

# Am I Cold

A Novel

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Translated from the Danish by Martin Aitken



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**O**n 11 June 2008, I resolved to turn my back on coupledness forever.

It is important for me to point out that I was not led into this campaign by disappointment. Yes, Helene and I had divorced and I was no longer living with my son, Charlie, but remarkably all of that had occurred quite without conflict, as a matter of course even. I gave up, and that was that. If ever I had wanted to find my place in coupledness, with all its trappings of vaguely satisfying kitchen-table natter, dreams of knocking through walls for that extra space, imagination construed as the ability to cook chicken in a variety of ways, then Helene was the woman for me. The fact that it fell apart should in no way be made her burden, it was my fault entirely, and here I shall permit myself the right of recourse.

The fact that I had never stayed in any relationship for more than five years could be ascribed to a number of factors. When I was younger I was constantly on my way out of relationships. Like so many middle-class youths, I idolised Henry Miller and his amalgamation of Eastern thought and unbridled shagging, the myth of New York's disco revolution of the seventies, the warped, gender-confused goings-on backstage at Studio 54, and Capri at the beginning of the 1900s, where English homosexuals mingled with exiled Bolsheviks, disgraced German nobility and gossipy writers. I have always bemoaned the fact that the sexual revolution ended with the women's movement and miserable Marimekko-clad cows and men wandering about in confusion, trying to find their own footsteps.

In the West, challenging prevailing conventions of love between

individuals has always been a privilege reserved for artists or eccentric members of the upper classes, while schoolteachers and nurses, to name but two examples, have had far too much to do to ever seriously devote themselves to such existentially perilous experiments. But I had this niggling feeling that it was time for a radical change for everyone. Instead of wasting colossal amounts of energy embracing coupledness and trying to keep it alive in the face of its inherently decrepit nature, could undreamt-of happiness be released by simply letting it go?

I realised all of this on the night of Wednesday, 11 June 2008 for a number of circumstantial reasons, but what really made the difference was a series of events and encounters with new people. One in particular.

**I**t is Christmas Eve 2008, and I'm sitting at the kitchen table in my flat on Klerkegade. To my right is the chopping board, reeking of onion as it has done ever since I was going about in grey charity-shop jackets and listening to *Steps Ahead*. I've had the place more than twenty years, thirty-seven square metres, or one hundred and eleven cubic metres of stale air, in a corner of the historic cluster of row houses called Nyboder.

It is Christmas Eve 2008, and I am in no mood.

In three and three-quarter hours my best friend, Søren T-shirt, will be here. Punctuality is a virtue he has retained, which is remarkable given his lifelong commitment to escapism, hedonism and drug addiction. I have just wrapped up his present, and for once I have made an effort, grey paper and pink ribbon.

It has been a tumultuous year, and though by definition I am back where I started, I nonetheless feel changed, a fact Søren was definitely not going to be arsed hearing about. The unctuous side of my character is not something he takes seriously, and whether that is a good or a bad thing I am unable to judge, but I do know for certain that the story this year brought with it is not one that will make him sit still. He will be here at twelve, and if I resist painting vivid landscapes

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I may have told it by the time he arrives. As I proceed, I shall swing my legs, to raise the pulse and firm up my more infantile passages. I promise, to the extent that it is possible, to be utterly and completely honest. Even, or perhaps especially, when the story puts me in a less than flattering light.

“Everything escapes you.”

FRANCIS BACON

## DENMARK, JANUARY 2008

It began in fog. The trees were blurred pencil sketches in a slush of landscape. One godforsaken town after another, condemned station buildings, depopulated platforms, not a fucking bird in sight. At Fredericia I realised I hadn't even noticed the other passengers, nor had they noticed me.

Nothing can be quite as disheartening as a train journey through Denmark in January.

Because I'd been a restaurant critic for a number of years, I had been invited to Aarhus by Thorbjørn Rasmussen, a foodie PR consultant in his fifties who was always rubbing his hands and heaving his neatly ironed jeans all the way up the crack of his arse. He had got his hands on the promotional account for an upcoming Aarhus Food Festival, about which I could have given less than a shit, but then he had beguiled me with the prospect of a truffle evening at Restaurant Frederikshøj and a night at the Hotel Royal.

