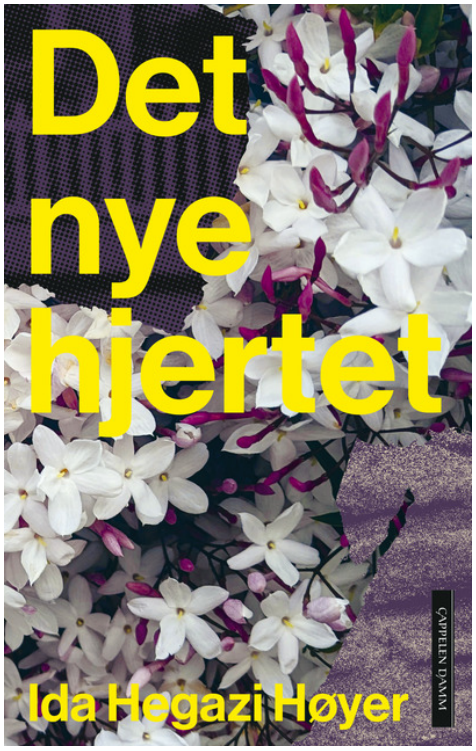
Cappelen Damm Agency *Fall 2025*



The Second Heart

The Second Heart is an earnest and tender story about being someone's next of kin – about alienation and longing for freedom.

Ever since childhood, she has been preparing for her father's weak heart to stop. She does not want to be there when it happens. Yet, she is scared every time he leaves the house or the country; the thought *don't go, don't go, don't go* has stuck with her since childhood. Her father, an Egyptian man with ties to Norway and the US, has been close to death many times through constant travels and changing homes. And now that his daughter is grown up, he needs her in new ways.

What responsibility do you have as a child, as offspring?

Father and daughter travel between different countries, and shift between closeness and distance. Does it have to do with their cultures, Egyptian and Norwegian, or is it who they are?

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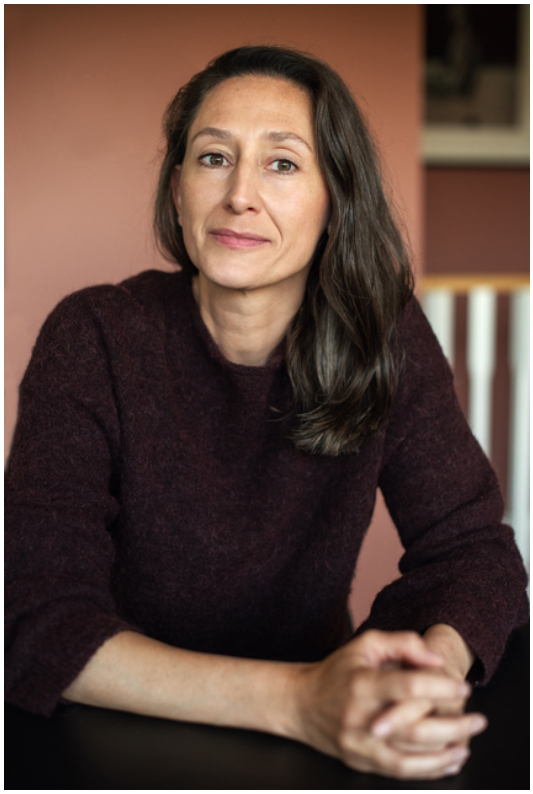
Ida Hegazi Høyer



Ida Hegazi Høyer (b. 1983) is an award-winning Norwegian author, recognized for her prolific output and consistently strong critical reception since her 2013 debut, Under Verden (Under the World). A recipient of both the EU Prize for Literature and the Bjørnsonstipendet, Høyer is celebrated for her intense, driving prose. She has also been named one of Norway's ten best young authors (Morgenbladet). Høyer's works explore the complexities of human relationships, identity, and the individual's place within society. She captivates readers with a powerful literary language and keen psychological observations.

