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Jaakko Seppälä

Contesting Marriage: The Finnish Unromantic Comedy

Mother-in-law: 'Are you going to get married?'

Karita: 'We don't know yet.'

Antero: 'No, we're not.'

Mother-in-law: 'That's good. It's easier to separate when the time comes. And it will come.'

Antero: 'Yes, it will.'

Mother-in-law: 'That's right.'

The conversation is taken from the Finnish romantic comedy *The Storage* (*Varasto*, 2011). The film is based on a gritty realist novel of the same name written by the late Arto Salminen (1998). In the scene in question Karita and Antero, a new and dysfunctional couple about to have a child, are visiting his future mother-in-law whose experiences of marriage are appalling to say the least. She has faced poverty, domestic violence and cheating before her husband committed a suicide. Before that he tried to kill his wife. Now, because of her sexual needs, the mother-in-law lives in a common-law marriage with another man who is an overweight drunk that spends his days watching sports on television. The young couple finds him disgusting, but the mother-in-law defends her choice: 'I like it when my lady neighbours are jealous when I'm out, happy and glowing with my man. And he doesn't beat me.' Clearly, she has learnt to lower her demands and expectations when it comes to relationships.

'(Un)romantic comedy' was the tagline with which *The Storage* was advertised. In the context of the romantic comedy genre this definition is a purposeful twist on the genre because romantic comedy, contrary to Salminen's novel, is regarded as escapist entertainment that fuses the romance and comedy genres (Mortimer, 2010: 4). Readings and interpretations of the novel, which has been turned into a play that was performed at The Finnish National Theatre, have been pessimistic. Director Taru Mäkelä says that contrary to these interpretations she modelled her film after Howard Hawks' *Bringing Up Baby* (1938)¹ and other screwball comedies of Hollywood's golden era in order to heighten the comic aspects of Salminen's story (Laakso, 2011). As *The Storage* combines conventions of the romantic comedy genre with Salminen's realism, (un)romantic comedy can be taken to mean realistic

¹ Karita is a screwball lady who knows what she wants and she has her way of getting it, much like Susan Vance, the fast-talking dame played by Katherine Hepburn in *Bringing Up Baby*.

romantic comedy. This fusion of realism and conventions of the genre is emblematic to various contemporary Finnish romantic comedies. This is especially evident in the ways these films discuss underlying tensions that are present between sexuality and marriage.

‘The happy couple’, to use the phrase that Nicolas Pillai (2012) has at the centre of his study of classical Hollywood films, is becoming something of a rarity in contemporary Finnish cinema. Marriages portrayed in Finnish films, unlike those studied by Pillai, are on the odd occasion happy and continuous. As Andrew Britton (2003) states, there is ‘implicit disharmony between sexual romanticism and the institution of marriage’. It seems that Finns on film are losing their faith in marriage. One reason for this state of affairs is the changed social reality. In 2011, the year when *The Storage* premiered, 13 468 Finnish marriages ended in divorce (Official Statistics of Finland, 2013). This is a high figure considering that that year the number of contracted marriages was only 28 408. The numbers have remained about the same for the last ten years. Almost every other marriage ends in divorce and these statistics suggest that many Finnish couples are anything but happy. In the 2000s divorces have been relentlessly discussed in the Finnish media, especially in the tabloids, women’s magazines and television shows (Maksimainen 2010: 10). Now romantic comedies are participating in the discussion. One reason for this is that for contemporary Finnish films set in present day Finland to be believable, they need to acknowledge the state of marital affairs in some way. This is easy in art house films, but problematic in romantic comedies, an age-old convention of which is marriage as a happy ending (Mortimer, 2010: 16 & passim), also in Finnish films (Koivunen, 1995: 214). But it is only by adapting to new historical circumstances that the genre overall can survive (Williams & Deleyto, 1998: 1). Filmmakers are now questioning traditional ideas of marriage with the result that contemporary Finnish romantic comedy is more unromantic than before.

