



JAMIE LEE CURTIS

Embraces the

F

-Word

(
NO,
NOT
THAT
ONE
)

BY *Strawberry Saroyan* / PHOTOGRAPHED BY *Andrew Eccles*

She's fierce,
she's funny,
and now
she's turning 50.
The outspoken
advocate for
staying true
to yourself
salutes a milestone
birthday as only
she can



Jamie Lee Curtis sits in the dining room of a house in Malibu being primped and powdered for her *More* cover shoot. Her silvery gray hair, cropped close to the scalp, needs little attention, so her stylist, Sean, is entertaining everyone instead. He informs Curtis that he's keeping a journal of his dreams.

"Am I in it?"

Sean nods yes.

"What was I wearing?"

"Not much," he replies. They laugh.

Even in the days when Curtis was known as The Body—hers having been on display in 1983's *Trading Places* and 1985's *Perfect*—she would have found this humorous. Now that she has left her quest for perfection behind, she barely gives it a second thought. Rising from her chair, she heads for a bedroom filled

with gowns (gold lamé, white organza, red satin) and stiletto-heel shoes. Emerging 10 minutes later, she is clad in an ice-blue silk number with a ruched bust and gold-grommited Jimmy Choos on her feet. "I'm in a dress with heels that already hurt!" she yells, sauntering over to the light-filled living room where the photographer has set up.

The shoot lasts a couple of hours, and Curtis is a pro throughout. "This doesn't feel like a sitting dress," she says at one point while perched awkwardly on a prop. She stands, and everyone sees that she is right. "I'm commando," she warns later. She even makes fun of her body, grabbing her breasts in one shot. *More's* photo director, laughing, asks, "What's the F-word for that?" referring to the day-in-the-life shoot the actress just completed for the magazine (see facing page). "Fallen," Curtis replies, and grins. "Former," she adds, cracking up.

Accepting the reality of your body is verboten in Los Angeles, but Curtis is famous for it. In 2002, she posed for *More* in her skivvies and became a spokesperson for women tired of trying to live up to a Photoshopped ideal. Today Curtis admits that she got so caught up in not caring about body image at that time that she stopped thinking about fitness. "So I made a change and lost some weight," she says. "And for me, the fun thing is to lift a 20-pound weight in the gym and think, I was carrying *that* around?" She's taken up Pilates and

"When I started writing, I found a voice, and I was thrilled. I could've paid them."

tennis. "I'm competitive now. You get me on a tennis court, I'm going to give you some game."

Curtis will be 50 on November 22, and she's more than happy with the view from there. "Fifty is a big corner to turn," she says. "It used to mean being put out to pasture, but it's the opposite with me. I feel more vibrant; I'm more active than I've ever been. The F-word really is *freedom*. It's the freedom to have dropped the rock—the rock of addiction, of family, of comparisons with other people. It's being fit and focused and kind of furious."

Hers is a philosophy that resonates for many women, but it is especially meaningful to actresses struggling with the indignities of Hollywood. "I don't want to be 60 and getting a call from a third assistant director telling me I have night shooting," Curtis says. "I don't want to worry about what I look like, whether I've got my big boobies pouring out of a gown.

"I have watched, my

whole life, people age and become buffoons," she adds. "When you crest in your thirties or forties and then you don't pull out of the public eye, you become a caricature. You have to have grace, dignity and gratitude, and walk away kind of slowly, like you're walking away from a bear." She mimics someone doing that: "I'm going to go now, bear. Don't kill me, don't rip my fucking face off."

THE NEXT DAY, I head to Curtis's home, eager to hear more about her freedom. She lives in Santa Monica with her husband of 23 years, actor-filmmaker Christopher Guest (*Best in Show*, *For Your Consideration*), and their son, Tom, 12. Their daughter, Annie, 21, is away at college. The house is white and airy, with sky-high ceilings and art by renowned photographers on the walls, and Curtis proposes a tour. She leads me first to the basement, where she has clearly exercised the organizational skills that friends say she inherited

JAMIE EXPLAINS

1. Laminated reminders about the pets—OK, so I'm a tad organized.
2. Forming the day in my mind.
3. With my son, Tom. My children are my life.
4. My sister Kelly (standing) is my best friend and gatekeeper.
5. It's been 24 years, and I still love my husband for his mind.
6. In my garden with the paper, fascinated by the world, politics, art.
7. I can't escape the talented Diana and her Leica camera.

“ F ” is for...

PHOTOGRAPHED BY
Diana Walker

Looking ahead to 50—the biggest F-word of all—Curtis spent 24 hours chronicling her myriad activities with her longtime friend Diana Walker, who was *Time* magazine’s White House photographer for 20 years. Curtis herself chose the F-word for each shot.



