



NORA ADAMYAN

FOUR
LIVES

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SHORT STORIES



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LIFE'S BEGINNING

Ruben was the first to congratulate Tamara. He looked into her eyes and said in a low voice, trying to master his emotion:

“Well, dearest, that’s over. Now—push on!”

How like Ruben that was! Only one thought in his mind even at a moment like this: push on! “It’s hard keeping up with you. I must for ever be reaching out to overstep myself. It’s like walking always on tiptoe,” Tamara had complained in the first years after they were married. Later she had understood: there was no living with him in any other way; or without him.

“Now, now, this won’t do, this won’t do!” said Academician Megrashvili, Tamara’s official opponent, in his rumbling bass. “Op-

ponents must be respected and indulged after the degree has been won, not only before. Your husband can congratulate you afterwards. My train leaves in two hours."

Tamara, radiant, held out both hands to him.

Flowers appeared—lilacs, white and deep violet, sheaves of blue iris. Friends, acquaintances, students crowded around Tamara.

The director of the Institute, a scientist of world repute, but quite a young man still, said gravely:

"It was splendid. Talented." He frowned, regretting the praise that had escaped him. "Perhaps I shouldn't have said that. But I have faith in you. It won't turn your head."

A friend came up and whispered:

"You were wonderful. A bit nervous just at first, but afterwards—it was all so cogent, so impressive!"

"Was it truly?" Tamara asked—and again: "Really, truly?"

She would have liked to live it all over again—all that she had experienced today, in this spacious auditorium that she had entered as a rank-and-file physicist and was now to leave as a Candidate of Sciences. She looked

about her. She wanted this room and all that had taken place there to be imprinted in her memory for ever. But it was changing with every minute. The charts, photographs and diagrams that only an hour ago had been so vitally important were now heaped carelessly together. The members of the Academic Board had left their seats, and no longer seemed so frigid, so forbidding.

Tamara went over to her old teacher of mathematics. It was he who had presided all those years ago over her first examination. Her little store of knowledge—all that she had carefully studied, pored over, memorized had that day suddenly abandoned her, leaving nothing but jumbled confusion. She had sat there silently, her mind a blank, with only a horrified sense that her margin of time was running out.

"I know the answers," she had said, despairingly. "I'm nervous, that's all."

Shaking his head indifferently the old man had turned his eyes to the blackboard. His next question was unconnected with the subject in hand.

"What shape is the earth?" he had asked.

"Round!" Tamara had at once supplied.

“Not nervous, eh?” His sharp little eyes had fixed themselves triumphantly on her face. “Not nervous this time, because you know it so well.”

It was a lesson Tamara was never to forget. There he sat, a bulky figure, leaning heavily on a stick.

“Well done!” he said, asthmatically. “It was a pleasure to hear you. Interesting—very.”

“He’s quite ill, yet he’s come,” Tamara thought with a pang. “Thank you,” she said softly.

As she spoke to him she realized more clearly than ever before that nearly every one of these people, who had come to hear her present her thesis, had helped her in some way, in her work and in her life. And she wanted to tell them so, loudly, that all might hear!

Gradually the auditorium emptied. Besides Tamara’s and Ruben’s friends only one old man remained—a lean little man who held himself somewhat apart from the others. Now and again he would make an ineffectual effort to push through to Tamara, but then, as though thinking better of it, retreated again to the background.

"Do you know who that is?" Ruben asked quietly, seeing that the old man had no intention of leaving.

"It can't be!" Tamara thought, taking in the humped nose and sharp features.

"It can't be!" she repeated loudly, hurrying over to the old man's side. "Uncle Armenak!"

A shy smile came and went on the old man's thin face. Then his lips began to tremble and pressing a heavy brief-case to his breast he began fumbling for something in his pockets.

Impulsively Tamara kissed her uncle on his badly-shaven cheek. She caught an odour of stale tobacco smoke, moth balls and something else that was infinitely familiar and infinitely distant.

"Ruben!" Tamara called. "Come and meet my uncle."

"Yes, indeed. Her own mother's brother.... Blood ties," Uncle Armenak was mumbling. He had dried his eyes with a yellowish handkerchief and timidly pressed Ruben's hand.

"I'm glad to meet you," Ruben said. "Did you come to town specially for Tamara's thesis?"

Uncle Armenak was shocked.

“Oh, no, no! I’m here on business. The office sent me.”

“A happy coincidence. You must come over to the house with us. That goes for all of you, comrades! And don’t any of you lose yourselves on the way!”

Tamara’s mother-in-law, Grannie Arus, loved a feast, but she was convinced that autumn was the only time for holiday-making.

“It’s only in autumn you can set a handsome table,” she would say. “Why, the grapes alone! And the peaches and pears. And the assorted *dolma* is a dream! And what can you do in spring? Not even a good bit of mutton to be had!”

“Now, Mother, no fussing!” Ruben had said. “Our friends will be coming to congratulate Tamara and to have a good time. Do you think your *dolma* will make any difference? Don’t bother your head about it.”

But there are flowers in abundance in spring, and all the rooms were full of them—flowers stood in vases, jars, and even in platters.

Grannie Arus and Marjik had planned to meet Tamara ceremonially in the hall, with huge bouquets. But Marjik most unceremoni-

ally shrieked, "Mummy!" and threw her arms around Tamara's neck, dropping her flowers to the floor.

