

"Solitary" by Precious Clinton

"I don't know what to do! She was right there! Right there! I turned my back for one minute!" Marcus exclaimed in anxiety and fear as he sat in a drunken stupor, yelling as he recalls what was likely the worst day of his life. He is seated in the middle of the front of the bar at Willie's, currently pouring his despair out while William Jackson, the owner and bartender, continues to pour shots of hard vodka to temporarily soothe his heartache.

"We were at the gas station", his voice trembles. "The gas station, on Port Fuller Road. Sh-she, uh, was in the uh, back seat. We had just come from her ballet recital. She's been doing ballet for 3 years, since she was six..." Marcus continues on, with more and more agony on his face as he remembers such a devastating moment in his life.

"Mark, you don't have to tell us the details and force yourself to relive this moment. What's important is that you find your daughter, and you already know we're all supporting you and her safe return. We're praying to God for that right with you," Willie assures Marcus. Yet, the 38-year-old with heavy bags under his eyes that can't be missed, insists on recounting the last moments he'd seen his 9-year-old daughter, Cameron.

"I got out to pump the gas. Cameron was so excited to have performed and she had my phone. She really wanted to show me a part of the recording of the recital...I always record her biggest moments, like any dad should, especially in case her mother... ummm," Marcus stops in his tracks and a couple of tears fall. They drop slowly down his brown face and seem to stop at every slight wrinkle, like speed bumps on a smooth road. He continues.

"She wanted to point out a specific ballet move. She said she'd worked so hard on it because she'd always trip over her own feet somehow," Marcus does a slight chuckle, thinking of all the times he would find her in her room dancing, twirling, and slipping, just to get herself back up again. That image slowly fades into the image of the 9-year old's pink bedroom now, cold and desolate.

"I previously told her to wait 'til I got back in the car, but she was so eager and persistent."

Cameron got out of the car and came to show me as the pump filled the tank. I watched the clip and wow, my little girl is amazing. She killed that. After I uh, watched it, I told her get back in the car. I was getting ready to get back in with her soon, but the gas pump hit a snag and stopped. I told her get in and lock the doors, I'd be back in literally just one minute.

There was no one in line, I'd be right back out. I told her I may even bring her out a quick snack for having such a crazy good recital," he recalls. William and the other bar patrons who have begun listening to the man and his despair, can visibly see Marcus getting uncomfortable. They knew what he is going to tell them in the next few minutes is going to break their heart, just like his had. William, with sympathetic eyes, reads Marcus' uncomfortable body language. He urges him to stop right where he is and insists that he gives him a ride home from the bar, which closes at 9:30PM. "The bar closes in a half hour, just bear with me and stop torturing yourself. Please. As your friend, I'd like you to just relax and not replay this in your mind for us all to hear the details this time. I know Cameron's face is imprinted in your head and there's not much else you're thinking about besides that day... that and Alicia, of course. Just chill for me man, until I can get you home."

Marcus nods with wet eyes and tight lips. He puts his head down for a split second before looking at the old-fashioned wall clock on the left side wall of the bar. The time read 9:02PM. He had just realized he's been at the bar for 3 hours. He had gone straight there after leaving his office. Marcus, who has his own real estate brokerage, Stone Realty, has been trying to drown out his thoughts and perpetual loneliness with whiskey and vodka. Let's just say the bar isn't the first place he started drinking today. It normally isn't, and hasn't been for the last 8 days; ever since Cameron vanished.

The next morning arrived far too soon for Marcus. It seemed like the 24 hours in the day skipped the night, and that is the time Marcus looked forward to the most. He looked forward to being able to tuck himself away in his big, drafty home that was once filled with his daughter's giggles and his wife's cheer and womanly gossip. A man who once enjoyed company in his home, now found it unbearable. Someone who used to love the sound of his wife's Sunday pop music, his daughter's faint ballet melodies, and the sound of his own phone consistently going off with work-related calls, he could no longer bear any noise. He didn't enjoy any songs, television programs, or calls. Those all reminded him of a sense of normalcy he could no longer have, now that his life has been turned completely upside down. The only noise he couldn't tune out was that which was constantly going off in his head. A noise that told him his wife having been in a medically induced coma for the last 7 months and his daughter disappearing, is his fault.

Alicia Stone is Marcus' wife of 14 years. She is a beautiful dark-skinned woman with glowing skin that matched her glowing personality and smile, some of the best things that made Marcus fall in love with her. Alicia was the manager of the Walsh Elder Care Center.

