

## Catherine's story

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### Reading one

*A woman living with HIV in Staffordshire in 2003 wrote this story. Because of the stigma and discrimination still experienced by people living with HIV/AIDS, the names and some other identifying details in the story have been changed so that she cannot be identified.*

This is what she wrote.....I'd been really poorly over the last few winter months and had now been in hospital for weeks with a diagnosis of "non specific viral infection" and "pneumonia", all a little strange since I was normally so fit and healthy! I had had every other test going, so I thought I may as well have this one.....

*What are our first thoughts about Catherine – about her as a woman – her background – her experience – her job perhaps?*

### Reading two

I wasn't concerned about the test, after all I wasn't a prostitute, and I had never taken drugs. I'd only slept with two men in the past twenty years and I was part of a wonderful loving family. I had three beautiful, growing daughters and a partner whom I loved and adored; this was quite a new relationship. My husband and I had separated a few years ago.

So I went along with the hospital doctors, just to satisfy their need to perform these endless pointless tests on me! The results were a day late, but I wasn't worried; then on the Wednesday ward round, they missed me! Someone said 'Catherine can you come into the office the doctor needs to talk to you' and as I followed my head was spinning. Why did I need to go into the office? My test results were back - I felt disbelief at what was happening, a slow rising fear and dread as the doctor said "I'm afraid your HIV test result was positive".

*What do you think Catherine's first thoughts and feelings might have been?*

### Reading three

I was going to die! Please God don't let me have infected my beautiful daughters or my partner, let it be only me!! Now I was different and the nurses knew it; they were uncomfortable and awkward.

For my own benefit I needed to move immediately to a ward where the nurses were experienced around people like me. What had I done to deserve this? I felt uncomfortable, and felt that people were asking themselves the same questions when they looked at me "Which one was I? A prostitute? A Drug user? Promiscuous?" But I'm a normal doting mum and partner to a wonderful

man, I'm only thirty years old for God's sake!

Twelve months passed and I realised I was not going to die, though part of me did die for a long while, and only now is it learning to live again. Apparently I was so ill because I had a very unusual reaction to being infected with the virus called "seroconversion illness" I was lucky I was diagnosed within months of infection; most people don't show symptoms for years. Am I lucky?

My girls of course are HIV negative but my partner has since been diagnosed positive. We are still very happy together, but I have many fears for the future. Now I live every day as a liar, having to keep a part of me secret from the world. I decided to tell my employer, but I couldn't tell my friends and family.

My best friend whom I love so much, we share everything, we know everything about each other, but not quite... She has worries of her own and to tell her this just doesn't seem fair... there is fear as well, would she reject me?

*What aspect of the illness do you think is the hardest for Catherine?*

#### Reading four

It's definitely the hardest thing, having to keep this secret. I should be sharing it with my girls but if I did they'd have this burden of secrecy too. They don't deserve that pressure, nor do they deserve to be bullied, shunned or teased because their mum is HIV positive. When I'm ill or dying and they have to know, will it be too late? Will they despise me for keeping it from them for all this time?

*So – now what do we think of Catherine, who might she be?*