

DE KLEENEX  
KRONIEKEN

**NESKE  
BEKS**

Writer/Director

Neske Beks (born in Belgium, 1972) has a West-African Flemish background. She received her education in Theatre (Acting and Performing Arts), though during acting school her teachers encouraged her to write and direct her own plays.

She started her education at the well-known theatre school Studio Herman Teirlinck in Antwerp, though graduated in 2000 in Amsterdam.

In 2002 she won the Hollandse Nieuwe Prize, a Dutch prize for Playwriting. Since then she's been working for years as a spoken word performer, writer (playwrights, poetry and screenplays) and theatre director. Autumn 2011 her debut novel The Kleenex Chronicles will be published.

NESKE BEKS

# The Kleenex Chronicles

1. Outward  
(Bus 297, Waarloos)

Somewhere along the way in life I'd decided my black-and-white two-piece with the curlicue ornamentation on the sleeves and lapels was ideal for interviews. But if I'm completely honest with myself, I can no longer take seriously the thought that I truly believed it.

The factory was on the main road beyond Waarloos. In my black-and-white two-piece, but brushed down from top to toe as gran would put it, I took bus 297 to the industrial estate where my future lay.

Two handbags over my shoulder. A small one for my wallet, lipstick, paper tissues and all the other accoutrements a young lady of good breeding carries around in her bag. A large one for the requisite diplomas and other paperwork a young lady of good breeding with job aspirations and other ambitions carries around with her.

The genuine article. Aside from the good breeding, that is... And perhaps the fact that a connoisseur would immediately recognize my handbags as seasonal bargains from C&A. So be it...

Years later a good friend who doubles as a psychologist would explain to me that the contents of my handbag told her all there was to know about my survival instinct. If they took my house away from me, I could make a fresh start anywhere. I always have everything with me.

The bus driver gives me my change and doesn't quite manage to stifle a phlegmy coughing fit.

'Bless you!' Five wet francs in the palm of my hand.

The paper tissues come into play immediately. My gran says a young lady should always have paper tissues on her. You never know when they might come in handy.

I offer him one. An awkward form of politeness perhaps that he flatly rejects. Being well brought up can be awkward.

Anyhow, before I can completely finish wiping my hands the driver

exhibits grander ambitions by giving his vehicle such a burst of speed that I fly the full length of the aisle. Straight into the lap of a fat lady holding a packet of biscuits.

‘I’m so sorry.’

‘It’s nothing,’ she lies, giving her Limmits biscuits a crestfallen look. Again I proffer a superfluous paper tissue. I hesitate but recover and then overcompensate by sitting only two seats behind her.

The sign marking the boundary of Kontich slides past my window. Why is Kontich spelled with a ch instead of the usual g? That sounds rather less rude, if you ask me: kontig. I settle my backside into the leatherette seat behind the lady.

Get a move on, I think, staring at the blue plastic around my paper tissues. Get a move on, or I’ll be late. It’s 9.52 by my watch and my appointment is at ten. This realization activates my underarm sweat glands.

The fat lady puts the Limmits wrapper to her lips and pours the crumbs into her jowls.

I don’t need to see this, I tell myself. But I look all the same. I stare shamelessly.

Meanwhile time slips forward to 9.54 and the underarm seams of my black-and-white two-piece grow damper and squelchier with each passing second. The fat lady is savouring the last few crumbs in her Limmits packet. I watch her fat pink tongue skim back and forth across the cellophane. My eyes seem to zoom in on the crumbs and the tiny pink protuberances on her tongue as they enter into a creamy symbiosis of carnality and wholemeal grain. Again I think: I don’t need to see this. But I can’t tear myself away. Her tongue. Her uvula. Her false teeth.

Drab Street stop

The bus pulls over and the fat lady waddles hastily to the door. She can’t resist turning to look at me for a second before she gets out. Her top lip slides up to reveal small jagged teeth. She looks like a Pekinese smiling

at me, although the moment doesn't quite last long enough for me to tell whether I'm dealing with a smile or a grisly threat. The doors close behind her and since she's rather a short person she's instantly hidden from view.

