

When enough of the world comes at you, telling you you're nothing, you believe. You become what you believe. You become until the pain of becoming is too great to bear. You constantly ask yourself: What if I don't know the answer? What if I'm wrong? What if they know I'm wrong? What if they laugh? What if fearing failure makes you fail? You're faced with a choice. To stay. Or to change. Or to end. If you're lucky, enough love begins seeping through, lighting a path to change.

This is the story of *I Am NOT!*, a memoir of triumph over verbal and emotional abuse, bullying, disordered eating, and societal norms. A journey of self-deprecation and the promise of continued growth. An anecdotal warning of the challenges kids, teens, and adults still face today.



*Brutally honest, beautifully empowering, and haunting in how many of our own lives' bits and pieces we can see in Rachel's journey.*

~ Kristen Caldwell, High School Library Media Specialist

*I Am NOT! is more than a memoir. It's a mirror for all of us. Rachel's reflections of who she was, is, and strives to be, resonate with all of us. Her recollections vividly transport the reader from our most vulnerable to our most victorious and serve as a reminder that we are all growing, learning, and becoming our best selves.*

~ Marla Zack, Entrepreneur

*With each vignette, we feel the impact of the heartbreaking reality of a society that unapologetically tells us that we are 'not good enough'. Yet through Rachel Boehm's deeply human and emotionally vulnerable story, we are reminded of the beauty in resilience, and are inspired to begin our own journey toward unconditional self-love."*

~ Alison Morogiello, National Certified Counselor

**I AM NOT!**  
Rachel Boehm



*"Brutally honest,  
beautifully empowering"*

a memoir by  
**Rachel Boehm**



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a memoir by  
**Rachel Boehm**



*Dedicated to my parents  
who believed in me  
when I could not.*

*I Am NOT!*  
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## PRAISE FOR **I AM NOT!**

*Brutally honest, beautifully empowering, and haunting in how many of our own lives' bits and pieces we can see in Rachel's journey. A flawlessly written memoir about the flaws that shape us into our authentic selves, this is a must-read for teen girls, moms of daughters, and any woman who knows the trials and tribulations of becoming her own hero.*

~ Kristen Caldwell, High School Library Media Specialist

*I Am NOT! is more than a memoir. It's a mirror for all of us. Rachel's reflections of who she was, is, and strives to be resonate with all of us. Her recollections vividly transport the reader from our most vulnerable to our most victorious and serves as a reminder that we are all growing, learning, and becoming our best selves.*

~ Marla Zack, Entrepreneur

*Rachel's journey to her present is one that is recognizable for many of us. It is an intimate window into so many of our common struggles, told with her unique voice. Tinged with humor, honesty, real and vibrant scenes; the human condition is evident in each picture played out. Woven through the experience is an invitation to look plainly at what we do to ourselves, have done to us or taken in by osmosis. Along the way, it also honors influences our epiphanies that can affect our transformation through our darkest days. It is brave,*

*it is courageous, and it is vulnerable. It brings openness to subjects often avoided. Rachel's work offers compassion and encouragement for each of us to find space and time to honor our journeys – no matter how they show up, they are valid... they are OURS.*

~ Natalie Jensen, MSW, Supervisee in Social Work, BFA Musical Theatre

*With each vignette, we feel the impact of the heartbreaking reality of a society that unapologetically tells us that we are 'not good enough'. Yet through Rachel Boehm's deeply human and emotionally vulnerable story, we are reminded of the beauty in resilience, and are inspired to begin our own journey toward unconditional self-love.*

~ Alison Morigiello, National Certified Counselor

*In a society of selfies, filters, and snapshots of real life, Rachel's book was an honest account of the stories we choose to believe and tell ourselves. Rachel's honesty, vulnerability, and true authenticity in sharing her story is what's missing in today's health, fitness, and nutrition world. Let Rachel's story remind you of the power of choice and guide you into a more fulfilling journey throughout life.*

~ Coach Adam Feit, Assistant Director of Performance Nutrition at Precision Nutrition.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wanted to be done writing this story many times. I returned to therapy so I could bring the past to life without it invading my present. Some vignettes were easy to resurrect. Others took me many attempts to go deeper, to truly relive. I was emotionally and mentally drained. And yet, I could not be done until I was truly done.

In a way, that is how my personal development journey went, nay goes. I thought when I was fat, all I needed was to be skinny. My problems would vanish with the pounds. Then I was skinny, and then finally a “normal weight,” only to learn I had more problems to tackle. I was not done. I was only truly done when I peeled back each layer and really examined what was inside it. This book is my layers.

