

# **N JUDAH**

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Where is the way where light dwelleth?  
And as for darkness, where is the place thereof?  
JOB 38, 19

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## **1. BENNY SILVER SHOWS UP**

Some years ago, a thick white fog drifted into an open window of the Ramona Hotel on Taylor Street in the city of San Francisco. It sank to the floor of the room and heaved gently, little wavelets on the puke green carpet, curling around the metal legs of the bed. This dream of fog covered the floor, as if the man in the bed were drifting on a white sea. He was breathing harshly in his sleep.

The phone rang. Good morning. This is your wake-up call. Five a.m. The phone went dead before the man in the bed could say thank you.

The man's name was Benny Silver, and he sat up on the edge of the bed, naked, half awake, about 45, with a sweet soft face. He put on his glasses, pushed his brown hair back. It came down to the tops of his shoulders. He kicked at the fog with one bare foot, watched it break up and drift, thinning into nothing. From down the hall, someone with a wracking cough that won't stop, like a tractor starting up, like something you die from. At last the coughing stops, and a man's voice says Jesus fuck, clear as a bell. Benny shivered in the pre-dawn chill. He got up and closed the window.

Benny hadn't slept much, finally nodding out a little after 2 a.m. He'd come a long way, driving from Albuquerque. It took him three days, and he had a bad night in every motel he flopped in during the ride. He'd close his eyes, and his head was full of

jittery fragments of dreams, old memories re-edited to make even less sense than usual, all bubbling uninvited to the surface, as if they insisted on not being forgotten. Maybe he was nervous about seeing Jessie, after all this time. Then again, Benny never slept very well in a strange bed, first night in a new town.

He shaved, got dressed, went downstairs, paid at the desk, got into his car and drove out through the dark toward Sunset Park. At the corner of Post and Van Ness a Dunkin' Donuts was already open. He bought two coffees and a cinnamon roll, propped them up on the dash, licked the icing off his fingers, and headed west till he ran out of streets. He pulled over by a stone bench overlooking the beach below, and the dark ocean. He got out of his car, sat on the bench, opened a container of coffee, lit a Camel Light and began waiting.

Below him ice plants, ivy, and spindly pine trees, all tumbling over the cliff to the wide beach and the sea. A little ways off to Benny's left was a stone staircase cut into the rock, rusted iron railing, leading down onto the sand. On his right, the street he was parked on dead-ended at the turntable for the N JUDAH streetcar line. The beach below was empty, except for the gulls. They squawked at each other as they fought over a dead crab.

Benny heard the rattle of the streetcar, and he stopped scanning the beach for a moment to watch it pull into the turntable. This early in the morning, last stop, it was empty. No one got off except the driver, tall black guy who slowly went to the end of the car, set his back against it, and began to push. Slowly the turntable moved, the driver's feet providing the power. One hundred eighty degrees, and the car clicked into place, headlight pointing back toward San Francisco. The driver spotted Benny watching him.

He gave the slightest nod of recognition, climbed into the warm streetcar, and opened the Chronicle.

Benny looked back down the beach. A few years ago, Jessie'd written him a postcard after he'd sent Lulu a birthday present, said she'd bought Lulu a puppy, and they'd just moved, a block from the ocean in Sunset Park-- 110 Cordero. Same address Lulu gave him on the phone a week ago.

Benny wasn't about to ring her bell this early. Jessie'd show up. Her habits wouldn't change, even after seven years. They had a dog again. She'd walk him down on the beach in the early morning, before she took Lulu to school.

About 6:45, almost dawn, first streaks of light blue in the sky, a thin figure in jeans and a red leather jacket appeared far below him on the sand. Her black hair was streaked white, down almost to her waist. It was Jessie. Even at this distance, Benny could tell she was cold, huddled inside her jacket against the morning chill. The dog was a black lab, running along the edge of the waves, splashing its legs and belly.

Benny ran down the stone steps onto the sand. When he was about thirty yards away the dog began barking at him, and she looked around. The black lab kept barking, came up alongside her protectively, and he realized she might not know him at first after all the years, might think he was some early morning crazy man coming at her across the sand.

Jessie knew who he was in a second, some angle of his body, even before she could see his face. Benny stopped running toward her, stood still. The dog became quiet. The sound of the surf was in his ears.

Hello, Jessie, he said. It's only me.

Benny? Her voice was still familiar, low and hollow with a cigarette burr that hadn't faded.

Benny, what the hell are you doing here?

I came to see you.

Just like that. After seven years you stroll up, way out here, no one around. You trying to scare me?

I just came to see you. I heard about Danny and I came to see you.

