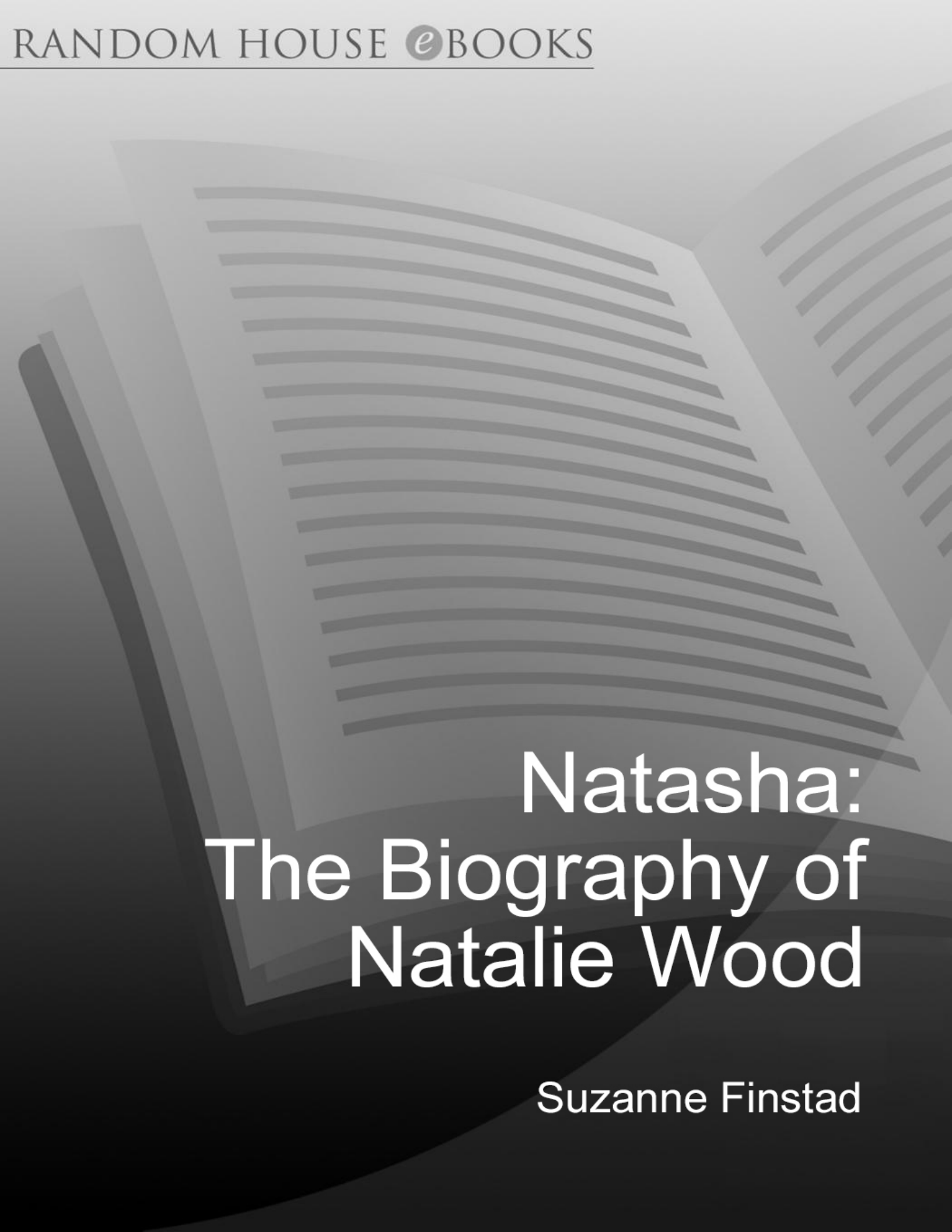


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# Natasha: The Biography of Natalie Wood

Suzanne Finstad



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## About the Book

In this explosive new book, Suzanne Finstad puts an end to the mysteries and tells the moving, sometimes shocking, story of this beautiful and extraordinary woman.

Beyond her dark, hypnotic beauty and her unbroken success as a child star, ingenue, and mature actor, Natalie Wood possessed an enduring star quality that continues to entrance both women and men. Here is Natalie's story, from emotionally abused and exploited child star to troubled teen, through her years as a top international movie star and sex symbol and her romances with Elvis Presley, James Dean, Steve McQueen, Warren Beatty, and Robert Wagner, and concluding with the shocking revelations about her long-unsolved drowning.

