

Not so long ago, I spoke to hundreds of thousands of listeners across North America every day on a public radio show. These days, the closest I come to public performance is at a neighborhood karaoke bar in New York. Even that can have its perils. One night last year, I was waiting my turn to sing when a woman spotted my name on the list. “Jian!” she said to me. “Your name is *Jian*? Ha! Hey, you know who ruined that name for you?” “No. Who?” I said, bracing myself. For the first time, she looked straight at me—and stopped smiling.

For her, it was like one of those excruciating moments when you accidentally include the butt of a joke in a reply-all e-mail. For me, it was just another day in the life of the notorious Jian. She apologized and said all the right things. And I said all the right things back. (“How could you have *known*?”) Mostly I felt bad because she felt bad. But then we rallied and sang a duet together. And then we became friends and are regularly in touch. Chalk up one more human being who no longer thinks I’m a creep.

Here’s the thing about being an erstwhile “celebrity” who is now an outcast: You’re not just feeling sorry for yourself. You’re also feeling sorry for everyone around you—sometimes even the strangers. You can see the anxiety in their faces as they stammer out banalities, studiously avoiding the subject of career (or lack thereof), making vague gestures of encouragement that trail off into silence.

In October 2014, I was fired from my job at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation after allegations circulated online that I’d been abusive with an ex-girlfriend during sex. In the aftermath of my firing, and amid a media storm, several more people accused me of sexual misconduct. I faced criminal charges including hair-pulling, hitting during intimacy in one instance, and—the most serious allegation—nonconsensual choking while making out with a woman on a date in 2002. I pleaded not guilty. Several months later, after a very public trial, I was cleared on all counts. One of the charges was separated and later withdrawn with a peace bond—a pledge to be on good behavior for a year. There was no criminal trial.

My acquittal left my accusers and many observers profoundly unhappy. There was a sentiment among them that, regardless of any legal exoneration, I was almost certainly a world-class prick, probably a sexual bully, and that I needed to be held to account beyond simply losing my career and reputation. Since then, I’ve become a hashtag. One of my female friends quips that I should get some kind of public recognition as a #MeToo pioneer. There are lots of guys more hated than me now. But I was the guy everyone hated *first*.

I have not spoken publicly about the explosion in my world for four years. Given that my name, at least in Canada, turned into a metonym for everything from male privilege to the need for due process, I’ve been aware that weighing in to reclaim it and inject nuance into my story is fraught, to say the least. In my silence people have tended to suggest what’s become of me. Like that I’m on a beach with martini in hand, having a laugh at “getting away with it” (no). Or that I’m curled up in a dark room, weeping in shame (well, yes, that happened). Or just forever cowed.

There has indeed been enough humiliation for a lifetime. I cannot just move to another town and reboot with a pseudonym. I’m constantly competing with a villainous version of myself online. This is the power of a contemporary mass shaming. Even people who are supportive sometimes have expectations of how I will act based on a singular, sexualized identity that was repeated in media stories. But this period has also been a tremendous education.

My path to public toxicity was a curious one. As a student, I was a doctrinaire activist who was tear-gassed at protests—I once made the evening news for organizing a demonstration about tuition fees at which wet macaroni was thrown at Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. For years after that, I wrote

progressive songs and toured in a sometimes-political folk-rock band, Moxy Früvous. I wore T-shirts screaming slogans of equality and liberation, and I believed it all.

At the CBC, I had a Canadian-style reserve when American stars would get obstinate on the air. The necessary image of a liberal public broadcaster can be tediously correct. I wore the right ribbons, used the right hashtags, hosted the right guests. I did interviews with everyone from Toni Morrison to Gloria Steinem, Drake, and Maya Angelou. I attended demonstrations and spoke at progressive fund-raisers. It didn't occur to me that I could ever be one of the bad men.