I'm left with an ingrained image of a woman grinning.

Our gran has just got herself a set of teeth like that. During the day it's too big for the curve of her gums and constantly tries to lead a life of its own, so she spends most of her time struggling to keep it in her mouth. At night it soaks in the glass she uses for my freshly pressed juice in the mornings. I've asked whether she could perhaps serve the juice in a different glass. But our gran swears by Drefit.

Brewery stop. If I can get up a good pace I may be there by one or two minutes past ten.

'Your ten o'clock appointment is here, sir,' the woman at the reception desk hisses into the black bakelite receiver. The mouthpiece has oily condensation marks around the holes. I contemplate what a source of bacteria it must be, harbouring a million-strong army of nasty horrid little creatures doing their best to bring down the woman and her colleagues hour after hour, day after day.

'Mr. Liekens will come for you in a moment.'

It's three minutes past ten. I've more or less made it and here I am, face to face with one of the few women who in this day and age, the early nineties, still paints her lips liver-pink and rubs bright red blusher all the way up past her cheekbones. Her eyes drill into my skin.

I give her a friendly nod.

It's a look I've been seeing for years, feeling for years. A sincere blend of curiosity, astonishment and horror. It's a look that has everything to do with the brown colour of my skin and nothing to do with any conscious thought behind the eyes in question. A moment later, as her appraising stare glides down my torso to my legs, I know she's just discovered I'm not only black but a woman into the bargain. Which could mean I represent a threat.

Mr. Liekens looks at me in a totally different way. And I look in a totally different way at Mr. Liekens. Mr. Liekens talks, but his words don't really seem to get through to me. They become stuck somewhere in an omniverse that separates his world from mine. I can't hear Mr. Liekens. I can only see Mr. Liekens, and that has certain repercussions.

Some men have such fat arses that I can't help staring at them for a long time, trying to imagine what a huge fat arse would look like naked. I picture the man heaving his mega-arse into his chequered micro-trousers early that morning, before drinking a cup of coffee and then planting the fleshy monster on a toilet seat where he... – I don't need to think about this.

'You don't need this,' my wise voice says to my drifting self.

'Actually in fact what it comes down to is that our clients come to our tasting facility and you – assuming of course that you are indeed asked to fill the vacancy – pull beers and have a little chat here or there.'

From its prominent position in the centre of his desktop my Hospitality diploma gleams expectantly in its plastic cover. I'm probably gleaming a good deal less.

'François Liekens' is engraved on a fake-gold nameplate. I'd already forgotten what he was called.

Liekens. There used to be a Liekens in my class at school.

We sang: Anneke Liekens, soup that weakens, soup full of fat, three fries in a vat.

'That's why actually in fact...' Mr. Liekens spits his abominable sentences at me without looking my way for a second.

Come to that, he's had his back to me all this time. I feel grateful yet again for my good upbringing. Certainly does come in handy.

'...the impression made by whoever's doing the job is such a high priority. Actually what it comes down to in fact is that we place great emphasis on our girls being well dressed. Beautifully dressed.'

The fat arse takes a quarter turn and the semi-bald back of his head is

replaced by a smiling full-moon face, the colour of the nose suggesting its owner regularly consumes large quantities of alcohol.

‘Actually you do in fact speak quite good Dutch for a dark-skinned lassie, don’t you?’

Terms like actually and in fact don’t belong together in a tolerably well-constructed grammatical sentence, I think to myself. But I hold my tongue, and smile.

Always smile. I learned that on my Tourism and Marketing course, although it’s something I never really needed to learn, since I’ve been smiling all my life.

Liekens absorbs my black-and-white two-piece with satisfaction and looks at me with such an enthusiastic smile that to be on the safe side I subtly manoeuvre my skirt with its curlicue ornamentation downwards a little. No bare flesh in the presence of this man.

