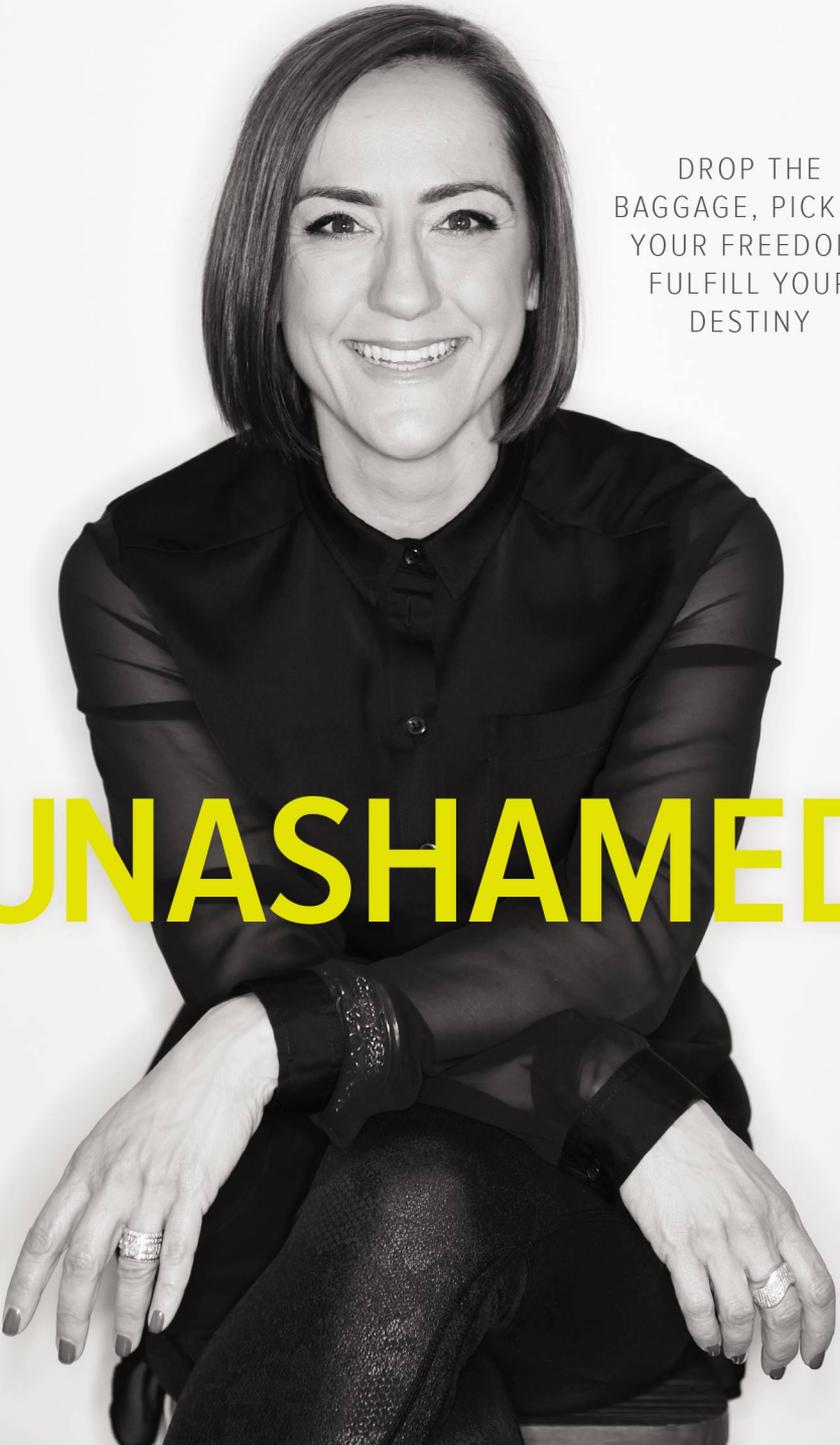


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Therefore have I set my face like flint,
and I know I will not be put to shame.

—*Isaiah 50:7*



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Chapter 1

SCHOOLED IN SHAME



I've got your lunchbox packed, Christine," my mom called from the kitchen. "Come let me braid your hair."

