



Pact Family Stories

Up Close and Personal with Jamie Lee Curtis Adoptive Mom

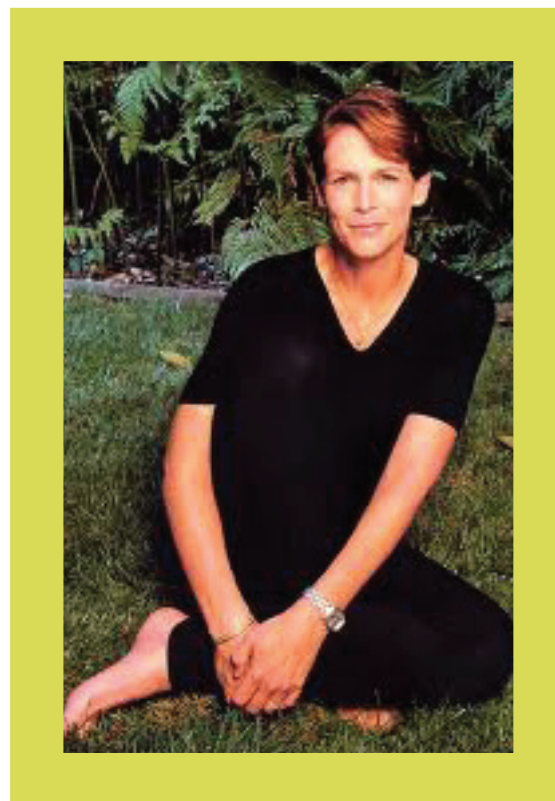
Twenty One Questions

Interviewed by Gail Steinberg

"This is Jamie Lee Curtis," says the voice.
"Who?"
"I'm on location and I have some free time this afternoon.
Would you like to do the interview you requested?"
"Is this a joke?"

I feel two years old. Just like that? No scheduler? No movie-star shtick? No hoopla? Just a normal-everyday-ordinary voice speaking to me on the phone, understated and casual, actually sounding friendly. But it's Jamie Lee Curtis! A lady with a reputation for razor-sharp, abrasive, and outspoken comments. Would I like to talk with her? Be cool, I calm myself.

- 1. You and your husband, Christopher Guest, have two children. Do you imagine the process of adopting is different for movie stars and other celebrities? Can you tell us how your children joined your family?** We were married in 1984 and adopted Annie in 1986 in an open adoption. It probably was different for us than for most others. There's something that happens to other people when you become very very famous. It's a look in their eyes — they're afraid to look straight at you; they treat you like royalty; they're very self-conscious. But when we met Annie's birth mother and she said, "Hi, I'm happy to meet you," it was like, boom, it was OK. I knew we could adopt.
- 2. Was there anything in your or your husband's personal background or value-system that moved you toward adoption?** Infertility. Adoption was the only way for us to have a family. People who adopt who are fertile have a more difficult decision than when you have no other option.



It becomes the viable option for you. If you want to be a family, that's how you're going to be it. I don't think you feel like a family until the child is born.

- 3. What do you mean by open adoption?** Open, meaning the birth parents and adoptive parents met, and we mutually chose each other through an attorney. Open to allowing ourselves to having all the information there was coming in. Open to a much more public scrutiny as adoptive parents.
- 4. Do you stay connected to Annie's birth family?** Theories are one thing and specific human contact is another. I believed Annie's birth mother would respect our wishes. We look at adoption as a very sacred exchange. It was not done lightly on either side. I would dedicate my life to this child.
- 5. How did you adopt Tom?** With Annie, I had sought her out. I have no idea how our son came to us. It's been a year and a month. I would have said no to any more children because Annie was nine.... But a set of circumstances occurred, all of which were celestial.

It was serendipitous and involved a friend of mine who died last year. Five or six events came together, all of which resulted in our family growing within four days. WE HAD A BABY!

