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Don't Trust the Band ("Méfie-toi de l'orchestre") by Boris Vian

TRANSLATED BY PETER HODGES

This story has been selected from Boris Vian's collection of short stories gathered under the title *Le Ratichon baigneur*. Vian wrote many short stories during his lifetime, but it was not until after his death in 1959 that this collection was assembled. Most of the stories are indeed short, mostly under a thousand words, but they provide interesting material for consideration in translation.

Vian is famous for his word plays and unique style of humour. How does the translator deal with this? I don't believe it is possible to capture every word play, every neologism, and every joke or piece of humour at the precise moment it occurs in the source text. The difference between languages and cultures just does not allow it to happen. Of course, there are times, probably more often than not, when the target text does convey all the subtleties of the original. But what about those times when, no matter how hard you try, and think, and reflect, and ask other people, you are just unable to find an appropriate translation for a word play or a joke? Sometimes an opportunity presents itself at a different point in the source text, where the temptation to dabble with the language is just too great. This is the case with the paragraph ("Deux fois, d'abord ... Double-Mètre"), where the "guy in the white jacket ... does a double take". It seems the perfect opportunity to insert another "double", which, to my mind, is in keeping with the spirit of the author. This particular paragraph could have been translated in a number of different ways. It could have been translated more literally, following ST word order and syntax, but it would most likely have been awkward, and could possibly have directed the TT reader to ask who is "Yvon Petra, known as Double-Metre"? The method employed here has preserved the macro-level integrity of the ST, and has deflected attention away from "Yvon Petra" by providing a more TT-oriented approach, thus possibly avoiding annotation and explanation, while at the same time capturing a word play that may have been lost somewhere else in the text.

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“Méfie-toi de l’orchestre”

Public des cabarets, méfie-toi de l’orchestre!

Tu arrives là, bien gentil, bien habillé, bien parfumé, bien content, parce que tu as bien dîné, tu t’assieds à une table confortable, devant un cocktail délectable, tu as quitté ton pardessus chaud et cossu, tu déploies négligemment tes fourrures, tes bijoux et tes parures, tu souris, tu te détends ... Tu regardes le corsage de ta voisine et tu penses qu’en dansant tu pourras t’en approcher ... tu l’invites ... et tes malheurs commencent.

Bien sûr, tu as remarqué sur une estrade ces six types en vestes blanches dont provient un bruit rythmique; d’abord cela te laissait insensible et puis, petit à petit, la musique entre en toi par les pores de ta peau, atteint le dix-huitième centre nerveux de la quatrième circonvolution cérébrale en haut à gauche, où l’on sait, depuis les travaux de Broca et du capitaine Pamphile, que se localise la sensation de plaisir née de l’audition des sons harmonieux.

Six types en vestes blanches. Six espèces de larbins. Un domestique, à priori, n’a point d’yeux, si ce n’est pour éviter de renverser ton verre en te présentant la carte, et point d’oreilles autres que ce modèle d’oreille sélective uniquement propre à entendre ta commande ou l’appel discret de ton ongle sur le cristal. Tu te permets d’extrapoler pour les six types, à cause de leurs vestes blanches. Oh! public! ... Ton doigt dans ton œil! ...

Don’t Trust the Band

Nightclub patrons, don’t trust the band!

You arrive there, in a good mood, well dressed, the right cologne, and happy with life because you have had a nice meal. You sit yourself down at a comfortable table, a mouth-watering cocktail in front of you. You have taken off your expensive warm overcoat. You arrange your furs, jewellery, and accessories as you take a look around. You smile. You start to relax ... You look at your neighbour’s corsage, and think that while you are dancing you might move in on her ... you ask her to dance ... and your troubles begin.

Of course you have noticed those six guys in white jackets producing rhythm on stage. At first the music doesn’t have any effect on you, but then gradually it enters your body through the pores of your skin, reaches the eighteenth nerve centre of the fourth cerebral convolution at the top on the left which, as everyone knows, since the work of Broca and Captain Pamphile, is where the centre of pleasure born from the detection of harmonious sounds is located.

Six guys in white jackets. Six guys paid to be there. It used to be that staff only had eyes to avoid knocking over your glass when handing you the menu, and no ears other than the one designed specifically for hearing your order or the discreet tap of your finger on the crystal. You allow yourself to jump to conclusions about those six guys because of their white jackets. Oh, patrons! Don’t let them fool you!

(Ne te vexe pas si je te traite tantôt en camarade, comme on entretient un homme, et si, tantôt, je souligne d'une plume audacieuse, le galbe éclatant de ton décolleté – tu le sais bien, public, que tu es hermaphrodite.)

Mais, au moment où tu invites ta voisine ... Ah! Malheur à toi, public!

Car un des types en vestes blanches, un de ceux qui soufflent dans des tubes ou tapent sur des peaux, ou des touches, ou pincet des cordes, un de ceux-là t'a repéré. Qu'est-ce que tu veux, il a beau avoir une veste blanche, c'est un homme! ... Et ta voisine, celle que tu viens d'inviter, c'est une femme! ... Pas d'erreur possible! ... Elle se garde bien de transporter ici les envelopes grossières du tailleur, slacks et chaussures épaisses qui, d'aventure, avenue du Bois, le gris du jour aidant, pourraient faire que tu la prisses pour l'adolescente qu'elle n'est point, oh, deux fois non! ...

