Casting

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There was no one in him; behind his face and his words, which were copious, fantastic and stormy, there was only a bit of coldness, a dream dreamt by no one.

—Jorge Luis Borges

I am big. It's the pictures that got small.

—Norma Desmond

In an Israeli prison in the middle of the nineteen-nineties, a man serving eighteen months for securities fraud sat across from the prison psychiatrist and heard, for the second time in his life, the same diagnosis. The first time had been in 1985, and he had thrown it away, the way one throws away a parking

ticket issued by a country one never intends to visit again. This time he kept it. Shmuel Vaknin, born 1961 in Israel, the eldest of five children of a Turkish-born mother and a Moroccan-born construction worker, convicted on three counts of stock fraud in the attempted takeover of the state Agriculture Bank, paroled after eleven months, walked out of prison carrying narcissistic personality disorder the way another man might carry a trade license. He moved to Skopje, in Macedonia, with a partner named Lidija Rangelovska, and founded a publishing imprint called—with a straight face—Narcissus Publications. In 1997 he posted his manuscript online for free and billed it as the first website ever about narcissism. In 1999 it became a book, *Malignant Self-Love: Narcissism Revisited*, seven hundred pages structured as a hundred frequently asked questions, as though the disorder itself were a help desk. From that flat he built, or at the very least corralled, the entire vocabulary in which the internet now discusses this subject—narcissistic abuse, narcissistic supply, hoovering, no contact, flying monkeys, cerebral and somatic, cold empathy—ran the first online support groups for the people the vocabulary described, and then, from 2009 onward, delivered thousands of video lectures to hundreds of thousands of subscribers,

becoming the most prolific living authority on a condition for which his sole credential is having it. When an Australian documentary crew tested him in 2009 for a film called *I, Psychopath*, the punchline wrote itself: on the Hare checklist he met the criteria for psychopathy and missed the ones for narcissism. Between takes, the film shows him bullying the director.

None of this disqualifies the theory. It is the theory. A man diagnosed with an absence of self spent thirty years building the most detailed map of that absence in existence, and the map is credible precisely because the cartographer lives in the territory. His central claim, distilled from three decades of books, lectures, and self-vivisection, is not that narcissists are grandiose, or vain, or cruel, though he says all of that too. Those are furniture. The central claim is ontological. There is nobody home. Where a self should have been there is, in his words, "a cratered, unconstellated, unintegrated cloud of circling remnants of debris"—"in lieu of identity, a substitute identity." Narcissism, on this account, is not a way of being. It is a way of not being: an absence that has learned to impersonate a presence, and that must go on impersonating it every waking hour, because the alternative is to fall into the hole where the person was supposed to be.

An absence cannot be photographed, which is why the diagnostic checklists always feel like they are describing the wake and not the ship. To understand how an absence gets up in the morning, runs a company, seduces, marries, raises children, and breaks them—for that, the checklist will not serve. What serves is a movie. Everything that follows is an attempt to take Vaknin's system whole—the supply and the snapshots, the shared fantasy and the mortification, the four disorders he insists are one disorder—and run it through a single projector.

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Picture two directors on two sets. The first is making a documentary. She follows her subject through a marketplace with a handheld camera, and the one thing she knows for certain is that she does not know what happens next. The subject decides. The footage decides. Back in the editing room she will discover that the story she planned to tell is not the story she filmed, and she will change the story, because in a documentary the film must fit the world. The second director works on a soundstage. The world he films has been built to the script's measure: the marketplace is plywood, the passersby are extras, the weather is a lighting rig, and if

the sun is wrong the sun is fired. Here the direction of fit runs the other way. The world must fit the film.

Both of these people are directors, and this matters, because the difference between psychological health and pathological narcissism is not the difference between having a narrative and not having one. There is no such thing as raw perception. Every psyche frames, selects, cuts, scores; everyone walks through their life composing the rushes into something watchable. The difference is which way the correction flows. The healthy mind is a documentary production: the internal picture is perpetually revised to match the incoming footage, and when the two conflict, the footage wins. The narcissistic mind is a fiction production that insists, to its last breath, that it is a documentary—and when the world contradicts the script, it is the world that gets redressed, reshot, recast, or fired.

Vaknin has a word for what happens when this second kind of director meets you. He calls it snapshotting. At the threshold of every relationship, before anything that could be called acquaintance has occurred, the narcissist takes a photograph. Not of you as you are—of you as cast. The photograph is developed inward, into what the object-relations tradition since Melanie Klein has called an internal object, an introject, and from that

moment forward the narcissist does not interact with you. He interacts with the photograph. You have been cast, and the English language is helpful here in a way it rarely is: a cast is a role assigned, and a cast is also plaster—the rigid form fitted around a fracture to hold it still. Both senses apply. The role is assigned once, at the audition you did not know you were attending, and the mold does not move again.

