

Why just hope for the future,
when you can plan for it?

‘I TOOK A DEEP
BREATH AND TOLD
MY BOYFRIEND
I WAS BORN A BOY.
HE WAS VERY CALM’

*Janet Mock has known all her life that
she was female. The fact that she was born
a boy called Charles doesn't change that.
She and her partner Aaron discuss
the new grey areas on the sliding
scale of human sexuality*

INTERVIEW Hermione Hoby PORTRAITS Martha Camarillo



Janet Mock with
her partner, Aaron
Tredwell, in New York

Twenty-three years ago, Janet Mock was a barefoot kid playing in the streets of Kalihi, a poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of Honolulu, when a game of truth or dare set in motion the defining story of her life. In the game, she plucked her grandmother's dress from a washing line, put it on and ran down the street. It seems like a laughably innocent thing for a little girl to do, but back then Janet was not, biologically at least, a girl. She began life as Charles, the first-born son of her Hawaiian mother and African-American father and, at five years old, wearing a dress was enough to appal her family. Although the game had seen her pick "dare" rather than "truth", the act of wearing the dress was in fact both: Janet knew she was female before she could even articulate it.

Now 28, Janet is a magazine editor and blogger with an apartment in Manhattan and a loving long-term boyfriend. She is also so beautiful – glowing skin, almond eyes, a mass of corkscrew curls – that she seems a little unearthly. When we meet in a café on a hot Saturday, she's wearing a slinky aquamarine dress and heads turn as she walks in.

When she thinks back to that game of truth or dare, she describes knowing she was female as her "first conviction". "There was never any wishing, any wanting to be a girl," she says. Nor was there a moment when she realised she was different. Instead, "It was more a moment when I noticed people around me were reacting differently to how they were to my brother."

Her father, a strict ex-Navy man raised a Baptist, was particularly horrified. He'd shout at her to be more like her "rough and tumble" brother, Chad. Although she hasn't seen her father in years, they now talk frequently. But for a long time he was "a symbol of what I had to conquer, this man who was telling me, 'No, you're not a girl, you're a boy.'"

"He couldn't see why his first-born son was acting like a female. It just wasn't right to him," she says. "So I learnt to hide things. I learnt to split myself at a very young age – I knew what to do for the public and I knew what to do for myself. It was one of the endings of my childhood, that splitting of myself, knowing I needed to protect my true self from the world."

She describes her mother as "a very tender person, very kind", but the maternal tolerance when it came to her child's behaviour was challenged by what her peers thought "natural".

"I didn't understand her struggle," Janet says. "She had parents and siblings, she had colleagues, neighbours, saying, 'What is going on with your son? You need to shape that boy up!'" As Janet sought to express her femininity more overtly, there were constant tussles of will. One of the most distressing was over her hair, which her mother would make her cut.



'My father was a symbol of what I had to conquer, this man saying, "You're not a girl, you're a boy"'

"Now I see that was a compromise we made. She allowed me freedom to be myself, while everyone was like, 'How can you let your child do this?' I love my family..."

At this point her face cracks a little and her voice wavers. "I wouldn't have been able to conquer any of this stuff without them."

She is devoid of pity for herself. Did it not feel desperately unfair that she'd been born in this boy's body? "It's funny," she says. "I never felt it was unfair because innately I was a girl. I felt it was unfair that people wouldn't seek to understand. I guess I think it could have been worse – I could have not cared about wanting to have an education. I just knew that I was blessed in so many other areas, so it was just like, OK, well, this is going to be my first obstacle in life that needs to be tackled."

She lists all that's she's been through – "Having to fight economic powerlessness, having to fight my own body, having to fight a society that is just not open to variations" – but she was always determined "to live not only as a woman but as a successful woman. I never wanted anyone to have an excuse to tell me no."

