

## His Benediction

by Anna Lear Pinkney, Grade 10

It was a bitterly cold day on the 4th of April. Nathaniel and Benedict were sitting in their favorite café just before school. Nathaniel was telling his friend about his first date with this Rosaline girl that Benedict had never even heard of. That's about the only information about his friend's situation that Benedict managed to take in. As usual Ben wasn't paying much attention, but rather observing his warm breath turn into a cloud of mist rising into the air before him. Lately he'd been having the most annoying dream that seemed persistent to grab his scattered attention.

It would always start on a cheery note: a warm summers day and he'd be sitting in that exact café opposite Nathaniel. It always seemed to him that they were staring each other down. Nathaniel's deep blue eyes looked like a stormy ocean – unpredictable and ever-changing. In Nathaniel's eyes Benedict could see his own – the same navy blue, just with a golden ring encircling his pupils like a ring of fire. There'd be something growing in Nathaniel's eyes, like a dark cloud wanting to choke the air. Just when Benedict thought that he'd be 'taken', something would pull his gaze away from his friend's. Then Benedict's surroundings would melt into the background and Nathaniel would turn into a shadow. His own eyes would then fall onto a juvenile ginger cat. She'd be striding away from him, but then she'd peer over her shoulder and her hazel eyes would make his heart skip a beat. It would be as if she were asking him for something. Before he could think anything more, she'd turn around and bound into a narrow alley-way. As soon as she was out of sight, his heart would fill with fear and he'd race after her. Then he'd find 'the Ginger' lying on her side, facing away from him, in a pool of sticky red blood. The pain he'd feel would be excruciating and before he could reach her side, he'd wake up.

Shaking his head now irritably, he looked up to study Nathaniel. His friend was always the shy, intelligent and innocently kind one. Lately, Benedict had noticed that this was all an act – though the girls never seemed to have a problem with that.

The way he spoke now, with a sparkle in his eyes, rosy cheeks and a smile tugging on his lips, gave Benedict the urge to laugh out loud.

"Nate?"

"Yeah, that's me."

" We've got to go, it's nearly eight o'clock."

Nathaniel heaved a big sigh and scooped up his sports bag. "You just had to interrupt my daydreams, didn't you?"

" Oh I only live for it."

They came to the zebra crossing leading to the entrance gate of Silvermist High when something lightly whisked past Benedict's legs. Watching her trot around the next corner, he couldn't believe his eyes. So, he pinched himself just to make sure that he wasn't dreaming. An incredulous frown creased his forehead as he took off after the alley cat. Benedict's heart was racing, drowning out his baffled friend's calls.

Navigating his way through the trickle of people racing to and fro, he managed to eventually keep pace with the cat. After a curious few minutes of left and right turns Benedict thought for sure he'd be lost. Finally the feline came to a halt at what was a deserted basketball court. It was a 'no go

zone'. A new owner had fenced it off as a building site. Seemingly they had never gotten to completing their little project. Halfway through clearing the site, the project had been cut because of a sudden misunderstanding. Benedict looked down to find the cat sitting on her hind legs, patiently looking up at him although, it seemed to him, she looked a bit annoyed.

"So you're Benedict Lorenz Blume? Hmpf, I would have at least expected you to know what you are! But I guess I'm being unreasonable...and what, may I ask, are you gawking at?"

At the cat's remarks, Benedict's mouth must have fallen open without his recollection. She looked at him as if he had this morning's peanut butter sandwich still stuck in between his teeth. He clamped his jaw and took a few steps backwards. His mind was racing at the thought of a talking cat, but surely he'd imagined it? "Who're you? What do you want?"

"Oh it's not what I want, it's what your parents wanted. Had they been alive, they would have trained you."

"My parents? What do you mean? What were you going on about just now? Know what I am? Of course I know what I am! I'm human!"

"Now there, there. No need to get your curls in a twist."

"What're you supposed to be? Just another one of those talking cats I suppose?"

"Humpf! That would be an understatement. I am a, what you may call it, 'shapeshifter'.

The name's Katharine, and I'll explain."

"You're special," she had said.

When Katharine explained 'everything' to me, I didn't want to believe it.

"You're someone whose spirit is deeply connected to that of the environment. Any emotion you feel, your immediate surroundings reflect. For example: feelings that make you tremble in rage, will make the earth around you shake."

To put it simply: my feelings can rip the world to shreds!

Katharine suspects that I am currently a threat to myself and everyone around me. That I can't control myself. As proof, she had found a way to anger me. I had stamped my foot in frustration and a miniature sand cloud had sprung to life around my ankle. It had only lasted a minute, but it was enough. I guess I'd always known that I am different. Strong emotions of mine had always caused some kind of comotion. She said that it represented what I was feeling. She said she understood! She said she'd train me every evening from now on. I agreed, but there's no way that I'll show up."