I witnessed my son's birth. I was able to participate, cut his cord, be the first person to hold him. He was home sleeping next to me the next day.

I thought, I have very thoroughly lived a life. The birth of my son changed me.

- 6. It sounds like Annie's arrival felt planned for and controlled and Tom's just happened.** When I saw "Father of the Bride, Part II," I saw Steve Martin and Diane Keaton having a baby in their forties.... We're ten years older now as parents. For us, there was an opening. Another possible family fell out of the situation. Tom was born early, maybe three weeks to go. We had a very brief preparation for his arrival and it was profound in how it occurred. He's the sweetest little boy. He's brought so much happiness and joy into our lives. He's opening the cabinets!

Motherhood is every wonderful cliché in the book. There is an unexplainable sort of thing you just feel. It's a permanent commitment, one I've change my life to meet.

- 7. How does Annie feel about Tom?** It's complicated to have a new baby brother when you're nine and a half. He represents things and challenges she wasn't able to have prior to his birth. After he was home six months, it started kicking in. As soon as he responded to a song she made up, that was it. That was her connecting link to him.
- 8. In the last ten years, there have been quite a few TV movies about horrible adoption situations. As an adoptive mom and as a star in the movie industry, how do you feel about them?** Lots of TV is a reflection of incredible, unbelievable stupidity. The networks sometimes make weird decisions, but now everybody's so afraid of losing ratings that some of the decisions are actually kind of bold. I do have very strong feelings that "bad adoption" horror stories suck. My husband and I are the lucky recipients of adoptive children, of unions we entered into with their birth parents that are profound in their depth. Our daughter is a very happy child, very loved and loving and so is our son. That's why people do this — to raise happy children.
- 9. Why did you decide to write your picture book, *Tell Me Again About The Night I Was Born*?** Christopher and I read to the children every night and I was getting tired of the children's books I was reading. There wasn't the humor and sort of off-beat sense that I like. All the books were about children I didn't relate to because they were perfect children with their little haircuts all perfect. I wanted to write a book about real children and real families joined by adoption. I intended it to be a book about families. The book is a way to celebrate. It came out very quickly. It was not particularly planned. I knew I wanted to write about it. It wasn't supposed to be exclusively an adoption book. Everybody is born. It's the one universal thing we all have. But the issue of being adopted is a polarizing one. People will only recommend

the book to adopted kids. (Laughs.) If that's who embraces the book, I'm happy.

Children who grow up in the families they were born to are usually told detailed stories about their births. How mom went to the hospital, who went with her, what happened during the birth — all the details become part of family lore. Adopted children often don't have those kinds of details. *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born* was written to let children who joined their families through adoption know that their own birth stories were exciting, too.

You can't imagine the overwhelming stories I hear back from people. Many birth mothers have bought the book and have come and told me their stories, women who have been so happy to have a book that reflects some of the joy they have provided to adoptive parents.

- 10. Do you have any concerns about how growing up adopted feels to kids?** I wrote an article for a magazine recently and they wouldn't let me say that adoption is a very difficult thing for a child to live with. But there are issues that are life challenges: abandonment and loss and identity that every thoughtful, well-intended, open-minded adoptive parent knows can't be erased. It seems ignorant to assume that someone who has an issue with separation would not have it surface within everyday life. But let's not forget that this is not heartache. Negativity is self-defeating and it's boring! The kids have to deal with it on their own. Overcoming challenges develops inner strength.
- 11. Are you planning any more books?** If I were to write a book for an adolescent, separation would be a very big chapter.
- 12. Your voice sounds sad when you say that. Can you explain?** It's sad to know you can't fix everything for your children. The challenge is not to be afraid to ask questions and then be willing to hear the answers.
- 13. What would you say to a parent who is looking for support or education about adoption?** The best advice I give is that I invite them over and they leave comfortable that these are my children.
- 14. How do your children feel about your book?** I gave up my children's privacy in writing the book. This was a gift from them to the world. If this book helps a child who was adopted, it was my children's gift to them. Annie responded with some pride and some hesitancy. She's happy I'm finished talking about it. I am so proud of my daughter and I think she is proud of herself.
- 15. What do you think children like most about your book?** I think we're all trying to have pride in who we are. We build it brick by brick, action by action. I hope this book makes them proud of their heritage, both birth and adoption. I hope kids who read this book find it tangible and funny, and think, This is about me! I tried to see it from a child's point of view, which isn't too hard because I'm as much of a child-adult as there is. I'm frozen at about six and a half. I'm still climbing down on the floor and looking at the world from a kid's perspective. It's an amazing tool.

