

Ebba
Witt-Brattström



The Love War of
the Century

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SYNOPSIS

A marital break-down in the mendacious paradise of equality. Two voices: a woman and a man who have lived together half a life. Through the dialogue you can hear the last, pounding heartbeats of their shared existence. What was once great love has turned into a drawn out struggle. It is brutal, quick-witted, naked, piteous, and so infinitely sad.

Århundradets kärlekskrig/The Love War of the Century is a novel in paragraph format, influenced by Märta Tikkanen's classic novel *Århundradets kärlekssaga/The Love Story of the Century* from 1978.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ebba Witt-Brattström is an award-winning author and scholar in comparative literature. She is currently Professor of Nordic Literature at Helsinki University.

She is a well-known feminist and debater in Scandinavia and has fronted several feminist movements and organizations. She has written several books on literature and women's liberation. *Århundradets kärlekskrig* is her literary debut.

SAMPLE TRANSLATION (pp. 7-22)

He said:
If you desert me
you will have only life-long hate
ahead of you.

She said:
I think either
you or I
must die.

THE DANCE OF DEATH

He said:
I guess this morning we're
no worse
for wear.

It won't get
any better than this.
In fact, we're losing
goodwill
on both sides
by a few percent a week.

I don't know
what could reverse
this process.
Why don't you ask
your therapist.

She said:
I asked.
He wants me to give
an ultimatum:
we go to therapy
you go to therapy
or else I leave you.
Don't kill the messenger.

He said:
I will never go back there.
He is a charlatan
like all psychoanalysts.

Tranquility sets in
during therapy only because
both parties imagine
thanks to the relative calm
that the other party
has yielded

and one's own conditions will soon
be met.

But since in fact no one
has backed down an inch
it is only a matter of time
before war breaks out anew.

A war only ends
when one side is
wholly conquered
or dead.

She said:
That's dictator talk, my friend.
In a war of love
there are no winners
only losers.

*A kiss, a bite
The two should rhyme, for one who truly loves
With all her heart can easily mistake them.*

He said:
The precautionary measures
the therapist wanted to teach me
are ones I have been using a long time
but I don't know
why I bothered.

I still can't shrink myself down
to the right format.

She said:
"Precautionary measures."
What kind of phrase is that for
a loving relationship?

Would I demand that
you shrink yourself
to my tiny format?

He said:
You have to laugh.
It's like the UN.
This guy has no idea
what sorts of folks
he is welcoming into his corner.
He's a well-meaning amateur.

His good advice
is not for clients
like us.
We have been sharpening our knives
too long.

Peace be with him.
Have a nice day.

She said:
Do you hear yourself?
As if I am a dwarf
and you are a titan
who could never stoop down
to my level.

That is to say
that very arrogance
and that contempt for me
and our relationship
which so effectively snuffs out
my sense of you.
Now everything is black as night.

He said:
“Everything is black as night”
is a perfectly
accurate observation
but it seems neither new
nor particularly astute.

I no longer wish to have
your trust.

Anyway it is
arbitrary and subject to
your moods.

And it doesn't take much
to put you in a sulk.
Or to be more precise
it takes nothing at all.

So it matters
not a whit
what I do or say.

She said:
The therapist says
that my symptoms are
those of a battered woman.

He said:
To say you are
a battered woman
is just an empty boast.

That would at least be interesting.

But your bruised vanity
is not interesting in the least
for these days such a claim
is so common
especially among women.

She said:
Hats off.
You are truly a master
of domination techniques.

You managed to fit in
minimizing
trivialization
ridicule
plus a patronizing insult.

He said:
Can we be done with
this childishness?

And let's be clear
I am no
candidate for therapy.

I will view any further suggestions
along those lines
as an act of hostility
same for any attempt
to disrupt or expressly
defame my actions
on a private or public level.

I say expressly
because I despise
interpretations and
argumentum ex silentio.

She said:
I shudder with uneasiness.
Normalcy —
this state of humiliation.
When you can't trust
those closest to you.

In the Gulag
the worst part was
hopelessness.
A slow death.
I am on the verge
of becoming autopsy fodder.

You said I killed you — haunt me then!

He said:
No *shrink* in the world
could make a human out of you.

She said:
When did our love become
this calculated evil?
It has gone so far
that I wish you were dead.

As if you were
vermin, no right to live
an infected ferret
a spewing rat
a repulsive beast.

But who made me this way?

She said:
When did you stop
apologizing when you
insulted me
belittled me
taunted me?

Raved like a madman
threw the candlestick
the teapot
the chair at me.

He said:
I can see you are suffering.
But I can't help you
because I
am the problem.

She said:
To think it was all a misunderstanding
a bad dream.
A trial, in the Magic Flute
opera of love.

How dumb can you get?

Brudertier, Du.

She said:

I live as a prisoner
in your power apparatus.

She said:

Can a person live without love?
I expect nothing now
have no demands of life.
Have learned my lesson.

Gaslight.

But why must women be punished?
Mother's fault
always mother's fault.

MUM IS GLUM DAD IS GLAD

He said:

Mother
how can she be trusted?
After all she once
abandoned us to the wolves.

She said:

As a couple we were completely banal.
Run-of-the-mill.
What a joke.
As if we were unique.
Après nous le déluge.

How much salt will be rubbed
into that wound.

He said:

Can't you talk about something relevant.

She said:
A marriage involves situations
which like art
carry condensed meaning
and symbolic weight.

The pattern will appear
upon rereading.

Was I duped?

THE STOPPER IS OUT

She said:
Burning down around me
is all I have lived for
believed in
wished for
loved.

Ashes wherever I look.

He said:
Sorry
but it's not therapy I long for
just to live a normal life
the way I am now
with my vanity
and what have you.

If you no longer
want to be part of the journey
what can I do.

I am no retraining manual
not for myself
nor for anyone else.

*Jedes Leben sei zu führen,
Wenn man sich nicht selbst vermißt;
Alles könne man verlieren,
Wenn man bleibe, was man ist.*

She said:
At least that was an honest statement
You are you and that's flat.
Best and biggest, ready and done.

My, that was some Goethe.
Dummkopf.

He said:
At the same time — let's be honest —
I am far from having overcome
my original sense of you.

Those brief moments
you strike a rather milder tone
I find them heavenly
though I am ashamed
once the mood has shifted.

It's not easy
to move forward
on the path of life.

She said:
All will pass, come to an end
from bad to good a happy trend.
Toodeloo.

I AM NOT YOUR LITTLE DOG WOOF WOOF

He said:
What I do with my life
after you is none
of your business.

And what will you do?
Get yourself a man-friend
whom you can lecture
without protest?

Who won't steal the limelight from you.
There must be men like that.
I'm sure you can confer with
your feminist cunts.

She said:
Limelight.
Lecture.
Feminist cunts.
Who are you?

REFERENCES

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Jedes Leben sei zu führen/Wenn man sich nicht selbst vermißt/Alles könne man verlieren, Wenn man bleibe, was man ist. “There’s not a life we need refuse/If our true self we do not miss/There’s not a thing one may not lose/If one remain the man he is.” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *West-Östlicher Divan* (1819). Trans. Edward Dowden, *The West-Eastern Divan in Twelve Books*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1914, p. 114.

Illustration: Jean Cocteau