

*The White Death: An Illusion*<sup>1</sup>

When I began my study of the late illusionist Benjamin Vaughn—a side project during my dissertation year—little could be found in the way of primary source material: a four-line obituary in the *Orlando Sentinel*, a scattering of mentions in obscure internet forums dedicated to contemporary magicians. The few photographs of the Great Bendini that I unearthed in these early forays captured an awkward teen, a young man difficult to square with the cult figure that he's become in the years since his death in 1995, at the age of fourteen.

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1. Author's Note: Tonight it was observed by the individual enlisted as my colleague, editor, reader of first drafts, and wife, that while she has enjoyed her first read-through of these pages, the *purpose* of the

Physically, Benjamin Vaughn would never have been described as “eye-catching.” In the surviving photographs his most striking feature is his hair, which is the glossy black of a cormorant’s wing. Otherwise, he is of average build for a boy of his age, with skin as sallow as tapioca. And yet, if asked to recall their first encounter with the Great Bendini, even the most inattentive bystander will tell you where they were, what he was wearing, what they might have had to drink that night. My own first meeting with the Great Bendini was in 1991 at the 26th annual Amateur and Professional Magician’s Association’s regional convention in Las Vegas, Nevada, where I was performing under the name “Remy the Great.” Benjamin Vaughn was

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document escapes her. Is it a true biography? Is she to trust that her narrator (and husband) has no ulterior motives in its research? Is it nonfiction at all, or is it to be taken as some sort of parable? Is it memoir? Ethnography?

It’s late on a school night when she asks these questions, as she dries the last of the dinner dishes. I scratch my son Jacob’s shoulders as he watches television—a late night comedian’s opening monologue. It’s to be read, I tell her, however she wishes, though I have never thought of it as anything other than a love story.

only eleven at the time—three years my junior—but even at this young age he carried a gravitas that left anyone in the room aware they were in the presence of a future master.

For me, this encounter was the beginning of the story of the Great Bendini, one that transcends faith, culture, and symbolism. It is, quintessentially, an American story in its themes of ambition, success, and inevitable heartbreak. And in many ways, it is the near bookend of my own story, one that finds me here tonight: failed magician, perennial lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at \_\_\_\_\_ University, father and husband.

The convention in 1991 was held in the basement of the Riverboat, a run-down casino off the Strip wedged in between the Glitter Gulch and the Golden Nugget. I was performing in the Friday night stage show and had just concluded my *Multiplying Doves* routine—one of three live birds had escaped from the hidden pouch in my left hip pocket, and as I exited stage left I was attempting to hide an awkward fluttering in the crotch of my pants. It was an illusion I'd performed a thousand times before, but always alone in front of a mirror. I'd been unsettled, from the outset, by the crowd of a few hundred professional magicians and talent

scouts, the first tremor in a series of anxiety attacks that led me to hang up my scarves and doves for good two years later. But even with the distraction of a live bird let loose in my pants, my attention was caught by the figure of a small, austere boy with a shock of dark hair passing me on his way to take the stage.<sup>2</sup>

The audience greeted him unenthusiastically, doubtlessly dreading the prospect of yet another mediocre adolescent magic routine before the headliners took the stage. If memory serves, several people left in the direction of the cash bar, though later anyone who was in the building would swear that they had been in their seats for the entirety of the Great Bendini's first performance.

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2. I'd seen young performers with nerves before an act, of course; we can always spot our own. But as we crossed paths this first time, the Great Bendini's face seemed consumed by a different, more otherworldly preoccupation altogether. I had been reading *A Tale Of Two Cities* in Mrs. Demming's freshman English class that year, and as Benjamin Vaughn approached the stage his grim expression brought to mind Dickens' Sydney Carton on his way to the gallows. Even today, no other description seems more apt.