The genre of the romantic comedy was domesticated in the studio-era of Finnish cinema that lasted from the early 1930s to late 1950s by filmmakers who admired Hollywood films, an example of whom would be Valentin Vaala (Alanen, 2004: 74–76). This domestication was an easy process for the reason that romantic comedies are universal in tone, which means they can be set pretty much in any location, discuss context specific problems related to relationships and be produced with modest budgets of small nation cinemas. This has made the genre more than suited for Finnish cinema. The budget of *The Storage* was merely 748 105 €, which is only half of the typical budget of a contemporary Finnish film (The Finnish

Film Foundation, 2011). The film was nonetheless seen by roughly 200 000 spectators (The Finnish Film Foundation, 2013), which means its mixture of genre conventions and realism was in accord with the tastes of contemporary Finnish audiences. Now other filmmakers are trying to repeat its success by discussing similar themes.

21 Ways to Ruin a Marriage (*21 tapaa pilata avioliitto*, 2012), another romantic comedy tackling the reality of the Finnish marriage, was even more successful. Johanna Vuoksenmaa's film – which was advertised with the tagline 'is someone still married?' – was seen by a spectacular 400 000 spectators (The Finnish Film Foundation, 2013b).² More conventional romantic comedies like *The Body Fat Index of Love* (*Rakkauden rasvaprosentti*, 2012), which is the third film I am analysing in this article, have not been as popular. Mikko Kuparinen's film produced in collaboration with The Family Federation of Finland drew only 42 120 spectators (Finnish Film Foundation, 2013b) even though it touches on similar issues as the other two. It seems to me that the popularity of *The Storage* and *21 Ways to Ruin a Marriage* was largely based on their satirical discussion of contemporary problems related to sex and marriage. Spectators probably found the films an effective source to make sense of these issues. However, one might object by saying that their popularity resulted more from the comedians that had become national favourites in the sketch television show *Putous*. I do not want to deny the impact of these actors on the popularity of these films, but I want to point out that *No Thank You* (*Ei kiitos*, 2014), a romantic comedy – in which there are no actors from the show – that tells the story of a middle-aged woman who gets herself a lover in order to save her sexless marriage, drew over 25 000 spectators in its first weekend. The film is still playing in theatres at the time I am writing this article, but it is already predicted that it will draw more than 200 000 spectators (Halttunen, 2014). We clearly need a better understanding of the ways in which these films discuss sex and marriage if we are to understand their national importance and popularity.

The Storage, *21 Ways to Ruin a Marriage* and *The Body Fat Index of Love* are all part of a corpus, a cycle of the contemporary Finnish romantic comedy that I term the Finnish unromantic comedy. These films, and the first two in particular, question what Peter William and Celestino Deleyto (1998: 3) call the 'relatively unchanged view of love, sexuality and

² *21 Ways to Ruin a Marriage* received the audience award at Jussi Gaala 2014, which is a further indication of its broad appeal. The Jussi Award is the Finnish equivalent of the Academy Award, an accolade to recognize excellence of professionals in the Finnish film industry.

marriage' of the genre. As Stanley Cavell (2005: 165–166) says, we should not assume that romantic comedies are popular commodities that simply serve to support the ideology of marriage. Here I am working with a notion of cycle that is based on Cavell's (1981: 146) definition of a genre 'that demands that a feature found in one of its members must be found in all, or some equivalent or compensation found in each'. There are two interrelated defining themes to the Finnish unromantic comedy. Firstly, traditional genre roles (especially those of women but often those of men too) are radically transformed in comparison to earlier Finnish films. This shows especially in the ways in which these films openly discuss sex and female desire. Secondly, serious relationships (especially marriage) are contested. In many of these films the main characters, in most cases new kinds of modern women, are looking for sex without commitment.

Film reviewers discussed these films in relation to Hollywood's popular romantic comedies and their ilk³ for the reason that these Finnish films make use of their established genre patterns. Nordic representatives of the genre – except other Finnish films – were not mentioned. Even though Finland has close film relations with Sweden and co-productions are common, contemporary Swedish films are largely unknown in the country. Contemporary Swedish romantic comedies like *Cockpit* (2012), *Once Upon a Time in Phuket* (*En gång i Phuket*, 2011) and *Midsummer of Love* (*Sommaren med Göran*, 2009) have not been shown in Finland. A comparison of these Swedish films to the films I am analysing here reveals some interesting similarities and differences. Swedish films, too, rely on international genre patterns and discuss contemporary societal issues, in the case of *Cockpit* gender roles and gender equality, but sexually active women are not at the centre. Both *Once Upon a Time in Phuket* and *Midsummer of Love* star actor Peter Magnusson, who has become a seminal actor in Swedish romantic comedies due to his popularity in the Swedish sketch television show *Hey Baberiba*, as the protagonist. And when women are at the centre, like in *Love and Lemons* (*Små citroner gula*, 2013), they are not portrayed as sexually active and the institution of marriage is not contested. The most radical of the mentioned films is *Cockpit* in which the protagonist faces a divorce. His wife then marries an elderly man for his fortune; and even though this can be seen as a satirical statement, the film does absolutely nothing to make the spectators share her views on the importance of wealth and unimportance of love in marriage.

