

**Chaddanta**

# **The Narcissus Fresco**

*But he who easily does without all this,  
Which only fools strive for,  
And, happy in his own abode,  
Lives his own life and nobody else's,  
Is the only one who can say:  
I am a free man!*

Johann Aloys Blumauer

*Für Portia*

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# **The Narcissus Fresco**

This novel is a dystopia. Any similarities to persons living or dead are purely coincidental. All places and events are also fictitious.

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Years ago, an acquaintance recounted a peculiar encounter to me. A minor sports injury had left him with an almost imperceptible limp. One day, a neighbor accosted him on the stairwell to inquire after his health.

“You’re not looking too well these days,” she said, looking him gravely in the eye.

“I got injured playing squash,” he explained politely.

But the neighbor did not let up.

“You have to take these kinds of injuries very seriously,” she warned in a disapproving tone. “Japanese medicinal oil is a helpful remedy even if it does have a rather strong odor.”

“I already have an ointment in my medicine cabinet which has proven its effectiveness on more than one occasion. But thank you for your concern!”

He meant it to sound like a goodbye but the woman did not get the hint. Instead, she drew him into a lengthy discussion about treatment methods, the latest medical findings, and the “duty of maintaining one’s health.” My acquaintance finally managed to shake off his neighbor by promising to visit a prominent alternate practitioner with a shady reputation. This encounter preoccupied him for days. He was upset with himself for revealing private information that was meant for his family doctor’s ears alone. He later learned that the woman had no medical training whatsoever and couldn’t make out the reason why she had cornered him like that.

“Paul, I still can’t understand what this woman actually wanted from me. Sometimes old or lonesome people seek interaction in unusual ways, but that seems unlikely to me in this case. There was nothing awkward or unfriendly about her approach, and I didn’t give the incident any thought until later that evening.”

I smiled and kept silent for a while.

“It’s difficult to effectively categorize a personality type based on a single encounter, but can you still recall the tale of *Narcissus and Goldmund*?”

I considered Herman Hesse as a cult author during my adolescence. Maybe it was his introspective worldview that fascinated me so much at that time in my life. Decades later I bought one of the few books of his I still had not read and brought it with me on holiday. The novel didn’t interest me in the least. I couldn’t even get past the first chapter and ended up consigning it to a second-hand bookshop.

“You mean the story about the monastic scholar Narcissus who wants to gain a purely rational understanding of the world and the bon vivant Goldmund who seeks a sensory experience?”

“Yes, that is exactly what I’m getting at. What they did not tell us at school was that the protagonist Narcissus was not a narcissist in the psychological sense of the word. This is one of the story’s weak spots that I only identified later on. From a literary perspective, he represents a balanced counterpoint for living one’s life to the fullest. However, a truly narcissistic person is more or less disturbed on a case-by-case basis.”

“And what does all of this have to do with my neighbor Mrs. Mautz, or whatever her name is?”

I had cast my net too wide and may have completely erred in my diagnosis.

“Well, you are well advised to steer clear of Mrs. Mautz. And if that isn’t possible, tell her you’re going to consult a reputed orthopedist.”

“What good will that do?”

“It will take the wind out of our suspected narcissist’s sails,” I promised.

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The narcissistic personality disorder phenomenon had long ceased to interest me. I would occasionally diagnose it in varying degrees and in conjunction with other symptoms exhibited by my patients. It is slightly more common in men than in women. People with this impairment rarely seek out a therapist. That’s because it isn’t a mental illness in the true sense of the word and also does not cause the affected person any suffering. Traumatic experiences coupled with a genetic predisposition lie at the root of the disorder which is felt all the more intensely by the narcissist’s close companions. Narcissists skillfully conceal the fact that they think and feel differently from other people. The nature of their temperament is such that they feel no – or very little – empathy for fellow human beings. However, it is very difficult for anyone to integrate into society without displaying a minimal concern for their environment. So that leaves narcissists no other choice but to find a means of simulating successful social interactions. This lies at the core of narcissism. However, it would be a mistake to believe that narcissists are socially impaired. On the contrary, being compelled to painstakingly learn skills which are naturally present in most people, can make narcissists develop a particularly high level of charm, persuasiveness or charisma. However, this is just an outer illusion and not their inner self. If a person’s narcissistic disorder is combined with a high level of cognitive ability, they have a good chance of becoming some of the most respected lawyers, investors or statesmen. Contrarily, if their analytical skills are not well-developed, the chances of them ending up on the other side of the justice system are that much higher.

