

the
Winter
War

Philip Teir

*Translated from the Swedish
by Tiina Nunnally*



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THE FIRST MISTAKE THAT MAX and Katriina made that winter – and they would make many mistakes before their divorce – was to deep-freeze their grandchildren’s hamster.

The whole thing was an accident. Max happened to step on the hamster. He felt something soft moving under his foot, he heard an awful, strange squeak from the floor, and then it was too late. Blixten, who was only six months old, ended up in a plastic bag in the very back of the freezer.

That was enough to make their elder daughter, Helen, refuse to speak to them for two whole weeks. But when Max thought about it, he wondered whether the problems hadn’t actually started earlier, back in November.

It had been a remarkably mild autumn. Töölö Bay sighed in the damp November fog as joggers huffed and puffed their way past. On a Friday towards the end of the month, Max and Katriina were invited to dinner by the Keskinens. Katriina was quickly drawn into the festivities while Max – just as he’d expected – was seated next to her boss.

Wivan Winkelmann was a short woman in her sixties with a horrible voice whose sole purpose seemed to be to seize hold of Max’s nerves and squeeze them tight. She was an upper-echelon executive within the Helsinki and Nyland medical district, a woman with tremendous influence in the entire public sector. She was married to a rabbit-like, bald-headed man named Pertti,

who always seemed to stand a metre behind her, as if he found Wivan to be an effective shield against the malevolent demands of the world.

The Keskinens lived in one of the new neighbourhoods in Nordsjö, in a flat straight out of a modern Finnish film: clinical, white and sterile, a flat in which Max imagined a serial killer would feel right at home. Previously they'd lived in an old Art Nouveau-style building on Fredriksgatan. Max had liked the Keskinens better when they'd lived in their former flat. It was the sort of residence that could be bought during the recession in the 1990s, which was exactly what they'd done. Like Max, Risto Keskinen had done well during those crisis years. They both worked in professions that had not been negatively affected by the bad times. On the contrary: while the rest of Finland sank into an economic malaise causing massive unemployment, Risto and Max had both prospered in their respective fields. The crisis seemed to increase the demand for the type of societal diagnoses that were Max's speciality within the field of sociology. And Risto, who was a psychiatrist, had been fully occupied with patients who came to him in the wake of the recession, bringing divorces and personal tragedies with them.

Max exchanged air kisses with Tuula Keskinen, who then disappeared further into the flat, linking arms with Katriina and carrying a gin and tonic in one hand.

Katriina and Max hadn't said a single word to each other in the taxi. Max had merely stared out of the window, enjoying the sensation of motion and the smooth ride as it raced along Sturegatan while the rain fell like glossy confetti. It had been raining all week, a gentle and pleasant rain that coloured the tree trunks black and brought a constant chill to everyone's cheeks.

The dark season had arrived early this year. Max had spent the entire autumn working on a manuscript with a March deadline that was approaching at a nerve-racking speed. Whenever he glanced out of the window of his office in the afternoon, he was

always surprised to see how short the days were.

That same autumn their younger daughter, Eva, had moved to London, and Katriina had sunk into what she herself called a 'depression', although Max thought this was simply a self-absorbed description of what happened to all parents when their children got older. By turning this transition into a personal crisis, Katriina was able to use it for her own dramatic purposes.

Three months earlier, when they had driven Eva to the airport, Katriina had talked on and on – as she always did – about what Eva should do after her year in London, what opportunities might be open to her, how she should arrange her life and how much money she needed to save each month if she managed to get a job. She had also mentioned, as one possibility, that Eva could resume her abandoned studies in Helsinki, and maybe even study for her Masters exams.

'Do you know what? I really don't want to think about that, Mum. Not everybody wants to plan their life down to the smallest detail,' Eva said from the back seat of the car where she was texting on her mobile phone. She'd spent the whole summer living at home with them because she'd given up her flat when she was accepted at the art school in London. She claimed she needed to save money, even though she'd never tried to find a summer job. She was twenty-nine and had whiled away the summer lying on the balcony getting a suntan and drinking wine.