You ever hear of the telephone, Benny? The thing that rings. They even got 'em on the street.

The dog came up by Jessie's leg, and growled low at Benny. It's O.K., Lupo.

Benny's not gonna hurt anyone.

I was gonna call-- I don't know, I just decided to come. I felt bad about Danny. And for you.

Well, yeah. I feel bad for me too. The whole world's a fuckin' misery. What's that about, Benny? You know?

Benny didn't answer. They sat down on a rise of sand, and the dog ran along the shoreline and chased seagulls. In the sky, first red hint of sunrise. Quiet for awhile, cold wind off the ocean, her body shivers under the thin red leather jacket. Jessie still had that spray of freckles across her nose. She lights a Pall Mall, cupping the match to hide it from the wind.

I can only handle about three of these a day now, Jessie said.

Don't be mad at me for showing up, Jess.

I'm not mad at you.

It's been a long time.

Yeah, it has.

You haven't changed.

You're a liar, Benny. Jesse reached up to touch her hair. You see these streaks of white? You think I'm nineteen, hanging out in the Mission? Jessie laughs, lies back on the sand. Benny just looks at her. It was Jess and a dream in his head at once, there she is, hollow-eyed at dawn, lost streets down by the beach, says Hello Benny, where you been all these years?

The wind blew her hair across her face, and she finally tucked it back behind her neck and shoulders. He could see she was tired. She must be forty-five now, he thought.

Your eyes are the same, he said. Same girl in the eyes.

Bullshit, Benny. She smiled in spite of herself, and Benny laughed.

What do you want here, Benny?

Talk to you awhile. I heard that Danny was dead..Your son. I heard he was far away from you when it happened.

He was living in New Orleans. I hadn't seen him for a few years. Some woman called and told me. Annie something. They found my phone number in his wallet. 'Case he ever wanted to call me, he always had my number... Fucking auto accident. Christ, he wasn't even twenty-five years old.... I'm going home. I gotta get Lulu off to school. She could be back there, still lying in bed. Teenagers are a bitch, Benny.. Last time you saw her, she was nine. Another world. You want to walk me?

Jessie went first, and then Benny, and the black lab followed, fur still dripping.



The dog's name is Lupo, by the way, but he doesn't answer to anyone but Lulu or me.

They reached the top of the stone steps when suddenly two raccoons scampered out of a driveway about ten yards in front of them, tumbling over each other, going who knows where. Suddenly the raccoons spotted them and froze, those masked eyes staring out of trembling balls of fur. One of them slowly lifted a paw, as if to wave. Lupo bolted after them, barking like a crazy dog, legs flying. They held their ground a moment, hissing and showing their teeth, but he didn't stop coming. They skittered through a flower bed, over a garden hose, and around the corner of a house. They were gone, too quick for him.

Invasion, said Benny. Those furry bastards are only the vanguard-- soon the locusts, alligators, packs of wolves...

You think wild animals on these streets are something new?

Benny grinned. You gotta have a tight lid on your trashcan in this town.

They walked on alongside each other, toward Cordero Street. After a moment Jessie said, Listen Benny, I appreciate your feelings about Danny, but you hadn't seen him since he was seventeen. You never got on with him anyway. He was always making fun of you hanging around with a book in your back pocket, or he was laughing at your clothes.

I wasn't hip enough for him.

Jessie laughed. You remember that purple suede jacket with the fringe?

I was trying to keep up. I still got that number, way in the back of the closet.

Keep it there. You might scare those cowboys in Albuquerque.

I came all this way 'cause he was your son, Jess. There's nothing worse than losing a child.

You don't know anything about it, Benny. Unless it happens to you, you don't know shit about it at all. I wish I was dead instead.

Don't say that. Don't think like that.

I'll think whatever I damn please. Benny, you rode some goddamn greyhound bus a thousand miles to see me. Didn't you?

It wasn't like that. I got a car.

Really? Come up in the world. Well, now you saw me. What do you think now you saw me?

You're beautiful.

Bullshit, Benny. I'm really not. Not anymore.

Yes, you are.

Jessie laughed again, looking down at her boots. You're something else, you know that? Look, Benny, I gotta walk Lulu to the bus stop. Its our mother-daughter thing.

Like I said, I got a car. I'll drive her to school. Its right over there.

Benny pointed to his car. Jessie couldn't help grinning.

Benny, that's a Rocket 88.

Genuine Oldsmobile.

Where'd the hell you get that?

I bought it off a lot in Espanola, up near Santa Fe. It's a '57. Original V-8 with 135 horses under the hood. Got the ultra-slick futuramic styling with whirlaway hydramatic drive plus dynaflo, whatever the hell that is. The upholstery needs a little work.

