

JAMIE LEE CURTIS

Shifting Gears

With grown kids, a 30-year marriage, and a career with a mind of its own, Curtis has found life's sweet spot.

BY MARGOT DOUGHERTY **PHOTOGRAPHS BY** ANDREW ECCLES





The door to the courtyard of Jamie Lee Curtis' vine-covered house is wide open, as is the door to her 1920s home. She waves from the kitchen, where she's putting the finishing touches on a garlicky gazpacho ("10 minutes in the blender!" she says) and a green salad tossed with shredded chicken and jalapeño-flecked corn bread. Turning from a counter where pastel roses are clustered in bud vases, Curtis opens the oven to reveal two squat, freshly baked loaves studded with hazelnuts and sunflower and flax seeds, a recipe from the blog of her friend, actress Jennifer Grey. "It's crazy good," Curtis says.

The house is clutter-free and cozy, without impersonal or trendy elements hinting at the influence of an interior decorator. The photos hanging in the living room are by people Curtis knows, including photojournalist Diana Walker, who covered the White House for decades. The Cindy Sherman self-portrait is the first piece of art Curtis and her husband, writer/director Christopher Guest (*This Is Spinal Tap*, *A Mighty Wind*), bought together. A large ceramic bowl made by Moye Thompson, a friend and highly regarded local artist, is filled with handmade clay cubes stamped with letters of the alphabet. "They spell out the Serenity Prayer," says Curtis, who has been sober for 15 years. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change

the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

It's a timely mantra for the actress and author of best-selling children's books. Movies like *Halloween*, *A Fish Called Wanda*, and *True Lies*, which earned her a Golden Globe, capitalized as much on her lithe figure and its killer curves as on her acting chops. But more recently Curtis, 56, has focused her public persona on dealing openly with the vagaries of aging. The daughter of screen legends Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh, she's now as well-known for her gray pixie haircut and regularity-promoting Activia ads as she once was for her cleavage—which, it should be noted, hasn't gone anywhere. A few years ago she stripped down to her undies for *More*® magazine, insisting readers see the Before Jamie, with her soft belly and not-so-toned thighs, as prelude to the After Jamie, dolled up and looking like a million bucks. "I thought women who had previously held me up as some picture of unattainable body perfection would be gratified to see I was just another chubby middle-aged woman," she says. "For the majority of my life, my body was my asset. When I dressed it up, I'd be dressing the part. But it wasn't me. Look at me."

Barefoot, wearing jeans and a navy button-down shirt, tiny diamond studs, and a diamond infinity ring, Curtis is the picture of casual elegance. For years she's limited her wardrobe to black, white, and navy, and never wears heels taller than ½ inch: "It's such a

relief," she says. She radiates the look of a woman who's found a new groove in a new stage of life, as a wife of 30 years and the mother of two grown children—Annie, 28, a dance teacher long out of the nest, and Thomas, 18, a high school senior—both of whom she and Guest adopted at birth. Curtis' acting career has slowed; a 2012 arc in the series *NCIS*, opposite her old friend and *Freaky Friday* costar Mark Harmon, ended with the fifth episode. ("I don't think the audience wanted to see Mark's character happy," Curtis says.) Her recurring role as Zooey Deschanel's mom and Rob Reiner's ex on *New Girl* is a small one, and although she keeps a hand in the film world—she plays a high school principal in *Spare Parts*, the new movie about four undocumented Mexican-American students who go up against MIT in a robotics competition—acting no longer consumes Curtis' time as it once did. "It's just the nature of this industry," she says. "It's not sexist or ageist—I'm not going to go on a tirade about women of a certain age. There are plenty of women of a certain age working. Maggie frickin' Smith couldn't have more fun at this point. Betty White? Couldn't have more fun."

Ditto, Jamie Lee Curtis—but she's finding plenty of her fun outside of acting these days. She's riding her 18-speed bike "like a teenager," taking kickboxing lessons at a dojo, and reading voraciously to keep up with two serious-minded book clubs—one of which she created by hiring a professor



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I'm doing things that make me laugh and have fun."*



Put a camera in front of Curtis and she lights up—striking the perfect poses, smiling warmly, and just having fun—especially when her 9-year-old yellow lab, Jay, joins in.

to lead discussions on historical novels by the likes of Julian Barnes and Salman Rushdie. “This,” she says, “is the life I’ve always wanted.”

Curtis has reached what she calls her angle of repose, an engineering term (and the title of a Wallace Stegner book she loves) defining the point at which a material—a pile of sand, for example—finds its equilibrium and settles in without danger of rolling or tipping. “The angle of repose,” she says, adding a dollop of crème fraîche and a sprinkle of chives to our bowls of gazpacho, “allows you to exist without the power of your past always being a threat to your well-being.”

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With famous parents who famously divorced when she was 3, Curtis’ past is a powerful one to contend with. “You have to believe somewhere there was love,” she says. “But by the time I came along I think they hated each other. They fought all the time.”

Leigh, born Jeanette Morrison, and Curtis, born Bernard Schwartz, handled the juggernauts of their celebrity differently. “My mother never lost the woman who was a greenhorn. She was Jeanette Morrison her whole life,” Curtis says. “Tony Curtis lived a life filled with artifice. So my mother kind of underlived and he overlived. I’m trying to live right in the middle, to not be embarrassed about my life and my choices and the affluence which, until my mother died, was all self-generated.” Although she was friendly with Curtis in later years, he left her—and the rest of his children—nothing upon his death in 2010.

Four years ago, when she was promoting her 10th book, *My Mommy Hung the Moon: A Love Story* (HarperCollins; 2010), Curtis wrote a magazine piece about growing up in the light and shadow of Leigh, the stunning star of *Bye Bye Birdie*, *Psycho*, and *The Manchurian Candidate*. “It was the first public sharing of things I’d kept very private about my experience being her daughter,” she says, and it prompted reflections on “the reality of my family life, coupled with the reality of my work life. I wasn’t intimate with my parents at all, and it broke my heart when I realized it, just as my kids were going off and having their lives. Had I not been intimate enough with them?” Thoughts she’d managed to bury began

percolating. “My retaining wall just sort of breached,” she says.

An interlude of sadness ensued, but introspection, therapy, the support of a posse of close friends, and “my daughter, who made me laugh, and my big sister, Kelly, who I am closer to than anyone,” allowed Curtis to “go into more understanding about who I am,” she says. “Since then, everything has gotten better. I feel better physically. I’m happier. I’m laughing a lot.” She’s focusing on having fun. For their 30th anniversary, she and Guest took a canoe trip following a Lewis and Clark route along the Missouri River. A young and industrious guide surprised them with an ad hoc marriage renewal ceremony, complete with vows he’d written one night at their campsite. The video on Curtis’ phone shows her barely getting out the first phrase, “I, Jamie Curtis, take you, Christopher Guest, to be my ‘schmoofie,’” before dissolving into an unintelligible language knit with laughter and tears. “Keep going,” an off-camera friend instructs the guide. “She’ll catch up to you.”

At home, Curtis is constantly busy. “I can fill a day like that,” she says, snapping her fingers. On top of being a mom and wife, she continues her philanthropic work with children’s charities, gets in her daily exercise, and is putting together a movie about a gay black baseball player from the ’70s named Glenn Burke, who is thought to have originated the high five. “I wake up every morning,” she says, slathering butter and berry jam on our dessert, toasted slices of her seed- and-nut bread, “with the promise a new day brings.” ■