

The sad secret my single

**Growing up,
Melanie
McKay knew
she was
different from
everyone
else. She just
didn't realise
how different**

Watching her twin sister Bec embracing her husband, Melanie McKay sighed.

Although Melanie and Bec were born within minutes of each other, their lives had taken very different paths.

Bec had been blessed with health and happiness, growing up to have a loving relationship and two beautiful children.

But Melanie had never experienced any of that. At 28 she'd never even had a boyfriend.

While Bec had hung out with her friends, Melanie had grown up coping with the effects of Noonan syndrome, a genetic disorder that causes abnormal development.

Instead of having fun in the playground, little Mel's childhood was spent in and out of hospital.

Always tired

'I had a heart defect,' she explains. 'So when I was three and strong enough for an operation, I had major heart surgery and a blood transfusion.'

Two years later, when her tonsils were removed, she needed another transfusion.

The operations left her feeling constantly tired. She would have to sit and watch while her sister and brother Redrick played together.

Over the years her health grew steadily worse. Then when she was eight, her

mum Muriel took her to the doctor's for a blood test. Afterwards Melanie was forced to take a new medicine six times a day.

'I know you hate it. But you don't want to get sick, do you sweetheart?' coaxed her mum, holding out a spoonful of vile-tasting liquid.

Melanie screwed up her face and swallowed obediently, praying that the medicine would soon make her heart better.

But as time went by her health seemed to deteriorate even further.

She became anaemic and suffered from chronic headaches and diarrhoea.

Shocking truth

In the years that followed, Melanie went for regular check-ups to monitor her condition.

Then one afternoon, when she was 14, her mum, dad and stepdad took her for an appointment.

Sitting opposite the grim-faced consultant, Melanie sensed something wasn't right.

'When you were younger, you had two blood transfusions,' the consultant began. As he spoke, her mum wrapped a protective arm around her. Melanie nodded anxiously as the doctor continued.

Talking more gently now, he explained she had contracted HIV through being given infected blood.

The foul medicine she'd been taking six times a day wasn't for her heart defect – it was to fight the HIV.

Shocked and confused, Melanie

turned to her mum and dad.

'Wh... what does that mean?' she asked.

'HIV affects the immune system so you'll be prone to infection,' the consultant replied. 'It's likely you'll have to take medication for the rest of your life.'

Still bewildered, Melanie looked again to her parents.

Then she noticed something. They didn't look shocked.

Suddenly she realised they'd known all along.

It was too much. Feeling sick, she kept quiet. She just didn't know what to say.

But at home, the awful truth that she had HIV whirled round and round in her head.

She was dying – and her parents hadn't told her.

Sensing her daughter's distress Muriel desperately tried to explain why she'd kept it a secret.

'You were just eight when a blood test showed you had HIV,' she said, her face full of concern. 'The doctors told me you might not even live to see your 10th birthday.'

Shaking, she continued: 'I was devastated and I just didn't know how to tell you.'

Melanie tried to understand but inside, she felt betrayed.

In the weeks to come, she decided to confide her secret just to her closest friends.

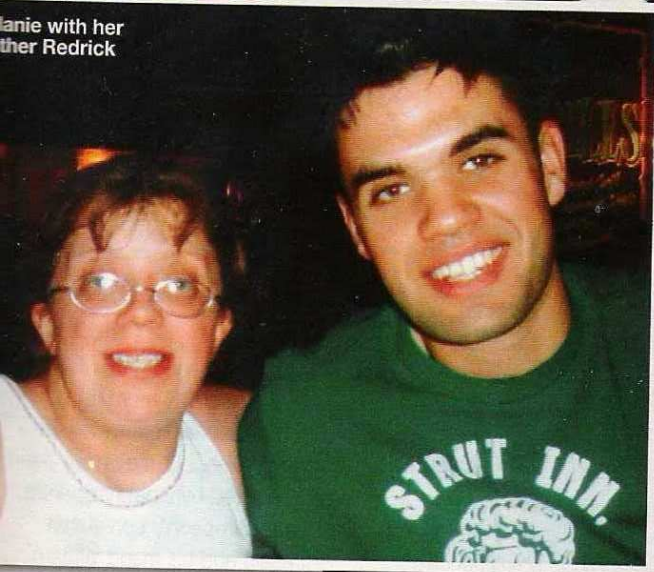
'Most people think you can't catch HIV if you're gay, or live in Africa, so I was terrified of what

Melanie with her twin sister Bec



behind life

Melanie with her
brother Redrick



might say,' she says. 'But
dads were really supportive.'

Unfulfilled dreams

time, but gradually Melanie
to come to terms with her
and forgave her family for not
her the truth immediately.

A long time I blamed myself
for having HIV. I'd lie in bed thinking

"Why me?" she says. 'I was 14

and my life had been
upside down.

I always wanted to be a nurse
after kids, but that chance

was stolen from me. What
is my future hold now?'

As she grew up, she watched
and other girls her age

dating boys.

Melanie stayed single.

It's hard knowing I was living
on borrowed time,' she says sadly.

It's hard making friends was

because people didn't know

I had HIV. I never had a boyfriend
when I was younger and as an
adult it's stayed that way.

'I've just never met anyone that
I felt I wanted to be with. And even
if I do meet someone I know it will
be complicated.'

Melanie has had to come to
terms with the fact that she will
never have any children of her own.

'It's sad because although there
are procedures in place to stop
me from passing on the virus to my
children, I don't want to pass on my
heart condition,' she explains. 'I'd

do anything to be a mum but it just
wouldn't be fair to my child.'

Moving on

With the help of a new drug,
Melanie's HIV is now suppressed
enough not to attack her system.

She's made an effort to move
on with her life, volunteering at an
HIV support centre.

'It's the only place where I can
talk openly about my condition. I've
made so many great friends there,'
she says, smiling.

'HIV is always at the back of my

mind and I may not get to live the
life I once planned. But I still have
great friends and family to help me
enjoy whatever time I have left.'

**Victoria Burt
and Gemma Wilcock**

**The Tainted Blood campaign
raises awareness of the
number of people infected
by contaminated blood.**

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or call 0121 288 2361.**