his mustache has stray, red hairs.

I don’t really want to, but I say okay. I don’t come to the museum because of the exhibits; I come because it is quiet and because here I can look at the paintings, lose myself in a world without Carls, without Lamaze instructors.

I was the one who wanted the baby.

I wanted a baby like I wanted a Coach purse; I wanted one badly. To have, to hold, and to show off to my friends, many of

whom had both babies and Coach purses. I imagined pushing her in a stroller through the park, the grass a startling green; it looked like the moment in the *Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy opens the door of her black and white bungalow to find a world in full, dazzling color. That is what I thought the baby would be: seeing color for the first time.

But how can you really love something before it is born? How can you know if you'll even like something if you can't shop around first, pick out a color, a size, straps, interior pockets and the like. I wanted a baby like a Coach purse, but really I should have gotten a Coach purse.

"We are not ready for a baby yet," Carl told me months before I was pregnant. "We should just enjoy our time together—travel some, look into buying a house."

"But my biological clock is out of control," I said. "It keeps me up at night with its ticking."

"Then get a digital clock," Carl replied with his crooked grin, "one that is quieter." He had never wanted children. I knew this years ago, before I married him.

"Can't you just be . . . content?" he asked.

"You confuse contentment and complacency," I said.

"Complacency isn't always bad, is it? Is it?"

Is it? I still think of the question.

I was the one who wanted the baby, but Carl was the one who loved her. I couldn't stand to hold her, to feel the warm, heavy weight of her body in my arms.

"Why won't you hold the baby?" Carl would ask. "She's your daughter, you know." Then, "What is wrong with you?" Then, "How can you feel nothing?" Then, "You are a cold woman," he said, and I felt cold, so cold I felt nothing at all.

I didn't have an answer for Carl; I didn't have an answer for it—for the baby. You can't force love, can you? You can't force it even for a child. Even if the child is your own.

But nothing kills a romance like a baby, in life as in fiction. Sandy is waiting by the spiral staircase. Sandy is waiting for me.

*The conflict-resolution should culminate in a love scene, even if a permanent union is impossible. Remember the love scene. Close your eyes and visualize the hero's touch. Embrace his warmth; feel his arms wrap around you, you, you, you, you, you, you. Surrender to the passion.*

Sandy leads me up the marble staircase; I am two steps below him; his hand reaches out behind his body like he is receiving a baton. Our hands connect. His palms are sweaty, and I notice a crescent-shaped sweat stain on the back of his shirt.

"Are you hot?" I ask, when I notice beads of sweat dotting his forehead.

"No," he says, then pauses. "It's kind of embarrassing, really. And I'll tell you this only because I feel like I've known you forever, a lifetime, and you make me feel like I can tell you anything. I mean, really anything. I mean, I really like you." Another pause. He smiles, and I notice brown stains between his incisors, which are sharp and uneven, one hanging below the other as though his mouth is tilted. Sandy lifts his hand off the banister, and I can see hand-shaped smudge marks where his fingers had been resting. "I have overactive sweat glands," he says. "It's bad." Sandy looks shrunken. "Real bad."

The first room is a colonial kitchen, and it looks very much like one: minimal, rustic, monochromatic. There is a fireplace with cast iron pots and pans hanging overhead. A simple wooden table sits in the middle of the room. A broom with a brush made of twigs rests against the wall, and two rocking chairs sit like skeletal remains in the corner.

"That's where we would have sat," Sandy says, as he imagines our domestic bliss through the centuries.

"Let's walk on," I say, and we do.

Down the hallway I hear voices talking in hushed tones. A couple stands near the Jacobean room, with its ornately carved furniture and checkered floor, which makes it seem modern, like a refurbished townhouse. The couple is standing in the shadows of the doorway, and I think I make out the silhouette of Carl.

I've been doing this lately—seeing Carl wherever I go. Well, not really Carl, but people who, at first glance, appear to be Carl. In the grocery store, he is squeezing the bread; at the bank, he is hunched over the teller station; at the Chinese buffet he is scooping sweet-and-sour sauce over a plate of crab rangoon. And I always imagine a baby draped over his shoulder or perched there, like a monkey or a parrot.

I wanted to love the baby; I did. But I didn't. I couldn't. It hollowed out my insides with its kicking and swimming, with its embryonic fluid, with its presence. It changed me. I'm not blaming the baby, but it changed me.

"Hold the baby," Carl would plead. "Just touch her. Hold her hand. Anything. Please." I'd sit on the corner of the bed with my arms crossed, drowsed like a zombie on pain medication.

"I can't do this alone," Carl said.

"Then let's give the baby away." Did I say that? Did I say that aloud?

I just want Carl back—Carl without the baby on his shoulder. Carl on Sunday mornings sipping coffee in bed. Carl cleaning out the attic. Carl watching television, his profile a blue glow in the darkened room. It is Carl, alone, that I want.

Sandy snakes his arm around my waist and starts to kiss my ear.

"Shhhh . . ." I say. I'm straining to hear the couple at the opposite end of the hallway.

"What?" Sandy whispers.

"Do you hear something—that couple down there. Do you hear heavy breathing?"

I think back to my Lamaze classes. Ms. Lamaze took such a concentrated interest in us.

"Breathe from your core," she'd say, pointing to her belly. "Breathe from your core." Then she would demonstrate, and she looked more like a convulsing cat than a mother-to-be.

"Now I want you to try breathing," she had said. She was talking to Carl, placing her hands on his stomach. And they kneeled face-to-face, breathing in and out in unison—two

breaths in, two breaths out, two breaths in, two breaths out—each sucking in the air that the other had just released, a quasi-kiss.

During labor, I opted for an epidural. But Carl stood by my side, breathing, in, in; out, out, breathing from his core.

“I don’t hear anything,” Sandy says, and I step closer. I hear it again. The quick in-out of breaths, patterns of inhales and exhales. I hear Carl’s laugh. I hear Ms. Lamaze’s voice. I hear the breathing, whistling like the wind through the miniature rooms, through 500 years of interior decorating.

“I want you,” I say, “it can’t wait,” and I push Sandy toward the replica of Louis XV’s bedroom. I’m blooming; I’m gasping. We are kissing as we gingerly step over the velvet rope. We are kissing, still, when we knock over the sign that says “Do Not Touch” and “No Flash Photography.” Our feet slip and slide on the waxed floor, and I can see scuff marks from my shoes. By the time we reach the bed, we’ve bumped into the hand-carved armoire, knocking a vase to the floor, shattering it. I unbutton his shirt, and I pull him down to Louis XV’s bed, which feels like it is made of wood. The flowered wallpaper is yellow and red, and I feel like Dorothy lying in the poppy field. I’m tired, so tired. I can feel Sandy on top of me. My eyes are closed, but I can see the hero, still; I can hear him in the distance.