I was asked by several people what this book meant to me, why I was compelled to tell my story. This story is my contribution. This story is one of survival. Told in hopes of bringing comfort and empowerment to those now struggling to survive. Told in hopes of raising a red stop sign to

those who are the bullies and abusers, or the parents and teachers and colleagues and spouses of those individuals. Told in hopes of inspiring stories from others who have already survived and righted their path.

There were so many memories to choose from. Some I didn't want to write. Some I wrote and took out. I wanted to give you a sense of my mindset throughout the years, of the world coming at me and me finally fighting back, without redundancy, without hyperbole. I hope, in the end, I selected well.

## Introduction

Me: "It feels like...like I've been at war with myself for almost thirty years. The woman I am now, I think she's been there the whole time. I just didn't know. Well, that's not true. Sometimes she broke free and stood up for us. So I had to have known. I guess I kept her locked away most of the time. Somewhere down deep so I couldn't hear her or feel her.

"Now she's out. I've embraced her fully. But before, I needed to shrink her to nothing. To the size of a speck of cinnamon—unremarkable but holding the promise of spice and fire."

Therapist: "Why do you think you buried her?"

Me: "Fear. She scares me. Scared me. I didn't see myself as a fighter. A lady doesn't fight back. She doesn't burn bridges. She takes the high road. She smiles, she nods,

she crosses her legs and bats her eyes and smiles. She doesn't yell. She's slow to anger. She takes it on the chin, turns the other cheek, she speaks softly and carries a big purse. She's virtuous. She's chaste. She's a 'yes' girl. She's flawless. She is perfect. She's Greta Garbo's sexy voice in a heroin chic body, with the purity of a Mother Mary. She's not damaged goods. She's the one men marry, not date.

“My speck of cinnamon is not those things. I didn't know I didn't have to be those things. So, I buried me and pretended to be everything I was supposed to be. Fought to become everything I was supposed to be. Almost died, fighting everything I'm not.”

## *Part One*

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# Fat



*My first day of third grade, in the cherry jumpsuit I never wore again.*

## *Chapter 1* You Are

My new backpack, stuffed with the entire back-to-school aisle, bounces off my back as I bob in jelly shoes down the hallway with natural 'tude. My headband has a stream of ribbons flowing in step. I pass the classrooms for the first and second graders. "Babies," I think.

I turn a corner that's angled like the hook of an elbow and pop into third grade. I find my seat, arranged alphabetically by last name, so it doesn't take long. Excitement fills the air around me—fills me. It's an excitement of beginnings, of hope, of promise, of big-kid arrival. Third grade was big-kid time. My mom and dad said so. It's when you get the big-girl college-ruled paper and not the Neapolitan ice cream paper that shows where the big and little letters should start and stop.

It's when you near the end of your single digits, age-wise. It's why I got this extra special outfit, this jumpsuit

I had fawned over at an overpriced children's boutique. Typically, my mom and I only window-shopped there. It's where the rest of my class shops, but we eye price tags and dream. But today was special. She had saved and saved and bought it for me. I feel like a million dollars in it.

The cherries and cherry stems and leaves cover a black background; red ribbon trims the sleeveless arm holes and ankle cuffs, which puff the legs in a balloon silhouette. I popped my hip out with gusto during our morning back-to-school pictures. I'm ready for big-kid world!

In no time, the clock ticks for recess. My peers, people I assume are my friends because we go to school together, bolt to the new playscape. I wait. Sarah is waiting for Linda. Sarah and I are best friends. In second grade, we gave each other those broken heart charms. I was the BE FRI and she was the ST END.

The second hand on the clock ticks loudly, seconds feel like hours, and I want them to hurry so we can play. I wait silently, impatiently, near the doorframe until finally the two brush past me, arms nearly linked. They stop long enough to eyeball me and declare, "You can't play with us. You're fat." A quick pivot and they're down the white-painted-brick, fluorescent-lit hallway, through the double doors that lead to the art room and the next set of double doors that lead to the playscape.

Blinded by the brightness of the hallway and the

welling of tears, I stand there alone and try to make sense of it all. "What just happened? What is fat? Why am I fat? Why is fat so bad? Is it contagious?"

Chapter 2

## Climbing into Womanhood

“It’s time for a bra,” my mom said. I’m not sure what indicator my body gave, alerting her the time for the bra had come. All I know is she is very excited and I am horrified. Horrified for two reasons.

First, I’m having flashbacks to when I got separated from her in the bra section of Bell’s Department Store. I relive the moment on loop the entire drive to go find my own bra. I was maybe six, just tall enough for Madonna-inspired pointy cups to hit eye-level at every turn. Turning and turning, I searched for my mom among the racks of pointed polyester, pads, wires, and hooks until she scooped me up. The drama of it probably lasted all but thirty seconds. It felt like forever. Bras are terrifying.

