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## Why Me, Why Now?

This chapter may or may not be relevant to you—and if you picked up this book to get straight to the “what do I do?” part of how to parent in a tech world, that’s totally fine, and you might want to skip this chapter. My ego will not be offended.

If you do, however, want to get to know my *why* behind what I do and how I got to be where I am today, then these next few pages will support your quest in understanding me and my perspective.

### **The Short Version**

I am part of the only and last generation to straddle the pre-social media and post-social media world.

I’m a mother.

I’m a survivor.

I’ve worked in the parenting/media/tech spaces for more than 20 years.

Over the past nine years alone I’ve served as the chief parent officer and chief marketing officer for Bark Technologies, an online safety company that helps protect more than seven million children across the United States, Australia, South Africa, and Guam.

I was born into an analog (noncomputerized) household with a childhood full of books and play like the generations who came before me.

I grew up experiencing a rapid technological evolution with connected tech, the Internet, and social media while I was actually “mature” enough to process and utilize it.

I was given incredible, unique opportunities to discuss these issues with experts much smarter than I across global platforms.

I’ve coached Drew Barrymore on how to keep kids safer online, I’ve covered teen texting and emoji slang with Steve Harvey, I’ve surfaced dangers of Snapchat to *Good Morning America*, and I’ve testified before legislators around the rate at which children are harmed online given our data at Bark. I’ve spoken with countless numbers of parents whose children have been harmed by unfettered and unmonitored access to tech, and I’ve been told I have a unique way of helping overwhelmed parents navigate this new parenting landscape with grace given my upbringing and experience.

My purpose on this planet is to help others. I sincerely hope this helps you.

## **The Long Version**

All right, buckle up, here comes the longer story.

So, who am I? Well, my name is Titania Jordan. That’s pronounced like the name Tanya or Tonya—and then stutter the T. Now try it out loud. Much easier, right?

Side note—I wish current Titania could go back and tell child Titania that her name is the coolest and it turns out the more unique your name is, the easier it will be to grab social media handles.

But back to the point: who is Titania Jordan, and why should I listen to her?

Good questions. Let’s start with the first.

I’m going to go ahead and take you back to the beginning, like the actual beginning.

## **The Last True Childhood**

I was born at the start of the awesome 80s in Tazewell, a very small town in the heart of Appalachia and the coal mining mountains of Virginia. And yes, *that* Tazewell—the one that gained fame in the March 2005 issue of *Time Magazine*<sup>1</sup> for its OxyContin problem.

That’s not how I remember it, though. Back then, it was bucolic in every sense of the term. Pleasant elements of country life appeared everywhere you

looked, and if my memory serves me as well as a five-year-old's memory can, it was truly breathtaking.

Tazewell offered rolling hills and snowy fields and horses and wildflowers and unlocked doors and small-town church vibes and all that jazz. I'll never forget the taste of my first donut—it was glazed and in-freaking-credible. I've never had a donut that good and am confident I never will again. Many thanks to the church lady at the local (only) Baptist Church who opened my eyes to that baked goodness.

My father was a business-savvy, handy guy, and my mother was a "couldn't-hurt-a-fly" nurse. She, to this day, still ushers bugs out of the house gently on paper instead of crushing them with a shoe or swatter because...they have feelings and a family too.

A few rad years later, my younger sister came along. Apparently, I was incredibly jealous of her out of the womb—but funny enough, today she is now my best friend. We lived in a pretty incredible two-story colonial brick house that my dad built, and I attended the local public school (I think there was only one in the entire town) where I vividly remember watching *Sesame Street* as a group activity on a TV that rolled in on wheels, pretending to sleep during nap time, watching the mischievous kids get spankings for acting up, and spending lots *and lots* of time outside.

We had one television in our home with fewer than 30 channels of content to choose from, and the only things I watched on it were educational children's programming and MTV at night with my dad back when MTV was literally only music videos. We share a deep love of great music to this day.

I colored, played outside a lot, played with toys, and played with friends. My one best friend, a boy whose dad was the town pediatrician, had a massive Victorian house and cable TV. We watched shows like *He-Man* and *She-Ra*, which I most likely wouldn't have been allowed to watch at my house given the themes of magic and dark forces.

