

The Chihuahuan Report

Hundreds of miles away, beyond the smog, rush of traffic, and clutter of urban neighborhoods, rested an oil rig in the Chihuahua Desert. The earth beneath its sands sung with an electric hum at the arrival of a new moon.

Pumping underneath this sacred ground was the black gold that man's machinery worked so hard to find. A power as old as life itself, surged throughout the land betwixt the morsels of dirt and clay. No one was there to see it, but all came to work it. For it was neither here, there, now, or then. And if one were lucky, the Milky Way would illuminate a path for them to come and gaze upon it, as Matthew Pierce had done countless times.

The land-based drilling rig stood erect. Perfectly cut squares of earth were carved into the desert, and the search for oil conquered more and more of the desert terrain. Matthew Pierce, still young and inexperienced, worked as a roughneck doing the undesirable jobs at this rig. Atop the highest peak of the derrick, he sat. It helped him forget his loneliness, especially in the hollow hours of dawn.

But today he could barely remember how he managed to climb this great height. His mind had shut off, and saliva formed a pool in his opened mouth that spilled over in a trickle, proving to be anything but the picture of a stable man. Even in his stupor, Matthew understood that to star-gaze on the job was a risk. But begging him to disturb their dormancy were the luminary fields above. The whites of his knuckles begin to fade as he loosened his grip on the steel, interested in obtaining a star from the sky.

“Hey! Pierce! What the hell are you doin’?!” A voice on a megaphone from down below echoed in urgency.

The sound made Matthew’s back bristle in agitation, but it jolted his senses enough to become aware of his catatonic drooling. Without missing a beat, he wiped the drool from his now-closed mouth and concentrated on capturing the star that hovered elusively in the silver solar system. The voice beneath his dangling feet could wait, he thought.

He reached up and picked a peaceful star, caressing its smooth surface as if it had the ability to grant him three wishes. Then, he abandoned his admiration for it and began to squeeze it tightly, wondering what true stardust felt like.

“Is that ‘sumbitch cutting the drill line?!” The voice belonged to the site’s tool pusher, Casey Nash, who tore his safety hat from his bald head and flung it to the ground. “He’s cutting the line, you ‘idgets!” he screamed. “Forget the kelly, get out of there!”

A cannonade of expletive shouts was hurled directly at Matthew from below, yet he remained perched upon the crown block, unaware of the commotion. A snapping sound reverberated in the air followed by his now-conscience witness to the traveling block plummeting to the ground. The crewmen, who were hundreds of feet below, scrambled to safety, but Matthew did not look to see if they had escaped. His priority was to observe the star that rested inside his palm.

To his alarm, the star had turned into an opaque crumb of dirt; Nothing like stardust. Disgusted, he released what was left of the dust into the darkness, letting the wind pick up its particles to be carried past the prairies and into the barren wilderness.

Later, his crewmen would tell Matthew that he had climbed to the top of the rig where the crown block was, straddled it, and sawed the drill line with a knife. But Matthew had no recollection of this. It was not too long that the roughneck was thrown to the ground on his knees in front of his supervisor, tool pusher Casey Nash.

Nash, who was already assessing the amount of rig repair and injuries to his men, examined Pierce in the way a wasp examines its freshly-stung prey. The boy's umber hair was drenched in sweat and fever, which made Nash take validation in his long-standing belief that fledgling men now-a-days don't understand the concept of a haircut.

It wasn't until the tool pusher demanded an explanation that Matthew spoke. "I was g-gone," he stammered, not daring to look Nash in the face. Bile began to insist its way forward from the back of the roughneck's throat, but he swallowed it in defiance. He tried to speak again, but the world was artificial. He didn't trust his surroundings or, for that matter, his own vocal cords.

Ploddingly, and with self-constraint, Nash asked, "Do you have any idea what you've done?"

