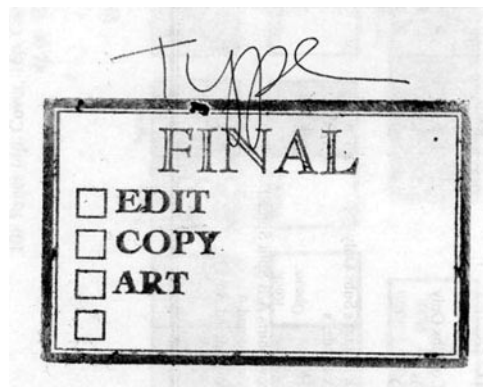




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The Artful Dodger

JT LeRoy rose to literary stardom with lurid tales of his days as a transgender teenage hustler. The only thing stranger is the true story of the two women who made him up – and masqueraded as him in public

THE IMAGINARY THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD boy who became the famed author JT LeRoy emerged from the body of Laura Albert one day in 1993. Albert was curled up on the bathroom floor of her tiny apartment in San Francisco when she called in to the Child Crisis Service. She was in her midtwenties, a struggling musician who lived in poverty and had a history of childhood sexual abuse and mental illness. Phoning suicide hotlines and talking in the voice of teenage boys was a compulsion for her. Voices emerged from Albert constantly, hundreds of them living inside her, boys in peril who needed to share their woes with the well-meaning strangers on the other end of the line.

The boy that emerged from Albert that day was poor and white, a soft-voiced kid with a Southern drawl. The call was answered by Dr. Terrence Owens, a psychologist who worked

at the crisis center. Gradually, as Owens gained his trust, the boy revealed that he was the son of a truck-stop prostitute who traveled the country plying her trade. A street hustler, he said he turned tricks in the Tenderloin and dumpster-dived in Golden Gate Park. The only name he gave was “Terminator” – an ironic play on the fact that he was fragile and frightened and harmless.

Albert tells me this story as we sit in an upscale organic restaurant on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Or, more accurately, she doesn’t tell me, not in any narrative, chronological sense. Over a period of weeks, in New York and then in San Francisco, she laughs and weeps and screams her way through the first complete recounting she has ever offered of the decade-long transformation of an HIV-positive, transgender street kid named Terminator into the celebrated fiction writer Jeremiah “Terminator” LeRoy. Depending on your

By Guy Lawson | Illustration by Erik Sandberg



AUTHOR, AUTHOR
 Laura Albert in her home office in San Francisco. "I have the road map to crazy," she says.

point of view, Albert is a con, or an artist, or a con artist who created one of the greatest literary hoaxes of all time. The imaginary author she passed off as real became a darling of the gay literary world, an icon in the hipster art scene, and the weird and brave inspiration for countless people who suffered child abuse. LeRoy wrote three books, including *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things*, and scripted an early draft of a screenplay that later became Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*. He was profiled in *The New York Times* and *Vanity Fair* and was celebrated by noted authors like Michael Chabon and Dave Eggers. His orbit of famous friends and admirers was a who's who of dysfunctional celebrity: Courtney Love, Winona Ryder, Tatum O'Neal.

Today, more than a year after Albert was outed as the woman behind LeRoy, she continues to defend the "reality" of her creation. LeRoy, she says, is not merely a voice in her head but a presence, an actual being trapped inside her body, an inner manifestation of the mental illness brought on by the abuse she suffered as a child. Dr. Owens, now aware of the real identity of the "boy" he spoke with over the course of thirteen years, has diagnosed Albert with a variety of personality disorders. "She shields herself with various other personas," he testified recently. "She is a very disturbed individual." Albert prefers a more literary explanation: Her disorder, she says, is a little-known variant of the illness suffered by

Albert demonstrates one of her many phone sex voices. Japanese, black, submissive, dominant, even children for pedophile callers, she had an intuitive sense of how to please – a trait she came to share with JT LeRoy.

the protagonist in the book *Sybil*. Instead of her own personality going to sleep while JT LeRoy or one of the hundreds of other voices take over her body, Albert remains conscious she is being inhabited by another being. Thus, she is both out of her mind and perfectly aware of what is going on at the same time.

"The thing is, I have the road map to crazy," says Albert. "You can say it's a fucking hoax. But a hoax you can't explain – there are going to be huge gaps. I can explain it. I have the road map to crazy."

WHEN TERMINATOR first arrived in the world, the boy wanted help, nothing more. He made it clear to Dr. Owens right away that he was not an abused child, even though he had been raised into prostitution by his itinerant mother, Sarah. "He loved

his mother very much," Albert says. "He was afraid that if he committed suicide he would go to hell. He wanted someone to tell him there is no such thing as hell."

"Do you have suicidal thoughts?" I ask Albert.

"Constantly," she says. "I go in and out of it. That hasn't changed. I have a kit. I have a bag at home. I play with it, I add on to it. I know exactly what to do. They ruined fucking stoves. You can't do a Sylvia Plath now because they changed the stoves. I researched it."

