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The Black Echo

Written by Michael Connelly

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MICHAEL CONNELLY

The Black Echo

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PART I

Sunday, May 20

The boy couldn't see in the dark, but he didn't need to. Experience and long practice told him it was good. Nice and even. Smooth strokes, moving his whole arm while gently rolling his wrist. Keep the marble moving. No runs. Beautiful.

He heard the hiss of the escaping air and could sense the roll of the marble. They were sensations that were comforting to him. The smell reminded him of the sock in his pocket and he thought about getting high. Maybe after, he decided. He didn't want to stop now, not until he had finished the tag with one uninterrupted stroke.

But then he stopped – when the sound of an engine was heard above the hiss of the spray can. He looked around but saw no light save for the moon's silvery white reflection on the reservoir and the dim bulb above the door of the pump house, which was midway across the dam.

But the sound didn't lie. There was an engine approaching. Sounded like a truck to the boy. And now he thought he could hear the crunching of tires on the gravel access road that skirted the reservoir. Coming closer. Almost three in the morning and someone was coming. Why? The boy stood up and threw the aerosol can over the fence toward the water. He heard it clunk down in the brush, short of the mark. He pulled the sock from his pocket and decided just

one quick blow to give himself balls. He buried his nose in the sock and drew in heavily on the paint fumes. He rocked back on his heels, and his eyelids fluttered involuntarily. He threw the sock over the fence.

The boy stood his motorbike up and wheeled it across the road, back toward the tall grass and the bottlebrush and pine trees at the base of the hill. It was good cover, he thought, and he'd be able to see what was coming. The sound of the engine was louder now. He was sure it was just a few seconds away, but he didn't see the glow of headlights. This confused him. But it was too late to run. He put the motorbike down in the tall brown grass and stilled the free-spinning front wheel with his hand. Then he huddled down on the earth and waited for whatever and whoever was coming.

Harry Bosch could hear the helicopter up there, somewhere above the darkness, circling up in the light. Why didn't it land? Why didn't it bring help? Harry was moving through a smoky, dark tunnel and his batteries were dying. The beam of the flashlight grew weaker every yard he covered. He needed help. He needed to move faster. He needed to reach the end of the tunnel before the light was gone and he was alone in the black. He heard the chopper make one more pass. Why didn't it land? Where was the help he needed? When the drone of the blades fluttered away again, he felt the terror build and he moved faster, crawling on scraped and bloody knees, one hand holding the dim light up, the other pawing the ground to keep his balance. He did not look back, for he knew the enemy was behind him in the black mist. Unseen, but there. And closing in.

When the phone rang in the kitchen, Bosch immediately woke. He counted the rings, wondering if he had missed

the first one or two, wondering if he had left the answering machine on.

He hadn't. The call was not picked up and the ringing didn't stop until after the required eight rounds. He absentmindedly wondered where that tradition had come from. Why not six rings? Why not ten? He rubbed his eyes and looked around. He was slumped in the living room chair again, the soft recliner that was the centerpiece of his meager furnishings. He thought of it as his watch chair. This was a misnomer, however, because he slept in the chair often, even when he wasn't on call.

Morning light cut through the crack in the curtains and slashed its mark across the bleached pine floor. He watched particles of dust floating lazily in the light near the sliding glass door. The lamp on the table next to him was on, and the TV against the wall, its sound very low, was broadcasting a Sunday-morning Jesus show. On the table next to the chair were the companions of insomnia: playing cards, magazines and paperback mystery novels – these only lightly thumbed and then discarded. There was a crumpled pack of cigarettes on the table and three empty beer bottles – assorted brands that had once been members of six-packs of their own tribe. Bosch was fully dressed, right down to a rumpled tie held to his white shirt by a silver 187 tie tack.