It's funny when I think back on the parental controls my parents had in their toolbelt.

(That means not many.)

But letting my sister and I know that we were not going to be a house where magic and dark forces were allowed clued me in to our household boundaries. So what did we do when we couldn't scratch that proverbial pop culture itch?

We just went next door! The fact that we weren't allowed to watch certain programs or play certain games or read certain books but our friends could meant that, well, we'd just go over to our friends' houses, right? Does this sound familiar with phones or video games or other media where you set a limit and someone else allows it?

Despite how it took place so long ago, it reminds me of a recent quote from a dear friend of mine, the founder of Protect Young Eyes, Chris McKenna. "Our children are only as safe as their friend with the weakest digital rules."

A few years later, my family moved from the tiny town of Tazewell to the big city of Atlanta, Georgia, when my dad got a new job. Let me just say that culture shock is real. Despite my young age, I knew things were different now. Much different.

We found a significantly smaller, one-story rental home, and my sister and I were enrolled in St. Martin's, a small private Episcopalian school. This must've been when I was around five or six years old. I noticed way fewer kids in my new class and a stronger emphasis on art and music. I absolutely loved it and attended pre-K through 8th grade at that beloved school.

Our Atlanta honeymoon was short-lived. Like so many marriages in the 1980s, my parents divorced shortly after the boxes were unpacked. Jackie (my sister) and I were still very young, and somehow, we understood that we were fiercely loved by both our parents. Despite the rift from our parents splitting, we still knew that everything was going to be okay. In retrospect, my parents weren't really the most compatible couple, so it was probably (ultimately) best for both of them. But this was a big event in my life. It still is. Not necessarily a negative. But impactful.

In our new setup following the divorce, in a two-bedroom, two-bathroom Buckhead apartment while with my mom (majority of the time) and a variety of nearby places while with my dad (every other weekend), we had only one television (in both homes) with just the basic channels. In fact, we had to literally turn a knob on the TV to change the channel or adjust the volume. At first, I think there were 3 channels, and then there were, like, 12 channels. And then cable came along, and there were a lot more. And then there was the Internet.

But today the media landscape is like taking a glass globe, shattering it, and all those pieces of glass are the fragments now with which you have to get people's attention.

And that's not just a TV screen. It's mobile devices. It's an iPad. It's everywhere.

Everybody's competing for everyone's attention, all the time. I mean, there are screens at the gas station now and screens built into the backs of seat headrests in luxury vehicles. Everywhere you look, screens large and small are competing for your attention.

I guess that's one of the reasons I enjoy branding, design, and copyrighting—because you have to constantly be going to the next level to figure out how to capture somebody's attention as there's such a fight for it. The competition for your eyeballs is fierce.

No matter what I'm doing, I'm always cognizant of how I'm talking to people and how I can say something differently in order to stand out.

But yeah, back to my childhood. No cable. No computers. No car phones (until my dad got one, but we sure as heck weren't allowed to use it—those minutes were expensive!). No camcorder or VCR. We did have a stereo that could connect to local radio stations and play records and tapes. We did get a CD player once they became mainstream and more affordable. We also had magazine subscriptions to publications like *Parents* and *Highlights* that my lovely grandparents paid for, as money was tight (divorce will do that). I was a curious kid, and I wanted information. That's why magazines were devoured. The nightly news, revered. And the barrage of questions aimed toward each parent remained constant.

During my new childhood in Atlanta, I remember how the kids who lived in neighborhoods, not so much my apartment complex, got to spend so much time together. And where were the parents? Gobs of kids all living in single-family homes on streets filled with other children that would spend hours playing outside together. I was in awe of this phenomenon, and I cherished every single invite when I got dropped off to join in the fun.

I did play outside for hours, running around, daydreaming, riding my bike, and roller skating solo around both my mom's apartment complex and my dad's condominium buildings. I had no other choice but to be creative as a kid. Whether solo or with my sister Jackie, babysitters, or friends—we played with Legos, organized colored pencils in a rainbow pattern, and built and imagined living in our Barbie houses.

This unstructured, pretend play allowed me to really explore and push through any perceived boredom. And creative free-play is so, so important

even alone—but it didn't come with the same sense of fun (and safety in some cases) as did playing with my friends in their neighborhoods.