³ British romantic comedies of the 1990s and early 2000s were also mentioned, especially in reviews of *The Body Fat Index of Love*, which, according to its director Mikko Kuparinen (Paju, 2012), was modelled after films like *Love Actually* (2003).

Even though divorce rates are just as high in Sweden (Eurostat, 2012), Swedish romantic comedies are less cynical and more optimistic about marriage than their Finnish counterparts. This serves to remind us that romantic comedies do not reflect society's marital reality in any straightforward way.

Before analysing the Finnish films in detail, I am going to provide a quick background exploration of Finnish romantic comedies of the studio era in order to show the transformation. The endings of even the most boundary-pushing of these, like Valentin Vaala's *Substitute Wife* (*Vaimoke*, 1936) and Matti Kassila's *Father's Old and New* (*Isän vanha ja uusi*, 1955), are conservative and conformist when it comes to questions of sex and marriage. *Substitute Wife* tells the story of a couple that gets married not for love but for a bet and a will to embarrass the other. The marriage turns out to be a kind of a game that both enjoy playing to the extent that they fall in love.⁴ The film ends with a kiss that may be formulated with the words: 'They lived happily ever after'. In *Substitute Wife*, like in virtually all studio era romantic comedies, marriage comes first and sex follows. *Father's Old and New* tells the story of a man who has divorced and married a flighty woman⁵ who is much younger than his first wife. The marriage turns out to be a disappointment. The man cannot stand his wife's constant partying and the wife is bored with her husband's wish to stay home and read. They both do their best to sabotage the marriage so that she could move away with her foreign lover and he could re-marry his first wife, whom he now understands he should not have divorced in the first place. Anu Koivunen (1995: 220–221) argues that there is much more to Finnish romantic comedies, or to 'modern comedies' as she calls them, of the studio-era than mere conservatism and conformism. The reason for this is that the happy endings that preserve the sanctity of marriage cannot undo all the tensions and contradictions that the films (and their many contexts) create. Ambiguity and variety might even be part of the convention of the happy ending itself (MacDowell, 2013: 192 & passim). These cracks in the happy endings, as I term them, some of which are intentional whereas other are not, are even more vivid in the Finnish unromantic comedy.

The implausible marriage

⁴ This battle of the sexes theme is reminiscent of that in American screwball comedies where both the man and the woman are so extraordinary that they cannot be anywhere but together, even though they try.

⁵ The woman is more than reminiscent of Marilyn Monroe, which, among other things, implies that the film was modelled after American romantic comedies.

Film reviewers criticised *The Storage* for downplaying Arto Salminen's social criticism. The film culminates in what was regarded as 'a forced happy ending' (Poussu, 2011). In this closure which takes place 'a couple of years later' the young child of Karita and Antero tells in voice-over narration that her parents have not divorced and that her mother is planning a church wedding. During her speech we see photographs of Antero and Karita who are now a happy couple. 'The cute summary at the end functions as a banal and tawdry conclusion to the story', Jussi Virratvuori (2011) claims. This suggests that spectators interested in the film's satirical discussion of societal issues found the ending unbelievable. In order to better understand these feelings we need to scrutinize how Antero's and Karita's relationship is portrayed in the film.

