

# BIG INCHES

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"May I see some identification, please?"

Pottah turned the engine off and reached clumsily into his hip pocket for his wallet. He opened it and flipped to his driver's license.

"Would you please remove it from your wallet and pass it out the window to me?"

Great.

He took the license out of its sticky plastic slip and held it out to the guard. The guard looked at it for a moment, turned it over to the other side, which was blank, looked at that side just as long, then raised his head.

"Would you step out of your car for a minute?" He made no motion to give Pottah his license back.

"I beg your pardon?"

The guard moved back a step to give Pottah enough room to open his car door. "Would you mind stepping out of your car for a moment?"

"You want me to get out of my car?"

"That's right."

Pottah opened the door, letting it swing out. "Is there something wrong?"

The guard smiled at him.

Pottah got out of his car and stood uncertainly by it. "My license hasn't expired."

"No, of course it hasn't. Would you mind moving away from your car a little?"

"Why do you want me to do that?"

"Please."

Pottah moved away a little more from his car. Four other uniformed men emerged from one of the buildings' shadows, leisurely heading their way.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing, sir, Just routine." He finished filling out a form and handed it to Pottah. It was a description of his car, along with the date and time.

"What's this for?"

"It's your receipt."

The four others stood casually by them now, two of them between Pottah and his car.

"Receipt for what?"

"Your car," the guard said very patiently. "It's a receipt for your car."

Pottah looked around, moved a little away from the others. They took a few friendly steps forward, even closer to him now than before.

Pottah studied the young guard very carefully. "Why do I need a receipt for my car?"

"To redeem it."

"What?"

"So we know which car is yours. To return it to you when we're through."

Tight smile. "What do I need a receipt for? There's no one else here. How long is this going to take?"

"Just a little while."

"How long is a little while? I--"

"You don't have to take the receipt if you don't want it." The guard made as if to take it back.

"No, no, I'll keep it." He put it in his wallet, which reminded him he hadn't got his license back yet.

"It'll be returned to you the same time your car is. Windshield wiper on the driver's side."

"And it'll blow away. I want a receipt for my license too."

"There's no form. Just your car."

"What it--"

One of the others: "Will you come with us, please?"

Pottah faced him. "Where?"

"Don't give any trouble, sir."

Another put his hand on Pottah's right shoulder and pushed him forward a little. "This way, sir."

"Don't push me!"

Sweat poured freely from the guard's crewcut scalp down the sides of his tanned face. "I didn't push you, sir-- you just didn't move forward with my hand."

They escorted him down a long, pleasant-smelling corridor, two in front, three behind. Nature prints hung on both sides, all of them of rabbits, all of the rabbits drawn in profile, the details as realistic as Audubon's drawings of birds.

He relaxed a little, and started aching for a cigarette.

At the end of the hallway one of the men opened the door for Pottah, and gestured for him to go inside.

"There'll be someone with you soon."

Pottah looked around the room as the door closed and clicked behind him. It was as bare as a room can get and still be considered a room. One window, looking out over the road he had been stopped on. He watched as six men in clean overalls approached his car, circling it, some with their large hands on their hips, in a what-do-we-have-here attitude; one or two touching the chrome fenders as though testing the metal's resiliency.

He watched for a moment, cracking his knuckles, then glanced back at the door.

It opened. The last one through shut the door behind him.

"Sit down, please."

Pottah looked around the bare floor.

"On the floor."

"I don't want to sit on the floor."

"Sit on the floor and then I'll explain to you why you have to sit there."

Pottah and the one who had spoke stood blandly staring at each other. They have to be here all day, Pottah thought. I don't. He hitched his pants up a little and sat down on the floor.

"Thank you." The leader walked over, looked down at Pottah, then looked out the window where the left headlight was being gingerly pulled out of its socket.

"There's no furniture in here because if there were, some of the people we deal with-- some of the people we're forced to deal with, as part of our job-- realizing they weren't going to get off quite as easily as they kidded themselves into believing they would, might try to hide whatever they were smuggling in the furniture. Get it off their person and scotch tape it to the underside of a table while our backs were all turned. All right? Or push it under the cushions of a chair we gave them to be comfortable in. While we stand. We had someone in here once, while we still had furniture, who was

desperate-- as I imagine you are right now-- to get rid of what he had on him. So desperate he tried to stick it on a lightbulb. With his spit.

