

# *Shame*

By James W. Fried

You are one lucky man.

The nightmare has run its course and you're still standing. The board has rewarded you with its highest honor, and the press conference has come off without a hitch. Hands have been shaken; toasts have been offered. And now it's official. You, Alex Baughman, are the new Chairman and CEO of a Fortune 500 company.

But the price you've paid! One personal attack after another over the past sixty days laid waste to your reputation. You wouldn't wish the experience on your worst enemy.

The onslaught began just as the board was set to confirm you as the company's new leader. That was when Cleta Shannon, a fifty-five-year-old widow, stepped forward with a story that brought the process to a grinding halt. She told a reporter about an assault that she claimed occurred some twenty-five years before. You were identified as her assailant. Her story of rape appeared below a bold headline on the front page of the city's largest newspaper and continued as a investigative story on radio and television newscasts for weeks. Social media had a field day. Your friends and associates were shocked. The allegation seemed so out of character, they all agreed. At the same time, the story had to be checked out; in this day and age, it just had to be.

The accuser said the rape occurred when she was in her early twenties. She insisted that she had remained silent back then because she didn't have any proof and besides, the system of justice at that time was skewed in favor of men. She had been

violated once, she told the press. She had no desire to be publicly violated again during a trial.

The charge and subsequent publicity rocked your family. Your grandchildren endured taunts at school, and you were shunned by faint-hearted friends. But those who know you best rejected the charge out of hand—it was simply not believable, they said—and they wondered why the woman would want to soil your reputation without one shred of evidence to back her up.

Still, the company's board of directors faced a public relations challenge. They needed to demonstrate that they were taking the charge seriously. But they weren't going to be browbeaten by the woman. After all, she might just be frustrated with her own life's circumstances and wanting to use the momentum of the MeToo movement to gain public sympathy.

With your reputation on the line, you vowed to defend your good name. You hired your own PR specialist and a team of attorneys to fight the allegation. The drama continued for sixty days. Then a second allegation surfaced.

The new charge came from one of your old college classmates, a woman now in her mid-fifties, though she looks older. With her attorney at her side, she stood before a gaggle of reporters and TV cameras and described an incident at a fraternity party during her freshman year. Fighting back tears, she recalled how you pressured her to join you in a night of binge drinking. She said she had almost passed out from the liquor, and then you backed her into a corner of a downstairs room of your fraternity house and groped her.

Did he force you to have sexual relations? a reporter asked.

I have no doubt that he would have, the woman said in a shaky voice. But one of my friends walked in and broke things up.

So what did he actually *do*? another asked.

He pushed me into the corner and leaned into me. It was obvious that he was aroused. Her voice broke and she tried to compose herself. I've never forgotten the feeling of helplessness, she said. When I heard Ms. Shannon's story and saw how brave she was by coming forward...well, I just couldn't remain silent any longer.

But her story quickly disintegrated. The date she provided for the incident was when you were on an out-of-state field trip with ten other students. And the woman who had been identified as having broken up the assault said that her only memory of such an incident involved another male student, not you. She didn't recall seeing you that night at all. To top things off, one former classmate, a woman who had been friends with the accuser way back when, said the complainer had a habit of accusing men of improper behavior. That was just her, the classmate said. Always the victim, always seeking sympathy by claiming that she'd been treated disrespectfully.

None of us took her charges seriously, the classmate said. I mean he might be guilty of a few things, but I certainly never saw him act inappropriately. In fact, we all viewed Alex as just a spoiled rich kid—a *boring*, spoiled rich kid. I'm not trying to say he's a saint, but I'm not going to stand by and let someone use an obvious lie to destroy his reputation. Look, he's got a wife and family, for God's sake. There are women out there who have really been abused. My concern is for them, not for some insecure person who's taking advantage of the anti-male environment that exists today.

When the second accuser dropped from sight, her entire story seemed to confirm a vendetta against you. In the end the original accuser also lost credibility when dates and times of her story proved inconsistent.