Many of those kids had televisions with fledging video game consoles. I recall going to a few friends' houses who had video game systems like Atari or Nintendo and me playing the motorcycle game or Super Mario Bros. for hours. I also remember how they had television sets with remote controls (*wait, you don't have to walk over to the TV to change a channel or adjust the volume?*), and that sure seemed incredibly luxurious. Do you remember the first time you hit the Mute button? The power we now wielded! Low-resolution, simple video games were a revolution for us. Yet somehow, we would grow tired of playing these 16-bit adventures and seek the comfort of playing outside. No one had to tell us to get off these devices. Ultimately, they were so basic we'd simply do it ourselves.

One of my very best friends in the entire world, Wade Beacham, a dad of two born in the late 70s, recalls,

In the late 1980s into the early 90s I lived in a suburban neighborhood setting with children all up and down the street. While many kids were close in age to me, the majority of us went to different schools, public and private. We played inside and we played outside. Weekend days were majorly spent outside with Friday, and Saturday nights reserved for sleepovers and a lot of gaming.

While we gamed for hours and hours into the night, I now feel a vast contrast to today's gaming setup and routine. The 80s and 90s gaming didn't isolate us in separate bedrooms or basements in separate houses; it collected us together in a single home, around a single gaming system. We would share by taking turns. With two controllers and five kids, the winner stayed, and the loser passed the controller. We had to cooperate to help each other get better. We had to beat the winner to unseat the prior games' victor. We had to occupy ourselves and each other with side games and conversation while waiting our turn.

So much of the activity and the memories I hold to this day were inside that room but outside the video game. I can only wonder what, if any, of those good times and lessons learned are lost to a new generation of gamers. How dramatically different my experience is to a gamer in 2024, sitting alone in a dark room with a headset on.

Maybe all is not lost for siblings when it comes to gaming. In the early 90s I grew up with one sibling, a younger sister. We had very little in common and even attended different schools. I was often absent from the house as a multisport athlete, or just out with friends. The same scenario played out in my home as so many others. My younger sister would continually seek any sort of way to connect or gain my attention to spend any amount of time with her. One successful solution was that she found our mutual interest in adventure games on the gaming console.

She figured out how we could play a single-player/controller adventure “together.” I would mostly play, and she would watch. By allowing me to play the game, she learned she had my captive audience and at least 10% of my attention that came with it. She would follow along as if my character or she would read the game map. She would help by reading about hints in the game to help inevitably figure out the correct path to advance the story. Sometimes, she would just sit there and sing aloud. Looking back, gaming with my sister may be some of the fondest memories I hold of her at that age.

—*W. Beacham, personal communication, 2024*

I love hearing stories like this. The 80s in particular was such a pivotal moment in time, when digital innovation was rapidly offering up new ways to connect and be entertained, yet we still had the solid grounding and traditions of generations past.

## **Early Media Impact on My Self-Esteem**

My dad’s place was much colder than my mom’s apartment, in many aspects, but he did upgrade to cable eventually. We still weren’t allowed to watch much TV (if any), and the few times that we could, it was nature shows, car racing, rock concerts, or preachers. We would frequently listen to all kinds of rock music on the radio or his vast record collection, which then turned into a tape collection, which then tuned into a CD collection, while we read books or played with our toys. We’d read the newspaper cover to cover, really anything we could get our hands on, including *Architectural Digest* and, oddly enough, *Women’s Wear Daily* (a fashion-industry trade journal often referred to as the “Bible of Fashion”).<sup>2</sup>

Like many men at the time, our Dad had a thing for looking sharp and keeping up with the hottest supermodels sporting the latest fashions. If I'm honest, none of this fashion culture of the 80s and 90s really helped my body image and self-esteem at the time, and there are traces of it negatively impacting me to this day.

