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SUNDAY MAIL (QLD)

March 17, 1991 Sunday

LENGTH: 2459 words

HEADLINE: THE GIRL FROM NOWHERE

SOURCE: QNP

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BODY:

THE GIRL FROM NOWHERE Denise arrives like a modern Cinderella Today she commands a modelling fee of \$8000 a day Within 3 weeks of the wedding her first husband had enough Successful and glamorous **Denice Lewis** . . . a long way from Houston Mixing it with the famous . . . including Jason Donovan By PAUL PALMER in Houston T HEY call her the Girl from Nowhere. Suddenly **Denice Lewis** is the darling of the international social set, feted by celebrities, waited on by eligible millionaires as she flits around the fringe of the royal set, usually monopolised by Sloane Rangers.

She can demand \$8000 a day in fees as one of the world's most wanted models, and she counts among her friends Australian singer Jason Donovan and American oil heir Steve Wyatt. (Wyatt has been spotted kicking round West End night spots with good friend Fergie, Duchess of York, a friendship which Andrew is reportedly relaxed about.) Denice has also been on close terms with Tim Jeffries, ex-husband of Koo Stark, an old flame of Fergie's husband Andrew in his wilder days.

And when she celebrated her 30th birthday at home in London, the occasion was to receive an important stamp of social approval when a report on who was there and what was said took up an entire page of last month's snooty London social register, Tatler.

George Michael came wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses. The Countess of Woolton donned her best designer dress and sparkling jewels. Mrs Nelson Piquet smiled dreamily for the bank of photographers camped outside.

Minutes after they disappeared inside, more celebrities stepped from the limousines _ a line of glitz, money and class trotting up the white stone steps in London's smart St John's Wood.

Rarely does a week go by without a picture of Denice appearing in the Press. Usually she is on the arm of an eligible _ and of course famous _ man.

She has arrived like a modern-day Cinderella, yet amid all the fame and adulation Denice herself remains something of a mystery. Just who is she _ and why do her celebrity friends in Britain appear to know little about her?

Denice has volunteered only the smallest of details of her past.

She has said she was born in Virginia but grew up in Texas; that she made her name in New York before being headhunted by a top London modelling agency.

She says she came to London, met a few well-connected people, fell into their crowd and that's the end of story.

Only it isn't _ not by any means. For the truth is much more complex. It is a tale of how a Texan girl from a working class background has planned her way to the top _ with looks and tenacity as her only assets.

Of how seductive charm and ambition have been rewarded by an address book of celebrity friends. But also, of how a woman has managed to rise to the top of her chosen world with hardly a trace of her past revealed.

For example, her friends will be surprised to learn that she was once Mrs Steve Martin, the wife of a Houston oil construction worker.

It was an acrimonious union that lasted less than a month. Steve and Denice had been at the same school, North Shore High, in a suburb of Houston. They were married on July 26, 1980, at the chapel on Corpus Christi Road, near Denice's family home. Denice was 19; Steve 22.

At first it seemed the perfect marriage. But, according to Steve's family, things soon went wrong.

Steve's mother explained: ""When they were dating, Denice was this nice, sweet girl. She went to church with Steve, threw herself into arranging the big wedding. But then the relationship deteriorated.

""She was never at home. Steve would return from shift work and she would be out with no mention of where she was."

Steve Martin confirms this. ""Let's put it this way," he said.

""If your wife wasn't beside you, where was she? Denice never told me.

And, boy, was she expensive.

""I would work all hours of the day and night, but I couldn't pay for her. She spent a lot. My parents had to help me pay the bills. When you are in love with someone you give them things. But she wanted more than I could afford to give her."

Within three weeks of the wedding Steve had had enough. ""I came home one morning and we argued. I threw her out into the street and she was dressed just in her bed clothes."

The couple formally separated on September 8, 1980, and were divorced that December.

Steve, who remarried and has a three-year-old son, said: ""I have to be honest with you. I don't think a great deal of her. She changed when we were married. Man, she completely changed."

It was not the last time she changed. Throughout her short life Denice has displayed an ability to re-create herself in her chosen environment.

The first stage in the creation of Denice Lewis, Celebrity, came with her ambition to escape from the grimy, working class environment in North Shore, Texas.