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I am about to do something very controversial: Apply a concept of individual psychology to a social system. I will begin with the thesis

that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. An individual behaves differently when part of a group or an institutional structure than he behaves on his own. I am by no means implying that political representatives and their medial accomplices all suffer from a narcissistic disorder. There are certainly narcissists among the ranks of the political opposition as well as in alternative media productions. What I am asserting is that our current regime has markedly narcissistic attributes which lie at the root of many gross distortions we experience nowadays. When people are asked about the causes of the political disaster, they refer – depending on their ideological stance – to the international banking system or a vague grouping of conspirators who meet up in Prague cemeteries at night. I regard these theories as complete nonsense. The primary concern is not whether “a man stands behind the curtain,” but whether this political complex with its seemingly strange characteristics can or cannot reform itself.

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The communicative pattern of a narcissist has several characteristics that are worth a closer look. The fundamental problem is that he considers his interlocutor insignificant. The real function of the interaction lies in his ability to exercise control. If unsuccessful, he reacts with frustration and belittles his counterpart. The narcissist has no interest in understanding others, but in being understood. A typical sign of a narcissistic way of relating is the repetition of the same story or joke. He preaches the same events or beliefs to his listeners and never takes any advice from anybody. Admitting a mistake would be akin to exhibiting weakness, something that his vulnerability does not allow. A narcissist does not understand that mutually respectful, sympathetic, and affectionate relationships lead to far better results than the one-sided exercise of power. Someone with a personality disorder cannot be a good listener because they themselves determine the central concepts as well as the language through which they define reality. This behavioral pattern is easily identifiable in politics. Using the term “refugee” for the myriad of

illegal immigrants was not just an improper generalization, but a strategy for covering up that the incentive for mass migration did not arise solely from dire circumstances in their countries of origin but also from the appeal of a small number of destination countries that the invaders favored on account of material and political benefits. “Diversity is our strength” reads a slogan from the narcissistic camp. This presumably refers to the synergetic effects of different elements coming into contact in chemistry, pharmacy or medicine. But the political powers do not bother to discuss these complicated interrelationships. The everyday life of the common citizen is shaped by dissonance more than by mutualism. This would be a welcome topic for an opinionated debate, but law and media regulators prevent it. The same is true for historical guilt, whose discourse is nearly always determined by the same anecdotes and victim destinies. Any suggestion of rising disinterest or oversaturation is equivalent to lese-majesty, and the taboo breaker is definitively ostracized. The state is founded on these kinds of illusions that gradually chip away at its legitimacy.

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However, I would like to take a closer look at one very central female politician who is a textbook example of covert narcissism. I’m referring to the former head of government who autocratically opened up the borders a few years ago, launching an illegal mass immigration of hitherto unknown proportions. The covert narcissist is a wolf in sheep’s clothing. The feigned insecurity, lack of charisma, and eloquence are all part of the disguise. This political actress always went on about “our” values. These included membership in an Atlantic military alliance, a special – or as she put it: “everlasting” – responsibility towards a state that has otherwise few friends, a market-oriented economic system, and a few other points. She refused to address her own values in order to conceal the opportunism characteristic of somebody with her background. As someone who led a privileged existence of allegiance to a totalitarian state and its ideology, she later switched sides with remarkable sophisti-

