



# THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

---

Year 2013

Article 2

---

1-1-2013

## The Sketchpad of Carl Smithson

Emily A. Francisco

Gettysburg College, [emily.a.francisco@gmail.com](mailto:emily.a.francisco@gmail.com)

Class of 2014

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Fiction Commons](#)

**Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.**

---

Francisco, Emily A. (2013) "The Sketchpad of Carl Smithson," *The Mercury*: Year 2013, Article 2.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2013/iss1/2>

This open access fiction is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact [cupola@gettysburg.edu](mailto:cupola@gettysburg.edu).

---

## The Sketchpad of Carl Smithson

### **Author Bio**

Emily is a junior double major in Art History and English with a Writing Concentration and is minoring in Studio Art. A founding member of Gettysburg College's first Poetry Circle, Emily is also involved with The Forum, Alpha Phi Omega, and Dance Ensemble. In her spare time she works on her portfolio for Emagine Design, her freelance graphic design business.

# The Sketchpad of Carl Smithson

Emily Francisco

The first time he saw her, she wasn't doing anything in particular. She was alone in the apartment, watching television. He could see her lying on the couch and browsing through the channels. It looked like she was wearing some kind of peach-colored dress. No, not a dress—it was some kind of skintight pants and shirt combination. Both were the same color, that odd peach shade. Maybe it was a leotard. . . . No, it must have been a turtleneck, but he couldn't tell where the collar began or where the sleeves ended.

There were two other specks of color on the woman's shirt, about halfway down her torso. From his window they looked like two tiny, red strawberries. The woman shifted position and the strawberries jiggled. She finally stood up and her dark hair spilled over her shoulders. She suddenly left his view, probably going to her kitchen or the bathroom. Carl stared at the empty room across the way and realized she had no clothes on at all.

Carl was transfixed. The woman returned to her couch. He remembered his old art teacher saying how the college-credit studios did life drawing, which was basically drawing naked people; he'd always wondered what that was like. His teacher had tried to get him to sign up for a college-credit course like that once, but the money didn't work out. He didn't save enough money back then, since he didn't work at a grocery store or the mall like the rest of his classmates did. It was hard to find a job with his condition, not that he'd ever tried. His hands shook whenever he thought about the prospect of a job interview. Meeting new people and talking to them scared him.

As he thought back to his high school art class, he had an idea. He kept watching the woman watch television.

Finally, he went over to his desk and picked up his notebook and pen in one hand and his chair in the other. He dragged the chair close to the window, sat down, and started to sketch. He couldn't see every detail, of course; their apartments weren't that close together. He drew the supple curves of her legs. He drew the tiny strawberries. He left the face blank.

\*

The woman on the bench across the street, though, was wearing a

lime green jacket. It was one of those shiny ones, the ones Carl had seen runners wear in commercials. The woman had tight, purple shorts too, not the dark purple like the plum he ate for lunch, but a screaming, neon purple. He could see her thin calves molded from afternoon jogging, and loose strands of her sweat-damp hair clung to each side of her face. Tiny headphones protruded from her ears and one hand was stuffed in her pocket. Carl looked at his blank notepad and started drawing with his ballpoint pen.

It was too bad he didn't have any real art supplies. All he had was this black Bic and a college-ruled notebook. He sketched the slump of her torso and her long, extended calves. A curve here, some cross-hatching there. . . . He shaded in the places where her shadow hit the concrete. Pressing his ballpoint hard on the thin paper, he darkened the contours of her jacket and tried to blend the ink with his pinky finger.

The woman stood up. She cracked her neck, twisted her arms in a brief stretch, and continued her run. Carl sighed. He had almost finished the drawing this time, but still he hadn't gotten to her face. Faces were where he needed the most practice. Scrawling a quick signature and putting the date at the bottom, he flipped the page over and looked around.

He spied another woman across the street, this one in a black leather jacket. She was leaning against a stop sign and chatting on her cell phone. He drew faster this time and got out a rough sketch before she hung up and walked into the Dunkin Donuts behind her.

The woman in leather reminded him of his sister, Max, who was working today at that tourist shop near Fenway, where they sold discount Red Sox tickets. Today he was supposed to turn in the Dunkin Donuts application she'd filled out for him, but he would much rather sit here.

He watched the woman in leather leave Dunkin Donuts with a plastic cup of iced coffee. She quickly glanced across the street and, in that split second, made eye contact with Carl. She pressed the button at the corner, waited for the street to clear, and began to cross the street.

Shit. What if it was Max? If she caught him sitting around and slacking one more time. . .