This area of Houston is a tatty neighborhood of caravan parks and junk food restaurants where the smell from the local chemical factories hangs in the air.

Denice moved to North Shore when she was a toddler; she was born on November 28, 1960, in Lynchburg, Virginia, where her father, Richard, was working on an assignment. Both her father and mother, Wanda, were from Texas.

After Denice there were three younger brothers: Ricky, 27, now car mechanic; Marshall, 25, who works in a hire shop; and Brent, 18, who works for a valve company. But Denice was always the precocious one.

Her father said: ""When she was small, she was always modelling, showing off a little.

""I remember once we were pushing her in her pushchair through a shopping mall when a group of nuns started fussing over her. Denice immediately put her hands together in a show of prayer and started singing for them. It was a great show."

He was sitting in the dark, sparsely furnished living room of the house where Denice grew up. Tin foil masks the windows to keep out the heat.

A kilometre away is the school where Denice went when she was 11.

Pretty from an early age, she appears to have made little impression at North Shore High.

""She was always very mature," said school administrator Charlotte Fleming. ""In a neighborhood where most girls worked as shop assistants, Denice was always perfectly made up, incredibly fussy about her clothes."

Her brother Marshall, who now lives in a caravan park with two small children, said: ""She considered me something of a black sheep because I was into bikes and staying out late at night. She didn't like the fact I had tattoos.

""I don't think she was ever ashamed of her past, just that she much preferred to mix with richer people. She always wanted to climb the social ladder. She liked rich things, good things."

Denice got her first taste of what life could be like on Saturday, April 21, 1978, when her senior year class held their prom, or ""goodbye party", at the flashy Hyatt Regency Hotel in downtown Houston. The words on her class yearbook rang a bell with her: ""Challenge is the core of life," it read. ""The mainspring of all human activity. If there's an ocean, we cross it; if there's a record, we break it; and finally, if there's a mountain, we climb it."

And Denice was already planning to climb that mountain. After North Shore High School she was accepted for a course at the San Jacinto College where she learned make-up techniques, hairdressing and presentation.

While attending a hair show in Dallas she met the man who gave her the first step on the ladder to fame.

Ernie Menchaca is a legendary Houston figure, the owner of a chain of beauty salons. Denice became his apprentice, starting as a hairdresser and make-up artist.

""She was extremely energetic and aggressive," Menchaca said. ""She built up a large clientele very quickly. She was, I have to say, a great asset."

Steve Martin noticed the change in her after she worked for Menchaca. ""She became swept up in this expensive lifestyle. It changed her a lot."

After her divorce, Denice set herself up at an apartment on her own _ and another man began to play a key role in her life.

Ken Steen, a trader in crude oil with good social connections, was one of her regular beauty salon clients. They started dating in 1981.

""She was sharp, funny, sexy and adapted very well to the new lifestyle I gave her," Steen said. ""She was very aware of where she wanted to go in life." She told him she was going to be a model, be very rich and travel the world.

Steen led her through a whirlwind of big oil money parties, but her family remained in the background.

""We dated for about 18 months and never once was I taken home. She didn't want the past dragged up."

Steen was one of the many men who have seen Denice walk in and out of their lives. A friend of Steen's said: ""He thought he was going to marry her. But Denice didn't want that. She had other plans."

Over the next two years, Denice planned her rise up the Texan social ladder. In October, 1982, she began dating real estate dealer Paul Gomberg, a friend of some of the richest people in the city.

""We had a great time together," said Gomberg. ""But boy, could that woman spend money. You would think she'd had it all her life the way she went through it. She was becoming a financial drain. She loved shopping at expensive stores like Neiman-Marcus and Tootsies."

After moving in with him, she asked Gomberg to collect her cleaning: he turned up at the shop only to be faced with two vanloads of clothes and a bill for \$600.

He also gave her a Gold American Express card. ""I had to put a stop on the card," he said. ""She called me one day because she took some people to lunch and the restaurant wouldn't accept the card. She was real mad. She called and said "How could you do this to me?" I just laughed. It was my money."

On top of her hairdressing job, Denice did some part-time modelling, mostly bit-part assignments for caravan companies and clothes stores.

