



Bärbel Wardetzki, Sonja R.

Is This Supposed to Be Love? How to Effectively Escape a Narcissistic Relationship

Original title: Und das soll Liebe sein?

Wie es gelingt, sich aus einer narzisstischen Beziehung zu befreien

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224 pages

Outline

After spending twenty years in a marriage in which she primarily just “functioned,” Sonja R. falls head over heels in love. As emotionally starved as she is, Frank gives her everything she has been missing for years. However, Sonja has found herself in the arms of a narcissist, a man who wants to monopolize her and who systematically destroys her sense of self-worth. This narcissistic relationship lasts seven years, until Sonja R. is finally able to break away from it after many attempts.

Bärbel Wardetzki provides commentary on the various phases of this relationship from the psychological-psychoanalytical perspective. She distinguishes healthy from malignant narcissism and describes the warning signs. The main thrust of this book relates to the question of what compels women to remain in destructive relationships, twisting the truth and lying to themselves as a protective mechanism. Wardetzki clarifies the behavioral patterns, and describes in detail the processes of escape and stabilization.

- Bärbel Wardetzki is one of the top experts on the subject of narcissism
- The connection between the inside perspective (the depiction of the relationship through the eyes of the woman who was in it) and the commentary from an experienced psychologist is equally enlightening and helpful for those who find themselves in similar relationships



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Bärbel Wardetzki · Sonja R.

Is This Supposed to Be Love?

How to Effectively Escape a Narcissistic Relationship

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Foreword

This book is written by women for women. But it is of course also interesting for their partners, because it deals with the subject of exploitative narcissistic relationships and the dynamic that develops between partners in those relationships over time.

We follow both our protagonists, let’s call them Sonja and Frank, over the course of several years. We find out how they met, how they fell in love, a love that felt like Seventh Heaven, and how the relationship slowly developed destructive traits. For seven years, Sonja suffered Frank’s accusations, devaluations, attacks and endless arguments until she was able to free herself from this man, through her own strength, and finally start a self-determined life.

This is an experience shared by many women when they get close to men who seem to offer love and affection, but whose emotions change into the exact opposite over time. Then, these women are no longer lavished with positive attention but psychologically devalued and subjected to accusations, verbal and sometimes even physical violence. But in spite of all this, many women cling to the relationship for years or even decades until it almost destroys them. They are trapped by the partner’s threats, in case they dare to leave him, but also by their own hopes that everything might become as wonderful again as it was at the beginning.

Sonja’s story is an example that stands for many narcissistic relationships. Many readers will recognize themselves in it and may feel that we are telling their own story. But this book is not so much about real people rather than about basic patterns of behaviour. It is also not about guilt and accusations, and not about who is good or bad. Both people bring experiences and old wounds into the relationship that eventually lead to destructive

developments. To protect everyone who might be affected, individual data and specific experiences have been altered so that real people cannot be identified. Anyone who still believes that they are reading a book about themselves could perhaps take this as an opportunity for self-reflection and a re-assessment of their own relationship patterns.

I am going to comment on the story of Sonja and Frank from a psychological perspective to explain how a woman can suffer so many torments in a relationship and why her partner becomes violent. We will see that the woman is not necessarily naïve, something that victims are often accused of, but that her behavioural patterns are connected to her individual life story. Relationship experience in the family of origin plays a particularly important part here because it determines our partner selection and love relationships as adults. Someone who feels inferior will need a confident partner. Someone who thinks of themselves as the greatest person ever will look for a submissive woman.

In most narcissistic relationships, the man is the grandiose narcissist and the woman his depressive narcissistic counterpart. Frank and Sonja both represent these types of narcissism: he appears to be supremely confident and tries to subject the woman. It is obvious that this will generate many psychological injuries and therefore that the relationship won’t go well. But of course there is also a different constellation: the man submits to a dominant woman and gains validation of his low sense of self-worth from her strength, attractiveness and professional competence. But this kind of relationship is less common, although the dynamics are basically the same.

