



**JEREMY MEEKS** is the incredibly handsome convicted felon who crashed the internet when his mugshot went viral, earning him the taglines 'Jail Bae', 'The Blue Eyed Bandit' and 'The Hottest Convict Ever'. Released from jail in March 2016 and standing at 6ft 1 tall, Jeremy recently kicked off his modelling career walking the runway in New York. In a post modern, twisted take on the American dream, we have the world exclusive story by Laura Albert, the brains behind the Jeremiah Terminator 'JT' LeRoy literary hoax. Here Laura writes the story of this new Jeremy and proves that every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.

Not so long ago, it was fancied that putting a criminal on public display would help deter crime, so public pillories were set up – head and feet in stocks, the person's crime listed on a board. Europe mostly abandoned the public shaming of criminals in the mid-19th century, but the United States held onto the pillory longer, with the state of Delaware not letting go until 1905. Having generally agreed that it was not a good deterrent, and might be a cruel punishment, we now fancy ourselves to be moving away from our savage selves in our societal customs. But as Oscar Wilde observed in 1891, "In the old days men had the rack. Now they have the press." With the presence of the Internet has come a new method for restoring the public pillory without seeming barbarian. In the spring of 2014, the Stockton Police Department ran a sting and busted alleged gang members with weapons. And they had a Facebook page of photos to display, with the name, age and crimes of each of those who had been caught. Their pillory also displayed the weapons they found – nasty-looking machine-gun-type weapons.

Back when people were on display in the stocks, the public knew its role – with joyous Schadenfreude, people would jeer, throw scat, rotten tomatoes. The public shaming was part of the punishment. Now, beneath the photos on the Facebook page posted by the Stockton Police Department, the comments are left open, they are public – the idea being once again to join in the shaming, as these photos of the arrested can be shared and spread, the images used to warn employers, friends and family. Perhaps the need to feel superior, to moralise and pass judgments on others, is genetically encoded. The Bible and Shakespeare caution us not to judge lest we be judged, but we seem to be hardwired for it – as if we can't help it. Fuck the Bible, pass that rotted tomato. We may whisper to ourselves, "There but for the grace of God go I." But we still feel glee that that ain't, in fact, us having trespassed, that we weren't the ones busted.

In June of 2014, when people went to browse the Stockton Police Department's public pillory on Facebook, maybe they did not feel morally superior; perhaps they just wanted to see their tax dollars hard at work. There they were, mug shots of the human bounty caught. Then something different happened.

Posted was a photo of a 30-year-old man, listed as a convicted felon, arrested for felony weapon charges. He appeared to be of mixed-race heritage. His shaved

head tilted ever so slightly, clear ice blue eyes accented with a teardrop tattoo and a comma of a scar near the arch of his left brow. His chiseled jawline proclaimed Alpha Male, dusted with a five o'clock shadow, rounded out with pouted full lips. I read recently how kissing serves procreation, introducing foreign flora into the gut of the mom, and perhaps the bacteria feeds the baby's gut bacteria – something like that, you go find it. All I know is, "they" are finding biological origins for most everything we feel an urge toward. And with this mugshot, the full accentuated lips of a felon – his name listed as Jeremy Meeks – were signalling perhaps biologically that here was a Natural Selection choice to make out with. Because suddenly it was kisses people were throwing, not manure.

Our gaze lingers on what we are wired to find physically attractive, so when a mugshot went viral, it was basic fuckin' Darwinism at work. Beauty preferences are culturally influenced, but there are some traits that just trigger us, like the cliché peacock plum, and with a loud Darwinian click on keyboards, Jeremy's photo was commented on with lust, longing and desire, not-so-disguised versions of "Hey baby, I need your microbiomes to mingle in my gastrointestinal tract!" The Stockton Police Department's photo of him went viral – that is the lingo used for what happened. But a virus mutates. His photo was infectious, and his story was the mutation.

Jeremy Meeks' photo inclined well for mythologising, his face staring out could be seen as a come-hither, lost and wistful gaze, his appearance could be labelled an irresistible hook line of the exotic – with his tawny skin, Caucasian and African-American could locate themselves in his appearance, fitting him into the romantic race fetish of our culture. And so Jeremy's mugshot was seamlessly photoshopped into high fashion ads – while he was in jail he also was modelling for Givenchy, Calvin Klein and Hugo Boss.

