



*Reluctant Press*

# How John Became Denise

Deena Gomersall



*ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHAS*

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**A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL**

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## *Reluctant Press TG Publishers*

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## HOW JOHN BECAME DENISE

**By Deena Gomersall**

When Christine Baker found that she had become pregnant it was a time of celebration for all the family, not least because only six months earlier her twin sister Caroline had also fallen pregnant.

Obviously Christine and Caroline's parents, Ted and Martha, were over the moon expecting two grandchildren within half a year. Christine and her sister were very close and seemed to always do everything together. They had met their prospective husbands at the same dance, with Christine marrying Bob just a month before Caroline wed Charles. At the moment, everything in the family seemed to be going terrifically.

Caroline's baby turned out to be a girl whom they named Denise. When Christine's baby came along it was a healthy boy weighing almost the same 8 lb. 6 oz that baby Denise had weighed and whom the proud parents named Jonathan.

As Christine and Caroline were twins and that at the time of their respective baby's birth everyone commented on how the tot looked just like its Mother, it wasn't too surprising that as John and Denise grew older, people began to notice that they also bore a striking resemblance to one another in terms of eyes, hair and skin color, height and general appearance.

Bob and his wife decided against having more children owing to the difficulties that Christine had suffered during labor. Caroline and Charles did want more children, though. Although they were aiming for a son this time to make the family complete, they had another girl, Samantha, born almost two years after the birth of their first child.

When John was four years old his previously close-knit family began to break up. First it was Caroline and Charles and their two children who moved away when Charles was given a promotion in his job which meant relocating to London. The two sisters kept in almost constant touch, both by letter and phone and each year Christine, Bob and little John would spend a week or two vacation in the capital, staying at the home of Caroline and Charles.

Then John's grandfather Ted reached retirement and his brother Alf suggested that, with his retirement money, he and Martha should spend the rest of their days living with him and his wife in Australia where he had emigrated fifteen years before. Such a suggestion was certainly tempting to Ted; he had enough retirement money in his

bank account to do so and, after much consideration, despite the tears of both Caroline and Christine, he and Martha flew to a new life Down Under.

Without their parents, Caroline and Christine gradually saw less and less of each other as they concentrated on their own lives and raising their families. And so the Baker family's close-knit tradition began to splinter. It was then that a bizarre string of tragedies rocked the family.

First, two months after John's seventh birthday, his cousin Denise contracted meningitis and, after a few weeks in hospital, she lost her fight for life.

John flew down to London with his parents to attend the funeral but his grandparents had already contacted his Aunt Caroline to say that they could not come as Ted himself was unwell and Martha was suffering badly with arthritis.

John remembered well all the tears at the funeral that day and standing beside his cousin Samantha who, although only five years old, was crying at the loss of her older sister.

Denise had been the apple of her father's eye and he was crushed by the death of his daughter, far more even than Caroline who, like her sister, was a strong person and had the ability to bounce back from personal tragedies.

Unable to come to terms with the loss of Denise, Charles turned to drink and in so doing lost his job which had an effect on his marriage. Inevitably, perhaps, as he and his wife argued constantly about his drinking and his being out of work, the marriage ended in divorce eight months after Denise's death.

With the breakup of her sister's marriage, Christine hoped that Caroline might be tempted to move back up north to Manchester. But, as Caroline had a very good job in London and her own home, plus with Samantha being settled and brought up down there, she decided to stay. They did start to keep in touch more often once again even though they rarely got to see each other.

Over the next two years, the health of John's grandfather began to deteriorate and Ted eventually passed away just before the boy's tenth birthday.

John, his Mom, Dad, Aunt Caroline and Cousin Samantha, all flew to Australia to go to his grandfather's funeral. For John, it was an opportunity to see his Granny Madge whom he had always been very fond of. It was also another chance to see his Aunt and Cousin again as he hadn't seen them for eighteen months.

He was surprised how Samantha had grown and how pretty she was becoming, with her long, waist-length hair and clear blue eyes. At his age he was starting to notice girls and thought his cousin, although still a bit young, was nevertheless, very attractive.

On his Aunt's part, seeing John again brought tears to her eyes owing to the likeness between him and her dead daughter. To her it was like seeing Denise standing there before her.