He reached his hand down to his belt and then around back to the area below his kidney. He waited. When the electronic pager sounded he cut the annoying chirp off in a second. He pulled the device off his belt and looked at the number. He wasn't surprised. He pushed himself out of the chair, stretched, and popped the joints of his neck and back. He walked to the kitchen, where the phone was on the counter. He wrote "Sunday, 8:53 A.M." in a notebook he took from his jacket pocket before dialing. After two rings a

voice said, 'Los Angeles Police Department, Hollywood Division. This is Officer Pelch, how can I help you?'

Bosch said, 'Somebody could die in the time it took to get all that out. Let me talk to the watch sergeant.'

Bosch found a fresh pack of cigarettes in a kitchen cabinet and got his first smoke of the day going. He rinsed dust out of a glass and filled it with tap water, then took two aspirins out of a plastic bottle that was also in the cabinet. He was swallowing the second when a sergeant named Crowley finally picked up.

'What, did I catch you in church? I rang your house. No answer.'

'Crowley, what have you got for me?'

'Well, I know we had you out last night on that TV thing. But you're still catching. You and your partner. All weekend. So, that means you got the DB up at Lake Hollywood. In a pipe up there. It's on the access road to the Mulholland Dam. You know it?'

'I know the place. What else?'

'Patrol's out. ME, SID notified. My people don't know what they got, except a DB. Stiff's about thirty feet into this pipe there. They don't want to go all the way in, mess up a possible crime scene, you know? I had 'em page your partner but he hasn't called in. No answer at his phone either. I thought maybe the two of you was together or something. Then I thought, nah, he ain't your style. And you ain't his.'

'I'll get ahold of him. If they didn't go all the way in, how they know it's a DB and not just some guy sleeping it off?'

'Oh, they went in a bit, you know, and reached in with a stick or something and poked around at the guy pretty good. Stiff as a wedding night prick.'

'They didn't want to mess up a crime scene but then

they go poking around the body with a stick. That's wonderful. These guys get in after they raised the college requirement, or what?'

'Hey, Bosch, we get a call, we've got to check it out. Okay? You want for us to transfer all our body calls directly to the homicide table to check out? You guys'd go nuts inside a week.'

Bosch crushed the cigarette butt in the stainless steel sink and looked out the kitchen window. Looking down the hill he could see one of the tourist trams moving between the huge beige sound studios in Universal City. A side of one of the block-long buildings was painted sky blue with wisps of white clouds; for filming exteriors when the natural L.A. exterior turned brown as wheat.

Bosch said, 'How'd we get the call?'

'Anonymous to nine one one. A little after oh four hundred. Dispatcher said it came from a pay phone on the boulevard. Somebody out screwin' around, found the thing in the pipe. Wouldn't give a name. Said there was a stiff in the pipe, that's all. They'll have the tape down at the com center.'

Bosch felt himself getting angry. He pulled the bottle of aspirin out of the cabinet and put it in his pocket. While thinking about the 0400 call, he opened the refrigerator and bent in. He saw nothing that interested him. He looked at his watch.

'Crowley, if the report came in at four A.M. why are you just getting to me now, nearly five hours later?'

'Look, Bosch, all we had was an anonymous call. That's it. Dispatcher said it was a kid, no less. I wasn't going to send one of my guys up that pipe in the middle of the night on information like that. Coulda been a prank. Coulda been an ambush. Coulda been anything, fer crissake. I waited till it got light out and things slowed down around here. Sent

some of my guys over there at the end of shift. Speaking of end of shifts, I'm outta here. I've been waiting to hear from them and then from you. Anything else?'

Bosch felt like asking if it ever occurred to him that it would be dark in the pipe whether they went poking around at 0400 or 0800, but let it go. What was the use?

'Anything else?' Crowley said again.

Bosch couldn't think of anything, but Crowley filled the empty space.