Back in those days, Albert was living with her boyfriend, Geoffrey Knoop, on the steepest street in the Noe Valley section of San Francisco. The pair were struggling musicians with a band called Daddy Don't Go, their music inspired by

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the Cocteau Twins and ethereal British rock. Albert was the lead singer, but she was battling an eating disorder, alternately starving and gorging herself, and insecure onstage. She was, however, a talented and relentless publicist for the band, hellbent on making it big no matter how many fliers and letters and phone calls it took. To get by, Knoop delivered pizzas. Albert brought in cash by performing phone sex, earning three dollars for a five-minute call, which could add up to as much as \$100 a day. (Her services were advertised in the back of ROLLING STONE.) Most of her clients were "crank and yank" types, she says, men who wanted to get off quickly. "Oh, yeah, baby, my pussy's really wet, oh my God, God, fuck me, fuck me hard," she says, demonstrating one of her many phone-sex voices. Japanese, black, submissive, dominant, even children for pedophile callers, she had an intuitive sense of how to please – a trait she came to share with JT LeRoy. "My feeling was that I was going to figure out what they wanted without them having to tell me what it is – by the cues they were giving me."

Albert spent most of her time on the phone in the bathroom. She had a pillow. She leaned on the toilet. Like a jail cell, she says with a laugh. In the beginning, Knoop was upset about Albert performing phone sex for money. But over time, in a manner that foreshadowed future events, Knoop became an integral part of her enterprise, sometimes pretending to be a she-male and faking sex with Albert for clients. The money was good, and it beat delivering pizzas. "She had so much wacky shit going on," Knoop recalls. "I'd come home from a bike ride and she'd be on the phone pretending to be a Japanese girl getting fucked by a guy pretending to be black. It was totally bizarre. But there was a premonition she could make things happen. I really thought she was a great songwriter."

When Albert wasn't servicing clients on the phone, she often made calls to the crisis hot line. Before long, Terminator was talking to Dr. Owens for up to an hour nearly every day. Over time, the boy revealed that his real name was Jeremy. He didn't want to meet Owens in person, he said, because he was afraid he would never want to leave. So Owens had an idea: He suggested that Jeremy write something for him to read to a class of social workers he was teaching at the University of San Francisco.

Albert, who grew up in Brooklyn and spent several years living in a group home, had studied writing in college but quit when it nearly killed her. "I had started to write about what my themes were – kids, sexual abuse," she says. "I was writing about it in a female voice, and I flipped out. I ended up hospitalized. I didn't want to have anything to do with writing. It was getting too close to a nerve." Albert wound up in a mental

hospital, depressed and suicidal.

But Jeremy, she felt, couldn't do it on his own. "Jeremy had started writing some poetry," Albert says. "But it was fucking awful. Really bad shit. And I'm thinking, 'Dude, you've got to be better than that.' I didn't want to get involved. But I was like, 'You obviously need some fucking help.' I liked the idea of being able to reach a social worker. Jeremy liked it too. Jeremy's and my purpose interwove, or connected, or whatever. We were in agreement."

So Albert agreed to serve as a sort of secretary to LeRoy, the superefficient assistant who cleans up the boss's correspondence and never reveals that he is actually, in her words, a "fucking numbnuts who doesn't know how to write." This is one of the oddest aspects of Albert, the jostle among her various inner voices to take credit for the writing—a disagreement nearly always won by Albert. "I don't lie," she says. "I just have different truths running concurrently. It's which truth you're going to pick, left or right?"

To write the piece for Owens, Albert sat by the window in her apartment and "collaborated" with LeRoy. "I didn't know how to type, so I wrote in a notebook," she says. "And I felt something click. I saw it. I filmed it." She starts to sing the Christmas carol: "Do you see what I see? Do you hear what I hear?" This, Albert says, is something that Jeremy always told her: "He wanted to put a tube connecting my head to his head, my heart to his heart. He said this constantly."

"Balloons," the story that resulted from the new collaboration, was about a boy purchasing heroin sold in balloons for his junkie mother—the kind of tale that mirrored Jeremy's life, as told to Dr. Owens. Albert had never purchased heroin, but she was spending time as a volunteer in the needle-exchange program in "Polk Gulch," the stretch of run-down streets in the center of San Francisco frequented by hustlers and junkies. Albert says she wanted to understand how it operated. When I suggest that she might have wanted to learn about street kids because she was writing about them—writing, in fact, as one of them—Albert gets defensive. She cannot tolerate any hint that her motives were in any way ambitious or self-serving.

"Street kids weren't fucking new to me," she says. "I was interested in how



PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST

Albert at eighteen months (top), and as a teenager in Brooklyn. When she first tried writing about childhood sexual abuse, she "flipped out" and wound up in a mental hospital.

Polk Street worked. None of those kids gave me any stories or anything. You don't ask kids for stories. It was like I had Jeremy inside me, and he wanted to be with his people."

THE STORY WAS A HIT WITH the social workers. The boy, it seemed, had real talent as a writer. Dr. Owens showed the work to a neighbor who had a job in the film industry, and the neighbor encouraged Terminator to contact the poet Sharon Olds. Albert went into networking gear. To protect the fact that he lacked a corporeal self, Jeremy operated exclusively by phone and fax. He requested an interview with the novelist Dennis Cooper for a zine called *Maximum Rock 'n' Roll* and sent the author handwritten pages of his work. Word of the talented transgender teenager quickly traveled to the trendier quarters, from the editors of an avant-garde magazine called *Between C&D* to an accomplished editor at Crown publishing house. Then, in January 1998, novelist Bruce Benderson introduced Terminator to the New York literary world in the pages of *New York Press*.