Thankfully, I didn't have a constant feed that I carried everywhere with me to remind me that I wasn't tall and thin and dripping in designer threads and jewels. I looked at a magazine over the course of an hour, max; maybe flip through it twice if I was really bored; and then I was finished. I didn't put it in my pocket and pull it out and flip through it every five minutes. We had unattainable images of what women should look like all around us—in addition to magazines, there were billboards and television commercials and movie stars shown on the big screen. But we were not steadily inundated. We were also taught little sayings back then—for example, if we wanted ice cream, the phrase “One minute on the lips forever on the hips” would buzz in our subconscious. And if we wanted an extra pat of butter on our baked potatoes or another piece of pizza? Well, that's when “Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels” would creep up.

In those days, there were images featuring these airbrushed, scantily clad models not only throughout my father's condo in print but everywhere really. The culture at the time, overall, was much more okay with women (and some men) displayed as sex objects and incapable of doing much beyond that, despite the women's liberation movements from the not-too-distant 60s and 70s. Ironically, this was when many of these young mothers themselves were growing up.

When I was a little girl, I remember accompanying my mom to SYMS (an off-price retail clothing store chain that no longer exists) off Jimmy Carter Boulevard (a.k.a. the boonies if you live in Buckhead). We eventually made our way into the dressing room, which to my surprise was just a gigantic room with a lot of mirrors and a lot of women in various stages of dress...or undress.

I guess discount stores don't do doors? Maybe that's why they went out of business. Anyway, I looked around and noticed many things.

Granny panties

Weird bras

Cellulite

Saggy skin

Ill-fitting clothes

And of course, grown women with teeny, tiny, almost nonexistent boobs

This scared me.

I wanted so bad to be a woman and one with curves! To me, one of the pros that could make up for the “con” of a completely average body build with a thick, short torso and zero thigh gap was to have ample, soft, beautiful breasts.

From that moment on, I would fervently pray for boobs.

(And my period actually. Right?! I don’t know why either.)

God sure has a sense of humor.

I went from a flat-chested 6th grade girl to a D-cup sporting woman who had periods every 28 days in two short years!

Talk about a game-changer. All of a sudden, I was pop-u-lar.

Boys who never gave me the time of day were suddenly interested in me, and not just for my Latin test answers. It was flattering and empowering, but for all the wrong reasons.

It was also incredibly distracting.

Some of my favorite memories are thinking about my first kiss in 7th grade—and I can’t imagine if those fond reflections were replaced with fears and regrets surrounding pictures or videos I had sent before my brain was fully formed and able to make adult decisions. I’d be gutted.

Looking back, I wish I had held firm to my desire to learn everything I could academically, instead of shifting my intense focus to what people thought of me.

I went from being a straight A, honor roll, perfect-score-on-standardized-tests kind of student to a sometimes-making-Bs-and-Cs (the horror!) student.

I still got into the high school and college of my dreams (at the time), but I did not fully utilize the resources that were at my disposal.

I wish so desperately that I would have taken drama instead of worrying about who I was going to catch a ride with up to Blackburn Park so I could hang with the cool older kids who were smoking (all sorts of things).

I should have taken as many art classes as possible, instead of making an ass of myself as a basketball cheerleader. But participating in any kind of sport was the fastest way to obtain a letter jacket. The alternative—wearing a starched navy blazer during the cold weather uniform portion of the year at my private Catholic high school—was both unflattering and not warm enough. I realize that with the right alterations most outfits can be made to look great on a human, but we could barely afford the private school tuition at a discount thanks to financial aid, much less a custom-tailored navy blue blazer.

I should have taken computer science and asked for help when physics and chemistry flew over my head, but I spent more time memorizing people's phone numbers and class schedules (so I could "accidentally" run into them, duh) than periodic tables and Newton's Law.

If I utilized the time I spent pouring over magazines figuring out how to lose weight and tone my "flabby" thighs to, I don't know, learn how to code instead, maybe I would have programmed something amazing and been able to afford a gym membership and a personal trainer instead of trying bulimia sophomore year of high school and the heart patient soup diet to drop 10lbs in a week.

Is that not what a 14-year-old girl should be doing? Making sure she ingests no more than 1,200 calories per day, including lifesaver mints (because fresh breath is errrythang), which by the way are 15 calories each?

