Babe in Boyland

Post-diagnosis, post-recovery and pre-menopausal, our fearless columnist finds her sex drive kicking into high gear. What's a girl to do? Emily Carter lets us in on a few of her favorite things.

November 1, 1999 By Emily Carter

At 38, I've forgotten the original color of my hair. A crown of white roots appears every six weeks, to which I apply a bottle of cheap blue-black dye because I've been coloring it that Wonder Woman shade since the early '80s and it's the one thing in my life that's remained consistent. Along with a head of gray hair, I now have a compromised immune system, a severed fallopian tube, holes in my nasal cartilage the size of dimes, a liver that's been exposed to hepatitis C virus, extreme fatigue at various times of day, smoker's cough and internal uterine scarring in the form of painful adhesions. I've never been sexier. America, lock up your sons.

Despite—or because of—my HIV status, in the years since I've sobered up and started to live like a reasonable facsimile of a human being, my sexuality has come out to play. Part of this may be simple biology: the old saw about women reaching their sexual peak later than men, who seem to attain the summit of sexual readiness at the age of 15. My friends and I notice this—a kind of random directionless horniness that settles into our bloodstream at the most inopportune moments. We have new sympathy for all those gawky junior high school specimens walking around with geometry textbooks in front of their crotches. On the other hand, it's a pleasant feeling to be sitting outside a café with your girlfriends and sincerely growl, as one of them sails by, "I'd like to knock him off that skateboard."

Some of this lubricious swagger actually leads to looking for sex, but most of it doesn't. Not only am I HIV positive, but I'm no longer a little kid. I don't need to act on every impulse I feel; sometimes I can just enjoy *feeling* it. Of course, when you get into that area of the brain, everything gets relative very fast. I had sex with my current partner on our first date, and he moved in two weeks later. The truth is that one of the reasons I felt so comfortable taking a tumble so fast was that my HIV status was already on the table, met without judgment or irrational fear. And along with the sight of bare hipbones in cut-off jeans, that's one thing that gets me hot, fast.

To be a woman in this world is to have a much stronger relationship with the cultural construct of sex than with the act itself. When I was young, it was this structure I found interesting, not the process of fucking itself, which I was either too nervous or too out of it to enjoy for the God-given juicy fun that it is. I was fascinated by the mechanics of seduction, the dance of predation and

surrender, the way a dull man would suddenly become clever, impelled by the urgency of his libido or the simple need to make a conquest. But sex itself seemed—sometimes quite literally—anticlimactic.

Hard-won mental health has made some changes. Now I just like the sex act itself. It’s a good idea, sex.

Not that the mangy phenomenon of shame doesn’t rub against my ankles from time to time. HIV brings out the worst in some people regarding their own attitudes toward sex. But eventually this disease reveals itself as the bunch of indifferent microbes that it is. As for the 7,000 years of human history that have formed our beliefs about sex, look into its giant gaping maw and say, “Fuck all that.” Not as easy as it sounds, but necessary for psychic survival in a world that fears women’s sexuality to the extent that there are people around who will cut the clitoris off a 13-year-old girl.

Here in Minneapolis it’s a hot summer day, and I’m sitting with my girlfriend on a bench by the Mis-sissippi river. Men go by on roller-blades and bikes, shining in the sun.… A breeze from the water cools off our hot shoulders as we discuss the boys and the things we’d like to do to them. After all is said and done, we are products of our culture, in love with our partners and basically too tired to actually do any of those things. But the joy of wanting, of being alive and horny and ready for action on an August afternoon is something no one can take away from me, even if they come for my clitoris wih a pair of pinking shears.

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