

# My Infection: (Chapter 1 of Milk-Blood)

*by* Mark Matthews

Puddles of mud.

After she confessed her eyes became puddles of mud, like tears had fallen upon dirty eye sockets and left a muddy mess.

"Okay, yes, it was Puckett. We had sex," she squeaked. "Three times only. I didn't mean to. Will you still take care of us?"

Latrice only confessed because she was caught. The paternity test showed a 99 percent chance that Zach wasn't the father. She held the child of Puckett in her womb.

"Will you take care of us?" she asked again. It wasn't a question. She was giving him a challenge. He took care of what he loved. His mother had been his to tend to for years, and they both got by with the help of some pills. He would take care of her until one of them died, because that's what he did. But Latrice with another man's child inside of her?

"I will take care of things," he answered, but he didn't say the rest that he wanted to, which was, "*Because the day I fucked you I caught an infection and now I have it for life.*"

"What about Puckett? Will you do him like you usually do?"

"Yes, I will."

He had to. Because now Puckett has the infection too, and he was sure to come around running his mouth about being the father of Latrice's child.

Puckett spent three more days alive before Zach found him. Suffocation by choking had always been his choice when he wanted others to think for a moment about whose hands were killing them. His hands came alive with power when wrapped around someone's throat. Like squeezing a loaf of soft bread he could squeeze necks, but when his hands were around Puckett's bulging windpipe, he eased up. He wanted to hear him talk. He wanted a confession.

When one didn't come and Puckett played stupid, he squeezed until he saw a shade of blue in Puckett's face and his body danced on the edge of death. Then he relaxed his fingers and let him gasp for air and come back to life. Dipping him in, and pulling him out. He could have done it all day, and nearly did, until the shade of blue seemed to burst and no more air was needed.

Later, Puckett would swim deep. The Detroit River doesn't give up its dead easy, and it was a better option than his burn and bury method. Last time he burned something was when he fire-bombed the house across the street with a Molotov cocktail made of vodka (100 proof). The whole block around Brentwood was rained on with ashes and soot of the boy who died that night. Latrice loved it when she could get into his head and make him kill, except for this time when a boy had died. But now she was giving birth to a new child, a baby girl, to replace him on this street. Spirit in, spirit out.

Labor pains doubled her over in pain a month before her due date, and Zach drove her to the hospital at 4:30 am on a Tuesday. The delivery room was lit like a spaceship and reminded Zach of his trip to Vegas. No windows, no escape, and you won't leave without being changed. He couldn't tell if it was day or night as the hours passed. He slipped out more than once to chew on his own supply of Percocets or Vicodins or Xanax, and came back feeling cleansed each time.

What he saw was a foreign liquid flowing from between Latrice's propped up legs. It smelled of something spoiled being cooked, something ominous—bigger than her, bigger than this hospital could handle. Latrice went inward into silent agony at times, at other times yelled not with words but noises. She dripped sweat, spasmed, and when the head crowned, Zach felt both nauseous bile and warm shivers of hope.

There was a one percent chance that the baby girl would have his ebony flesh. The miracle waited in his chest, thumping, wanting to explode. But on first sight the thump died. She did not. In fact, the

baby's flesh was a veiny blue color and so pale it was nearly see-through.

A heart condition kept the child in intensive care for days, in an incubator, looking like a blue frog ready to be dissected. Zach peeked in at her and tried to make eye contact, did make eye contact. This infant seemed to be his very own heart beating in front of him, shriveled and alien, with doctors prodding it to keep it alive.

"She's going to die," Latrice repeated again and again. "I can't take this, I can't see her. You do it, you stay here."

He did, and he slept in the hospital on plastic pillows while Latrice went home to watch over his mother who lived with them on 618 Brentwood Drive.

His lone finger in the sterile glove touched the infant girl's forehead.

*Where's my mother?* She asked him with tiny motions of her incubated arms.

*Soon. Soon you will see her. I am here. This is how it is.*

Days later, talking hospital heads gave him instructions and medicine and appointment reminders, and he brought the child home to Latrice. Life had grown stronger in the nameless infant, but she was still barely bigger than the palm of his hand. At home the child shrieked and wailed as if it hurt just to be alive.

"This is not how it's supposed to be," Latrice said, watching Zach holding the wailing child at 3:36 am in the rocker on a Tuesday.

"This is how it's going to be."

He slept with the 10 day old baby flesh on his own. The skin was so thin you could see her insides, like it wasn't fully done growing and she was thrown into the world before her time. Their bodies warmed each other and he rocked her on his chest until 4:25 am. She fell asleep against the beat of his heart].

On her mother's chest, she refused to take the breast and would not sup at the nipple introduced to her mouth. Latrice seemed as scared of the child as the child was of it.

Medications the baby did take. Zach injected them into an IV port in her neck. Warnings from doctors rang in his ears. Too large of an

injection could lead to asphyxiation. Failure to administer would do the same. She was already like so many who lived on this street and needed a daily drug to face each day.

Latrice curled up into a ball much of the time. Her hair, unwashed for days, became stringy as a broom. Pill bottles with the prescription labels rubbed off sat on the counter. Oxy's or Xanax or both.

The infant tears came at night—sometimes for hours, non-stop. When they got too much and it seemed the child herself might shatter, the parents would wrap themselves in jackets against the cold and take dark trips to the hospital, only to be sent back home again. Sleeplessness weighed them down like soaking wet clothes.

"This isn't how it's supposed to be," she said.

"This is how it is," he answered.

"No. No. You can take care of this. Take care of her like you do. Make it like it was before. She's not meant to be alive." Her eyes filled with tears once again. They pleaded to him. The infection bubbled in his veins.

Killing again would be easy.

He walked around the house, pacing, gaining energy with each stride, summoning up the courage to do the deed. This one needed to be fast and clean, unlike Puckett.

When he held the pillow over her face, he smothered her with his whole body weight to make it quick, but it may not have been needed. Things were fragile already, and they were just tiny breaths to take away this time.

The body fit easily into his trunk, the night air cold around him. The car seats were frigid leather. Soon the car would heat up, and things would be better. He whispered middle of the night words to his passenger in the back seat.

"We're taking mommy to her grave. Then we'll be home, and I will give you a name, and I will take care of you as long as I live."

*My infection is gone*, he thought, as he drove with the body ready to burn and bury.

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