Tales of the City

The bad girl of writing Roiphe clan, Emily Carter took a dark journey, but now at 37, she's one of the generation's brightest talents.

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"Guys would fall completely in love with her," writer Darius James says of his longtime friend Emily Carter. His tales of a mid-'80s drinking-drugs-and-poetry scene in New York City's East Village always cast Carter traumatically at center stage. Right where she likes it.

James remembers the time one young man became obsessively attached to Carter. He took to following her around, hanging out wherever she was, stalking her. Alarmed but amused, Carter, then deep into her mid-20s heroin-and-cocaine habit, decided she would ice his ardor through the time-honored tactic of relentless ridicule. Late one night, Carter, James and their crowd were, as usual, at the Horseshoe Bar, a rowdy spot in Alphabet City. Carter lit loudly into the lovesick youth, using every trick in her considerable verbal arsenal to insult him. The tirade intensified, and the two moved their beef to the street. As patrons and passersby looked on, Carter delivered a spurning sidewalk humiliation while her admirer, literally on his knees, pleaded with her not to ditch him. "Emily had balls, she had wit, she had style, she had imagination," James says through his laughter. "But she also had these self-destructive habits."

Carter, too, remembers the incident. "I was very aware of the audience, but I also felt terror and confusion," is all she says.

Now, at 37, Carter is still slaying audiences, only she does it sober, and in her prose and performances. Since 1989, when she moved to Minnesota for treatment for addiction to drugs and alcohol and discovered that she has HIV, Carter has honed her wild open-mike poems, half heckle and half hubris, into fierce and funny stories that have found their way into the pages of The New Yorker, Open City and other literary journals. She reads regularly for Minneapolis/St. Paul audiences, has written columns and reviewed movies for The Twin Cities Reader, an alternative newsweekly, and recently had her story, "Glory Goes and Gets Some," selected by guest editor Garrison Keillor for The Best American Short Stories of 1998. At the moment, Carter is working with a New Yorker editor on a nonfiction piece, "The Bride," about her "boy craziness" and the troubles it caused.

Carter says "The Bride" is the most ambitious piece she's written—long, complex and on a favorite

theme from a favorite book, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. "It's an old, old story, about the unloved becoming monstrous through rejection." The longing for love is countered by repulsion. "My need for this certain kind of glamour—call it love—flourished like something in a dark refrigerator until it became almost separate from myself, a monster that I had no memory of creating," Carter writes. "When I was 10, I was in the middle of reading Frankenstein when a bolt of recognition pinned me to the bed. I began to dream of the North Pole, the setting of the story's climax. I would find the sad creature who had last been seen vanishing into 'darkness and distance.' There we would set up housekeeping, me and the only creature who could possibly understand."

That thorny emotional thicket is one Carter has hacked away at in much of her writing. Another is the prickly tangle of pathos and bathos arising from her HIV status and chemical dependency. When the subject is AIDS, Carter often totes her trademark deflating humor. Told by a physician of her seroconversion, the acronym-acquisitive narrator of "The Bride" says, "My T-cell count was low enough to qualify me as a PWA, which, while not quite as glamorous and tragic as being a POW, had a shiny, grant-getting gleam about it."

In real life, Carter got news of her positive test in 1989. She was 28 and had recently graduated from her first treatment program at Minnesota's pricey Hazelden Clinic and a halfway house in St. Paul. "When I got out of the halfway house, I relapsed right away, and went back to New York, where I relapsed horribly," Carter says, sitting in an upholstered swivel chair in her South Minneapolis apartment and trying to keep the powerful, slobbery jaws of her pit bull, Betty, off the slender wrists of an interviewer. Carter wears men's plaid pants, a tight green tank top and big Fluevog-like Oxfords that she found for $3.40 at a neighborhood store called Gus. Carter is penny poor but shoe rich, and she always shows up at places done up in flaming look-at-me duds. At a Halloween party, for instance, she wore her wedding dress appliqued with a scarlet A on the front.

Carter was living with a boyfriend in nearby Hoboken, New Jersey, when she overdosed on heroin and was placed in a hospital's locked ward for the mentally ill. While there, a doctor noticed her abnormally low white-blood-cell count and ordered a series of blood tests, including one for HIV. She was back in Hoboken when the ward psychologist called her with the results. "I told my boyfriend," she recalls. "He said, 'Well, I hope you're not going to use this as an excuse to get high.' I said, 'I sure the fuck am.' He said, 'Let's go get the groceries,' like 'Let's not even put a ten-minute delay in our life.' We went and did our day, and I went out and got high. I was like, 'This rocks. I'm going to be able to play it off everyone's sympathy.' I was planning on dying real soon anyway. Instead, people told me, 'So die already. We're not going to lend you twenty dollars.'"

