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A Life Picked Apart

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Libby Conroy

A Life Picked Apart

First, you need to understand that she haunts me. I can't escape her face, her flowery smell, or her pain. She follows me everywhere, as she should, since I was the one who murdered her. I suppose I'll start at the end...

It was only four o'clock, yet darkness already had fallen. I could barely distinguish the faces in the crowd; their black garments and veils blended into the shadows. As the coffin was set into the earth, Ma lost control. She fell into Da, her body shaking with each sob. I restlessly rocked back and forth on the balls of my feet, eyes fixated on the ground below. Frantically, I bit my nails, spitting the shards only inches away from the coffin. Da placed his hand on my shoulder, attempting to quiet and restrain me. Both of us knew I could not be comforted. The bagpipes carried a tune of sorrow, echoing through the empty hills of Boyle, dedicated to my sister. The coffin was in the ground, and the reality of the situation had slapped us in the face: although inside the coffin contained no body, we would never see Caitlin again.

My sister's funeral seems like ages ago, yet time never heals an eternal wound. Ma cried each night for years, and Da never recovered. He died not the humorous man I once knew but solemn and distant. I can't help but to wonder how my life would have been different if Caitlin were still here, if I wasn't sick that day and walked to school with her. I've been told repeatedly that it wasn't my fault—but it's only natural to disagree. No one else was there that day. No one else knew what happened. The truth is undeniable: she would still be alive if I didn't catch the flu. She wouldn't have disappeared if I were near.

It was December 16, 1913. I was in bed with what Ma claimed to be "jus' a bit o' the common cold". I remember feeling as if I was going to die. My body was shaking with the chills, yet my fever was causing me to sweat out every pore. I could neither swallow nor breathe easily, and my cough rattled painfully through my lungs. Although Ma seemed cheery enough, I saw through her optimistic mask. I was deathly ill, and not even the doctors thought I would come out of it alive. "I suppose ye won't be going to school today," Ma decided, as if it wasn't obvious already. "Jus' rest yer head, Alice. Caitlin can manage alone today. Lord knows I was going to the mill an' back when I was 'er age."

Ma was right; Caitlin was nine by then. She should have been fully able to care for herself, and a simple three-mile walk to school was tolerable. Yet something didn't sit well with me; Caitlin had yet to prove herself independent. She was the most docile and naïve child I've ever known. Caitlin would catch spiders and cockroaches, and set them free. She couldn't bear to kill them, for she believed that they had feelings too. In school, she would be the last one to leave, always helping Mrs. Murphy with the chalk board and grading papers. "Ma," I began to protest. "I can take 'er. I'll jus' walk 'er ter school and come straight—"

"No! Ye know jus' as well as I that yer not strong enough ter leave yer bed. If Da and I didn't 'av ter leave for work, we would take 'er. She'll be fine, Alice. She needs ter grow up eventually." With that, Ma rewet my damp cloth, placed it on my forehead, and left my room. Before I could fall asleep, I heard a voice, almost a whisper, call my name.

"Ally? Are ye okay?" I relentlessly opened my eyes, and attempted to focus on the pale blonde girl bending over my bedside.

"Caitlin. I'm fine." The words sounded strange as I said them. My throat seemed to be in protest of my speaking, each word tasted like fire. "An' you'll be fine, Cait. Mind, you've walked ter school 'undreds of times, I know ye know the way. Don't forget yer gloves an' hat, it's bitter cold outside."

Caitlin held my clammy hand and smiled. "I'll say hello ter Ms. Murphy for ye." She kissed my cheek's burning skin and left. She shut the door of my room, and walked out of my life. I closed my eyes allowing my mind to travel far beyond my home in Boyle. The fever produced a nightmare, yet it was better than the reality I would awake to. I was running from a monster—no, a lion—and next I know, my fear melted away, and was replaced with anger. I faced the lion, grabbed its mane, and snapped its neck. But it was no longer a lion...I was holding a dead kitten in my hands...

"What do yer mean she wasn't in school? Well, aye, everyone knows that Alice is under the weather, but Caitlin? She should 'av been 'ome hours ago!" Ma's voice exploded with anger yet trembled with panic. Even from my state of deliria, I could sense the atmosphere growing thick with alarm. As I attempted to sit up from my bed, Ma swung my bedroom door open; the wind from it knocked me back in bed. "ALICE MARY," Ma screamed. My head, already aching, began to throb. "Where is yer sister?!" Where is Caitlin?!"

"I dunno, Ma. She left hours ago. I thought she went ter—"

"She never made it ter school, Alice. She is far ter young ter 'av walked alone." As tears formed in my eyes, Ma fled from my room. She was right—Caitlin still needed me, and I hadn't been there. I was too weak to take care of my own baby sister, and my parents clearly agreed.