Carl hastily stuffed his notepad and pen in the worn out backpack beside him. He stood up and started walking in the opposite direction, staring straight ahead as if going towards the Bank of America on the next street over. He clumsily maneuvered around a businessman and narrowly avoided a collision with a dog-walker. He spotted a CVS coming up on his right and darted in as quickly as he could.

He stared out the big glass window as the woman in leather walked past. It wasn't Max; this lady had lighter hair. He sighed with relief. Absentmindedly, he walked to the shampoo section. He was pretending to browse

through conditioners when he felt a hard tap on his shoulder.

“What’s your problem?”

Carl’s heart sank. There went his afternoon. Hanging his head, he slowly turned around. A pale, dark-haired girl with heavy eyeliner and a nose piercing glared at him. She was wearing a blue t-shirt with the logo from some indie band printed on the front.

“Dude, we were supposed to meet up an hour ago,” Anna joked.

“Right. Sorry,” Carl stammered, not entirely thrilled to see her.

He’d known Anna since their sophomore year in high school and they’d graduated together last May. Now the two of them hung around the city, unemployed and undereducated, while their old classmates enrolled at places like Boston University and UMass. He didn’t know why she stuck around with him. Maybe it was because they were both outcasts; neither of them had had many friends at Arbor High.

At first it was like high school never ended. The only difference was that instead of going to class during the day, they could wander around Quincy Market or catch a lunchtime movie. That, and he lived with his sister now, after his parents had ordered him to either get a job in the city or find a way to go to community college. They weren’t happy that he’d graduated high school without any plan for the “real world.” He’d moved in with Max under those conditions.

Now it was October, and he still hadn’t pursued either option to date. These days, whenever he and Anna hung out, he couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable. Today she wanted to sneak into the movies again and he wasn’t feeling up to it; last time she’d smuggled a water bottle of whiskey in her bag. Carl had finished half the bottle trying to impress her, but he puked it all up in the bathroom twenty minutes later. She’d laughed.

“Come on, let’s get going,” she said, bored. They walked out of the store.

“How’s the view from your window at home looking?” Anna continued, asking with a knowing smile. Carl considered for a moment.

“That lady’s friend was over again,” he confessed. “I mean she never keeps her blinds shut, so I can see everything, basically. It’s like she wants everyone to see or something.”

“What happened? Did they fuck?”

“No, they were just... hugging or something. But it was a weird kind of hug. They were hugging for five minutes straight before the other lady jumped away, like she knew someone was watching.”

“Well, yeah. You were watching.”

Carl’s face grew hot. “Yeah... Anyway, I thought they were going to kiss, like last time, but nothing happened after that.”

“Damn. That’s too bad. You should take photos next time,” Anna

suggested. Anna's bright green eyes suddenly got excited. "I kinda want to meet her. How funny would it be if I knocked on her door and she opened it stark naked?"

"Why would she open the door if she was naked?"

"I don't know. Why does she leave the blinds open if she's naked?"

"No idea," Carl shrugged.

Anna was quiet for a moment, suddenly pensive. "What would happen if I left my blinds open one day and stripped in front of the window?"

Carl froze, confused. "What?"

"Well, what if I made out with a girl in front of my window?" Anna prompted.

"Why would you do that?"

Anna looked disappointed. "I wouldn't. I was just wondering. Would you draw me, I mean?"

Carl thought for a moment, unsure of what to say. "Um, I guess. I don't know."

A brief silence ensued. Anna looked sad, though Carl couldn't fathom why.

"Anyway, call me when it gets good again," Anna pushed. "I want to come see."

"Sure," Carl shrugged. He knew he wouldn't call her. It was his window.

\*

In his head he called the woman in the window Viola; it was the name of a character from some Shakespeare play he'd read in high school. He thought it suited her; it was exotic and had something of a musical quality. It was an instrument after all. Kind of like a violin. Max used to play the violin, but she'd sold her instrument years ago.

After suffering through a long horror movie that afternoon with Anna, he got back to Max's apartment later than usual. He liked to get home by 5:30, which was when Viola got home from work. Ever since the first time he'd seen her, he took to keeping his desk chair permanently by the window, so he could observe and sketch at a moment's notice. Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday he drew her for an hour, until Max got home from the shop.

Sometimes she wasn't naked, but he didn't care. He thought of these sessions as free drawing lessons, and he needed all the practice he could get. He didn't know what for, but he liked it.

Fortunately, today Viola was running late, too. He slid into his chair and pulled open his shades just as the woman entered her room across the way, then watched her drop her purse gracefully on the floor by the coffee table before leaving his view. He guessed she was in the bedroom, or the

bathroom, or something, so he waited with his pencil hovering above the page. It would only be a thirty-minute session today, he unfortunately realized. He'd have to relish it.

\*

Her real name was Alice; she and Max were classmates at Tufts. He learned this the next day, when Max introduced them at dinner.