Synopsis

The Second Heart is a literary memoir in the form of a novel, drawn from Ida Hegazi Høyer's own life, chronicling the fragile, complex bond between herself and her father, Hassan. It is an intimate and unsentimental portrait of a father and daughter whose lives have been shaped by migration, illness and the quiet weight of obligation. Told in a mosaic of present moments, remembered scenes and unspoken histories, it explores what it means to belong to someone, and yet remain at a distance from both the person and their world.

Hassan came to Norway from Cairo in the early 1970s. He built a life here on charm, willpower and improvisation, but also on restlessness and an avoidance of roots. In his mid-forties he suffered a massive heart attack that reshaped the rhythms of his life and his daughter's. Illness became the constant backdrop: hospital corridors, medication schedules, moments of crisis that demanded her instant readiness.

As a child she rehearsed how to call an ambulance and imagined the worst. As an adult she becomes his link to the system, his interpreter, driver, organiser and sometimes his only safety net. Care comes folded into habit, love intertwined with fatigue. There is closeness in the daily phone calls and shared meals, but also an enduring emotional gap they have never learned to cross. And between them remains the absence of a shared language deep enough to carry the nuances of who they are to each other. Threaded through the caregiving is a story about identity. She is half Norwegian, half Egyptian, yet the two halves resist blending. Norway is home, but through him she is marked as "foreign" in ways she cannot escape. Egypt is her father's country, not hers. In Cairo she is family and stranger at once, aware of the rituals and codes but never entirely inside them.

The story balances tenderness and confrontation, humour and grief. There are absurd, vivid episodes, him dressed as Santa for her young children, his determination to show her his Guinness World Record, flamboyant arguments with airport security, alongside the stark fragility of recovery and decline. Throughout, she examines the contradictions of loyalty, the guilt of wanting distance, the need to keep showing up, the small rewards of shared time that come without resolution.

The Second Heart is about survival in more than one form. It is about how a man outlives a failing body, and how a daughter lives with the long shadow of his survival. It is about carrying the weight of two cultures without settling fully in either, about what we inherit despite ourselves, and about the stubborn bonds that tie us to those we love and cannot entirely understand.

Sample Translation

***The Second Heart* by Ida Hegazi Høyer**

Translated by Jordan Barger

This translation has received a support grant from NORLA

But what is the point of writing if not to unearth things, or even just one thing that cannot be reduced to any kind of psychological or sociological explanation and is not the result of a preconceived idea or demonstration but a narrative: something that emerges from the creases when a story is unfolded, and can help us understand—endure—events that occur and the things that we do?

Annie Ernaux, A Girl's Story
tr. by Alison L. Strayer

*

My father's name is Hassan Hassan. I can start there.

The first time my father got sick was in 1991. I was ten, he was forty-five. I remember my mom's face when she picked me up from school, her eyes teary and serious. She didn't usually pick me up. I always stayed until the end of after-school care then walked home on my own. It was a short walk from school to my grandparents' house, but this time my mom came to get me. She walked across the room and crouched down next to me, your father is sick, she said, and then we drove straight to the Fornebu airport. We hadn't packed anything, we had no luggage, it doesn't matter, my mom said, don't worry about it. A child immediately understands crisis when an adult suddenly stops caring about their stuff. I felt our urgency and tragedy. For a child, this moment stings. Nothing else matters now, not your clothes, not your toothbrush, not your teddy bear, and not even money. The plane tickets must have been expensive, and we were pretty poor. Let's hope we get there in time, she said, mostly to herself once we were in the plane. She seemed different, older, and I wondered about the situation we found ourselves in. What were the rules here? For example, was I allowed to be visibly happy about the candy the cabin crew gave me? They must have felt sorry for this pale girl and her crying mother.

A heart attack had blocked two of the main arteries in his heart, and now he was in intensive care at Gravdal Hospital in Lofoten. A month earlier, his two nephews had come to stay with him. Munir and Latif, aged sixteen and eighteen, had been sent on a kind of educational trip from Cairo to get Scandinavian work experience. My father ran a pizza place in Moss, and they had been working there for a while before their uncle decided to show them around Norway, perhaps as a reward for their hard work.