Carter figures that she got the virus shooting up with a dirty needle. Though her outlook was grim, Carter's mother, the novelist Anne Roiphe, and her stepfather, the psychoanalyst Herman Roiphe, rescued her once more. The trash-talking downtown diva of dis, who came of age uptown on Park Avenue, flew back to Minnesota and rented a room in a boarding house for "so-called sober people" in a blue-collar St. Paul neighborhood. In AA fashion, Carter had to learn about humiliation. She went to meetings, met many other Hazelden graduates from the East Coast and worked a

series of “get-well jobs”—dishwashing, newspaper delivery, bagel making, counter help at an airport gift shop. “Our little gang of recovering addicts were the biggest freaks, an island of lost souls in the middle of the American prairie,” Carter says. “I felt like I’d finally found the right planet.”

Though asymptomatic, Carter hooked up with the HIV clinic at St. Paul Ramsey Medical Center (now called Regions Hospital), run by researcher Dr. Keith Henry and clinic nurse Kathy McCabe. “Keith’s a very loving man, and Kathy is the reason I kept going back there, to get a smile or a hug. She was so concerned, so nonjudgmental. People go for her little bits of love,” Carter says. On Henry’s advice, she first tried AZT, which immediately made her sick. But she found better combinations, and now takes Combivir (AZT/3TC) and Viracept. Her CD4 cell count is 266, up from an August 1996 low of 88; her viral load is undetectable, after a 296,438 high in May 1996. “But I’m a really bad PWA,” Carter says. “I don’t keep up with anything. Being isolated and prone to inertia is part of who I am.”

Life-threatening illness and claims of laziness aside, the years since her return to Minnesota have been fruitful for Carter as a writer. Though it was a struggle to keep writing while trying to make ends meet, she persisted, focusing on both the public performance of her short fictions and a new pursuit-—polishing pieces for publication.

She sold her first two stories to a little journal called The Jailfish Review for $40 in 1990, and by 1992, The New Yorker had grabbed “Parachute Silk” for a cool $5,000. “I was very excited to get the money,” Carter says. “As for the magazine itself, I didn’t give a fuck. Their journalism is great, but their fiction is nothing I really read. Still, I was very glad I could give my mother and my family a trophy, because I had come up very short in the trophy department for thirty years.”

In “Parachute Silk” as in “Bad Boy Walking,” which the magazine published in 1995, Carter proves that she can make the difficult leap from the coffeehouse stage, where her forté was the 700-word, short-attention-span rant, to longer, more traditional forms. “I haven’t forgotten anything that I’ve read by her, and I read all the time,” says Sean Wilsey, a New Yorker poetry and fiction editor. Carter’s work has “always made me laugh out loud. I’m fairly in awe of the way she’s able to handle the things that she writes about.” In prose by turns glittering and sardonic, Carter chronicles the small world of total strangers from different classes thrown together by their addictions. In halfway houses and treatment centers, the smart-asses and the know-it-alls, the suburban pill popper and the felon, the grease monkey and the stockbroker, the sex addict and the Teamster official with wet brain gather to drink coffee and grapple with sobriety, old mistakes, time wasted while getting wasted and a sea of future possibilities.

Carter is quick to skewer herself and the jargon of recovery, from grief groups to Therapeutic Duty Assignments. The narrator of “Parachute Silk” befriends a geeky sex addict in treatment, but spurns him when he wants a relationship. “Matthew,” she tells him, “it’s probably not real sober behavior for me to start dating perverts.” The two drift apart, and Matthew starts using again. Even as she gets on with her life, the narrator suffers regrets about her lost friend, who made her tapes of his favorite music to listen to during occupational therapy.

Everything Carter writes, no matter how tough, sad or romantic, gets a humor basting. “Emily is clearly one of the wittiest writers of our generation,” says Darius James, author of the novel Negrophobia and the nonfiction film critique That’s Blaxploitation. In “The Bride,” Carter writes of her adolescent arrival at a WASPy Connecticut prep school. “I came crashing down in their midst and began to talk loudly while chewing with my mouth open. It took two days for the school to call me ‘Tits’ and declare me a ‘Loudmouth Ugly Slut’ who would ‘Suck Your Dick for a Quarter.’ My hair, sometimes called a ‘Jew ’fro,’ gained me the nickname ‘Bride of Frankenstein,’ which I naturally cherished.” Carter says she uses jokes to deflect her tendency toward the lyrical or pompous. “I like humor that makes you wince—upsetting, super-biting humor,” she says.