John's granny was now wheelchair bound; she could scarcely walk due to the arthritis in her legs, but it didn't stop him from giving her a big cuddle. He wasn't aware

of it at that moment, but it was going to be a further five years before he would see her again, when he, his Mom and Dad went back to Australia on holiday.

As he gave Martha a big squeeze, she told him how big he was becoming and what a handsome young man he was turning out to be.

## **FIVE YEARS LATER :**

It was September, the new term at school was just beginning and John Baker's family were newly back from their Australian holiday.

John was thinking how cold and miserable Manchester was compared to Brisbane. He was also thinking that the very last thing he wanted to do after such a wonderful holiday was to go back to school.

In the last term before the holidays, John had been subjected to quite a lot of bullying from some of the school's rougher boys. John was quieter than many of the other pupils and disliked fighting which only brought all the more trouble his way from the school bullies.

He was casually stirring his milk into his cereal bowl when the voice of his Mother interrupted him from his thought.

“Come on, John. You're going to be late for your first day back if you don't get a move on.”

“Yes Mom, I'm nearly ready,” came his halfhearted response.

Finishing off his cereal, he tied up the laces of his trainers, pulled on his coat and, lifting up his school bag, made his way to the front door.

“Right. I'm off. Bye, Mom.”

“Just hold on a minute, you!” Christine cried after him. “Just look at the state of your hair. You've not even bothered to brush it and it looks so much worse with it being so long. You had better get yourself along to the hairdressers on Saturday and get it cut.”

“Aw, but Mom, most of the guys have their hair long now. It's fashionable.”

“No it isn't and no they don't. But even if they did, it doesn't suit you being so long. Now, no complaints. Saturday, haircut! Right, get yourself to school.”

John set off up the hill on foot with his best friend Ian, his mind still active with the memories of Australia. He had really liked it there and it had been great to see his gran again. It was so sunny and bright with everybody seeming to be friendly. He was wishing that he could live there, away from all the smoke and the rain, the traffic, pollution and Jason Adams' gang who were always picking on him.

John hardly paid attention to the lessons at school as he was feeling much too down in the mouth over one thing or another. The trouble with not taking an active interest, though, was that it made the day drag all the longer.

By the time he was finally going through the school gates on his way home, it seemed that he'd been at school twice as long as he actually had.

"Hey, there's Michelle over there," Ian suddenly informed him "Have you gotten round to asking her out this weekend like you said you were going to?"

"Er...no, I'm not really bothered."

"But I thought that you fancied her like crazy?"

"Yes I do. She's gorgeous, but I haven't had much chance today. I haven't even seen her until now."

"Well now's your chance. Go and ask her, man," Ian prompted.

Shy and yet not wanting to lose face with his friend, John gathered his nerve and walked over to where Michelle Jenkins was standing, talking to three of her friends.

"Hi, Michelle," John began.

"Oh, hi ya, John. How was it in Australia ? You only got back on Saturday, didn't you ?"

"Yeah, that's right. Listen, I was wondering if you'd like to go to the disco with me on Friday night? Then I could tell you all about it. I've got some photos that I took, I could bring them to show you...if you wanted."

"It sounds fab, John, I'd like that. I was thinking about going myself anyway but I had nobody to take me."

John couldn't believe his luck and a big smile spread across his face...soon to disappear rapidly as he heard a voice he knew and loathed.

"Hey, Baker, you got back from Aussie land, then ? I thought the Maoris may have captured you or you'd got lost in the bush."

The remark was followed up by the course laughter of Jason Adams' two mates as they came up from behind.

"You mean Aborigines, you dumb fuck," John swore under his breath.

"You what ?"

"I was just saying you mean Aborigines, Maoris are natives of New Zealand," he said, a little bit louder.

"So? Who cares? I didn't recognize you at first, Baker. I thought that it was five girls standing here gabbin'. When you gonna get your hair cut then?"

Apart from the very top, Jason wore his hair shaved very close to his scalp as did all of his mates.

John blushed at his remark, then, in an attempt to repair his dented male ego, he stammered back, "I've just been fixing it with Michelle to take her to the disco on Friday."