For years, he followed the same routine. He smoked fifty cigarettes a day, coped with the stress of working life with nicotine and unimaginable amounts of coffee, before eating his one and only meal late at night, a gigantic dinner, then he'd fall asleep immediately. He probably saw his body as an unstoppable machine, and like most other people, he took his health for granted. Even at the start of their car trip up north, he had seemed tired. Munir and Latif both noticed. He was constantly yawning. On one occasion, he even fell asleep at the wheel, and at Mo i Rana they urged him to check into a cabin for the night. My father wasn't the type to take breaks. He was a man who drove straight to his destination, but contrary to expectations, he had done as they asked and, after a cheap stake dinner at the inn, he had apparently slept through the night. The next day they drove on. He still seemed tired and complained of pain in his left arm, but he had been in good spirits and spoke warmly about the landscape. Munir and Latif, for their part, were amazed by the midnight sun, that it never got dark. After several weeks working inside at the pizza place in Moss, it was overwhelming.

They were on their way to my mother's childhood home. Mom grew up in an old house on the north side of Vestvågøy, and since my grandparents were living in Oslo at the time, the house was empty. Not just the house, by the way, half of the seaside village had been essentially abandoned. The few souls who still held out there must have looked through their binoculars with excitement when a strange car drove up, and especially when they saw these three dark-skinned men get out of the car and enter the house. Oh, it must be them. The rumor that my mother had had a child with an African man had, of course, spread.

When they arrived, Munir and Latif were eager to look around the place. They wanted to climb to a mountaintop right away. And unfortunately, even though they told their uncle that he didn't have to come with them, my father didn't want to disappoint them. Afterwards, they said they felt guilty, as the mountain hike turned out to be a disastrous idea. My father wasn't used to walking in the mountains. Hiking in general was foreign to him. The truth was that his only footwear was dress shoes, and after only a few hundred meters of gentle ascent, he was out of breath and had to sit down. No one knew then, least of all himself, that on this sunny June evening, right now, in the aftermath of the failed mountain hike, he would assume his new identity, a sick man, which would follow him for the rest of his life.

Neither Munir nor Latif knew the number for the Norwegian emergency services, and oddly enough, neither did my father, so after carrying him back to the house and laying him on the sofa, one of them, I don't remember who, had to run to the neighbor's house. The neighbor wasn't home, so my cousin had to run even further, to the next neighbor, while my father was vomiting on the floor and moaning in pain. It didn't help being foreigners in a small place where no one spoke English, or that the other neighbor, who was handicapped, after finally understanding the word "ambulance," had to hobble to the innermost room of his house, only to discover that the landline phone wasn't working. It was only at the third neighbor's house that they could finally call for help, then it took half an hour for the ambulance to get there, and by the time my father was strapped to the stretcher, with electrodes and an oxygen mask, he was unconscious.

For unknown reasons, my mother wasn't notified until the following day. This was before the era of cell phones, so perhaps that's why. In any case, it wouldn't have changed anything if she got the news earlier. In Bodø, she had a glass of wine at the airport bar while we waited for the little propeller plane that would take us across the fjord. "It's over between your father and me," she said. She spoke softly and looked at me with unfamiliar eyes, as if she were asking for something, as if she were expecting a present. "I think this is a good time for you to know," she continued, "just so you know, no matter what happens." In the midst of our impending crisis, the truth had come into focus for her, but I didn't have much of a reaction to her news. Maybe that had disappointed her a bit. No matter what happens. Death was the only thing I could think about. Same as now.

From Leknes, we took a taxi. It was my first time in a taxi. Being surrounded by the spiky Lofoten mountains, it felt spectacular. The driver chatted with my mother, who immediately switched dialects. Even though we were on our way home, everything about this trip felt new, a completely new way of returning home. I lost track of how many times I had been there, how many summers and school vacations I had spent here with my grandparents, but everything felt different now. We followed the gravel road up to the foot of the mountain, where the house gradually came into view, and the closer we got, the more unfamiliar it seemed. It didn't help that my father's Mercedes was parked there, in all its misplaced glory. Only once we were parked in the yard could we make out two people, Munir and Latif, who I had barely thought about in all the commotion, who I had honestly forgotten. They stood in the living room, each standing in their own window, motionless, my Egyptian cousins, looking like inanimate lamps. Mom, who had obviously forgotten them too, looked at them in disbelief. "Oh jeez," she said, "they must be in shock."