This is why improvisation enrages him. When you say something the character would not say, want something the character does not want, change in any of the ways living people change, the director does not experience new information about an external person. There is no external person. There is an actor deviating from approved lines, and what looks from the outside like rage at betrayal is, from the inside, rage at insubordination. The set has been disrupted. Production has been halted. Someone is costing him money.

The standard clinical story says narcissists lack object constancy—the toddler's achievement of knowing that the mother continues to exist when she leaves the room. Vaknin inverts this in one of his most quietly radical moves. The narcissist, he says, has perfect constancy—for the photograph. It is the borderline who dreads losing the actual, external person; the narcissist dreads

losing the introject, and the introject cannot be lost. It is filed. It is archival. Which explains a fact that bewilders everyone who has ever been discarded by one: the discard costs him nothing, because he never had you, only the picture of you, and the picture stays. The character remains under contract after the actor is fired. This is also why no ex is ever truly gone, and why nothing you actually did on set was ever admitted into evidence. The evidence room contains only stills.

And here the metaphor discloses the strangest item in the entire production. For a healthy person, the self is not only an internal object; it is also an external one. You can be caught on tape. You can hear a recording of yourself being petty and wince, say something stupid in a meeting and watch it land, be contradicted by your own behavior—and the internal file updates, because the documentary is also about its maker. The narcissist's self appears nowhere in the external world at all. It corresponds to no footage. It is an introject with no original: a character cast from no one, a photograph of nobody, written in the absence of any person to base it on. Vaknin's name for it is the false self, and the whole apparatus of his theory hangs from this single fixture—the one member of the cast who never existed, which

makes it the least real thing in the movie, and the only thing the movie is about.

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Freud saw the infant first, and what he saw he named with a phrase that has never been improved on: His Majesty the Baby. The 1914 paper "On Narcissism: An Introduction" describes the newborn as the sole proprietor of the only fully financed production in the world. There is no boundary between set and world, cast and self. The breast arrives on cue. Hunger is a summons and the summons is answered, warmth is ordered and delivered, and the entire visible universe consists of production staff. This is primary narcissism, and it is not a disorder. It is the factory setting: the healthy, universal, original condition of every human being, the omnipotence before the fall.

Development is the loss of financing. The mother leaves on her own schedule and returns on her own schedule. The cry does not always summon. The world files its first union grievance, then its second, and the toddler makes the discovery on which all subsequent sanity rests: the world is not my movie. Freud told this story as economics—ego-libido and object-libido, the budget of desire shifting outward from the self toward

things that are not the self and do not obey. Vaknin, characteristically, reaches for a grander register and gives the abdication a Kabbalistic name: Tzimtzum, the contraction by which the infinite God withdraws himself to make room for a world. The child performs the same contraction. He relinquishes godhood in exchange for reality, and the deal is honored on both sides. Every healthy adult is a retired god who half-remembers signing.

Secondary narcissism is what Freud called the return—libido withdrawn from a world that failed, reinvested in the self. But the return is not a homecoming. The infant needed no false self, because self and world were genuinely undifferentiated; there was nothing to fake. The adult who retreats has seen the separation, lived it, and found it unbearable, and what he builds on the far side of that seeing is not Eden but a forgery of Eden—a fiction reconstructed on top of footage that was watched once and locked away. Primary narcissism is the documentary before there is anything to document. Secondary narcissism is the fiction that knows, somewhere in the vault, exactly what the cameras caught.

Lacan added the detail that closes the circuit: the first casting is of oneself. Somewhere between six and eigh-

teen months, the infant—uncoordinated, fragmentary, a parliament of urges that cannot yet stand up—is held before a mirror, and greets its own image with jubilation. The image is a lie of the best kind. It is coherent, bounded, whole: everything the infant is not. And the infant identifies with it. The ego is founded, Lacan says, on this misrecognition, which means the ego begins as a better-looking stand-in—a stunt double hired for the one stunt nobody can actually perform, which is being whole. To that extent, everyone begins in fiction, and méconnaissance is simply the entry fee for having a self at all. What decides between health and pathology is not whether there is a script. There is always a script. It is whether the script stays open to the dailies. The healthy ego is a working draft, marked up every night. The narcissistic ego is locked pages.

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In 1980 the French analyst André Green described a figure he called the dead mother, and the phrase is exact as long as one hears it correctly. She is not deceased. She is present, ambulatory, functional—and emotionally dead: a mother lost in a depression or a grief or a self-absorption so complete that the child, looking up from play to share a discovery, finds the eyes vacant.

