

NUREYEV

THE LIFE

Julie Kavanagh



PANTHEON BOOKS • NEW YORK

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Originally published in Great Britain by Fig Tree Press,
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kavanagh, Julie.

Nureyev / Julie Kavanagh.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-375-40513-6

1. Nureyev, Rudolf, 1938–1993. 2. Ballet dancers—Russia
(Federation)—Biography. I. Title.

GV1785.N8K38 2007

792.8'028092—dc22

[B] 2006038137

www.pantheonbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

First American Edition

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

*To Ross,
for everything*

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1 A VAGABOND SOUL

Early one morning when six-year-old Rosa Kolesnikova woke up, she remembered first of all that she was on the train, and then she noticed the three Nureyev girls sitting on the bunk opposite. The toddler was whimpering, and her eight-year-old sister was trying to comfort her. She saw to her annoyance that her friend Lilia, who was also six, had taken her toy and was clutching it. Their mother was nowhere to be seen. Something was going on. In the corridor people were rushing back and forth talking excitedly, but no one would say what was happening. Later she noticed that next door there were sheets curtaining off the Nureyev compartment and doctors in white coats were going in and out. *Tjoty*a-Farida must be ill. Throughout the morning, making some excuse, she and the other children jostled to see if they could peek through a crack in the screen of sheets, but her mother would call them back and try to distract them. “Look, Lake Baikal! Lake Baikal! Isn’t it beautiful?” she cried.

It was a cold, clear morning, and the lake, a sunlit ocean of ice, seemed to merge with the far-off white mountain ridges of Khamar Daban. For most of the day the train traveled along the southwestern shore beneath sheer cliffs and steep woods, offering sudden dazzling views of Baikal as it threaded through the tunnels. With its legend of the vengeful Old Man Baikal, who hurled a huge rock at his runaway daughter, the lake was a wonder for children: Its size alone was breathtaking—four hundred miles long and one mile deep in the middle. By late afternoon, however, its fascination had worn off, and everyone was glad to get to the Mongolian city of Ulan-Ude, where the train stopped for several hours.

Almost all the passengers went into town to shop in the trading arcades and the poplar-lined main street, Leninskaya Ulitsa. When they returned, one or two of the women came up to the children with a large box and told them to look inside. There they saw a tiny baby swaddled tightly: “We bought him in Ulan-Ude,” they said, laughing. “It’s a little Tatar brother for the Nureyev girls!” Rosa found this hard to believe. It didn’t make sense that a Tatar child would be for sale in a

place full of people who looked so foreign, with their big foreheads and slanting eyes. Besides, before they arrived, she had heard the adults talking about a new baby on the train. Rosa had a six-month-old brother of her own, but even so she was full of envy of the Nureyev sisters and tremendously excited. “We were all in ecstasies, and in the carriage there was such jubilation! It was like a holiday, with everyone happy and wanting to share in the celebration.”

Word of the event spread quickly, and for the rest of the day people crowded into the carriage to see the new arrival: Rudolf Nureyev’s first audience. His birth, he would later say, was the most romantic event of his life, symbolic of his future statelessness and nomadic existence. It was to be a life lived mostly en route to places, navigated by what he called his “vagabond soul.” To Rosa he was never Rudolf or even Rudik, its diminutive, but *Malchik kotoriy rodilsay v poezde* said in one breath as a name: The-boy-who-was-born-on-a-train.

The order for the soldiers’ families to leave had come suddenly. Almost full term in her pregnancy, Farida Nureyeva knew she was taking a risk by traveling at this stage, but she had had no choice. For the last two months, Farida and Ekaterina, Rosa’s mother, had regularly gone together to the authorities to find out when they were going to be permitted to join their husbands, who were serving in the Red Army’s Far Eastern Division. One delay had followed another until at last, at the beginning of March 1938, the wives were told that a military train would be leaving that night.

The children were asleep by the time the trucks arrived, and after waking them and bundling them in blankets, Farida left the barracks of Alkino, her home for the past nine months, and started for the station in Ufa, about forty kilometers away, where the train was waiting. There were two carriages set aside for the women and children, and a special wagon for their luggage. The compartments opened straight onto the corridor without the privacy of doors, but they were clean and quite comfortable, with an unoccupied single row of bunks on the opposite side, which all the children on the train immediately converted into a play area. “It was the best of times! There was such a spirit of adventure and excitement.” Most of the wives were young, already friends, and delighted to be going to their husbands, whom they hadn’t seen for several months. They were all very kind and solicitous toward Farida, making sure she had everything she needed, and each day one of the two doctors on board would come and check up on her.

The train traveled at varying speeds, sometimes racketing along, sometimes stopping for hours while waiting to be hooked up to another engine. At stations there was usually a straggle of *babushki* selling little piles of wares—scallions, pickled gherkins, curds, smoked fish—but the women rarely bought anything, as the soldiers appointed to take care of them brought them provisions as well as hot water for tea and for washing. The children would have liked to get out and run along the platform, but their mothers were reluctant to let them go: They never knew when the train was going to leave. After nearly two weeks of traveling, everyone was growing restless, “Is the Far East far?” became the children’s endless refrain. “That’s why the day the little boy was born stuck in the memory. Given all the monotony, expectation, and boredom, you couldn’t forget such an event in a lifetime.”

Rudolf Nureyev was “shaken out of the womb” as the train ran alongside Lake Baikal around midday on March 17, 1938. Farida was euphoric. Not only was the baby born safely, but at last she had the son her husband longed for. When the train stopped in Ulan-Ude, she asked one of the women to accompany her eldest daughter, also called Rosa, a solemn, responsible girl, to send a telegram to her husband, Hamet, with the news, even though she felt sure he wouldn’t believe it. Once before, when her second daughter, Lilia, was born, Farida had sent word that she had given birth to a boy—“She lied because she longed to make him happy,” Rudolf wrote in his memoir. It is far more likely, however, that as Hamet’s work kept him away for long periods, her motive was to persuade him to return to their village. If so, it worked. “Overjoyed, Father came home on leave as soon as he could and found out that the ‘boy’ was Lida [Lilia]. He was speechless and utterly miserable.”

By 1938 Farida had been married to Hamet for nearly nine years, although they had spent much of that time apart. When they first met, in the city of Kazan in the late twenties, he was still a student, studying Tatar philology and the new ideology of Communism at the academy there. He was not then the rigid army officer he later became, but a debonair young man full of ambition and ideals. A studio portrait of Hamet at twenty-five, dressed in pinstripe trousers, dress shirt, and bow tie, shows him sitting at a café table with an equally handsome friend, cigarette in hand; they look like a pair of Parisian flaneurs. Two years younger than Hamet and also of slight build, Farida herself was extremely attractive, with long sleek black hair parted in the middle, and dark round eyes. She rarely laughed, but