They hadn't seen him since the day before when he was taken away on a stretcher. The ambulance only had room for one of them, and they didn't want to be separated, so they both stayed at the house. Besides, neither of them had a driver's license, so they couldn't go anywhere. "Do you have any food?" Mom asked. They couldn't answer. They seemed cautious, in a way, introverted and shy, just like me. Something about the walls, the rooms. It was suffocating, so much silence, so much space. We struggled to breathe, to stand, to be in each other's presence. It was strange, weren't we family? Mom put crispbread and jam on the table. Eat before we leave, she ordered them, there was no hint of kindness in her voice and, during the meal, almost nothing was said. My cousins' English was limited, mine even more so. The only common language we had had, until now, was a nonverbal form of humor. We had made faces, tickled each other, and occasionally thrown teddy bears at each other or had pillow fights. Now that this form of interaction was out of the question, we sat there in silence. All we could do was give each other comfortless smiles. I didn't think about it at the time, but naturally they must have longed to go home.

Outside, the air was cool and clear. The North Atlantic knocked against the pier down by the harbor, and sea salt settled on our skin every time the wind blew. That's how it was up there. A raw harshness, where nature had teeth. We all quietly contemplated my father's car. There was something scary about his dark blue Mercedes, something stern that made my mom's fear even more palpable. But his car was the only means of transportation we had. We stood in the yard and hesitated for a moment before finally getting in. Everything will be fine, my mom said to herself as she turned the key.

In my memory, it's the hospital that stands out most clearly. The building itself. So sterile, so serious. The lighting, with its screaming whiteness. As a child stepping into the corridors, what struck me were the smells: death and disinfection, blood and bacteria, everything a small child's mind could imagine, from the tangible to the completely absurd. I remember feeling, "Now you have to be sad." And at the same time, "Now you have to be a grownup."

Before we went in, the doctor wanted to talk to us. It's good to be prepared, he said, and he was mainly referring to me. It could be helpful to have a mental picture before actually seeing him.
He told us about the machines and the beeping sounds in the room, about the electrodes attached to my father's chest, and about everything they had stuck into him, here and there. He was a gentle doctor, patiently educating us. I wasn't used to adults talking that way, with both care and authority. Finally, he knelt down and said, "Your father is very sick, do you understand?"

I have never forgotten the first sight of the sick man, my new father. Nor have I ever forgotten the first thing he said to us. With a tube in his nose and countless wires in a contraption across his chest, he still managed to lift his head, a seemingly superhuman effort. He looked firmly into my mother's eyes, "Did you drive my car?"

Every morning I call him. And every evening. "Are you okay, is everything alright?" I'm always the one to call, and I'm always the one who asks the questions, as you'd expect, he's sick and lives alone. We used to talk about other things. We used to discuss current events, he liked to lecture me on politics and sports: soccer, boxing, tennis. Now our conversations are short, it's April 2023, and it's enough to say fuck the war. After I had children, he got humble. "I know you're pressed for time," he says. So, when he's the one calling, I know something has happened, that he needs help with something. There's a warning in his voice, like dark clouds coming over a mountain. "Everything okay, Ida?"

Something's always breaking or has broken. Something in the old house that has stopped working, malfunctioned, been smashed, or fallen apart. This time it's the TV. First, the picture went out, then the sound, and then he called his neighbor Frank, who came over and confirmed that the set had stopped working. My father is the introverted type. He doesn't invite his neighbor in unless he has to, and he knows that I know that, which is why he tells me about it, to emphasize the seriousness of the situation. It's out of commission, he concludes. Unfortunately, the screen has gone black. I'm sorry. There is silence on the other end as he waits for me to say something. The silence also has its limits. His breathing, an open door in a strong draft. I can come Friday, I say. And again, there is silence. Silence, like the air leaves the room. "Friday," he repeats after a while. He leaves it hanging like a question. "Friday? And what day is today?" "It's Monday," I reply. He repeats "Monday? So, four more days? You can't come for four days?"