The Stockton Police Department never inspired so much love, not even when they posted a photo of a fallen officer.

By the time the Feds picked up his case, the charges against Jeremy Meeks seemed to increase like a viral caseload, competing with his popularity. But his case dropped from eleven felony charges to one after he got a lawyer.

What followed was the cliché buzzard storm of agents and media, all circling over

the jail to claim a chunk of the hunk. Two other men's photos were also posted on the Stockton Police Department's Facebook page. They were dark-skinned African-American men, and I haven't heard anyone asking for their story or fighting over where they wind up.

On the Internet everyone has something to say, and everyone had an opinion on this, ranging from how this piece of shit felon deserves to rot in jail and how he's skating just because he's got a pretty face, to how this was the Lord shining down and giving him a second chance by making him too hot to rot in jail! The mugshot photo inspired men and women around the world to start creating Jeremy Meeks' story, and then explaining why that story is either a horrible sign of our end times or a blessing of God's will.

People bet on Jeremy's future like share traders, with many selling short – the media has made us all jaded, hey the parade moves on. Jeremy had to serve two years in jail. Would anybody care after he did his time?

Jeremy did twenty-seven months, and no one from the media was allowed access. He worked out in jail, ate carefully, read books on acting, on spirituality, a range of fiction, and when he was popped, he looked no worse for wear, and his new agent was there as a welcoming transition team along with his wife and three kids. When most people get out of jail, their mugshots being made public on the Internet haunts them worse than if they had just done their time in a public pillory of yore. Even if they do a geographic, their mugshot is a Peter Pan-like sewn-on shadow that will travel with them to whatever city awaits them. Most felony convictions in the US almost guarantee a life where you can't get housing, where it's harder to get hired, where you can lose even the right to vote, where you are disqualified from getting financial aid and basic government services. Two hundred years later, it's still pretty much Jean Valjean's plight, marked for life. Yet here is Meeks with a *Les Misérables* flip, using the brand on him to brand himself.

In our social fabric we believe, even if we don't admit it, that pretty people, beautiful people can't be bad. They are blessed by God, just as HE personally must be involved in afflicting another to be homely or worse, way not cute. Jeremy's picture screamed Blessed By The Lord, even if his life was nothing of the sort. His appearance hints at a mixed androgyny, the inviting list of his head allowing for a vague vulnerable openness that we associate with femininity, the counterpoint of his gang hardcore tattoos – some will inform you that an inked-in teardrop tattoo like Jeremy has means he took a life. A cuddly panda mixed with a poison dart frog. Dangerously Irresistible!

That Jeremy comes to us with his made in the USA tag gang tattoos prominently displayed makes him all the more ripe for adventurous projections and backlash moralising.

He's a convicted felon; we don't consort with those types, well them that get, uh, caught... Only like those that maybe do the American Repent shuffle, that ol' "I'm sorry! I'm going to rehab!" jig. We even welcome back Mel Gibson with open arms. And how many in the Trump administration alone have already earned their own filled-in teardrop tattoos?

But as the stratification of our socio-economic classes widens, so does the 'mind the void' in our justice system. It's cheaper to load charges on a suspect with a free lawyer (also known as a dump truck); their advice is often to take the plea, and with the three strikes you're out, a young man could be sentenced to life for stealing a pizza. Yes, it happens. Three felonies and you're in for life. If a defendant cops a plea, the state saves money on a trial, the D.A. gets credit for being tough on crime and people figure the accused probably deserves to be locked up anyway.

I don't know what Jeremy Meeks did or did not do. What he actually did time for might be very different from what he did or didn't do. He has done time for grand theft and has been quoted as saying the teardrop tat leaking out on his cheek represents "doing some things in his past he is not proud of."

But he did the time the state gave him.

Is he allowed to tell who he is? Will it ruin the mystique for us? In being photographed by Steven Klein, Jeremy has taken another opportunity to reveal himself.

An award-winning photographer who has worked with such celebrated figures as Madonna and Lady Gaga, Steven has also photographed my own Jeremy – his portrait of JT LeRoy was exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery. He's photographed me too, and Steven and I both found, with another Jeremy, our opportunity to collaborate once again. Steven's high-fashion photography keeps him exposed to gorgeous eye-catching faces the way a GYN is finger-deep in vaginas – it takes something other than a striking face for him to be less than clinical. And he sensed in Jeremy Meeks a luminous spirit that he felt drawn to photograph. It reminded Steven of Marilyn Monroe, a vulnerable openness that

had endured hard times and which brought qualities of depth and aspiration, even innocence, to Jeremy's physical beauty.