'Okay, okay, I'm just saying that it'd be good if you had some sort of plan.'

'But I do have a plan. I'm going to study art. And hopefully I'll be dating a lot of hot British guys. That's enough for me. Do you know how hard it is to get into this field?'

'I know, I know, and we're so proud of you.'

Max had tried to keep out of it. He really was very proud of Eva. Katriina and Eva often argued about things that Max found totally incomprehensible, but he assumed it was because they were so alike. They both possessed a certain proprietary view of the world. He realised that Eva had inherited this tendency

from Katriina, but he had no idea where his wife might have come by it. He found it to be one of those personality traits that was easy enough to admire in theory, but much more difficult to live with. For as long as he'd known Katriina, she'd never once hesitated if there was something she wanted.

Tonight he'd said to Katriina that maybe she shouldn't be calling Eva every week, that maybe their daughter should be allowed to establish her own life in London. That had led Katriina to yell at him because he'd made plans to play tennis two hours before the dinner party at Risto and Tuula's place. Then he'd said that maybe she shouldn't be drinking so much wine on an empty stomach, and she responded by saying that she wouldn't need to drink if he spent more time with her.

And they'd continued on like that until Max slammed the door and went out in the rain to go over to the indoor tennis courts. He'd played like a fiend, irritably and without finesse, and by the time he got back home and stepped into the front hall, his mood was even worse. In the end, they'd caught a cab to the Keskinens' party, although without exchanging a word during the entire drive.

Max didn't have a driving licence. When they met thirty years ago, Katriina had admired him for refusing to join the ranks of car owners. Nowadays she ridiculed him for the very same reason. She claimed that for all these years his decision had been more a question of indolence and stinginess than any concern for the environment.

They arrived twenty minutes late, just in time to join everyone else at the dinner table. Max sat down, noticing that he either knew or at least recognised most of the other guests: Wivan and Pertti; Tuula and Risto, who nodded a greeting as he walked around the table, pouring everyone a vodka; and several of Katriina's work colleagues accompanied by their respective spouses.

Also seated at the table was a Norwegian couple who had

been to their home for dinner on a couple of occasions. The husband's name was John, and Max recalled that he was a man of few words, but a highly likeable expert on international trade law. At the far end of the table sat Stefan and Gun-Maj, a Finland–Swedish couple who had sold all their possessions when they retired. They now devoted their time to travelling throughout the Far East and organising expensive meditation courses for other middle-aged Finnish couples who wanted to get out of the rat race. Stefan was always suntanned and leathery and Max could smell a trace of incense from across the table.

Max said hello to the two guests seated on either side of him, and Wivan immediately started up a conversation.

'I saw the interview you gave in the latest issue of *Anna*. I said to Pertti yesterday: "Look, there's Max!" Didn't I say that?'

Pertti, who was sitting a few places away, nodded, although it was highly likely that he had no idea what his wife had just said. He was simply programmed to agree with her in all situations. Wivan turned again to Max as she handed him a tray of beets. Her bracelet clinked against the silver tray.

'No, you must be thinking of my colleague,' said Max.

'But it said "a sociologist from Helsinki University". Surely there can't be other sociologists named Max Paul?'

He handed the tray of beets to the next person.

'Well, actually, there are two of us in the department. It's funny, but people often get us confused.'

For a few seconds Wivan didn't reply, then she laughed nervously. Max glanced in Katriina's direction, but she refused to meet his eye. She had obviously decided to ignore him for the rest of the evening. He looked at her wine glass and noticed that it was already half empty, even though Risto had just filled it.

'I'm serious. It wasn't me,' he said, turning again to Wivan.