# Natasha

The Biography of Natalie Wood

Suzanne Finstad





For the three sisters:

*Olga*, the lucky one

*Lana*, the survivor

AND IN MEMORY OF

*Natasha*, the little girl lost inside

"Natalie Wood"

## NOTE TO THE READER

The Source Material for *Natasha* is located at the back of the book, set forth in chapter order, by page number. If an individual or a publication is quoted without being named in the text, consult the notes section for identification.

For consistency and correctness, the Russian spellings of names are courtesy of Professor Olga T. Yokoyama, UCLA Department of Slavic Languages.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Five years ago, I happened to see a documentary about Natalie Wood. As I watched the clips from some of the fifty movies in which she appeared from the age of four, I was moved by the vulnerability behind her hypnotic brown eyes, by a pathos in Natalie made more tragic by her mysterious disappearance at forty-three in the dark water she feared all her life. Her daughters, who were only eleven and eight when Natalie drowned in 1981, expressed their grief with such poignancy the sadness was overwhelming.

Natalie Wood haunted me afterward. When I discovered there had never been an authoritative biography about her, I felt compelled to write about Natalie's life, and her legacy, which has consumed the last four years of my life.

After interviewing close to four hundred people, watching her filmed performances, excavating ship's logs, articles, photographs, birth, death and marriage records dating from the 1800s, examining the sheriff's and coroner's official documents related to her drowning, making pilgrimages to every apartment, hospital, church, school, and house she lived in or attended, being taken by boat to the cove off Catalina where she was found in her nightgown that last, bizarre weekend, I am still moved by Natalie, who was as beautiful, and haunting, as those dark Russian eyes, and whose life is far more compelling than any of her movie roles.

Before she became Natalie Wood—Hollywood's child—she was Natasha Zakharenko, the daughter of Russian immigrants who fled Bolsheviks. Her fame, and her drowning, had been foretold before she was born to her

mother Maria, who claimed to be Russian royalty and who created the actress personality “Natalie Wood,” a tale as rich, complex and mysterious as “Anastasia,” the role Natalie was preparing to play before she was lost at sea twenty years ago. From the time she was a teenager to the night she disappeared off Catalina, Natalie was struggling to reclaim her lost identity as Natasha.

I am deeply grateful to the hundreds of people who contributed to this biography, including many who have never spoken publicly about Natalie before. My heartfelt thanks to her sisters Olga and Lana, who inspired the Chekhovian theme; to Natalie’s cousins, the Liuzunies, for their treasury of photographs and Russian history; to Sue Russell for audiotapes of Natalie’s mystic mother and alter ego, Maria Gurdin; to the Hyatts for invaluable confidences; to Natalie’s close friends Ed Canevari, Maryann Brooks, Jacqueline Perry, Peggy Griffin, Scott Marlowe, and Jim Williams, who bared their souls to tell Natalie’s powerfully moving story. It is a tribute to their affection for Natalie that this book is further enriched by the personal reminiscences of Robert Redford, Dennis Hopper, Tony Curtis, Maureen O’Hara, Sydney Pollack, Karl Malden, and countless other legendary stars and directors whose lives she touched. I have tried many times, in many different ways, over the last several years to meet with Robert Wagner. My intent, from the outset, was to present a sensitive, truthful account of this tender star as a legacy to her family and her legion of fans.

My gratitude is extended to Ned Comstock, the curator of Special Collections at USC, as well as to the staff at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and to JoAnne Grazzini, who spent countless hours researching or coordinating transcribers, including the exceptional Hillary Gordon. Thank you to my family, to Tony Costello, Phyllis Quinn, Duane Rasure, Louis Danoff, Marvin Eisenman, Charles Higham, Pat Broeske, Barry Redmond, Ed Jubert,

Doug Bombard, Betty Batausa, Ariel Kochane, Diana Rico, and Henry Jaglom for further support, assistance, or insight; as well as to Bill Ogden, Gerry Abrams, and J. K. Selznick for guidance. Lastly, to my editor, Shaye Areheart, for her patience and for sharing my passion to honor Natalie with this book.

Suzanne Finstad  
Los Angeles, March 2001

# ACT ONE

## *Star Child*

1908–1951

*“She does her hair up in pigtails, like a little girl; then she talks with amazing archness . . .”*

ANTON CHEKHOV  
*Three Sisters*

# 1

“NATALIE WOOD” NEVER really existed. The actress with that name was a fictional creation of her mother, a disturbed genius known by various first names, usually Maria. How Natalie was discovered, why she went into show business as a child, her background, were all part of a tapestry of lies woven by Maria that began before Natalie was even born. “God created her, but I invented her,” her mother said once, after Natalie’s body was discovered floating in the dark waters off Catalina Island the Sunday after Thanksgiving of 1981, when she was just forty-three. Natalie Wood, the celebrity, was an entwined alter ego of mother and daughter so powerfully macabre her drowning had been predicted by a gypsy, years before, to happen to Maria, not Natalie. The person inside the illusion of “Natalie Wood” was lost for years, even to herself.