FASTIDIOUS 1
FIVE AM 2



3 FAMILY
4 FEALTY



5 FAMILIAR
6 FULL BLOOM



FRAMED 7





FUNNY 1 2 FACE-TO-FACE



FLAWLESS 3
FOCUSED 4 5 FOREHAND



6 FIT



JAMIE EXPLAINS

1. Tom found these antlers by the river near our house. 2. Connecting is an integral part of my day, even when I'm being a chauffeur. 3. At my friend Cathy Waterman's studio to pick out jewelry for the *More* shoot. (Cathy is at left; Dana Gati, her assistant, is at right.) 4. Reviewing my fiftieth-birthday book with the printer, Tico Ohanian. 5. Waving at my imaginary fans at group tennis clinic. 6. Sandy Shimoda, at Winsor Pilates, makes sure I address middle-age spread.

from her mother, actress Janet Leigh. (Curtis's pal Naomi Foner Gyllenhaal, screenwriter of *Bee Season*, was at Leigh's funeral, in 2004, and says, "I remember Jamie standing up and saying, 'Janet planned her funeral. Even the order in which things were supposed to happen.'")

In the basement, transparent boxes are piled high. There is luggage hanging from the ceiling and a gift-wrapping area with pink and blue ribbon dangling on hooks. Curtis opens an impeccably arranged file cabinet and says, "If you asked to see a picture of me from *The Heidi Chronicles*, I would be able to pull that up for you." And like a magician, she produces just that.

The rest of the tour is brief; one highlight involves bursting in on Guest, who is notoriously reserved. (The couple's friend Richard Lewis, who starred with Curtis in the sitcom *Anything but Love*, says, "I once saw Christopher at a party, and his shadow was

still in the car.") "Chris?" Curtis calls through the closed door. No answer. She enters; it turns out he is inside and we didn't hear him. After a hello, the silence is excruciating. "So . . . this is Chris's office . . . and he makes music down here. . . . Bye, honey." Guest, with only a trace of a smile, replies, "Bye."

Soon we settle into Curtis's office. Dressed in black and white—she has pared down her wardrobe to those colors alone—she leans back in a chair. I'm not sure where to begin; even though I've read through 25 years of her press clippings, I don't yet have a good sense of her. There are the milestones, of course: born to Leigh and actor Tony Curtis and showcased as an infant on a *Photoplay* cover; her stint as Hollywood's "scream queen," starting with 1978's *Halloween*; her years as The Body; in 1988, her emergence with *A Fish Called Wanda* as an accomplished comedienne. But it's not apparent how she went from a young woman playing the Hollywood game to a mature woman rewriting its rules.

Fortunately, Curtis jumps right in. "I'm the daughter of pretend people," she says. "My mother was Jeanette Morrison; my father was Bernard Schwartz. They kind of changed to become these stars."

Curtis says her parents' divorce, when she was nearly four, was "a catastrophe for me. But I had no way of communicating that. In my home, you did not say 'boo.' It was a very old-school upbringing in that way." She felt insecure in those years, the

daughter of stars valued for their appearance and who valued appearance themselves. "I was intimidated by anyone who had beauty and intellect," she says. Even as an adult, she has joked in speeches about the fact that her combined SAT scores were 840. She fishes them out of a drawer and shows them to me.

There was one bright spot, in eighth-grade U.S. history. "I was giving an oral report about Paul Revere's ride," she recalls. "I went in the bathroom and put on green tights, a green leotard and little antennae. I walked into the classroom, and everybody turned and looked at me. I went, 'Hi, I'm a flea. I was on the horse that Paul Revere rode.' And I told the story from the point of view of the flea. The teacher gave me an A-plus, and that was the only time in my academic life where I found my way of doing it."

She was a movie star by the age of 20 but dismisses the achievement. "Becoming famous for doing nothing," she calls it. Her gaze is withering. "I was making horror movies, six of them in a row." Of the high points that followed, she says, "I've done movies

"Growing up, I was intimidated by anyone who had beauty and intellect."

I didn't care about my entire life. The quality ones are an accident. That's the luck of the freakin' draw."

Curtis has a new film, *Beverly Hills Chihuahua*, coming out this fall, in which a pampered pooch gets lost in, yes, the mean streets of Mexico. But these days her children's books are her main creative focus. Her eighth, *Big Words for Little People*, hits stores in September. "When I started writing books, I never thought, wow, this is going to be a great way to make a living," she says. "I merely found a voice and a way to express it, and I was thrilled. I could've paid *them*."

Curtis admits that her family would like to speed her transition to a more private life. "I married someone who detests show business," she says. "He just doesn't think you need to play [the image game]." As Foner Gyllenhaal observes, "Chris has almost made a mantra of not caring what other people think. He's taught Jamie to trust her own instincts."

She seems to. Curtis has worked diligently in recent years to free herself of superficial concerns—streamlining her wardrobe, weaning herself from high heels—but there has been a deeper transformation too. I ask her to explain how she got to where she is at 50. "Well, I've had the benefit of psychoanalysis," she says. But there seems to be more, and when I press a bit, she adds, "Sobriety. It's the single most important thing I've ever done. When you gain sobriety in the middle of your life, you're really reborn." →

For years, off and on, “I had a problem with drugs and alcohol,” she says. When she was 35, after complications from plastic surgery under her eyes, she started taking painkillers. “The feeling I got from [the pills] was, oh, wow, I feel better,” she says. “So I rode that. No one knew. Chris didn’t have a clue.”