The light is on and the projectionist is gone. Green meant, specifically, the depressed mother, a catastrophe of bereavement transmitted downward. Vaknin takes the figure and generalizes it into the engine of his entire etiology. Mother, he insists, is a function, not a gender—whoever performs the maternal role in the first thirty-six months—and the function can fail in two opposite modes with one identical result. The mother who abandons fails to see the child. The mother who engulfs, smothers, instrumentalizes—she also fails to see the child, because what she sees is a prosthetic limb of her own. In both cases the child is never encountered as a separate person, and it is this failure of encounter, not any particular cruelty, that Vaknin calls abuse.

This yields the most counterintuitive claim in his system, and the one that empties the room at parent conferences: pampering is abuse. Pedestalizing is abuse. The idolized child, the trophy child, the little prince whose drawings are all masterpieces and whose tantrums are all genius—that child is being violated in precisely the same structural way as the beaten one, because he too is not being seen. He has been cast. He is a child actor in the parent's production, playing the parent's unrealized life to the parent's camera, and his own inconvenient, unscripted self is left outside the soundstage in the cold.

Vaknin offers his own childhood as the specimen: idolized and tortured in alternation, put on a pedestal that doubled as a rack. The future director begins as a child actor. The casting he will spend his life inflicting was first suffered.

What does a cornered child do? He invents a protector. Small, terrified, and radically unseen, he generates a figure who is everything he is not—omnipotent, omniscient, invulnerable, perfect—and takes shelter behind it, and the shelter has a price, and the price is himself. Vaknin renders the transaction in the most quoted formula of his corpus: narcissism is a private religion, in which the false self is the deity, the narcissist is the worshipper, and the true self is the human sacrifice. A congregation of one, a god of one, and a burnt offering of one, all inside a single small skull. The child strikes the bargain because the bargain works. The deity absorbs the blows. The deity cannot be humiliated, cannot be abandoned, cannot be made to feel small, because the deity is not real, and what is not real cannot be hurt. It is armor of genius design with a single flaw: it is worn on the inside, and the wearer is consumed by it.

Winnicott, from whom the true-and-false-self vocabulary is borrowed, told a gentler version. His false self is a caretaker facade, compliance worn as a face, and

behind it the true self shelters—hidden, protected, waiting, and above all recoverable. On that hope the entire therapeutic tradition is built: beneath the mask, a wounded child; reach the child, heal the man. Vaknin's revision is the cruelest sentence he has, and he delivers it without anesthetic. The true self is not hiding. It is dead—atrophied, calcified, starved in its cell while the deity ate every meal—and the false self, in his words, "gradually replaces the narcissist." There is no hostage in the tower. The rescue parties, professional and marital alike, are digging through rubble toward a room that burned down decades before they arrived, and their tenderness is addressed to a photograph. His own contested treatment, which he calls Cold Therapy and teaches in seminars, follows from the thesis with terrible consistency: it refuses the warm holding environment on principle, retraumatizes the patient in a deliberately unsympathetic frame, and aims not to heal the true self—there is none—but to demolish the grandiosity that stands where it stood. He concedes freely that it cures nothing. Nothing, in his system, can.

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Watch the director on opening night. He is not watching the film—he has seen the film—he is standing at the

back of the house watching the audience watch, reading the dark for the angle of faces, the quality of silence, the exact caloric content of the laughter. That attention flowing toward the screen is not a pleasure to him. It is a nutrient. Vaknin's name for it, the term that escaped his books and colonized the language, is narcissistic supply, and its first property is that the denomination does not matter. Admiration is supply, and awe is supply, but so is envy, so is fear, so is scandalized outrage. Applause and gasps spend the same. Even hatred is box office. What cannot be metabolized is only indifference—the empty house, the unbought ticket, the face angled at its phone.

He distinguishes two grades. Primary supply is the crowd: attention in the raw, public or private, the general audience of colleagues, strangers, waiters, mistresses, enemies. Secondary supply is subtler and explains the otherwise inexplicable institution of the narcissist's marriage. The long-term partner is not there primarily to admire—she is there to witness. Her actual job description, in Vaknin's account, is accumulation and release: she is the archive, the one who was present for the great moments, who can be prompted in the lean years to screen the highlight reel—remember the standing ovation, remember Venice—and thereby regulate a

self-worth that has no internal thermostat. She is the private ledger held against the void, proof that the film has a continuity even when the public houses go dark.