This was not asked in concern, nor did he intend for the question to produce an answer. Casey Nash has been in the oil business for thirty-one years. He's directed the drilling of black gold for longer than this boy has been alive. Thus, Nash knew that there was not a reply that Matthew Pierce could give that would mollify him.

Completely defeated, Matthew gave in to the ache in his bones and to the drilling in his head. With a frail disposition and quivering words, he asked only one question.

In utter despair he whispered, "What is today?"

If Nina Fuentes, a homicide detective, was asked how far her precinct was to the dirt roads that lead to a drilling rig in the desert, she would answer with the hours in which it took her to drive there, or if she was feeling feisty, she'd reply with the number of gas station stops needed: one. She did, after all, own an eco-friendly car.

In addition to having an affinity for environmental awareness, she was a woman of practicality. The less noise in her life, the better her mind could focus. Unfortunately, she accepted that the bustling city she lived in could not hear the undisclosed desires of its citizens' hearts, nor did it notice her yearning for occasional moments of solitude. Because in the end, that was all that she desired: to be left alone. Two decades of ex-lovers could attest to that.

The ten-minute drive to her job from her condo was fitting for a sunrise excursion, but her preferred transportation was the twenty-minute bicycle ride in the early mists of the morning. Peace was often achieved when the earth was dark at her departure and pessimism in her arrival.

Uncharacteristically, she did not arrive several hours early to work. Instead, she arrived at the normal hour of nine o'clock sharp and was crestfallen when the morning did not notice. The sunrise did not bother to inquire about her absence, and her Prius did not boast to her bicycle that it was chosen to be the head chauffeur. However, her arrival met with the usual smiles and courteous nods that were given freely to all, no matter the hour.

"Good morning, Detective! Captain Lamar wants to see you in his office." Melody, a newly hired twenty-something-year-old, smiled brightly at her.

Fuentes reciprocated the welcome with a nod and kept walking. Past the reception area was her office, or rather, a communal space that housed the desks of four detectives including the sergeant. It was situated in the back of the precinct away from the rotating door of citizens, criminals, and boys in blue. From there, the space narrowed to reveal two doors belonging to the lieutenant and captain.

As she entered Captain Philip Lamar's suite, she was greeted with a grievance. "Look at this mess, Fuentes!" he said, making a grand gesture at a stack of papers placed on

his desk. "You would think they could at least find a secretary who understood the value of a filing system!" He picked up a plain, white mug that cowered next to said papers and waved it in the air as if making a case to an imaginary jury. "And I have to make my own coffee too!"

Leaning a shoulder up against a wall where his honorary awards hung, Fuentes took her cellphone out of her pocket and began perusing the web in nonchalance, retorting as she scrolled, "Melody isn't incompetent, Phil. You're just a *crazy person*." The delivery of that last line was accompanied with a smile and a raise of both eyebrows.

Taken aback, he set the mug back down and gave his full attention to her. She, on the other hand, returned to her phone. The captain was relatively harmless since he was made completely up of formalities and Germ-X. At the time, she told herself that it was his Obsessive Compulsive Disorder that doomed their relationship-not his accusation of her tendency have been "emotionally withholding."

The captain breathed in deeply (which Fuentes assumed was the latest advice from his therapist) and sat down in his yoga ball chair. Straightening the edges of the paper from the file stack, he said, "I'm assigning you a case. It seems there was a big accident on an oil rig in West Texas."

At this, she glanced up. "Oh? In the Permian Basin?"

“No.” His tone remained informative, “It’s in some obscure site in the middle of nowhere.” He handed her a file from the same stack that he just moments ago tried to straighten. It was labeled “The Chihuahuan Report.”

Her interest peaked, and she tucked her phone into the pocket of her high-rise slacks and relieved the file from Captain Lamar’s moisturized fingertips. Pacing the small area in front of his ajar door, she read its contents.