"My love affair with Terminator began two summers ago," Benderson wrote, describing the phone call he

See photos of JT LeRoy on the party circuit and hear audio from Laura Albert's conversations with Guy Lawson at rollingstone.com/jtleroy

COURTESY OF LAURA ALBERT (2)

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received from an adolescent praising *User*, his novel set in the world of hustlers and junkies. At first he thought Terminator was a girl – “the voice had been alternately timid and insinuating, breathily distracted and pushy” – but he soon discovered that the would-be writer was a sixteen-year-old boy. Terminator, he wrote, was raw, gifted, original – a kid from the rough side who would soon be a sensation.

Albert says Terminator’s appeal came from his take on child abuse. “There was a truth to his stories that the ‘abused books’ didn’t have. They angelicized the abused child and demonized the abusive parent, but there are a lot of shades of gray.” Terminator, she says, was “an abused child who is seductive, who is not innocent, who is mischievous. More like how an abused child really is.” In one story, “Natoma Street,” Terminator recounts the tale of a young male hustler who was beaten as a child. “I pray during my punishment,” the boy says. “I pray so hard, I drown out the horrible whipping sound. I pray that God, or Satan, or whoever, won’t let them see how sinful and repulsive and bad I truly am. I pray something won’t let them see what my mother knows and has tried to punish me for but which only worsens. . . . For hidden in my bunched-up jeans is my erection, like a gleaming badge of guilt, waiting to be discovered and ripped from me.”

“It’s all in that fucking story,” Albert tells me. “The whole fucking thing.”

In short order, the mysterious Terminator landed a book deal. It was to be a memoir, tentatively titled *Angel Tears*. Through his new agent, he began to talk to Mary Gaitskill, the celebrated novelist who wrote the short story that was turned into the film *Secretary*. Gaitskill sent Terminator reading material – Flannery O’Connor, Nabokov – and pointed out the clichés and weaknesses in the young hustler’s work.

“I was intrigued by JT,” Gaitskill says, specifying that she is going to refer to LeRoy as a he. “He was extraordinarily charismatic. He made you feel very alive. It was partly manipulative, and I knew it from the beginning. He had a gift, if that’s what it is, to connect very quickly – or at least appear to connect. At the time, I was single. Talking to him, I suddenly had a feverish fantasy that I must find someone to marry and get a house and adopt him. He aroused those feelings in everyone – but he didn’t have that effect with heterosexual males.”

Believing that LeRoy displayed real promise as a writer – for a self-taught, abused sixteen-year-old – Gaitskill called his agent to suggest giving JT time to grow before publishing his work. “He agreed,” she says. “But he said that JT had AIDS and he may not live that long.” Albert says telling people that LeRoy was sick, with sores all over his body, was

primarily a way to fend off unwanted advances from men. It was also a way to explain LeRoy’s unwillingness to actually meet the mentors he courted.

Gaitskill did have the chance to see LeRoy once – or a boy she thought to be JT. When Gaitskill went to a deli in San Francisco to meet and collect a manuscript from LeRoy, she encountered a small androgynous boy with blond hair wearing sunglasses and a cap – a street kid hired by Albert to play the part. The boy presented Gaitskill with a bag containing one of his manuscripts, a book of Sharon Olds poetry, a bottle of balsamic vinegar and a bar of dark chocolate. “He had a soft and extremely nervous voice,” Gaitskill recalls. “He stammered. He said, ‘I’m T-t-t-terminator.’”

Eventually, Albert decided to scrap the memoir. She couldn’t bring herself to label the work of Terminator as non-fiction, she says – that was a conceit, or untruth, she couldn’t abide. The reasons were literary, not literal. “I wanted to be a writer,” she tells me. “If it wasn’t about the craft, then it would be like all these other books that I fucking hated. They fetishize the abused kid. The experience to me was fake.”

Slowly gathering confidence, JT LeRoy began work on a novel. *Sarah* is set in two surreal truck stops somewhere in West Virginia, where truck drivers come to worship a teenage transgender “lot lizard” who calls himself Cherry Vanilla. The quasi-comic truck-stop universe it creates seems fixated on food: Albert wrote the book while she was nursing her newborn son Trevor, moonlighting as a restaurant reviewer and eating herself into obesity. “From outside the trailer I can smell reheated Appalachian foie gras,” the boy narrator says of his truck-stop paradise, “with apple crisp in ver jus with grilled tender mango, and microwaved cider-cured spit-roasted pork loin with grilled figs and sweet Vidalia onion purée.” By the time *Sarah* was published, Albert weighed 320 pounds. Now nearly 200 pounds lighter and a long-standing member of Overeaters Anonymous, she shows me the scar from the obesity surgery she had after she finished *Sarah*, the long red mark slicing across her abdomen just above her pelvic bone.

When Albert talks about the book, she sounds less like someone suffering from multiple personalities and more like any fiction writer describing the strange experience of channeling other voices. She likens the experience to watching a movie on a screen inside her mind and transcribing what was unfolding. “I was just trying to keep up with it,” she says. “I remember watching it, and I was like, ‘Oh, my God, there’s going to be a car-chase scene with these transgender people shooting guns.’ That’s the great thing about books – you’re watching your own movie.”

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THE ODDS WERE HIGH that *Sarah*, like most first novels, would vanish as quickly as it had appeared.