"Eh ! What the fuck do you want to go with that wimp for?" Jason asked Michelle. Jason was handsome and most of the girls fancied him—and he knew it. He wasn't

particularly interested in Michelle. He could pull all of the prettiest girls in school, but he did enjoy baiting John Baker.

“What's wrong with going with me?” he continued.

“You never asked me to,.” Michelle replied with a blush, feeling flattered. It would be a big plus for her in front of all her school mates if she went to the disco with Jason Adams. She smiled coyly at Jason, gently twisting from side to side as she played with a strand of her hair.

“I'm askin' now, sweetheart. You comin' with me or not? Don't settle for third best when you can go with the Ace.”

Michelle turned apologetically towards John. “You don't mind, do you? I'd love to see your photographs some time. Perhaps next week?”

“No, it's okay, Michelle,” John lied, feeling deflated.

“Hey Baker, why don't you take Sedgewick over there?” Jason snorted as he nodded in the direction where Ian was standing. “You could go along as the broad with that mop of hair. I might even give you a dance,” he added, puckering his lips.

John wasn't so much angry at Jason's remark as upset at the fact that Michelle had laughed at it. He walked back towards Ian feeling small and as though the bottom had just fallen out of his world.

“What's wrong?” Ian asked on his return. “What was it that Adams was saying?”

“I'll swing for that bastard one of these days, I swear I will. He's only gone and snatched Michelle right from under my feet.”

“There'll be other opportunities, mate,” Ian suggested in an attempt to lift his friend's spirits.

“Nah, she's not worth it. I wouldn't take her out now if she paid me,” John answered miserably, though he knew that if she *did* ask, he would jump at the chance.

As the two boys made their way home, they noticed a pall of thick gray smoke rising up over the rooftops and a flickering of red from some unseen fire. From the distance, the sound of sirens could be heard.

“Hell, it must be a building on fire, a real big one by the look of it. Come on, let's go see,” John said with excitement. The two boys ran across the road and toward the direction of the smoke.

“It seems to be pretty close to where you live, John,” Ian stated as he puffed alongside of his friend.

“Yes, you're right, it must be. I wonder where it is?”

The two friends turned the corner and ran down the alley toward the maisonnettes where John lived. Then they stopped dead in their tracks.

It was John's own block that was already well ablaze. Several fire appliances were gathered in front of the inferno and a number of fire fighters with hoses were trying to wet the building down.

Fear and panic etched across John's face, his eyes filled with tears. Ian glanced at his friend in horror.

"No!" John suddenly cried out and began to run as fast as he could towards the burning building.

Crowds of people were already gathered to watch the blaze and police officers were attempting to push them back to safety.

"Hold on, young man," shouted one of the officers as he caught John by his arm, preventing him from running through.

"Let me go, let me go, I live her," John sobbed, tears streaming down his face. "Let me go...I want to find my Mom."

"Miranda," The officer called to a young WPC standing close by.

An attractive police woman with dark, combed back hair beneath her cap came towards them.

"Yes Sarge?" she inquired.

"You had better take this young lad to the van, give him a sweet, hot drink. He lives in the building that's ablaze," the officer said compassionately.

"Come on with me, love," the WPC said in tender tones, putting an arm around his shoulder and gently escorting him towards a police van.

As he climbed inside, John saw the first of two ambulances that were speeding around the street corner with blue, glaring lights.

"I need to find my Mom. Is she safe?" he asked, choking back tears.

"I dunno yet, love. I do know that some people have been rescued, some had already got themselves out when we arrived and have gone to hospital for smoke inhalation. Other than that, we will just have to wait for the flames to be extinguished, but it is likely that she is safe. What floor did you live on?"

"The second," John sobbed.

He noticed the policewoman's face turn grave but all she said was for him not to worry unduly.

His tears were stinging his eyes now and he rubbed at them with the back of his hand. He wasn't concerned about his personal belongings, his PC or his Hi-fi system, nor any of his CD collection; all he was concerned about was that his Mom was safe and well.

John was just telling the WPC his full name when another officer came over to talk to her in whispers. Then, going to the front of the van, he started it up and drove out of the street.

To answer his unasked question, the WPC smiled and said that they were taking him to hospital in case he was suffering from shock.

"We can look after you better there and that's where your Mom would have been taken," Miranda told him comfortingly.