16. Has being a mom changed your acting choices?

Without question. Motherhood has changed everything in my life. When I began acting, I did not assume I would ever have a child. I made choices based on my life then. But Annie is ten now, and very aware of movies. I know I have the potential of being a role model not only to my own children, but in general. Now I make every decision with my children in mind. I choose my roles carefully, always asking: What messages are they being sent?

17. As a working mother who has to travel, how do you manage?

I am a mother, wife, friend, daughter and actress in that order. My children are the prime focus. I try to work almost exclusively in Los Angeles but I still have to juggle carpools with work schedules. When I do have to go on location, I take pains to make the kids feel secure. A child psychologist told me to give Annie something of mine to hold for me so she would know I was coming back, so I bought an angel on a chain and wore it a few months. Then when I left town, I gave it to Annie to hold for me and she wore it all the time I was gone. Then I got it back, and I've worn it ever since.

18. Do you have a dream role you'd like to act? I try not to dream about my work too much. Acting is a job for me. I try not to over-estimate its importance. I just turn in my work every day and go home. I mean, I try not to glamorize what I do. I don't think we can have it all. Something's going to fall through the cracks when we try to have it all, and I think it's usually our children, because we go off saying, this is who I am and if I go off and do my work, I'm a better mom when I get home because I'm a happier mom. I don't think that's true. I think we let our work define us because we don't have enough self-confidence. Actually, if I get the chance, I'd like to play a plain woman some day, a real everyday woman who doesn't carry the burden of her femininity and sexuality.

19. How did your own childhood affect your ideas about having a family?

I was brought up in Beverly Hills and was privy to a certain brand of royalty as a very young child. With Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh as parents, I was surrounded by people with real clout, upbringing and class. But I kept thinking that as myself, I wasn't enough. I needed to evoke somebody else. I really wanted to look and be like other people. I wanted to be normal. I wanted to be a typical little girl from Smalltown, USA. I never felt very comfortable with the way I looked. For a long time, I never smiled because I was self-conscious about my teeth. That's why I developed my smirk.

When my mother remarried, we lived in a non-Hollywood atmosphere, and with my step-father I got to have as normal a childhood as possible in an abnormal situation. Now I want my children to grow up feeling close to nature and being part of the community. Chris and I hope to move to Idaho permanently within the next few years. Living there helps us keep perspective on a more natural way of living, which I believe is good for us all.

20. Do you have any thoughts on changes you think should be made in the adoption system?

I don't want to become a spokesperson now for an issue that will draw attention to something very important in my personal life. Once my children are older and I do not have to be private, I will become a spokesperson for adoption changes on a public level. I have done some public service announcements and been a spokesperson for a program that finds adoptive families for children who are orphaned because their parents died of AIDS without plans being made for the children. I believe we need legal changes to provide medical benefits and insurance coverage to birth parents through the policies of adoptive parents. And I'd like to see the law validate adopted kids as members of their families. For example, my husband is a titled British aristocrat but his title does not pass to adopted kids.

21. What are your goals for the future? I have the life I have always wanted. I have a family I love and the kind of work I like to do. Every day I tell myself, "I did it." What I want to become is a wise old woman. Not smart, wise. That leaves you fluid.