She was wearing blue jeans and a satiny purple shirt that rippled whenever she laughed. Alice looked different from the woman he saw from his window. She was rigid in the way she leaned back, in the way her hands stiffly rested on the table. The woman in the window was always relaxed.

Carl didn't say much to Alice that evening. He couldn't, she was sacred, like a rock star or a supermodel. Anything he said to her would have to be eloquent and well thought-out. While he thought about what he might say to impress her, he twirled his spaghetti and listened to her chat with his sister. They made fun of their professors, talked about the new Barnes & Noble store that opened downtown, and critiqued some soap opera the two of them watched. Bored, he tuned out of the conversation, and his mind turned to the sketchpad in his room. He started visualizing a color drawing of Alice he'd like to try, one featuring her in that purple top. He'd bought a set of colored pencils last week with the bit of money he had left over from graduation and was itching to try them out.

"How are your folks?" Alice asked, and Carl sat up straight. He prayed Max wouldn't bring him into the conversation.

"They're actually coming by on Friday," Max responded, "Just to check in on things." She sipped her water. "Carl, make sure you're around that day."

"Friday?" Carl spoke up.

"Yeah, Friday." Max rolled her eyes.

"I have plans."

"You working?"

"No."

"Too bad," Max quipped. Then, her mood shifting, she gave him a sympathetic look. "Like I said, they just want to check in. Did you turn in that job application?"

Carl shrugged. "Not yet. Going to tomorrow."

"Do it first thing in the morning, okay?" Max said.

"Okay."

The rest of the conversation was as dull as when it started, although he did learn a few more things about Alice. When she wasn't working on her masters in drama, she enjoyed photography. She also liked to drink merlot. He treasured each of these facts, but the thing he most relished in learning about her was that she worked part-time as a nude model over at

the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. He'd been drawing a professional studio model for the past few weeks and he hadn't even realized it.

His "free art lessons" suddenly became more credible. He had the urge to draw again and decided to try doodling something in the living room. Max and Alice were still talking at the dinner table, but he cleared his plate and put it in the sink along with his silverware and empty glass of water.

He went to his room to grab his sketchpad and pencil and then walked back through the kitchen to get to the living room. Maybe he'd try doing a still life this time—

"Carl—" He heard Max call his voice. "Can you empty the dishwasher so we can refill it? I need to run the trash downstairs. It's overflowing again."

Tossing his sketchpad on the coffee table, he ran back into the kitchen, annoyed. He opened the white dishwasher, which was as pale and blank as each of the pages he wanted to fill in his notebook.

"Here, let me help," Alice offered as Max exited, lugging an enormous black garbage bag.

"No, it's fine," Carl muttered, and he opened the drawer by the sink to start putting away silverware. Alice shrugged and went to the living room. He heard her turn on the TV and sit on the couch to wait for Max.

Their dishwasher was pretty small, so it didn't take Carl long to finish the chore. Finally he went back into the living room, ready to start his next drawing.

His sketchpad wasn't on the coffee table, though—Alice was holding it in her lap on the couch, flipping through the pages as if it were a magazine. His heart stopped as he thought of all the things he could say or should say in that moment. She looked up and raised one eyebrow at him. She grabbed the remote and turned the TV on mute.

"Nice stuff," she said to him, pointing at the page open currently. It was one of his "life drawings" of her lying on the sofa. He'd tried to include the window in that composition, and he thought he'd made it pretty realistic. Anyone who knew the outside of the building well could recognize the apartment easily. "How old are you, Carl?"

He was flustered, red-faced at the situation. "Um, eighteen."

"Old enough for me to sue, then?" Her eyes bore into him.

"Uh—"

"Fortunately for you, I'm not the suing type." Was she smiling?

The door opened and Max walked back in, her hands empty. Alice instinctively flipped the notebook shut.

"What's that?" Max asked, pointing at Carl's book. Alice shook her head.

“Oh, nothing,” she responded. “Anyway, I was just talking to Carl about the job openings over at the Museum.”

“Huh?” Max slumped into the armchair. “What job openings?”

“We always need male models.” Alice smirked at Carl, who was confused. “For the undergrads and the public workshops. Pays great.”

Max looked to her brother, surprised and disbelieving. “Really? I can’t imagine him standing naked in front of a room of people.”

“You don’t always stand. Sometimes you sit or lie down, actually,” Alice clarified, winking at Carl. “Anyway, what do you say, kid? You were looking for a job, right?”

Max and Alice both stared at him, Alice smirking and holding his notebook of drawings in her right hand as if it were blackmail, while Max looked unconvinced of her proposition.

“Uh, sure, I... I guess I could do it,” he finally said.