Facts:

On Saturday, Dec. 17, 2011, at 8:49 a.m., Waterville residence Justin DiPietro reported his 20-month-old daughter Ayla Reynolds missing from their 29 Violette Avenue home. The toddler was last seen on the night of December 16th, wearing green polka dot pajamas with “Daddy’s Princess” printed in the front and a soft cast on her broken left arm (“Disappearance of Ayla Reynolds”). The disappearance of Ayla initiated the largest criminal investigation and the third largest search for a missing child in Maine history (Baber, “Police Vow Commitment”).

Six days into the search, 29 Violette Avenue was marked as a crime scene (“Ayla Reynolds Timeline”). Bloodstains were found throughout the house. In Ayla’s crib lay a baby doll with blood smeared all over its face and arms. Next to the crib were Ayla’s blood stained pink princess slippers. A “silver dollar sized” stain was found on the living room sofa. In the basement bedroom, drops and splatters of blood were present on a fan cord, a wood pallet, and a plastic blue tote containing a sheet with bloodstain on both sides. A "fist size stain" found on Justin's mattress and sheets contained blood, saliva, possibly vomit, and pink fiber resembling toy hair. There were also drops on the tongue and inside Justin's sneakers beside his bed. Several dime-size blood splatters found on the cement floor and wall beside Justin’s bed were consistent with Ayla's standing height, possibly resulting from intense projectile vomiting and/or blunt force trauma. Several blood drops were also found on the left shoulder strap of Ayla's car seat in Justin's vehicle, along with Ayla's dried vomit on the backseat (Hanson, “The Case for Ayla”). In January 2012, the Maine State Police had confirmed the blood samples taken from the house belonged to Ayla (Cousins, “Police Confirm Blood”). This evidence suggests that Ayla Reynolds was murdered by her father.
Not An Accident

Elisha Dipietro was probably the happiest person in the 29 Violette Avenue house when little Ayla arrived. She was particularly fond of her energetic 20-month-old little niece with short blonde hair and cheerful blue eyes, who would giggle like the sweetest thing in the world when people called her “Buggie” (“Ayla's Page”).

Elisha felt sorry that Ayla’s mother, Trista Reynolds, had to go through drug rehabilitation and wouldn’t be able to care for little Ayla for a while, but was also happy for Trista to make such a difficult decision. For some reason she felt she could so relate to Trista: probably because her Gabby was about the same age as little Ayla; probably because they were both young single mothers scarred by a volatile relationship. Justin Linnell, Elisha’s ex-boyfriend, reminded her a lot of her brother, Justin Dipietro (“The Puzzle Piece”). They were both unpredictable, sometimes violent, and apparently not the most responsible boyfriends or fathers.

Although something about him seemed scary to her, Elisha had always loved her big brother. Yet she was worried for Ayla. According to Ayla’s aunt Jessica Reynolds, Ayla was visibly afraid of her father. Jessica objected to Justin taking the child and described him as an abusive father who had “beaten the child in the past” (Simpson, “The Taking of Ayla Reynolds”). Trista also had her share of doubt and mistrust, claiming that when Ayla stayed with Justin he wouldn’t let her talk to Ayla on the phone and reacted agitated when asked about
Ayla’s bruises (Koenig, “Missing Girl’s Mom”). Elisha knew only too well that their worries were not out of nowhere.

Elisha, along with her daughter Gabby, lived with her two siblings, Justin and Lance, in the 29 Volette Avenue house owned by their mother Phoebe DiPietro (Ayla Reynolds Timeline). At first glance, it was one of the most modest houses out there. The little house, painted pale grey, had a matching one-car garage and a small back yard. All the decorations it had were a tree near the driveway, a couple flower bushes under the window, some swings in the back yard and a shabby green tool shed behind the house. In any ways it was exactly the kind of house people would walk past all the time without even noticing.

However, it was not as peaceful a home as it seemed. Ever since Justin’s new girlfriend Courtney Roberts moved in with her young son (Ayla Reynolds Timeline), the couple had had countless fights, often with a furious Justin throwing and smashing stuff around the house and a terrified Courtney running out of the room in tears. Elisha had always managed to keep herself and Gabby out of it, and had tried her best to watch out for Ayla, but Justin didn’t appear too happy about having other people butting in on his parental business, even his own sister. Poor Ayla was thus often caught in the middle of Justin’s storming rampages. It broke Elisha’s heart to see bruises on the Ayla’s tiny arms and legs. Yet every time after Justin calmed down he would always rush to check Ayla’s injuries, and Elisha could tell from his eyes a sincere regret over what he had done to his daughter. For a time she naively believed that Justin would start to take up his responsibilities as a father.

But he never changed. In fact, things got even worse when Justin picked up a new hobby of drinking. Violence became such a common scene in the house that Elisha wondered how on earth Courtney could still put up with Justin. One day in November, when Elisha came home
after spent a couple nights with friends, she was shocked to find Ayla with her left arm in a sling. When she tried to confront Justin, the little girl’s dad brushed it off with a flawless story. According to him he slipped on the stairs leading to the kitchen while walking into the house carrying both Ayla and a bag of groceries in his arms. “It happened so fast, I don’t know exactly how I fell on her, but I fell on her. It’s burned into my brain.” He showed her his own injured wrist (“Father Explains Ayla Reynolds' Broken Arm”). Justin was pretty much like any average father when he was not on one of his violent rampages, however, Elisha knew he was hiding something. Later that day when Justin was not around she asked Courtney, who was the only other adult in the house when it happened. The truth was that Justin got drunk and lost his temper again that evening. When he was about to hit Ayla he lost his balance, fell on his wrist and accidentally pushed Ayla down the stairs. Despite the shock, Elisha was grateful for Ayla’s good luck. It seemed almost a miracle that the tiny girl survived the fall with only one broken arm.

