

# THE MAKING OF 'DOWN THE CHIMNEY' (KID-SISTER'S PERSPECTIVE)

Jean Tee, 2004

From: *E\*V\*O\*L E\*Y\*E LAND\*S-END*

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## *The opening*

Jennifer has an exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam! My parents and I arrive uncomfortably early and are uncomfortably dressed-up. We are both proud and nervous. Not only because this is her most important exhibition up till now, but also because video-images of ourselves will be shown.

The 'Down the chimney'-space is dark and dreamy. Curtains hang from the ceiling, oddly shaped pillows lie on the floor and the four of us are projected on the walls. Life-sized and simultaneously on three walls. There are joyful images of two little girls, wearing masks, jumping from pillow to pillow and of our family, funnily dressed, playing in the garden. But other images dominate, more oppressing ones, gloomier ones. We pitch into each other, fall down, are threatened and overcome by sadness. When I see my sister, I want to ask her: 'Is this the way you see us: struggling, anxious and alone?' But she looks so radiant, laughing and chatting with her friends, that I leave it be. Only upon leaving the room, I see it: the garment I wore in the film is hanging through a noose from the ceiling.

## *The film shoot*

'Hey Jeany! We're going to start.' Jennifer wakes me from my nap. I've been taking a lot of those lately; my new pills make me drowsy. My mother looks like a fairy godmother in her dress made out of quilts. My father is wearing the hairy, brown plaid that used to be on our couch. A bear mask clutched in his hands. For me, Jennifer made a tunic out of her old, orange, checked blanket and my yellow one. On the back a sheet with the words 'worried' and 'head' painted on it. She herself is wearing a grey outfit, made of capriciously shaped layers of felt. 'Shall we begin in the garden?' Sure, why not. Frankly, my parents and I haven't a clue what the point is of all this. When my sister asked us a couple of weeks ago to put our dreams and family-memories on tape and our fears and secrets on top of it, we were a little apprehensive.

Now, we're mostly curious about her plans with it. And about the things the others have said.

'We'll start with 'Annemaria koekkoek'.' Jennifer places herself at the prune-tree, her back turned to us, and the three of us automatically form a line next to the magnolia, about ten metres behind her.

'Annemariiiiiiiiiiaaaa koekkoek!'

My father has taken a small step towards her, I have taken a few large ones and my mother has run halfway there already.

'Mom, return.' 'No way, I was completely frozen!' 'Yeah, right, back.'

'Cool that you guys just do all of this,' says Jonas, the cameraman. The combination of his large body and the knot of blonde dreadlocks on top of his head make him look like an enlarged child. He's filming my parents as they are having a stick fight in the snow. Behind them, all sorts of people are watching them from the park. Jennifer and I start our fight calmly, concentrating on fluid, martial arts kind of movements. Tock! Tock! The thrashing of our sticks makes a loud and sharp sound. Tock! Tock! Tocktocktocktock! Our beating into each other is no longer a matter of form. Pure self-defence from my side. A grim fixation on my sister's face. We play to win. I just pushed over my mother during a game of musical chairs.

'Ai, does it hurt?' My hand is red and I feel my fingers throbbing with pain.

'It's ok. Remember when we were small? That we always stopped fighting then too when one of us really got hurt?' 'Yeah, we were sweeties. Let's go, the others are waiting.'

Now we're supposed to do a sort of conga line around the garden. Jennifer is last. She is meant to trip and to be left behind. Much to the amusement of the people in the park, we do this over and over again, until it looks natural.

One of the stories my mother apparently told is about a dream of hers. She dances with Jonas, who has changed himself into "Dark Things". A dark habit hangs around his large frame, his face invisible. A frightening appearance. Their dance starts peacefully and pleasantly, but slowly accelerates, till they're spinning around each other with enormous speed. Dark Things doesn't leave my father be either. In his pyjamas he comes out of the bathroom, carrying a balloon with a face painted on it. He looks so small and fragile. He puts the balloon on his pillow and completely disappears under the blankets himself. Dark Things approaches and raises a club over his head. As the balloon bursts, a red sludge billows out of it.

Jennifer wants to combine my old dream of becoming an astronaut with the nights I told her about the time i used to spend on the balcony, gazing at the stars, contemplating. I'm wearing a space helmet and silver moon boots.

While I sit there, for the first time in a long while, I think of the past, I think of us. Of Jennifer, lifting me out of my baby bed and taking me to her bed. Of that time on a climbing frame in England, when children made Chinese-like sounds to us and I looked at my sister and realised for the first time that we were different. Of the marks we used to make on our letter "J" shaped chocolate bars to indicate up to what point we were allowed to eat. Of playing with the cuddly toys and sleeping hand-in-hand. Of the tennis games Jennifer used to play, coming back from being 5-1 behind to a tie-break in the third set. Of the names we gave each other: Mouse for her, Pino and Olli-Okki for me. Of the nastiest thing I ever said to her: 'I'm disgusted by you.' (When I wanted her to stop sleeping in my bed and using my toothbrush.) And the nastiest thing she ever said to me: 'Don't be such a baby.' (When I told her how I felt.) Of the image of Jennifer sitting on the stairs, crying because a girl she knew had killed herself. She was so appalled that someone could actually end her own life.

The second time I enter 'Down the chimney', I decide to be more objective. I see images shifting in a dream-like fashion, telling a story that isn't clearly defined, but clear nonetheless. I see organic shapes and colours. Together they form a new world of myths, dreams and associations. Memories of the fun we had the weekend we shot the film rise to the surface.

Jonas and I, covered in red mashed potatoes, because it came splurging out of the balloon. My father taking a picture of my mother in her dress while she bashed the ice of our little pond with her stick, trying to make breathing holes for the fish. My sister and I, having a fit of laughter because I look so ridiculous in my space-outfit. Eating Chinese take-away while watching the Simpsons.

I look at Jennifer, still just my sister, but an artist now as well and I wonder what her story would have been.