

THE ADOPTION OPTION

by Christine Kilpatrick

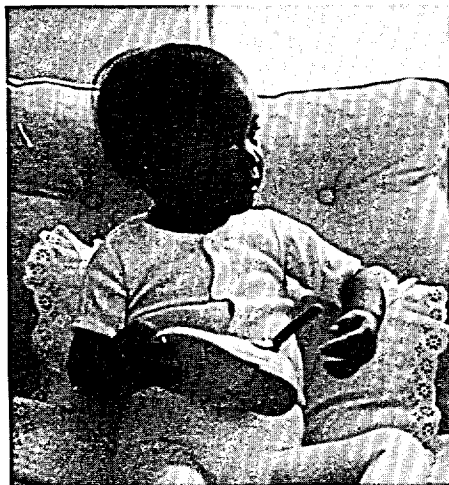
She was skinny and bald, her skin was dirty from the long jeepney ride and parched from a fever; her head was asymmetrical, testimony to the days she had spent lying on one side; her ears were pierced with gold and pearl adornments disproportionately large for her 15-pound body. She was dark brown, her huge, intelligent eyes black and luminous with tears.

To me she was the most beautiful baby in the world. Then known as Maria Teresa, an eight-month old ward of the state living in a bamboo hut outside of Manila. Today Laura Ainslie Christina, my daughter — a beautiful, healthy and rambunctious toddler.

Such is the miracle of adoption, in this case international adoption. Once a "last resort" for childless couples and a closely-guarded secret within the family, adoption has become a viable and socially acceptable alternative for building or completing a family. How is it accomplished?

In Ontario there are three avenues to adoption — the Children's Aid Society (CAS), private adoption and international adoption. The first of these, the CAS, is restricted to those who meet their rigid requirements and are prepared to wait four to six years for an infant (not very practical considering a home posting is four years at most). Those willing to accept an older child or one with physical or emotional problems would have a shorter waiting period.

The second route is that of private adoption. For years it was known as a risky, very expensive business of questionable legality. This reputation was not without foundation, as birth mothers often received no counselling as to their alternatives, exorbitant fees were charged by some unscrupulous lawyers and some adoptive parents were ill-prepared for the addition to their family.



Laura Kilpatrick



Christine Kilpatrick with her daughter Laura

Today approximately one-half of all adoptions in Ontario are done privately. It is an acceptable and perfectly legal procedure and one which often takes a fraction of the time required for a CAS adoption. Costs vary, depending on the complexity of the case, but the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services (MCSS) regulates closely the services for which an adoptive parent can be charged (e.g. one may pay for the counselling of a birth mother, but not for her room and board). Also regulated by MCSS are the persons licensed to legalize such adoptions (usually, but not necessarily, lawyers), who are known as "adoption licensees". A fairly recent piece of legislation sets out stringent qualifications which must be met before a license is granted — facilities for foster care, access to a psychologist and social worker, the services of a pediatrician and so on.

It is advisable to talk to adoptive parents who have pursued the private and international routes before embarking on it yourself, as the process is not without its pitfalls and frustrations. Contacts are helpful not only for their first-hand knowledge of the process

itself, but also for their emotional support during the waiting period. Names of persons willing to share their experiences can be obtained from adoptive parents' groups such as the Open Door Society in Ottawa (see page 16) and from your social worker. It is also advisable to read as much material as possible on the subject. A reading list can be obtained from your social worker and books may be found either in the public library or the library run by the Open Door Society.

PRIVATE ADOPTION

The four basic steps to private adoption are as follows:

(a) Register with a private social worker and ask that a "home study" be initiated. This is basically an assessment of your potential as parents of an adopted child, from the viewpoint of your physical, emotional and financial ability to cope with this addition to your family. If done in a professional manner, it is a positive and revealing experience. This study is a pre-requisite for any adoption in Ontario, regardless of the "source" of the child. (A list of private social workers authorized to do home studies, as well as a list of adoption licensees in your area may be obtained by phoning MCSS in Toronto. Their phone number, as well as the numbers for one private social worker and one adoption licensee in Ottawa with whom I am familiar, are given on page 16.)

(b) Contact an adoption licensee. This meeting is not absolutely necessary at this stage, but might be useful in terms of apprising yourself of the legalities involved and the expenses to be incurred as the adoption proceeds.

(c) Identify a child. In private adoption it is the prospective parents themselves who are the instigators of the search for a child available for adoption. This is done through a process of "networking", i.e. spreading the word among friends, family, acquaintances, doctors, etc. It helps, of course, if your friends happen to be in fields of medicine, social work or the clergy, but very often the successful contact is the one thought to be the least likely. Hints on networking can be obtained from other adoptive parents, from your social worker or from books on private adoption.

(d) Make it legal. When a child is identified, the services of an "adoption licensee" are required. Once the child has been placed, there is a six-month probationary period then a one- to two-month wait for an appointment at Family Court, where the final Adoption Order is handed down.