"Which meant that each time we examined someone in here, and couldn't find anything, we'd have to take all our furniture apart afterwards to assure ourselves they hadn't managed to get rid of something damaging while we were busy filling out our reports. Our budget will no longer allow us the 'luxury' of doing that. All right?"

"Fine," Pottah said from the floor.

"We ourselves will have to be searched if what we're looking for isn't found on you. On the chance you might have slipped it into one of our pockets, or--"

"Is this the border?"

"Forty-three yards beyond that door."

"Then there's been a mistake. I don't want to cross the border. I've been driving through the desert all night, trying to get to M----- as soon as possible, I have business there, business which is very, very important to me, and I admit that just from lack of sleep I must have taken a wrong fork somewhere on the road."

"If you only knew how many times we've heard that in this room. Take your clothes off. You can stand if you like."

Pottah thought: there's no way they're going to let me out of this room without first having me strip for a search, either voluntarily or involuntarily, and if I argue with them about it, it's just going to waste another half hour.

Knees crackling, he got off the floor. Started unbuttoning his shirt, head down. Pulled the tails out of his trousers. Took the shirt off, saw that no one was going to step forward to take it from him, let it fall from his hand to the floor. Unbuckled his belt, released the catch at the top of his fly, pulled his zipper down. Let the pants drop around his ankles. Stood on one foot, swaying slightly, and pulled the trouser leg over and off the opposite foot, then stood on his other foot. Boxer trunks on underneath. Tiny black and red crowns. Bent over, unlaced his shoes. Took them off, took his

socks off, put one sock in the other as though he were going to toss them into a hamper, put both socks in one of the empty shoes, straightened up again, pulled down his shorts, pulled them off, leaning forward, smelling a faint genital odor, folded them once and lay them over his shoes.

He straightened up then, tall, slightly pot-bellied, and cleared his throat. "Satisfied?"

"Get it over with."

The man addressed pulled out a jar and unscrewed its lid. He approached Pottah.

"Bend over, please."

"What?"

He put his right middle finger in the jar and rolled it around the sides real slow until it was thickly coated.

"Bend over, I have to examine you."

Pottah took a step back. His eyes looked different.

"It's on the checklist."

"What checklist?"

The man held up a long sheet of paper and pointed to one of the items, careful not to touch the paper itself with his coated finger. Pottah came close enough to read what was printed on the line. Rectal examination. Next to the two words was a small, unchecked box.

"That is ridiculous."

"The fact that you're hesitating is making us suspicious."

"You haven't found anything on me. Anything at all."

"Which is precisely why we'd like to have a look up there."

"I've never had this done to me before."

"Never?"

"Never, outside of a doctor's office."

"This man is a licensed physician."

"Even so..."

"Will you bend over?"

"I've been cooperating."

"Before the vaseline drips off my finger?"

Pottah's car was gone. At least, he couldn't see it from where he was standing.

He looked over his shoulder. The others in the room were laying out his clothes in scarecrow fashion: the shirt spread-eagled in line with the V-legged pants, an unrolled sock at the bottom hole of each trouser leg, the shoes on top of the socks, his shorts across the top of his trousers, and his wallet atop his shorts, as though a man had once lain on the floor but had been blown away, leaving behind only his clothed outline.

They seemed uninterested in him for the moment, so he walked over to the picture window to see what had happened to his car. No one tried to stop him, or even bothered looking up from his clothes.

At the glass, he saw that his car was still there where it had been stopped, but that it had been completely disassembled, the ten thousand pieces of it lying in a flat spread, like a cracked-open egg, across the tar road. The workers, at least two dozen in strength by now, were picking over the remains, getting down on their haunches to more closely examine a particular bolt or palm-sized section of metal, each of which had a tiny white identifying tag tied to it, all ten thousand tags fluttering weakly in the midday breezes above their accompanying part.