In classic romantic comedies characters are likeable and relationships they finally form ideal. 'What this pair does together is less important than the fact that they do whatever it is together, that they know how to spend time together, even that they would rather waste time together than do anything else', Stanley Cavell (1981: 88) analyses the couple in *It Happened One Night* (1934). According to Wayne C. Booth (1988: 204) films make us certain kinds of desirers. In *It Happened One Night* we desire to see the couple get married for the reason that they go so well together and we find it hard to believe that either of them could be happier alone or with someone else. The same could be said about the couple in *Substitute Wife* and the original couple in *Father's Old and New*, but certainly not of Antero and Karita. They work in the same paint shop and have sex nearly every weekend, as a result of which Karita is now pregnant. When Antero is informed about the future child he refuses to believe it is his for the reason that other men are sleeping with Karita as well. 'Even your neighbour's dogs are screwing you', Antero protests in his highly dislikeable manner. Karita nonetheless believes that she and Antero could be happy. This is irrational, as is obvious from her comment: 'We make the perfect couple because your ascendant is in Taurus.' Clearly Karita's faith in their 'love' is comparable to superstition. Even so, when she learns that Antero has been stealing from the shop's storage she manages to blackmail him into moving together and starting a family. This is hardly a basis on which a happy marriage could be built, the reviewers must have thought.

Antero finds the idea of living with Karita so repulsive that he attempts to abort the baby by putting emergency contraception pills in her yoghurt. This plan that fails further designates

Antero's immorality and implies that he does not recognize Karita as a fellow human with equal rights. He merely wants to take advantage of her sexuality, which does not make us, the spectators, like him. The dysfunctionality of this couple is best illustrated in a scene where Karita and Antero watch television shortly after moving in together. The program in question is *The Singing Bee*, during an opening insert of which – in which there is nothing particularly funny – Karita cannot help laughing. Her laughter is reminiscent of Jayne Mansfield trademark 'ooo' in *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* (1957), which heightens Karita's screwball character to which Antero (and presumably most spectators as well) finds it difficult to relate. When the host of the show makes a lame joke she gets nearly hysterical. Antero cannot enjoy the show or her company (seppälä.figure1). It is evident that there is absolutely nothing upon which these two could build a lasting relationship and it is hard to believe that their baby could undo these tensions and contradictions. In his study of Jane Austen's *Emma*, Booth (1983: 259) discusses the marriage, which he finds a complete and perfect resolution to the story. According to him 'this will be a happy marriage because there is simply nothing left to make it anything less than perfectly happy. It fulfils every value embodied in the world of the book'. When it comes to *The Storage*, in which the relationship is based on sex and taking advantage of the other, and in which the best hope for the couple comes from an astrological sign, we are guided to desire Antero to treat Karita better, but we certainly do not desire a church wedding, as there is little that could make their marriage even relatively happy.

Unsatisfactory and Satisfactory Endings

The main female character of *The Body Fat Index of Love*, Ella, is interested in sex without commitments, unlike her friend who craves for romance. When Ella meets Stigu in a restaurant she flirts with him and makes a direct suggestion: 'My place, Wednesday, 7pm. 45 minutes, sex only'. Stigu is offered what Antero had but lost. The precision of the suggestion indicates that Ella is a rational person; she knows exactly what she wants and where her limits are. For her, all kinds of relationships are off limits: 'I don't want to know anything about you or tell you anything about myself. No commitment, no soul searching. And certainly no Facebook friendship.' When Stigu comes to meet Ella the following Wednesday, he brings a bottle of wine. The bottle refers to the possibility of loosening one's rational judgement and spending a romantic evening together. Ella puts the bottle away and takes an egg timer, as 45

minutes of sex is all there is going to be. The timer, which refers to temporality and measurability, further enhances her rational nature and comes to characterise the relationship.

In this film, too, love is portrayed as an irrational force that could destroy the lives the protagonists want to lead. Ella, and even Stigu regardless of his romantic interest in her, are ambitious and care more about their careers than about each other. Ella dreams about her own vintage clothes shop whereas Stigu makes commercials for an advertising agency. Such career commitments are typical problems that many young couples face today. At the turning point of the story, Stigu erases a meeting from Ella's calendar that he knows to be most important for her as her vintage shop depends on it. Stigu does this to save his own career, because he needs Ella's help on a commercial on that particular day. In other words, he knowingly, all things being equal, destroys Ella's career so that his would continue. The conventional happy ending where Ella and Stigu not only get together but also end up co-owning the vintage shop is hardly a resolution that can undo such tensions the story has touched – there are severe cracks in the happy ending.