She stopped laughing and gave him a confused look. In a manner of speaking, Max meant what he said. The person who had been interviewed in *Anna* was not him – it was a personality that he assumed for the benefit of the media in particular kinds of situations, like when a women's magazine called him up and

wanted a quick one-liner or two. The questions often had to do with family life or sex, and it was true that Max had done a lot of research on those topics, but they were by no means his primary field of expertise. Yet the more interviews he did, the more journalists called, wanting to speak to the ‘sex professor’.

Max had promised himself he’d stop answering those kinds of questions, since sociology in Finland had begun to have a reputation as a discipline obsessed with sex. But he was frankly too lazy and polite to say no, and it was much easier to give a few quick answers than not to respond at all. On this particular occasion the interviewer had been a young woman, probably around twenty-five, who phoned him at the department just as he was sitting in front of the *Helsingin Sanomat* website and writing something for a discussion forum.

The reporter began by introducing herself – Max didn’t catch her name – and then told him that she was calling from the magazine *Anna*.

‘I was wondering whether you’d consider answering a few questions for an article that I’m writing about today’s ideal housewife.’

‘Sure, go ahead,’ Max told her, his attention still focussed on the discussion forum. Lately it had been taking up more and more of his time. There were a couple of contributors who often popped up in the same discussions as Max. They’d been having fervent conversations for several months now about everything from Islam to the way in which the city of Helsinki was handling the expansion of the subway system to the west. Max knew that he shouldn’t really get involved in debates on the Internet. The feeling of instant satisfaction at crushing an opponent’s argument was spoiled by the fact that it never ended – there were always new contributors who entered the conversation from some tangent, or who tried to sabotage the discussion by deliberately provoking the others. It was like trying to win on a slot machine, always taking one step forward and two steps back, and it was equally addictive. Sometimes he found himself sitting at home at two in the morning, participating

in discussions about the biological differences between men and women, attempting to inject a scientific perspective, even though he was well aware that the people he was arguing with might be secondary-school students.

The woman on the phone started asking her questions.

‘Okay, well, first of all ... some people say that we’re witnessing a new conservative trend right now, and that women who were born in the eighties are embracing the traditional ideals of the fifties. TV programmes like *Mad Men* are an example of this. What’s your opinion?’

The ideal housewife? That was simple. Max didn’t need to think about it for long.

‘It’s difficult to say without taking the statistics into account. If we look at recent decades, the figures show that, on the contrary, people are getting married later, and the number of people who live together without marrying is steadily growing. Women also have careers and are no longer relegated to the kitchen.’

‘And yet it’s said that there’s a trend—’

‘You can say there’s a trend, but that doesn’t mean there is one, from a purely statistical point of view.’

He closed his browser.

‘Yes, but my article is about the new ideal housewife. Could you say a little about that? I mean, right now, for example, there’s a huge interest in cooking. Why do you think that is?’

‘People need to eat.’

The woman on the phone laughed politely.

‘Sure, but could you say something about trends? I mean, the fact that more young women today seem to want to stay at home and have children earlier.’

This was a trend that Max had actually seen first-hand. His older daughter, Helen, had married young and soon after had children – he was inclined to interpret this as her way of rebelling against her parents. But it didn’t look as if Eva had any plans to follow in her sister’s footsteps.

‘Is that really what they want?’ asked Max.

‘Well, er ... I don’t have the figures at hand, but there’s a lot of talk about the new ideal housewife ... more and more magazines are writing about it, and there are lots of new publications that are marketed specifically for young mothers ...’

Max wasn’t stupid. He understood how these types of articles got written. All they needed was a couple of statements that appealed to the imagination and – most important of all – one so-called case, an interviewee who confirmed the thesis that the reporter was trying to push. Best of all was if they could get a media-hungry expert like Max to confirm the hypothesis. He thought that he really ought to decline to comment, but instead he decided to give her what she wanted. He leaned back in his chair, speaking slowly, so that she’d have time to take notes.

‘Okay, if we look at marriage from a purely historical point of view, it has always been linked to the state of the marketplace. For a long time we used to say that grain prices affected the number of marriages; that was almost a statistical axiom even in the 1800s. Do you follow me?’