When Janet was 12, she moved back to her mother's in Honolulu, having lived with her father in California for a few years. It was a relief to be back in Hawaii, where attitudes to



From left: Janet and Aaron at home; Janet in her Year 7 school photo

gender are a little more relaxed. "Growing up in the native Hawaiian culture, I always knew about *mahu*, which are considered the third gender," she explains. "So many places outside Western civilisation are much more embracing of nature's variations. People always say that God created man and woman, but God did not create gender – gender is a social construct, just like race is. I don't think the split comes until you go to school, when everything is segregated by gender. Kids just understand – they're like, 'Oh, you're a girl with boy parts.'"

After just a few weeks back in Hawaii, Janet met Wendi. "She was this flamboyant, green-haired *mahu*-girl, in-between girl-boy," Janet smiles. "I finally saw someone who was like me. We knew that we were kindred spirits. We lived in a poor neighbourhood and Wendi was the person who had a volleyball, so everyone congregated around her. And she read me: 'I was like, 'I can see you, I know who you are.' I could be myself. I could see being able to drop that whole double thing and just be one person.'"

But puberty threatened that. "My most depressing years were in high school, when I could see my body was changing. I remember seeing a little peach fuzz and thinking my body was turning against me. There were moments of breaking down and hating my life, hating my body, hating the fact that I wasn't born in a body that aligned with my sense of self."

Her unhappiness was compounded by the frustrations that every small-town teenager feels. "I was sick of Hawaii, sick of being in a town where everyone knows you. I wanted to get out and get on with my life. There was so much I wanted to do. So it was vital that my gender stuff was taken care of at a young age."

Around the age of 15, Janet started taking hormone pills in secret, bought from Wendi. ➤

"I didn't feel the need to ask for permission," she says. "I was just like, 'This is my body, I know I'm not confused.' Everyone always says, 'Oh, what if you changed your mind?' I think, 'Have you ever had a moment when you've doubted your gender?' I just knew that I couldn't psychologically, emotionally, afford to live in this body that doesn't represent me at my best. Hormones were a life-changer."

A year after she began taking them she met a transgender woman called Stacey who had already transitioned. "And this was the first time I thought, 'Wow, this could be real.' From that moment, I knew that I would be taking those steps and it became very easy to navigate what that would mean for me as a teenager."

But at school, staff were uncomfortable with her dressing as a woman. "I had a lot of friends – my self-assurance was contagious and kids could respect the fact I knew who I was – but the administration was so uncomfortable. I was voted vice president of my class, I was an academic scholar, I was a volleyball captain, but just because I was exerting my gender in this way..." she trails off. "I guess they couldn't wrap their brain around it."

When I ask her if there was much bullying, she throws back her head and laughs. "You know, it was like I put a target on my back." And then she sighs. "They called me fag; they called me 'You mahu'; 'Oh, I can see balls'; just stupid stuff. But what hurt the most was when they called me Charles. Because everyone knew what that meant for me. It was like putting me back in my place: 'You're counterfeit, stop trying to put up this sham.'"

By this point Janet had been "Janet" for years, a name that stuck after one of her friends remarked on her resemblance to Janet Jackson. She celebrated her 18th birthday by legally changing her name. The next step she took, though, was even more important.

"So many people don't understand that some transgender people are completely OK with having their natural sex organs and that doesn't make them any less of a woman," she begins. "But I knew that I would never want to feel shamed by what was in my pants and so the surgery was very important to me. I just didn't want to have a penis any more."

Janet had had part-time jobs since she was 15 to save up \$7,000 for the surgery in Thailand. She was determined to have it as soon as she turned 18 and made the journey there alone, a term into her first year at the University of Hawaii. It was the first time she'd been away from her family for Christmas. She'd quizzed one of her friends who'd undergone the same process so she knew what to expect.

"It wasn't as scary as it could have been because it wasn't as foreign – I knew the nurses' names, I knew how the room would be, I knew what to expect when I came out. And then the Thai people are so nice."

Nonetheless: "I was very emotional. I couldn't believe that I was finally aligning myself fully. Even though there were so many people who were supporting me, it had been a solitary journey."

