

# MINNA MEANS LOVE

**Kristin Pauly** had never realized one of her most important dreams. She'd always wanted to be a mother. Every time she had a glimpse of motherhood, the door was shut. When she was twenty and pregnant, she had to place her son for adoption. It nearly broke her heart. Later, when she got married, she couldn't get pregnant.

After her childbearing years passed, Kristin hoped that somehow there would be other children in her life. Twenty-one years later she and her biological son, Philip, reconnected. Kristin was thrilled to meet her two beautiful grandchildren. Now, she was a happy grandmother.

At age fifty-one, Kristin was feeling settled, living a happy life. She had a job that she loved as an advocate for the Chesapeake Bay and lived in a beautiful spot. She'd had a life full of adventure and rising to challenges.

One Saturday in March, she went to a baby shower for her friends who had adopted a sweet baby girl. The parents of this child were extremely happy, and they spoke about how Kristin's reunion with her son had touched them, and how they would always be grateful to their daughter's birth parents for entrusting her to them. Kristin's heart was opened that day.

During the reception, chatting with another guest, Kristin asked the young woman if she had any children. "Well, yes, we have a six-month-old daughter," she said. "We just came back from China, where we

adopted her.” She went on to explain that with China’s one-child policy, many little girls have been abandoned. The Chinese tradition of preferring male children is so strong that if a family can have only one child, they want a boy. If their first child is a girl, she may be abandoned so they can try again.

Kristin was stunned. It took her a while to comprehend fully what the woman was saying. Then she felt tears welling up inside, and the room felt like it was floating away. She sat down for a moment in the nearest chair to collect herself. In an instant, the door of motherhood that had been closed to her for so many years opened. With a rush, the thought came to her: *I could do that, too. I could go to China and bring back my daughter.*

Kristin amazed herself with the idea that she could be a mother at fifty-one, and that a little girl was waiting for her in China. But maybe she was too old, maybe they wouldn’t let her adopt a child at her age. Still, she knew she was going to try, and joy filled her heart.

The next morning, Kristin called the woman from the party. “I don’t know if this is even possible,” she began. “Do you think I could adopt a little girl from China, too?” The woman said, “I think so. The Chinese have a different respect for age; their regulations specify that adoptive parents must be *over* a minimum age, and I don’t think there is an upper age limit. I’ll give you the name of the agency we used, and you can call them tomorrow.”

Kristin started going through all the steps required for an international adoption—making lists, filling out forms, and waiting for documents to arrive from government agencies. The adoption process is

not an easy one; it took nine months to complete the paperwork, to take the parenting classes, and to go through all the necessary steps. In August, Kristin received the long-awaited photograph of her little girl. Her name was Chang Chun Da, which means “spring arrives.” It was hard to believe that a flesh-and-blood child would emerge from all of this paperwork, but there she was! On October 24, Kristin and her sister-in-law boarded a plane for the thirty-six-hour trip to China.

They landed in Beijing, and after a few days of sightseeing and acclimatization, on a Sunday, the ten other families who were adopting from her agency took a four-hour bus ride through the Chinese countryside to Changzhou. At 8:00 A.M. on Monday, they went to Changzhou Children’s Welfare Institute, where they were escorted to a narrow room lined with banquettes and doilies. There were bowls of fruit piled on the tables, and many officials and nurses were present. There were speeches (and translators), and gifts were exchanged. After too much ceremony, the families were lined up in a certain order, and when everyone was in place, caretakers poured in with a beautifully choreographed parade of babies! A woman in a white coat handed Kristin a little baby girl dressed in a yellow knitted outfit. She couldn’t quite hold her head up. But Kristin recognized her from her photo and knew this was her little girl. From the first moment, she was Minna—Kristin’s great-grandmother’s name, which means “love” (in Finnish).

The quiet room erupted in happy chaos as people who had wanted children for years actually held their hearts’ desires. There were babies everywhere—some in yellow like Minna, some in blue—but they were all little girls. The new parents left with a bag of formula and bottles,

and a list of the things the babies liked to eat.

Eventually, Kristin and Minna arrived back at the hotel—at last they were alone together. But Minna didn't seem to want to eat. Kristin was worried about her and had trouble falling asleep. Around four in the morning, she woke up and heard the baby stirring. Kristin leaned over, picked up little Minna, and put her on her chest. There they were, the two of them, in a dark hotel room in China. As Minna lay on her chest, Kristin felt Minna open her heart to her. In that intimate, dark space she said, "I'm here. I trust you." And Kristin answered, "I'm here, too. It has taken a long time to get to you, but now I am here. And from now on, I will always be here for you." In that moment, Kristin and Minna became mother and daughter.

The next day they went back to the orphanage to take some pictures, and as they were leaving, one of the caretakers leaned over and said, "This baby loves to laugh!" Kristin was overjoyed, since of all the major characteristics that she hoped her daughter would have, this was most important to her. Just a few weeks later, during an episode of the TV program *World's Funniest Videos*, when Minna was only six months old, the two of them laughed together until tears ran down their cheeks.

Kristin has discovered that she's a very good mother. She kept waiting for the meltdown or the sense of inadequacy to come flooding in—but it didn't. She found her own reserves of calmness, patience, and wisdom. The shift from single life to being a family is momentous, but there's nonetheless an easy flow to their lives.

Minna is now six years old and comfortable being a Chinese American. Kristin and Minna keep in touch with the families who

adopted that same day in Changzhou. With other families in their town who have adopted Chinese daughters, they've started a Chinese-language class and get together often. Kristin herself feels physically bound to China now and studies its history, cuisine, and traditions. It is especially painful for her to think about Minna's sisters who weren't in the favored orphanages that benefit from international adoptions. In both cities and rural areas, many of them don't get enough to eat and cannot go to school. Only 10 percent of the hundreds of thousands of little girls abandoned in China find homes.

As they build their lives together, Kristin and Minna will always be sensitive to women's rights, to their struggles for independence and self-esteem, and to the rights of all different kinds of families outside the young, racially homogenous, married heterosexual model. Over the years, China has changed its adoption policies, making it much more difficult for single parents to adopt. However, there are children in other countries in need of loving families. One day recently, a manila envelope arrived at Kristin's house—the forms to start the process of adopting a sister for Minna.

Kristin is committed to helping anyone—especially older or single people—go through the process of adoption. “Adoption is a wonderful way to create a family—at any age,” says Kristin. Minna loves being a “little aunt” to her grown brother's children. And pretty soon she will have a new baby sister! “Every girl and every woman deserve an opportunity to love and be loved, and to have a chance in life,” she says.

*And as they held you close they whispered into your open, curving ear, “We're so glad you've come.”*

DEBRA FRASIER, *On the Day You Were Born*

Learn how you can adopt a Chinese girl and bring joy to both of you. Contact **Families with Children from China**. Call your local chapter, or visit <https://www.fccny.org>. Contact Kristin Pauly via e-mail at [kapauly@aol.com](mailto:kapauly@aol.com).