Natalia Nikolaevna Zakharenko<sup>fn1</sup>, the real name of the actress known as Natalie Wood, was a child of Russia, once removed. Exactly where in Russia we may never know, for her mother, the source of the family history, was an unreliable witness, a feverishly imaginative woman who lived in a world of her own invention, only occasionally punctuated by the truth. Maria’s friends characterized this as colorful; others considered her devious; her youngest child eventually concluded she was a pathological liar. There was intrigue to Maria no biographer could fully unravel. She would have three daughters—Olga, Natalia, and Svetlana—three sisters, as in the Chekhov play. For Maria, there was only and ever Natalia. Her consuming obsession with

Natasha, Natalia's pet name, was the one thing no one questioned about Maria.

The rest of her life was a masquerade, with Maria assuming different disguises.

Natalie Wood's mother came into the world somewhere in Siberia. It was most likely the town of Barnaul, as her oldest child, Olga, believed and ship's records document, though she told a different daughter and a biographer that she was born in Tomsk. They are both close to Russia's border with Mongolia, near the Altai Mountains. Maria's early years were spent in this nethermost, Russian-Asian region of the more than four and a half million square miles known as Siberia, famous for its bitterly cold winters, romanticized for its forests primeval, and considered the ends of the earth.

Maria claimed, throughout her life, to have grown up in fantastical luxury on a palatial Siberian estate with a Chinese cook, three governesses, and a "nyanka" (nanny) per child. But her most cherished belief, or delusion, was that she was related, through her mother, to the Romanovs, Russia's royal family. Her stories—whether true or not, and most who heard them questioned their veracity—"kept you spellbound," according to a young actor who befriended Maria in the 1980s, after Natalie drowned. "She herself was quite the actress. She spoke in a very dramatic whisper, so you had to lean in, and pay close attention. She used her hands as she would describe in great detail her genealogy from Russia. She would whisper, '*We were descended from royalty . . .*' and you would just hang on every word."

What is known of Maria's family is that her father, Stepan Zudilov, was married twice. He had four children—two boys, Mikhael and Semen, and two girls, Apollinaria (called Lilia) and Kallisfenia (or Kalia)—by his first wife, Anna. Anna died in childbirth with Kalia in 1905 in Barnaul, where the Zudilovs resided. Stepan took a second bride, who would likewise bear him two sons and two daughters in reverse order: a girl, Zoia, born in 1907, followed by Maria, then

Boris and Gleb. Stepan Zudilov's youngest daughter, Maria Stepanovna Zudilova, would become the mother of Natalie Wood.[fn2](#)

According to Maria, her mother (also named Maria) was "close relations" to the Romanov family. It is believed her maiden name was Kulev. Whether she was an aristocrat is unknown. Kalia, Stepan's younger daughter by his first wife and the only Zudilov child other than Maria to immigrate to the United States, would later tell *her* children, "Somebody in the line was a countess." But as a Russian historian notes sardonically, "*Everyone* from Russia wants to be related to the Romanovs."

If Natalie Wood's grandmother had royal blood, her mother undermined her own credibility by the thousand-and-one variations on her lineage she offered, *Scheherazade*-style. "One story was that her parents took her to China when she was a little girl and she became a Chinese princess through some mysterious circumstances that were never explained," recalls a Hollywood friend. Another version that surfaced in studio biographies after Natalie became a child actress identified Maria as "being of French extraction." According to her eldest daughter, Olga, this was a prank on Maria's part. "When they would ask her if she's French, she'd say, 'Oh, yes . . .'" She knew how to *speak* French, because she probably had French nannies." Even this was based solely on Maria's word, for Olga never heard her mother actually speak a word of French (nor did Maria's half-sister Kalia speak it). Maria's white lie sustained itself all the way to a 1983 television tribute to Natalie Wood, during which Orson Welles, her first costar, refers to Natalie being "not just of Russian but also of French descent." Maria, in the opinion of her daughter Lana (Americanized from Svetlana), was "frightening" in her ability to bend reality and convince others it was true, "because she did believe everything that came out of her mouth."

Maria told Lana that she was born to gypsy parents who left her on a hillside, where the Zudilovs found her and raised her as their own. "I heard that story my entire life." Maria would laugh about it with friends after Natalie became famous, muttering, in her heavy Slavic whisper, "They used to call me 'The Gypsy'!" She could easily create that impression as an adult, with her raven hair, magical tales and musical accent. "I could almost see her," remarked a Hollywood writer who spent hours with Maria, "waylaying me on a street with a bunch of heather, saying, 'Buy this or you'll be cursed for life.'"