A refugee was talking to himself on the street in Aarhus. He had a wild look in his eyes, staring into the dismal chain stores on either side of him. In the central square was a pathetic attempt at recreating a Roman coffee bar, complete with big sugar bowls and signs in Italian. When the chance comes around they always end up overdoing it in Aarhus. They grab the whole catalogue. There was a word for that city, I just couldn't think of it.

Some boys were running about after a deflated plastic football in front of the cathedral and I found myself standing there missing Charlie and trying to suppress a rising feeling of self-loathing.

I had just dropped my bag down on the hotel bed when my phone

rang.

It was Søren T-shirt.

‘I’ve been in Hvidovre Hospital for a week.’

‘What’s the matter with you?’

‘I was pissed off. I fixed some rat poison.’

‘Are you okay?’

‘They might have to take my leg. My calf looks like a pumpkin.’

There was an abstract painting above the bed. Yellow, orange, white.

‘You’re going to come and see me, aren’t you?’

I laid out the clothes I was going to wear – grey pants in a sixties cut, pale blue shirt, the red silk cravat again – and was about to have a shower when there was a knock on the door.

‘We’re so happy you could find the time to come over and see us.’

It was Thorbjørn Rasmussen in a loud new suede jacket. He squirmed his way in, apologising on the one hand for turning up unannounced, ignoring on the other the fact that I was standing with a towel around my waist.

He’d just popped up on the off-chance, he said, with the press folder that he reckoned in all modesty had turned out really well. He began to present it to me in the minutest of detail. First the logo on the front, wanting to make sure I noticed how his clever, outside-the-box-thinking graphic artist had implemented a fork. Then a prolonged sales pitch taking in gastronomic initiatives and regional dishes 2.0 with all the sports metaphors: everything to play for, best form of defence is attack, killer ball.

But it ended well. ‘I’m afraid I can’t make it tonight’, he said, ‘but let’s have a spot of lunch tomorrow at twelve, I’ll fill you in on the game plan.’

He turned casually in the doorway:

‘Oh, and when do you reckon we can expect something in the paper?’

I gave him a non-committal answer and he made an effort to keep smiling, stuck an unconvincing thumb in the air and left.



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Respectable! That's the word. Even something as outrageously luxurious as a truffle evening becomes moribund in Aarhus. There were none of your Chanel earrings here, not a blasé air in the house. The speaker at the truffle evening was a social democrat with a line in repartee, his mission to bring the truffle down from its pedestal. He went on in his Jutland drawl about how truffles found nourishment in the vicinity of new oak trees and lavender, and presented slides of men from Provence in waistcoats with their brainless fucking hounds, and then when he sent a genuine black truffle round the tables all the schoolteachers got their little digital cameras out and took pictures.

I was the only one eating alone, and so I produced a notebook to fend off pitying looks. On my plate was a poached egg with black truffle, lumpfish roe and a truffle beurre blanc.

Helene had always had this rather frenzied way of wanking me off. Maybe she had once read that was the way to do it, or maybe it was the way one of her old boyfriends had preferred. In general, I didn't much care for high-speed sex, but it did the job surprisingly well. Until one day it didn't. After a year I suddenly realised that my hands followed the same route every time and I found myself looking for signs of wear: first the shoulders, then down her back, across the loins to the outer thighs, buttocks, inner thighs, and finally the cunt.

Four men stuck out from the homogeneous mass. They were in their early thirties, without the sheepish deportment of the rest of the party, and they held their wine glasses properly. They were dressed like Aarhusian senior creatives, in sneakers and suits with untucked shirts. One of them in particular had his attention directed towards my table. I went out and found a book of recipes in reception behind which I could hide and prayed not to be accosted, but halfway through the second course he got up and came over and stood in front of my table until I lowered my book, then presented himself as Morten Levinsen.

'We're with you all the way, Vallin! If you don't mind me saying?'

His smile was at once timid and sceptical.

'All what way?'

'We kiss your feet, Vallin, but you know that, don't you?'

MARTIN KONGSTAD

Immediately I was in trouble, unable to muster a reply. I received his smile with a mixture of offence and embarrassment, then found myself feeling guilty, and began talking away in an oddly lecturing tone of voice, and even heard myself plug the Aarhus Food Festival before he cut through my act and did a frighteningly good imitation of Thorbjørn Rasmussen, to whom, it transpired, he had served hectolitres of house red the time he had a student job as a bartender at the Café Casablanca.

‘Come over and join us!’

I was too gobsmacked to say no.

‘We’re *good times*, Vallin. You’ll love us!’