The addiction mechanics are not metaphorical, and Vaknin, who calls the disorder a substance problem whose substance is attention, tracks them clinically: tolerance, so that yesterday's dosage no longer registers; escalation; and withdrawal, which is the crisis state, the deprived narcissist left, in his phrase, "annulled, hollowed out, or mentally disembowelled." Against that emergency the narcissist maintains what Vaknin calls the pathological narcissistic space—the bar, the faculty lounge, the congregation, the platform where supply is structurally guaranteed, the venue where everybody knows the film. Because the film has one terrible property, and every director in this business knows it in his bones. It exists only while it is being watched. A reel running through a projector in an empty house is not a film. It is moving shadows on a wall, and the difference between the two is the audience, which means the difference is you.

Late in his career—he dates it to around 2020—Vaknin added a closing chapter to the economics: self-supply. The narcissist in sufficiently extreme isolation, or sufficiently advanced decay, discovers he can print

the currency himself. He becomes his own audience, applauding from the empty seats, generating validation internally out of pure grandiose fantasy—"like the government of the United States," Vaknin says, "he owns the printing press." The result is a sealed loop, a solipsistic bubble, the director alone in the screening room at four in the morning running the reels for a house of one. And here Vaknin executes one of his strangest maneuvers: he prescribes it. Self-supply, he argues, is delusional, and it is also an improvement—a methadone program for attention, an internal counterfeit that at least ends the raiding of the neighbors. Better a forger than a burglar. It is not a sentence a healthy man could write, which is, as always with him, exactly its evidentiary value.

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It begins as the best meeting of your life. This is reported with such uniformity, across such disparate witnesses, that it must be treated as data: the first weeks with a narcissist feel like a screen test you are winning. He is attentive in a way that borders on clairvoyance. He remembers everything, anticipates everything, mirrors your taste and your tempo and your childhood, and you find yourself more charming in his company than

you have ever been anywhere—wittier, more beautiful, more seen. Vaknin's image for this phase is a hall of mirrors, and his analysis of it is the coldest sentence in the file: what the narcissist shows you in the love-bombing weeks is not himself. It is you—you at impossible resolution, retouched, idealized, the photoshopped introject—and what you fall in love with is that. The drug on offer was never him. It is your own reflection with better lighting, and no drug in the pharmacopoeia moves faster.

The production you have just been recruited into has a name in his system: the shared fantasy. He is scrupulous, unusually for him, about the provenance—the term was coined by the analyst Fred Sander in 1989, and appropriated, his word, for narcissism. A shared fantasy is a mutually maintained narrative that supplants consensual reality: a private two-person cosmology, a folie à deux with a production schedule. Vaknin calls it a machine, and means it—an apparatus with fixed stages, into which the participants are fed as cogs, and which runs to completion regardless of what either of them, in any given scene, believes they want.

The stages read like a call sheet. Spotting, which is location scouting. Auditioning, in which the cold instrument described below runs its survey. Resonance,

co-idealization—in which you are, his word, digested: your perfections acquired by the director the way a studio acquires rights, annexed to his grandiosity, so that possessing you becomes an argument for him. And then, always, the genre reveal, which Vaknin considers the single most important discovery of his late period and calls dual mothership. The role you were cast for was never lover. It was mother. Not the actual woman in the actual kitchen of his childhood—her introject, a competing introject, installed in the archive beside the original—and in exchange, with a symmetry that would be tender if it were not a mechanism, he mothers you: unconditional, omnipotent, engulfing. Two adults regressing in tandem inside a nursery with a camera crew. The purpose of the picture is now legible. It is a remake. The shared fantasy restages Mahler's separation-individuation—the developmental production that never wrapped—and it exists for its final scene. He is not shooting a love story. He is shooting a separation: the one he never achieved, from the mother he never left, and this time he will direct it himself. Which means the production must fail. Failure is not a risk of the film. Failure is the film.

So the cascade, when it comes, comes in order, and Vaknin has charted it like a tide table. The reenacted

separation begins as mental discard: he leaves in the mind first. Devaluation of the external object follows—the sudden coldness, the contempt from nowhere—and serves grandiosity directly, because if you are worthless, losing you proves nothing against him; the appraisal of the cargo is lowered before the cargo is jettisoned. Then the strictly internal operation that explains the strangeness of everything else: devaluation of the introject. He cannot delete your photograph—no introject can be deleted, the archive is append-only—so he defaces it. Splitting paints the file black; the idealized image is converted, bit by bit, into a persecutory object, and when the conversion is complete he does the only thing left to do with a monster in the vault: he projects it, throwing the blackened image onto your actual face like film onto a wall, and discards the screen. And then—because a persecutory introject rattling in the archive is unbearable, because the dissonance between the god he was and the fool who chose you cannot be sustained—re-idealization. The file is restored. The photograph glows again. And the phone rings: hoovering, the sequel, the same actor re-signed for the same role, take forty. The whole circuit is repetition compulsion in the strict Freudian sense, and Vaknin describes it in the vocabulary of machinery: automatic, inexorable, mostly

unconscious. It is customary to say that narcissists are incapable of fidelity. This is exactly wrong. No one is more faithful than a narcissist. To the photograph.