What followed this tepid welcome was a five-minute routine jammed with every variety of classic magic trick—*Chinese Linking Rings*, a unique variation of *The Floating King*, a half-dozen card sleights—so flawlessly executed that the audience of amateur and professional conjurers was held rapt. A murmur passed through the auditorium during his first “production” illusion, *The Appearing Candle*, in which a wand was made to disappear, only to reappear from thin air as a lit candle. While this may seem like a trick typical of any stage performance, most of the audience instantly recognized it as a seamless fusion of two distinct—and seemingly irreconcilable—illusions: *The Collapsing Wand* and *The Silk and the Flame*.

His presentation was astounding; even from my vantage point offstage, *behind* him, none of the palms, cheats, or devices necessary to complete the illusion were visible. Though the *Levitating Light Bulb* required a length of No. 2 invisible wire attached to the magician’s shoe, at no time was a glimpse of it seen, regardless of how much I strained to look.

If the crowd’s murmurs induced in the Great Bendini the slightest hint of satisfaction, it was easily confused with a focused pursing of the

lips.<sup>3</sup> Soon, however, the audience's murmurs gave way to speechlessness. For the final moments of his performance, the Great Bendini played to an eerily quiet audience whose trance was broken only when he took a quick bow before leaving stage right; the ovation that followed, however, lasted several minutes past his departure.

After the show, I lingered backstage among the performers. My doves now safely back in their wire cages, I stood quietly off to a side, taking in the melee of props and ropes and barely dressed women. However, I soon found myself eavesdropping on a conversation between the Great Bendini and the woman who had been smoking offstage during his performance. The woman, I quickly deduced, was his mother, a woman in her mid-thirties with dyed-blond hair whose leopard print halter-top looked as if it had been purchased from the juniors section at Sears.

"I'll need two packs of cigarettes for tomorrow night, Colleen," I heard him say in a voice too low for a boy of his age. "Fifty meters of

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3. During this performance, the only lapses in concentration I detected came in the form of quick glances side stage, where a not-quite-young woman sat on a cargo box smoking distractedly.

microfilament—three-pound test—and a small jar of carnauba wax.”

His mother ashed her cigarette into an empty wine cooler before addressing her son.

“Just use mine,” she said, offering up her pack.

The Great Bendini smoothed a hank of slick black hair away from his brow. “They’re slims. I need a standard three-and-a-quarter-inch cigarette.” He hesitated for a moment, before adding, “Camel Lights, if they have them.”<sup>4</sup>

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4. It was the recollection of this performance in Las Vegas, which returned to me in a hospital room south of Syracuse ten years ago, that first inspired my scholarly work on the Great Bendini. More specifically, I trace my studies back to the moment in which Elizabeth’s nurse—a rough-handed woman in her mid-fifties—held the wrinkled, shivering form of my son, still glistening with amniotic fluid, up in the fluorescent glow of the hospital room.

As if magician herself, the nurse had revealed this impossible object, the waxy white umbilical cord dangling like an extension cord leading back to his mother. And then, as if reversing the trick, the same nurse brusquely swaddled the boy in a small cotton hospital blanket, shrinking him back into something again

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diminutive and mysterious. Wrapped tightly in his blanket, Jacob seemed to regain a miraculous smallness, curled back up into the posture that had maintained him for the prior thirty-eight weeks. Wracked with exhaustion, I found myself worrying, irrationally, that he might continue to shrink, that he might disappear back into the emptiness from which he'd emerged. The nurse's gesture—the presentation of new life, a simple act—had, in a way I hadn't experienced since the last time I saw the Great Bendini perform, unbraided my basic understanding of reality. And it was in this moment that I was reminded of the first time I had witnessed Benjamin Vaughn perform in Las Vegas.

Elizabeth, it should be noted, recently called this account—a late addition to the manuscript—into question. She asked if this origin story is true only in retrospect, or if it's a narrative that I've superimposed during my own internal editing process. *Does it really matter?* I find myself wondering, ignoring the most basic precepts of the Scientific Method. Verification of fundamental assumptions, accounting for subjective bias. *Even if you were right*, I want to argue, *would that make it any less true?*