

The oppressive perspective of the stalker



Christiaan Weijts

Art. 285b

IN CHRISTIAAN WEIJTS'S debut novel, love evolves into an obsession. When his girlfriend Victoria Fabers terminates their relationship, Sebastiaan Steijn, the main character in the book, inundates her with telephone calls, SMS messages, and e-mails.

The stalker justifies his conduct in the novel, but the issue of whether or not he can refute the accusation still remains. The striking feature of Weijts's novel is the perspective through which readers view the events. They see the situation only through the eyes of the stalker – and only gradually experience growing distaste.

Sebastiaan earns his living as a piano teacher in his place of residence, Leiden, and also plays as a background pianist in an Amsterdam pizzeria. The fact that he leads two lives is also demonstrated by the fact that he visits prostitutes and peep shows in Amsterdam. He becomes acquainted with Victoria in one of the striptease joints, where she works to support her study at a dance academy. Sebastiaan becomes enchanted by this impulsive, elusive and licentious performer who alternately attracts and repels him, without ever giving herself to him completely. At the same time, he begins a fleeting relationship, which is doomed from the outset, with his sixteen-year-old pupil Rosetta. With her, he devotes his energy to the sonatas of the composer Domenico Scarlatti, whom he admires greatly.

When Rosetta ends their affair, Sebastiaan's obsession for Victoria takes over. The stream of SMS messages, e-mails, and telephone calls with which he bombards her eventually forces her to lodge a complaint for stalking, referring to the article in the Dutch Penal Code.

Besides a pure defence of Sebastiaan's actions, the novel also presents a sharp picture of the times. Weijts sketches a portrait of a generation that can no longer cope with an unprecedented amount of freedom, a generation for which the differences between art and porn, passion and lust, truth and fiction have no significance whatsoever, and which can only find meaningful engagement in limit-stretching behaviour. In that context, stalking is primarily a metaphor for a libertine generation that, although it seeks love, is only capable of pursuing it in vain. Weijts has articulated this doubt and desperation perfectly in his debut novel.



photo Bert Nienhuis

Christiaan Weijts (b. 1976) studied Dutch Language and Literary Theory in Leiden. A collection of the columns he wrote for the Leiden student magazine *Mare* appeared in 2003. *Art. 285b* (2006) represents Weijts's debut as a novelist.

In his virtuoso debut novel, Christiaan Weijts constructs a cathedral of sound and pain.

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In the sixth year of the third millennium, a Dutch novel that could only have been written in the 21st century has ultimately appeared.

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An interview with Christiaan Weijts

‘What do you need a man for?’

by Aleid Truijens
(De Volkskrant, 28 August 2006)

translated by George Hall

His debut novel, *Art. 285b*, was warmly received and even met with rave reviews. Christiaan Weijts (1976) on writing about music, the impoverished communication due to sms, and the student girls who throw off all restrictions – ‘drinking every evening, hundreds of one-night stands’.

Imagine it happened to you. You write a novel, your first, in the awareness that you are not the only one knocking on the publisher’s door. But the publisher accepts you in the very first interview. Then you are one of the dozens of debutants that year. You know that debutants are seldom discussed, and, if so, it usually occurs both condescendingly and collectively.

But shortly after the presentation, a comprehensive review by Geerten Meijnsing appears in *Vrij Nederland* magazine. It is one, long, slaphappy eulogy: the author would have been glad to have written this novel himself – ‘a cathedral of sound and pain’ – and directly tips literary juries and foreign publishers. To him this debut is ‘a hell of recognition’.

Christiaan Weijts is still rather dazed from all these developments. Of course, he was delighted. ‘But I was also afraid that so much praise would work against me.’ No, Meijnsing is not one of his friends, but he is an admirer of his style. And fortunately, positive reviews also appeared in *HP/De Tijd*, *NRC Handelsblad* and *De Volkskrant* by critics who do not identify with the main character. The first edition of *Art. 285b* sold out in no time. The second one too. And, indeed, a section has been translated – ‘a part with lots of canals and red light in it’ – which will circulate at the Frankfurter Buchmesse. ‘Sounded quite good in English’, admits Weijts.