I loved *Q*, the culture show I co-created and hosted for eight years, and I was consumed with finding as wide an audience for it as possible. But I was also consumed by anxiety in my pursuit of success. By 2014, I was telling close friends that I felt I was in a cage of my own making. It didn't help that my pay increased as my Twitter following skyrocketed, or that agents and publicists touted my appearance on "influential people" lists. I had become a man who derived all of his self-esteem from external validation. In tandem, everything around me seemed to condone the bullish way a successful single guy might act. This is not an excuse; it's a somber realization.

With each career step, I would leave a trail of disappointed friends or coworkers. I learned to be pushy when I didn't get my way. And at some point, when it came to women, I began to use my liberal gender studies education as a cover for my own behavior. I was ostensibly so schooled in how sexism works that I would arrogantly give myself a free pass. I was outspoken in public life but tone-deaf in my private affairs.

Before 2014, it was unimaginable to me that I would become a poster boy for men who are assholes. I had not been a network boss or an executive with institutional power; there had been no formal complaints at work that I was aware of over the years; there were no hush-money deals or nondisclosure agreements. As things came crashing down, I became obsessed with the inaccurate stories and the pattern of salacious details taken as truth in the echo chambers of social media outrage. That foreclosed any focus on my own accountability.

Since then, I have spent almost four years reflecting on my relations with women I dated. For some, nothing I say here will be enough or be put the right way. Even as I feel deep remorse about how I treated some people in my life, I cannot confess to the accusations that are inaccurate. What I do confess is that I was emotionally thoughtless in the way I treated those I dated and tried to date. As well, I leveraged my influence and status to try to entice women and lead them on when they were interested. There are all sorts of old-fashioned words to describe men like this: player, creep, cad, Lothario.

But it went deeper than that. I was demanding on dates and in personal affairs. I would keep lobbying for what I wanted. I was critical and dismissive. Some women I cared about went along with things I wanted to avoid my disappointment or moods. I ought to have been more respectful and responsive with the women in my life. To them I say, you deserved much better from me.

I craved the interest of women. Dating and having sex became another measure of status. When a well-known fellow broadcaster saw me with a twenty-something date at a film festival event in Toronto around 2006 (I was then thirty-nine), he left a voicemail saying, "Dude, you are the king!" That memory is mortifying now, but at the time I basked in his praise and wanted more. He'd never called me before and never mentioned my work; the real message was that the women I was with were the true gauge of success.

But if the opinion of others is how you define yourself, what happens when all of the outside props of status—the ratings, the followers, the social media likes—are torn away overnight? Who are you?

I equivocated about writing this essay for many months. I have never responded to media requests. For a while, the silence was a necessary consequence of the legal case I was facing. Since then, it's been about gaining some certainty about what I would want to say. I also understand that this piece is focused on my experience, which may be seen as not helpful in rendering women's experiences more visible.

I have spent these years trying to listen, read, and reflect. I did a great deal of talking before my life exploded. While I was a keen listener during interviews I conducted on the air, I didn't apply that awareness in my personal life. Self-involvement will make you deaf to important things you should be hearing. Humility comes with perspective—and listening is a big part of it. But there is no fast track to the reckoning. Coming to terms with a seismic life interruption and beginning a true process of reflection takes time.

When a man is publicly accused of sexual misconduct in this era, almost invariably the first thing he does is apologize. However heartfelt the remorse, my own experience makes me distrust it. In a maelstrom of confusion, humiliation, resistance, and conflicting feedback from those around you, how much can anyone really inhabit "I'm sorry"?

You *want* the feeling of genuine contrition to stir within you—because people are telling you it's the first step to redemption. And you let yourself imagine that some grand mea culpa might actually turn your fate around—regardless of the veracity of any allegations. But what you truly feel in the first days after being publicly accused is fear and anger, in that order.