cation. Nobody saw her demonstrating in favor of democracy when the centrally-planned economy collapsed. No documents reveal even the slightest opposition to the dictatorship on her part. Her political police file has been deemed “disappeared,” and her professional involvement in the service of the Socialist Unity Party is said to have been limited to the organization of “cultural events.” Many speculations have been made about this woman’s character in terms of her religious upbringing, bitterness over the failed state or biological infertility. But it is difficult to classify a narcissist in this sense. She has an ambivalent relationship to her state and pledges loyalty as long as there are benefits to be reaped. She is indifferent to the associated values and is not truly bound to her adopted standpoints. This positional flexibility is largely responsible for her meteoric career. Her other pathologically narcissistic qualities have been brought to light on specific occasions: When over a thousand people were robbed, spat upon, and sexually assaulted on that infamous New Year’s Eve as a result of her arbitrary migration policy, she simply brushed over the incident. It was of no personal interest to her or her henchmen. There was no sign of sympathy or concern. Neither she nor any of her trainbearers made an on-site visit or contacted any of the victims. One week after the pandemonium, she succinctly declared: “some people have abused our hospitality.” That was it. The “guests” were therefore at fault and she did not reproach herself for anything at all. The narcissist wants acceptance, but wants it in a way that sets him apart from the rest and thus affords him a special status. In the narcissist’s eyes, he – and he alone – has the right to inflict damage of any kind, and any criticism of his actions is perceived as insolence.

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In my mind, political policemen were always the uniformed, club-wielding henchmen of a totalitarian system. They tapped telephone conversations, tasked undercover Romeos to recruit inconspicuous women who would spy on dissidents or relegated oppositionists to South American police cellars. In my youth, the “party’s

sword and shield” really did exist. However, I then lived in another part of the country. These fiends also took center stage as far as conspiracy theories were concerned. A guru in North America founded an obscure sect whose male members self-castrated. Ultimately, the entire community became persuaded that it would be kidnapped by alien spaceships. All-knowing “experts” suspected that the founder of the sect was a secret service employee whose duty was to explore the power of charismatic leadership. In our state, political “law enforcement officers” act like members of an intrusive intelligence service who renounce physical violence and resort to destroying economic livelihoods. However, these civil relations disguise reality. In times when manipulation and deception are no longer a sufficient means of citizen control, a narcissistic regime cannot refrain from violence. But establishing an official functional association with state terror would tarnish the narcissist’s deceptive self-image. Therefore, such activities are delegated to seemingly independent clubs and institutions. They are given unsuspecting names, such as “Antiracist Action” or “Tolerance Foundation,” are generously funded, and enjoy considerable penal tolerance in using their fool’s license. They occasionally bite the hand that feeds them but generally fulfill their task with all the brutality and malice it calls for. They fill their empty lives with moral superiority and a chaotic refusal to accept reality. They are mentally no different from their personality-disordered financiers, even if they do allegedly hate them.

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A narcissist does not see other people’s guilt within a holistic framework. He does not acknowledge that human fallibility is responsible for a broken law or rule and is not satisfied with an adequate penalty or reparation. All apologies fall on deaf ears as he turns the offender’s guilt into an instrument. A narcissist also latches onto the shame associated with this guilt to make offenders aware of their inferiority and thereby ensure their own superiority. In the context of a narcissistic regime, the role of collective guilt or shame can hardly be overestimated. This burden can be carried forward

indefinitely and weigh heavily on the shoulders of generations to come. It has no legal legitimacy and evades scientific scrutiny.

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Our state makes a clear distinction between the princess and the urchins. The latter confine themselves to their own barely recognizable camp and fall outside the scope of the law. This means that violence is openly accepted below a given threshold. There were alleged clowns who threw a birthday cake in the face of an opposition journalist at a press conference. Media producers outdid one another in excessively covering the event with concealed mockery. It would appear that certain people are free game for ridicule in the press. This is cause for amusement in the eyes of some members of the public. They probably belonged to that category of people who, back in the Middle Ages, distributed rotten produce to children so that they could launch them in the faces of the pilloried. Others speak of a political tradition aimed at making a mockery of extremism. The sarcasm reaches as far as the boardrooms. A coffee-shop chain advertises its paper cups as “fit for throwing.” There is no clear distinction between the legitimate and the reprehensible. Can the coffee you throw in someone’s face be scalding hot? Such an act would probably be unfit for media promulgation. In our day and time, this is the only criterion that still protects the seditionists.