The suspicion that I’d be little more than a glorified bar girl puts paid to the lofty ambitions in my large C&A handbag and dashes all my hopes of a dream job in the tourist sector.

‘So be it...’ our gran would say. ‘You have to start somewhere, don’t you...?’

Bonk. Mr. Liekens plunks a huge glass of beer down in front of my nose.

On the glass it says ‘Alken Maes’. Magic words in our village. Put Alken Maes on your coat of arms and all doors open.

‘What was it again?’ he asks, sliding my diploma towards him. ‘Ah yes, Priscilla. Like Elvis’s wife. Of course!’ His eyes search for any resemblance to the seventies icon. In vain.

A mild urge to vomit comes over me. How often have I seen this before? Joyful little stars light up in the eyes at the memory of Priscilla Presley, followed by obvious disappointment that I’m not lily white and blonde-locked, but coffee-brown with a frizz.

‘Here’s to you, Priscilla!’ says Mr. Liekens, his smile baring two rows of yellow teeth. Then he tips the beer down his gullet in one.

Bonk. Mr. Liekens puts his empty back down on the glass tabletop with

a bang. To me beer is the most disgusting form of alcohol known to man, but I don't feel like letting it show.

'*Ad fundum!*' I say with a sour laugh.

'Ah, so you're an expert already,' says the puffy monster, and his guffaw echoes down the corridors.

Mr. Liekens looks at me expectantly.

I wonder how, if at all, I can ask him what a job like this actually brings in.

Can I really ask him that, or will I sound ungrateful?

Or greedy? Grasping perhaps?

'Come on then, let's see how much in fact you actually know!'

I put the glass to my lips and swallow.

My quartz watch hovers away to my left and tells me it's ten to eleven.

I swallow.

I swallow. And swallow, and swallow...

One gulp for gran, one gulp for Puckie and one gulp for Dede who's up in heaven.

After one more swallow I'm nearly there. Mr. Liekens' face shines like the morning sun over Waarloos and I know I'm almost in.

One more gulp for Thierry no, no gulps for Thierry. Thierry's screwing someone else and will never, ever deserve my love. Another gulp for gran, then a gulp for mum who's up in heaven too.

When I finally put the glass down on the desktop with a loud thud I know I've landed the job.

And I sense that here, at this moment and in this position, I still have a choice.

'Congratulations, Ms... What was it again?' He peers furtively at my diploma.

'I think our Brewery will actually in fact be making a really good move by taking you on. What am I saying? I'm damn sure of it.'

I stand up and feel dizziness strike. I wobble, but here comes my saviour

in the person of Liekens himself, who catches me before I fall.

Cheap aftershave wraps itself around my neck muscles like a scarf and images of fat arses on toilet seats surge towards me row upon row.

'Many thanks, Mr. Liekens, but actually in fact I think I'd rather decline after all. Which I hereby...' I manage to stammer. Then I grab my handbags and leave his office at considerable speed. Along the corridor, past the desk where the receptionist, she of the penetrating stare, looks at me again with raised eyebrows.

When the fresh air hits me cold in the face, I break. And with me a warm flood that spatters my shoes.

I throw up everything I've swallowed, in one great gush.

Paper tissues.

Where are my paper tissues when I really need them?

Out of the corner of my eye I see François Liekens at his window, watching me with a hint of compassion. He stands there like a hazard I've narrowly managed to avoid – at a safe distance, but still a bit too close for my liking. I stick up one hand and produce something resembling a smile. Good upbringing, see? Always comes in handy.

But as I walk away I feel my staggering gait transform itself into an increasingly firm stride. 'Click clack click clack click clack click,' I listen to my heels striking the black tarmac.

I swallow and an aftertaste of bile slides down into my throat. I've swallowed enough. Enough for everybody. Whole generations before me have swallowed whatever came at them.

Perhaps for most people, life is like downing beers in one.

But here and now I decide once and for all: not for me.