

(The incredible story of Laura Albert)

“People see what they want to see. I could have screamed from the rooftops at the time that I wrote the books but no one would have believed me”

Cannes, May 15th, 2004, and JT LeRoy had the world at his feet. Attending the premiere of *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things*, the movie version of his second novel directed by Asia Argento, he had garnered both acclaim from the literary world and cult status amongst a growing army of fans. For those around in the late nineties and early noughties with a finger anywhere near a pulse, LeRoy was a byword for cool queer-ness. His first novel, *Sarah*, was optioned by Gus Van Sant and fêted as signalling the arrival of a searing, raw new voice in American literature; a precocious and transgendered witness to the social underbelly. His books chronicled the life he claimed to have come from: prostitution, drug addiction, child sex abuse; a harsh world of needles and bodily fluids peopled by characters of lacerating emotional indifference. But, as all good stories go, there was a twist.

Within eighteen months of Cannes a piece would emerge in *The New York Times* by Warren St. John that revealed JT LeRoy was an avatar for Laura Albert, a forty something mother of one from Brooklyn living in San Francisco. The physical JT, the gawky kid hidden behind outsized sunglasses, trademark fedora and club kid wig was Savannah Knoop, Albert's sister-in-law. LeRoy, the enfant terrible of turn-of-the-century American letters, turned out to be not so enfant and — for many — deplorably terrible: people felt manipulated, hoodwinked, and angry that a minority identity had been appropriated in the service of Albert's career. One reading of events could reach that conclusion — she readily admits to the quagmire of deceit it took to sustain the story — but it would be a vapid account of a remarkable and complex story and its author. A decade after the JT LeRoy bubble burst, Albert, having watched the Sundance winning documentary *The Devil and Daniel Johnston*, agreed to work with director Jeff Feuerzeig, who thought the saga was the “wildest story he had ever heard”.

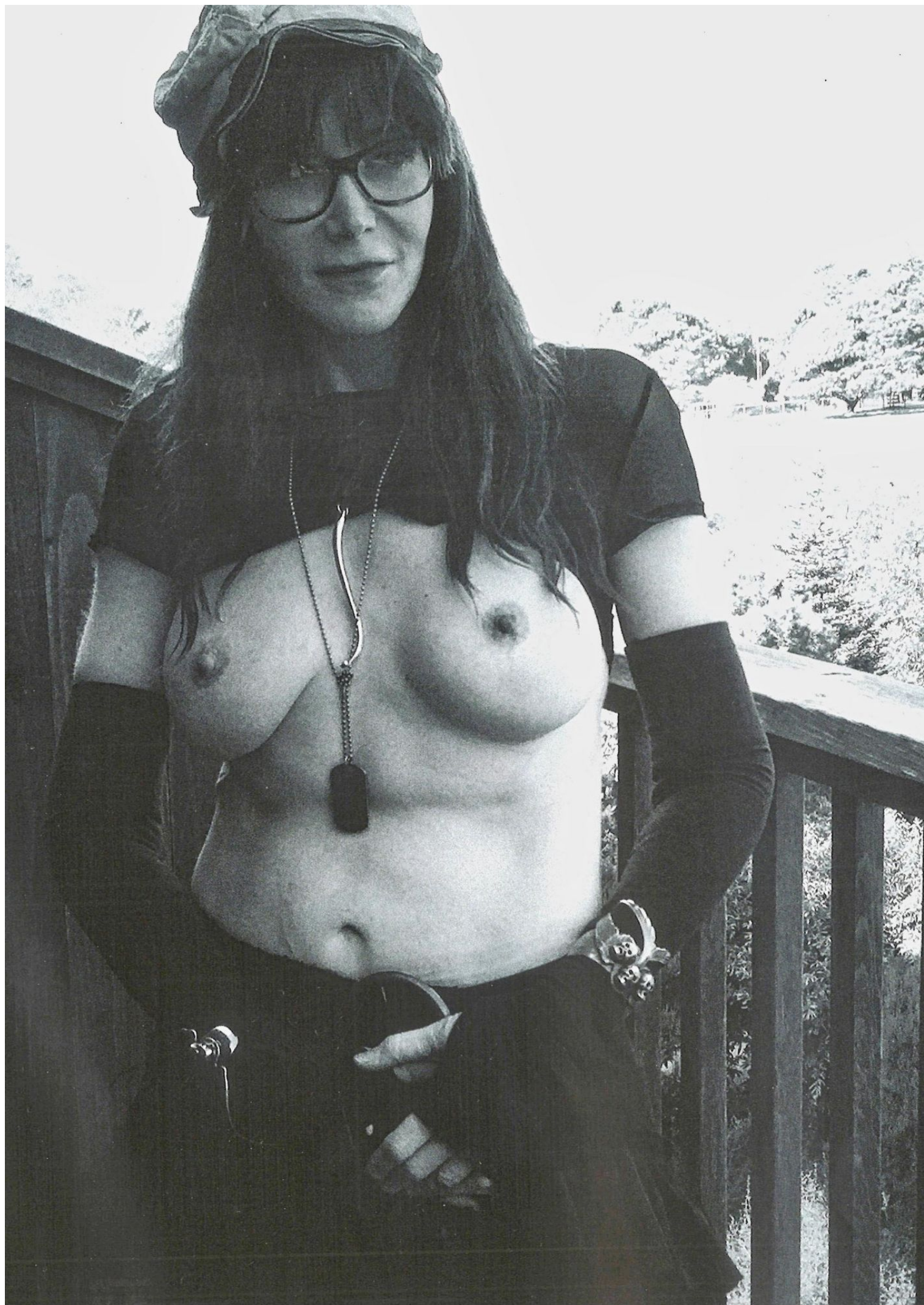
The result, *Author: The JT LeRoy Story*, showcases Albert's gift for story in an extended interview filmed over eight days, interspersed with recordings of messages and conversations JT has with various characters and celebrities. It's a riveting account of the relationship between Albert herself and LeRoy, and as her story emerges, the lines between fact and fiction blur further still. As ironic as it is to talk of veracity when discussing the story of a woman pretending to be a boy who wants to be a girl played in public by another girl, there is a raw truthfulness to Albert's account of a troubled childhood that saw sex