I looked down at my brand-new shiny black shoes, checked that my white socks were evenly folded at my ankles, and skipped from my bedroom to collect the pretty bright pink lunchbox I'd been allowed to pick out for my first day of kindergarten. I had tried to eat a little breakfast that morning but couldn't manage more than a few bites. No problem. Who wanted to waste time on breakfast? The big day had finally arrived—my first day of school. I couldn't wait to get there! I fidgeted impatiently as my mom neatly braided my long, light brown hair into pigtails; then I bounded out of the house, pigtails flying, for the walk to school in the footsteps of my second-grade brother.

For some children, entering kindergarten is an exciting adventure of new friends, new songs and games, and new discoveries, while for others it can be a frightening separation from parents and the familiar security of home. I was

definitely in the first category, an eager six-year-old filled with great expectations of good things.

I vividly recall taking my seat in the classroom for the first time and wiggling with excitement over the eye-widening, colorful world of bookshelves and chalkboards—a wonderland I was bursting to explore. But what excited me most was all the other children—a whole room of new playmates my own age! Until now, I'd seldom played with neighborhood children, though I had longed to. My playmates had mostly been my brothers or my cousins at family gatherings. So I couldn't wait until outdoor lunch and recess when I could begin to make new friends.

Finally lunchtime came, and we all carried our lunchboxes outside and sat on the asphalt playground. But this is where my warm waves of nostalgic memories give way to a scene that made my cheeks burn red and my heart sting.

I chose a spot next to a few other girls and unlatched my lunchbox, happy to find that my mom had packed my usual lunch—a feta cheese-and-olive sandwich. I was enjoying my first bite when Wayne, a boy sitting nearby, wrinkled his nose and cried out, “Phew! What’s that awful smell? What’s that stinky stuff you’re eating?”

Suddenly, all eyes turned to me. Wayne’s friend, Raymond, announced to all, “She’s eating that Greek cheese.” Then he eyed me suspiciously and asked, “Why can’t you wogs eat normal food like everybody else? No wonder you all stink like garlic.”

For a moment I froze; then my heart started to pound. I felt my face growing hot. The word he’d called me was a

terrible word, a nasty word, an inflammatory racial slur for Greeks never used in my house, though I'd heard it before—spewed angrily by strangers in public places. Why was he calling me this? And my sandwich smelled normal to me, not stinky. Didn't everybody eat feta cheese?

I looked around hoping to see someone else with a lunch like mine, only to discover that all the other kids had something we never ate at my house—white-bread sandwiches spread with Vegemite, a distinctly Australian food paste. I felt exposed, an oddity on display, checked out by the puzzled and scowling faces of those who, only moments before, I had assumed were my new playmates.

I wanted to disappear.

Wayne and Raymond, on the other hand, bolstered by the attention of their newfound audience, grew bolder. "My dad says you people should go back to your own country. You don't belong here."

My stomach clenched. I didn't understand what he meant. Go back where? This *was* my country, wasn't it? I'd been born here in Australia. I'd lived on the same street my whole life. Didn't everyone else at lunch that day all live in the same Australian neighborhood my family did—Lalor Park? Why was he saying I didn't belong?

I looked at the other girls sitting alongside me, hoping to find a compassionate expression or reassuring sign, but every one of them looked away, pretending to ignore me. No one was going to come to my defense. I was all alone.

More stinging words about my heritage followed, accompanied by snickers from some of the other kids. I sat

in silence, eyes to the ground, until Wayne and Raymond finally tired of taunting me and turned away. Obviously there was something wrong with me—something embarrassing about being Greek. No one else was mocked because of his or her food or family. I was, for reasons I did not understand, strange, different, and unpleasant to them, someone to be avoided.

Though my empty stomach rumbled, I'd lost my appetite. I stuffed my uneaten sandwich back into the lunchbox—the pretty pink lunchbox I'd been so excited about earlier—and snapped it shut. The minutes ticked by slowly. I watched longingly as others gathered in little groups and talked and played. But no one spoke to me. I sat quiet and alone, wanting to join in but feeling unwelcome, like an outsider.