Art. 285b is certainly a striking novel, with a strange title. It refers to the law on stalking: ‘He who unlawfully and systematically breaches the privacy of another person’s living habits...’ The main character Sebastiaan Steijn, a piano teacher and bar pianist, is accused of stalking by his former girlfriend Vicky, a *peepshow* girl and ballet student. The novel has the form of a plea in which the ‘accused’ passionately explains that love was his motive. A tried and trusted technique – see Nabokov’s *Lolita*. His Humbert Humbert wrote: ‘With a murderer, you can

always count on an imaginative prose style.’ Weijts echoes: ‘As you know, with a stalker one can always count on an elegant prose style.’

In addition, Sebastiaan loses his heart to his 15-year-old, Italian piano student Rosa. Their shared favourite composer, Scarlatti, also had a preference for *fruit vert*. Sebastiaan develops an audacious theory – the notes in Scarlatti’s composition are a covert declaration of love for the 12-year-old Maria Barbara. ‘I conceived that theory myself’, Weijts confesses.

In the novel, the hypothesis is refuted by a beautiful student. Sebastiaan switches his ambition to music itself: he composes variations in which he mixes the sugary Scarlatti with the wildly romantic Liszt, music in which his love for an innocent girl and a shrewd teaser converge. Weijts ‘tried it out on the piano a bit’.

He discovered how difficult it is to write about music. ‘What does Scarlatti sound like? I tried to write charming Scarlatti passages and inspired pieces that sound like Liszt in his coarser period. The art is to convert what is happening in the music into language, into tone, style and rhythm, without having to use metaphors such as “gushing waterfall”. While writing, I put on Scarlatti and Liszt. But when I revised the text, I preferred Bach, he is clear and rational. Bach clears everything up.’

Art. 285b is also musical even when it is not dealing with music. Weijts’s book is a feast of changing registers. Stiff legal jargon alternates with terms used in the sex business, romantic epistolary styles, the code language of young people in their sms messages, student-like jokes. This is roughly the language that rings in the environment of Weijts, who is editor and columnist of the Leiden university weekly, *Mare*.

“Readers have a crap-detector, they feel when someone is not honest.”

‘I have done everything that happens in my book,’ he says, ‘but I have enlarged it. I have not been a bar pianist, but I have performed on occasion and have given piano lessons. I know girls who dance striptease, as well as Rosa-like girls. You compile them, an arm from the one, a leg from the other. Particularly if you take yourself as the starting point, you then arrive at the universal things. People do not differ a great deal from one another. Readers have a crap detector, they feel when someone is not being honest.’

He has also had intimate knowledge of stalking. ‘Relationships end and people cannot leave one another alone. The fact that they can bombard one another with emails, voicemails and sms messages nowadays does not improve the situation.’

The increase in means of communication, in Weijts's opinion, impoverishes its content. 'Being constantly in contact leads to misunderstandings. Conflicts are no longer discussed. Sms messages form the communication, which again stimulates disagreement. People drink a lot these days, and many messages are sent in a state of inebriation. When people get home they unleash all their grievances, and the recipient reads them soberly the next morning. People no longer sit face to face with one another, but communicate via a screen, that is the reason. You miss the physical reaction, the non-verbal signals.'

Of course, you can remain deaf to that verbal onslaught, Weijts confirms. 'But being unreachable leads to suspicion. Where is he? What is he up to? Jealousy arises quickly in this kind of setting. You seldom hear people saying anything else into their telephone except to render an account of where they are and what they are doing. The photos they make with their mobile phones are also all the same. They show how much the maker and the others are enjoying themselves. Always laughing faces, glass in their hands. All those texts and images are stored. It is not difficult to find evidence for stalking.'

Weijts enjoys observing students in Leiden, his place of residence. This is also fieldwork for his column. 'It is a kind of sketchbook in which you do style exercises, experiment with structures, record dialogues. It is a good place to become enthusiastic about literature.' Not so long ago, he observed a group of girls in a bar. 'A mobile phone with an sms message, probably from a boy, went from hand to hand. Laughter! I thought about that poor boy, perhaps sitting lonely in his room expressing his deepest feelings.'

In his letters to Rosa, written with her pencil, Sebastiaan refers to the love letter that Beethoven, '*zwar mit Bleistift (mit deinem)*', wrote to his loved one. 'If you compare Beethoven's letter to our incessant chatter, the contrast is enormous. In those days, a letter took a week to be delivered. All the passion was bundled into that one letter. That simply doesn't happen with an sms message.'