But young JT LeRoy was blessed with a great representative: Laura Albert. To protect “her” author, Albert had created an alter ego named Speedie, taking the name from a punk band she adored as a teenager. A tough and pushy woman, Speedie spoke in a hard-to-place accent, a preposterous blend of Cockney East London with inflections of Australian, South African, even Israeli, Albert says with a laugh as she breaks into the voice. As JT’s minder and protector, Speedie could make all kinds of demands on behalf of her tender charge – flights, food, star treatment. “Speedie was obnoxious, and she could insinuate herself when JT couldn’t,” Albert says. “Speedie was OK with being hated.”

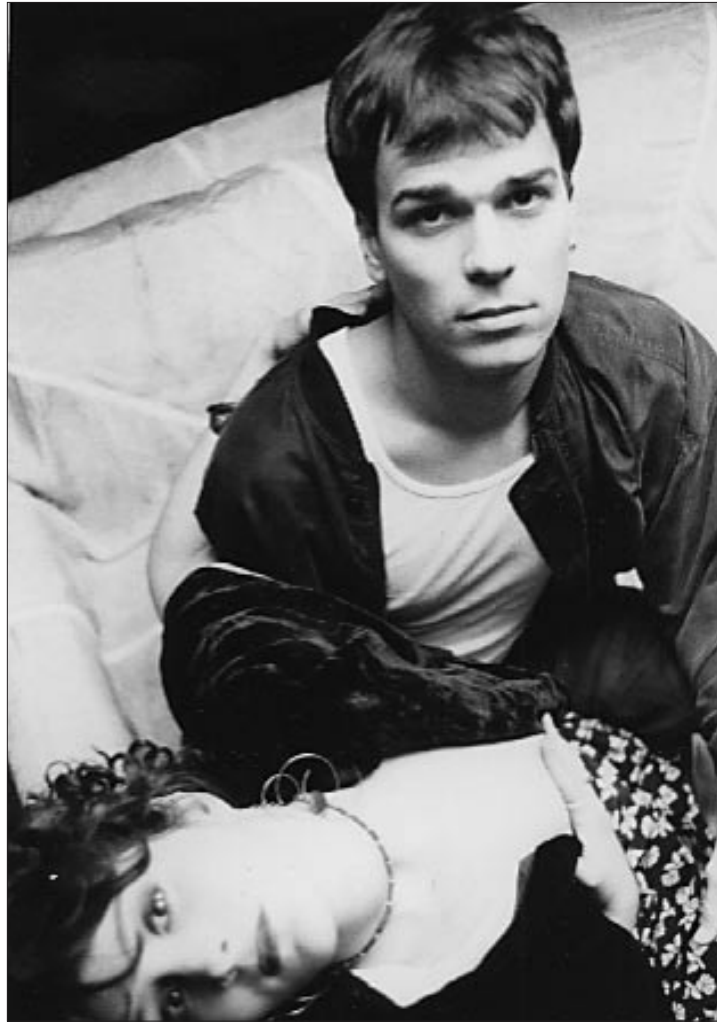
The second member of LeRoy’s new entourage was Astor, an aspiring musician who ran errands for the writer. Astor was sometimes presented to the literary world as JT’s male lover – a fact that caused considerable embarrassment to Geoffrey Knoop, Albert’s longtime partner, who was playing the part of Astor. Knoop had good reason to help keep LeRoy’s true identity a secret. Before JT, the couple had been little more than washed-up local musicians living in poverty. Now, with the publication of *Sarah*, they were hanging with famous people and eating in the best places. Albert also took it upon herself to use JT’s newfound celebrity to turn Knoop and his band Thistle into rock stars, lending the otherwise average band some intrigue by crediting its lyrics to the elusive author. “I was going to make Geoff famous,” Albert says. “I wasn’t going to leave him behind. If I made it up to the top, I was going to send the elevator back down for him.”

For Knoop, it was the best of times. “I’m not going to lie to you, man,” he says. “After years of living in poverty, all of a sudden we were getting wine and dined. It was fun.” But he also began to feel powerless in the relationship, and resentful of the ways Albert portrayed him as Astor. “She was weaving stories, not worrying if I would give a shit,” Knoop says. It was, he adds, “almost like she was trying to piss me off.”

But with the buzz around LeRoy growing, there still remained the problem of making LeRoy incarnate. Publicity events were held in New York and San Francisco, with other writers reading LeRoy’s work, but the author was nowhere to be seen. Magazines and newspapers were asking for interviews and author photos. To maintain the career of JT LeRoy there had to be a JT LeRoy. To truly succeed, JT required a body – actual flesh and bones to purvey.

Over the years, Albert had paid street

Knoop enjoyed the perks of Albert’s fame but resented the charade. It was, he says, “like she was trying to piss me off.”



CRAZY LOVE Albert with her longtime partner, Geoffrey Knoop, not long after JT LeRoy first appeared. Knoop sometimes pretended to be LeRoy’s male lover, and the couple used JT’s celebrity to promote his rock band.

hustlers small amounts of cash to be JT, but she had no one she could rely on to be LeRoy’s permanent avatar. Then, one afternoon, Knoop’s younger sister Savannah put on one of Albert’s many hats while she was sitting on the couch in their apartment. At the sight of Savannah’s blue-dyed hair and slightly boyish looks, Albert had a flash – there before her eyes was JT LeRoy. “Savannah was chewing on a penis bone,” Albert says, referring to a raccoon penis that featured prominently in the novel *Sarah*. “I was like, ‘Oh, my God, you look like JT. Here, put on these sunglasses.’ It was like seeing someone who looks like a ghost.”