I had my face-to-face with Jeremy and his wife Melissa at Rusted Mule, an underground place in SF, kind of steampunk, it feels otherworldly – in its *Blade Runner*-ish décor, a place to be anything and anyone, my friend manages the place and we gave Jeremy, his wife and his manager a tour.

You know how there are some people you feel chill with right away, like no bullshit, and open? Jeremy Meeks and his wife felt like that. Jeremy has an easy relaxed swing to his being, in a grey hoodie, sweats, and Michael Jordan 12's, a soft stubble on his face, he was warm and easy to smile. Melissa fit in with the venue's décor, a dark green shredded cotton shirt dress, over the knee leather boots, black tights, her glossy long brunette highlighted hair loose over her shoulders. She has the direct confident manner earned by being a mother of three, a nurse and the wife in a marriage of eight years which could have had the line from *All About Eve* in its vows: "Fasten your seat belts, it's going to be a bumpy night." We settled into a nook upstairs and we got into it. Having been in institutions myself, one thing I learned was that you get good at telling your story. You go through a lot of intakes; in a way institutionalisation is a perfect primer for fame, all "Why are you here?" interviews.

Jeremy knows his way around an interview, but what someone might take for prepped smoothness is in reality a skill he developed from interfacing with social workers, police, and the court system.

He has a charismatic assured presence, and Melissa feels like the type of nurse you'd want to tend to you in an emergency room, grounded and steady, like nothing would faze her – not even her husband facing life in prison and then becoming a possible Hollywood sensation.

All the same, chatting to them reminds me of interviews with families who just won the lottery – how they are managing the onslaught of attention, the surreal world of fame, the opportunities and the money, how they are rolling with it.

We speak about his kids and he lights up, enacting and giving his recipe for cooking their peanut butter French toast.

Jeremy has a gift few in the media have yet to sample, a mesmerising voice with a melodic swagger – and like I said, he knows how to tell a story. But if he deadens the intonation and his stare bores down at you? If he shows you that Jeremy? It drops your stomach like the Kingda Ka roller coaster, and that teardrop near his eye almost glowers.

I get that look when he addresses all the haters weighing in on him.

"A lot of people don't know me, so they write all this stuff, they don't know, they don't know me." He shakes his head. "They don't know me, I'm a family man, I'm a father, I'm a husband, I'm an uncle, I'm

a best friend, I'm a God-fearing man, a Christian." A smile dances on his lips as he adds, "I'm the peanut butter and French toast champion!"

So how do you tell who you are? Am I here to tell you who he is – that is, after he tells me? I know that game, from telling social workers, intake workers – hoping they will see something and write it down in their notebook, work some magic diagnosis of comprehension that perhaps justifies and explains my being. And I've been interviewed for publications where I've opened my veins and then the reporter goes home after meeting me for an hour or so and tries to tell the world who the fuck I am, but winds up revealing more about who the fuck they are.

Doing that to someone else is not my deal, as much as I can help it. But I can give you some intake worker-type facts, and I'll try not to fuck them up too much. Jeremy's mother is white, his dad is black, and they met in Washington state where his dad had come, having left Kansas City or maybe Oklahoma. His mother was 30 years old when she had Jeremy – her fourth kid. They lived in Washington and she did any drug but mainly heroin. His dad was in and out of jail until he "caught a murder sentence when I was nine months old." Jeremy's mother had gotten clean but then relapsed – the loss of Jeremy's father was too much. From then on his mother got clean/drug free in the late 80s and stayed clean. "We grew up in the heroin household our whole life."

There was a rescue, but it wasn't a model scout seeing how lovely this boy was, or even a social worker. Rescue came from his 18-year-old sister, who had gone into the Air Force and two weeks out of boot camp came back for Jeremy and his older brother. "She adopted me and my brother to take us out of that situation. I was nine or ten, my brother thirteen." At first they resided on the Air Force base in Washington, but their lives changed when Jeremy's sister was transferred to Travis Air Force Base in California. His older brother, with whom he was very close, had a college scholarship and stayed behind. Jeremy was in seventh grade and on his own when they arrived in a small town between Vacaville and Fairfield. "I came from Washington, and the town I came from didn't have gangs,"





he explains. "I didn't understand colours and neighbourhoods and gangs, I didn't come from that world. So I would wear any colour I wanted and didn't understand why everyone was trying to fight me, over a colour. Asking me where I'm from. I'm from Washington, I lived on an Air Force base."