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My first confrontation with our national guilt came by way of my former religion teacher. I must have been seven or eight years old at the time. Mr. Geiger was a war veteran and his lessons had little structure; his prayers and religious discussions often segued into current events. Every now and then he would spontaneously pepper his lessons with stories from the war and early post-war period that still lingered in his mind. For instance, he told us about the time he was shown a suitcase full of female hair while he was a war

prisoner in France. As pupils, we were yet unable to relate to these stories. We didn't know anything about the victors' revenge on the women accused of collaboration. One day he brought up the topic of the industrialized mass murder that our people were accused of. That was the first time I learned about that guilt so absolute that it did not fit into any historical schema, but ruled over us like a political religion. This memory weaves together with another one. It must have been at around the same time because I can still remember my parents' first television set. It was a bulky wooden unit supported by four short legs and fitted with four large black buttons to turn it on and off, regulate the volume and contrast, and switch between the three state television stations. The program must have been broadcast in the early evening because my father was not home from work yet and my mother was busy with housework. It featured a couple by the name of K. The wife, Ilse K., had something of an obscure penchant for tattooed inmates. According to the original American reportage, she used to lure men with impressive skin designs into her bedroom and arrange their deaths immediately following intercourse. She allegedly transformed the victims' skin into all kinds of decorations such as lampshades or shrunken heads. At the time, it did not occur to me that the sadistic woman was driven by a psychiatric disorder rather than an ideological idea. The husband, Otto K., was supposedly indifferent to his wife's goings-on and the resulting anatomical unicas. Today I consider that this reportage was cut from the same cloth as one of the fairy tales my grandmother used to tell me. Although insignificant, I would still like to know who was behind the strange tumult that caused townspeople from the region to walk around in solemn garb. The aforementioned lampshade – experts suggest it may have been painted goatskin – is now archived in North America. The narrative is also no longer the same. According to two inmates who have since passed away, Ilse K. had not just created a lampshade, but an entire bedside lamp out of skeletonized foot bones and a shin bone that served as a utensil in some kind of macabre celebration. The legends altered over time as the old ones faded away to make room for the new. The guilt remains.

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Regular people do not circumvent an objective fact because it exists beyond the scope of one's intentions, desires or dreams. It can be measured using scientific methods or at least estimated with the aid of binding categories. One can acknowledge a fact even if it does not comply with one's will or stands in the way of one's interests. It is part of reality for at least as long as it has not been falsified on a subject-specific basis. Narcissists, on the other hand, perceive their own feelings as facts. They interpret events in a way that agrees with how they already feel. If they feel discouraged or depressed, they readily assimilate negative accusations against other people. If they go through a happy phase, they react open-mindedly to positive news. They cannot distinguish between truth and emotion, so they fit the facts to their feelings. If a person has lost their favor, every suspicious or defamatory statement about said individual is valuable information for the narcissist. The situation is no different when the political class looks upon its own people with contempt and the media offers a powerful platform for voicing it. Every bias, disparagement, and falsehood thus acquires an emotional dimension that shields them against public intellect. As for the dissident, he is automatically viewed as a denier without having a chance to raise any objections.

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A narcissist may very well be the worst people's representative imaginable. His inflated self-image and his "alternative viewpoint" create a double standard. He is not really interested in the problems and needs of the population. Although he conceals his unapproachability before elections, the general rule is: everybody out there must learn to understand those in power. And if the citizen does not want to "understand," then the "facts" are "explained" to him by the politically conformist media. This happens to be the case for the allocation of social services. The illegal immigrants now receive state allocations that the nation's lower class can only dream of. Mainstream politicians are mainly concerned with their inter-

national image. Their alleged grandiosity shines bright at summit conferences though they could care less about what the common folk think. Greed and coercion drive cooperation with the political media complex. Equal rights do not apply to all, and those who entered our country without travel documents have a subtle understanding of this reality. What matters to them is power, not merit or propriety. They are guests in a house left unguarded. And they are well aware of that.

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A joke has been doing the rounds lately. It is probably not entirely new or original: "HE: Excuse me, ma'am, would you spend the night with me in exchange for a sum of money identical to the state budget? SHE, hesitant but also bemused: I could be on board with that! HE: Would you be up for it if I just bought you the next drink? SHE, outraged: Just what kind of person do you think I am? HE: We just clarified that. Now it's only a matter of price." The opposite is true for the contemporary eyewitnesses of our guilt. They go by the name of "survivors" and are thrown at our feet like holy pillars. Anybody who tries to uplift them despite all contrary recommendations is declared an outlaw. The price they charge us for our moral inferiority exceeds any numeral range. They accept our apology without any display of gratitude. Every tear they shed is a waterfall and the sea does not fill up.