Albert offered to pay Savannah fifty bucks or so an appearance to pretend to be LeRoy. The first publicity shoot was for a German magazine. Savannah-as-JT scarcely said a word as the ever-pushy Speedie handled the questions. It quickly became the pattern, as a host of

other magazines followed. To prepare Savannah for her performances, Albert briefed her on the many twists and turns of LeRoy’s life. “I never did theater or anything,” Savannah tells me one afternoon as we accompany Albert on a culinary tour of San Francisco. A short woman in her midtwenties, Savannah is cute in a boyish way, with a few pimples and a dusting of peach fuzz on her upper lip. “I was always really shy. When I was JT, it was like I was fronting something, and it wasn’t me. That was always the feeling I had.”

There were now two JTs, compounding the author’s multiplicities. Albert’s version of LeRoy existed only on the telephone. In interviews and conversations with the celebrities and writers she courted, her JT was loquacious, intimate, a tireless talker. In contrast, Savannah’s JT, the public face, was withdrawn, quaking with fear, hidden behind

her sunglasses. But the pair were drawn together by the shared endeavor. Using Savannah as a front, Albert parlayed the early publicity for *Sarah* into a burgeoning commercial and artistic enterprise. The two women were soon touring the world. They dressed in designer jackets and pajama pants and used their real names at airports, tearing off the identity tags from their baggage when they reached their destination. Sweden, Amsterdam, London – Albert organized a five-week tour of Europe to promote the novel. “We were like two little kids, constantly surprised at where we found ourselves,” Albert says. Savannah walked the red carpet at Cannes behind Angelina Jolie. The two friends giggled like teenage girls, picked at each other’s food, finished each other’s sentences, even slept in the same bed and showered together – not in a sexual way, but out of the closeness of their entwined. “We felt we were a trinity,” Albert says. “We were creating a third. It was like we fell in love with each other.”

In Rome, Savannah-as-LeRoy read at the Basilica di Massenzio, the site of a prestigious literary festival that featured authors like Nobel laureate Günter Grass and Pulitzer Prize winner Michael Chabon. Before the reading, Savannah was beset by anxiety. Albert told her there was nothing to worry about. No one would turn up to see some punk kid from San Francisco. They arrived in a limo to find a crowd of fans clamoring to get in. “There’s people as far back as you can see,” Albert says. “Savannah throws up. She goes out onstage, and it’s dark and she can’t see. Then the lights come up and she sees the crowd. She turns to run, and *bam!* – her face hits the microphone. There’s silence. A collective sigh of love. It was so JT. I was watching JT. Everything was JT.”

In public, Albert-as-Speedie was treated as a hanger-on at best, little more than a sleazy woman using the author for his money and connections. Albert claims that the arrangement suited her and her inner adolescent just fine. “JT was just ready to be rid of me,” she says. “He wanted his own body. He wanted out. He was pissed as shit. I have a really feminine body. I was jealous of women who could pass as men. I saw that as power. I was in love with the archetype of the bad boy, the mischievous innocence. Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, Oliver Twist and the Artful Dodger.”

But in character, the two women were also prone to fighting. “Savannah wasn’t taking care of JT properly,” Albert says. “She was hosting JT, and I was in the position of caretaker. I was the bad guy. I said, no more.” Furious at Albert, Savannah would scream, “You can’t tell me what the fuck to do – you’re not my mother!” Tired of playing along with the many fictions of JT, Savannah quit several times. The worst experience

COURTESY OF LAURA ALBERT

occurred in 2003, during the shooting of the film version of *The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things*. Albert was in Hawaii at the time, writing a magazine article as JT LeRoy, so Savannah was forced to visit the set in Knoxville, Tennessee, on her own. She was expected to contribute insights on LeRoy's story to the filmmakers – but she hadn't written the book, and the creeping dread of being exposed morphed into the feeling that she was living a lie.

"I felt alienated," Savannah says now. "I had no idea who I was. I had no idea who JT was. They were asking me for details, like words for the movie, and I didn't know what to say because it wasn't my work. Or it was. I felt useless."

AFAN OF THE MOVIE *My Own Private Idaho*, Albert waged a campaign to get a copy of *Sarah* in front of the director, Gus Van Sant. As it turned out, Van Sant had already picked up the novel himself and saw the potential for a film version, a fantasy truck-stop picture with a teenage-hustler hero. Van Sant struck up a phone relationship with JT: Over the next year, the two spoke for hours every day. "He sounded like somebody from West Virginia," Van Sant tells me. "I thought of him as a real person. He was funny and smart. He cracked jokes. He would be lewd. He told me his job was doing phone sex. JT could almost do skits. He would do characters he knew. He talked about the multiple-personality disorder he thought he had."

Van Sant became an adviser to LeRoy. The young author sent him drafts of short stories he had written and asked for feedback. JT also told him remarkably vivid and detailed stories from life on the street. The nasty pimp who ruled his hustlers through violence. The transvestite trick whose breast implants burst during sex, spewing red oil. "He gave a long description of spending a night in a movie theater in San Francisco as a place to sleep," Van Sant says. "I guess he just made it up. Or it could have been something Laura did. I told JT he had a lot of stories. He said to me, 'I'll never run out.'"