The aim of this book is to help people who are trapped in a destructive relationship so that they can see the negative warning signs earlier and respond to them more consistently instead of denying them for too long. The earlier a woman realizes that her partner is hiding a Mr Hyde behind the charming mask, the earlier she can set boundaries and separate from him, or perhaps not even engage with him in the first place. When her sense of self-worth has

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been weakened by years of lies and devaluations, the decision to leave becomes more and more difficult. We want to encourage women to take a good, hard look at their relationship and finally say goodbye to their dream, a dream that has already become a nightmare.

[...]

[p.89-96]

His Dark Side

New Beginnings

At the age of now 47 I started all over again. Johannes got his own space, everything was new and wonderful, I was content. It was completely up in the air if I would find a job here, but for the moment I didn't think about it much. I was full of hope for my new life, our new life. I decorated our new home and it had my signature style all over it. I felt good there. I was curious about our future, a future that we could finally spend together. My dream!

But Man No. 2 didn't show the slightest intention of moving in with me. Bit by bit I got to know a different side of him: his constant excuses. He always found new reasons why he couldn't move yet, why his divorce hadn't come through, why it wasn't the right time yet for me to meet his children. There was always something. First he claimed that he didn't have any furniture because it all belonged to his ex-wife, then he claimed that I had decorated everything so beautifully that he didn't really have anything to add, and then of course he still had his own apartment. In the end he only occupied a small part of my wardrobe and put his toiletries in the bathroom. He acted as if he was just a visitor.

I was hugely disappointed. Didn't he want the same things that I wanted?

His Way

Even at this point, one aspect of Frank's behaviour emerges that will shape the relationship more and more: he determines the conditions and Sonja has to adapt to them. There is no such thing as a discussion between equal partners about where and how they are going to live. He decides on the location and the type of home. It has to be a detached house in order to avoid any kind of social control. But Sonja doesn't know that yet. Sonja falls back

into her old patterns. She is the one who finds the house and does all the work. She remodels, decorates, does everything and pays for everything, as if she was in a state of trance. But nothing actually points to a common goal, to a sense of ‘we’. He doesn’t fulfil a single promise: no divorce, no moving into the shared house, no fresh start together as a patchwork family.

At first I thought that he just had to get used to life as a family again. But when, more and more often, he left late at night to return only the next day, I started to wonder. He justified it with his job that forced him to get up very early and drive to his customers. He said he didn’t want to disturb me and therefore preferred to spend the night at his apartment. He absolutely didn’t want to give it up. He needed his own space, he said. At first I understood. Or, rather, I tried to understand. I never liked it.

But I was happy when HE came home. I cooked for him and spoiled him. Of course at the back of my mind was the hope that he would then stay with me all the time because he enjoyed being with me so much.

Old patterns

And here we see Sonja’s old thought and behaviour patterns emerge again. She has to make things wonderful for other people so that they stay in her life, she has to work hard to achieve being loved, and she can make everything work out alright in the end. What a trap! But many women get caught in this trap. However, neither Sonja nor anyone else can actually achieve all of this. To believe that is quite arrogant, but at the same time it is also overwhelming. Sonja can’t see that other people make their own decisions, and that her influence on those decisions is limited. But by burdening herself with the entire responsibility for the success of the relationship and even for Frank’s emotions, their life together becomes stressful and any problems become her personal failure. Maybe this is another reason why

she doesn’t respond to any of the warning signals. She is convinced that she can change Frank’s behaviour and she doesn’t want to give up before she has tried everything.

But at the same time I felt very hurt and disappointed. I experienced his behaviour as rejection. Only our intimacy during sex made up for it and made me cling to the relationship. I thought it was better to get a little bit of what I wanted than nothing.

Now, after so many years of denial, I know that I should have ended the relationship then and there. All the warning signals were at red. But I didn’t want to see that and I didn’t want to admit it to myself.