Benedict was striding back the way he had come at a determined pace. He was not planning on looking back at the ginger cat that watched him. He would not go back to school that day. He'd already missed first period, and was sure that his friend would come up with one of his widely creative excuses. Nate could most definitely persuade anyone or anything with that brilliant 'Simon says' trick of his.

The extra wind from earlier had died down by the time Benedict reached his apartment door. He lived with his Aunt Anne in a cramped space above her bakery, Sugar & Spice.

"Hey Aunt Anne, I'm home! Did you leave me some of those famous brownies of yours? May I?" There was no reply. Benedict assumed she couldn't hear him all the way downstairs. As usual, he could effortlessly make out the sound of The Spice Girls blaring out of their speakers through the kitchen door.

Mumbling to himself, Benedict made his way down their stuffy passage to the last room on the right. A large yellow sign, reading "ENTER AT OWN RISK", was stuck to a blue door that had its paint peeling off.

When Benedict opened his bedroom door, he walked straight to his window to open it and let out all the stuffy air. He then sighed and relieved his shoulders of the weight of his rucksack, plonking it down beside his chair. Then, placing his hands on either side of his old wooden desk, he looked down to see that he had left his phone lying on its counter. In his rush to get out of the house early, he had forgotten it there. This reminded him of his aunt's bid to clean up his ever so dirty room. Groaning, he turned on his heel, rubbing his temples. Instead of finding his room a mess, the denim covers of his bed halfway to the floor and his cupboard doors ajar, his belongings pooling out, he found the neatest version of his room that he had ever seen. A chuffed Nathaniel was lounging on his bed, smirking up at him with his hands resting behind his head.

"I thought, while I wait, that I'd clean up this dreadful place you call your room."

"What, another one of your 'Simon says' tricks? Aren't you supposed to be in school?"

He sat up, "Well, no. It's not every day that your best friend abruptly takes off at an alarming pace, and doesn't seem to think it necessary to enlighten his baffled companion as to what he was getting up to. I was worried!"

"Oh, sorry."

Nathaniel patted the space beside him, to indicate that his exhausted-looking friend should take a seat. Benedict sat down and put his head in his hands. He was doing that a lot lately.

"Do you plan on telling me what you did? You know, I went looking for you."

Benedict glanced at Nate. The strangest look was in his friend's eyes, Benedict thought it almost looked intimidating.

"Ben?"

"I'm sorry Nathaniel, I'm too tired for story time. I myself am not sure of what is going on. I'll tell you later."

Nathaniel seemed to be temporarily content with his friend's answer. Ben guessed Nate wouldn't let it go, until he knew all the details of whatever it was that Benedict had gotten up to.

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Benedict had been sitting cross legged on the dusty remains of the basketball court with his eyes closed. He was supposed to be meditating. For the past hour he hadn't been able to figure out what had persuaded him to show up for his training session with the cat. He'd even been on time! This had not done much to impress the feline, who'd already been sitting, waiting for him. According to her, anyone that arrives after her, is late. At this remark Benedict had just shrugged his shoulders. Now his back hurt from keeping up his posture. He had a headache from all the concentrating he

had to do. This, with the cat barking instructions and criticism at him left, right and center, was not the easiest task.

She'd said that he had to learn to channel his feelings. To do that, he had to be in tune with himself as much as everything around him. He had to reach 'deep inside' and listen to the secret of his 'Self'. Benedict should 'reach for his spirit' and 'see it'. He had to 'understand it' before he could 'control' it. She said that if it were easier, he could 'picture it as a flame in the darkness'.

The cat had fallen silent for a while, and Benedict dared to open his one eye to see what had become of her. This, to Ben's disappointment, the feline noticed immediately, and she told him off. He had to 'stay focused'.

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The second time Benedict dragged himself to training, he had been determined not to let a cat boss him around. The feisty ginger got the better of him in the end anyway. So he resorted to plan 'B' and decided not to give her the satisfaction of being 'easy' to handle.

"You realise, the more you fight against me, the less I can help you! Don't you want to get to the good part?"

"Which is what exactly?"

The cat looked incredulous, "Well, controlling your power of course!"

Benedict was not impressed.

"I work for an international organisation called The Rule of St. Benedict. Do you even know what the name means?"

"Yes of course. Something to do with poached eggs on toast."