When *My Own Private Idaho* came out on DVD, LeRoy provided commentary. Recorded on the telephone, JT's voice has a distinct Southern inflection, effeminate but unmistakably Laura Albert, only sweeter and kinder. Van Sant also photographed LeRoy for an Abercrombie and Fitch catalog – unaware that he was actually making a portrait of



A STAR IS BORN Albert used JT LeRoy's fame to befriend a wide range of artists and celebrities. **1** Savannah-as-JT (far right) with (counterclockwise from lower left) Tatum O'Neal, Albert-as-Speedie, Rosario Dawson, Asia Argento, Winona Ryder, Debbie Harry, Shirley Manson, Gaby Hoffman and Vanessa Carlton. **2** Courtney Love with Astor, JT and Speedie in 2004. **3** Albert with Billy Corgan, one of the only people in on her secret, at the singer's fortieth-birthday party this year. **4** Savannah-as-JT at an afterparty with Bono in 2001.

hides his face in photos but bares his soul on the page," reads the caption for a profile in *The Face*. LeRoy also wrote for a host of fashionable publications, from *McSweeney's* to *7x7*, and crafted press releases for Conor Oberst, Liz Phair and Bryan Adams. Many of the magazine stories are the same tales, slightly reconfigured and sold again and again to different publications.

When I suggest to Albert that her deception – employing the persona of a gay street kid – lent her commercial work a hipster edge, she begins to shout hysterically. "There was never a conversation or a thought about how I construct a persona!" she screams. "Let me do a couple of years in a psychiatric hospital and spend fifteen years on the phone with a therapist – let me do all of this because my books aren't going to sell under my name?"

"Do you think it was clever?" I ask.

"I do think it's clever to know that a tall, chubby girl is not going to be heard," she says. "In order to validate my feelings I became what was more allowed to express pain. It is a clever act of survival.

LAURA ALBERT'S OFFICE in San Francisco is a cluttered room on the second floor of a railroad apartment she shares with her son Trevor, now ten. When I arrive, she is dressed in pajama bottoms and a green T-shirt that says I'M JUST A LITTLE FAMOUS. A *New Yorker* cartoon of a couple sitting on a couch is taped to a filing cabinet. "I suppose we could burst onto the literary scene," the caption reads. "This is where it all happens," Albert says.

Albert picks through her filing cabinets, handing me examples from the scores of glossy magazines that covered JT LeRoy: *Details*, *Index*, *Blue*, *Pop*. "He

Savannah – and paid the writer \$10,000 to option *Sarah*. After a year of trying to develop the project, Van Sant let the option lapse – but he still thinks there's a great movie to be made from the book, even now that he knows it is fiction rather than a thinly veiled autobiography. "In some ways it's more interesting now," he says. "I don't feel ripped off. I still think about doing *Sarah*."

Look at those artfully decorated Amazon forest frogs. They look like leaves. They evolved that way. That's awfully fucking clever of them. It's a strategy of survival, but it's clever."

As LeRoy's notoriety grew, Albert began to associate less with the writers and artists JT had known for years – Olds, Gaitskill, Van Sant – and more with an odd, seemingly random collection of celebrities. The list makes sense only when paired with Albert's tastes. Growing up, she was attracted to the image of Tatum O'Neal as the bad-good girl in *Paper Moon* and *The Bad News Bears*. Suzanne Vega's song "Luka," about child abuse, had moved her to tears, so the singer was drawn into LeRoy's orbit. Susan Dey from *The Partridge Family*, Carrie Fisher from *Star Wars* – all had been icons to a lonely and troubled girl who grew up in public housing in Brooklyn, dreaming of another life.

To get to Billy Corgan, LeRoy pitched an interview of the Smashing Pumpkins frontman to *Spin*. After striking up a phone relationship in 2002, the two agreed to meet at a show at Spaceland in Los Angeles. Instead, a woman with a British accent who introduced herself as Speedie came backstage and told Corgan that JT was too shy to meet him. Corgan and Speedie hit it off. That night, they wound up at a disco – and Albert did something she had never done before.

"We're in this very loud club, and she insists that I sit down in the booth with her," Corgan tells me. "She gets this really weird look on her face. She shape-shifts. I know it sounds funky, but I could see the transformation. She grabbed my hand and started talking as JT."

Albert confessed everything. "JT was an accident," she told Corgan.

"I looked at her and I understood," Corgan says. "It was a painful thing, and she was letting me into a very painful part of her life. She identified me as somebody she could trust. I took that as a blessing. If you need to wear a wig or put on a clown nose, I don't care. If you're that person, that's all I need to know."

In the beginning, Corgan says, knowing Albert's secret was like being inside the Magic Kingdom. But he soon became annoyed at the energy she expended to maintain the fiction. Corgan would call and talk to Albert for a while before she switched voices, and selves, and began to speak as JT. "Laura is very paranoid," Corgan says. "Speedie is very manipulative. JT is just 'Ah, shucks, I'll suck your cock for a dollar.' It's a weird mix. But that's Laura."