Not only Carter’s wit but her range impressed Story magazine editor Lois Rosenthal, who has bought four of her pieces in the past few years. Rosenthal hails Carter’s “Big Red Heart” as “one of the best broken-hearted stories I’ve ever read, about a woman who dumps a guy.” Her Story story about a hatmaker’s suicide, “Cute in Camouflage,” branches Borges-like into magical realism. “She is so inventive,” Rosenthal says. “I can’t imagine wanting more than that a writer move you, entertain you and also change your mind about things.”

Whether she’s recalling in a tour-de-force rhapsody the cruel and sexy voices of all the men who’ve called out to her on the streets (“South of Houston”), or musing on the end of time arriving at an inner-city laundromat (in a just-completed performance piece), Carter employs rich sensory details and turns of phrase that illuminate as they alarm: “And what will happen is simple, the silent breeze of mercy will blow through everything, starting with the wet socks and logo-blasted T-shirts sudsing behind the clear round windows of the washing machines. The tiny, squawking children, clambering over mountainous piles of dirty clothes, will turn to look and stop to stare, their eyes as black and glossy as the dark gleaming portholes with things spinning around inside them.”

Yoko Ono meets Patti Smith in Carter’s look on the warm May evening we talk in Quang Deli, a Vietnamese place on Nicollet Avenue in Minneapolis. She’s wearing white pants, a white regimental jacket with embroidered cuffs, white V-neck T-shirt, white mules and light-blue sunglasses. Her dark hair falls past her shoulders. “I have to keep these shades on,” she says, smoking a Marlboro. “They pull together what otherwise would be a very cheap look.”

Carter, the bad girl in the celebrated Roiphe literary clan (Carter is her middle name—she dropped the Roiphe), was born in 1960 to writer Anne Roiphe, whose 1970 novel Up the Sandbox was made into a movie starring Barbra Streisand. Roiphe, now a columnist for The New York Observer, divorced Carter’s father, an award-winning playwright whom Carter refuses to name (TK NAME), five years later. She later married Herman Roiphe, who adopted Emily, then age 15. The marriage produced two half-sisters, Katie and Becky, and there were two more girls in the family from Dr. Roiphe’s previous marriage.

The Roiphes lived comfortably on Park Avenue at 86th Street, the children attended private schools, and the family spent summers at Martha’s Vineyard or Nantucket. But Emily was a

problem child from the start—absent-minded and unable to conform. “I was kicked out of kindergarten for being a little psycho,” Carter recalls. She was always in trouble, and never stayed in one school for very long. Among her problems was chronic forgetfulness, but a gift for language saved her even early on. “In sixth grade I brought home a report card with all Ds,” she says. “But I had also won the school poetry prize.”

She eventually graduated from New York City’s Robert Louis Stevenson School for Gifted Underachievers, then dropped out of New York University after a semester “to go chasing boys.” She also chased booze and drugs. Asked what drew her to chemicals, Carter answers with a question: “Which would you pick: Constant depression, self-loathing and pain, or a substance that, at the beginning, countered those symptoms, but also produced euphoria?” She describes her 20s as “just long times of hanging out.” There was a six-month jaunt to Mexico, where she spent some college-tuition money, and some time in Seattle. She called Park Avenue for bailouts, latched onto men in a series of short, obsessive relationships. “I ran around looking like Valerie Solanas, a wretched little beatnik,” she says. “I hung out at the Horseshoe Bar. A more obnoxious drink-cadging slut they never came in contact with, and there was stiff competition.”

Yet she was always writing and, in the mid-’80s, was a regular at open-mike readings at Neither/Nor in the East Village, along with Darius James, John Farris, Norman Douglas, Bernard Meisler and Tina Carstenson. James recalls that Neither/Nor was a combination gallery, rehearsal space, after-hours bar and shooting gallery that attracted the Lower East Side literati, a scene he says invented the tough-it-out poetry slam long before it was popular. “Emily is completely on point,” James says. “Her writing is not a result of some silly MFA program. The things she writes, how she writes, what she has to say is earned—it’s lived. Few people have that.”

Carter’s theories on male-female relations and the sex industry, for example, derive not from academia, but from the three years when she worked intermittently as a topless dancer, performing for tips in bars from Sunset Park in Brooklyn to Bridgeport, Connecticut, to support a heroin and cocaine habit. In a journalistic account written years later, she argued that neither antiporn crusaders like Catherine MacKinnon nor pro-sex-worker Susie Bright got it right. While some of her experiences as a topless dancer were memorable and positive, Carter says, “sexual sadness runs rampant in the titty bars, as in life.”