Jeremy's long body folds in on itself, holding the questions that came at him.

"Well, why are you wearing red?"

He reenacts the interplay – his voice ping-ponging back and forth.

"Why am I not allowed to wear red?"

"Are you a Blood?"

"What is a Blood? I don't understand that!"

"Are you a Crip?"

"No I don't know what a Crip is. But I had to learn fast. Because I wasn't getting my ass kicked, but I was fighting a lot." Jeremy's laugh is more ironic than amused.

"I was fighting a lot!" he reiterates. "It just came to the point where I had to force myself to understand this new world I moved into and it sucked."

I ask him if his sister knew.

"She learned very fast. I went to the park to play basketball one day wearing basketball shorts, and I came back in some Dickies and Chuck Taylors, all beat up – all beat up from being jumped in," he states matter of fact, explaining his initiating ceremony into gang life.

His sister didn't give him state care, and as Jeremy says, "She didn't turn her back on me. She didn't throw me out." She was a teenager herself, and it was what it was. There was "family" now. And Jeremy was in a sense protected. And he was a beautiful boy who could fight hard. And now maybe he wouldn't have to.

There's also a belief that if you are beautiful, you are protected. If you have physical beauty, nothing really horrible will happen to you. After all, you are blessed. And in our stories beauty is a magical way out, a rescue – we all know the beautiful child gets plucked from the orphanage because

they are beautiful, from *Oliver Twist* to the Indian kid adopted out to an Australian family in the recent film *Lion*. When I ask Jeremy about that, he tells me, "I heard all my life, you're so handsome, you have the most beautiful eyes, and I heard it a hundred times a day. To where I would not even pay no mind to it. It didn't fix it then. I still had a father in prison doing life. I still had a heroin addict mother and me and my brother and sisters struggling through life's tribulations."

Then he does the dead drop voice, the glaze over stare.

"I just knew as a kid I had a lot of pent-up anger."

So yeah, his beautiful eyes, his "exotic"

looks were not the golden ticket out and just maybe made him more of a target.

"I have a lot of pent up anger and I like to fight," he re-emphasises. "So I didn't think of it as oh, I'm pretty so that's a tool. I knew that I was a tool to release my anger, and I fought a lot as a kid."

We talk about his tattoos, he's got the word CRIP on his arm, he has a lot gang artwork tagging his flesh. "Most of my tattoos are from my past which I am trying to shed and remove." But there are some in Hollywood who don't want him to remove his tattoos, they bring a titillating bad-boy quality. To someone who has no idea of what they really mean, it can look downright romantic.

I ask him, "Did you quit, can you quit?"

He leans forward, "You can quit, to a certain extent I have, I am very extremely non-active. I'm grown now." I take that to also mean he has a different family now. The main concern is how those markings on his body affect his kids, two step children and a biological son who looks just like him, down to the clear beach water eyes, he even refers to the boy as his Mini-me. And that has got to concern Jeremy, because in gang law, when one person in a family bangs, the whole family bangs. And you never tuck your rag.

"They ask me a lotta questions that are really hard to answer." His hands rubs together, as he talks about his kids. "All they gotta do is type in my name, Google it." He enacts how easy it is, hand on a keyboard. "It tells about crimes and my background and my gang affiliation. There comes a million questions..." He shakes his head woefully. "They want to be just like me – I don't want to tell, yeah I'm a Crip and I'm this and I'm that and I've done this and I've done that. And it's nothing to boast about or even something you even want to talk to your kids about because next you know, they say, 'OK well my dad's a Crip so that's what I'm going to be.'"

It's hard not to imagine those tattoos as warning labels, like the rhymes I learned as a kid in Florida, to discern venomous snakes. "Yellow Touches Red – Soon You'll Be Dead." "Red Touches Yellow, Kill a Fellow."

I ask him if the tattoos were a tool in jail, a rattle to warn.

"It sucks to say but my gang is tattooed all over my body. There's no reason to ask me..."