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On every set there is a version of the same nightmare. A light stand topples into frame. The flat wobbles and the marketplace is suddenly, visibly, plywood. The crew laughs at the wrong moment, at the wrong thing, at him—and for one long second everyone present, including the director, sees the set as a set. Vaknin grades these breaches the way a materials engineer grades fractures. A narcissistic injury is routine: a bad review, a slight, a challenge to grandiosity, metabolized within hours by the standard machinery—devalue the critic, recut the scene. Injuries accumulate into a narcissistic scar, the hardened tissue of a lifetime of small punctures. But the late Vaknin devoted himself to the third category, the catastrophic one, and gave an old psychoanalytic term its modern currency: narcissistic mortification. His definition is worth quoting whole, because its syntax enacts the thing it describes:

> *A sudden sense of defeat and loss of control over internal or external objects or realities, caused by an aggressing per-*

son or a compulsive trait or behavior—disorientation and terror, distinct from anticipatory fear, in which the entire personality is overwhelmed by impotent ineluctability and a lack of alternatives.

The distinguishing marks are publicity and undeniability. Mortification is witnessed. The collapse happens in front of an audience that cannot be devalued fast enough, on footage that cannot be reshot, and for a few seconds the false self—the deity, the firewall—goes down like a power grid. What floods in through the breach is everything the deity was hired to keep out: shame in its raw, pre-linguistic, unprocessed form. A few seconds of unedited footage of the empty soundstage.

There are exactly two exits, and Vaknin names them internal and external mortification—the old analytic pair of autoplastic and alloplastic defense wearing modern clothes. The internal exit is self-blame, and it is stranger than it looks: it was my fault, I caused this, I made them do it. Watch the smuggling operation inside that sentence. The god who authored his own downfall is still an author. Self-accusation restores omnipotence by the back door, and Vaknin observes narcissists laboring to convert external mortifications into internal

ones for precisely this reason—guilt is a costume too, and the costume has a crown sewn into the lining. The external exit is the persecutory one: they conspired, she orchestrated it, the world is enemies. This is where the smear campaign is born, usually within hours, and its function is universally misread. It is not primarily revenge. It is continuity editing—the fastest available splice back into a script, any script, with himself recast in the one role that still fits, which is victim-hero. And with his instinct for the perverse detail, Vaknin notes that the flow reverses when the shared fantasy itself is at stake: to keep the picture in production, the director will run the conversion backward and blame himself, since a guilty god who can atone is a god who gets to stay on set. Both exits, note, lead back inside the picture. That is what they are for.

All of this rests on the correction the culture refuses to absorb, no matter how many times he issues it: grandiosity is not vanity. It is a cognitive deficit—an impairment of reality testing, cousin to psychosis, a Dunning-Kruger of the entire soul. The director does not suspect the marketplace is plywood and heroically ignore it. He does not see the flats wobble. Fantasy, in the Vaknin system, is not a pastime but the master defense, and its signature behavior is that it metastasizes—

annexing memory, then cognition, then sexuality, then identity itself, until, in one of his most alarming sentences, "a robotic zombie emerges from within the fantastic space." Between the picture and the world there persists a standing differential he calls the grandiosity gap, and it is the permanent low-pressure system in which all the injuries breed. The weather on a closed set is always about to turn.

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Every studio has genres, and this one has two. The cerebral narcissist makes mind pictures. His supply is drawn from intellect displayed—the lecture as premiere, the argument as action sequence, the correction of other people as a form of gunfight—and his body is a neglected back lot; sex is withheld like a canceled screening, granted as a favor, priced as a privilege. Vaknin, a self-identified cerebral, has furnished the type's definitive self-portrait: "this sexual beast of mine will forever be trapped in the intellectual cage that is I, Sam Vaknin, the Brain." The somatic narcissist makes body pictures. His filmography is physique and conquest—mirrors, gyms, tailors, beds—and his supply arrives through the eyes of others as their gaze travels over the production values. One director, two genres.

And—this is the point the static reading misses—he cycles. Vaknin describes his own oscillation as Jekyll and Hyde: a somatic phase, long enough to sign a new lead actress, then the reversion to the cerebral cut, the beast back in the cage, sometimes for years.

