

FOCUSED WOMAN

A Free Gift for You

Chapter 1: Why Nobody Noticed

from

The Late-Diagnosed Woman's ADHD Guide

by Rachel Morgan

If you've ever wondered why everyone else seemed to get a manual for life and you didn't — start here.

The classroom clock ticked too loud. That's what I remember most.

It was one of those wall clocks with the red second hand that swept instead of glided, and every tick landed like a little hammer tap on the inside of my skull. The fluorescent lights hummed. Someone's chair squeaked. Mrs. Henderson's red pen scratched across paper at her desk, and I watched that pen like it was writing my future. Because it was.

She called me up at the end of the day. Nine years old, skinny knees, hair in a ponytail my mother had redone twice that morning because the first two attempts had been "messy." Mrs. Henderson slid the report card across her desk, face-down, the way adults do when they want the moment to have weight.

"Rachel," she said, and her voice had that soft-disappointed tone I'd already learned to recognize — the tone that meant *you should be better than this* — "you are so bright. But you just don't apply yourself."

I flipped the card over. There it was, in red ink, in the comments box. The sentence that would follow me for the next twenty-five years like a shadow I couldn't shake.

So much potential.

I didn't cry until I got home. I cried into my pillow, the ugly silent kind, because even at nine I understood that "potential" was a word adults used when they were giving up on you politely. I wasn't the kid who acted out. I didn't throw chairs or shout answers. I stared out the window. I lost my homework between my desk and the teacher's tray. I forgot my lunchbox three times in one month. I was the quiet disaster, and quiet disasters don't get diagnosed. They get report cards.

If you're a woman reading this, I would bet money — real money — that you have a version of this story. Maybe it was a teacher. Maybe it was a parent. Maybe it was you, at twenty-seven, sitting in a performance review, hearing "you're so talented, but you need to be more consistent," and feeling nine years old again.

Here's the thing nobody told that little girl: she wasn't failing to apply herself. She was applying herself *constantly* — to the heroic, invisible effort of looking normal.

The invisible kind of ADHD

When most people picture ADHD, they picture a boy. Specifically, they picture a boy bouncing off walls, interrupting class, climbing the bookshelf during reading time. That image isn't wrong — it's just incomplete. It's one presentation of ADHD: the hyperactive-impulsive kind, and it shows up more often (or at least more visibly) in boys.

Girls tend to get a different version. The inattentive presentation. And "inattentive" is a terrible, misleading word, because it sounds like we just don't pay attention. The truth is we pay attention to *everything* — the clock ticking, the lights humming, the pen scratching, the bird outside the window, the itchy tag in our shirt, the argument our parents had last night replaying in our heads — all at once, with no volume knob. We don't have a deficit of attention. We have attention with no filter.

Here's what that actually looked like, for most of us, growing up:

The daydreaming. Not the cute, poetic kind. The kind where a teacher says your name three times and the whole class laughs and your face burns. You weren't being rude. You were somewhere else entirely — building an entire world in your head, or replaying a conversation from

lunch, or suddenly remembering that you never returned that library book and spiraling about the fine. Gone. Just... gone.

The disorganization. The desk that looked like a crime scene. The backpack that contained, at any given time: three crushed permission slips (two past deadline), a pencil with no eraser, a library book from two months ago, a granola bar wrapper, and one single mitten. You'd clean it out, feel hopeful for exactly one day, and then entropy would reclaim it. Every time.

The quiet chaos. This is the one that kept us invisible. Boys with ADHD tend to externalize — the chaos comes OUT. Girls tend to internalize — the chaos stays IN, and we spend enormous energy making sure nobody sees it. We develop elaborate systems to appear functional. We over-prepare for everything. We say yes to everything so nobody notices what we forgot. We become the friend who remembers *your* birthday because we set seventeen alarms, while our own lives quietly smolder in the background.

The CDC describes ADHD as a neurodevelopmental condition that affects attention, impulse control, and activity levels — and notes that symptoms can look very different from person to person. "Different from person to person" is doing a lot of heavy lifting in that sentence. For girls, different often meant *silent*. And silent didn't get help.

Masking: the perfect disguise (and its price)

I was the perfect student. Let me tell you what that actually meant.

It meant I did my homework in the bathroom stall before first period because I'd forgotten — again — and the shame of walking in empty-handed was worse than the panic of doing long division on my knees. It meant I studied for tests by reading the chapter four times,

because the first three times my brain had wandered off by page two and I'd absorbed nothing. It meant I smiled and nodded and said "I'm fine!" when teachers asked, because "fine" was easier than explaining that I'd spent the entire math lesson thinking about whether birds get cold.