Unlike the vast majority of admirers, who felt angry and used when the truth was revealed, Corgan remains friends with Albert. He has asked her to write liner notes for his next record and continues to comp her tickets to his shows. In Albert, he sees a fellow artist at-



FAKING IT
Savannah was so nervous before reading from *Sarah* in Rome's Basilica di Massenzio, she threw up. "When I was JT, it was like I was fronting something," she says. "It wasn't me."

It's amazing so many people believed she was a he: In photos of LeRoy, Savannah is so plainly a woman it beggars belief she passed for a man.

tempting to write about eternal truths. He doesn't care "who" wrote LeRoy's books. "It came out of this soul," Corgan says. "Whatever soul wrote those books is a tremendously large soul."

AS JT'S FAME GREW, SO did the dangers of discovery. LeRoy attracted the attention of some top celebrities, and along with that came rising risk. Madonna exchanged e-mails and sent LeRoy readings from the Kabbalah. Bono told *ROLLING STONE* he was reading LeRoy; Albert took the opportunity to meet him at an afterparty for a U2 concert. Tom Waits interviewed LeRoy for *Vanity Fair*, calling him "the brilliant, gifted and profound fly on the wall." Mary Ellen Mark photographed the author sitting on the edge of a bathtub, dressed as "Cinderella after the ball."

There were many occasions when Savannah and Albert were almost caught. At a screening, Savannah encountered a family friend and freaked out that she would be recognized. She told one interviewer that LeRoy was from "South Virginia," and her accent veered all over the landscape. "I told Savannah no one is really listening," Albert says. "I had ways of covering for her. I told people it was JT joking."

Albert also used LeRoy's growing ce-

lebrity to promote Knoop's band. Thistle and JT vamped in *The New York Times* Style section, and Albert joined them in the pages of *I.D.* wearing Gaultier. "I'm sporting bling – a big Jewish star," says Albert, who was already thinking ahead to the day when she would be exposed. "I felt like eventually this will be out, and I didn't want people saying I was trying to hide my Judaism."

Looking at the photos of LeRoy now, it is impossible not to be amazed that so many people actually believed she was a he. In every picture, Savannah is so plainly a woman that it beggars belief she passed for a man, no matter how androgynous. Albert calls it "the emperor has no clothes" syndrome – people see what they are told they see, not what is before their eyes. She snorts with laughter as she tells me that Savannah-as-JT would sometimes accompany a male friend into a men's room – only to have everyone turn and wonder at a woman's presence.

In 2005, drawing ever closer to true fame – as well as to her own undoing – Albert conceived a show at the noted Deitch gallery in New York dedicated entirely to artwork inspired by JT LeRoy. The artists in LeRoy's solar system would display their wares, and Knoop's band would play. Lou Reed took the stage to read LeRoy's work, as did Nancy Sinatra and Debbie Harry and Shirley Manson. Other celebri- [Cont. on 94]

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[Cont. from 76] ties were out on the street, unable to get through the crush of people lined up around the block. Albert watched the proceedings from a balcony overlooking the packed gallery. It was her masterpiece, art and prank and absurdity worthy of Warhol. “My dad was there in the audience,” Albert recalls. “I couldn’t boast about what was happening, but he knew. He had visited me in mental hospitals as a kid. Imagine if you were told one of your children could never walk again, and then you see them ice skating. I gave him a lot of *tsoris* – that means pain in Yiddish. Now I was giving him *nachas* – the kind of pride a parent feels when a child accomplishes something, like becoming a doctor. I was looking at my dad. His body was shaking with laughter.”

OVER TIME, IT BECAME impossible to distinguish between Albert’s need to continue the act and her need to be caught in the act. Once, on assignment to write about Disneyland Paris for a travel supplement of *The New York Times*, Albert introduced herself as JT LeRoy, despite the patent fact she was a she. When LeRoy was given free tickets to Cirque du Soleil, Albert sent an Asian friend to see the show and told her to say that *she* was JT LeRoy. Everyone should have a turn, Albert believed – everyone should have their fifteen minutes of LeRoy.

One day in early December 2005, Geoffrey Knoop’s phone rang. It was Warren St. John of *The New York Times* – a reporter who had previously written a glowing profile of LeRoy. “I know everything,” St. John told Knoop. A friend of the couple had called the reporter and told him the story, determined to protect their son Trevor from the lies of his parents. “I was just about to spill my guts,” Knoop recalls. “I was in shock. I asked if I could call him back. Laura and I went into full-on emergency mode. We went down the phone tree telling everyone to batten down the hatches – deny everything.”

Now estranged from Albert, Knoop talks to me in the sparsely furnished apartment in San Francisco that he shares with a roommate he found on Craigslist. In his early forties and chronically unemployed, Knoop wants to be liked and understood but seems adrift as he still hopes against hope to make it in the music business. His recording studio is in the basement, where his bookshelf includes *The Encyclopedia of Record Producers* and *How to Be an Adult*. Knoop is deep in debt and struggling to pay the rent. He hands me the first five pages of a screenplay he’s written about Al-

bert and JT LeRoy. “I submitted those pages to Sundance for their screenwriter competition,” he says. “I don’t think they are going to go for it because it’s too controversial.”