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During the second half of the last century, an American cult director produced films so unique that they remain unparalleled today. These suspenseful masterpieces were set in a world of firmly established middle-class conventions and featured contemporary characters struck by various misfortunes. One of these films' curiosities was how the stocky, plump-looking director made short appearances as an extra. He would unexpectedly place an order in a sidewalk café or purchase a newspaper from a kiosk. Some of the viewers were

so focused on sighting the filmmaker that the plot's drama faded into the background. To avoid this, his later productions have him appearing in the very first sequences. Nowadays, cinema audiences experience a similar form of *déjà vu*. These are not the result of a producer's craze, but several deliberately rewritten stereotypes. They include the lesbian chief inspector who declares from the outset that she will chase down her villains more relentlessly than any man, the computer genius from a poorly educated faction of the population, the religious representative who demands justice for the suffering of his ancestors without ever seeking revenge, and the openly gay man who faces prejudice in his daily life due to his same-sex orientation, but whose composure turns out to be a saving element at the end of the drama. Film consumers are unaware of the way they are being conditioned. At first, they have no suspicions about the slow-witted male Caucasian who is in love with his firearms and who ultimately exposes himself as a political monster, but believe that the scriptwriter wrote him in on a whim. None of this is new. But the subtext was much more subtly concealed at the beginning of the film.

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Our people doubtlessly have their merits, and our cultural achievements remain undisputed. But in the spirit of self-criticism, we must acknowledge that other nations supersede us in the battle for freedom. This submissive element goes back to our monarchic past. The original intent and purpose of the paragraph that currently undermines our freedom of speech – and with it our academic freedom – was to ensure social peace during the period of industrialization. This paragraph remained in force as a continuum long after its accomplishment and after the kingship had already given way to a whole series of republics. Every new government form lent it different interpretations and numerous subparagraphs that proliferated like a cancerous growth. Nowadays it serves the claim to absoluteness of a decade-long historical narrative. It contained so many absurdities, exaggerations, and scientific inconsistencies that it was ultimately and reluctantly subjected to an official revision.

This revised version seemed to almost pinpoint the deeds of the condemned dissidents. Naturally, there is no Orwellian Ministry of Truth, but the institution empowered to determine what is actually possible is one of our state's best kept secrets. Aside from that, it also has to do with monetary and political demands, but one would be well advised to keep silent about it. When dealing with religious doubt, one can reach out to the nearest parish office or – if relations extend far enough – to a Vatican delegation. One need no longer fear death at the stake. Contemporaries who have lost their faith in politics but still want to be in the know refer to compliant judges and to a prosecutor who is well-versed in politics. The constitution states that “Censorship does not occur.” This is a lie.

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The deceiver must address every target of his manipulation in a different way. This generally holds true for every communicative situation. The tone and subject matter of my discussions with my lawyer differ from those I have with my wife. No politically irrelevant media productions are ever released to the public without ulterior motives. Many people are unaware of this because they are not inherently interested in products aimed at a different target group. Let's take the early evening soap opera on the state radio station as an example. It is intended for a simple-minded audience that does not reflect upon social change but accepts it as a given. The soap opera brings the viewer face to face with the drunken father who has long retreated from responsibility, the archetypal kind-hearted mother who keeps the family together despite adversity, the successful uncle who intervenes with financial aid, and the foreign subtenant whose cultural idiosyncrasies cause repeated disputes, but also makes life more colorful through constructive disarray. There may also be a lesbian daughter who combats all types of discrimination and issues propagated by the spirit of the time. This is somewhat like the attempt to immunize an organism by injecting dead viruses into it. But the comparison falls short. The growing savagery, the brutality of crime, and the scarcity of resources available

to the lower classes and illegal immigrants are steadily rising. The entertainment series fabricate a social microcosm which addresses and ultimately solves problems for the benefit of all those involved. Nevertheless, their viewers live out a dangerous illusion due to this fabrication of reciprocal harmony.