And then I came home, and I collapsed.

Not tired-collapse. *Gone*-collapse. The kind where you lie face-down on your bed in your school uniform and stare at the wall for an hour because the effort of being a person all day has used up everything. My mother thought I was moody. I thought I was moody. Nobody — not one adult in my life — looked at the girl who held it together flawlessly from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. and then fell apart the second she was alone, and thought: *maybe the holding-it-together is the symptom*.

That's masking. It's the performance of normalcy, and girls with ADHD learn it early and master it young. We watch other girls — the ones who remember their homework, who don't lose things, who seem to just... function — and we reverse-engineer their behavior like anthropologists. We build a version of ourselves that passes. And the passing works. Teachers don't flag us. Doctors don't screen us. Our parents brag about how "easy" we are.

But here's what masking costs, and I need you to hear this clearly because you probably paid this bill for years without knowing what it was for:

It costs your energy. All of it. Masking is a full-time job layered on top of your actual life, and it doesn't come with breaks. That's why so many of us describe the same pattern: functional in public, wreckage in private. Great employee, disaster kitchen. Perfect friend, unanswered texts. The outside looks fine because the inside is paying for it.

It costs your identity. When you spend years performing a version of yourself, you start to lose track of which one is real. Am I actually organized, or am I just terrified of being caught disorganized? Do I actually like helping everyone, or is people-pleasing the camouflage I built in fourth grade? Diagnosis doesn't just explain your symptoms. For a lot of us, it's the first time we get to meet ourselves without the mask.

And it costs your health. The research on this is still catching up, but CHADD and other ADHD organizations have been raising the alarm: women with undiagnosed ADHD show up in doctors' offices with anxiety, depression, eating disorders, chronic exhaustion — and get treated for those things, sometimes for decades, while the underlying ADHD goes unaddressed. Not because the anxiety isn't real. It is. But in so many of us, the anxiety was the *result* of living with an unsupported brain, not the root cause. Treat the ADHD, and the anxiety often loosens its grip. Nobody told us that either.

I want to say something to the little girl with the report card, and to every version of you who came after her: you were never the problem. The system that only recognized ADHD when it climbed the bookshelf — that was the problem. You were doing the hardest thing a kid can do: struggling invisibly, and being blamed for the invisibility.

The hormone complication (nobody warned us about this)

Here's something that makes the female ADHD story even more maddening: our symptoms aren't stable. They move. They surge and crash on a monthly cycle, and for decades, most of us thought we were just... losing our minds on a schedule.

Let me tell you about my hormone weeks. (You know the ones. If you don't, you will.)

There were weeks — always the same weeks, though I didn't track it for years because tracking things was, you know, the whole problem — where everything fell apart at once. The systems that barely held during good weeks would disintegrate. I'd forget appointments I'd *just* made. I'd cry over a mildly critical email. I'd snap at people I loved and then hate myself for it. My brain felt like a radio between stations: all static, no signal. And every single month, I'd think the same thing: *what is WRONG with me? Am I going crazy?*

Nothing was wrong with me. Estrogen was doing what estrogen does.

Here's the science, kept simple: estrogen supports dopamine function in the brain. Dopamine is the neurotransmitter ADHD brains are already short on — it's the chemical behind motivation, focus, and feeling like things matter. So when estrogen drops — in the days before your period, after childbirth, during perimenopause and menopause — dopamine function drops with it. And for a brain already running on a dopamine deficit, that drop doesn't feel like a dip. It feels like the floor falling out.

This is why so many women report that their ADHD got dramatically worse after having a baby, or in their late thirties and forties when perimenopause began. It's not in your head. (Well — it is in your head, literally, in your brain chemistry. But you know what I mean.) The CDC and researchers are still learning exactly how these hormonal interactions work, which is scientist-speak for *we're pretty sure this is real and we're still mapping it*. What women report, consistently and overwhelmingly: the cycle is real, the crashes are real, and tracking them changes everything.

I'm not going to give you a medical protocol here — that's a conversation for you and your doctor, and we'll talk more about that in Chapter 3. But I will tell you what changed my life: I started marking my cycle on my calendar and labeling the hard weeks in advance. Not to dread them. To *plan* for them. The week my brain would be at its worst, I stopped scheduling important meetings, lowered my expectations on purpose, and told my partner, "Hey, next week is going to be a low-capacity week for me." That one sentence — said without shame, as a fact about my neurology — did more for my marriage than a year of arguing about the dishes.