By the time she was 40, she was ready to quit. At a New Year’s Eve dinner, her friends proposed they each write a list of things they hoped for themselves in the coming year. Sobriety topped Curtis’s list. She points to a framed two-by-four-inch piece of paper on her desk—she still has that New Year’s note.

She fiddles with the frame and confesses that she wishes she had evidence of her addiction. When she talks to someone who’s addicted, she asks, “Did you get booked [for DUI]? Get the picture. Go to the police department, thank them for arresting you, frame the picture, and put it up in your kitchen.” As we talk, she pulls open the back of the frame and, inside, discovers a piece of paper. I become aware that something is happening. The paper turns out to be a letter to her sister Kelly, written while Curtis was still an addict. “The first line is, ‘I’ve been harboring a secret, a bad secret for the length of your stay,’” she begins. “‘I have found and taken many of your Percocet and Vicodin.’” Kelly, she adds, had broken a bone and had been given painkillers. She continues

“This is for the women with hot flashes!” she says, opening a window.

with the letter. “‘I’ve betrayed you, and I know that you’re angry, and you have every right to be.’ And then it goes on to say, ‘I am lonely. I take them at night at home to ease the pain. I was so afraid to tell you.’” Curtis looks up. “‘I’ve said to Kelly, ‘Can you find me that letter I wrote you?’ Wow. This has been on my desk for 10 years. Holy shit!’ It is her evidence.

During her forties, Curtis experienced the growth of a person previously stunted by addiction. “Moving forward and dropping loads, dropping the rock of materialism, of possession—it’s just been constant with me,” she says. “Maybe, by the way, manically. I think I have some friends that are like, ‘Jamie, geez, back off. You’re not going to die tomorrow.’”

She has delved more deeply into the writing of her children’s books and further developed a passion for photography. “We go walking in Santa Monica with our Leicas,” says Diana Walker, who took the F-word pictures of

Curtis for this article, “and Jamie can see things I can’t see. She’s like a laser.” To celebrate her fiftieth birthday, Curtis is creating a book of her photos to give to friends.

One of her pals is California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, her costar in 1994’s *True Lies*, and she tells a story that illustrates how friendship in Hollywood can be both long-term and casual. “The other day I’m sitting in the back of my car doing needlepoint, and my phone rings and it’s Arnold, saying”—she breaks into her best Ah-nuld accent—“‘I saw you on *Oprah*, and I want you to know you were terrific, honey.’ It was like, ‘Thanks, Arnold. You good?’ ‘Yeah.’ ‘You’re doing a great job. Bye.’ That was the phone call.”

As for what’s next, “I’m hoping that 50 and beyond is about reading and studying and learning,” she says. “But I also hope that it’s relaxing and enjoying and participating without it being all about me. I’m not going to become a media conglomerate. I’ve opened myself up for some scrutiny, and now I want my private life.” She looks out at the yard and smiles.

ON A COOL Tuesday evening, Curtis greets me at her front door and welcomes me to a dinner party with a dozen of her girlfriends. Kelly is there, as are Foner Gyllenhaal and Walker and several mothers from Tom’s school. Curtis flits from kitchen to dining room,

stopping every so often to hug a friend and praise her work. “I feel sorry for people who don’t know Jamie,” says her mother-in-law, Jean Guest.

Mint-and-rosemary lamb chops, giant asparagus, brown rice and a salad have been laid out buffet style, and Curtis tosses out witticisms as the guests dig in. “This is for the women with hot flashes!” she says, opening a window. Talk meanders from *American Idol* to Marlene Dietrich’s old pad on Park Avenue in New York, which Curtis rented years ago. “I was dating her grandson, Michael Riva,” she confides. “She had a platform bed in a room entirely filled with smoked mirrors.”

After a few hours of merriment, we all wind down and Curtis announces she is off to bed. She will be getting up at the crack of dawn, as she does every day in this season of her life. She has—perhaps now more than ever—things to do. **M**

STRAWBERRY SAROYAN IS THE AUTHOR OF THE MEMOIR *GIRL WALKS INTO A BAR*.

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FOOL 1 2 FINE-POINT
3 FOUR-STAR



4 FATIGUE

JAMIE EXPLAINS 1. Even when shopping (at the store Duet), I go for the laugh. 2. At 50 I'm obsessed with needlepoint. What took me so long? Oh, the wasted years! 3. My dessert meringue. 4. I get up early, and I need a nap almost every day. Obviously I didn't get one this day. 5. At an estrofest dinner at my house, telling a story to Patti Rockenwagner (left) and Rona Elliot. 6. Frances is our found dog; we are devoted to each other. 7. With Patti and my fantastic mother-in-law, Jean Guest. I love women's hearts and minds.



FRIENDS 5
FOUND 6



7 FEMININE