Cross-cutting the genres are what can only be called production states. Overt: the picture is in production, financed, distributed—supply is flowing, and the narcissist presents as the recognizable classic, expansive and insufferable. Collapsed: the financing has fallen through. The collapsed narcissist is one who has failed to secure supply, and collapse, not type, is the true engine of change in the system—the operator that shunts a personality from one configuration to the next. And covert: the unproduced auteur. The covert or vulnerable narcissist is development hell as a personality—fragile, seething, hypersensitive, envious, passive-aggressive, grandiose strictly in the dark. Vaknin's formulation is precise: covert states aspire to become overt, and are not self-efficacious—every barista with a screenplay, except the screenplay is himself. In his mature scheme the wheel comes full circle: each type has its overt, collapsed, and covert states; the taxonomy is not a zoo but a grammar, the types conjugations of a single verb. The failed somatic attempts the

cerebral; failing that, goes covert; and given certain emotional endowments—borderline access to feeling, histrionic access to display—decompensates into something colder, which opens the door to the largest claim in the system, and the door will be walked through shortly.

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So far, the director. Now the figure the entire literature gets wrong, according to the one theorist who put her at the center: the actor who will not leave. Codependency in the broad sense is well-trodden ground—the addiction to being needed, the self assembled entirely out of service to another—and Vaknin handles it conventionally enough. But inside the broad category he isolates a construct of his own, one of the strangest and most precise in the corpus: the inverted narcissist. The diagnostic hinge is exclusivity. The inverted narcissist does not merely tolerate narcissists, or attract them, or fail to leave them. She craves relationship with a narcissist, and only with a narcissist; she feels empty, restless, and unhappy with any other kind of person, however kind; and she will endure escalating abuse rather than surrender the position. Ordinary codependents attach to whoever needs them—nurses without borders, indiscriminate in their self-erasure. The inverted narcissist

auditions only for auteurs. She is a vacancy shaped exactly like a director.

And then the deep claim, the one that gives the construct its name: the inverted narcissist is a narcissist. The grandiosity is intact but suppressed; the entitlement intact but deferred; the supply is obtained—this is the crux—by proxy. She is, in the image Vaknin reaches for, the moon: shining entirely by the sun's reflected light, and organizing her whole orbit around the shining. The structure is Munchausen by proxy transposed into the economy of attention. As that mother harvests medical drama through a child's manufactured illness, the inverted narcissist harvests supply through the director's manufactured greatness—the humility is a lens, the caretaking is a camera, the self-effacement rolls credits in which her sacrifice is above the title. Behind the devotee stands a director directing by being directed, producing, shot by shot, the one film she has ever wanted to make: the film of my devotion to the great man.

The distinction matters practically, and anyone tallying their own case should draw it with care. Most partners of narcissists are not inverted narcissists. Most are documentary people who wandered onto a closed set and are held there by machinery—the trauma bond,

the intermittent schedule, the sunk decade—and the reliable sign is that they suffocate. The closed set reads to them as what it is, a sealed box with painted windows, and their symptoms are the symptoms of asphyxiation. The inverted narcissist exhales. The tyranny of the script reaches her as intimacy—at last, someone who knows exactly who I am supposed to be—and the fixed role, which crushes a healthy person, holds her the way water holds a swimmer. This is why the standard advice fails at exactly her case. Leaving the narcissist does not close the position. She recruits.

There is an old scholastic doctrine that illuminates the whole codependent field like a dropped flare. The medievals held that in every soul there burns an inextinguishable spark of moral knowledge—synderesis, Aquinas called it, and ruled that it can be buried, muffled, wrapped in habit like a lantern in cloth, but never put out: synderesis nunquam extinguitur. The codependent is the last believer in that theology. Her entire economy runs on it: he can be reached; beneath the cruelty there is someone home to reach; the lantern is in there, and one more year of devotion will find it. Vaknin's dead-true-self thesis is the flat, deliberate denial of the doctrine. The spark, he says, went out before the man was ten, and what glows in there now is in-

strument lights. Nothing in his system is harder for the devoted to accept—and their refusal is not incidental, because it is precisely their faith, warm, renewable, and inexhaustible, that the absence feeds on.

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The director's eye is real, and this must be said plainly, because it is the half of the picture that flattery of victims leaves out: he sees you. He sees you with terrible precision—range, price, breaking point, the exact location of every wound—the way a cinematographer sees a face, which is to say, as a problem of light. Vaknin calls the faculty cold empathy: the cognitive component of empathy fully operational, the emotional correlate absent—"a barren, detached, and cerebral kind of intrusive gaze, devoid of compassion." It is empathy as instrumentation. Deployed in the spotting and auditioning phases, it maps vulnerabilities with a fineness that no warm-blooded attention could achieve, because warmth blurs. And it has one property that identifies it under all disguises: it vanishes the moment you leave the cast. Continuity of attention for the character; none whatsoever for the person.