I'll never forget the feeling of buying a pair of size 2 forest green corduroys from The Gap and feeling like I had won at life. SO THIS IS WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE SKINNY. So what if I'm starving. So what if I have only 70 calories left in my day so I'll have one piece of reduced calorie toast with "I Can't Believe It's Not Butter" spray for flavor. So what if my body and brain are still growing and I need to be nurtured emotionally, mentally, and physically? I'll just eat my feelings, throw them up, erode my esophagus, wear the enamel off my teeth, still hate my body, and cry myself to sleep.

I'm so glad my mom overheard me throwing up about a month into that phase and scheduled an appointment with a nutritionist at Piedmont Hospital. I don't remember her name, but I am so thankful for her taking the time to show me what a proper portion of food should look like and showing me what a healthy body should be. Newsflash: it wasn't the models on the cover of *Women's Wear Daily* back in 1995. #thighgap #heroinchic #cokediet.

## **Outside Influences Abound**

Now, when you have divorced parents and they are dating long-term partners, the vibe changes. In our case, that's when it seemed the rules would flex a bit. My sister and I would be introduced more to outside cultural influences. They weren't all bad, of course. I'll never forget seeing Doritos and Pepsi in our kitchen for the first time ever (mom's boyfriend) or seeing lovely floral window valances one day in my dad's condo that were definitely not his style but added a touch of warmth, and Jackie and I were here for it. The prevalence of these new cultural and technological access points, be it the new Sega Genesis my mom's boyfriend kept at our apartment or the *Cosmopolitan* magazines my dad's girlfriend kept at his condo, seemed to grow.

I remember reading the book *Cheaper by the Dozen* when I was around 12 years old. I was the biggest book nerd (as reading was the one thing I was allowed to do with no time limits or rules; well, that and cleaning and praying). Why I remember reading it is significant. The story is about a family with a lot of kids and the dad's job is an efficiency expert. And I was like, "What? There are actually jobs that allow you, and pay you, to go in and tell companies how to be better? And how to do better?"

And after I read that, I think I said, "I want to do that. I have a lot of opinions. And of course, I think they're great. And I want to tell people how to do things better and how to stand out."

In a sense, that's what I get to do with this book as well. But not from a place of judgment without experience. It's absolutely from a place of *please don't make the mistakes that I and so many other parents made*.

## **Media Consumption Moves on Demand**

The original on-demand viewing—owning a VCR—meant everyone could bring home the experience of the movie theater. Almost overnight, children and their parents would gather around the family television to watch a film together as a Friday or Saturday night ritual.

We would go to the nearby Blockbuster Video, or the small mom-and-pop video store on the corner, to wait at the counter for the newest releases to be returned. We'd order Domino's pizza (shout-out to thin crust pepperoni), have it delivered as if it was a novelty, and watch movie after movie. Sometimes with our parents in the room, but many times—if we could get away with it—without them.

The 80s were also a time where we saw the rise of slasher movies and horror films, which more often than not also featured young, buxom women falling victim to sexualized acts and violence. Figures like Jason from the *Friday the 13th* slasher series or Freddie Krueger from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films grew popular, even celebrated, in our culture. These half-men, half-monsters were soon able to be taken home on VHS video as VCRs exploded in use during the second half of the decade.

It was also during this time that America, and the world, experienced the explosion of XXX videos, dirty movies, or pornography. It didn't take long for the exploitation of women in film via this genre to overtake this media. And the advent of cable television only propagated what was happening. More sex, more violence, cruder language, and more mature themes were appearing more frequently across all types of media. It was much like today but less amplified in terms of the places it's now available, and honestly—in terms of the level of unthinkable graphic and violent content that is portrayed alongside.

### **Sometimes Monsters Are IRL**

Whether the monster was a fictionalized monster or not, my exposure to strangers, predators, sexual content, violence, scary news and world events, health misinformation, political unrest, drugs and alcohol, disordered eating, mental health issues, and suicide was still mostly contained to a few sources. Despite video killing the radio star, MTV music videos dominating the airwaves, and Blockbusters on every corner, exposure to adult topics was still somewhat limited. But children of today (and their friends) have one-click access to all of the above.

Not all dangers are digital, and here's part of my personal story to highlight that fact.

At one point, my own son was scared of the dark. I had been trying my best to convince him up, down, and sideways that there were *no* monsters, they absolutely were not real, and that he was totally safe inside the confines of our sleepy, suburban home. But, deep down inside, I knew that was a lie.