As Pottah watched, one of the workers, searching through the pieces, picked up an anonymous bit of metal, and unholstering some sort of carving instrument he had strapped to the belt of his overalls, began shredding the scrap into a small white bucket. After doing this to a few more bits, he stood up and made his way over to the edge of the spread, where he dumped the contents of the buckets, and then the bucket itself, into a large cylindrical container with thick black wires leading out of its side. Every once in a while a worker, pausing in his labor, would tap the top of this machine, then open a hatch at the bottom, pulling out a shallow drawer heaped with glinting dust. He would shift through the dust for long minutes before emptying it into a slightly smaller container standing alongside the first. A switch would be thrown, the worker would wait, hip cocked and upturned palm rubbing his nose, until he would give this

machine a tap. This one's drawer appeared to contain nothing at all, but the man would stare into it nonetheless, moving his fingers along the sides until satisfied, and then, careful not to tilt it, he'd carry it over to still another container, on the periphery of Pottah's vision, where he'd invert it over that machine's top, flicking that machine's switch on with his left hand at the same time.

Pottah turned away from the window to ask the others in the room a question, turning around just in time to see knives get passed around. He forgot his question.

One of them, broad-shouldered and quiet, started thumbing through Pottah's wallet. Another, all crewcut and eyes that don't quite look at you, picked up his pants, a cuff in each hand, and made a wish.

Pottah, goosebumping, watched as his shirt was torn apart and then slit into tinier and still tinier sections, the last delicate pieces thinner than the threads which had once made up the shirt. Traces so fine they were now colorless. Yet still the splitting apart went on.

"Long enough, diligently enough..."

Pottah jerked away, wishing immediately that he hadn't, knowing instinctively, like an animal hidden in the brush, that the best reaction is no reaction.

So he stopped reacting. His wallet goes under the blade, one of the men whittling away at the leather, whittling away at the creased money inside, the forgotten notes and miscellaneous receipts; pausing occasionally to flex his hand to avoid cramping. His wristwatch is trisected like a pie and passed out to three of the men. A plucked metal coil is held up in the air between two careful fingers. Its spiral is split by the thinnest of razored instruments twisting slowly down its winding curve time and again, each time increasing the number of separate cork-screw pieces as it decreases each one's width, until it seems as though only the light reflecting on the metal is left to be spiraled apart; and then even this faint gleam is spiraled away in a sudden twinkle of disappearance. And Pottah realizes, his tongue shifting as he swallows, that what

had once been between the two fingers, without having dropped, is no longer there.

"I should warn you, Mr. Pottah, that we're running out of possessions of yours to search."

Pottah sat quietly on the white stool which had been provided for him, in the middle of the room, rubbing his bare arms up and down with slightly trembling hands.

"We will find it, you know."

"Good luck."

"Fine."

Annoyance.

A nod.

They had him tilt forward on his stool while one of the assistants brought an electric razor buzzing up from the back of his neck in a straight swath to his forehead where another assistant caught the hair in a salad-sized white bowl. The loud humming neared his left ear, and more hair fell in.

"I don't feel the least bit discouraged, because once they get a facial tic, like you have now--"

More hair fell in.

"--that tells me-- all of us here-- that they're beginning to realize they're not going to walk out that door until they hand it over."

More hair fell in.

They examined the bowl of brown hair. Afterwards they burned the hair, examining the ashes left behind, then burned the bowl, catching the smoke, as it rose in the air, in a special container.

The men outside rigged up an elaborate overhead lighting system, turning back the evening into a day as bright as the slide under a microscope. They started digging up the ground around the road where Pottah's car had stood.

Pottah lay on the floor, naked, eyes closed, listening to the crunch and crackle of his white stool as it was wrenched apart to see if he might have secreted anything in it while his head was shaved.

Nothing.

Pottah opened his eyes. One of the assistants, his face informationless, worried his hands into a pair of squeaking white

rubber gloves. It was the same man who had examined Pottah's rectum hours ago.

Pottah pulled himself up to a sitting position on the cold floor, knees drawn up to his bare chest, eyes large as a child's.

"Are you calm, Pottah?"

"Yes, I'm calm."

"There's no reason to be nervous now."

"I'm not."