All the while, the captain remained sitting but resumed his briefing. “Apparently, a man named Matthew Pierce, white male, twenty-four years old, is being charged with homicide, killing one man and injuring several others by cutting the drilling line that held heavy equipment. It happened today at 4 a.m. The local police are still taking statements as we speak.”

“And the media?”

He shook his head, “Haven’t been notified. The oil company wants to keep it under wraps. Actually, the only reason we know about it is from an anonymous phone call we received around 7 a.m this morning. From there, we dug until we had a case.”

A sarcastic snort escaped her nose, “An anonymous caller? Who? Deep Throat?”

No reply. Sarcasm, she reminded herself, was another reason why she and the great Captain Philip Lamar couldn’t go the distance. Instead of saving the joke, she decided to concentrate on the obvious holes in the case.

With a thumb nail wedged in the crevice of her two front teeth, she began to think out loud, "How did they keep the accident a secret for two whole days?"

The captain did not move, but his eyes tracked her movement until he offered a simple statement of, "My thoughts exactly." He motioned for her to step closer, and when she did, he tapped his index finger on the name printed at the top of the file that she held. *Driggs Drill*. "You see here? I've never heard of this company. It doesn't check out either when I looked it up."

Of the few wrinkles that Fuentes had on her face, the one on her brow appeared most often, especially when she was perplexed. "Wait," she said as she rummaged through the case information. "So, an oil field worker causes a huge accident, killing one man. The oil company notifies the local police but are keeping the whole situation a secret from the media *and* the family of the deceased worker?"

"Correct," he said evenly.

She closed the folder and crossed it against her chest. "I don't understand why they'd hold this Pierce guy in confinement," she pondered aloud. "Could it be a case of false imprisonment?"

Smoothing his fine wool shirt, the captain answered, "Starting today, you're going to find out. As far as we know, there are no other authorities on the case besides the police department of a one-horse town. Why *we* got tipped off is not going to matter if we

don't find out what's going on." There was a pause while he awaited any questions that she may have. When she didn't ask any, he concluded their conversation with a short dismissal.

There was an awkward silence in the several seconds that it took for Fuentes to turn heel and leave, but it was broken as she reentered the the reception area. Making eye contact with the receptionist, Fuentes threw a small wave at Melody, who immediately covered the receiver with the small of her hand, giving the detective her undivided attention.

"Melody, could you hold my calls for the next couple of days? I've got a case near the border and probably won't have reception."

"O-of course!" She cast her eyes down, remarking to her caller, "Let me put you on hold, ma'am. It'll just be one minute! Thank you." She fished for a pen and paper and eagerly asked the detective, ready to write down her every need, "Can I, uh, can I get you anything for your trip?"

Fuentes gave a tight but genuine smile. "No, thank you. But you might want to get Captain Straight Jacket some coffee. He's doing breathing techniques as we speak."

The color quickly drained from Melody's face as she scrambled up from her seat, verbally cursing her own forgetfulness. Fuentes told herself that scaring the poor girl may

be the only way to ready her as secretary to the most meticulous officer in the tristate area.

The land-based drilling rig was a mighty machine to behold, and it insisted upon thrusting its power into the earth, unapologetically shaking the ecosystems beneath it. In return, the earth let it do so, waiting for man to intervene, to finish what they came to do and leave. Alas, they never did. Once the black gold was found, it was capped and sealed, only for a different set of humans to come and extract it.

Matthew Pierce sat by the sole window of a small trailer onsite, staring at the machine's unwavering persistence. A hardhat would come in now and again to update him on his current situation. It began to rain, and with it, Matthew returned to his reveries. He wondered at the last time he ever experienced a true jaunt in the rain and if he was still a boy now, waiting in the principal's office presently, waiting for his mother to come and get him.