Film reviewer Rane Aunimo (2012) was disappointed with *The Body Fat Index of Love* because it discusses different kinds of relationships in a laid-back manner, but despite all its quasi-courage the main message is conservative. He implies that the film should have portrayed a new way of being a couple. Juha Rosenqvist (2012) says why he thinks the story is flawed: 'Ella would be every guy's dream woman, sex without necessary lovers talk, but lovers talk is what Stigu wants'. Soila Ojanen (2012) found the film's conventional plot twists that result in the happy ending formal to the extent that the film is not believable. These reviewers, and presumably many spectators as well, wanted to see a more unromantic ending. It seems that conventional happy endings, which may be suited for contemporary Hollywood films, are not suited for the Finnish unromantic comedy. The probable reason for this is that these films, due to their locality and discussion of contemporary societal issues, are more realistic to Finnish audiences than Hollywood films that are typically watched with different kinds of expectations. The same seems to be true when it comes to Finnish crime films (Seppälä, 2013: 230).

Only *21 Ways to Ruin a Marriage* was not criticised for its ending. In this film, like in the other two, the affair of the main couple is built on promiscuous sex. Unlike in the romantic comedies of the studio-era, in these films sex unites couples and it is love that comes later, if

it comes. The protagonist in *21 Ways to Ruin a Marriage* is Sanna, a PhD student who explores reasons why couples divorce. She conducts her study by filming and interviewing married people. Sanna believes she can predict divorces from certain signs in these videos. Her lengthy list of ways of ruining a marriage contains conducts like 'be blind', 'be clingy' and 'treat your spouse like a child'. Sanna argues that '[d]ivorce is a natural and probable consequence of falling in love'. She does not believe in love, probably because her own parents have divorced, and satisfies her sexual needs by having next to anonymous sex (seppälä.figure2). 'Sex happens separately and just once with everyone. It works well, and there is no emotional mess,' Sanna, who believes this is rational behaviour, explains her conduct.

The film guides us to see Sanna's friend's beliefs in love and marriage as irrational. Especially telling are scenes in which she tries to foretell her future love life and possibility of getting married by randomly listening to radio stations and interpreting what she hears. Love is also portrayed as irrational in the sequence in which Sanna is totally drunk, at her most irrational that is, and her list of ways of ruining a marriage is transformed in her mind into ways of creating a happy marriage: 'touch, listen, love, love, love'. Against her better judgement, she falls in love with Alekski who is one of her recently divorced interviewees, a kind young man that looks after his two children and believes in marriage despite his bad experience.

'[W]hether it lasts one day or the rest of your life, being in love has its value', Sanna says after seeing her gloomy father happy and glowing with a new woman with whom he has fallen in love. Sanna and Alekski decide to give their relationship a chance. Falling in love might not be rational, but it should not be avoided, the film suggests. On the night they get together, Sanna and Alekski go through the lengthy list of ways of ruining a marriage, ways that they should now avoid. 'I don't think anyone can do all of that', Alekski remarks and in so doing acknowledges his human weaknesses. 'I guess that's my point', Sanna says. The film implies that marriages need to be based on love, but there is no guarantee that it will last. 'Despite the happy ending there seems to be a fundamental distrust in love in this movie', film critic Antti Alanen (2012) suggests. To be more precise, there is a fundamental distrust of marriage in the film. Sanna and Alekski, like all Finnish couples that fall in love, hope that their relationship will last. This might be wishful thinking, but they have a chance, and considering that they acknowledge their weaknesses, it is probably much more than a chance.

Yes, *21 Ways to Ruin a Marriage* has a happy ending, but this ending does not downplay the societal realities and therefore it does not feel unsatisfactory.

Young couples and the married generation

The ending of *The Storage* is not as happy as the reviewers found it. The photographs of the happy couple and the child's voice-over narration that accompanies them follow a scene in which Antero has shown the child a storage worker's cotton canvas glove. In the eyes of the baby the grip dots of the glove transform to a starry night sky, across of which two shooting stars race. As they say, when you see a shooting star, you can make a wish; and this is precisely what the child does! This means that her happy talk about Antero and Karita being together after couple of years and Karita making plans for a church wedding is mere wishful thinking. We have learnt that there is nothing but the child to keep the couple together. Besides, Antero has said that the average length of a relationship in their suburbs is about three years. That is probably as long as the child can hold them as a family. This does not have to mean that the relationship could not be happy and last longer, as Karita and Antero, too, have a chance, as slim as their chance may be. The important point is that the ending of *The Storage* is open and not that dissimilar from that of *21 Ways to Ruin a Marriage*. Unlike the romantic comedies of the studio era, these endings do not guide spectators to make confidently optimistic predictions for the future of their couples.