On the other hand, Weijts sighs, 'a talent for conciseness and biting irony may be stimulated'. Yes, of course he participates in this. He is thirty. Old enough to have read and heard a lot, young enough to hang around in student bars. 'Not only to observe, but also to go after the girls.'

He is a late-developer in that field. The realm of the night only opened up to him after his study of Dutch Language and Literature. 'When I studied, I lived together with my girlfriend. We used to go walking along the shore, on the dunes. Then came the period that I had to make up for lost time. I met girls like Vicky,

who were deeply entrenched in a world that was, to me, unknown and promiscuous. It was attractive because the contrast was so great.'

Now he also sees a student world in Leiden in which it is primarily the girls who throw off the reins. 'Out drinking every evening, hundreds of one-night stands. Presenting yourself on your weblog as a Playboy bunny. Apparently every girl seems to think she is entitled to a wild time. But you see them becoming fatter and greyer, from an overdose of beer and a shortage of sleep. Nabokov wrote: "Students are the coffins in which the flesh of my Lolas lies in state ". I won't go that far. But Rosa changes in a very short time from a timid, serious girl into this kind of exuberant student.'

Ultimately, this Scarlatti girl also evolves into a new-style woman: financially and erotically independent, manipulative and ruthless – a 'feminist tsunami', in the words of Sebastiaan. 'What do you need a man for?' Weijts asks rhetorically. 'In a little while we won't even be needed for reproduction. I don't know if that's such a good trend' Whatever the case, he thinks that men ought to reconsider their position. 'Boys are still stuck in the old patterns. The role that Sebastiaan assumes, as the saviour of fallen angels, no longer works.'

An idea for a new novel has already arisen. It will again be about love. Weijts conceived the idea in Verona, at the house of birth of Romeo's Juliet. 'The wall is covered with names and wishes. I want to write the love stories of couples who have written their names there, full of expectation.'

Immortal love does not exist, but immortal art does. The final sentence of *Lolita* is: 'This is the only immortality you and I can share, my Lolita'. In Weijts's book, there is again an echo: 'We have to get on, that is what you and I can still share.' The final sentence of *Art. 285b*, which Geerten Meijnsing could not read with dry eyes, was thus a loose reference to Nabokov. Sebastiaan and Vicky have to get on to the stage, but they also have to run their course as characters in a novel.

Christiaan Weijts also has to get on in the literary world. He has succeeded in the talent contest. Now only a whole oeuvre to go.

Sample Translation

Art. 285b

(Art. 285b)

by Christiaan Weijts

(Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2006)

Translated by Brian Doyle

[pp. 16-23]

Human existence, he figured, fluctuated between the inclination to security and the inclination to adventure, and circumstances had now decided that the pendulum had swung to the adventure side or was about to do so in the not too distant future.

‘A man is always a compromise between Tristan and Casanova’ was the formula he maintained with friends. Dedication to one single woman, a woman who, as it were, encapsulated all possible women, promised security and the accumulation of shared memories. The price you had to pay was your freedom (‘what time will you be home?’) and a temporary decline in sexual performance. Crossing over to the other side of the spectrum brought you into a world in which horniness, tension and significant density of experience ruled the roost.

The suspect had played the Tristan for seven years with a girl he met at secondary school. It was high time he treated himself to a Casanova refresher course, and Amsterdam seemed like the liveliest possible classroom. The city was an unstable container in which so much was floating around that a multiplicity of explosions and discharges was guaranteed. In the university town where he lived, everything was diffident and respectable. Experiments took place under the controlled circumstances of five student associations, two or three discos and a handful of cafés, each with its own strictly segregated group of patrons who would put in an appearance every weekend.

When his restaurant recitals were over for the evening, the suspect always took the tram to the Leidseplein. The mass transportation of teenagers from the satellites and the suburbs gathered pace. The trams would steam up, sweet from cosmetics and sweat. The doors opened at the Leidseplein and the creatures of the night dispersed into the surrounding cafés and discos. The rest of the passengers remained in the tram, like silent parents leaving their kids behind for a school outing. This was the tram stop where the youth distinguished itself from the adults and, for the meantime at least, he still belonged to the former group.