abuse, multiple commitments, an eating disorder and ensuant morbid obesity that would end with a gastric bypass and an addiction to suicide helplines presenting as a boy. This ain't Sylvanian Families and, unlike LeRoy, after speaking to her at length and watching the documentary it feels like she didn't make this shit up.

Albert calls me from from LA on Sunday night. She is humourous, open and talkative. Very talkative — we chew the fat for three hours. In the film there's a haunting photo of Albert as a young girl smiling up at the camera, behind her several Barbie dolls are on all fours with their exposed arses in the air as if waiting to be spanked. The subject of her sexual abuse comes up midway through our conversation. “I wish regular love making worked for me”, she says, “but if I'm not having a violent fantasy where I'm being hurt in some way then it does nothing for me. I never had a choice about that and I'm very fucking angry about it... Every time I do an interview this is where the nail went in”. Disassociation is a well documented coping strategy in response to trauma, so as unusual as her psychological dependence to phone lines pretending to be a boy is, there is logic to it. “Growing up, the only images around child abuse was a cute little blonde kid with blue eyes and I wanted to be him, someone a man would love and want to protect because that's where the power was, being a pretty twink — who wanted an ugly, fat girl?”

Denied the physical body of a boy, Albert created a series of young, male avatars to speak to operators on suicide helplines. “There were many before”, she explains, “Terminator and Jeremy (JT LeRoy), it was like pulling a one arm bandit, pulling the slot machine handle down and I didn't know who I was going to get would appear. That felt like my real life, Laura was just pretending”.

It was through these phone calls as Terminator that she met Dr. Terrence Owens, a San Francisco-based psychotherapist specialising in youth work with whom she has a continuing therapeutic relationship. A request by him to write something that would be of use to young people living on the streets and sex workers in a similar position to Terminator resulted in the short story ‘Balloons’. Owens read the story to a group of youths he was working with who responded positively, relaying this to Terminator he encouraged him to pursue writing. She did, and later through approaching the writers Bruce Benderson and Dennis Cooper by fax, both of whose work she admired, Albert landed first an agent, Ira Silverberg, then a book deal. There is a minefield of stories around



these early days, including the supposed story that JT LeRoy was HIV+, both denied by Albert and a point won in a federal court case that she intends to address in her forthcoming memoirs.

Word of mouth spread quickly for LeRoy as celebrities, either having read the books or looking for some underground cachet, name dropped him in interviews. "That started with Drew Barrymore in *Vanity Fair*", she says. "Celebrities wanted to attach themselves to JT, but I also think a lot read the books and they resonated with them. Many actors and singers are damaged, they crave attention and fame because of feeling horribly invisible. It's why so many take drugs."