As he watched the police van drive away, Ian was still standing with tears in his eyes. His mind was almost numb as he watched ambulance crews bringing out bodies on stretchers and putting them into waiting ambulances. He couldn't tell if Mrs. Baker was among them as they all had blankets pulled over their heads.

The ambulances sped off as the fire crews continued damping down the now smoldering building. The heavy smell of smoke and burning filled the air. Some people turned away while others gathered to discuss the fire in small groups.

It seemed like hours that John had been in the small room in the hospital. Nurses had frequently come in to talk to him and try encouraging him. He was just sipping at a cup of hot chocolate when Miranda, the WPC, came back to see him. John immediately sensed by the look on her face that something was wrong.

"It's Mom, isn't it?" he said bravely. "Is she...is she dead?"

Miranda took his hand and looked into his eyes, ensuring that she had his full attention.

"John. I want you to be very brave for me and listen carefully to what I have to say to you."

John felt his throat tighten and he began to shake as a red hot, solitary tear ran down his cheek. He braced himself for the worst.

"John, your Mom was trapped by the fire in one of the bedrooms. As far as we can yet make out, one of your neighbors who escaped the fire phoned your father at work and told him what was happening.

"Your father arrived home as the fire was taking hold and managed to push his way past one of the fire fighters. Apparently, he was trying to save your Mom but he was overcome by smoke on the stairway..."

"And Mom, what about Mom?" John interrupted.

"Miranda took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, but they were both found dead by the fire crew."

Miranda's voice began to sound distant, then faded all together from John's hearing. He felt sick and tears flooded once more from his eyes. He began to feel dizzy as the full realization that he had lost both his parents hit home. He would never see them again, never be able to tell them just how much he loved them both. They were gone, taken from him and he was alone.

He tried looking at Miranda but her face was out of focus. He tried looking around the room but it wouldn't stop spinning. He was afraid and everything kept going around and around.

"How are you feeling, John?" inquired a pretty nurse.

"Where am I, what has happened? THE FIRE. Is this a dream? No, it's real, isn't it?"

"Come on now, don't start agitating yourself. I want you to relax. I'm afraid it is real but you must try not to get yourself all upset."

"I can remember it all now, but how come I'm in a hospital bed and how come my head hurts?"

“You have an awful lot of questions.” The nurse smiled. “But as far as I know you passed out when the lady officer broke the news to you and you banged your head when you hit the floor. You've got quite a lump on your forehead.”

John's eyes began to moisten again as he began to make mental images of his parents.

“I'm going to give you a mild sedative, John, because I don't want you getting stressed. You're going to need a lot of rest.”

John was vaguely aware of the nurse dabbing his arm as he sobbed on the pillow, then he felt the needle prick his skin.

John was kept in hospital for several days, both to keep him under observation and while the authorities decided what to do with him. He was both orphaned and homeless.

During this time, a lady welfare officer made several visits to him and a social worker came to see him, too. Even Miranda made a visit when she was off-duty; everyone seemed so caring and so wanting to help.

The social worker, whose name was Gail Redhall, paid him a second visit on the evening of his third day in hospital.

“Hello John, and how are you feeling today?”

“Not too bad, Gail,” he replied.

“Well, I have been in touch with all of your relatives since I last saw you. Your parents' funeral is tomorrow and your..” She stopped to look at her note book “Aunt Caroline is taking care of all the proceedings. Do you feel up to attending?”

“Oh yes, I definitely want to go,” he replied quietly

“Oh, and your gran is being flown over from Australia. She has been very concerned about you and has even inquired as to whether it could be possible for you to go live in Australia with her.

In spite of his grief, John's face lit up slightly.

“However, due to your gran's age and the fact that she is unable to walk, we unfortunately can't allow that.”

John's face fell again.

“Your Aunt Caroline has kept in touch with us about you too. She would have liked to visit you but she's been very busy clearing up all the legal things like insurance and such, not to mention making the funeral arrangements. She also has offered to take you in. So, how do you feel about living in London?”

John wasn't really sure just what he thought about it as he hadn't even given it any consideration. He knew that he would have jumped at the chance to go live in Australia as he felt much closer to his gran and had enjoyed his holiday there so much, but he did like his Aunt too, and London would be a pleasant change from Manchester.