Benedict found his contribution extremely hillariouse. He grinned at her smugly. The cat, on the other hand kept her sullen poise." Quite the contrary, this is a serious matter! The sooner you understand, the better for both of us. You were given the name, Benedict, for a reason, a higher purpose than a breakfast dish. You have been ordained with a gift, and every gift comes with a certain responsibility. This is not a game! This can proove to be YOUR BENEDICTION!"

"Oh, come on Kitty! Don't be so uptight, it was just a joke!"

She turned her head away in indignation.

That's when Benedict felt the anger boiling up in him. "I never wanted this 'blessing'! I wish I'd never been born with these 'abillities'!"

He felt alone and cold inside.

He'd never liked being responsible for anything: for the car accident that he'd been the sole survivor of, for all the trouble he'd caused his aunt when he'd tried to run away, for the time he'd trashed the kitchen, for the time he'd hurt his aunt by being ungrateful for anything she'd ever done for him. The list went on. Now he had to deal with some 'super powers' he'd never even asked for!

Benedict slammed his fists onto the stony ground. He pounded them and screamed, letting out all his hatred towards himself. The cat yelped in surprise and jumped back, hairs on end. The ground sprang up in a cloud of sand. Benedict and Katharine watched in amazement. The dust particles that shimmered in a mass above their heads, seemed frozen in time. The sun reflected on each of the sand grains, making them look like a shower of powdered gold. Benedict had been so surprised that he'd forgotten all about his temper tantrum. His anger subsided. The mound fell onto the two onlookers as they ducked to shield their heads.

When the dust had settled, the boy and the cat sat very still, looking at each other. Then Benedict abruptly let himself fall backwards. The effort of his outburst had cost him his breath. Thank goodness, there hadn't been any piles of bricks around.

"That was amazing, Benedict! Although, you could clean up your act," she mumbled as she licked her paws.

Benedict moaned in self pity, but didn't argue. Training was obviously done for the day.

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The next day, Nathaniel had bugged Benedict throughout school, begging him to hurry up and tell him why he'd taken off the other day. Nate's constant, playful threatening of using 'Simon says' on him, didn't help Benedict's negative attitude towards his friend. In fact, all this time that Benedict had known Nathaniel, he'd never seen his friend to be so irritatingly persistent. Then again, it might just be one of Nate's developing phases....

Benedict shook off the feeling that Nathaniel was getting dangerously excited, as if he almost knew what to anticipate. Ben had the strongest urge to resist Nate's wish to know his secret, but he would have to tell his friend sooner or later anyway.

Benedict decided he'd take Nathaniel to the place where it all began, and actually show him what he could do. Once there, Benedict sat down in the middle of the basketball court with nervous butterflies in his stomach. He then closed his eyes and meditated for a while. Every now and then, he'd peek through his eyelashes at his friend. Nathaniel only stood to the side, waiting patiently.

"Give me an emotion."

At this Nathaniel stared at his friend in confusion.

"A...an emotion?"

"Yes."

Nathaniel hesitated for a split second, then gave Benedict the emotion 'sadness'.

To reach this emotion, Benedict had to grasp a memory that contained this feeling at its peak. He knew exactly where to look.

"I remember myself sitting in the backseat of my family's black Audi. I am seven. We are on our way to our holiday house in Simons Town from Cape Point. It isn't a long drive, but the mountain side road is deserted. My parents are arguing in the front seat and little me is getting annoyed. I lean my forehead against the cool window pane, my arms I folded stiffly in front of my chest. My angry eyes are searching out the window, for something, anything, to distract me from the escalating volume of Mamma and Pappa's shouts. They argue all the time these days.

My golden-blond hair had grown over the years, and a few loose strands fall over my brow. My eyes that blaze, complement my navy blue button up shirt brilliantly. I try my best not to lose my temper. I count to ten and take deep breaths. It's a shame that I'm not thinking of putting my headphones on. Music has always had a way of subduing me, it might even have saved my parents' lives. Through all the heated disagreeing, I'm unable to think rationally. I thought to myself, "Be quiet, you're ruining our holiday. You promised you wouldn't fight! You promised!" Now I watch as my body shakes and I feel how my face contorts into a mask of fury. Then there is an ear-splitting crack and a scream, and my memory's vision goes dark."

Benedict was back in his seventeen year old body. His lungs were heaving as if he'd run a marathon. His eyes shut tightly, he let the feeling of excruciating sadness wash over him. His parents are gone and Ben feared it was his fault. He knew what he'd done. The memory was as fresh as if he'd just been hauled out of the car's crashed remains by the random couple that had found the wreck and called the ambulance. Tears streamed down Benedict's face, salty and warm. Then he felt a reassuring hand on his shoulder. When Benedict opened his eyes, he'd expected the long and elegant fingers to belong to Nathaniel. On the contrary, all he saw in front of him, was the most beautiful face he had ever seen: her red hair plastered to her temples, her pale complexion soaked, her big almond-shaped eyes looking up at him. Benedict thought it seemed familiar. He could see all the little raindrops webbed between her long, dark lashes. Her other hand came up to stroke his hair out of his face. Benedict was overcome with a strange urge to feel her reddened cheeks. Then her lips formed words that took him a while to understand.