The idea that Maria was the displaced child of gypsies is "hogwash" in the pronouncement of her closest traceable living relation—Kalia's son Constantine. No one in the family, including Lana, took this tale seriously. It originated, Maria's daughter Olga believes, as gossip among the family servants, for Maria was born, she told Olga, at the Zudilovs' "dacha," a country cottage, in the mountains. "And when my grandmother came back she had my mother, so the servants used to tell her, 'You were born by gypsies,' because she wasn't born right there where they could see her."

One clue exists to help decipher Maria's past. It is a photograph of the Zudilov family, retained separately by both Maria and Kalia, taken somewhere in Russia circa March 1919, according to the handwritten description. Maria's family, judged by their portrait, appears to be of means. They are dressed à la mode, the girls in shirtwaists and sailor dresses, posed regally, projecting a patrician mien. Stepan Zudilov, Natalie Wood's maternal grandfather, sits on a chair to the far left of the photograph, a stout but stately figure with a sweeping moustache, in a well-tailored three-piece woolen suit. At the center of the portrait, also seated, is his second wife, Maria, the putative Romanov. Maria evokes a gentle womanliness. She is possessed of a round face with soft features, girlishly pretty; her dark hair,

contrasted by fair skin, is styled in marcelled waves. What distinguishes her as the grandmother of Natalie Wood are her liquid brown eyes: they hold the camera with their tender, slightly sad gaze.

Stepan and Maria occupy the front row with their four children—Natalie’s mother, Maria, staring brazenly into the camera’s eye; thirteen-year-old Zoia; and the two boys, Boris and Gleb, six and four, seated side-by-side in identical Lord Fauntleroy suits. (Maria would later bizarrely refer to them as “twins.”) Standing behind Stepan’s second family are his four grown children by his first wife, Anna; including Kalia, the corroborating witness to the family history. Anna’s offspring are swarthier, with sharper features than Stepan’s children by Natalie’s grandmother. Everyone has captivating eyes.

The picture helps to solve the riddle of Maria’s true age, which would become the subject of whispered speculation once she came to Hollywood. From the time she was twenty or so, she gave her date of birth as February 8, 1912. On the back of the 1919 family photo, she is identified as “11 years, 1 month,” which would mean she was born in 1908—the same year recorded in the ship’s log when she immigrated to America. Both Maria and Kalia, Kalia’s son cheerfully admits, “lied about their age.”

The photograph of Maria’s family, ironically, bears a resemblance to the romantic images of Russia’s Tsar Nicholas II and his wife, Alexandra, in formal portraits with their children, taken in the last days of the Romanov monarchy. Maria kept this family photo beside a framed portrait of the Romanovs in similar pose, to the day she died, prizing them as jewels. Aside from Natalie, her link to Russian aristocracy is what defined Maria to *herself*, true *or* false, for as one companion remarked, “She believed every word of it. That’s the mark of a good actress.”

Musia or Marusia, as young Maria was affectionately called, was pampered from the time she was born because

of her diminutive size. One of her stories was that she weighed only two pounds at birth, nearly dying. In the family portrait, she is nestled into her mother, cradled to her breast, as Marusia peers out with the smug self-possession of the favored child. She has an elfin quality, her dark hair pixie-short, with penetrating, birdlike eyes she compared to her father's as green, her daughter Olga describes as a changeable gray-blue, and those who considered her malevolent called "black and beady." Her expression, even at eleven, suggests cunning. She was a mischievous girl. Her German nanny was fired for making Marusia kneel; she learned to swear in Chinese from the cook. When she did so in front of her father, it was the cook—not Marusia—who "got a talking." The young Marusia adored jewelry (a bold bracelet leaps out from her tiny wrist in the family photo). She collected pictures and books depicting the royal family "because I worship them," she would say later, "almost like a god." [fn3](#)

Kalia, Maria/Marusia's older half-sister, supported her grandiose accounts of governesses and fur coats and seamstresses for their dolls, though Kalia identified the origin of the family's wealth as a factory that produced vodka and textiles, while Maria later said their father manufactured candles, ink and candy. [fn4](#) Kalia was not heard to repeat Maria's boast that the town where they kept their dacha was named after Natalie's grandfather. ("Because he was such a generous man. If a peasant is nice and he likes him, he'll give him house, he gives him horse, he gives him land.") According to Maria, her parents' marriage was arranged to merge Stepan Zudilov's fortune with Maria Zuleva's name. Neither Kalia nor Maria, once in America, had photos of the family's estate, or their dacha, to authenticate living such rarefied childhoods, though according to Kalia's son, they behaved like it. "Didn't cook, didn't clean, had other people do that."