Tamara had an odd feeling—a mingling of blissful emptiness with the urge to be doing something. She kept wandering to the kitchen and aimlessly opening and shutting cupboard doors, as though there were something she must do to help. But there was nothing at all to do. Grannie Arus had everything ready and waiting. For all her grumbling, she had prepared a really sumptuous feast.

Uncle Armenak, at first, kept in the background, looking on with interest but speaking to no one. Then, timidly, he beckoned to Tamara.

"That man—I know him," he whispered in her ear, rolling his eyes to indicate Megrashvili, whom Ruben had persuaded that he would not miss his train if he dropped in for a glass of wine. "He's a very important man in our parts. A deputy. I voted for him, mind you tell him that. He's here on a business trip, too, is he?"

"Academician Megrashvili? Why, he's my official opponent. He came to hear me present my thesis."

"A man like that, coming on your account?" Uncle Armenak shook his head doubtfully. "Well, I suppose, he might. . . ."

Then, with mincing steps, he made a round of Tamara's rooms, looking into every nook and corner. He seemed satisfied with what he found.

"All conveniences," he said. "But the furniture's not what it should be. Riga suites are in fashion now. The Kalustyanovs—you remember them? Their daughter's got herself a dining-room suite, very smart. Of course, you can get them in one of those commissionary shops, only that's more expensive."

"Yes, of course," Tamara replied absently. "What had changed Uncle Armenak so, made him so talkative?" she was thinking. Then she remembered—why, of course! Grandmother was gone.

"We got your money regularly," Uncle Armenak went on. "But you know your grandmother. She never spoke about you. She thought of you often, but—never a word. She had an easy death. Slipped off in her sleep. And I gave her a good burial, don't you fear for that. The coffin alone cost seven hundred

rubles. Of course, the office helped. They value me, you know."

The company in the dining-room were calling loudly for Tamara. They drank her health, and her further achievements. And Tamara, too, drank a full glass when a toast was raised for Soviet science.

Uncle Armenak was not satisfied with the toasts. Too little had been said in praise of Tamara.

They had seated the old man at the head of the table, in the place of honour: After all, he was Tamara's only relative. Old folk are respected in Armenia and relatives honoured. They drank his health, and he was touched and proud, and decided to offer a toast himself.

"It makes me very happy," he said, lifting his thin-stemmed glass, filled with sparkling, golden wine, "it makes me very happy that your friend and my niece, Tamara Zurabyan, holds high the honour of our family."

"Yes, yes," Tamara was thinking, "the same old words, how familiar it all is!"

"Of course, you people here may not know it, but I'm sure Tamara will confirm to you that in our town, and it's not so very small a town"—Uncle Armenak gave a self-

satisfied chuckle, "the Zurabyans are known to all as honest and worthy people. I may not be a man of science, but when my superior, the esteemed Comrade Barsaladze, sends for me and tells me, 'You're the only man I can depend on, Armenak Zurabyan,' surely that means something! And if my mother, who brought up Tamara—Tamara who has now become a scientist—if my mother were alive, she would be proud to know that Tamara Zurabyan has proved her worth a hundred per cent. I raise this glass to my niece, to her esteemed husband, may they and their dear ones thrive and prosper, and to all these honoured guests who sit at this table today!"

The nights are short in spring. The sky had turned from black to a transparent blue before the last of the guests went home. Grannie Arus, indefatigable as always, moved noiselessly about the rooms in her soft slippers, clearing away the dishes. Ruben, a little overcome with all the toasts, was sound asleep. Uncle Armenak had gone to bed long since, on the big sofa, and was snoring away contentedly. His brief-case was tucked carefully under his pillow.

"Rest, child," Grannie Arus said to Tamara. "See! It's daylight already."

But excitement banishes sleep, and Tamara lay in bed, open-eyed. For the first time in many years her past life rose before her, brought vividly to memory by the unexpected appearance of Uncle Armenak.

Every person experiences things in his life that he prefers to forget. And our memory accommodatingly draws a veil over all unpleasantness, secreting all our past hurts and humiliations in its deepest recesses so that ordinarily, looking back over the past, we recall only what was fine and pleasant.

Tamara never looked back into her childhood—perhaps, because there was nothing pleasant to look back to. Her childhood was joyless, and so was her early youth. No one had loved or wanted her in those years. Her mother had died when Tamara was born, leaving her on Grandmother's hands. Grandmother had been old and tired, her store of love expended. She had had no wish for new ties, new affection.

"My poor, unhappy daughter," Tamara had often heard her say. "It would have been better a thousand times if the child had died, not she."

Perhaps that was so. But these words had weighed upon Tamara from earliest childhood as a bitter slight.

"Do you want me to die?" she had asked Grandmother, when she was only three. And Grandmother had complained of her to her son, Armenak.

"Just like her father!" she had said. "The same insolent eyes, the same insolent talk. It's his blood, his child!"

Grandmother hated Tamara's father, hated everything about him. She hated him because he had been a man without fortune or family, because he had had the effrontery to marry her daughter, because he had got himself killed in the Civil War and left the child on her hands. But Tamara—though she barely remembered her father—jealously cherished the memory of him. Only there was no one she could talk to about him, except Dunya, the washerwoman who came once a month.

"He's not really dead, you know, Auntie Dunya," she would say. "It's just that he's far, far away. I know where he is, only I can't tell you. But he'll come and he'll bring me everything. And then I can buy