Justin DiPietro called 911 on the morning of December 17, 2011 to report his 20-month-old daughter Ayla Reynolds missing from her crib. She was wearing green, polka dotted footie pajamas with the words “Daddy’s Princess” on the front. Her left arm was broken and in a soft splint and sling. (“Ayla Bell”) Reynolds had been staying with DiPietro at 29 Violette Avenue, the house he shared with his mother in Waterville, Maine. On the night of December 16th, DiPietro, his sister Elisha Dipietro, and his girlfriend Courtney Roberts were present in the house. They reported to police that they believed Reynolds had been kidnapped. (“The Case”)

Her case became a criminal investigation ten days after she was reported missing. Police have conducted over 20 searches for Reynolds in Waterville and the surrounding areas with the help of dogs, divers, residents, the Maine Warden Service, and the FBI. (Ohm, McCanna) Police do not believe Reynolds is still alive.

Reynolds’ blood was found on her car seat in DiPietro’s car, on her slippers, and on the sofa in the living room of 29 Violette Ave. Her blood was also found in the basement on a sheet and tote bag, on DiPietro’s sneakers, and on DiPietro’s mattress and sheets. Spatters of her blood were found on the floor and wall of his bedroom, and on a pallet in the basement. Her vomit was found in DiPietro’s car, and some of her blood was mixed with saliva and vomit. Blood analysts concluded that the blood spatters were the result of projectile vomiting and/or blunt force trauma. (“The Case”) The saliva present in some of the bloodstains suggests that Reynolds was bleeding both internally and externally. (Candiotti)

Reynolds had suffered injuries before when in the custody of her father, including bruises, an injured leg and a broken arm. She was visibly afraid to go with him when he came to pick her up. (Simpson) This evidence suggests that Ayla Reynolds was beaten to death by her father, Justin DiPietro.
Miss Marple
November 19, 2015

The Murder of Ayla Reynolds

Toddlers can be trying. Perhaps she wouldn’t go to sleep. Perhaps she wouldn’t stop crying. Perhaps he got wind of the fact that her mother was trying to get custody. Whatever the contributing factors were, they caused him to snap and lash out at his child in a more terrible and violent manner than ever before.

As the sun rose on the morning of December 17, 2011, Violette Avenue was still. Modest one and two story homes lined this sleepy side street in Waterville, Maine. The houses had red, gray, or brown siding, some with garages, some made of brick. What remained of the grass of everyone’s lawn was covered in snow. The road was potholed in places, and there was no sidewalk. There was ample space between the houses for a driveway, a grill, or a yard.

Number 29 looked peaceful, the empty branches of the large tree in the front yard shuddering in the wind. The house itself was gray with white trim. It was in no way remarkable, at least not this early on a Saturday morning. There were no clouds in the sky, although the cold was bitter. The final echoes of her screams had disappeared several hours before.

Maine State Police Sgt. Jeff Love could see his breath in the air as he rushed to the Waterville police station later that morning, responding to a call he received about a missing child. He could not imagine that this would be the start of a heart-rending investigation into the disappearance of a smiling 20-month-old girl.

Ayla Reynolds went to bed around 8 pm on the night of December 16, 2011. The blonde-haired, blue-eyed toddler wore her green pajamas emblazoned with the words “Daddy’s Princess.” She was under the care of her father, but there are doubts as to whether she really was his princess.
After studying the facts of the case, Sgt. Love could imagine that Ayla got fussy. Her father, Justin DiPietro, told her to be quiet and go to sleep. He was getting tired of this nonsense. Ayla had been living with him for about two months while her mother, Trista, went to rehab. Trista had worried about Ayla’s condition after previous visits with her father, when she came home with bruises and an injured leg. A police officer had witnessed young Ayla’s fear of her father when he came to pick her up. Trista’s concerns heightened after she came out of rehab and noticed that Ayla seemed unkempt and distraught during her few visits. In addition, Ayla was treated for a broken arm while staying with her father.