This idyll, if it existed, came to a tragic end around 1919. A civil war erupted in Petrograd two years before, forcing Tsar Nicholas II to abdicate. Bolshevik workers seized the Winter Palace by October, naming Communist Vladimir Lenin as their leader. The summer of 1918, the Bolsheviks murdered Nicholas, his wife, Alexandra, and their five young children, Grand Duke Alexei and the grand duchesses Olga, Tatiana, Maria, and presumably Anastasia.[fn5](#)

Natalie's grandparents kept an uneasy vigil at their home in Barnaul as the Bolshevik Revolution made its way toward Siberia. Sometime after March of 1919, the date they sat for their portrait, they were warned the Bolsheviks were coming. "They told us, '*Run!*'" said Maria, "because of Mother, the whole family would have been killed. They were killing aristocrats." They left so quickly, she recalled, there was no time to find her favorite brother, Semen.[fn6](#)

The Zudilovs, dressed as peasants, crossed the border into Manchuria, where they stayed a few days per Maria, a year by Kalia's version. "Then the Czechs came and chased the Communists away," Maria recounted, "so we came back."[fn7](#)

Marusia and her family returned to Barnaul to find Semen hanging from the archway of their front door, a rope around his neck. Ten-year-old Marusia went into violent convulsions. "I was so little and I loved him so much—he was such a nice half-brother. When I saw him hanging there, with the tongue and everything, I start to have convulsions, starting with the neck, then with leg and hands, and then I just drop." The episode, a family legend, permanently affected Natalie's mother's nerves, leaving her subject to "the fits," she called it, damaging her psyche in ways unknowable.

Marusia and her family remained in Siberia until the Bolshevik Revolution reached their door, when they fled for China, "because the Reds were killing everybody." She and Kalia would provide essentially the same drama of the family's escape: how they packed what jewels and

belongings they could onto a train their father bought from the Chinese. According to Maria, Natalie's grandfather buried "jewels and money and gold" worth "millions" in a waterproof box with a map of its location provided to everyone in the family "except me. I was young, they didn't give me the plan." A similar story surfaced from Kalia, though never, notably, the "plan." Whether the tale of their escape and the buried family treasure is true remains cryptic. "The problem with stories from Russians," one historian of the era observes, "is that they're *all* probable."

According to Natalie's mother, her parents changed everyone's names because they were afraid Communists would find them, exacting a promise from each child never to reveal the family's true identity—a reaction a Russian émigré friend considered extreme to the point of "demented." "Stepan Zudilov" is identified as Kalia's father on her 1905 birth certificate, *before* the alleged name change, and "Maria Kuleva" is the name documented as Marusia's mother on family possessions prior to the Revolution. These are also the names Natalie's mother would use to identify her parents on legal records once in the U.S., leaving little room for doubt that Natalie's grandparents were born Stepan Zudilov and Maria Kuleva; though Olga, Natalie's older sister, still expresses uncertainty those are their true names, "or if they changed them when they ran." Olga and Natalie's mother remained haunted all her life by the fear that Communists would come after her and "kill me like killed my brother."

Once in Manchuria, little Marusia and her family stayed at a hotel in Qiqihar, where Natalie's mother had the first of several alleged mystical experiences. As Maria later told the story, she "recognized" a house near their hotel as one she had lived in, remembering an outdoor playhouse and the ceiling of her bedroom, with "angels" on it. Her parents took her to the house, afraid she would have another seizure if they refused. Upstairs was a room with cherubim painted on

the ceiling; in the backyard, concealed by spiders' webs, Marusia found a decaying playhouse. Natalie's mother believed in reincarnation ever after, despite the opposite position of the Russian Orthodox religion in which she was baptized, and to which she and her parents adhered. ("How can you explain that?" she would ask. "There was my angels!")

Natalie's grandparents settled in nearby Harbin, China, where so many Russians had fled, neighborhoods appeared to have been lifted out of Siberia. The family lived in such an enclave, in a "good" part of town. Stepan, Natalie's grandfather, is presumed to have managed a soap factory. Natalie's mother, Marusia, attended an all-Russian girls' school, though Marusia's eye was on "pretty young boys." She went to church so she could "look at the boys, and look at what the girls are wearing—is my dress better than theirs?" Marusia had thick, naturally curly, crow-black hair and was preternaturally tiny—just five feet—"But she carried herself as if she were seven foot tall," said an acquaintance from Maria's senior years. "She liked to talk about how she had been a great dancer, and how she had been a great beauty." Natalie's studio press releases would later describe her mother as a "professional ballerina" in China. "That was made up," admits daughter Olga. Teenage Marusia took *one* ballet class in Harbin. "For grace," she put it later, claiming her parents withdrew her, believing dancers and performers fell into a category with "prostitutes."