They knew each other from the second intake of KaosPilots, the alternative business school in Aarhus, back in the early nineties, and told stories of all the projects they had got started: a red-wine disco for unrepentant hippies, an African restaurant whose profits went to Somalia, a singing car park. They’d all done well for themselves since: one owned a minor empire of restaurants, another was something big to do with the Aros art museum, and a third was one of the driving forces behind the Aarhus Festival. Only Levinsen had decided to move to Copenhagen, where he quickly made a name for himself in advertising. First an account manager in a small agency, then planner in a bigger one, strategist in one of the well-respected ones, and now partner.

‘And now you’re in Aarhus stuffing your face, Vallin?’ he said.

After the food we drove into town and it wasn’t only for the sake of politeness that I went with them to Pinds Café, and though Levinsen kept feeding me with flattery it wasn’t entirely for reasons of vanity either. The others found a corner to sit in and carry on their reminiscing, while Levinsen and I stood with pints of Ceres Royal at the bar. He kept looking at me and I couldn’t work out whether it was psychological interest or lack of tact, so I began, for want of a better idea, to evaluate the meal and praise the three variations of roasted foie gras with cauliflower. He did nothing to help me along and simply kept smiling at me overbearingly. My calves were aching and

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I wanted to sit down, but I kept talking. Without invitation I began to plough through the story of my divorce, and as if that wasn't enough, I quickly became categorical and self-critical to a point far in excess of what was reasonable.

'All that stuff about how it takes two to split up, that's just crap,' I said. 'The lamb doesn't ask to be eaten by the wolf. It just lies there in the meadow. Looking delicious doesn't mean it's to blame.'

He leaned so close I could smell his aftershave.

'My life's an open book!'

Apparently, he couldn't care less about my divorce.

'Do you understand what I'm saying, Vallin?'

'Your life's an open book, you say.'

'A year ago I sold my share in the agency with a view to opening up my life.'

He placed his hand on mine. It was highly unpleasant.

'Now is when we start to close in on ourselves, Vallin. Now, at our age. Do you follow me?'

I removed his hand and reached for my beer.

'When was the last time you danced with your arms above your head?' he said.

'I don't dance at all any more. I hang around at the bar.'

'We mustn't become small and embittered, Vallin. It happens by itself, unless we choose another way.'

'And what way did you choose?' I said.

'I met my wife straight after school, right? We've got the whole package, *the lot* – three kids, big house, two cars, but we've shaped it in our own way.'

'Wouldn't most people say that?'

'Ours is an open relationship, Vallin.'

'You shag other people?'

'We share our love with others. It's a revelation!'

'So how does it work?' I said.

'We do what we feel like, and we don't tell each other. Come on, Vallin! It's a total turn-on. I know she's having sex with other people,

but I don't know when or with whom. We get off on each other just thinking about it!

He maintained eye contact longer than I was comfortable with.

'Openness is my mantra. It's even how I run Levinsen Open!

'A tennis tournament?'

'Levinsen Open is my gallery. You're into art, right?'

'Of course,' I said. 'In the eighties you had to play in a band, in the nineties you had to make films, now it's art.'

'The artist seeks to expand the world, Vallin! It's the only ambition worth having. Artists make our lives bigger.'

He suddenly wanted a Moscow Mule and talked the bartender into popping out to the nearest kebab shop for some mint and cucumber.

'Did you know that the word *amateur* comes from *amour*? I'm a happy amateur, and the art world has so many rules, so many ossified ways of going about things. Artists are always in flux, but the galleries haven't moved an inch since the eighties.'

'So what do you do?'

'I enter into a process with my artists. I call them daily on the phone, stop by their studios and tell them what I think. They have to adapt themselves to the market. We're in this to make a living, and I know what my clients want. For Christ's sake, Vallin, I know them! I used to go out on the piss with all the upcoming marketing boys in the nineties, they're all handling massive budgets now, and they want art!'

He listed his artists and there were a couple of representatives from the peripheries of *De Unge Vilde*, albeit not quite as young any more, and one from the Fluxus movement who was rediscovered every few years. The others I'd never heard of but the drink was good. The cucumber set it off nicely.

'You *must* have heard of Henrik Høeg Müller, Vallin, surely! He's the new Hammershøi. Huge, wide-format things, rich kids on junk, flat out in des-res apartments. I've just sold two of them to this major collector in Germany.'

One of his friends came up, mobile in hand.