So, the relationships I have discussed might last, but the question is, what form they are going to take and how happy they are going to be. All three films imply that their main couples probably need to find new ways of being happy, as there is no certainty that old models will work for them. The films create this sense by contrasting the young couples with older couples. In *The Body Fat Index of Love* Stigu's parents are a happy couple: they enjoy each other's company and have a continual relationship. In one scene they show Stigu a video clip of the Wife Carrying World Championships in which they participated. While watching the video, the parents sit close to each other, which mark their relationship with love and warmth. Stigu, who thinks he has lost his chances with Ella, is sitting on the other side of the table looking sad and lonely. The positioning of the actors and their expressions heighten the generational gap that exists between the characters (seppala.figure3). 'I was almost ready to quit but I thought to myself: It's not a shame to lose but it's a shame to give in', Stigu's father

tells about his experience in the race. 'It's awesome', Stigu says, referring to his parents' marriage and the video that represents it. In this video the couple seems to lose the race, but looks happy nonetheless. After crossing the finish line the husband lowers his wife to her wheelchair and they embrace while spectators cheer in the background. Happy and ideal as this marriage may be, it is also marked as one that might not be possible for Ella and Stigu. This is because the parents are from a different time. They are old-fashioned or, maybe better put, traditional, and live at the countryside in Sonkajärvi. Their marriage has been built and maintained in circumstances that were vastly different from those in which the younger generation lives. Besides, what could this generation really learn from Stigu's father's words? The film suggests that they should be taken as an analogy of a marriage, but the way I see it, both losing and giving in result in the same thing and that thing is divorce.

Most marriages in *21 Ways to Ruin a Marriage* are anything but happy and will probably end badly. The only happy couple in this film is an elderly couple, one that is even older than the one in *The Body Fat Index of Love*. The couple lives next door to Sanna, which enables her to watch their life, which she does without fully understanding them. 'I want something like that', Sanna's friend who yearns to be happily married says and points at the old woman who is giving her husband a haircut on a sunny yard. 'Now I know why he has always such a funny haircut', Sanna says. 'She's almost blind and he can't hear anything'. Here too the happy couple is portrayed as a loving couple in which the husband and wife complement each other. In the most touching scene of the film Sanna sees an ambulance taking the woman away while the husband stands behind waving his hand. Clearly their love affair, which has lasted their whole life together (with its ups and downs, I am sure), is about to end. In other words, the only marriage in *21 Ways to Ruin a Marriage* that is happy and does not end in a divorce is from another era and about to leave the world.

Conclusion

Social realities are satirically discussed in contemporary Finnish romantic comedies, as a result of which these films are more unromantic than before. This tendency is most evident in the cycle I have termed the Finnish unromantic comedy. There are no happily married couples in *The Storage*. Only the mother-in-law and the overweight drunk who live together seem satisfied with their lives. Even though Karita and Antero find this couple disgusting, it can be

seen as a new kind of happy couple. As James Wood (2009: 135) argues following Leo Tolstoy, 'the only way to understand people properly is to see things from each person's point of view'. As I have suggested, this is a relationship that both participants find satisfactory. The mother-in-law gets sex and the drunk can watch television and drink beer in his solitude, just as he pleases. Their relationship might not last forever, but it does not have to mean that it could not make them happy. The crucial point is that this is their relationship and it is built from their needs and wishes. The lesson that the young couples could learn from the mother-in-law and his drunk is that they too have to find their own ways of being together, married or not. Marriage is nothing but a social institution, in a sense a coulisse, whereas the relationship is the content. Considering that *The Storage* and *The Body Fat Index of Love* were criticised for their endings, it seems that Finnish audiences are of the opinion that filmmakers who fuse social realism and conventions of the romantic comedy genre ought to find fresh endings, probably ones that portray new ways of being together. Actually, the first steps have already been taken, as the latest film in the cycle, *No Thank You*, ends with a scene in which the protagonist acknowledges that she does not always have to love her husband, as it is enough that they both love their daughter. Such an unromantic ending would have been unimaginable in a Finnish romantic comedy in the studio era.

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