Was she in a lot of pain? "You have so many medications, if anything it's more uncomfortable – you can't get up and go to the bathroom, obviously. They put a catheter in and it's just kind of... inconvenient."

She couldn't wait to return to university and "just be a student, not have to worry about the gender stuff any more. I didn't have to confront any of that until I was in a relationship with someone. Now I could just be."

After graduating she moved to New York, gained a masters degree in journalism from NYU and secured a job with *People* magazine.

And then, two and a half years ago, she met a softly spoken man in a bar in Manhattan. Aaron Tredwell, who works as a dog-walker, wears his good looks almost apologetically.

"I was dancing to some song on the

'I knew I'd never want to be shamed by what was in my pants. So the surgery was important'

dancefloor," smiles Janet. "I was twirling."

"You were definitely twirling," he confirms.

When he approached her she was, she says, instantly "blown away". He asked her to go for a walk with him. "We were just strolling arm in arm. And then we came here, right here."

"We ended up sitting right there," says Janet, pointing to a table just behind us. Janet says she wanted to tell Aaron about her past almost straight away, "but I was struggling with, 'Is he still going to love me? Is he still going to want to be with me?'" One night in his apartment, she mustered the courage.

"I remember taking a deep breath, and I said, 'I was born a boy.' And he was just nodding and listening. He was very calm."

She turns to him. "What were you thinking when I told you?"

"I knew Janet," he begins slowly. "And I knew there was something going on. So when she told me, I was pretty open to whatever was coming. I just said, 'It's OK, whatever you want to tell me.' When she told me, I understood the gravity of it straight away. And then it took a while to process what I'd just been told."

"Telling him was the hardest part," says Janet, "so when it came to everything else he wanted to ask me, I committed to being open."

"Besides the movie *Boys Don't Cry* and some

bad humour, I had no experience of this," Aaron admits. And then, he says, "I saw it everywhere. My whole outlook changed. There are all these grey areas and this sliding scale. And the biggest question for myself was what parts of me are feminine. That's been a real self-discovery."

They hope to start a family some day. As Aaron says: "I wasn't interested in marrying or raising children until I met Janet. It would be a great waste if she wasn't a mother."

Recently, Janet recorded a video for the *It Gets Better* project, in which gay, lesbian and transgender adults record video messages aimed at teenagers. Janet says she'd been watching the videos for months, "thinking, 'If I'd had this when I was in high school, I would have been much stronger.' But I didn't see trans women who represented me or kids growing up like I did, and I realised that I needed to be the change I craved to see."

And so, with Aaron's help, she sat down and recorded her message, which has been viewed nearly 60,000 times. It's spurred her on to write a memoir of her gender struggle.

"I have to go back to when I was a 15-year-old and what it meant to be in a body that didn't match me. I take it for granted now that I'm able to just be, without anyone looking at me in a freakish way."

She no longer takes hormone pills, but: "I have monthly tests to check my hormone levels. If they're low, I'm given an injection. Hormones have more to do with energy and bone development than with achieving a feminine look or secondary sex features."

Janet and Aaron do a podcast called *The Missing Piece*, which has the relaxed tone of them having a chat on their sofa. Do they have any qualms about being so public about their relationship? "Nooo!" Janet says. "Living our lives openly, as a heterosexual couple, helps people understand that gender and sexuality are different. People can understand falling in love with somebody and having things in your past that you are aching to tell them. Because they understand the relationship, they can try to understand what I've gone through."

Aaron says since what Janet calls her "big reveal", she has even more confidence.

"I'm a total diva now," she says, laughing. "But I think there's a lightness there too."

A few days after our meeting I find a post on her website in which she calls her gender struggle the greatest gift she's received. It seems an extraordinary thing to say. I e-mail her and she writes back: "While in the trenches of fighting for my true self, I did not view my gender struggle as a gift."

But then she adds, "How lucky am I to have been blessed with such a quirk of nature, to be given this biological variance that tested my strength and to be given such rewards and life lessons due to it. That's how I choose to see my experience." ■