My father doesn't see friends, he doesn't go for walks, and he doesn't read books. For him, a TV-less existence is a claustrophobic nightmare. The hours. The minutes. No escape from his own head. His walls are brown, and the carpets are forty years old. The shelves are overflowing with medicine, papers,

and plants, some of which died long ago. Listen, he says, I'm changing the channel, nothing's happening, can you hear that? I can't hear anything, I say. No, exactly, he insists, we have to buy a new one, how early can you be here on Friday?

He is seventy-seven years old and has recently had the little toe on his right foot amputated. A toe may seem like a small trifle. Much, about his daily life may seem trivial, but not to him, of course, because it's his life. The calendar, the cookies, the olive bowl, the toothpicks, the napkins, the remote control—everything has its place, has its meaning, everything is so organized and interwoven, he has his own world in there, his own country. How are you feeling otherwise, I ask. Comme çi, comme ça, he replies. The only words he knows in French. Or rather, he can also say, je voudrais l'escargots, I'll have the snails, from the time he used to take weekend trips to Paris and eat at fancy restaurants, which he later impressed me with when I started learning French at school. Incidentally, I have always thought that this fondness for snails was fitting, as they are known for their slowness, but are also delightfully bland and would taste of almost nothing if it weren't for the fact that they are bathed in chili and garlic, which is how my father wants all food to taste. When are you coming, he pesters me. As early as I can, I reply.

Despite our routine, I sometimes forget to call. I'll look up at the clock and realize I have to pick up the kids from daycare, hang up the laundry, answer emails, or get to an appointment. Sometimes, as is probably the case for most people, it's already too late, and I have to send a text message instead: "Good Night Dad." My father rarely replies to texts, but I fall asleep anyway.

I struggle to recall clear images, it's all a blur, a hodgepodge of tasks and times, running hands and feet. It's been like this for a long time now, in the middle of life with responsibilities in both directions, the heaviest acts of care collide with the simplest, the constant tug of my conscience, it's no wonder I have to forget, forgetting is the only way to sleep. The week goes by. Tuesday, Wednesday, suddenly it is spring, and everything is bursting green. On Thursday morning the neighbor calls, his voice is anxious: "Hi, it's Frank." I know immediately something has happened. Like a clock inside my body, I know it. I instinctively try to go back to our last conversation, how are you, Dad, was it yesterday, was it the day before? But I don't remember, it's all transparent, and then Frank says: I found Hassan lying by the garage.

If I was sitting, I stand up. If I was standing, I sit down. Now! The dewy blue color outside pushes all other thoughts away. The clarity is tingling. The sky above the sky. April inside April.

"Your father," says Frank. As if it were a question. He clears his throat. "Your father?" "Yes," I exclaim expectantly, so he can continue. He clears his throat again. Your father took a fall, he says. That's how the story could either begin or end. The whole thing has a cinematic quality to it, the details demand to be colored in. I found Hassan by the garage, he repeats, and my heart is beating wildly, like a dying fish thrashing its tail against the ground, until Frank punctures the tension. "He seems very weak," he says, and then my wild heart realizes it doesn't need to beat so hard anymore. Not now. Not yet. Frank tells me how he struggled to get him back on his feet, but failed, that he had to ask his neighbor Trygve for help, and how together they lifted him up, carried him inside, and laid him on his bed. He seems quite out of it, says Frank. His leg looks really bad, probably a serious infection. He also thinks we should call a

doctor, preferably an ambulance, but my father refuses. Don't call anyone, your father keeps saying, Frank tells me. But you're calling me, I think. In the background, I hear my father moaning, a rough howl. We've tried getting him to drink water, Frank continues, we've also tried giving him some fruit, but he just wants to be left alone, it seems. What should we do now?

Leave the door open, I say, I'll be over in a bit.

From my studio, I can see out into the garden, and farther out the Bakkehaugen church. I can't see the church itself, just the backside of the hill it's on. The window is one square meter, more or less. This quarter meter provides my daily view: four houses and six rooftops, trees and bushes, a powerline and a transformer, horizontal wires across the sky. The living room and the kitchen and the bedrooms are on the floor above, where my husband and children and the everyday plays out. In other words, I have to come down here to write. I would rather go upstairs – upstairs to write, it seems like the natural thing to do, but this is the room I have, I go downstairs, I write on the ground floor. Or, I don't write. I look out the window. I think about my father.