Marusia and her sisters placed absolute faith in Russian superstitions and "did gypsy stuff" using Romany magic, such as "looking in the mirror on a certain night between two candles and you can see the person you're supposed to marry." One day, the sisters had their fortunes read by a Harbin gypsy. The fortuneteller warned Marusia to "beware of dark water," for she was going to drown. The gypsy also predicted her second child "would be a great beauty, known

throughout the world." Natalie Wood's life, and death, would be dictated by the gypsy's twin prophecies.

The fortuneteller's predictions held an immediate power over Natalie's mother. She refused to go near water, "especially if it's dark waters."

Marusia eloped in her teens, defying her parents by choosing a Russian-Armenian, the brawny handsome Alexei Tatulov, originally "Tatulian," the son of an Armenian Cossack who, legend has it, led a regiment against the Turks astride a white horse, Marusia was fleeing a father too strict for her ambition; her choice of a "ladies' man" her girlfriends coveted revealed her vanity, and a competitive streak. (She told Olga, their daughter, she married Alexei "because he said he would kill himself if she didn't.") Natalie's mother was not a true beauty, as she imagined, but her vivid personality was a magnet.

She became pregnant in 1928; claiming, later, that she weighed only seventy-five pounds and doctors ordered her to abort. She would tell Natalie she had several abortions before this, because she was too tiny. By Maria's later account, her mother took her to a French doctor experienced with "narrow" Chinese women, who agreed to deliver her baby. Alexei brought a priest, she would recall, "because he thought I definitely was gonna die." Marusia gave birth to her first daughter, Olga, on October 28, 1928. She alleged that it was without anesthetic, that her labor lasted five days, and "it felt like my bones were cracking, they were stretching, it was horrible." "My mother," Olga would later sigh, "told so many stories."

Olga was originally called Ovsanna, christened in the Armenian Orthodox church. One morning, Stepan Zudilov took his infant granddaughter "for a walk," secretly bringing Ovsanna to a Russian Orthodox priest, who baptized her in the Zudilovs' religion, renaming her "Olga," a Russian name.

Olga/Ovsanna had her part-Armenian father's dark eyes and gentle disposition.

When Olga was a little over a year old, Alexei and Marusia Tatulov made the bold decision to leave Harbin for America, Alexei's dream, according to Marusia, who saw America as "just this amazing land, and the Communists will never get there." Alexei boarded a ship called the *Taito Maru* in Kobe, Japan, on January 12, 1930. He arrived at the port of San Francisco, California, fifteen days later, identified in the ship's logs as an "auto mechanic." He had no job, no prospects, and fifty dollars in his pocket.

Marusia was rejected for the voyage, ostensibly underweight. She spent the next ten months in Harbin drinking a concoction of beer and milk to gain weight, a recipe she would one day give to actor Jack Lemmon, when Natalie starred in *The Great Race*. A Japanese nurse tended Olga while Marusia passed the time studying bookkeeping. She and Olga were issued their visas in November 1930, embarking on a grueling, month-long journey to the United States.

Dispossessed of her child's nurse, Marusia had no maternal instincts. She continued to breast-feed Olga, who was now two, and the little girl cried without ceasing as they traveled by train from China into Korea, then Tokyo, where they boarded a ship, the *Asama Maru*, sailing first to Hawaii, finally to San Francisco, sleeping on bamboo mats. Natalie Wood's mother's life of privilege, if it existed, existed no more.

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[fn1](#) Spelled 'Zackharenko' on the birth certificate and by the family.

[fn2](#) An "a" is added in Russian to the surnames of female children. Middle names derive from the father's first name: in Maria's case, "Stepanovna" for Stepan.

[fn3](#) Grammar will remain uncorrected to reflect the speaker's personality.

[fn4](#) Maria's version made more sense, according to a Russian scholar: the textile industry was based near Moscow then, far from Barnaul, and vodka was controlled by the Russian state, prohibited by 1914.

[fn5](#) A rumor, crystallizing into myth, would surface that Anastasia escaped.

[fn6](#)Kalia's descendants recall it as Mikhael.

[fn7](#)Referring, most likely, to the Czech Army's march across Siberia.

## 2

MARUSIA AND OLGA'S ship, the *Asama Maru*, arrived at San Francisco's Port of Angels on the eleventh of December 1930. Alexei met them at the pier, informing his wife he had a mistress. He still loved her, he told Marusia, but Armenians were "passionate" men who could not survive a year without a woman.