She loves taking care of others, especially children and the elderly. She made a career out of it. It was at this nursing home that she met Marcus 16 years ago, having been Alicia Clarkson back then. He had been visiting his elderly grandfather who she had helped take care of, ever since she started there fresh out of graduation from Quinnipiac University. They were brought together by a senile Charles Stone's declining health. Despite such unfortunate circumstances, they bonded over their mutual care and concern for the old man. As his health got worse, they spent more and more time together. After having been in a relationship for two years, Marcus proposed to Alicia and changed her last name, something he told her he would do someday. It was the beginning of the best years of his life, and those years have been the best, until this very year.

Marcus never thought he'd see the day he'd lose his wife and daughter, figuratively and/or literally. He lost Alicia in what would be 8 months ago, two weeks from yesterday. His life may currently be full of agony, but it is also filled with such unfortunate irony. The day of Alicia being put into a medically induced coma, the three of them, Marcus, Cameron, and Alicia, had all been on their way to Alicia's parents' house for dinner. Marcus sits at his kitchen table, riddled with old plates and takeout boxes. He breathes in and stares at a family photo of the three of them on his Samsung refrigerator. His mind begins to race between memories of the last day he'd seen his wife conscious and the last day he saw his bright-eyed, wide-smiled daughter.

"I hope your father doesn't call me out again on the whole Pats thing", Marcus recalls saying to Alicia, referring to his support for the New England Patriots football team, despite living in a Maryland community that strongly supports their opponent, the Baltimore Ravens. "Oh babe, you'll be fine. I'll make sure he behaves," she says with a cheeky smile on her face.

"The one you might have to worry about tonight is my momma, you know how she gets with Cameron and gives her everything she wants. Spoiled rotten!" She exclaims as she looks in the backseat and smiles at her daughter. "Yeah, well she won't be spoiled tonight!" Marcus playfully assures his wife and daughter as he drives to the Clarkson household.

Alicia chuckles, knowing that is the furthest thing from the truth. As she looks ahead at the street, her phone rings. "Hi mom, we're almost there...yeah...of course, I can grab some. No problem, see you soon. Love you." Alicia gets off the phone with her mother.

"Sooo turns out mom needs gravy! She wants us to pick some up from the supermarket. I think we're just about 3 minutes away from one. I always forget where it is.

I swear it's in a different spot every time we come down here." She tells Marcus.

Before they know it, their blue Jeep Grand Cherokee pulls into the vast parking lot of Aldi's supermarket. It is a quarter to seven o'clock in the evening and the unsuspecting Stone family is one of about a dozen vehicles in the lot.

"I'll go grab it," Alicia says as she starts stepping out the parked car. "Can I go I with you?" Cameron eagerly asks her mother, hoping this is an opportunity to bribe her into buying her a Payday candy bar from the checkout line.

"Cameron, baby, your mom will be right back. Before you know it, we'll be at grandma and grandpa's." Marcus looks at his wife who looks at their daughter and is clearly giving in to her child's bright puppy dog face. "It's okay hon'. We'll be right out. Come on love bug," Alicia motions for her daughter to get out of the car and Cameron's face lights up just like moonlight. "Yes!" Cameron exclaims, happy to be out of the car for the first time in 40 minutes.

"And the spoiling begins!" Marcus quickly shouts to his wife before the passenger door closes, smirking to himself as he watches his pride and joy saunter away from the SUV. Suddenly, in the quickest instant, Marcus hears his daughter scream and the sound of some sort of collision. He jets from the car and sees his wife unconscious in front of a black SUV, lying still on the cold, hard ground. Cameron is sitting on the ground with minor scrapes on the palms of her hands and knees, watching her father hold her mother while shouting for someone to call 911. Cameron sits and cries unsure of how their night—and lives, had just changed in an instant. The driver of the large vehicle gets out of the car, along with a selection of empty beer cans falling to the ground. He anxiously looks at Alicia's body, then Marcus' panicked face, and then lastly to Cameron, before uttering a faint, "I'm so sorry..." before sprinting off out of the parking lot in total fear. Marcus screams, "hey! Get back here! Look at what you did!" In disgust, he watches the drunken driver take off. Marcus looks over at a woman, one of the store clerks, who lets him know that paramedics have been called. Marcus defeatedly thanks the young woman and diverts his attention to his 8-year-old daughter, who is trembling as tears pour from her eyes. She looks up at her father and says shakily, "Daddy, sh-she pushed me out of the way. Mommy saved me." Marcus looks at his daughter and simply nods in understanding, as if all the energy has been sucked out of his body.

Marcus, still sitting at his kitchen table, begins tearing up as he allows the memory to temporarily fade. He continues to torture himself as he begins to think of his daughter and the peril she may be in.