The fear is easy to explain: your whole future hangs in the balance. But you're furious, too, at being made fearful by everyone who's trying to bring you down. You're confounded at how tales of your alleged behavior from years past are now used as a sledgehammer to destroy the career you've built and determine the way you will forever be seen. Even if your lips are speaking words of contrition, your mind is a ferment of petty, selfish fury.

Adding to your shame is the fact that you're suddenly helpless. Lawyers tell you what you can say (nothing) and to whom you can say it (almost no one). You don't leave the house because there are cameras outside. You stop looking at the Internet because it's mostly people telling you to curl up and die. You savor the few messages of support from friends—pathetically so. In your darker moments, you make lists of the ones you haven't heard from. And that's pathetic, too.

You realize almost immediately that this is a financial calamity as well: not only have you lost your income, but you're also hemorrhaging your savings to legal fees. The accusations you face get conflated in social media with horrible things other men have done that are totally unconnected. The details of the allegations seem to become irrelevant, as does any legal decision. The stain of bad actions becomes indelible; a presumption prevails that the worst of what is tweeted is to be believed. You wonder how you can exhibit any contrition about ways you may have behaved badly in the past without validating every crazy thing that is being said about you by people you've never met.

Less than a month before my life exploded, I watched my father die. Then I lost almost everything else I thought was important. All the pillars of professional and personal support I had believed to be solid were gone almost overnight. The professional team that I had hired as experts to guide me through the explosion bolted, too—but not before they had cheered on some ill-advised social media postings and threatened lawsuits.

During the first two weeks, I was suicidal. I contemplated the methods by which I could kill myself. I was terrified of being awake and terrified of falling asleep. Evenings were filled with nightmares that inevitably involved my father on his deathbed. It was as though the end of my life as I knew it was somehow conjoined with the actual end of his.

In a crisis like this, you are painfully aware that it is happening not just to you, but also to those closest to you who stick around. I became frantically and helplessly worried about my mother. While I was fuming about media depictions, I questioned my own memories in the face of a barrage of speculation. People on TV expressed “shock” about the allegations of misconduct and my “secret life,” as it was sensationally termed. I was shocked too. For weeks I was used as clickbait and a meal ticket for certain reporters who pumped out whatever stories they could with my name in the headline. One writer questioned my upbringing, using a comparison to the convicted murderer Paul Bernardo. There were few limits to how far some would go.

When the scandal broke, dozens of female friends, some of whom I’d previously dated, reached out in support to say they would speak on behalf of my character. As the storm grew, many backed away, too scared or conflicted or shocked at the headlines to take a public stand. Several friendly artists and celebrities wrote to say they would need to stay silent because it might affect their careers. I was grateful for their candor. Many others, even those I thought to be close friends, simply have not spoken to me since.

The storm also transformed me from being a proud Canadian to being “Iranian-Canadian.” My inbox and social media accounts filled up with noxious allusions to my Middle Eastern background and racist references to Iranians. On my first court appearance, in November 2014, amid the media mêlée outside as I emerged with my lawyers, one man repeatedly shouted, “Go back to Iran!” I was not born in Iran and have never lived there. It would be more accurate to say, “Go back to Thornhill!”—the pleasant Toronto suburb where I grew up. It was not that I was ashamed of my heritage. On the contrary, I abhorred the racist implication that bad behavior would be seen as correlated with my ethnic background—just another Iranian guy channeling some ancestral Middle Eastern brand of Asiatic misogyny; and I was deeply embarrassed that the Iranian-Canadian community, which had been so supportive, now had to endure an association with me—on top of all the other stereotypes out there.

The CBC dutifully passed along all of my hate mail. One anonymous letter was typed in all-caps: “YOUR FATHER HATE FUCKED YOUR MOTHER AND PRODUCED A BROWN BABOON... YOU ARE LUCKY TO BE (VISITING) CANADA... IN I-RAN THE AYATUALLA [*sic*] WOULD HAVE FUCKED YOU... WATCH YOUR BACK AND YOUR HOUSE.” But even these specific racist responses were not as personally damning as being broadly cast as an outsider because of my heritage—a narrative that spoke to my deepest insecurities. In truth, I had always seen myself as a scrawny brown kid who didn’t fit in—not as the cocky, entitled immigrant my attackers saw. Both images were wrong. But my misperception obscured an awareness of my status. I didn’t accept my own power.