Second, I’m pretty sure I’m the first girl in my grade to be faced with the bra. It’s because I’m fat and they’re not, something no one lets me forget. I know that’s the reason

because we learned in our two weeks of sex ed that boobs are basically fat. My boobs are part of my fat and that is why I’m first. Chunky me with the premature boobs. Boobs suck. I mean stink. I’m not supposed to say “suck.”

We’re greeted by an older saleslady, who looks like a pencil and does not appear to have boobs herself. She leads me back to the dressing room so she can measure me, before rejoining my mom on the floor to scout for an assortment of “possibilities.” “So exciting!”

Left alone, I stand in the yellow box of a dressing room, wishing I could disappear. I ignore the first few bras handed over and under the door. I don’t want to undress. I don’t want to accept the bras. But I cannot ignore the growing pile of “lovely options” forever. I accept my fate and shed my clothing as if it were a protective layer—slowly, sadly, not wanting to bare myself to even myself.

I begin to try on the weird-looking contraptions. They pinch and are dizzying to get on.

Some close in the back, so I figure out you have to put it on inside out and upside down and then turn it and twist it around you like a stubborn hula-hoop, then flip it right side up and crawl your arms through the holes. Then stand and reach in and readjust all your parts.

Or they close in the front, so you slip your arms through the straps like a vest, then bend over to scoop your boobs and side boob fat into the little triangle-shaped cloths, then clasp them together and then stand up and readjust it all. Bras are exhausting.

Either way, vest or hula-hoop, my reflection is unpleasant. I stare at it. Usually, I try not to look but today, right now, I can't help but look. These things are just there, somehow drawing even more attention to my belly. It's almost like I have three bellies now. Three little pillows of skin and fat. And when I bend over to do all the adjusting and readjusting and everything dangles...well, it is hideous watching gravity just taking my body for a spin. The song, "Do your ears hang low," enters my mind. Only it isn't my ears hanging and wobbling to and fro. It's me. All of me. And I'm alone in this. I know I am. I'm the only hanging and wobbling and trying to squeeze their boob things into pieces of fabric strewn together with wires and straps and clasps.

Loneliness, isolation, washes over me like the yellow light of the dingy dressing room stall; the tears fall uncontrollably.

"Sweetheart, how's it going? Do you want to show me anything?"

"N-n-no. I don't want them," I tell my mom, choking on my tears.

"Are you crying?"

"Y-y-yes!"

Informed I must pick two, a nude and a black, I pick the first of each color I see up off the floor and toss them over the dressing room door before hurriedly hiding myself under my own clothes. As if my own clothes were a safety blanket, an invisibility blanket. They protect me

from the world, hide me from it.

Silence fills the car as we drive home. We drive past the hills, which look like up-turned boobs. The wires of the telephone poles are the wires that were poking me. Everywhere I see signs of what my body is becoming, and I hate it. I just want to be like everyone else. A stick, free of squeezable flesh.

### *Chapter 3*

## Open Wide

As if the bra wasn't bad enough, now I have braces. Metal mouth. I'm not the first. Jesse got a retainer and Chad got braces. But they're popular. I'm now just more of an out-cast. I even tried to make my braces cool by picking rubber band colors that matched the Dallas Cowboys...but no one noticed. I don't even like football.

My orthodontist thought my idea was "cool," but he doesn't count. During my last exam he also said I have a large mouth. "Wow, you can open really big. Bet you don't have any trouble with Big Macs! Ha, ha!"

I don't eat Big Macs. I guess I look like I do. I'm never opening my mouth wide again. I'm going to start smiling with my mouth shut. Lips tight, jaw clenched. It kind of hurts and it gives me a headache sometimes, but it's better than people thinking I eat a lot because of the size of my mouth. My front teeth are big too. They look like chiclets.

### *Chapter 4*

## Unexpected Visitor

"Mom! Mommy!"

She rushes in, thinking due to the nature of the scream, I'm somehow being mauled by a bear on the second floor of our suburban home. Seeing no bear, she asks, "What's wrong?"

"I. Am. Bleeding!" I woke up like any old school day, only this wasn't any old school day. There was blood.

She delicately surveys the scene. "Rachel, you got your period!"

"I don't want my period!"

"Yes, you do! You're becoming a woman!"

"But I don't want to be a woman. I want to be a kid!"

My mom thinks this whole womanhood thing is exciting. To me, it's more like being stricken with the plague or leprosy. Only fat girls get puberty early. I learned that too in sex ed. More fat, more puberty-starting-hormone-things.