Relief washed over me when the bell finally rang. On the way back to the classroom, fighting back tears, I secretly pulled my sandwich from my lunchbox and tossed it into the trash can. I never again wanted to be ridiculed for being different. I would try to be like everyone else. I didn't want to be Greek. Was I different in other ways I didn't realize? Did I have an accent? Did I use different words? Was there anything else about me that would make people laugh? From then on, I would try to not say or do anything that the others didn't.

The six-year-old me didn't really have a word that expressed what I felt that day. Since then, I've learned one.

Ashamed.

Almost every day for the rest of the year, no matter how

hungry I was, I quietly carried the lunch my mom had lovingly packed for me over to the trash can and tossed it out.

Shame does that. It prompts us to toss away the good gifts we are given.

Lessons Learned

All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten is the title of a famous book by Robert Fulghum. What he meant, of course, is that kindergarten is where we were taught what is expected of us to get along in this world. Share everything. Play fair. Hold hands and stick together. But the lesson I learned in kindergarten that day was the lesson of shame. I learned it so well in kindergarten that, by first grade, I'd come to expect the daily taunts and jeers, the name-calling and bullying. I'd also caught on to the fact that the hateful graffiti spray-painted on the walls of our housing projects was directed at my Greek immigrant family and me—the only Greeks in our low-income government housing neighborhood. I had learned through bitter experience that I could do nothing to erase the chasm between my classmates and me. My kindergarten plan to try to blend in had been met with failure. Instead, I was repeatedly shamed for the Greek blood running through my veins.

My response? I became a rough-and-tumble kid, ready to fight back. If I couldn't find security in my heritage, I would find it in strength and tenacity. If I couldn't win my classmates' affections and friendship, then I'd try to win

their respect. Because I loved sports, especially soccer, I worked hard to be the best. I pushed myself to run the fastest, kick the hardest, set my sights on the best player—who was always a boy—and then work to outplay him. Soon, I more than held my own on the playground, competing evenly against the boys.

One day that year, now seven years old, as I walked home from school with my brother, a group of nine-year-old boys started pushing my brother. He tried to ignore them and continue toward home, but one of them yelled, “Come on, wog, too afraid to fight back?”

When the pushing escalated to punching, I’d had enough. Even though I was far smaller, I jumped to his defense, leaping onto the back of one of the bigger boys and pulling his hair until he broke free and ran away. The others followed him, turning back occasionally to yell insults and call us names.

“I don’t care what they say,” I spat. “They’ll think twice before they jump us again.” But I *did* care. I cared a lot. I just wouldn’t show it. Hiding my feelings had already become a way of life for me.

Shame does that. It teaches us to hide ourselves, to hunker down wherever we can find a wall of protection.



Despite the prejudice that surrounded me, I loved school and excelled at it. Books became my best friends, and my appetite for learning kept me eager for each new challenge.

I was determined to prove to the world that I *was* worth something. Achievement, performance, accomplishment, success—these had become my means of seeking acceptance and approval. When the teacher asked questions, my hand shot up, and when assignments were given, I completed them without fail.

By second grade, I was emerging as a leader in the class, which I assumed was a good thing. I noticed that when we divided into groups, others often followed my lead. If a question stumped my classmates, their eyes, even the teacher's, often turned to me for the answer. When choosing up teams, academically or for sports, I was often among the first to be chosen. I assumed it wasn't because they liked me—I was still "that Greek girl"—but because they wanted to win.

Halfway through the year, report card day arrived. I was so excited to open the sealed envelope that I couldn't bring myself to wait—so as I walked down the road toward home, I tore it open to see what marks my teacher, Mrs. Black, had given me. My heart swelled with a sense of achievement as, scanning the page, I saw one high mark after another.

And then my eyes stopped at the bottom, locked on Mrs. Black's careful printing: "Christine is an excellent student but has to learn that she can't always be the leader."