Marusia's next shock was her home, one room in a bungalow co-occupied by a crowd of Russian immigrants who worked with Alexei at the nearby shipyards. "I thought, 'What we gonna do?'" She had no money, a toddler, and spoke broken English. Marusia accepted the arrangement, consoled by the fact that she was further from Communists, about whom she was possessed by a terror bordering on the hallucinogenic.

Natalie's mother's escape from her demons, and her poverty, was the movies. She was "movie crazy," relates daughter Olga, who remembers how her father would give her mother money for food "and we'd go to the Temple Theater instead." Flights of fantasy transcended Marusia from the reality of having seen a brother hanged, or the squalor of her life in America. They infused her with the cheerfulness of the deranged. "She would say, 'Believe in the best, expect something good to happen, and it will.'"

Ballet was Marusia's secondary passion. She befriended Nadia Ermolova, a model who taught ballet to children, enrolling Olga in her class. Marusia danced alongside the little girls, "doing it more than we would." Marusia left her toddler to her own devices. When she got a job as a church

seamstress, lying that she knew how to sew, Marusia left Olga, then four, in the park while she went to work.

She was remembered as a “social climber” in the Russian community of San Francisco, which socialized at a Russian Center off Divisadero, where an Invalids Ball was held each year. Marusia was twice Queen and twice Princess, chosen on the basis of having collected the most money for Russian veterans. “Here we all were,” recalls a neighbor, “not two pennies to rub together, and Marusia is standing around on the corners gathering money for the Invalidzi.” A 1936 photo of Natalie’s mother as Queen shows her sitting in a ballgown wearing her crown, a satin banner draped across her chest, trophy in one hand, a spray of flowers in the other, looking as if she had assumed her rightful place on the Russian throne. The gossip where Alex worked as a janitor was that he “took” the dress from the emporium where he worked as a janitor and returned it after the ball. Olga remembers her mother hiring a dressmaker a different year she was Queen, “using *all* her money for this one dress.”

Marusia began acting in plays at the Russian Center, then at the Kolobok, a Russian club, where she danced onstage, dragging Olga, who would “fall asleep on pool tables.” Marusia wanted to be an actress, in the opinion of her closest friend, Josephine Paulson, whose daughter Lois was Olga’s playmate, giving Olga the lifelong nickname “Teddi,” for Tatulov. Marusia read palms and threw tarot cards, “always into something.” She looked at apartments full-time, moving the family at whim.

Though her husband continued to have affairs, Marusia became pregnant in 1932. She collapsed on the street and was rushed to Mt. Zion Hospital, where her second reputed mystical episode occurred. She hemorrhaged during a blood transfusion, lost the baby, and was pronounced dead, regaining consciousness as a nurse prepared her to be embalmed. Marusia lay on the hospital bed, unable to speak

or move to indicate she was alive. Alex arrived to accompany her body to the morgue, carrying dried flowers from a religious icon, sent by Marusia's mother. As he placed the flowers on Marusia's neck, she felt warmth. "I open my eyes and I start to scream. The nurse fainted, then she run out and said, '*She's alive!*' " Marusia's friend Josephine, Josephine's daughter, and Olga all confirm the incident, which Natalie's mother would consider a miracle, reinforcing both her religion and her belief in the mystic.

Marusia was still living with her husband, Alex, when she began dating a Russian sea captain, George Cetalopv, the "great passion" of her life. "My father had other interests," as Olga explained, "and she had this interest." One night Alex brought home for dinner a coworker from the sugar boats, a Russian immigrant named Nikolai Zakharenko. He was twenty-three; short, but well-built; with black hair, black eyes, and the refined face of a matinee idol. "God, he was so handsome," Maria would swoon in her later years of the man who would become Natalie's father. She continued to dally with her sea captain, but acquired Nick Zakharenko like a trophy. "All my girlfriends want him, and I thought, 'If they want him, I have to get him!'"

Nick and Musia, his pet name for Maria, made a dazzling couple on the dance floor, where they won prizes dancing together. He impressed Maria with his gentlemanly manners, for Nick had a poet's soul which expressed itself when he played the balalaika, a Russian string instrument. He was also possessed by a dark force that could explode after too much vodka. "Nick would get very moody and would hurt somebody," recalled Olga, who was seven when they met. "He would fight."