His bedroom, I know exactly what it looks like. Nothing has changed in forty years. The pictures, the clocks, the rugs, dirty laundry. He lies there, sick, still, the same old bed, the same old room, which also holds my story. There are memories, whole lives, sometimes the sight of Mom close to him, and before that, in photographs in the album, a little baby on his chest, me, so white against his dark skin, and all the days, days and days I must have crawled around in the time before memory. The sounds occupy a space inside me, an echo. The cupboards opening and closing. The curtains being drawn open and closed.

He lies on his bed at home and is doing poorly, as I often saw him lying there. And now I sit here in my creaky, blue office chair. I look out my window, through the winter grime that has built up on the glass. The trees, the bushes, the house, the sky. Far away, up and over. I think about my father. I search for something. I need another version of him.

"Do you know what happened to me in the war? I don't want to tell you," he said, but then he told me anyway. We sat on his sofa, I was in my early twenties, I took in everything like it was nourishment for the soul. We had never talked about the war before, we haven't talked about it since, and this image, this snapshot, has stayed with me: my father walking through the desert, alone in the deadly heat of Sinai in 1967. For some reason, he been separated from his troop. He didn't say why. It's a picture without explanation. Just sand and sky, then Hassan, twenty-one years old, walking alone through the dunes in his military uniform. Did you kill anyone, I asked. It was a question I was both too young and too grown-up to ask. And the look he gave me then, a stab, I regretted it immediately.

I try to visualize it, and this is the clearest image I find. The primary image. Unpredictable and full of light.

I remember almost nothing from my childhood. My memories are few and far between, with no connection between them. Perhaps this is true for most people, that childhood is fabricated only once we become adults, or once we realize how much we've forgotten? The gaps are huge. The memories that do exist are like asteroids in endless space. It could be a smell, for example. A distinct smell that awakens something vague, yet tangible, once real in history. The taste of something, the wind blowing through the kitchen vent in the old house, wet grass underfoot, or the feeling of November. Until I started school, everything was dark. Even then, there are just a few glimmers. But it is only when my father falls ill, when I am ten, that real time begins. As if I needed to be turned off to be turned on again, a jumpstart, to have my memory restarted.

I stood at a border. At his sickbed at Gravdal Hospital in Lofoten, I tried to trace this same border in him. Was he different now, after almost dying?

Most of all, he was worried about his car, his dark blue Mercedes. How would he get his car home now that he couldn't drive? Mom repeated over and over that she could drive it back, she could take Munir and Latif too, we would save up for four plane tickets. That was out of the question, he said, we had to find a shipping company, a professional driver. And if not? Well, in that case, he would wait until he was well enough to get behind the wheel himself, he decided. And that's how we left it. After a couple of weeks, we flew back to Oslo, leaving him there in his hospital bed, with his car keys under his pillow.

When he finally came home, Mom and I had moved out. It was over between them, just like she told me, I had to understand that you couldn't stay together just because one of you had gotten sick. She rented an apartment in the city, in Frogner, on the second floor of a building with small balconies facing a side street off Bygdøy Allé. It will be nice with no commute, she said, and just think, now you can ride your bike to school. We never looked back, neither of us. There was nothing left in the old house. Our life had always been in Oslo anyway. She had her office job in Skøyen, and I went to Ruseløkka School, right near my grandparents' house in Vika. I used to spend a lot of time with them, staying overnight several times a week so I wouldn't have to commute. That was where I felt at home. All my friends, all my activities, the parks I hung out in. In short, my whole life was in this part of town. The only thing that was elsewhere was him.

Every other weekend, that was the official arrangement, same as any other kids going through a divorce before the turn of the millennium. But every other weekend is not enough to create a sense of belonging. I wasn't going home, I was going to visit my father, which meant being away from home, away from my friends. Ten years old, with that headstrong impatience that defines every child, I had to stay with my father two weekends each month. Had to? Yes, that's how it felt.