So today, after receiving the results of the investigation that found no proof of wrongdoing, the board gave their final approval, naming you their new Chairman and CEO. A press conference and brief celebratory reception followed, where you received pats on the back from friends, board members, and company employees. Then, after accepting the last of the congratulations, you and your family retreated to the quiet sanctuary of your home.

- - -

Now you're ensconced in the study of your house that is dark but for the faint light of a single desk lamp. You sit alone with a glass of Scotch and think about the day's events...and about the truth. As you sip from your glass, you feel a tug of competing emotions. On the one hand, you feel pride in how you handled the accusations that were thrown at you and in the way you refused to cave under the pressure like so many other accused men had done. Instead, you fought back, which isn't easy to do in the heat of the momentum created by the national women's movement.

But on the other hand, there is an ever-present visceral pain—the frightening realization of what could have happened because of that day twenty-five years before. There have been many times like this when you've sat alone and thought about how different your life would have been, if your your accuser had spoken up.

Yes, *that* day. It was a Sunday afternoon a quarter of a century ago when you began your daily exercise—five miles of mixed running and walking. As you jogged out

the gates of the apartment complex where you and your young wife lived, your thoughts focused on an upcoming business meeting. To you exercise was more mental than physical. It was when you could focus on a problem, and by the time you'd finish a workout, you would more than likely have arrived at a solution.

That afternoon you noticed a runner approaching from the other side of the street—a woman with her head high, legs pumping. She looked mid-twentyish, slender, with an athletic build. She wore a pair of yellow shorts and a bright blue tank top that exposed plenty of sweat-glistened skin. A fanny pack was tightly cinched around her waist. As she passed, she turned toward you with a wicked smile—an obvious come-on, you thought.

Need any ice chips? she said through her heavy breathing. She pulled a plastic bag from her fanny pack, fished inside for a large ice chip, and flipped it to you. You put the cube in your mouth and nodded a thank-you,

Hot enough for you? you asked.

She laughed and said that she loved the heat. That's why I run in the middle of the day, she said.

You settled into a brisk walk beside her. Looking her over, though not being too obvious about it, you asked if this was her regular jogging route. She shook her head. She said she was from a different neighborhood. You loved the sound of her voice.

When you came to the gate of your apartment complex, you didn't stop but kept running beside her, trying to think of things to say. She was warm and friendly. You can still remember that.

You turned onto a major avenue and headed east. You had trouble matching her pace. Her long legs glistened under her sweat. You entered another residential area, and she began to slow, then she stopped outside a nice Cape Cod house.

Well, she said, as you both leaned over with hands on knees and gasped for air, this is where my journey ends. You looked at the house and squatted down on the curb. Neither of you said anything. The air was filled with the silence two people experience when they both know something is happening between them but don't know how to take the next step. You laid back on the grass and looked up into the summer sky. She laid back beside you, her hands clasped under her head. You can remember admiring the muscles in her shoulders and watching the sweat run across her chest.

Five minutes passed without so much as a word being uttered. Then you decided to act. Well, you said, I'm going to either find a drink somewhere or pass out. She giggled, stood up, and gave you a big grin.

Come on, she said, I've got something in the fridge you might like.

You remember how the interior of her house was filled with long shadows. She asked if you wanted a cold beer. You smiled and said you did. She brought two chilled bottles from the fridge—one for you and another for herself. You both drank the beers and found things to say, though nothing so important as to be remembered. You were killing time.

Then she announced that she would return and disappeared behind the closed door of her bedroom. You stared at the door and imagined her on the other side. Had she jumped into the shower? Was she changing out of her sweat-soaked running outfit, sitting on the bed, fidgeting with her shoes?

You considered your options. It would be awkward, if you opened the closed door only to discover that you'd misread her mood. On the other hand, if you waited in the dining room and she wanted you to join her...well, you had a decision to make.

As soon as you opened the door of her bedroom, you froze. She stood with her back to you, wearing nothing but her jogging shorts. Her tank top and fanny pack were on the floor at her feet. She looked at you over her shoulder. The look on her face was one of surprise. You stepped forward, and she stared past you toward the bedroom door. You closed it with a swing of your foot. Then you moved toward her.