He loved the metamorphosis the city underwent around eleven at night. It was time to stack the daytime terrace tables of the city under canvas, like pieces of scenery after a show. As the shops rolled down their shutters, the public space was transformed into one big amorous meeting place. Night-time lowered the contact threshold and raised the interactive tempo. Meeting someone during the day usually implied a measured trajectory with many an awkward silence, half-hearted invitations, and more approving smiles than was good for a person.

The city at night was carnivalesque, in the sense that every high-spirited participant was both actor and audience at the same time. He himself played the role of wandering pianist in a dinner jacket. The man who sat at the bar after a performance, melancholic, drinking whisky and thinking about his girlfriend who had left him and what the future might hold for the world in general and for him in particular. As member of the audience, he also let himself be charmed by the new teenage girls, the jewels of the city at night. Patent leather boots and fishnet tights, long, bored, defiant faces and navels stuffed with diamonds. Tanned bellies, washboard firm, and jeans with slivers of string peering over the top. The curve of buttocks in loud, fanned-out, baggy skirts and the oval-shaped dimples you occasionally came across on the lower back, either side of the spine. And let's not forget the dimples between the collarbones where silver pendants not infrequently dangled, or the leather handbags on the floor surrounded by dancing huddles, or the wavy hair and the hairgrips, bands and clasps that kept it in shape.

Up to this point, only the breasts had been left out. *Oh la la*. They flaunted them upfront, proud, soft, either captured in bras, the lace of which sometimes revealed skin while they shimmied to the rhythm of their footsteps; or loose, nipples piercing white tops with spaghetti straps, made to be touched, the jewels of the city. A new type of girl had appeared on the world stage. According to the statistics, girls started to have sex these days around the age of fourteen or fifteen and by the time they had reached twenty they had experienced things that even their mothers' generation – adolescent in the 1960s – never got close to. If you followed the long evolution of womankind from the rib to the front cover of *Girl*

Talk, their liberation from the tyranny of male domination only took place yesterday. Women had just learned about sexual equality and, like anyone else with a new toy, they were thrilled with it. Whatever you might think of the third millennium, one thing is for sure: it's going to be the millennium of the woman.

After some introductory boozing in a couple of obscure and noisy bars, he bought a ticket on a whim at the front counter of the Paradiso. There he was in a dinner jacket surrounded by the hippest and prettiest teenagers. Crop tops, low-cut jeans and the most unlikely skirt creations imaginable; like the girl in front of him at the cloakroom who was wearing a skin-tight yellow and orange number with an oval-shaped opening exposing serious flesh from the line of the hips to the ribcage. It was clear that she was braless and slipless.

Inside he ordered a vodka and coke and stared at a girl's naked back. V-shaped straps zigzagged downwards. You could even see a hint of asscrack.

He took a deep breath and said: 'Tight outfit you're wearing, eh...'

The girl turned towards him with an arrogant smile. 'Thanks.'

She headed back to her girlfriends who had formed group at the base of a pillar somewhere, two glasses filled with yellowish stuff in her hands.

To all appearances, the life of a young person in western society at the beginning of the third millennium was juiced up, exhilarating and over the top.

In those days, the suspect had the same dream at least once a month. He would make his way onto a stage where an orchestra is already waiting, there would be applause from a full, expectant auditorium, he would shake the conductor's hand and take his place behind the grand piano. Just as the strings opened the piece, he would realise that he had prepared for a different concert. The shock was always enough to wake him immediately. Anxious sweat, fretful palpitations.

'Hey man, chillin'??'

A boy had appeared beside him. Suspect smiled politely. Boy told him he worked for the technical services at KLM and that he was an aircraft mechanic. He could organise free flights. Suspect feared for a moment that the bloke – bald and on the hefty side – wanted to take *him* on a free flight, but fortunately he

started on about *all that skirt* just waiting for his *visitor's card*. 'Then they'll be beggin' for a weekend away, guaranteed.'

Suspect conjured up a consenting smile. In theory, any one of the dancing girls in front of him could end up joining this guy on a plane to Madeira next week. Then he pulled a stack of cards from his pocket, carefully, as if they were one or other obscure religion's holy pictures. He inspected the girl with the straps on her back out of the corner of his eye. The buttons bedecking the straps invoked images of slowly unpacking a gift.