All the cool girls in my sixth grade class are still stick thin. They look like models. I look like a muffin. Or an apple. Our shapes are fruits, I'm learning. Except theirs. They don't look like a fruit, more like a stem of sugar cane.

### *Day Two of Womanhood*

I walk into school armed with tampons. I'm still mourning the loss of childhood but feeling more comfortable, having read the rather overly descriptive instruction pamphlet in the box of tampons my mom gave me. I'm ready, sort of. I go to the bathroom on occasion to check on everything. I don't want anything to show. I don't want anyone to know.

Between afternoon classes, I go to the bathroom. I open one of the grey stalls. The entire bathroom is shades of grey. Grey and black against the white of the toilets. Except this time. This time there was red. The toilet bowl was blood red. Written on the side of the stall is, "Rachel thinks she got her period and she's a woman but she's not. It's food coloring. She's lying."

Red. I don't know how they found out, but Marla and Cassi did. They are two of the more popular girls. They're the ringleaders. The principal found out they came to school that day armed with red food coloring. I wasn't the first to see it. Too many saw it before I did. Marla and Cassi got in trouble, but the damage was done. Another mark against me. A scarlet letter, or scarlet toilet bowl.

## Chapter 5 B-Rating

Maybe this is the year, I thought. So many thoughts bouncing in my brain as I waited impatiently for my future.

I was good last year! In volleyball and basketball. I was even MVP of my basketball team! I was the "lay-up queen." I practiced all the time in the driveway of our new house. My dad helped me too. He showed me how to aim it just off the square of the backboard to get it right in the net, instead of circling and bouncing around and then off the rim.

My coach last year was amazing. I didn't know coaches could be that nice, or that good at what they do. She made me feel like I could actually do things. Like I belonged there, like I wasn't out of place or incapable or just taking up space. She even said that if I practiced hard enough, I



*Mid-North Face 50K run, which was a training run for the JFK 50-miler I completed later that year (2014). It's a glorious thing when you begin to love and respect your body for what it can do, not exclusively for how it looks. Life, and even trail runs, are more fun that way.*

## STATISTICS

### ***School Bullying***

Definition: Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time.<sup>1</sup>

- Between 1 in 4 and 1 in 3 US students say they have been bullied at school.<sup>2</sup>
- In one large study, about 49% of children in grades 4–12 reported being bullied by other students at school at least once during the past month.
- Only about 20 to 30% of students who are bullied notify adults about the bullying.<sup>3</sup>
- In 2017, about 20% of students ages 12–18 reported being bullied at school during the school year.
- Of students ages 12–18, about 13% reported being the subject of rumors; 13% reported being made fun of, called names, or insulted; 5% reported being pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on; and 5% reported being excluded from activities on purpose.
- Childhood bullying can have significant lifelong consequences for victims and bullies alike. Adults who were frequently bullied in childhood have an increased frequency

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1 “What Is Bullying?” (2019, December 5). Retrieved from <https://www.stopbullying.gov/bullying/what-is-bullying>.

2 “Facts About Bullying” (2019, December 18). Retrieved from <https://www.stopbullying.gov/media/facts/index.html>.

3 Ibid.

of psychiatric disorders, including anxiety, depression, and suicidality, extending into middle age.<sup>4</sup>

- Frequent bullying in childhood may impact victims similar to experiencing multiple adverse childhood experiences (Takizawa, Maughan, & Arseneault, 2014).<sup>5</sup>
- Adolescents who perpetrate bullying tend to be thought of as popular, possessing a social status of leadership, influence, and respect (Cillessen & Rose, 2005).<sup>6</sup>
- Both overweight and obese youths experience significantly more bullying than normal-weight youths.<sup>7</sup>
- Bullied students indicate that bullying has a negative effect on how they feel about themselves (19%), their relationships with friends and family and on their school work (14%), and physical health (9%) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016).<sup>8</sup>
- Youth who self-blame and conclude they deserved to be bullied are more likely to face negative outcomes, such as depression, prolonged victimization, and maladjustment (Perren, Ettakal, & Ladd, 2013; Shelley & Craig, 2010).<sup>9</sup>

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4 Hornor, G. (2018). "Bullying: What the PNP Needs to Know," *Journal of Pediatric Health Care*, 32(4), 399–408. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pedhc.2018.02.001>.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 van Geel, M., Vedder, P. & Tanilon, J., "Are Overweight and Obese Youths More Often Bullied by their Peers? A Meta-analysis on the Relation between Weight Status and Bullying," *Int J Obes* 38, 1263–1267 (2014) doi:10.1038/ijo.2014.117.

