



MAN WITH THE PEARL/WHITE CORD

Helen Garner

Somebody told me that Burkhard Augustin Hase, the young German magician who has married an Australian and come to live in Melbourne, was doing a few gigs at the Butterfly Club next door to South Melbourne Town Hall. I took my sister, an odd choice, since her natural expression is a sceptical half-smile. The barman had barely obeyed our commands about gin to vermouth ratios when the manager rang a bell and cried: "The magician's show starts in the front room in five minutes!" We ran for it, slopping our drinks. Eight of us packed into two rows of chairs, facing a wall, in front of which stood a tiny folding card table covered in green baize.

Burkhard Augustin Hase slid into the room behind us and approached the table, on which he laid down a chunky little suitcase with brass hasps. He was a smallish man in his mid-30s, slender and graceful in a loose, beautiful old suit

with fat lapels, a tie and shiny black shoes. He had close-cropped dark hair and a sweetly Teutonic face, mobile and clever, with cherub's lips and a wide jaw-line. His voice was quiet, his manner was quiet, everything about him was quiet. The mind and the senses relaxed.

Hang on. Was this just the martini effect? I glanced along the row. Every single person was leaning slightly forward, lips curved, eyes bright.

As casual as a schoolboy unpacking his play-lunch, Hase removed from his case a metal cup, a white ball the size of a peach pip, and a short, dark wand tipped with brass at each end. He placed them gently on the green cloth.

"The most beautiful things," he remarked in a conversational tone, "happen secretly and privately." He pushed back his cuffs and picked up between his fingertips the spongy, ridged white ball. His grandmother, he said, had knitted it for him. "There are many ways to make a ball disappear. Do you want me to show you the fast way or the slowly way?"

He made free with the weeny thing, smiling at us genially. It flew up one of his sleeves and down the other, romping invisibly and reappearing in his palm. He tapped the inverted cup with his wand and made a magic twirl: the white ball vanished into the ether. Next time he raised the cup, there it was again – but it had become a tiny *red* ball. He clapped the cup down over it: "Red or white?" Shy silence. A daring soul piped: "White?" He raised the cup. The ball had quadrupled in size and turned into a lemon.

We were his. Long before he had sprayed a deck of cards in a watery arc, made coins change denomination in mid-air, fluttered antiquities in and out of silk squares and caused two "genetically-modified Dutch tomatoes", round which my sister obediently squeezed her fist, to become three Dutch tomatoes when she opened it, his small, enchanted audience was floating inches above the ground, in a swoon of laughter and dumb-struck silence.

His patter caressed the ear, a teasing drawl that morphed between German and English idioms while his small, rounded, muscular hands manipulated time and space. "Have you ever saw this coin before? Is this your card, yes? Is it suspicion? Do you know Schopenhauer? He was a Philosoph, ja? You know what is a Philosoph? Someone who thinks a lot about what happens. You don't find the answer with thinking. It's all imagination. All right – we are going slowly to the final."

Then he produced a length of soft, pearl-white cord, stepped back against the blank wall, and did things with it that are simply not possible unless one believes in magic. It broke in two, in three and four. It tied itself in and out of knots which glided this way and that. It grew long, it grew short. It disintegrated completely, frightening us with



destruction, and then comforted us by turning back into a perfect white O that hung from his hands. We could not clap loud enough to fill the high Victorian room, but after he had stepped out the door with his little suitcase, waving politely, eight people sat still on their chairs, hardly daring to look at each other.

“We need some counselling,” whispered a woman. “We need debriefing. We can’t go out into the world like this.”

Word must have got around. The next night the house had doubled, but the mood was less reverent. A couple of smart-arses sat grinning in the front row. Hase’s light, elegant charm showed a faint edge of steel. “Let’s go to the casino!” yelled a woman when he showered the table with golden coins, “you look cashed-up!” His pace remained lordly. “Maybe later,” he said, pursing his pretty lips. “Let me first finish my show. Are you often to the Kazino? I haven’t saw you when I was working there.”

That night, in a complex card manoeuvre, he flung the entire deck into the air. It slammed against the ceiling. We craned up. The card that stuck there, picture-side down, was *the right card*. He left the room on a tide of applause. I saw with a shiver of respect that he had the power to make a meddler wish he had never been born – and that what he was after was not merely control, but a mood of benevolent intimacy among strangers, so fragile that he

must be subtly on guard against a spoiler who might smash it with a sneer.

On the third night at the Butterfly Club the house had doubled once more, and the vibe was eager. Hase surfed the waves of our attention, languid, gracious, delicately hilarious. The power was with him: at the very moment the broken white rope returned to its circular perfection, the Town Hall clock next door struck the three-quarters. There was not a cold eye in the house. People crowded round him. Nobody wanted to go home.

“Some people who are illusionists,” said Hase when I visited him one afternoon in his crumbling first-floor St Kilda flat, “like to do the big things – putting someone in a box, cutting them in half, making an elephant disappear. But that’s not enough for me. I like working with my hands, using the whole person as the act. I want people to give all their attention to what I’m doing, so we can be surprised together. I don’t want them to think. I want people to be *rapt*.”

With an old-fashioned pair of silver tongs he served us each a little cake on a plate, and poured the tea. The open window looked out to a huge plane tree in full summer leaf. I peered at my cake. It stayed quiet on the china, so I ate it.

The next time I saw Hase working was at a CD launch in a dark Fitzroy nightclub. A band was playing, people were drinking and the room was full of noise and yelling. He moved from table to table in his bright white open-necked shirt. I worried for him. How could he get people’s attention against that tremendous racket? He approached the table behind mine. He had the cup, the brass-tipped wand, the tiny knitted ball. He leaned forward, and I lost sight of him for a few moments among the bowed heads of half a dozen women and one little girl with blonde pigtails.

Suddenly the ring of women rocked back in their seats like a sea anemone opening. Their teeth flashed in the dim light. They drummed on the table edge with their palms. The air of the riotous room was suffused with a freshness. I sprang up to look. There in the middle of the table sat the lemon.

X