(Deux fois, d'abord, car c'est ce qui frappe le plus le type en veste blanche, à qui sa position élevée permet l'utilisation du regard plongeant, mis à la mode par certains grands du monde. Citons incidemment: Charles de Gaulle, dit Double-Maître, et Yvon Pétra, dit Double-Mètre.)

Et, à ce moment-là, public, tu n'es plus hermaphrodite.

Tu te scindes en un homme horrible – un rougeaud repu, le roi de la boustife, un marchand de coco, un sale politicard – et une femme ravissante, dont le sourire crispé témoigne de la dureté des temps, qui l'oblige à danser avec ce rustre.

(Don't be annoyed if I have been treating you as a friend just now, talking to you man to man, and if, in a little while, I emphasize the dazzling cut of your neckline with a bold pen. Patrons, you should all be aware that you are hermaphroditic.)

But just as you invite your neighbour to dance ... Oh, patrons! Woe betide you!

For one of those guys in white jackets, one of them who is blowing in tubes, or tapping on skins or keys, or plucking strings, one of them has spotted you. What do you expect? Even though he has a white jacket, he is still a man! ... And your neighbour, the one you have just asked to dance, she is a woman! ... No mistake about that! ... She is very careful not to be seen here in anything but the finest clothes. No slacks and big boots, which might make you mistake her for a teenager, which she certainly is not, if by some chance you saw her on the Avenue du Bois in fading light. But you wouldn't make that mistake twice!

(The guy in the white jacket, whose elevated position allows him to look down on the crowd, a technique made fashionable by certain great people in the world, Charles de Gaulle known as Double-Master, and Yvon Petra known as Double-Metre, just to name two, does a double-take when he sees someone who stands out.)

And patrons, that is when you cease to be hermaphroditic.

You split in two: a horrible man, a red-faced over-indulger, the king of gluttony, a coke dealer, a dirty politician; and a ravishing woman, whose tight-lipped smile bears witness to the harshness of the time that forces her to dance with this clod.

Qu'importe, homme horrible, si tu as, en réalité, vingt-cinq ans et les formes d'Apollon, si ton sourire charmeur découvre des dents parfaites, si ton habit, de coupe audacieuse, souligne la puissance de ta carrure.

Tu as toujours le mauvais rôle. Tu es un pingre, un pignouf, un veau. Tu as un père marchand de canons, une mère qui a tout fait, un frère drogué, une sœur hystérique.

Elle clame ... elle est ravissante, je te dis.

Sa robe! ... ce décolleté carré, ou rond, ou en cœur, ou pointu, ou en biais, ou pas de décolleté du tout si la robe commence plus bas ... Cette silhouette! ... Tu sais, on voit très bien si elle a quelque chose sous sa robe ou rien du tout ... Ça fait des petites lignes en relief au haut des cuisses

(Ça en fait si elle a quelque chose. Si ça ne fait pas de lignes en relief, en général, le type de la trompette fait un couac que tu ne remarques pas, parce que tu mets ça, généreusement, sur le compte du jazz hot.)

Et son sourire! ... Ses lèvres rouges et bien dessinées et elles sentent sûrement la framboise ... Et toi! ... Tu dances comme un éléphant et tu écrases sûrement ses pieds fragiles.

Et puis, vous revenez à votre place. Enfin, elle va respirer. Elle se rassied à côté de toi.

Mais quoi?

La main ... Ses ongles effilés laqués d'argent ... sur ton épaule de bouseux? ... Et elle te sourit? ...

Ah! ... La garce! ... Toutes les mêmes! ...

Et puis, les types en vestes blanches attaquent le morceau suivant ...

What does it matter, you horrible man, if, in reality, you are twenty-five years old with the body of Apollo, if your charming smile reveals a perfect set of teeth, if the dashing cut of your suit emphasizes the broadness of your shoulders?

You will never win. You are a peasant, a miser, a misfit. You have a father who is an arms dealer, a mother who has been around, a manic sister, and a brother on drugs.

She is crying out to be noticed ... She is ravishing, I tell you.

Her dress ... with that neckline! Square, or round, or heart-shaped, or plunging, or to the side, or no neckline at all if the dress is off the shoulder ... And that figure! ... You know, it's easy to tell whether or not she is wearing anything under her dress ... It makes faint raised lines around the top of the thighs ...

(But it only makes them if she has anything. Usually, if there are no lines, the guy on the trumpet hits a false note that you don't notice, because you generously put it down as being what you would expect from hot jazz.)

And her smile! ... Her perfectly shaped red lips that must surely taste like raspberries ... And you! ... You dance like an elephant. You are sure to crush her delicate feet.

And then you return to your seat. Finally she can catch her breath. She sits back down next to you.

Now what?

Her hand ... Her slender fingers with silver nail polish ... on your country bumpkin shoulder? ... And she is smiling at you?

Oh! ... The bitch! ... All the same! ...

And then the guys in the white jackets launch into the next piece ...