It was normal to lose track of time; the tasks of the job were never-ending, and the hours began to blur with one another. Night was not the mark of the end of the day, but to some, it was the beginning of a shift. The day no longer belonged to those who knew when their lunch hour was. He no longer knew if it was night or day. The rain did not help in that regard. The trailer itself stood a good distance from the rig, as safety protocol dictated. He had a clear view of it from where he sat, and he studied the rain as it splashed off the equipment and onto the platform. He thirsted for the surrounding

sands to engulf the metal structure, sucking the crude oil up long before man could transmute it from the dead.

The room itself featured an old pine table complete with two matching chairs, a self-contained portable sink, and a dusty armchair which had not seen shampoo in decades. Matthew referred to the one door, one window trailer, formerly used a lounge space for administration, as "The Brig".

Just then, the door opened and in marched a woman of methodical presence. "Mr. Pierce, hello. I'm Detective Nina Fuentes. I would like to ask you a few questions so that we can clear up some things and get you out of here."

She was a tall woman, he supposed, because as she stood in the doorway, he noticed that the frame did not extend too far above her head. "Please have a seat. I see you got my phone call." He remained sitting; his attention was on his new visitor.

Lingering in the doorway, she responded, "I assume you are referring to the unidentified caller we spoke with early this morning. Are you saying that was you?"

"Affirmative." He saluted tersely. He had made up his mind immediately to dislike her. She was not warm in the least, and frankly, Matthew was tired of dealing with alpha males.

Quickly making up her mind to enter, she steadied her stance and pushed back her shoulders. She walked with composed posture to the table where he sat. As she eased

herself into the chair, she did not react to his brusque manner. "Where did you access the phone to make this call? From what I understand, they've had you under guard for days."

"Don't know," Matthew shrugged. "One minute I'm sitting in 'The Brig,'" he made a sweeping gesture to the room's surroundings and added dryly, "The next minute, I'm on the phone with someone from your department."

Taking out a pen and notepad from the inseams of her blazer, she pressed further, "So you don't remember? Just like you don't remember cutting the drill line and injuring several workers?"

"Exactly." Bored, he turned his attentions back to the window, as he heard the scratch of her paper receive a quick note.

"How convenient for you, Mr. Pierce."

At that, he turned to face her, his blue eyes aflame with dereliction. "Oh, believe me Nina, the loss of my memory is terribly *inconvenient*. I am, after all, going off of what everyone claims they saw me do. They said I climbed atop the crown block; They are correct, I remember climbing it. They said I cut the drill line with a pocket knife; Who knows? But I do own a pocket knife." He pointed a dirty finger to the rig that stood hundreds of feet away, "Have you gone out there yet?"

"Do you take drugs, Mr. Pierce?"

“No, Nina. I don’t,” he smiled and added, “at least not the kind that makes me lose time.”

“My name is Detective Fuentes, Mr. Pierce. And I spoke with your boss. He thinks otherwise.”

“Casey Nash is a miserable dinosaur who’s worked here too long. Plus,” he grinned, placing a hand over his heart, “He’s nothing like you. You’re so sweet and nurturing.”

She gently placed her pen and pad on the table, and looked at him squarely, “Mr. Pierce, a man is dead. You are not helping yourself by being uncooperative.”

His replaced his smile with a glower. The malice in his voice shook his upper lip and he said quietly, “That *dead man* is not the only one who has suffered on this ground. *I’m* not the only one who is responsible for his death.”

She picked up her writing materials once more. “Is this a confession?”

In an uproar, Matthew shot up on his feet, seized the notepad from her, and threw it across the room. “Look where you’re at!” he yelled. “Tell me, how many people do you think have died on this land? How many innocent natives or settlers?”

Fuentes, already on her feet, instinctively reached for her gun. “Matthew,” placing her left palm out in appeasement. “Calm down. Let’s talk-”

He spat on the ground, pointed at it, and shouted, "Our spit, our *blood* should be the black gold! How many mindless workers have lost their souls to these sands? We're slaves, Nina. Slaves!" He backed up into a corner, far from the table they were previously seated. And for the second time that day, he felt defeated. "I'm so sick of this god damn day!" He cradled his head in his hands and slid them down his face in despair.