Gaining some strength to move from the kitchen to the second floor of his home, he slowly makes his way to Cameron's bedroom. He hesitates to touch the doorknob at first, until he eventually pushes open the blue door that reads "Cameron" in bright colorful letters surrounded by small star-shaped stickers. Taking a second to look around, he smiles softly at her rainbow artwork that covers the 4 walls of the room. He walks to the twin-sized bed that remains covered in multiple leotards and fluffy tutus. This is how Cameron left her room the day of the incident, and he had no interest in moving anything. He kept it as is, holding on to the hope that his daughter will be back to tidy the room herself, sooner than later.

Marcus lies down on the child's bed. Lifting one of the pillows to his face and inhaling. He begins to recall the last moments with his daughter at the gas station. He remembers the last thing he said to her, "maybe I will bring you out a quick snack for the ride home for having such a crazy good recital." He can vividly see the smile on her face as he watches her get in the car and lock the doors, before turning his back. He went in to the front counter of the station and began explaining the pump situation to the worker. The clerk was a young 20-something with very little motivation and even less care. The worker simply tells Marcus, "It does that all the time, just gotta give it a little jiggle 'til it starts pumping again." He thanks the clerk and pays for a PayDay candy bar he got from the selection of sweets beneath the countertop. He heads back to his car. He begins jiggling the pump multiple times until he's reached the maximum fill of the \$45 gas payment he'd made with his credit card at the pump. Marcus gets back into his Jeep, saying to his daughter, "sorry Cambug, the stupid pump stopped working. I've got you a PayDay!" He began to extend his arm to the backseat just to immediately look back and see his daughter wasn't in the car. He began panicking, looking around frantically, then jumped out, screaming his daughter's name. "Cameron, that's enough! Come on out, stop hiding! This is a gas station for crying out loud. This isn't the place to play around." Marcus gets no response. His daughter is nowhere in sight, just a few approaching vehicles and seemingly ignorant passersby with inquisitive expressions on their confused faces. Marcus starts running up to possible witnesses that may have seen Cameron wander off. He does this to no avail.

Needing to call 911, Marcus realizes he doesn't have his cell phone. "She has my phone! Y- yeah she has my phone." He runs back into the gas station and hysterically asks the clerk if he could use the "Find My iPhone" feature on her device. "Huh? What's your problem man?" He responds angrily and nervously, "my daughter, sh-sh-she's gone."

But she has my phone, I need to track it!" The clerk's nonchalant face quickly turned into an expression of sympathy. She hands Marcus the phone.

Marcus quickly opens the application and begins entering his phone credentials. The feature starts tracking. He goes back outside and hears the tracking alarm on his iPhone 11—coming from underneath his car. "What the.." Marcus says to himself, as he gets on his knees besides the Jeep to look under. There his phone was indeed, now brandishing a cracked screen over the wallpaper of him, his wife, and his daughter's faces. Marcus grimaces at the location of the phone and its state and begins wailing. He acknowledges that the phone had to have been kicked under the car. At that point, he knows someone took Cameron, or lured her out into their filthy hands.

By the time the police arrived, who had been contacted due to the gas station employee's good judgment, Marcus had been sitting on the cold cement with his hands on his head, and his head leaning against the car. He sat in disbelief. He had not imagined that his day would end up with him speaking to police, allowing them to document what felt like yet another nightmare.

Having closed his eyes, Marcus slowly opens them again. He gets up from his daughter's bed and as though he were lightheaded, slowly drifts out of the missing girl's room. As he slowly walks down the steps, the home phone rings. The noise sends an unpleasant ringing through his ears. He then begins rushing to the phone, having remembered that it could possibly be his wife's doctor or the detective working on Cameron's case. He grabs the phone, but doesn't immediately pick up, acknowledging that either of those calls could result in his day getting completely worse, or slightly better.

"H-hello." Marcus says apprehensively, not knowing what he is about to hear. "Hi, Mr. Stone.

This is Dr. Samuel. I've been monitoring your wife for the last few months or so." Marcus notes that this conversation could go in two possible directions. He's not sure if he is ready for either.

"Yes. D-Dr. Samuel. How is she..." Marcus stammers nervously.

"Well, Mr. Stone, I call with great news for you and your family. Alicia is very lucky to have a husband that hasn't given up on her. Your wife is awake."

Marcus nearly drops the phone. He is flooded with ambivalent emotions as the doctor's voice turns into a faint echo of "hellos" and asking if Marcus is still present at the phone.

Grateful yet overwhelmed, Marcus thanks the doctor for informing him of the miraculous news and hangs up. He walks over to his living room sofa, now in a trance-like state. After about five minutes, Marcus collects himself and tries to gather his thoughts. He begins heading to the coat closet and grabs his old, worn-out running shoes. He then grabs his car keys.

Marcus is in one of the most difficult positions of his life. He is eager to see his wife, who has been unconscious for nearly 8 months. But, how does he tell his wife who has been in a coma for so long due to one tragedy, that he has lost their daughter due to another?

TO BE CONTINUED...