The underlying cause of Natalie's father's rage was not fully understood. His brother Dmitri believed it came from deep-seated hatred of Communists. The Zakharenko brothers—Nikolai, Dmitri and Vladimir—spent their childhoods in the eastern Siberian port of Vladivostok,

where their father, Stepan, worked at a candy factory and their mother, the former Eudoxie Sauchenko, was known for her beauty. During the revolution, Stepan Zakharenko fought against the Bolsheviks. Nikolai, the eldest, was not quite ten when Communists killed his father. Eudoxie received financial aid from a brother who immigrated to California, enabling her to escape Vladivostok for Shanghai with her three handsome young sons. She remarried in China. Her new husband, a Russian naval engineer named Constantine Zavarin, determined to move the family to the U.S., far from Bolshevik forces. Their first stop was Vancouver, the end of 1927, when Nikolai was fifteen. By 1932 the family made their way south to Seattle, settling eventually in San Francisco. Dmitri and Vladimir Zakharenko survived their upbringing relatively unscathed; Nikolai emerged with psychic wounds even Dmitri considered an enigma. “He kept in touch with Russians that were in exile, and he read the Russian books—oh, and he was so proud of the Tsar’s family. I didn’t even *think* of them.”

Nick struck out on his own when he was twenty, mining for gold in the Rockies. Dmitri, who briefly joined him, described a tortured artist playing balalaika part-time with an orchestra, railing against Communists during drunken binges on vodka. “He worried about and hated the Communists so much . . . it kills *you* instead of the other guy.” Nick’s anger came out in fistfights, when “he’d just lose his temper and threaten some guy. He’d never back down.”

Alex Tatulov saved Nick’s life in such a brawl before he brought him home to dinner. Natalie’s mother, who thrilled to strong and handsome men, and to drama, may have found Nick Zakharenko’s furies exciting at the start. They also shared a fanatical attachment to the royal family and a frenzied paranoia about Communists. Maria ended her “arrangement” with Alex and set up housekeeping with Nick, taking Olga. She filed for divorce in October 1935,

identifying herself as Maria and as “Marie,” a name she began to use arbitrarily. The new setup with Nick did nothing to deter Maria from carrying on her flirtation with George Cetalopv, the captain she considered her true love.

Maria became pregnant with Natalie in October 1937, six months after her divorce from Olga’s father. She and Olga, who was nine, lived in a cubbyhole apartment in an alley with Nick, who was working as a janitor at Standard Oil. The conception was noteworthy, for Nick thought he could not have children, according to Maria, who was still romantically involved with George Cetalopv. The baby, from all accounts, was Nick’s. He and Maria were married on February 8, 1938, in a small Russian Orthodox cathedral in the neighborhood, witnessed by Nick’s artist brother, Vladimir. Why she waited until she was four months pregnant with Natalie to get married is one of Maria’s mysteries. “George went on a trip because he was captain of the ship,” recalls Olga. “When he came back, she was married to Nick.” Olga wondered, then and later, why her mother married Nick and not George Cetalopv, the love of her life. “I asked her that once. She said she liked George *too* much, that she’d always be jealous of him. But who *knows* her story? Nick was *very* attractive . . . much more attractive than George.”

Maria may have delayed marrying Nick because of his alcohol problem, which concerned her. “He drank a lot,” she said later, “even when I married him. He was wonderful man—when he was not drinking.”

Her choice of Nick Zakharenko over George Cetalopv would prove prophetic to Maria, despite its disturbing consequences. She was glad she married Nick, she said at the end of her life, because he gave her Natalie.

### 3

MARIA BELIEVED SHE was carrying destiny's child, the world-famous beauty the gypsy in Harbin had predicted as her second-born. She ingratiated herself to a rich, childless Russian couple, Theodore and Helen Loy (originally "Lopatin"), whom she met through friends in the immigrant community, asking them to be godparents, assuring wealthy patrons for the unborn child she was convinced fate had chosen for fame. Natalie, a childhood friend would observe, was stage-managed by her mother "from conception."

The Zakharenkos, who were struggling to pay the obstetrician's bills, managed to move out of the alley to a cheerful duplex nearby at 1690 Page Street by the time Maria went into labor the morning of July 20, 1938. True to the fortuneteller's prophecy, her baby, a girl, resembled "an exquisite, perfectly formed china doll," said a neighbor. Maria granted the wealthy Helen Loy, the fairy godmother, the manipulative privilege of naming her star-child. Loy chose "Natalia," for the pretty blond daughter of a friend in China. It was Americanized to "Natalie" on the birth certificate, which omitted the Russian patronymic "Nikolaevna" (daughter of Nikolai). The petite infant with flashing dark eyes carried the ponderous name Natalia Nikolaevna Zakharenko. She was called, simply, "Natasha."

"As soon as she was born, she brought us some luck," Maria boasted later. According to Maria, Nick placed a small bet on the Chinese lottery while she and Natasha were still in the hospital, winning "exactly the amount" owed the doctor. "She brought money, even when she was born!" her mother crowed.