Taking a small step towards him, she tried to console him, "It's alright. That's why I'm here. To help."

He glanced at her and sniggered in disdain, "Is that how you're going to help? By shooting me?"

He was looking at her hand, which was still hovering over her weapon. She had not realized this, and cursed herself. He was unarmed; she didn't need her gun. "I'm sorry," she said quickly, raising both hands up. "I had no intention to--"

"Go ahead. Shoot me. It's not like it matters. Nothing is real."

Just then, the Sheriff stormed in with two officers in tow. "Detective! Do you need assistance?"

"No, sir." She replied, averting her gaze from Matthew. "I think it best to return later when Mr. Pierce is feeling better." She paused, picking up her materials from the table. "I would, Sheriff, like to speak with you about Mr. Pierce's confinement conditions."

"Alright," he said reluctantly, holding the door open for her to exit.

As she and the Sheriff's two-man posse exited the room, Fuentes stole a last glance over her shoulder at Matthew, second guessing her decision to leave him.

As she walked towards the rig, that was now a crime scene, she noticed that the sun was only beginning to set. The rig's silhouette against a backdrop of purple clouds made her think of her grandfather's old knife for some reason.

When she was a child, Nina would sit in her grandfather's lap and watch him peel a custard apple. The curvature of his hands impressed her no less than the razor-sharp blade of his pocket knife. And even though she already knew, he would warn her not to eat the toxic seeds. The knife itself was a hand-me-down from his own grandfather and was kept in pristine condition.

This massive structure, which loomed over her in paralyzing enormity, was also serviced by immaculate upkeep; And like that custard apple that he would cut for her every Sunday after mass, the rig too was toxic.

"Thas' a nice pair o' britches you got there, ma'am." A man, too old to be a worker, stood next to her in front of the derrick, dressed in a sweat stained white tee with tan cargo pants, pointing at her slacks.

“Oh!” She exclaimed, surprised at his sudden appearance. Touching the flannel that she donned, she rubbed its thin fabric between her thumb and index finger. “Thank you...sir.”

Embarrassment set in. Unbeknownst to her, drool was exiting her open mouth as she had stood there staring at the rig. She wasn't sure how long she was lost in her own musings. Staggering backward, she used the back of her hand to wipe the saliva from her mouth. Her breathing, which had been stable during her interview with Pierce, picked up speed into a ragged locomotion.

“You alright, little lady?” The man asked.

“Yes. I'm fine.” She sought desperately to refocus her mind. “If I may ask a question,” she said to the man, “Where is the crown block located?”

He gave a wry smile that accentuated the sun spots above his grey beard. “If ya look at the very top of the derrick there, you'll see like a box that surrounds a little pulley. That's the crown block.”

“And the drill line is threaded through that pulley?”

“Yess'm. That line can hold 'bout a thousand pounds of equipment.”

“Really? Can it be cut with a pocket knife?”

He hesitated for a moment, scrutinizing her. "Well, that's a good question. Be a helluva knife now, wouldn't it?" There was a familiarity in his eyes that she could not pin down, but before she said anything further, he started to trek away, as if on a pilgrimage.

She did not attempt to stop him, for she realized that it was uncommonly dark. Save for a few stragglers who were being relieved from their shifts, she was also alone. How long, she wondered, had she been standing there? And for all the vastness of the site, she did not see where the old man went. He had disappeared into the darkness of the desert. Eerily, gone.

Searching frantically for her car keys in her pocket, she knew she had to leave. The air smelled of hot pitch, lingering just below her nostrils. It suddenly felt *wrong* to be there. The ground beneath her screamed, sending sharp pain into her legs as if she were standing on hot coals.

From the confines of her car, Fuentes took note of the lack of density in the air, and to her relief, she could breathe again. Determination to drive all night from this God forsaken place back to her home was overwhelming, and she recited in her head the need for her own environment, her own people in order to knock her back into her senses. If she could get as far away from this desiccated land, she knew that she would be right as rain again.