The sense of deprivation was one thing, what I was missing out on, all the things my friends told me about when I was back at school. Another was the fear. The word "heart attack." The idea of it. The scene I imagined. What I would even do if such a thing happened. A major heart attack could often lead to recurrent attacks, the doctors had explained, just like aftershocks after a powerful earthquake. It wasn't certain that it would happen, but it could happen, and before each visit I prepared as if it would. Alone in my room, while my mother thought I was asleep, I repeated the number for the ambulance

and went through the already memorized life-saving procedures for when someone goes unconscious. I read everything I had learned at school over and over again from the worn pages of my science textbook. Heart compression, steady breathing, stable side position, and so on. The more I prepared, the more anxious I got. What if I couldn't save him? Fear struck me, and it wouldn't leave. If he died, I didn't want to be there.

*

The house was different. You can't take a woman and child out of a home without the rooms changing. What once was ours had become his. A man in his habitat. Papers floated around, the TV was on 24/7, and the plants, which were multiplying, soon took over the entire living room. He no longer worked. The massive heart attack had left him with heart failure, his general condition was not compatible with a stressful working life, the restaurant had been sold, and his disability pension clinked into the mailbox in its monthly envelope. There he sat, alone. Except for every other weekend, that is.

He called it the Movie Marathon. I was allowed to watch as many movies as I wanted, and I was allowed to choose them myself. We drove to a kiosk in Ski that rented videos, and there we each picked out a few movies, then we went to Malik's and bought hamburgers, which we took home and gobbled down while watching the first movie. The food was never spicy enough for my father, so he spiced it up with chili and raw onions, and I can still remember the smell from the little spice dish that was always next to his plate. There was red chili, green chili, jalapeño, and pepperoni, olives stuffed with chili seeds, and at least half a yellow onion. The smell overpowered all the other smells in the house, and of course it stayed on him, lingering like a shadow over all the movies we watched. I mostly wanted to watch Disney movies, but sometimes I chose horror movies. A Nightmare on Elm Street, Friday the 13th, Poltergeist, It, Jaws. Jaws was a particular favorite of ours. We could watch several Jaws movies in a row. He thought it was funny how obsessed I was with this monster shark, he used to laugh, are you sure you can handle this, when you're too scared to swim? He himself mostly wanted to watch action movies. Die Hard, Rambo, RoboCop, Terminator, Top Gun. I didn't always follow along, but I watched anyway. I also watched the thrillers. The Shining, Sleeping with the Enemy, Silence of the Lambs. If there was something I didn't understand, he explained it to me. And if something was extra scary, like Hannibal Lecter, I could close my eyes without him noticing, because I sat on the floor in front of the TV while he sat on the sofa behind me. The TV was on all the time, which was fine, because then we didn't have to talk so much. With all these exciting movies, I could even forget my fear of heart attacks, at least for a while. Besides, it gave me something to talk about at school. I watched movies that none of my friends were allowed to watch, and I bragged about it, I felt proud. In a strange way, I was also a little proud of my father.

Before my father got up, I spent my mornings with MTV and cookies and chocolate milk, then we'd spend the rest of the day watching movies. It could have been nice, I think now. Well, it was nice. Spaghetti and meat sauce, milkshakes, and candy. Pillows on the floor and no bedtime.

Below follows a new chapter which is further into the book.

Aunt Laya lived right near the neighborhood where the Brotherhood had its headquarters. She said she had been afraid to go out and that, at the worst of times, she stayed in her apartment for three months straight. Her son, Farid, who held a high rank in the military, was out on the streets fighting, and her husband, Amir, had been sick. How did you manage to buy food, I asked, and she replied that she relied on a delivery man. It was terrible, she said, every time I opened the window, I could hear gunshots. As she spoke, Farid nodded and smiled at me, while my father and Amir talked about something else. It was always like that. The older men had a natural right to talk over everyone else, and as soon as dinner was over, they went back to the living room to be served their tea. Would you like to go for a walk, my cousin asked. Of course, he also asked his uncle for permission, and luckily we got a yes. Farid was a grown man now, not to mention a soldier. One hour, we were told. My father looked at me sternly. You follow Farid, you understand!

