

*The White Death: An Illusion*¹

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.

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

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.²

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.

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.³ 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

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.”⁴

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

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?*

*

From what I've pieced together, the Great Bendini's love of illusion was both instantaneous and singular.⁵ Since the discovery of an older cousin's magic kit in the basement of his maternal aunt Julia's house at the age of seven, Benjamin Vaughn displayed a preternatural gift for all things sleight-of-hand. The kit, a dusty suitcase filled with a clutter of rubber thumbs, richly dyed scarves, shining brass rings, and other colorful doodads, must have felt like an appendage that he had forgotten existed. It was your basic commercial kit from the 1960's—a deck of rigged cards, a few dummy coins, and the first two volumes of *Tarbell's Course in Magic*. According to Julia, after Benjamin had

5. When I first contacted them in 2003, eight years after his death by drowning at the age of fourteen, the Great Bendini's extended family was—nearly without exception—generous in their willingness to discuss his earlier years, and to provide whatever notes and documents he had left behind. This candor, it must be noted, evaporated after the publication of my first article on the Great Bendini, "The Life and Death of the Great Bendini." (*Society of American Magicians' Magazine*, Vol. 102, Fall 2005.)

carefully unpacked the contents of the suitcase onto the linoleum floor of the laundry room he spent an hour simply examining the items, enjoying the coolness of the brass against his wrists, the sensual slickness of the scarves through his fingers. In what would become a hallmark of the Great Bendini's study of his art, he carefully catalogued the contents of this first magic kit in a spiral bound green notebook.⁶ By the time he emerged from the basement seven hours later, he was the possessor of a passable *Vanishing Coin in Handkerchief* routine.

Though I've interviewed Colleen Vaughn on a half-dozen different occasions, she remains something of a mystery. She is, at turns, a mother devastated by the death of her only son and also a woman so self-absorbed that it's difficult to imagine her ever having held a child. During the first year of her son's interest in illusion Colleen would, on occasion, drive him to The Wizard's Lair, a magic and gag store in a strip mall in downtown _____, California, a midsize town near the Oregon border that has struggled to redefine itself after the collapse of the timber industry in the late 1990's.⁷ Seeing

6. See Notebook 1, p. 1.

7. It wasn't until the summer before my son Jacob

magic as an inexpensive alternative to after-school care, the Great Bendini's mother had funded the hobby even if she didn't actively encourage it. Books and boxes from mail-order catalogues and hardware stores began to arrive regularly at the Vaughn residence, a worn

began elementary school that I was finally able to visit the Great Bendini's hometown in person, a one-night pit stop on the way to a pictureque town on the Southern Oregon coast. I left Elizabeth and Jacob in a tidy motel room for a few hours while I retraced the paths—so familiar to me through my studies—trod by Benjamin Vaughn in his few terrestrial years. I drove past the bungalow on Warren Street, where Vaughn had enjoyed the most stable years of his childhood, the house barely recognizable from the one depicted in the old photographs from the Great Bendini's childhood: the yard now primly landscaped, the front awning adorned by peonies and a crisp American flag. I peered through the dimmed windows of the defunct Wizard's Lair (now a real estate office). I paid the small admission to the local swimming pool where he practiced his earliest escapes, cooling my feet in the chlorine-clear water amid the delighted screams of children on summer vacation, the old concrete of the pool cracked and yellowing.

bungalow on the outskirts of town.

Soon enough, the practice of illusion passed from childhood hobby to nascent obsession, though this progression (if it can be called that) occurred in such a seemingly innocuous way that it escapes the memory of his family even in retrospect. His uncle Sandy remembers fondly a morning that first year after the discovery of the magic kit when Benny—as Sandy calls him—emerged blurry-eyed from the basement at seven, just as Sandy was enjoying his first mug of coffee.⁸ As Sandy remembers it, Ben asked that he be bound to a leg of the Ping Pong table in the den using a series of ropes and chains. Sandy reluctantly obliged, relying on knot-tying skills learned from three years in the merchant marines in hope of keeping the boy out from underfoot for an hour or so. Over the course of the morning, each time Sandy passed through the den Benny appeared to be in the identical position that he'd been left in, though the Great Bendini invariably refused any assistance. Nearly four hours later, Sandy passed the Ping Pong table to find it unattended, the Great Bendini

8. The Great Bendini had by this time cordoned off a portion of the basement as a sort of laboratory of illusion.

back at work in his basement, the ropes and chains neatly looped over labeled hooks on the basement wall.