"Of course you're not." One man clamped Pottah's ankles together, one bent his arms behind his back, and the leader, leaning over, placed a dry palm on Pottah's forehead and pushed his face slowly, slowly back until Pottah's eyes-- round, white, staring eyes-- were aimed at the ceiling.

It got very quiet in the room.

The one with the rubber gloves went down on his haunches and put his lips against Pottah's ear. There was a staccato rush of hot, moist air, as though he were blowing affectionately into the ear. Only after the highly tactile sensation passed did Pottah realize the man had whispered something very important to him which he hadn't heard.

The assistant glanced round at the others still holding Pottah securely in place. Then he brought his face up so closely to Pottah's his features blurred and their nose tips touched. He repeated what he had whispered in Pottah's ear.

Everyone watched as Pottah obediently opened his mouth.

"We're not going to torture you, Pottah. If we wanted to torture you, we would have pulled your teeth out right away, to get you to talk. Right? Now we're going to pull them out only to find what we're looking for. You don't want to tell us where it is, you want us to find it on our own instead, kind of test our cleverness, and I myself don't resent you in the least for being that way. Not in the least. Do any of the rest of you resent Pottah or keeping us here all day? See, Pottah, they're all shaking their heads no, even the ones behind you whom you can't see at the moment. Do you feel relaxed enough for us to continue our

examination now? Some of us have long drives ahead of us."

Pottah tried to say ah-hah with his mouth opened wider than it had ever been before, but the saliva was already pooling in the back of his mouth so badly he felt sure he was going to gag.

The man with the rubber gloves pulled out a cluster of yellowed teeth with his thumb and forefinger. The short crescent trailed threads of saliva from their edges back to Pottah's shaking lips.

"And some of your teeth are even false. How much easier this is all going to be. We're very pleased. A quick examination of them, if you will, and we might find what we're looking for right there, and we can all call it a day."

The teeth were passed to someone behind Pottah. After a moment he heard a high speed drill start up, its whine exploding in a series of crushing sounds.

The assistant reached into Pottah's mouth with a clean pair of forceps, fastening the heavy grey prongs on either side of Pottah's left canine. He started pulling down.

"Now, now. Now, now, Pottah. This is only your eye tooth. You know, many dentists believe it simply flows out of one's mouth because of its position.

"Watch his feet.

"And I'm sure you must think it hasn't budged at all, and yet really it's almost halfway out already."

The prongs shifted roughly against both sides of Pottah's tooth for a better grip. The assistant bore down some more, a tendon flexing up long and taut on his forearm. "There. It's almost out. Just a few more tugs to wrench the roots free from your jawbone and it will all be over with, and we can go on to the rest of your teeth."

He was awake again. It was too bright beyond his eyelids, so he kept them shut. He was in horrible pain, so horrible it seemed not that the pain was inside him, but rather that he was inside it.

He was on something hard, presumably the floor. Eyes still squeezed shut he tried rolling over onto his side, but with his left shoulder blade only an inch off the floor something pulled him back into the position he had woken in. His left hand wouldn't move. When he tried to send his right hand across his body to explore whatever it was restraining him, he felt an immediate tightening around his right wrist and realized he was bound to the floor with straps.

"Pottah."

He was violently sick to his stomach for a long, dragging while, thrashing and whimpering in an effort to keep his throat clear lest he drown here on this harsh floor. After each spasm choked off he felt a wet cloth pass over his lips, and heard a scraping sound on the boards next to him.

"Pottah."

He experimented with opening his eyes. He didn't like it.

"Up here, Pottah."

He saw waving white trouser legs, a billowing seesaw of arms akimbo, and, at the summit, distorted faces tilted downwards.

"We have not taken much of you so far-- clothes, hair, teeth-- but we can take much, much more of you if we have to. If you force us to."

Pottah screamed for the first time in thirty-two years, forgetting his agonized mouth, forgetting his nausea as the scalpel burnt a red line across the top of his left thigh.

"And we can examine all of you, and re-examine all of you, and then re-examine what there is left to re-examine after we re-examine you, until there is none of you left. All of you that we've looked over already: if you weren't tied to the floor, and could examine this room, or examine us, do you think you could find any of it now? Your clothes are no longer in this room, Pottah, not because we brought them out of the room, but because we examined them so well they no longer exist.