Farid changed before we left. From jeans and a sweater to military uniform: from boy to man, from private to public. As soon as we were out on the street, he put his arm around my shoulder, wanting to show that he was looking out for me, that I was safe. We walked through the darkened streets in the dry, warm breeze of the rising spring. Everywhere, people greeted him, respectfully and politely, and he nodded calmly in return. My uniformed cousin represented freedom. For the country, for the people, and for me, obviously. The army was in power now. It didn't just represent the people, the army was the people. And we were all warriors. Small, but many. It was like following the flow of a river. I just wanted to walk and walk. Every now and then we looked at each other, we passed a flashing neon sign, a cat leashed to a pole, a birdcage by the roadside, and we exchanged quick glances, almost like a game, like when we were little and had made caves and tunnels out of blankets and sheets, and suddenly found each other in all the blankets, crawling and half-crazy, as if to say: This is our world. We were still strangers. We were still a boy and a girl. And every time we had to cross the road, he wanted to protect me. He stretched out his arm in front of my stomach like a barrier, and when he was sure it was safe, he grabbed my upper arm. My unit is over there, Farid said, pointing to a tank parked by a small park. He pulled me across the road. He laughed a short, strange laugh. And later, after the soldiers had come out of the tanks to say hello, after I had been given a tour inside the armored vehicle and seen the automatic weapons and the box with all the grenades, after Farid had run to the kiosk to buy soda and fruit candies—while we stood there hanging out with his unit outside the tanks outside the park, it began to dawn on me what this was all about. Are you cold, Farid asked. No, I replied. He put his jacket around my shoulders anyway. The jacket was light blue and covered with stars and emblems. It was heavy, it meant something. He showed me off, his Norwegian cousin. The young soldiers thought it was embarrassing to speak English, they giggled a lot. I wanted to get drunk and stay out all night.

Afterwards, he and I had a smoke on the balcony. My father, Amir, and Aunt Laya sat inside watching TV. We had closed the door behind us, up on the seventh floor of his apartment building, alone with all the sounds of the city. We stood in the blazing light of the setting sun, the whole country was heading towards night, when suddenly he touched me and said, "You're very beautiful." I tried to wriggle away, had to find a way to arrange the words. But Farid was serious. His gaze was dazzling. "I mean it," he continued. My cigarette had burned down, but I took an extra drag anyway. I remember the light in the

background almost better than I remember him. Shimmering, hazy, the sun sank behind the clouds. “Will you marry me?” my cousin asked. And then his warm hand around my arm. I felt my nerves go dull for a moment. My cousin stood there stroking me, like any man before a woman. Look at us, he said, we’re not young anymore.

By the way, that can’t be true, the thing about the sun. The sun had already set before we went walking. It must have been late. It must have been dark. It must have been me, in my nervous unease, who fictionalized the background. Nevertheless, it’s the light I remember. In other words, the light I invented.

But, I said, we’re related. He shrugged his shoulders. So what, he smiled. He assured me he knew it was unusual to have relationships with cousins where I came from. “Aren’t you an artist,” he asked rhetorically, “you write books, so can’t you think outside the box?” I looked at him while he spoke. I tried to look at him as objectively as possible. Man, tall, dark, muscular. And besides, was it even possible to determine who was more conventional, him or me? Let me think about it, I said.

In the days that followed, I wasn’t sure whether I should tell my father or not. I didn’t know how he would react, or if he would react at all. My thoughts were racing. What if he already knew, I began to wonder. Could it be that my father was involved in the proposal, that it was some kind of family scheme? I was single now after a long-term relationship, no longer living with a partner, and it seemed as if Farid knew that. And Aunt Laya, his mother, when I thought about it, hadn’t she been a little extra enthusiastic about seeing me, a little extra loving, extra happy? The table had been overflowing, the food, the gifts, the hugs. There had been no end to it. Could that be it?

But I didn’t laugh about it. I didn’t tell my friends, it didn’t become a joke, as it so easily could have, I didn’t even tell my mom. I must have decided, it had nothing to do with me.