The car's white leather seats were half covered with silver duct tape, but there was a brand new cherry-red paint job, and the chrome was shiny.

Beautiful, said Jessie. It is utterly gorgeous.

Make a date in your Rocket 88.

We can watch the locals turn green as we cruise down to Noe Valley High School.

Benny looked off down the cliff, scraggly young pine trees, rocks tumbling down to the sand. Jade green boulders worn smooth long ago by the sea. Along shore, white sea foam pools under a gray morning sky.

Danny's being buried tomorrow in New Orleans. Three o'clock. That girl Annie told me. I wrote down the address.

You going?

How can I go, Benny? Its eight hundred dollars one-way, if I'm lucky. I don't have ten cents. I'm a teacher's aide three afternoons a week at the high school. Me and Lulu just get by.

That's bullshit.

How's that?

You can find a way.

I can't find a goddamn way. I got Lulu to take care of. Who's gonna do that? Beside, I hate funerals. Always some phony priest babbling on about the dear departed. And who's gonna feed Lupo while I'm in New Orleans at my son's funeral with a bunch of people I don't even know?

Jesse took a deep breath, turned away from Benny, looked up Cordero Street. She could see her own house, small at the far end, faded green shutters. I loved him, Benny, she said, but I haven't actually spoken to him in a while.

What's that mean, a while?

He never called, and he didn't have a phone. I haven't heard his actual voice for five years or so. A letter, maybe two years ago. He sent that picture of himself graduating from Tulane in his academic gown. An 8 x 10. I meant to frame it, but its still on my fridge. I wrote back same day. I'm so proud of you, I said. Your Mom's so proud of you. He never answered.

A moment's silence, and then the grunt of a bull seal, far off on the rocks out at sea, behind the fog. Then a streetcar bell, over and over, as the N Judah pulled away from its turntable, headed off to San Francisco.

Benny said, You can find a way.

Get in your fancy-ass car. Lulu's gonna be late.

Lulu came running out of the house shouting, Mom, where the hell you been? I got history at eight. I coulda gone without you.

Then she saw him. BENNY! Benny! Benny! You're back in San Francisco. What are you doing here?

I came to see you, of course. I heard you'd gotten kinda good-looking, and I wanted to see for myself what that nasty baby grew up into. 'Sides, I missed your birthday the last few years....

Mom? Where'd you find Mr. Benjamin Silver at seven in the morning? I thought you were walking the dog.

Benny came to see us. He heard about Danny, and he came to see us, see if we needed anything.

Lulu, said Benny, we can talk later. Get in the car. I don't wanna make you late for school.

That's your car?

Yeah.

You shouldn't have stolen that car, Benny.

I didn't steal...

It will not make you more attractive to the ladies. By the way, my first class is Ancient Civilizations. Fucking Sumerians, with all their boogedy-boogedy gods. Instead of attending class, I'd like to cruise the neighborhood with an older man in his fifties thrill machine.

You're going to school, young lady, Jessie said.

Benny gave the gas pedal a little extra kick as he pulled away. Lulu sprawled in the back seat with her bare feet out the window. She's almost sixteen, Jessie said again, as if excusing some bad behavior that hadn't happened yet. Make a left at the corner, a mile down, big pink building on the right. You can't miss it.

They pulled up at Noe Valley High School and Lulu got out. Benny couldn't help thinking she was a living duplicate of her mother at twenty, clever, smartass, beautiful. He couldn't tell if she was dressed way down for school or she needed new clothes. Torn jean jacket, stained black belly shirt, navel ring. Old song ran in Benny's head-- Blood is

red, money's green, sugar's sweet, and you're sixteen... Lulu ran over to a group of her friends, pointed at Benny and the Rocket 88. They laughed, headed inside. Lulu waved.

Hey, said Jessie. She likes your car.

I guess she does.

So do I. Lulu called you, didn't she?

No. I got a friend in New Orleans who...

Don't lie to me, Benny. You don't know a goddamn soul in New Orleans.

I damn well do. Louis...Armstrong. Something like that.

Lulu called and told you about Danny.

Yeah. She thought I might want to come by and see you.

Bull. She probably said I was taking it pretty hard, and having you around might make it easier.

You pissed at her for calling me?

That girl thinks she's my mother some days.

You glad I showed up?

That depends.

On what?

If you're gonna let me drive this thing.

I don't think so, Benny grinned. It's a pretty powerful machine for some chick to handle. You gotta know how to work the Dynaflow and the hydra...

Shut up and hand me the keys.