"We are the sieve which is a solid sheet of stainless steel."

The leader brought his towering face down closer to Pottah's. Two huge hands spread dizzyingly in an arc above Pottah's flat face.

"Gone."

The leader waited a moment, perhaps a moment longer than he was required to, or had been asked to. Then he sighed, patience in the sigh, and nodded. Outside the unopenable window he saw the crew of workers, now dirt-covered, tearing apart the stretch of tar road Pottah's car had driven over on its way to the roadblock, passing the black chunks hand over hand to the first of a series of cylinders. Most of the area surrounding the demolished roadway was dug up to a depth of three men's height and a hundred yards or so across. He could just discern in the electric light starring the excavation lone workers along the distant rim of the huge hole shoveling away at its widening edges.

He turned back to the activity within the room. "What he is injecting into your thighs now is a new drug, one which, I'm told, help deaden the pain some. I have phoned my wife already. I caught her just as she was about to put the roast in the oven, we're going to have sandwiches instead, so please don't be so foolish as to think we'd stop this investigation simply because we worried whether we'd be going home to a cold, fat-caked dinner. You've been outmaneuvered there."

He paused until the commotion became more talkable over.

"And all you need do to end all this is tell us where you've hidden whatever it is you're hiding. I guess this is what they call the pitch, Pottah. We'll recover it, fill out our report, which has already been rolled into a typewriter and lined up at the first blank in a room at the other end of this hall, and that will be that." The attending assistant released the bonds from around Pottah's left ankle. "Just think of it, Pottah: a free man again, able to hop back into your car, go back to your apartment, back up your stairs, a quick shower to wash all of this away, some television or a drink or five, and then slipping between cool sheets and

calling it a night." The attending assistant picked up Pottah's left leg and carried it over to where several of the others were waiting with magnifying glasses and hacksaws.

Dawn.

The assistant with the rubber gloves pulled out a pair of large shears which he opened and closed experimentally.

"You might be thinking, you might be planning to say to us: 'I have told you everything.'" The ray across the leader's forehead became more prominent. "Pottah, you have told us nothing.

"Nothing.

"If you could just see outside this window, how impressed even a cool customer you would be. Nothing but a pit's vast yawn for as far as the eye can strain to see. It has to make you stop and think, Pottah: the entire length of the road you traveled with those gasoline cans knocking against each other in the back seat, all the landscape you might possibly have seen, and all the landscape you didn't see because you were deep in worried thought, or staring nervously ahead of you, both hands firmly on your now nonexistent steering wheel, or glancing down to see how much of your cigarette was left-- all of it gone forever. Completely examined."

He cocked his head to listen to the latest negative report from an assistant.

"Well, well, well." He went down on his knees, wet his lips, and sank his teeth into Pottah's left ear lobe in an attempt to revive him.

"And even then, Pottah, our search has just barely begun. You can't even call what we've done so far the beginning. I'd even hesitate to call it the beginning of the beginning of the beginning. Because we will gladly trace you backwards in time, examining your life day by day, decreating you as we go. By noon tomorrow, our augmented team of workers should reach your apartment building. Can you imagine it separating into an infinity of bricks, tumbling over the ever-widening edge of our hole? And the office where you worked, down to the last discarded paper coffee filter

in the last trashcan, and the home of your lady friend-- the mahogany dining table, her mist suspension inhaler, the blue-flowered curtains upstairs-- and then your school, all those innocent, scribbling classmates of yours, even the ones you detested, even the ones you didn't know; and then, finally, all the way back to where your parents first met, eight years before they married: each tree in that park, each leaf on each tree, each green cell in each leaf....goodbye, Pottah."

The men stood still for a moment around the lone heart lying inert on the white floor. The leader rolled up his tight sleeves to his elbows, first the left and then the right, exposing the black hairs on his forearms. He picked the heart up very deftly from the floor and tore it in half, turning it inside out. An assistant caught the blood in mid-air with a white plastic bowl.

The leader held the heart out in his left hand to each man so they might see it was authentic. He put his right hand over his left, raised both hands in the air, mumbled a few words, and brought his hands down again.

When he opened them, the heart was gone.

The assistant with the least seniority started undressing.