Almost exactly twelve hours later, I found myself wrapped in five different layers of clothing, standing in the harsh of winter. My

body was in the ultimate protest; the fever was causing me to sweat through my ratted clothes, which then froze to my body from the cold. My heart was heavy with dread. Each neighbor I visited only verified the truth: Caitlin was missing and no one had seen her disappear. My gloved hand knocked on the door a second time. I was standing outside of home belonging to a man that was new to Boyle. No one knew much about him, besides the fact that he lived alone and rarely interacted with others. He herded sheep for a living, and, since hermit-like behavior was common of most shepherds in town, no one thought twice.

His lawn was littered with rubbish—bits of metal, cloth, baby dolls, books, children's toys—each half frozen to the ground. The house itself was falling apart. The paint had already peeled off most of the wood, the shutters were swinging from their hinges, and the roof seemed to be caving in. As a matter of fact, I have no idea how it was holding the snow gained in the last night's fall. After several minutes, the door remained unanswered. Feeling defeated, I turned around and began to walk away from the home's stoop. I felt a hand grab my arm.

"Can I help ye, miss?" I turned to see a decrepit old man, just as withered as the house he lived in. His hand's skin had aged to the point where it appeared as a leather glove, sagging like it might fall off. His facial features were sunken in; his eyes drooped like a hound dog's. The most frightening quality of this man was not seen by the eye, but experienced through the nose. Mr. Picket reeked of death, even more so than the average eighty year old man. Decay and stale bread, I thought to myself, the perfect description for his scent.

Mr. Picket stared expectantly at my blank expression. "Ello," I began breathlessly, "I live across the road, and...well, me sister went missing yesterday. 'Av ye seen 'er?" Mr. Picket's saggy face stretched oddly into a grin.

"Nay, I 'av not seen her, Caitlin. Ye best be off, ye look ill and it's mighty cold outside." He finally let go of my arm, breaking under his surprisingly firm grasp. I frantically scurried away, running as fast as I could back to my home. Ma has always said not to be judgmental, for you never know the true story behind anyone. Judgments or not, Mr. Picket left an unnerving feeling in my bones, a feeling which demanded further examination.

After my excursion with Mr. Picket, I only became sicker. The doctor blamed Ma and Da for this, stating that I was on the road to recovery before I went out in the cold. They both nodded absently, neither retaining his lecture. I was strictly ordered to bed rest, and I could barely manage that. Emotionally and physically, I began to shut down. As each day passed, the hope of finding Caitlin alive diminished. No one saw her leave our home. No one saw her walk to school. It was as she had dropped off the face of the Earth, as she left absolutely no trace behind.

Consciousness became a state of torment. I would weave through dreams and hallucinations, only to wake to reality's nightmare: an empty cold house and a permanent feeling of remorse. Ma and Da silently left for work each morning, abandoning me in my sickbed. Because my eyes were too raw to read my storybooks, the window opposite my bed became my sole source of entertainment. I watched Mr. and Mrs. Malloy habitually send their young children to school day after day. My eyes followed John and Maggie, observing as they walked past Mr. Picket's shabby home. I saw John place a hand on his younger sister's shoulder, gently pushing her forward. Their pace quickened past the house, and for an obvious reason: Mr. Picket stood frozen, watching sinisterly as the two scurried past.

Thoughts flooded my half-coherent mind. Something was off—Mr. Picket was hiding something. I slowly emerged out of bed, supporting my weight on the bedposts. My eyes never left the window. Mr. Picket continued to stare at John and Maggie, with an expression of complete calculation. He had the look my old cat used to get, right before he pounced on his prey. Mr. Picket sneered to himself, and turned back inside. My hands were pressed against the window, and my body was shaking not from the sickness, but from fear. The back of Mr. Picket's coat was stained with two brown handprints, a color eerily resembling dried blood.

I rushed down the stairs, disregarding the doctor's order of bed rest. Throwing on my coat, I burst through the front door, and proceeded to head across the street. I had a gut feeling that she'd be there, behind the rotted wooden door would reveal Caitlin. Panic and anticipation took over my emotions; I had no plan, and no idea how I ended up opening his front door. Fear—what I should have felt—was not an option. I had to fix the family I had broken. Or at least try.

The inside of the home was in ruin, even more so than the exterior. I peered around the corner, only to see an empty kitchen. The floor was trashed with bits of moldy food, explaining the putrid smell. I continued through the house, trying not to notice the remains of rodents scattered about the house. Each step taken left me feeling even more terrified. Although I could feel Caitlin coming closer, I also felt the fear of uncertainty to how I would find her.