8 "Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2016," (2017, May). Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017064.pdf>.

9 Perren, S., Ettakal, I., & Ladd, G. (2012), "The Impact of Peer Victimization on Later Maladjustment: Mediating and Moderating Effects of Hostile and Self-blaming Attributions," *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 46–55. doi: 10.1111/j.1469-7610.2012.02618.x.

### **Workplace Bullying**

Definition: Workplace Bullying is repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons (the targets) by one or more perpetrators. It is abusive conduct that is:

- » *Threatening, humiliating, or intimidating, or*
- » *Work interference — sabotage — which prevents work from getting done, or*
- » *Verbal abuse*<sup>10</sup>

- A 2017 survey by the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) estimated that 61% of US employees are aware of abusive conduct in the workplace, 19% have experienced it and another 19% have witnessed it.
- The number of US workers who are affected by bullying—summing over those with direct bullying and witnessing experiences—is 65.6 million, the combined population of 15 States.<sup>11</sup>
- In addition to being bullied, targets are significantly more likely to lose their job than the bully, 82% vs. 18%.<sup>12</sup>
- Close to 40% of employees utilize a personal day or sick day due to a stressful relationship at work.<sup>13</sup>
- It has also been estimated that overall, US organizations sustain \$5 billion in health care expenses attributed to psychological stress of issues related to the workplace (Lim & Teo, 2009).<sup>14</sup>

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10 (2014). Retrieved from <https://www.workplacebullying.org/individuals/problem/definition>.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

- 12% often eat when they're not hungry; 49% sometimes do.<sup>37</sup>
- 15% of young women in the US who are not diagnosed with an eating disorder display substantially disordered eating attitudes and behaviors.<sup>38</sup>
- 51% of 9 and 10 year-old girls feel better about themselves if they are on a diet. Mellin LM, Irwin CE & Scully S, "Disordered Eating Characteristics in Girls: A survey of middle class children," *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* (1992); 92:851-53.
- 42% of 1st-3rd grade girls want to be thinner. Collins M.E., "Body Figure and Preferences among Pre-adolescent Children," *International Journal of Eating Disorders* (1991); 199-208.
- 46% of 9-11 year-olds are "sometimes" or "very often" on diets, and 82% of their families are "sometimes" or "very often" on diets. Gustafson-Larson, A., & Terry, R.D., "Weight-related Behaviors and Concerns of Fourth-grade Children," *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, (1992); 818-822.
- Time Magazine reports that 80% of all children have been on a diet by the time that they have reached the fourth grade.<sup>39</sup>
- Disordered eating attitudes and behaviors were present in over 27% of girls aged 12-18 years and were seen to increase gradually throughout adolescence.

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37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Eating Disorder Statistics (n.d.). Retrieved from [https://www.ndsu.edu/fileadmin/counseling/Eating\\_Disorder\\_Statistics.pdf](https://www.ndsu.edu/fileadmin/counseling/Eating_Disorder_Statistics.pdf).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rachel Boehm is an award-winning journalist, turned workplace wellness organizer and advocate. Her experiences with school and workplace bullying, fat shaming, disordered eating, perfectionism, and verbal and emotional abuse began at a young age and continued into her late-twenties.

Embracing a survivor's mindset, Boehm now views her journey as a calling to transform the way individuals and organizations view well-being, the beauty of the human body, metrics of success, and the fragility of time.

Boehm was raised in Austin, Texas. A love for the fine arts, film, and television took her to Southern California for undergraduate studies and to pursue a career in the industry.

A quarter-life crisis fueled by the tumultuous nature of the industry and a realization of society's flawed definitions of beauty and success, sent her on a multi-year

soul-searching quest. She traveled back to Austin, then on to the UAE, Syria, Jordan, Europe, and New York City, before accepting a graduate studies scholarship with American University in Journalism and Public Affairs. Following commencement, she moved to Northern Virginia.

This journey is detailed in her memoir *I Am NOT!*, which in many ways provides the backstory for her 2018 self-published collection of quips and lessons learned, *Tripping in Public*.

Today, Boehm works at an individual and organizational level to change the dialogue around the workplace well-being experience. She shares her story and works to help others: redefine success and beauty; develop mindfulness and self-compassion; and embrace the art of the “always something” mindset.

Through her many endeavors (day job, side hustle, and private practice), Boehm seeks to help everyone bring their best selves to work and life, and to truly love the skin they’re in. You can learn more about Boehm and her work at <http://YesYou.Co>, and connect with her on Social Media.

*LinkedIn* [linkedin.com/in/rachelboehm/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/rachelboehm/)

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