To learn his sleight-of-hand illusions, the Great Bendini developed a four-step approach to his craft. Early notes found on the back of an old spelling test⁹ reveal that he would first study the theory of the new illusion, either through instructional books on magic or by watching VHS tapes of another magician performing the routine. Once a thorough theoretical understanding of the illusion was achieved, the Great Bendini would turn his focus to the dexterity the feat required. This dexterity, most often, was a matter of simple repetition, of muscle memory. His uncle Sandy recalls evenings in which the family gathered in the living room to watch *Cosby* or *Who's the Boss*, his taciturn nephew's face lit by the glow of the television set. The Great Bendini, an unabashed lover of lousy television, sat on the living room floor laughing just a bit louder than the rest of the family, all the while his hands moving inside the closed

9. The words "amendment," "pleasant," "whoever," and, ironically, "handkerchief" were particularly problematic for the Great Bendini.

pillow case on his lap, the clinking of steel cuffs just audible under the laugh track.

Only after he had gained physical mastery of the illusion did the Great Bendini move on to performance itself, first practicing in the crudely made room that Sandy built by fastening three full-length mirrors to a two-by-four frame, allowing the Great Bendini a nearly three-hundred and sixty-degree view of himself. Finally, the Great Bendini would reveal the illusion to any family member that might be in the house, which more often than not was either Sandy or his aunt Julia.

These early years in the Great Bendini's career coincided with a turbulent time in the Vaughn family history. His parents had divorced when Ben was seven, and while these years of middle adolescence was a period of discovery for the Great Bendini, so was it a period of discovery for his parents. His father, once a prominent tax attorney in _____, had moved to rural New Mexico to live in an adobe hut with his high school girlfriend before the divorce was finalized.¹⁰

His mother, Colleen, had landed hard on the

10. All attempts at communication with the Great Bendini's father have been met with frustration.

local dating scene, living with three men in as many years. As a consequence, the Great Bendini was left primarily in the care of Julia and Sandy in the bungalow on Warren Street. In the years since his death, I've spent many late nights debating my wife about whether the advances made by the Great Bendini during this time merited the emotional toll this isolation took on him. Regardless of the winning argument, it is beyond debate that this period of familial isolation was also one of great technical advances for the Great Bendini.¹¹

11. As I type these words, I hear the small crashes and explosions of my ten-year-old son's video game console echoing down the heating register into my basement office. I consider my son's own growing isolation, his recent inclinations towards quietness and introspection. This change strikes both fear and hope in me; hope that, in his way, my son has arrived at the trailheads of his own life callings, his own senses of self and purpose. And fear that these are the same dark seeds of isolation and malaise that, it could be argued, brought Benjamin Vaughn to his premature death. Can these two contradictory sentiments, I wonder, even truly be extricated from one another?

I'm reminded of the photographer Sally Mann's

Luckily for me—sole historian and biographer of the late Benjamin Vaughn—the Great Bendini was a meticulous journaler and note-taker from a young age. According to his earliest entries, the Great Bendini earned his first professional job at the age of nine, two years before I crossed his path at the APMA convention in Las Vegas. He was given a formal audition at Blue Bronco Entertainment, a local talent agency, at 3:30 on a Thursday afternoon. (It had initially been scheduled for noon, but Julia demanded the Great Bendini reschedule so as not to interrupt his school day). If the nine-year-old aspiring performer was nervous for the audition, it isn't reflected in his journal. Instead, the entry for April 19, 1989 records only the series of illusions that he had performed at the audition (*Invisible Money Transit*, *The Three Wandering Sponge Balls*, *Find the Burglar*, etc.), along with several notes in shaky cursive about his execution (“work on left hand for last reveal of *The Magic Orange*”).

translation of a Japanese phrase, *mono no aware*—beauty tinged with sadness—in her invocation to childhood: “How is it that we must hold what we love tight to us, against our very bones, knowing we must also, when the time comes, let it go?” (Mann, Sally. *Immediate Family*. Aperture, 2014).

For his first paying jobs he dressed in a red sequined tuxedo furnished by Blue Bronco Entertainment, strolling around company picnics or the birthday parties, performing impromptu illusions for a set fee of fifteen dollars an hour.¹² When his mother stopped in for dinner at her sister's house a few days after his professional debut at the Cascade Paper Company employee dinner, her eyes lit up in happy surprise.

"Sixty dollars," his mother said over a mouthful of scalloped potatoes. "That's real money for an afternoon..."

In subsequent interviews his aunt and uncle shared similar memories of the eager reaction that Ben, an ordinarily quiet child, showed to his mother's interest in his art that evening: the happiness with which he ran to his room to retrieve his Velcro wallet so that he could present the three twenties to her.

*

12. Amazingly, Blue Bronco is still in existence, and still has its payroll records from the Great Bendini's time there.