My heart lurched. I felt as if I'd been punched in the stomach. Leading, whether through example or bossiness or just being the loudest, was the one place I had found for myself in second-grade society. Maybe I couldn't get them to like me, but I was actually quite good at getting them to follow me. And wasn't being a leader supposed to be a

good thing? Something to be praised? Yet here I was, being chastised for the very thing I thought I was excelling in! I *wanted* to lead. I wanted to be something other than a poor and hated minority. I wanted to be strong. By working up the courage to step forward, to stand alone if need be, to be the leader, I'd discovered I had enough strength and skill that others wanted to follow me—even admire me. Me! The unwelcome Greek girl! But rather than encouraging and rewarding my leadership abilities, Mrs. Black was telling me to stop.

The joy I'd felt moments before morphed into embarrassment and hurt. While I'd thought that I was finding my place and proving my worth, had I all along been just a disappointment to my teacher, failing without even knowing it? Deflated, I slid the report card back into the darkness of the envelope.

Looking back at the teacher's words now, I realize that perhaps she saw a need to smooth the rough edges off a girl who was trying too hard, who may have been bossy or pushy or abrasive, and who tended to take over rather than work together with others. Today, I can give her the benefit of the doubt—maybe she was looking for ways to help me grow in social skills. But those thoughts were beyond the scope of my shamed second-grade heart. All I understood was that my teacher wanted me to stop being a leader, to stop being—or so it appeared to me—the best I could be.

Sadly, the final report card at the end of that year showed the results. Right next to her earlier comment, Mrs. Black had written: "Christine has settled down very well."

Yes, I'd gotten the message. Squelch my gifts of leadership. Stifle my strengths. Become more invisible. Be less than myself.

Shame does that. It pushes you down and prevents you from becoming all you could be.



Shame was my companion from my earliest memories, a huge part of my life and identity. And not just in school. Outside my home, my ethnic heritage was a reason for shame, but inside my home, I had almost the opposite problem: It seemed that I did not fit as I should into my culture or my gender. The messages of disapproval I perceived added fuel to the fire of shame that burned inside me. Since sports and books were my favorite pastimes, I threw myself into both with a passion, energized to be one of the best, the smartest, the fastest, the toughest. The only problem with that was—well—good little Greek girls weren't *supposed* to love sports and books!

“Christine, why can't you be like other girls? Why don't you play with dolls instead of spending so much time reading? That can't be healthy.”

“Christine, stop playing ball with the boys. You should be in the kitchen, learning to cook.”

“Why do you spend so much time on schoolwork? Boys don't like girls smarter than they are.”

The message was loud and clear: A good Greek girl should want to learn to cook and play with dolls because

her real purpose, her ultimate future, was to grow up, get married, and have babies. Any passions beyond those, the messages I heard at home clearly implied, were shameful.

My mom, wanting the best for my future and doing her best to motivate me in “girl” interests, signed me up for ballet lessons, which I hated. And when I complained, she would ask, “Christine, why do you like soccer more than ballet? What’s wrong with you?”

You should have heard her the day she discovered that each time she dropped me off for ballet, I’d wait for her to drive away, drop my tutu to the ground, and tear off running to the soccer field to play with the boys. She flipped!

I don’t recall a time in my life when I didn’t feel that there was something wrong with who I was, something deficient in me. My sources of shame, however, went far beyond the ethnic prejudices of my schoolmates, the mis-directed messages of my teacher, and the cultural pressures and expectations of my Greek family. What my mom and dad, teachers, and classmates didn’t know was that I carried a shameful secret.

From my earliest memories, I was the victim of sexual abuse. Far too young to comprehend what was happening, I only knew that what was being done to me felt ugly and wrong, and it left me feeling that *I* was ugly and wrong. My parents did not know it was happening. These secret acts took place behind closed doors, and I had no words to describe them even if I had felt safe enough to try. But shame took hold from the very beginning, so I wouldn’t have dared utter a word.

When you are abused, at first you are ashamed of what is happening to you. Over time, though, you begin to think it is *because of you* that it is happening. The abuse continued for years—throughout my entire childhood. It was hidden; it had always been hidden; and I believed it needed to stay hidden. After all, I thought, there must be something very wrong with me. *I must be at fault. I must be a bad person. I am not worth protecting. God must not love me. I guess I'm not worth his attention.*

Shame does that. It whispers lies to your soul.