The drive back was one of mutating topography accompanied by a spectrum of colors: the red rock cliffs that stood tall began to wane into lush greens of flat agriculture, the palette of a sunrise sharpened into the bright blues of the morning, and a riot of the melded masses soon invaded the landscape altogether as the local, dusty towns grew into metropolitan areas. She was grateful to be back in the city where the earth no longer pricked her skin or vibrated violently inside of her.

If she were a logical person, she would have driven straight to her condo to get much needed sleep, but she needed to discuss the strange occurrences of that place with someone. For her own sake

It was nine o'clock sharp, and the reception area of her workplace had not changed at all. The smiles and courteous nods of the everyday morning were thrown her way even if she returned them with disheveled concernment. To her relief, the quiet clacking of keys, ringing of telephones, and pushing of paper delivered a sense of security that she was not expecting to hope for.

Before she reached Captain Philip Lamar's office, she heard his voice from behind her say, "Nina, you look like hell. Where have you been these past few days? I've been trying to reach you!"

He held an empty, plain, white coffee mug in one hand, and a stack of messy papers in the other. Eyeing the case file spilling out of his grasp, she replied, "What? What do you mean? I've been driving all night and day--"

"Well, that explains why you look like hell." He motioned for her to follow him into his office. Talking over his shoulder, he led the way. "I am assigning you a case," he said casually. "An anonymous caller tipped us off about it this morning."

She stopped dead in her tracks. Her cheeks began to burn with a heat that magically manifested out of nowhere. "Another case? But I...Let me see--"

"Look at this mess!" he interrupted, shaking the stack of papers he was carrying in front of her face. "You would think that they could at least find a secretary that understands the value of a filing system!"

Still unable to move, Nina hovered in the doorway, experiencing déjà vu. Except, déjà vu was not supposed to hurt, she thought. Her stomach was full of acidic fluid, threatening to dissolve her intestines, and her body was now a furnace.

The captain waved his mug in the air and complained, "I have to make my own coffee too!"

She fixated on the details of the office, trying to make herself certain of the walls and furniture. There was no doubt that she knew this building; she knew these people with

whom she had worked with for the last ten years. Yet, the mordancy in her throat suggested none of it was real.

“Nina, are you alright?” He set both paper and mug down on his desk, and took a couple of steps towards her, shuffling his feet as he got closer.

“You never call me Nina...” Her voice trailed off and she stumbled backward, surprised at her own discombobulation. She put a fervent hand on her brow while reaching for support. The captain leaped to her aide, guiding her into a chair that rested near his window. “Melody!” he called, “Get me some water, quick!”

Now sitting, she pointed to the stack of papers which were now sprawled out on his desk. She managed to say, “...The Chihuahua Report.”

“Don’t worry about this assignment.” He wagged his hand dismissively at the case file. “I’ll assign it to Detective Hayden. Take the day off, ok? You obviously have been sick these past few days. Come back to work when you’re rested. That’s an order.”

“Take the day off...” she repeated in an absent-minded echo.

“Yes, today. Take off.” Lamar stood erect and drew a quick breath in and exhaled in announced agitation, “Melody! The water! Where is that water?!”

“Today,” Nina muttered to herself. “Today....”

“Phil,” she said locking eyes with him. “What is today?”

This job, which paid his bills and kept his mother comfortable, was now a place floating in time. What was real, Matthew knew not. What formerly mattered, no longer did. There was only earth and machination, mindlessly drilling, counting the seconds of its existence.

There was only black gold waiting to be discovered.

And somewhere, in the passing of time, there may have been a man named Matthew Pierce, whose story may have enticed a woman named Nina Fuentes to investigate it. Some say there was, some say there wasn't.

And the Chihuahuan Desert, no matter what man named its territories, remained molested and angry.