Since the scandal, the reaction of men has perhaps been most striking. Aside from some, including former media colleagues and friends who reported on my downfall with a zeal that was transparent in its efforts to display their own virtue, there was a distinct pattern to the men whom I would encounter in the first year, amid all the headlines and shaming. Many of them—strangers, acquaintances, friends, or people reaching out in social media—would at some point furtively say, “What happened to you could have been me.” That is, in the safety of conversations they were certain would not become public, men would tell me there were things that they, too, could have been accused of at points in their lives.

The disconnect was confusing. Just as my name was trending as the ultimate avatar of bad male behavior, men were confiding in me that, in various ways, they were not much different. I have had countless men contact me in the last four years to tell me their stories or somehow commiserate. It is bizarre to become an unwitting repository for men who are bewildered about gender relations or sexual behaviors. I began to see my own actions as part of a systemic culture of unhealthy masculinity. At the other end of the spectrum, I get messages from women who tell me that they “enjoy the same lifestyle” and want to meet up for sex. I don’t respond, but I suspect that I would disappoint them with the news that I don’t have a “lifestyle” that might facilitate what they’re looking for.

Last year, when I posted a creative project on YouTube, a Toronto weekly declared that I had “slithered out from underneath my rock.” Another observer predicted that I would emerge from self-imposed exile as rabidly right-wing. The truth is more banal. I am not suddenly an antifeminist activist, stage-diving at a *Breitbart* road show. Neither am I planning to seek public absolution through the embrace of a notion that all men are evil. What I am is someone who has had a crash course in empathy. I have a new unwavering antipathy toward schadenfreude.

Many of those who helped me survive the explosion are people who have been through great difficulties in their lives: addiction, bankruptcy, the loss of dear friends or family, or big mistakes and public humiliation. I now have a different way of seeing anyone who is being attacked in the public sphere, even those with whom I may profoundly disagree.

And with all of this, I am moving toward what might be seen as a trite point: we learn from our mistakes.

A couple of years ago, on a trip to Europe, emancipated by the anonymity of being abroad, I was on a train from London to Paris and found myself sitting next to a single woman in her late thirties. We had both come onto the train wearing earphones and fell into a conversation about music. We learned that we shared the same tastes in New Wave. She was captivating and smart.

As soon as our conversation began, I felt galvanized by an automatic reflex from my days as a Somebody. Tell her about your show. Tell her about your band. Sell your book. It occurred to me that I had been campaigning my whole adult life for the promotion of Jian. The same instinct began tracing out a line of events. She would give me her number. After getting to Paris, I would text her. We’d meet at a bar. I would tell her more about me. Perhaps we would become intimate. I would feel wanted.

There were positive sparks. She mentioned that she had an open schedule in Paris. I listened and smiled. Again, I felt the old urge to use this to my advantage.

But this interesting woman was speaking to me without knowing or caring if I was Somebody. As if maybe I had the ability to be worthy without reciting my résumé. She did the talking for most of the trip, and I listened. I poked some fun and enjoyed making her laugh. There were moments when she would reference events or places or people (“I adore Leonard Cohen”) that would once have been my cue to talk about myself (“you know, I did one of the last interviews with Leonard Cohen, and...”). Instead, I found myself asking her questions.

When the train arrived in Paris, we got up and grabbed our stuff. She smiled at me. We paused. I extended my hand and wished her a good afternoon. “It was really great talking with you,” I said. The words lingered for a moment. Then she shook my hand and uttered something similar. Then we both went off to find our respective ride-shares. Only once I emerged onto the street did I realize that I’d never even told her my name.