Shackled by Shame

Shame is a powerfully painful emotion. Though as a child I lacked the understanding or vocabulary to define it, I knew well the many feelings of shame: humiliation, disgrace, unworthiness, embarrassment, anger, dishonor, remorse, anguish, sorrow, and self-reproach. I had no concept of the difference between the shame of what was being done to me and the shame of my own actions—they were inexplicably meshed into a mass of inner pain. I remember my face heated and my stomach churning. I remember wanting to duck down and disappear, to shrink down into myself where no one could see the ugly feelings of wrongness deep inside. And when I did dare step into the spotlight, to take the lead in something and excel, I worked hard to be sure that all those frightening feelings were locked away and invisible, so that no one would know they lurked within. I was a child

damaged by shame, shackled to it, and I dragged it with me from childhood into adolescence and then into adulthood.

Most likely, you have done the same.

Experience and observation have shown me that countless women of all ages, on every continent, have been schooled in and shackled by shame. As I travel the globe, I meet thousands in my speaking engagements who are struggling and debilitated by shame. I see shame everywhere I look, including the church. It creeps into the heart, growing in shadowy places, until those struggling with it are too shamed to seek help from the very shame that enslaves them.

Shame lives within women who worship beside you at church, work in the next cubicle, attend your workout class, entertain you on TV, smile at you from magazine covers, or live next door. I've seen it in so many faces I've come to know.

I see shame in Emma, my friend Carol's granddaughter who saw her parents fight and do terrible things. She didn't know who was responsible for what. All she knew for sure was that she felt a terrible wrongness that made her want to hide. Little Emma, a child who had done nothing wrong.

Dianne was an honors student who dreamed of college. But her dad said he wouldn't waste money on a girl attending college. So she put herself through school. Once in her career, in a rewarding position, she was treated differently than her coworkers—because she was a woman.

Yun, a young Vietnamese girl, was forced to become a sex slave. Her repeated attempts to escape that life resulted in vicious beatings, one of which brought her to the attention not only of government social agencies but also of A21,

a global ministry my husband, Nick, and I began to assist victims of human trafficking. Even under A21's protection, Yun continued to experience debilitating shame that almost defeated our attempts to help her find the life she wanted.

Shame compounded my friend Heather's lifelong struggle with mental illness that left her in a cell in a mental institution after a grisly suicide attempt—alone, disheveled, missing a shoe, covered in blood and vomit and urine. What she felt was not just fear and humiliation, but shame.

Natalie was forever asked when she would marry. A successful lawyer, she had pursued her childhood dream, but everyone only cared if she was married or not. She came from a culture where everyone thought getting married was more important than having a life or a career. Those achievements were secondary. Every family gathering was another date with shame.

And there are women in the Bible who were made to feel shame. The woman with the issue of blood had been in hiding for twelve years when she touched the hem of Jesus' garment and was healed (Mark 5:25–34). She had been forced to live in shame as an outcast in her family and community, hidden away from everyone—all because of a condition she couldn't control.

The woman caught in adultery was literally drug out of bed and brought before Jesus (John 8:4–11). Her reputation sullied. Humiliated. Shamed. Judged. Rejected. Labeled.

Me. Emma. Dianne. Yun. Heather. Natalie.

The woman with the issue of blood and the woman caught in adultery.

Modern times. Biblical times.

We are just a few who represent the many stories I hear every day about the kinds of experiences that produce and bind women with shame.

We have all been affected. But we can all be free.

Silent No More

Talking about my past and my struggle with shame used to be very difficult for me. I remember, in my early years of ministry, contending with shame's lies. *Others will find out you are weak*, shame whispered. *Then you will lose their respect and damage your ministry. Shhh. Hide. Don't be vulnerable! Project only strength.*

Oh yes! Shame lies. Big time. Even today, every now and then, unless I am vigilant, shame still tries to sneak up on me at the most unexpected times. The devil still lies to me, as he did back then. And he would love for me to believe his lies and remain silent rather than choosing to dig deeper, to root out more of his lies and shame in my life, and to encourage others to do the same.

But I cannot be silent.