Worst of all were the weekends. I always had to spend them alone with my son. HE only came to the house in the evenings to sleep or to sleep with me. Sometimes he stayed the night but then he disappeared at 5.30 in the morning. I started to feel like a spare wheel, needed by not respected. We didn’t even have breakfast together. I suddenly felt inferior again. The times when he adored me to the heavens were over.

That was very painful, particularly because he had acted so differently in the past. But those were the wonderful times that we had spent alone together. How stupid of me to think that it would continue like this. I didn’t really feel wanted, only tolerated and at the mercy of his moods. He didn’t stand by me in public and we never took any trips together in the area because he didn’t want to be seen with me. In order to keep his visits secret, he always parked his car in the garage. Oh, how that felt. All those secrets. So I was his mistress. Great. We were further away than ever from my expectations of becoming a patchwork family. But in spite of all this I still kept my hopes up. Maybe it all just needs a little bit more time, I told myself. I was lying to myself.

And I also started to become familiar with his tendency to prefer ‘style over substance’. The most impressive car, the best clothes, the most expensive restaurants. But Frank actually came from very humble beginnings. Of course he had achieved a lot through

hard work, but he was not the man of the world that he liked to be seen as. And I also heard from others that he wasn’t always a gentleman at work. It seemed that he had a habit of taking advantage of others. He readily accepted the way I spoiled him, buying the most exquisite food and creating a wonderful dinner for him every night.

Frank also tried to prevent contact between me and his children to prevent us from forming strong family bonds. And he always found something to criticize with my own son so that Johannes eventually retreated. Because the separation from my daughter was painful for me, Johannes and I went home many times at first. Yes, I still called it that. Our old home. And that’s when Frank’s jealousy started. Every time I wasn’t within his reach, there was a big scene. Which was quite ridiculous considering that I lived alone in the house with my son most of the time while Frank still lived in his own flat. And what he got up to there I would only find out later. But one thing is clear, he was probably rarely alone.

His extreme jealousy became a bigger problem all the time. There was rarely a day when we didn’t argue about it. For example because I was dressing too provocatively, in his opinion, in order to attract men. He even implied that I wouldn’t be averse to being with other men which I found disrespectful and impossible. He trampled on my feelings, and he didn’t take me seriously. Generally he saw all other men as competitors. He often shouted at me because of that. He humiliated me with eruptions of anger. “You did...”, “you are...”, followed by something negative. At first I misinterpreted this. I thought he loved me so much that it almost drove him crazy.

Any sensible person would have warned me. But unfortunately my rational mind was switched off. It was probably my sexual dependency that made me stay with him, and why I always forgave his hurtful behaviour, his lies and humiliations, again and again.

More and more I discovered a sense of ownership in him. Our arguments also became more frequent and were often extremely hurtful. At first, these arguments usually ended up in

bed, he called it make-up sex. He managed to get around me again and again. Afterwards I felt even worse but I didn’t know how to defend myself. My son also suffered increasingly. Often, Johannes tried to comfort me. He took me in his arms and tried to encourage me, saying that everything would eventually fall into place. But in reality, I was responsible for him. Again, I felt alone with all my problems and now I had a few new ones on top.

My body responds very sensitively to dissonance and negative influences. My gut feelings returned and they were not good. Apart from digestive issues I had difficulty sleeping again. I lay in bed worrying about my problems and my so-called new life. I couldn’t switch off. One time Frank even wondered aloud if it wouldn’t be better if Johannes lived with his father. How selfish! Frank only ever thought of himself. That way, he could have exerted even more influence over me. But his unreliability and his lack of engagement also disappointed me. He treated me more or less like a mistress, and he left me with all the expense of running the house and everything around it. There were reasons enough for me to separate from him. But I dismissed my worries and continued to deceive myself. On the one hand I was ashamed, and on the other hand I still hoped that everything would turn out alright in the end.

Sugar-coating and Denial

She decorates the house and makes it into a home for everyone while he arrives with a toothbrush, pyjamas and an overnight bag. Why are her alarm bells not ringing, at least when he leaves again and again to spend the night at his own flat? That’s not a new beginning, or a life together.