- - -

You shake your head to escape the memory. You understand how the encounter with the Shannon woman could have ruined your life. The realization has often sent a chill through your entire body. But it's just a nightmare. She didn't come forward. There was no police report, no knock on the door, no detectives, no attorneys to deal with. You lived in fear for days, but time passed and the stabbing pain in your gut was slowly pushed aside. Pushed aside but always there to be revisited.

Then you think of the irony—how three weeks after your encounter, you were called into the office of the company president and told that you were to become the youngest Executive Vice-President in the firm's history. The meeting changed your life. On that day you vowed to overcome the curse that had almost ruined your career and your marriage. You dedicated yourself to becoming the kind of man who would be admired as a community leader, not despised as a common rapist. And you have honored that promise.

You've even sought the help of a therapist, without revealing your weekly sessions to your wife, Melinda. You are now a member of the most prestigious civic clubs and an active deacon in your church. You've left your old self behind, the immature pornography-addicted young man who lived in a world of sexual fantasy.

You and Melinda eventually established a nice home in a fashionable suburb and started a family that now includes three children and five grandchildren. You've distinguished yourself as a respected member of the city, someone to be looked up to and admired. Then the company announced their plans to make you Chairman and CEO. When your accuser found the courage to come forward and make her charge, insisting that this respected man had, in fact, committed a reprehensible act long ago, you did your part to discredit her. You denied even knowing who she was, and you were believed because you were respected and had been for many years. The charges didn't fit the man everyone knew and loved. Your friends and colleagues believed you because they *wanted* to believe you.

It seemed to the world that this self-serving woman had set out to ruin the life of a good man for the sake of a national cause that was engulfing the country. Her story had little foundation to it—at least the part identifying you as the assailant. Many people sensed truth in her account of a sexual assault, but they believed she had carelessly focused on a high-profile, innocent man to garner public attention. And when your second accuser's story fell flat, their belief in you grew stronger. So, in the end the board entrusted the company to your care. And what about the two accusers? Both women have drifted harmlessly into oblivion, where they now serve as nothing more than uncomfortable memories.



You think of your youth when you entertained thoughts that you knew would not serve you well. You developed an appetite—then an obsession—for the world of sexual invention. You remember the magazines that you kept hidden in the attic of your parents’ house until you and Melinda were married. Then you moved them to the attic of your own home. Which is where they stayed until the encounter with Cleta Shannon, when you put them in three large garbage bags and deposited them in a nearby dumpster, feeling the sting of their loss with each dropped bag. And with each step of strengthening your life—the climbing of the corporate ladder, the renewed commitment to a religious structure, the involvement in the city’s civic clubs, the involvement in worthy charity causes—you’ve had to fight against dark inner thoughts that pull you like a magnet toward an old abyss you are determined to avoid.

It’s as if you’re on a dark road that leads from one life-improving stop to another while a demonic shadow of temptation lurks between the stops, always there, always following. You race to get away, running as fast as possible toward the next bright light, always managing to stay one step ahead of the demon that wants to drag you back into the ever-present chasm of illicit thoughts...and forbidden actions.

Your mind turns to God. You aren’t completely sure if you believe in a higher authority or not, but you must admit that *someone* or *something* has protected you during the most vulnerable times in your life. Your accuser didn’t come forward at the time of the assault, and you wonder if God or some other force stepped in and made her hold her tongue so that you might change your life and do good in the world. Whatever the answer, your accuser remained silent for twenty-five years, giving you time to establish yourself as a someone to be believed.

You're proud of the way you put your life together and proud of the way you stood up to the charges, never wavering in your resolve. You proved your toughness and convinced yourself, as well as your board, that you are up to the task ahead.

But now as you drain the contents of your glass of courage, the dark and consuming demon returns. It offers no sense of satisfaction or accomplishment. It's a demon that you've lived with all these years, a demon that you know you'll live with for the remainder of your life. Because that's the thing about this demon—its flame is sometimes hidden, but its fire can never be fully extinguished.

Yes, Alex Baughman, you are one lucky man. But as you know, even *good* luck comes with its own set of dark passages.