Elisha hoped in vain that this dangerous accident would finally wake Justin up and put a stop to his irresponsibility. However, waiting for the family in the future was more unpredictable violence and terror. Then, finally in December, came the night that would haunt Elisha’s dreams for years to come.

On the night of December 16th, 2011, neither Phoebe nor Lance was in the Violette Avenue residence. It was already past Ayla’s usual bedtime, but the little girl was not feeling well and couldn’t sleep in her crib. Justin decided to take her to the basement bedroom with him and Courtney so they could keep an eye on her. Elisha was sleeping in her first-floor bedroom across from the room Ayla shared with Gabby. She didn’t want to leave Gabby alone so she also took Gabby to sleep with her (“Unofficial Diagram of the Crime Scene”).
At around 9:30, Elisha heard noises from downstairs. It sounded like there a fight broke out between Justin and Courtney again. Worried about Ayla, Elisha decided to go and check on her. When she stepped down the staircase the first thing she saw was a crying Ayla sitting in the middle of Justin’s bed hugging her baby doll. Justin was standing in the middle of the room with an almost empty beer bottle in his hand, while Courtney was sobbing and huddling with her son in a corner. The half finished room was even messier than usual, with beer bottles and dirty clothes all over the place (“Unofficial Diagram of the Crime Scene”).

Elisha was about to go forward and pick Ayla up when the little girl started coughing into the doll. To her horror, Elisha saw clearly streaks of red smearing across the doll’s face and arms where Ayla used to wipe her mouth.

“What have you done to her!” Elisha screamed while more blood began to come out of the little girl’s mouth and pooling onto the mattress.

“Is this a house or a pigsty?!” Justin was obviously heavily drunk, waving his beer bottle, “Nobody ever bothers to cleans up—I’m talking to you b*tch!” he turned towards Courtney with frantic, bloodshot eyes. The poor woman almost disappeared into the wall, whimpering in terror.

“And this little bastard here, of course this little bastard can just throw up on whatever she wants to!”

Suddenly, with one violent wave the beer bottle slipped out of Justin’s hand, flying straight towards Ayla. Before anyone could react, the little girl fell backwards, without even a scream disappeared headfirst over the edge of the bed. Elisha felt like her heart stopped. As if her limbs froze in shock, she watched in horror as Justin, probably too drunk to realized what had happened, went around the bed trying to lift the toddler to her feet. Blood began to spray from
the little girl’s mouth all over the wall and floor. Elisha never even dreamed that so much blood could come from one person, not to mention a tiny, fragile girl who was not even two years old.

“Get up you lazy little bastard! Just as lazy as everyone else in this goddamn house!” Elisha heard Justin’s voice from far away, then realized he was lifting Ayla by the collar and shaking her against the wall. The toddler barely had enough strength to choke for air.

“Stop it! You are going to kill her!” Like a mother deer desperate to save her fawn, Elisha leaped forward, and with all her strength slapped Justin across the face. Everyone went quiet for a moment. Elisha saw the craziness in Justin’s eyes slowly fade away, and was then replaced with horror.

Justin picked up the choking toddler and went sprinting towards the car, followed by Elisha. She watched him failing to strap Ayla into her car seat with trembling hands and instead put her into the backseat. The girl’s forehead had swollen up hideously, perhaps because she was hit straight in the face with the beer bottle, perhaps because she landed on her head when she fell off the bed. She was barely conscious when she started to vomit again, this time with no blood coming out, as if all the blood had been drained out of her little body along with her life.

“Oh god… what have I done…” Justin murmured, staring at the dying girl. To Elisha’s surprise, a moment later he picked Ayla up again and began to head back to the house. “What are you doing?! We need to send her to hospital, there’s no time!”

Justin turned to look at her with a strange calmness, “We can’t save her. No doctor can save her now. And they will know what we did. None of us in this house will get away if they find out.”

Elisha felt a chill running down her spine. Despite the pain she felt for Ayla she knew that he was right. They went back in, put the dying girl down on the living room couch, and
along with Courtney they sat in silence while little Ayla took her last breath. Elisha couldn’t really remember how she helped clean up the blood in the numbness following the shock. She wished she didn’t remember how they hid Ayla’s tiny body, wrapped in her favorite pink blanket, into the trash so the first garbage truck in the morning would take her away forever, along with the punishment they all deserved. She put Ayla’s blood stained baby doll and princess slippers back to the little girl’s crib while mechanically repeating the story Justin fabricated for all of them: of how they tucked the little girl in like any other peaceful night, only to wake up and find her missing from her room… Elisha tried to convince herself that these lies would save her from jail. But would they also save her conscience?

“Ah, I woke up this morning, my daughter is not here… She is an infant she’s only twenty months years old… I put her to bed last night. My sister had checked on her. Um, woke up this morning, went to her room and she’s not there… There’s no way she could (have climbed out of her crib).” (“TRANSCRIPT”)

The sun rose in the morning of December 17th, a quiet, snow-covered morning in the small town of Waterville, just like any other winter day in central Maine. Christmas was only a week away. Most of Violette Avenue was still sound asleep in the warmth their cozy homes. However, little did they know what happened in the peaceful 29 Violette Avenue house last night, that a 911 call would shatter the joy of the upcoming holiday and leave a family heartbroken.
Works Cited


<http://www.aylareynolds.com/anon/The%20Taking%20of%20Ayla%20Reynolds.pdf>.