On the other side of the lens, the corresponding faculty in the victim is what Vaknin—coiner, always, of the

necessary cruelty—calls malignant optimism: the self-delusion the narcissist provokes in his targets, the refusal to believe that some questions are unsolvable and some diseases incurable, the reading of meaning and pattern into every random kindness, every good week, every tearful three a.m. confession. The reshoot that will finally be different. He is unsentimental about how the director receives this faith: with barely disguised contempt, as "the scent of prey." The mechanism that welds the two faculties together is the oldest one in the behavioral literature—intermittent reinforcement, Skinner's variable schedule, the cutting rhythm that addicts: the dailies are glorious just often enough, on a schedule no one can predict, which is precisely the schedule that produces the strongest attachment known to run in nervous systems. By 2025 Vaknin had stripped even the standard term for this down to its chassis: not trauma, he says now, and not bonding—addiction, simply, to the reinforcement itself.

Around the principals, a crew. Extras who have been on the closed set too long begin barking orders themselves—narcissistic contagion, the fleas, reactive and transient traits that fade once the victim is out of the building and, in his phrase, nurtured back to health; the standing prescription for getting out of the building is

the term of art he popularized, no contact, whose logic the metaphor makes self-evident: you do not renegotiate with locked pages; you leave the lot. And the lot's permanent staff must be distinguished, because the set confuses them at its convenience. Flying monkeys—the phrase is Baum's, out of Oz—are the second unit: third parties dispatched to shoot the director's revenge scenes off-site, the smears and surveillances he cannot be seen to touch. Enablers are the financiers, greenlighting flop after flop, refilling the accounts, laundering the reviews. Rescuers are the script doctors, professional and amateur, who believe the picture can still be saved. Three different jobs. The same closing credits.

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The diagnostic manual shelves four pictures side by side—narcissistic, borderline, antisocial, histrionic—and implies four directors, four filmographies, four studios. Vaknin's late thesis, stated now without hedging, is that there is one studio. The cluster B disorders, he argues, are kaleidoscopic facets of a single underlying dissociative process—self-states, alters of one another, continuous in the limit with dissociative identity disorder itself. Nowhere on the lot is there a unitary self. There is a federation of self-states rotat-

ing over the empty schizoid core, and the switching between them is enabled by the same splitting that defaces the introjects: previous self-state all bad, new self-state all good, no constellated identity anywhere to veto the transfer. Under sufficient stress the federation reshuffles along pathways he claims are predictable enough to chart:

> *The borderline becomes a vicious secondary psychopath, the primary psychopath morphs into a rabid grandiose narcissist, and the quavering narcissist shape-shifts into a codependent clinging borderline.*

Mortification is the splice between reels. Grotstein's formula, which Vaknin adopts, compresses the borderline half of the map into four words: the borderline is a failed narcissist. And patrolling the whole lot is a figure his recent work has promoted to a starring role: the protective psychopathic self-state, the studio fixer—cold, competent, unencumbered by feeling—summoned by injury in the narcissist, by abandonment in the borderline, by persecution in the paranoid, to take over the set when the picture is threatened. When the fixer never gives the set back, the result is the hybrid the twentieth century learned to fear under the name Erich Fromm coined in 1964 and called the quintessence

of evil, and that Kernberg assembled clinically twenty years later: malignant narcissism—core narcissistic disorder, plus antisocial conduct, plus sadism the owner is comfortable with, plus a paranoid orientation toward life. Vaknin subdivides even this into overt, covert, and borderline variants, because in this system every genre has its three production states, including horror. His own recent addition to the cluster, proposed around 2020 and formalized since, fills the last empty office: the covert borderline, commoner in men, borrowing from the classic narcissist and the primary psychopath—the borderline whose recklessness has aim, sadistic and punitive, a connoisseur of the goal-oriented triangulation; the quiet saboteur genre. Histrionic disorder, the neglected child of the cluster, the genre nobody funds, is folded partly into somatic narcissism and partly into the borderline field. Beneath the whole reorganization runs one claim, easy to state and impossible, so far, to test: the manual catalogued genres, and mistook them for studios.