Your hormones aren't a separate problem from your ADHD. They're part of the same story. And once you see the pattern, you stop blaming yourself for the crashes and start preparing for them like weather. You don't get mad at the rain. You bring an umbrella.

Why the tests were built for someone else

So why did nobody catch this? Why did the questionnaires, the teacher checklists, the pediatrician visits all miss us?

Because they were looking for the boy.

The diagnostic criteria for ADHD — and the rating scales built on them — were developed primarily by studying boys. Hyperactive boys. Boys who couldn't sit still, who blurted answers, who disrupted class. The scales ask about fidgeting, interrupting, climbing on things. They ask, in various ways: *is this child a disruption to others?*

But the inattentive girl isn't a disruption to others. She's a disruption to *herself*. She's the one staring out the window, losing her pencil for the fourth time, turning in the homework she definitely did but can't find. None of that shows up on a scale designed to measure how much

trouble a child causes in a classroom. The quiet girl who internalizes everything, who masks, who overcompensates — she scores low. She passes. She falls through the crack that was built exactly her size.

And it compounds. Girls who mask well don't get referred for evaluation. Girls who don't get evaluated don't get diagnosed. Girls who don't get diagnosed grow into women who develop anxiety and depression from years of unsupported struggle — and then get diagnosed with anxiety and depression, which is technically true and completely incomplete. The ADHD underneath keeps running the show, unnamed, while we treat the smoke and miss the fire.

I'm angry about this. I think you should be too. Not the bitter, corrosive kind of angry — the clear-eyed kind. The kind that says: *a system built on half the population failed the other half, and I deserved better.* Because you did. That nine-year-old with the report card deserved a teacher who wondered *why* the bright girl couldn't apply herself, instead of writing it off as a character flaw in red ink.

Here's the rage, channeled into something useful: we can't rewrite the diagnostic history. But we can make sure the next generation of girls doesn't need a book like this at thirty-four. And we can start, right now, by refusing to carry the blame that was never ours.

Looking back without blame

I want to offer you something. Not a technique, not a system — those come later. A reframe. A way of looking at your childhood that replaces the shame with something closer to the truth.

For years, I looked back at my childhood and saw a failure montage: the lost homework, the forgotten lines in the school play, the birthday party invitations I never RSVP'd to, the friendships that faded because I

couldn't keep up with the maintenance. Every memory was evidence in the case against me. *See? You've always been like this.*

Now I look back and see something different. I see a little girl with an undiagnosed neurological condition doing her absolute best with zero support and zero explanation. I see a kid who developed masking, over-preparation, and people-pleasing as *survival strategies* — not character flaws, survival strategies — before she was old enough to spell "neurodevelopmental." I see resilience. I see a brain that found workarounds before it knew what it was working around.

That's not failure. That's extraordinary.

So here's what I'd like you to try — not as homework, just as a thought experiment. Pick one childhood memory that still makes you cringe. The lost thing, the forgotten thing, the moment you felt stupid or lazy or "too much." Hold it in your mind. Now replay it, but this time, you're watching a little girl with undiagnosed ADHD — not a lazy kid, not a careless kid, a kid whose brain works differently and nobody told her. Watch her try. Watch how hard she tries.

Feel different? That's not self-pity. That's the truth finally getting its turn to speak.

I want to take it one step further. I want you to write her a letter — the nine-year-old, or whatever age your version was. Not a long one. Just a few lines. Here's the start of mine, to give you the shape of it:

Dear little Rachel,

You weren't lazy. I need you to hear that first, because no one said it and you needed someone to. You were a kid with a brain that worked differently, doing your best in a world that only noticed the kids who bounced off walls. The report card wasn't about you. It was about a

system that didn't have eyes for girls like you.

I'm sorry it took me twenty-five years to tell you this. But I'm telling you now: you were never the problem. You were never too much. You were exactly enough, with a brain nobody bothered to understand.

Love, the woman you became anyway.

I cried writing that. The first time, I mean — ugly crying, at my kitchen table, years after the diagnosis. And then something in my chest unclenched that I didn't know had been clenched since I was nine. That's what compassion does when you aim it backward: it doesn't change the past, but it changes your *relationship* to the past. And that changes everything going forward.

She wasn't lazy. She wasn't careless. She wasn't "too much."

She was undiagnosed. And she deserved better — from her teachers, from the tests, from the world.

She deserved this book about thirty years early. Since we can't have that, she gets it now. And so do you.

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