'Oh yeh... And does that include transatlantic flights?'

He tried to keep the conversation going. He nevertheless felt free to leave it for what it was, now that the aircraft mechanic had nervously fixed his gaze on two girls at the bar. Men keeping each other company in discos. A mammoth alliance with a single purpose – to avoid looking like a loner, and with the unspoken guarantee for both parties that the chances of a catch were increased, or at least not reduced any further.

He emptied his glass and decided it was time to make a move, to take another deep breath, to walk right up to her and declare: 'I'm a fervent supporter of unbuttonability.'

Without relaxing her smile, she tossed her dark curly tresses over her shoulder and leaned towards him, her head tilted. 'What?'

'I asked what you'd like to drink,' he repeated, a little louder. The unbuttonability stuff was overstepping things a bit. The girl smelt tauntingly horny. Added to that, he could clearly feel the warmth of her body. Her answer was swallowed up by the pulsations of God the DJ, but the suspect smiled and said delightedly: 'Ah... Sure...', as if she had just invited him to join her on her yacht in Saint-Tropez.

Just as he was about to ask a follow-up question she turned her button-back on him and threw her arms around one of the boyish types populating the room. The Bacardi Breezer he had in his hand pressed gently against her buttocks in the

entanglement. They took to the dance floor without a word. He lit a cigarette and pretended to be thinking.

Bollocks music was what they used to call it at home, when the neighbours played their radio in the garden in the summer. And in spite of the fact that he had once capitulated to bands that were already completely out of fashion in those days – such as the Rolling Stones, the Beatles and The Doors – he had to admit that his parents had been right, at least when it came to music. And it didn't improve much in the years that followed: funk, techno, acid, house, gabber, grunge, hip-hop, rap, soul. Globally speaking, it was evident that music had been stripped of as much expression, emotion, individuality and charm as possible, and all that was left was an accumulation of primitive rhythms and sounds that were supposed to bring about some kind of inadequate ecstasy. Nowhere in the city had been spared. Supermarkets, clothes stores, hairdressers, cars, and in many instances also, what was referred to in those days as the *shopfloor*: people let themselves be pounded to a pulp wherever they were. If what Plato said in *The Republic* was right – that musical education was of the highest importance 'because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inner places of the soul; on which they mightily fasten' – then there was much to be feared for the present generation.

But since we find ourselves at this moment within the confines of a police report, and in order to prevent the warm body of the bare facts hiding itself from view behind even the thinnest bra of morality, we'll simply tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

The aircraft mechanic was dancing with a girl further up, or whatever, they were close to each other and moving. He left half an hour later. Once you had been at the bar too long on your own you became a suspect loner who could only be expected to bring misery.

'That was short,' observed the cloakroom girl as she passed him his jacket.

'It was short but not sweet,' he replied in a reassuring tone.

It was dark outside and rainy. Tram rails gleamed, taxis cast cylinders of drizzle in front of them.

Next stop, Odeon nightclub. It was still open and he had had a reasonable experience there the week before.

In front of the entrance, three students were passing out yellow pamphlets the size of a credit card. He took one. *A safe night out. Information on the safest possible night out.* Read it!

A bouncer stood by the door, arms crossed over his belly, microphone next to his cheek. There was always a sort of barracks smell about establishments like this and an unambiguous sense of hostility.

‘Bring ladies next time!’ the bouncer yelled at a group of lads who had backed down and cleared off in the direction of the Leidsestraat. *‘Bring ladies next time, boys!’*

That was exactly it, suspect thought. They come here to learn on our pretty little bikes – *Dutch teenage girls*, famous the world over – so it’s only polite to do the right thing and offer something in return. Fair exchange, wankers, he growled to himself and opened the pamphlet.

Nightlife is about having fun, partying, having a good time. You relax, enjoy the conversation, you feel fantastic, you dance and give yourself completely to the music. You let go of everything and you’re ready to face the rest of the week.

The huddle at the door looked in his direction, surprised and a little sullen: he had burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

Suspect departed. His chances of being allowed in to the Odeon were zero, so much was clear. He headed along the Spuistraat, crossed the Dam, which was bathed in synthetic halogen light, passed Krasnapolsky, braced himself in the Warmoesstraat to keep the dealing and begging hordes at a distance – this was once among the city’s most luxurious streets – and arrived at the Wallen.