Yeah but was it protection?

Jeremy shakes his head and gives me a patient smile as he explains, "Predators

and people of this world, they know who to prey on..." His eyes narrow. "So, they been doing it their whole lives, so they can just look at you and just tell by how the way you talk, look, carry yourself, 'OK, I can victimise him...'" He pauses for effect. "Or I can't." He takes in breath. "So they know who to do it to and who not to. It's just the way you carry yourself."

It's clear Jeremy knows how to carry himself. He knows how to let the others know he's carrying venom if provoked. But Jeremy doesn't have to fight any more, not with his fists.

He's taking acting classes in LA. He gets wistful when he talks about watching TV, how he thought about acting in passing, as a kid, but it wasn't something he had ever considered before. With a mom on drugs and a dad in jail, the opportunity was just not there.

"The acting – I didn't know how I would like it – but once I got into the classes I realised it's a strong passion in my life, I really fell in love with it. Just being on the stage, doing improv – aww man..."

I ask him what he likes about acting. He has button dimples and laugh lines that hollow out when he smiles. "I like improv more than anything." But he turns reflective, "I don't really care too much for the vulnerability. Do you know what vulnerability is? That part?" he asks me, and I'm not sure I know what it means in his context.

"Where you go back and forth. It pretty much is making yourself cry. You're trying to hit that spot where you can make yourself cry, where that way you can use it on the spot, when you're acting."

"It's the complete opposite of being on the street," I suggest.

"Yeah, it actually came easy," Jeremy marvels.

Wait up! Before you roll your eyes and think oh I know this rap! Another pretty face going Hollywood, after he had the luck to be at the right jail at the right

time. But not so fast... Jeremy is not afraid of physical pain, he'll bring it and hard, need be. But this next part is his secret weapon. "It took me so many years to build up these walls, and my walls where so thick and so high..." He laughs, in kind of amused amazement. "But I broke 'em down like fast and before I know it I'm sitting there trying to focus and do improv and be vulnerable and do this and do that, and I could hear everyone in the audience crying." He reflects, his voice mixed with awe and wonder, pleasure on his face. "And so I'd be done with my scene and everyone runs upstage and they're hugging me and crying."

He explains how his acting coach had him doing a vulnerability exercise, where he was

talking about his dad. "It took a lot out of me, I was drained, because I hadn't cried in years. I can't remember the last time I cried that deep, deep cry like that. I couldn't even finish the vulnerability exercise. The coach was trying to get me to keep going but I'm not used to crying and being vulnerable in front of people, but once I really got there – I was like, 'Oh no', and he's like, 'Keep going', and I was like, 'No I need a minute', and he's like, 'No come back'. And I walked out and I'm pacing in the street and I'm crying and everyone came out. It was a powerful moment."

Jeremy half-smiles, pondering this new tool that's not etched into his skin or fists, not a muscle memory he yet has down. It is Luke Skywalker digesting wisdom from Obi-Wan.

I ask him if he knows about the Chinese Finger puzzle. His eyes twinkle. Yup, he nods.

Most people don't know it at all. It's a straw tube, a cheap toy, you put a finger in at either end. If you attempt to pull your digits straight out, it tightens on you.

"The way to get it to open..."

"You have to go in deep."

We share a laugh.

Yeah Jeremy got a second chance. And so many others won't and don't. They will rot in jail for a host of socio-economic reasons, not just because their mugshot didn't score. By the same token, other ex-felons who keep clean and non-violent in a society that has mistreated them, whose triumphs are just as real and meaningful as Jeremy's are, won't get any of his coverage. So yeah Jeremy was lucky. But he is a fighter, and as he said he liked to fight. Perhaps he had to. But now he's got another way to bring the pain. And when he does, it's cathartic – because of the tattoos, because of the walls, because he was beautiful and that didn't mean shit. And it's cathartic not just for him. I have no doubt there will be a book deal, there will be movie offers, there will be roles. Jeremy has a new tool, and if he stays willing, stays in the room... Being a pretty face did not give him rescue as a child, and it will not be enough now either. Just as the streets taught him to survive, the new skills of Hollywood will teach him another way to fight. Or as Jeremy says, "I love acting..." For Jeremy to stay part of this new whacked family, to hold our attention, he will need to go inside, to bring out what is in him and in our culture. He will need to bring the pain.