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I cannot get past our humility and submission to the politically corrupt system and am becoming increasingly cognizant of the fact that a mono-causal explanation does not suffice when different causes are at play. The offender is not continuously malicious in a narcissistic cycle of debasement such as this. Nobody would be willing to cooperate with him if he revealed his destructive side right from the outset. Over time, we get to know the narcissist in various roles and are led to believe that he has multiple personalities. But that that is not the case. In reality, his personality lacks unity: it is fragmented and cannot be assembled coherently. His needs and desires result from an immature personality and are very one-dimensional, sometimes contradictory. The positive and negative roles he adopts do not offer a glimpse into true personality. Camouflaging his inner wound is part of his daily struggle for survival. The unjustified political loyalty of a faction of the population may have something to do with the way they cling to the positive aspects and repress the negative ones as much as possible.

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The start of our project is closely approaching; Aya has taken over the organization while I find myself repeatedly mired into dark thoughts.

“Why does the regime want to replace us? We are like dairy cows that can be milked for years to come and obediently put up with everything...I just can't understand! What do the invaders contribute to the system?”

“The regime does not view matters according to your rationale,” Aya replies. “This political mindset is all about living in the present and has little to no concern for the future. The same is true for the economy. They do not set aside surplus amounts in reserve for upcoming imponderables but squander them on unrealistic schemes. On a personal level, this is characteristic of an infantile and irresponsible personality. On a public level, it is the telltale sign of a corrupt state. Furthermore, a narcissist rapidly grows bored. Bear in mind that he views people as objects or even slaves and keeps a partner for the sole purpose of fulfilling his needs and standards. He only thinks of himself and people who exhibit human flaws will have soon outlived their purpose.”

“I just don’t see how a future population that will be largely made up of migrants and their descendants could better meet the preferences of this regime.”

“You’re forgetting the narcissist’s greatest fear,” Aya goes on. “The main reason he wears a mask isn’t to set others on the wrong track, but to hide his true self. He couldn’t bear anyone seeing the emptiness inside of him because it would mean having to face the mental miscarriage that makes up his identity. And that would be a fatal blow for him. Therefore, he spends his entire life trying to prevent any such exposure. As a civilized nation, we represent a danger for him because our abilities enable us to close in on him. He is well aware that he cannot be reformed or treated and that makes him react with primitive hatred.”

We sit in silence for a long time. I’m worried about what awaits us.

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The population’s willing allegiance can be rationally explained to a certain extent. Passive refusal and active resistance both generate certain risks and disadvantages. And yet there is a hypnotic element at play here. It is reminiscent of the Stockholm Syndrome and the

freed hostages who stepped in for their torturers and even financed their court defense. Some victims of narcissists display similar behavior. They are blind to the abuse and its disastrous consequences. Nobody is perfect, they say. That is correct, but the narcissistic personality is so distorted that it cannot be held up to universal standards. What makes it so difficult for people to tear themselves out from under the narcissist's spell is the confusion he incites. He does not act like himself from the very beginning and his victims no longer act like themselves when under his influence. Their healthy identities are shattered piece by piece. But deception isn't his only tool. No narcissist is permanently dismissive, offensive or violent. He understands the effectiveness of making promises and taking people under his wing. Pathological phases are always followed by periods of relative normalcy. It is an emotional roller coaster that causes people to lose their bearings. The longer they remain emotionally dependent on him, the less capable they are of making distinctions. Top becomes bottom, the sincere individual appears evil, and the lie becomes a certainty. Nevertheless, the wool that has been pulled over our nation's eyes can always be cast aside so that our individual character steps up to bat. When will we cease making compromises? When forced to admit that we have been cheated? When our children's future will be compromised? When the public space will be increasingly overrun by those who threaten our livelihood? The tolerance threshold differs for every individual. Our political system will require fewer bodyguards in the end. With this in mind, they hurry to destroy us.

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Every one of us has an identity. It is made up of various components such as our educational level, gender, age, and many other aspects. It does not help us in the least to reject or even hate our own identity. Whether we like it or not, others judge us from this angle during our interactions. Collective identity is similar in this respect. Most groups uphold their own culture and represent their own interests. Since the narcissist has no stable sense of self and his own existence is a more