‘Uh-huh,’ she replied. He could hear the clack of her computer keyboard.

‘Today we have an extremely high standard of living in the Western world – so people don’t need to marry simply in order to support themselves. And this change applies to women in particular. But marriage is an ancient tradition. Human beings have always entered into marriage in some form or another, in all cultures. Marriage is a very hardy enterprise. Today young people may get married because they view it as an integral part of establishing their identity. It may no longer have anything to do with a sense of security, but instead involve a kind of role-playing, a necessary rite of passage to adulthood in an era when the teenage years are being extended in absurdum. Or, as you say, a trend. Those of us who were young in the seventies were intent on breaking away from marriage because it was viewed as outdated and passé. Our parents represented the old patriarchal model, and we wanted equality. So, to answer your question: the overriding trend is probably that marriage has lost its force as a

societal institution. It has never been easier to get a divorce than it is today. Maybe that's also why it's easier to get married.'

Max never knew where he was headed once he started talking, but he thought that this theory, improvised on the spur of the moment, sounded quite plausible.

When the text was later published, his comments had been reduced to three sentences. The journalist had also put words into his mouth. This is what it said:

The sociologist Max Paul, whose specialism is researching sex practices, also believes that we're experiencing a boom in which many more young people want to get married:

'Marriage is part of our basic nature, it exists in all cultures. For young people today, marriage is a way of signifying that they've become adults, and it's easy to get married.'

Wivan Winckelmann was still waiting for Max to explain further the reason for the confusion of names in his department. He was just about to say something when he heard someone clearing his throat at the other end of the table. Risto was preparing to sing a drinking song. Risto was a notorious boozier, tall and solidly built, with a circle of grey hair around his head. He could drink ten shots of vodka at one sitting and still show no signs of intoxication. He loved to take control of a room. Max wondered if this was a characteristic of psychiatrists. During the week they were forced to sit in silence and listen, so they became hyper-social when the weekend finally arrived.

The mood at the dinner table gradually grew more intense and boisterous. Everybody was laughing at a long, drawn-out story that Stefan was telling at the other end of the table, but those guests who were seated near Max couldn't hear anything, which caused Wivan to keep asking the person on her left to repeat what Stefan had said. It was obvious that the story lost much of its impact in the few metres from Stefan's seat to Wivan's. The longer the story went on, the more bewildered she looked. Max glanced at Katriina. She was listening to Stefan,

but he could see she had that glassy look in her eyes that she often had by this time of the evening. It meant that she wasn't really paying attention.

When the dinner was over, Katriina went out on the balcony to have a smoke with Tuula. It was still raining. Max went over to a corner of the living room and glanced at his watch. We should be getting home, he thought. As soon as Katriina came back inside, he'd ask her to get her things.

Until then, all he could do was stand in the corner and pretend to be enjoying himself. The other guests were now scattered about the flat, some still sitting at the table while others occupied the sofa.

Max was leafing through a book when Stefan suddenly appeared at his side. They had known each other since the seventies. Stefan had worked as a journalist and travelled a lot, to anti-nuclear power conferences in Japan and Geneva, covering them for *Fredsposten* and *Ny Tid* – writing articles that Max had never felt the urge to read – and he'd been involved in protests against NATO and European missiles in the early eighties. But these days he talked mostly about the small islands that he visited in Southeast Asia, places with names like Koh Phangan and Pulau Pinang. Max barely even had a chance to say hello before Stefan launched into a monologue about yoga.

'It's more than just yoga, you know, it has to do with a way of looking at life. I mean, I've always been involved in moral questions, just like you are, but at the end of the day – ever since I learned to breathe properly – I realised that the journey has to start from within. Don't you agree?'

Max nodded. 'Absolutely.'

'Just let me know if you want to join us and give it a try sometime. I can offer you a simple course in the basics. Free of charge, of course.'

Max promised to think about it, and Stefan looked pleased.

'I'll just tell you one thing: flexibility. You have no idea what