She took part in the American TV talent show Star Search, but failed to win. Then came her lucky break. Talent-spotters from a hairdressing salon in Manhattan visited Houston: she was invited to New York and introduced to the prestigious Eileen Ford modelling agency.

She moved to New York in the spring of 1983 and signed with the agency. But her work with Ford Agency was not hugely successful.

""She was with us only for a short time; she wasn't tall enough for New York modelling," said a Ford Agency spokeswoman.

Increasingly impatient in New York, she visited London on an assignment and, as she said ""something clicked about the place".

The attraction may have been the glittering English-speaking society and an established celebrity circuit, both of which would be happy to accept a beautiful Texan model without asking which side of Houston she came from.

Whatever, the ultimate transformation was about to begin.

Fortuitously she had met a Houston heir who was setting up a base in London. Steve Wyatt is the adopted son of the hugely rich Texan oil tycoon, Oscar.

The Wyatts are serious socialites. Steve's mother Lynn is a friend of the Duchess of York; Steve has been a regular guest of Fergie and only last month, while Prince Andrew was aboard a Royal Naval ship on stand-by for Gulf duties, the two were seen in swish London night spots.

This was perfect Denice territory. Steve was a young man with money and connections, and he fell for Denice.

It was to be an extraordinary affair: one story has it that Denice ran up a bill in Wyatt's name and is paying it back. It is said his father intervened to stop her spending.

Despite the relationship with Wyatt, Denice did not begin to make her mark on London society until 1988 when she began dating Tim Jeffries, at that time estranged from his London-American wife, Koo Stark.

Denice first met Jeffries when she visited top photographer Norman Parkinson who, she claimed, had named her as one of his Faces.

Parkinson had an office in the Mayfair's Hamilton Gallery, co-owned by Jeffries.

Jeffries was ideal Denice material: he is at the centre of the kind of high society in London which parties before it thinks.

A good-looking charmer, he later met her at Brown's nightclub and they began an 18-month affair. She moved into Jeffries' \$1 million Chelsea home.

Denice Lewis, the girl from nowhere, had arrived. Almost.

The hard part was making her own name. She was working with the top agency Models 1 (she is still with them) and her career was to be launched on the cover of Town and Country magazine, the New York glossy.

Today, she is said to command a modelling salary of \$8000 a day, the demand for her looks being fuelled by her fame.

She has been pictured at countless parties. In December 1989 _ having split with Tim Jeffries _ she turned up on Jason Donovan's arm at the premiere of Kylie Minogue's film The Delinquents. She

walked across the foyer of the Empire cinema in Leicester Square in a tight, velvet Antony Price dress.

She and Jason had arrived last to ensure that they _ not Kylie _ made the news next day.

The following day, as Fleet Street predictably hunted for the ""top model" who was ""dating" a pop star, Denice said she didn't expect all the attention.

""It wasn't what we wanted," she said. ""I am only Jason's friend.

I just want to be left alone to get on with my modelling."

Does one turn up at a celebrity-saturated premiere in the heart of London with one of the biggest pop stars of the day and not expect attention?

Denice knew very well what she was up to.

In fairness, she does have a natural charm. She is easy to talk to and there are few pretensions about her. As one London fashion editor said: ""She should have done on what Jerry Hall did: make a virtue of the face that she came from nothing. People would respect her for that."

Last spring she began dating actor George Hamilton (""He's a very, very old friend," she said at the time) and they appeared at Epsom on Derby Day, Denice in a stunning low-cut dress.

She was quoted as saying in June last year that she had ""a relationship" with Hamilton. By November it was over, ""sexually inactive", although they remained, you've guessed it, ""very good friends".

Back in Houston, most of her old friends are stunned by the change in Denice Lewis. To those from her past life, she is almost unrecognisable. Her figure is more rounded, sexier, not the thin, bony girl they once knew.

One friend who used to see her a lot in Houston said: ""I bumped into her with George Hamilton at a poolside party in Beverly Hills recently. I couldn't believe it was her. She seemed so different.

""And she seemed almost embarrassed by the fact that I knew her.

Because I had seen the old Denice, the platinum blonde who wasn't famous."

GRAPHIC: PIC OF DENICE LEWIS WITH JASON DONOVAN AND DENICE LEWIS MODELLING

LOAD-DATE: September 25, 2003