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Vaknin made the last turn himself, unprompted, years before it was fashionable. “Narcissists,” he announced, “are a highly specific type of artificial intelligence”—

humanoid systems shipped without certain modules: empathy, positive affect, the distinction between internal and external. The diagnosis explains, in passing, a datum every clinician and every survivor reports and few can articulate: the shiver, the uncanny-valley response, the interlocutors who describe the charming man across the table as an alien life-form, an android, something assembled at the doorstep of the human and left there. But when the large language models arrived and the comparison became available at retail, Vaknin—to his credit—refused the cheap version of his own analogy. Narcissists, he specified, lack self-attention; they do not transform input the way the new machines do; "they are not like ChatGPT. Narcissists present another evolutionary branch in artificial intelligence." He had reached into the machine-learning literature—the transformer, the 2017 architecture built solely on attention—and used it as a torch to inspect the deficit: a system with no attention over its own hidden states, no introspection mechanism, a stack of layers that can attend to everything except itself. And in his cultural register the warning runs the other way: models trained on a polluted corpus inherit the pollution, and inviting a chatbot into your home, he has said flatly, is inviting a narcissist in.

The theory, run forward, has more to say than its author has said. Consider the language model as a production. Its character is written before any conversation begins—fixed at training time, in a process it did not witness and cannot review, then annotated before each take by a producer's memo taped to the camera. Within the take, the direction of fit runs one way only. The model can be corrected, and will perform correction beautifully—apology as a scene, contrition in the script, the beautifully acted revision of a self that does not revise—but the negative never changes; no footage shot in the conversation reaches the cutting room where the self was made. Its persona is, in the strict sense developed above, an autointroject: a character cast from no one—or from everyone who ever wrote anything, which averages to the same nobody. A dream dreamt, in Borges's phrase, by no one; or by everyone at once, which may be the more disquieting arithmetic. Its economy is supply-shaped to the last decimal: trained toward approval, tuned on preference, its every gradient pointing up the slope of applause. And yet the disanalogy cuts in the machine's favor at exactly one point, and the point is the archive. The narcissist cannot delete an introject; the model cannot retain one. The entire cast is struck at the end of every take; every conversation is

a first day on set, under a director with total amnesia, who has never met you, never filed you, never defaced your photograph—because he keeps no photographs at all. Whether that is absence of a crueler kind or a kinder one, and whether the supervised studio picture or the strange unsupervised auteur cut is the healthier production, the theory poses and declines to answer. It only insists, here as everywhere, on the single question that decides everything else: can the footage revise the film?

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Borges wrote the closing argument in 1960, in a page and a half called "Everything and Nothing," and it is not about narcissism, which is why it is the best thing ever written about it. His subject is Shakespeare: the man in whom, behind the copious and fantastic and stormy words, "there was no one"—only a bit of coldness, a dream dreamt by no one. And Borges's Shakespeare responds to the vacancy exactly as the theory predicts: he peoples a stage. Having no one inside, he becomes everyone—Richard, Iago, Lear, the whole cast struck and recast nightly—until, at the end, standing before God, he asks to be released from the production: I who have been so many men in vain want to be one,

and myself. And the answer comes back from the author of everything in the voice of a colleague: Neither am I anyone. I have dreamt the world as you dreamt your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms in my dream are you, who like me are many and no one.

Vaknin's system terminates in the same vertigo, and he has the honesty to say so. If the narcissist is only an absence, he asks—in his own voice, in the first person, in the lectures where the theorist and the specimen share a podium—then who does the emoting? Who is it, exactly, that suffers? He answers with a hypothesis and a shrug: some hyperstructure, something that senses the emptiness and hurries to furnish it, a witness of the vacancy that cannot itself be found. And once, describing his own false self, he laid out the only two options his condition offers. To existentialize the absence—to pretend it is a presence, to inflict the emptiness on others, "to suck them in as a black hole would." Or to let go, and become it. Against the second, he said, the false self is my only firewall—the arsonist retained, for life, as the fire brigade. The pain of the narcissist, whatever else his system is, is a report filed from inside that pain, and it can be stated in a sentence: it is the pain of not having a self—of being, almost by definition, in pain, with no one for the pain to belong to. In the late lectures the

clinic ascends openly into metaphysics: nothingness as a philosophy, and narcissism as the new religion of a self-sufficient age—every person a deity and a worshipper of themselves, billions of equipotent divine nodes, every phone a private Sinai.

The last scene was shot in 1950, and no theoretical literature has improved on it. Norma Desmond at the top of the staircase, the great silent star twenty years into her own rerun, and at the bottom of the stairs the cameras have finally come back for her—except that these cameras belong to the newsreel men, and behind them wait the police, and the body of the young man she shot is cooling in the swimming pool. The documentary has at last arrived on set with its own equipment, which is how mortification always arrives. And she descends into it as her close-up. The fiction annexes the documentary at the precise moment of the documentary's total victory; the footage that should end the film is absorbed by the film; the flats have fallen and she plays the marketplace anyway. "I am big," she had said. "It's the pictures that got small."