"...edict, Benedict! Earth to Benedict," she smiled the most dazzling smile, and his heart skipped a beat. Then her expression darkened, "Be strong for me now, you have to keep your head." She looked over her shoulder. When their eyes met again, he could detect fear in her's.

"Benedict run! He's coming, He's dangerously unstable. Don't listen..."

The pretty one was cut off. Benedict heard the log swing before he saw it. The beautiful girl's hands on his skin went slack, and her eyes rolled back into her head. She slumped to the ground. He watched her fall as if in slow motion. She lay too still on the ground, and his heart contracted.

Benedict was overcome by a feeling of sorrow as the rain continued to beat down on them. He didn't want to believe it. Benedict, still cowering on the floor, leant forwards but didn't dare touch her. He helplessly watched as a red flower started to bloom from the crack in her skull. The dark liquid making her curls turn crimson in the rain.

Benedict felt as if he'd been slapped in the face. He heard a shuffle and a thud nearby. The sound, like thunder to his ears, ripped him from the veil that had cut him from his surroundings. As if to protect the sleeping beauty from further harm, he moved to stand in front of her, facing the direction that the log had come from. When Benedict saw Nathaniel standing there, a blood-stained piece of wood at his feet, his mind went blank.

"Nathaniel? Nate...Nate what happened?"

Nathaniel grinned widely, "There you were, sitting, meditating, and then you began to shout... You said something about fighting. An argument? A promise?"

You thought of the day of that car accident, didn't you?" There was a long pause.

"Then suddenly it wasn't sunny anymore, but cold. There was a strong wind, and rain, and dark clouds! Lightning struck the ground just a few meters away, see?" Nate pointed to the ashen area a handful of paces to Ben's right. There was more silence. Then Nathaniel spoke again.

"I was right! I mean, I'd always had my suspicions," he started to pace, "maybe it was you, maybe it wasn't? Then there came the day when you ran away, without any further explanation. So I followed you till here." Nathaniel pointed one long finger at a pile of rubble within hearing distance. "I knew you'd be special, but never had I dreamed that you were so powerful!"

"You hit her with that log! Why? What did she ever do to you?" Ben was building himself up slowly.

"That girl," he said the word as if it were something distasteful, "and her kind, they are liars! Do you not recognise her? Her ginger hair, her hazel eyes! Her slim, cat-like features?"

Then it dawned on Benedict. KATHRINE! She'd always acted older, and wiser and more mature than him. She'd never really been much older than himself.

"What do you mean by liars?" Ben collected himself.

"Oh, didn't she tell you? She works for a 'secret organisation' that just wants to control anyone that is special!" Nate idly gestured to Katharine, "She trained me too, you know. It was a few years ago. You were still new at the school. I was in love with her, and she played me! She used me! She told me that it was all for the better good, but she lied!"

Benedict shook his head in distaste. He'd never seen his friend look so pittyful: his strawberry blonde hair was in knots because of the storm, his black jeans smudged by clay. Self-control!

Benedict turned on his heel. He was planning to get as far away from this scene as possible. So that there was a chance that it hadn't happened. He'd go back home and have a nice, warm bath. Then, when he returned to the basketball court tomorrow, he'd be just on time and she'd be sitting on her usual pile of rubble. She'd roll her eyes at his appearance and sprout a cheesy remark as a greeting. Ben's eyes narrowed.

"Simon says freeze."

Benedict's breath hitched. His feet felt glued to the ground, his hands bound at his side. No matter how hard Benedict struggled, he was forced to watch the scene unfold in front of him:

It must have gotten a lot later, the sun was setting rapidly and the remains of light fell onto Katharine's body. If her head hadn't been beat-in and there wasn't so much blood, Benedict would have thought her almost peacefully asleep. Then, as tears stung his eyes and his lungs heaved in desperate, rattling breaths, her body began to crumble. When the last breeze came, all it stirred were the dead girl's ashes. There was only the sticky red substance that stained the place where she'd just lain.

One at a time, Nathaniel's icy hands lowered themselves onto Benedict's hunched shoulders. He could feel the intruder's breath tickling the hairs on his neck.

"Simon says come, my dearest friend."

Nathaniel Piper led Benedict into the shadows. Now all that remained were the echoes of silence that filled the surrounding area.