'It's probly just some hype who croaked himself, Harry. No righteous one eighty-seven case. Happens all the time. Hell, you remember we pulled one out of that same pipe last year. … Er, well, that was before you came out to Hollywood. … So, see, what I'm saying is some guy, he goes into this same pipe – these transients, they sleep up there all the time – and he's a slammer but he shoots himself with a hot load and that's it. Checks out. 'Cept we didn't find him so fast that time, and with the sun and all beating on the pipe a couple days, he gets cooked in there. Roasted like a tom turkey. But it didn't smell as good.'

Crowley laughed at his own joke. Bosch didn't. The watch sergeant continued.

'When we pulled this guy out, the spike was still in his arm. Same thing here. Just a bullshit job, a no-count case. You go out there, you'll be back home by noon, take a nap, maybe go catch the Dodgers. And then next weekend? Somebody else's turn in the barrel. You're off watch. And that's a three-day pass. You got Memorial Day weekend coming next week. So do me a favor. Just go out and see what they've got.'

Bosch thought a moment and was about to hang up, then said, 'Crowley, what did you mean you didn't find that other one so fast? What makes you think we found this one fast?'

'My guys out there, they say they can't smell a thing off this stiff other than a little piss. It must be fresh.'

'Tell your guys I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Tell them not to fuck anymore with anything at my scene.'

'They –'

Bosch knew Crowley was going to defend his men again but hung up before he had to hear it. He lit another cigarette as he went to the front door to get the *Times* off the step. He spread the twelve pounds of Sunday paper out on the kitchen counter, wondering how many trees died. He found the real estate supplement and paged through it until he saw a large display ad for Valley Pride Properties. He ran his finger down a list of Open Houses until he found one address and description marked CALL JERRY. He dialed the number.

'Valley Pride Properties, can I help you?'

'Jerry Edgar, please.'

A few seconds passed and Bosch heard a couple of transfer clicks before his partner got on the line.

'This is Jerry, may I help you?'

'Jed, we just got another call. Up at the Mulholland Dam. And you aren't wearing your pager.'

'Shit,' Edgar said, and there was silence. Bosch could almost hear him thinking, I've got three showings today. There was more silence and Bosch pictured his partner on the other end of the line in a $900 suit and a bankrupt frown. 'What's the call?'

Bosch told him what little he knew.

'If you want me to take this one solo, I will,' Bosch said. 'If anything comes up with Ninety-eight, I'll be able to cover it. I'll tell him you're taking the TV thing and I'm doing the stiff in the pipe.'

'Yeah, I know you would, but it's okay, I'm on my way.

I'm just going to have to find someone to cover for my ass first.'

They agreed to meet at the body, and Bosch hung up. He turned the answering machine on, took two packs of cigarettes from the cabinet and put them in his sport coat pocket. He reached into another cabinet and took out the nylon holster that held his gun, a Smith & Wesson 9mm – satin finished, stainless steel and loaded with eight rounds of XTPs. Bosch thought about the ad he had seen once in a police magazine. Extreme Terminal Performance. A bullet that expanded on impact to 1.5 times its width, reaching terminal depth in the body and leaving maximum wound channels. Whoever had written it had been right. Bosch had killed a man a year earlier with one shot from twenty feet. Went in under the right armpit, exited below the left nipple, shattering heart and lungs on its way. XTP. Maximum wound channels. He clipped the holster to his belt on the right side so he could reach across his body and take it with his left hand.

He went into the bathroom and brushed his teeth without toothpaste: he was out and had forgotten to go by the store. He dragged a wet comb through his hair and stared at his red-rimmed, forty-year-old eyes for a long moment. Then he studied the gray hairs that were steadily crowding out the brown in his curly hair. Even the mustache was going gray. He had begun seeing flecks of gray in the sink when he shaved. He touched a hand to his chin but decided not to shave. He left his house then without changing even his tie. He knew his client wouldn't mind.

Bosch found a space where there were no pigeon droppings and leaned his elbows on the railing that ran along the top of the Mulholland Dam. A cigarette dangled from his lips,