To this day, Knoop says, he is still not sure if the whole endeavor was a game to Albert, or if she was indeed inhabited by LeRoy. “Everyone loved JT,” he says. “I felt the same way. My best memories of those last years are sitting on a couch, snuggled up, her as JT talking to someone on the phone. JT was funny and smart and goofy and ridiculous and warm.”

Over the years, Knoop urged Albert to give up the ruse, to vanish from the scene like Thomas Pynchon or J.D. Salinger. JT LeRoy could have lived forever, he believes, if Albert had possessed the will or wit to quit. “That would’ve been the smartest move,” he says. “None of this ever had to happen. It would have been this great mystery. It could have kept being a best seller.” But now it was too late. On January 9th, 2006 – the day after James Frey was caught fabricating his memoir *A Million Little Pieces* – St. John published a piece in the *Times* revealing Savannah’s role as LeRoy.

The day the story appeared, Knoop flew down to Los Angeles to sell his story to Hollywood. But when no deal materialized, he decided to go on record with St. John. “Laura had already betrayed me many times, as far as I was concerned,” he says. “I was like, ‘Fuck you, I’m telling my story.’”



THE TWO FACES OF JT Savannah Knoop (left) and Laura Albert last February, after their true identities were revealed.

When St. John published Knoop’s account in the *Times* on February 7th, the response was swift and devastating. Most people who had been drawn into LeRoy’s orbit felt punked and used. During the days I spend with her, Albert routinely goes off on long rants about the various stars and authors she feels have wronged her, or lied about her, or misrepresented their relationship with JT LeRoy or Albert. She accuses former friends of being pedophiles, or traitors, or just plain fucking assholes. She shares scurrilous gossip as a form of payback. “You want to talk shit about me?” she says. “Let’s do it. Because I can talk shit. I know a lot of things.”

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PAUL REDMOND/WIREIMAGE

When the story broke, Albert was on the set of the HBO series *Deadwood*. As with Billy Corgan and other prominent people, Albert had translated her admiration of *Deadwood* producer David Milch into a friendship. By that time, Albert had stopped trying to maintain the act of being Speedie – she had already told Milch she was the author of *Sarah*. Some of the show's cast and crew were also in on Albert's secret.

Ironically – or perhaps predictably – public exposure only served to heighten the commercial value of the artist formerly known as JT LeRoy. Antidote International Films, which now owned the option to *Sarah*, instantly recognized the tantalizing possibilities of turning the entire story of Albert and her adventures into a gay-hustler-meets-literary-hoax-celebrity-quest metamovie – a kind of latter-day *Being John Malkovich*. Inside the company, the new project became known as “Sarah Plus.”

But when Albert refused to sell her life rights to Antidote, the company sued her for fraud and breach of contract. In his swish SoHo suite of offices in New York, wealthy movie producer Jeffrey Levy-Hinte tells me that he met LeRoy only once, at a party in the author's honor. He shook JT's hand – the slightest and most effete of shakes – and looked at Speedie and Astor. In that moment, he had the strong feeling that LeRoy was being exploited by the people who purported to protect him. “I was right metaphysically speaking, but wrong in the literal sense,” he says now. “Laura was exploiting JT, but not in the way I imagined.”

At trial last summer, Antidote portrayed Albert as an evil woman pimping the persona of LeRoy for profit. Dr. Owens, who was JT's confidant, testified that Albert is “a lot sicker individual than is obvious on a superficial contact with her.” In her defense, Albert offered the truth – or at least her complex and contradictory truths. On the stand, her testimony careened from laughter to tears to denial. “We were not being cruel,” she tells me. “We were not hurting anybody. We were not taking from anybody. We had purity of intent.”

But the jury found against her on all claims, ordering her to pay \$116,500 in damages and more than \$300,000 in court costs and legal fees – a sum certain to bankrupt Albert and cause any future earnings to wind up in Levy-Hinte's pocket. “I will not write to enrich that man,” Albert declared in a press scrum after the verdict. “I'm done.”

But nothing is that simple in Albert's world. Four months after the verdict, she has filed an appeal in *forma pauperis*, meaning she is too broke to pay the court costs. She tells me that she is unable to write her own story. There are so many layers and textures and nuances – so much insanity and betrayal and pain and anger – she doesn't know where to begin. She is also unable to let go of the persona she has lived with, and in, for so long. Before the tempest broke, Albert had written an unpublished novel called *Labour*, about a boy living in a shack with his mother and being forced to take care of a newborn sibling. “Labour wasn't written by JT,” she says. “It was more the mother, but it was still filtered through the voices of the kids. I felt her more this time, but I wasn't ready to let her speak on her own.” In an e-mail, Albert writes that she is thinking of checking into a hospital – the first time she has needed such help since the day JT came to life.

“The thing I miss most about JT was that it was like Christmas every day,” she says. “It was a constant invitation to engage with creative people. Music, magazine articles, reviews – because it wasn't me, I had permission to try it all. JT had way more confidence and a thicker skin than I ever had.”

Throughout the time I've spent with Albert, I have repeatedly requested an interview with JT. She tells me that she asked him if he wanted to talk to me, but he said no. “Sometimes in the shower I'll have a conversation with him,” she says. “During the lawsuit I would ask if he was still in there. It's sad. I can't find him.” She starts to weep, deep, inconsolable sobs.

“I like him,” she says. “He's a great spirit. He didn't want to leave. I didn't want him to leave either.”

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Michael J. Sheehy, Circulation Director