This broken arm was the source of the trouble that night. He had broken her arm a few weeks ago, lashing out at her when she once again failed to grasp that she must stay quiet and stop crying. Love’s heart broke for this kid. She couldn’t understand what her father wanted, could only express her frustration in ways that irked him. That night, her arm was itching under the cast, and she couldn’t scratch it.

Love could almost hear her, crying in her crib, and he could feel her fear when her father banged open the bedroom door. He roared at her to shut up, but his volume only made her cry harder. She wasn’t even two years old. How could she understand the emotional depths of her father? She only knew that she was itchy, and now she was scared too.

Her father strode across the room and smacked her across the face with considerable force. Her cherubic features crumpled, and she howled with pain, shielding herself with her hands and her dolly, but the blood was already dripping from her mouth. She couldn’t help but scream all the louder.

Sgt. Love winced at the recollection of the trail of Ayla’s blood police found spattered throughout 29 Violette Avenue. There were drips of it upstairs and on her doll and her slippers.
There were spatters of it in the basement on the walls and floor of Justin DiPietro’s bedroom. A sheet stained with blood was found stuffed in a bag in another part of the basement. Drips of her blood were found on the tongues of her father’s shoes and on her car seat in his car. Her vomit was found in Justin’s car and mixed with her saliva and blood in the basement.

The police officer could picture the fight raging through the house, if it could even be called a fight. It was more of an attack, with the man snatching the girl from her crib and inflicting more blows. She never hit back, but tried to shield herself and run away, howling with the pain, incensing her abuser even more.

There were witnesses, and Love understood their fear and horror as they watched the terrible scene unfold. Justin’s sister Elisha DiPietro and his girlfriend Courtney Roberts could not have slept through this ordeal. They must have seen the beating, but they were too afraid of Justin when he was in one of his tempers to intervene. They didn’t realize that this rage was worse than the others until it was too late for Ayla. If they told the police, they could get in trouble too. Worse, Justin could attack them, or their kids. They couldn’t risk it, and agreed with his story that someone kidnapped his small, blonde daughter.

But Love knew she wasn’t kidnapped. The trail of blood led to a different conclusion. In his mind, Love followed Justin and his daughter to the basement. The father kicked her hard, catching her in the ribs. Ayla’s body was broken; she was coughing up blood, nearly choking on her vomit, spewing the remains of her insides across the room.

He had had enough. He dragged her to his car, tossed her in the back, and sped off into the night. Her cries were quieter now, muffled by the pain so excruciating that she could barely whimper. He drove and drove, turning down winding back roads until he was a bit lost. Love guessed that he was miles and miles away from Waterville, dumping the now lifeless body in the
woods somewhere so remote that it would not be found for years, if ever. Maine is a large state with lots of empty space. She was so small.

Love could not imagine what Justin DiPietro was thinking when he returned home to his quiet street as the tendrils of dawn began to pierce the sky. He must have been formulating a plan, for he called 911 a few hours later to lie that his daughter was kidnapped.

The police searched thoroughly for the small, blonde girl. They scoured the neighborhood, enlisting the help of as many officers, firemen, and volunteers as they could find. Although they later concluded that Ayla could not have left the house under her own volition, they did know that the temperature had not risen above freezing that first day of the search. A toddler alone would stand no chance against the elements, even on a sunny day.

Love took part in those searches, becoming more and more convinced that Ayla was dead with each passing hour. It was a hard case to work on, but the tragedy of the situation only fueled him to search harder for an answer. Ayla, who was so young and powerless, deserved a closed case, but Love, try as he might, could not find the body or enough other evidence to convict her father.

Today, when Sgt. Love drives by, 29 Violette Avenue once again blends into the surrounding neighborhood, at least to people who are unaware of its history. The police tape is gone, as is the pile of stuffed animals left in tribute to the little girl who disappeared. The tree still stands in the yard, its leaves shifting with the seasons, and the bushes next to the house cling to their pink buds well into each fall, but Ayla remains 20 months old forever.
Works Cited