Sonja herself knows that she should have left, but she is so dependent on him that she can’t bring herself to do it. She is ashamed of herself, she doesn’t want to admit to herself or to others that this relationship, too, has failed, and that her partner isn’t who she took him for. How often do women start to blame themselves if the man turns away from them? And then

they try even harder to please him, to get everything right, and to spoil him, in order to save their relationship dream. But all that actually obstructs a clear view of reality: the lies, the secrets, the jealousy, the claims of ownership, the excuses. Sonja suppresses her own suffering, glosses over the situation and tries to understand things that are incomprehensible such as her partner going home at midnight or running away early in the morning.

And it is not only Sonja who suffers, but also her son Johannes. He can obviously sense that he is unimportant and unwelcome. Frank is only interested in his mother, but she is becoming more and more unhappy. So Johannes feels called upon to comfort her, to look after her and encourage her. He puts her before his own sorrow. And again, the roles of mother and son are switched around.

Sexual dependency certainly also plays a big part in the fact that Sonja stays with Frank. Right from the start, sexuality is one of the fundamental building blocks of their relationship, if not the most important one. Up to now, they met in hotels and spent most of their time together in bed. They didn’t share much beyond that. And that doesn’t change in their new house. However, now it is no longer such an effort for him to see her and sleep with her. The situation isn’t all that different from before. All that is missing is the initial passion. Gradually, everyday life establishes itself, and for a narcissist that means the death of their feelings of love. They are only attracted if something is unattainable or forbidden and has to be experienced in secret. Sonja is now available all the time and that takes away a large part of her attraction, and for Frank, that transfers to her attractiveness as a person. The passionate declarations of love have ended because he no longer has to conquer her. Johannes is experiencing something similar. As long as Frank was courting Sonja, Johannes also got a lot of attention. But now that he is part of his unloved everyday life, Frank shows his true attitude towards Sonja’s son. He is not interested in him in the least and regards him as a

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nuisance. What a devaluation and what disrespect towards someone whose only fault is to exist. The situation that Sonja experienced with her stepmother repeats itself here.

And although Sonja can sense that Johannes is also suffering, she doesn’t make any changes because she longs for love and pushes everything away.

[...]

[p.199f]

Pathways Out of a Narcissistic Relationship

How to Recognize Narcissistic Relationship Patterns

Typical Statements and Behaviours

1. He is the prince of my dreams

“If everything is too good to be true at the beginning – then it usually is.” (Christine Merzeder). The prince of your dreams is a perfectly normal man who is idealised and put on a pedestal by women.

2. I could have known this very early on

Warning signs usually appear very early in a relationship. But nobody wants to see them. The emotional tantrum triggered by a trivial incident, the inappropriately harsh and loud tone if you do anything wrong, the punitive gaze and perhaps even the raised hand. This is micro-violence (Merzeder) that can lead to big violence.

3. It’s your fault

Narcissists never take responsibility for their own faults. Instead they blame the woman. If she swallows this a few times, it becomes a habit.

4. Everything is different with you.

You shouldn’t just reject accusations and devaluations, but also unjustified praise for being so much better than all his previous partners who only took advantage of him.

5. It’s only about him

He always wants to be the centre of attention. He doesn’t speak, he lectures. He knows everything better and never asks how you are because it’s not a priority for him.

6. I am no longer myself

In a narcissistic relationship you can no longer be the way you really are. You have to act in a specific way all the time. And so, gradually, you become separated from your own self and no longer know what you want and what is good for you.

7. Seduction is not love

Seduction is a mis-use of power in order to control you and make you dependent. Love is psychologically fulfilling. Seduction evaporates quickly.

8. Monologue instead of dialogue

The egocentric attitude of “what I say is always right” leaves no room for dialogue.

9. Constant mood shifts

He is in a good mood if everything is going well and if you behave the way he wants you to. Everything else is a psychological insult that he takes very personally.