In writing about her stint in the sex industry, Carter offered her own reform platform: “If I were ruler of this, our darkly gleaming universe, I’d make laws against this kind of behavior, against cruelty, against domination and insecurity. I’d make it a felony to change any human interaction into something reeking of power and degradation. I’d make it illegal to turn your life into an endless behavioral reply, like a skipping record, of something that happened to you as a child. I’d make everyone play nice.”

Both Emily’s sister and her mother have used parts of Emily’s biography in their own writing. Ten years younger than Emily, Katie Roiphe earned a PhD in English from Princeton University, contributed articles to Harper’s, Esquire and The New York Times, and then made a national stir with her first book, The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism, a “post-feminist” cultural critique

arguing that the burgeoning date-rape phenomenon stemmed as much from a long strain of anti-sex feminism as from actual rapes.

Roiphe followed up her success with her 1997 current-affairs book, Last Night in Paradise: Sex and Morals at the Century's End. In the introduction, Katie Roiphe tells the story of her older sister, the rebel who wore black nail polish and earrings made out of barbiturates, and how Roiphe and another sister were drawn to the wild side that Carter represented—but only so far. "In the end our attraction to danger was limited to the nights when we didn't have to study for tests or write papers. When the time came, we were going to take our SATs with No. 2 pencils like everyone else, then drive off to college in a car packed with lamps and towels." Roiphe recounts, among other things, how Carter in her drug years once stole a painting off the wall of her parents' brownstone and sold it to a gallery.

"I was not a rebel, I was a fuckup," Carter says simply of her kid sister's portrayal. "It both glamorizes and demonizes me in a way that I don't always recognize," she adds. "Katie's perspective is one of academic cultural criticism. I'm here to bring you the hands-on perspective."

Despite Carter's many troubles growing up, she and her mother remain in regular contact. She often reads pieces to her mother on the phone for feedback. "Some of her material is very difficult for me, but we have good writing conversations together," Anne Roiphe says by phone from her Manhattan apartment. "It's a pleasure to have a daughter who's also a colleague. Emily has a lyric gift." Asked about her daughter's output, and her ability to connect with mainstream publishers and audiences, the prolific mother says that Emily's "free spirit sometimes has difficulty coming into the structure that we need to communicate on this earth. I think Emily will not have a conventional career, and that's because Emily has not done anything in a conventional way."

On the question of whether having HIV has made Emily more creative or productive, Anne Roiphe, whose brother died of AIDS in 1993, refuses any easy affirmations. "The readership of this magazine would undoubtedly like to hear that a better writer has emerged from this health crisis. Maybe it's true. But I don't know," she says. "Silver linings are a human impulse, but I'm not playing. We don't know what would have happened otherwise." Carter views her HIV status and her chemical dependency as inextricably linked. "My sobriety, more than my HIV status, made me more productive as a writer," she says. "But if it hadn't been for my sobriety, I don't think I would have addressed my HIV."

In Minnesota, Carter has found paying gigs as a freelance journalist and as a restaurant critic for an online service. For several years she has been part of S.A.S.E, a group that stages readings and runs workshops. She writes at home on a Powerbook in a simple room with a photo of Frank O'Hara on the wall and a bookcase with a sampling of authors including Borges, Malamud, Celine, Amado, Marquez, Janet Frame, Patrick McCabe, Camille Paglia, Mary Gaitskill and Elizabeth Jolly. Her pit bull keeps her company now that she is separated from Bruce Cheney, a college professor and sometime cab driver. The two were married in 1995, and Carter calls their separation "the subject of intense pain."

Writing continues to be both joy and hardship for Carter, who says the discipline and solitude that the work demands is “the struggle of my life.” In Minnesota, where winning arts grants is a true art form, Carter remains outside looking in. It’s not that she doesn’t want the money and recognition. “My big fantasy is to have the grant truck drive to my house and say, ‘Everyone else has to fill out all these forms, but you’re so exceptional that you don’t have to. In fact, don’t even get up.’”

Carter is acutely aware that her talent is playing catch-up with her own past. “I was always gonna be a writer,” she says. “Because of certain things in my life, I’m not as far along as I’d like to be, so I’m still kind of a young writer, despite my age.” She hopes that her agent succeeds in finding a publisher for her book of stories. Meanwhile, Carter the performer, the audience charmer, dreams of ramping up her show-biz chops by working with a director, a speech coach and a video person. Then, she says, “I could kick [performance artist] Karen Finley’s ass. She’s got the moves, but I’ve got better words.”

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