Taken together, the surrounding streets formed one massive stage set. Strangers with false names fucked in the narrow lanes. The blood thinned in your veins as each window revealed a different girl, more or less naked, unforgettable.

What you can only get in real life after a great deal of nagging and crawling is available here in such abundance it's enough to drive a man crazy. And there's no charge for looking.

Suspect always whistles when he walks through the red light district. He looks at the whores and whistles Schubert, Mozart, Chopin. This was partly an occupational disability – he whistled and hummed on his bike, in the shower and sometimes even on the train -, partly to surround himself with a protective circle of familiar sounds. He firmly believed that junkies, vagrants and drunken football supporters would leave him alone if they heard the andante form one of Haydn's piano sonatas. The fact that it actually worked was probably because they took him for a completely unpredictable idiot, but that wasn't the point.

The point was that he wandered whistling into a peepshow that evening. How do you go about such a thing? Mostly as follows: he singled out the girl of his choice from the photos on the television monitors in one go, just as he did in every other public space – trams, discos, classrooms, theatres – she's the one. Then he waited for her number to light up on the red display, made his way into one of the peepshow carousel's twelve cabins, popped money in the slot. He saw, he surrendered, he came.

It was her photo all right, and probably the same sunglasses she was wearing in it, he figured later. She was on her knees and her black lenses stared into the camera while she popped her little finger into the corner of her mouth and licked it with the tip of her tongue. *Diana 4*. Her name was spelled out in cheerful colours. The sunglasses made the difference. This was of course because of the eroticising effect of the patented capacity of masks, Venetian or Zorro type, to hide a person's identity.

She was clearly the youngest on the team. Twenty max. And yet it wasn't only her age that made her seem out of place. In the middle of all the stylised women whose strip shows he could already predict, women you only visited for the more rudimentary sort of gratification, she radiated something tauntingly *ordinary*.

Why did Diana wear sunglasses? Was it only to create the appearance of anonymity? Or was it a compromise because she was serious about the possibility that familiar eyes might accidentally pick her out? Whatever it was, he had questions about her and that was good. As a matter of fact that was very good. Even inside, where all the cabins almost simultaneously filled at the moment she stepped onto the circular stage, the questions remained.

You had women for whom this was clearly routine work, who performed with assembly line enthusiasm. Their repertoire consisted of a single hip movement, rhythmically up and down to the music (*'I'm still, I'm still Jenny from the block'*). They reckoned their body to be a device for the performance of mechanical movements, regular as clockwork. The body as a galley slave, he thought, writhing to the black man's drums. After a minute and a half of bobbing up and down, spreading their legs in a fraction of a second, they turned around in a single flawless jerk. New position. Dismissed! They must have an army sergeant in their heads yelling ice-cold commands at their limbs.

You also had women – and the frustrating (and expensive) part was that you never knew which you would get beforehand, the photos at the door didn't offer much clarity in that respect – who played the game, who could act as if they were really horny, let the mirror-ball lights caress their body. The same girls would always stand up halfway through their performance, make their way to the edge of the podium and stop at one of the windows for a short private show, taking a good look at the men and leaving their number when it was over. 'Its number five, number five for you... You come with me for private show?' Those were the rules of the seduction game, set in industrialised form. The woman dances from window to window, sends out signals with which she attracts a circle of potent men, and seduces one of them into entering her private sanctuary.

Diana belonged to neither category. The sunglasses turned out to be for more than the photograph at the door. She kept them on during the entire act, which went as follows.

She shook her long blond hair free with a single toss. She was wearing a thin, aesthetically pre-wrinkled dress in purple tulle, under which her breasts could be seen, the dark areolas around her nipples, the white panties radiant in the black light. She then did something smart: she slowly took it off. He noticed a thin line of pubic hair through the cloth of her dress. It never got really explicit. That's how she kept her clients hungry. After about ten euros he knew for sure: *this girl doesn't strip naked!*

She put down mild protest from the adjacent cabins with a shrug of the shoulder: 'Only naked in private.' And her red lips smiled cutely (that was the word) under her sunglasses. *Only naked in private...*