I gravitated towards a set of stairs leading to what only could be the basement. Down, down, down, I traveled, until the breath in front of my face was all I could see. Darkness consumed the chamber-like room, completely blinding me from what it contained. My feet slipped on the ground; ice was covering the majority of the floor. Sliding across the room, I held out my hand until I made contact with a wall, damp and frigid. I could hear my heart's beat, and feel its vibrations through my body. What was I doing in this basement, and more importantly, where

was Mr. Picket? Scaling the wall, I continued around the perimeter of the room, hoping to find some sort of indicator to if Caitlin was here. A familiar stench crept up my nose, the same smell that followed Mr. Picket. Rancid and horrible, I began to follow the odor, until it became unbearable.

I was about to give up my search until I crashed into something hanging. It began to swing back and forth, causing the hook it was dangled from to piercingly shriek. Footsteps boomed from the floorboards upstairs. Mr. Picket was coming. I tried to silence the noise, grabbing the object violently swaying. My fingers sunk into icy flesh, ripe with decay. I didn't have time to panic, let alone think about what—or who—could be on the hook; the footsteps were approaching the stairwell. As I ran through the basement, I collided with several swinging bodies, each causing their own racket swinging from the rusty hooks. My body would convulse each time I would make contact, as I felt skin against skin. Life against death. Warmth against the frozen cold. I could barely distinguish the footsteps from my own heartbeat, each pounding in my ears.

I came to a corner, completely trapped. Frantically, I felt around, looking for any sort of weapon or tool I could arm myself with. Cobwebs and dust were all I felt—yet almost miraculously, my hands closed around a heavy wooden stake. It was a pickaxe. Mr. Picket was fully in the basement now, holding a lantern illuminating the room. From the little light, I could make out exactly what I was standing in. Naked bodies were dangling from hooks, each preserved from the freezing temperature. Their hair held bits of ice and frost, and their skin was each tinted blue. Not one face had their eyes closed. Each was looking straight at me, wide-eyed, as if they were pleading for help. The hooks pierced directly though their chests, but the bits of blood that would have oozed though had been wiped away. I tightly closed my eyes, unwilling to see anything more as my stomach churned. I doubled over to vomit, but tried not to. Any sound would give my hiding spot away.

Mr. Picket's wheezing voice issued a laugh, malice and evil, causing the room to become even colder. Although he couldn't see me in the corner, he could sense my presence. I shuffled back into the shadows, my knuckles turning white against the axe. The further he came into the room, the more bodies I saw. Eventually, Mr. Picket stood in the center, so his lantern shone throughout the chamber. There must have been about twenty bodies—almost all children—hanging from the ceiling like cattle. I felt myself becoming sick, paralyzed with fear; I was standing in the middle of a human slaughterhouse, with a cold-blooded killer.

"Alice," he hissed, "I know yer in 'ere. Come out, Alice. I'll show ye yer sister." He began to laugh again, as if he knew that there was no escape. The element of surprise, I knew, was my only advantage. He

didn't know where I was, and had no idea to what I carried. "Look, stupid lassie. Ye can hide, but in the end, look what you'll become." He held up his lantern to a body hanging in the center. Caitlin. Her green eyes looked right at me, as if begging for avenge. Anger, disgust, and hatred filled my body, completely overruling my fear. Her pale naked skin reflected the light, lighting a path connecting Mr. Picket and me. I charged. The pickaxe was no longer heavy in my hands and was effortless to lift over my shoulder. I plunged the blade into his chest, and didn't even have time to register the look of shock on his face. He fell. His body crashed into the stone floor, and his head cracked wide open. Blood gushed out of the calculated mind that murdered my sister. I swung the axe again and again, piercing his chest, legs, stomach, face. His metallic blood drowned my bare feet, as it seeped through every pore. Eventually, my arms couldn't move anymore. They hung limp from my frail body, covered in a murdered man's blood. Mr. Picket was now unrecognizable. His features were destroyed, and organs protruded from their dwelling.

The axe clattered to the stone floor, splattering blood as it dropped. Looking at the mess I created, I stepped away from the body and vomited. I vomited my pain, my guilt, and my fear. My body was now physically as empty as I felt. I searched for Caitlin in the pitch black; Mr. Picket's lantern shattered when he fell. Fumbling from body to body, I finally felt my Caitlin. I would recognize her whisper thin frame anywhere. She was too high up to remove. I tried time and time again. My feeble attempts to detach her would only tear at the flesh in her chest. The sound of ripping skin was the last I remembered...

I awoke three days later. My body had collapsed from a mixture of sickness, exhaustion, and obvious emotional stress. The haunting images never came close to fading from my memory; it was impossible to move on with life. I would close my eyes, and see blood, death, and my sister's limp body. Ghosts haunted not only my nightmares but crept into my conscious mind. During dinner, I would scream, for chicken soup would have turned into blood. I would faint during Mass because I would see Caitlin's body nailed to the cross. Four years after Caitlin's death, my parents checked me into Galway's Insane Asylum. I don't blame them; I know I'm crazy. You see, a part of me is glad I lost my mind. I deserve to be punished for the extensive grief and death I created.