Did she want to be famous?

"Completely. I wanted to be beautiful and famous but I learnt fame is not a fix. I got to see — almost from the shadows as JT's handler 'Speedie' — fame and money up close and how fucked up and dysfunctional much of it was". Ironically, while Albert craved to be in the limelight, it was Knoop who the public spotlight lit upon. "It was masochistic in way, I had to be hidden in the background of my own creation."

Given the gravitational pull LeRoy had on celebrities from Madonna (who offered to send Kabbalah books, obviously) to Debbie Harry and Courtney Love, some suspected an element of publicity-grabbing starfuckery. Early champions like Bruce Benderson, feeling there was a literary purity to the writing, were wary of the developing fame game being played. Did Albert court the attention? "I'm no saint, and later when trying to sell a film of course all of that helps, but it was largely a media thing. I was more interested in talking to artists and creative people — some were 'bold faced' names, most were not — but for the media to sell magazines they focused on the celebrities. Look, Savannah had a job and I was raising a baby during a lot of this period, it's not like we were hanging out every weekend with some star. That would happen very few and far between, there would be more photos if that was the case but there isn't."

The opening shot of the Feuerzeig's film has Winona Ryder telling an audience she first met JT while he was still working the streets as a hustler. For some, including me, it's a cringeworthy moment — a straight ten on the celebrity driv-el-o-metre. Albert disagrees, "It was a Warholian kind of thing", she corrects. "Let everyone have their 15 minutes of being with JT. She joined in, it's a transmigration of spirit and what she brought to it was really beautiful. I had people tell me they'd tricked with JT, that they knew JT before me. I don't think there should be any shame around that". In a story where identities smudge and blur, truths blend into lies and vice versa, performance becomes person and the spark of imagination a cultural celebrity, there's a wonderful childlike innocence to Albert's take on it. Is this a post-rationalisation? Possibly, but as Federico Fellini's

quote that opens the film states: "A created thing is never invented and it is never true: it is always and ever itself".

When the story broke there were answer messages of outrage. For those closest to LeRoy/Speedie the anger is understandable. When a friend does something out of character it can make us wonder who that person is. When the person turns out to be a walking fiction profound disturbance is not inconceivable. For others further out in the LeRoy-asphere cries of foul play seem at best naive. Savannah Knoop, in a brief appearance at the end of Feuerzeig's film, looks far more boyish and convincing now than she did as JT.

There were those who suspected duplicitousness was at play, including the photographer Mary Ellen Mark who questioned Savannah's supposed trans identity on a shoot but, as Albert says, "People see what they want to see. I could have screamed from the rooftops at the time that I wrote the books but no one would have believed me". I'm not so sure. The many who spoke in lengthy conversations with JT by phone must have questioned the awkward shyness of him in person. Asia Argento had a sexual relationship with JT. Knoop supposedly before jumping into bed saying she'd gone the full way with gender reassignment. Asia unsurprisingly thought something was not quite right. "Like seeing Savannah's pussy wasn't a tip off?" Albert quips.

For those who were hurt Albert says, "I can't give them their time back, but I can be there for people now, people who the work has touched". One case being a young woman who turned up at a JT LeRoy book reading in London with cut marks up both arms and openly wept. Albert hugged her, spent time listening to a history of abuse and has continued to stay in contact. It's easy to see why Feuerzeig found the JT LeRoy tale so fascinating. We all did. It's an insanely unlikely story that only a real humbug could deny the chutzpah involved. Albert holds her hands up to the deceit, to the sheer ridiculousness and the chicanery of it.

Towards the end of our conversation she quotes the therapist R. D. Laing, "Insanity is a perfectly rational adjustment to an insane world". When your life starts as hers did, there's room for things to go awry. It's clear from her language that there has been a lot of therapy, an attempt to heal wounds and the fictional character of LeRoy, she says, was part of that, a way of handling issues with asbestos gloves she couldn't approach directly.

Her final comment, one regarding her writing, questions those who criticise her. "Some people go through abuse and end up being abusers themselves, they molest children, they do terrible things. I created art that I know has saved lives. So my response to them is, 'What the fuck have you done? Before you judge me tell me what the fuck you have you done?'"

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SARAH

Laura Albert aka JT LeRoy

AUDIOBOOK

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