Because I had found a real-life monster through our church, of all places. He was awesome. So good with the kids. His dad was a preacher, I think, but not ours. And I literally begged my mom to let him babysit us. Keep in mind, I was a very convincing 6-year-old. My sister was 2. He was 17, maybe 18.

My monster was fun. He was polite. He had more energy than my other babysitters and let me call the shots. He let us run him ragged and was an excellent jungle gym. Eventually the fun had to end and we had to get to bed as per my mom's orders.

I needed help going to sleep at night. I shared a room with my baby sister, but still, I was a really anxious kid. It could have been the divorce or my genes, or Peter Gabriel's "Shock the Monkey" video I shouldn't have seen on MTV as a toddler or a combination of all three, but I did not like going to sleep at night in the dark without an adult in the room.

I had asked him to scratch my back, and he obliged. My mom was the best backscratcher where he was just so-so. Awkward. Clumsy. He started off as any normal back-scratching babysitter would but then did something different. And his hands were not on my back.

This is the point of the story that sucks.

This part is disturbing.

This part makes me part of a statistic.

And this is why I'm sharing it with you. We need to talk about childhood sexual abuse, especially in light of the fact that technology has exponentially increased the rate at which children are abused both in real life and online.

Mere seconds made me instantly aware of how my body felt when touched a certain way in certain places, way, way before an innocent little girl should have. Unfortunately, I would like to share more about what happened, those feelings, these feelings, and how it's continued to affect me but for the fear that there are still some people, creepy, hurt people, out there who get off on this stuff, so I won't expand here. Just know it happened repeatedly.

My experience with sexual abuse still breaks my loved ones' hearts. It's what my mom had tried to prepare me for with books about decrying "stranger danger" and the part my dad prayed would never happen to his little girls if he wasn't in the house to protect them.

This is the part of my story that I didn't even know was such a common story until two years later when I was watching cartoons on our green floral sofa and an NBC "The More You Know" special aired. This topic was meant to inform both children and their caregivers about the very real, and far too often, instances of childhood sexual abuse. As I sat there, I realized that I was the 1 in 4.

As with every childhood, there are parts that are still so crystal clear and yet other parts that remain cloudy, fuzzy, patchy, maybe even distorted.

The part that I don't remember most clearly is what happened when I told my mom that I believed I had been treated inappropriately and how we ended all contact with him.

Looking back, I know she was devastated. I can understand the full force of mommy guilt and how it envelops you with what can only be described right now as a nonverbal, beyond expressive "oof." This news? Oh, man. How do you deal? How did she deal? I can only imagine the impact of this knowledge on her when I think of how I might deal with something like this happening to my own.

I believe that, at age 8, I didn't want to confront him, talk to him, or certainly deal with any legal or judicial process that had to occur as a result of me speaking up. I wanted to simply move on. And my mom honored that. My fiercely strong, hard-working, single mom who loved me with every fiber of her being just wanted to make sure I was okay.

Somehow, I really think I was okay because she was with me through it all. She was on my side and provided everything that I felt I needed at the time. Understandably, at the time I was unable to really grasp the long-term or lasting effects that something like this produces. And I convinced her of that as well. Mom, I really hope you are not reading this because I don't want you to feel guilt or pain—not for one single second. It is *not* your fault. He fooled us all. But you were there when I needed you, and I'm stronger for it now.

Another cloudy account was my interaction with my dad at the time I told each parent. I can't recall his reaction. To this day, I don't like to talk about it with him because I know it hurts him so. But it did happen, and we can talk about it if he wants. Dad, I hope you are not reading this either.

A few years later, my monster suddenly appeared at the doorstep of my mother's apartment. We had certainly moved on. I have no idea as to the reason why he showed up, but he did. We hadn't pressed charges. We hadn't put him on blast on social media—that wasn't even a thing yet. We hadn't told his parents or his school or our church. We silently moved on.

I can only wager a guess as to why he was there. Maybe he was coming to apologize. Maybe he was coming to see if I remembered what happened and if I had told anyone. Maybe he was just still so sick. I don't know and my mother never told me what transpired at that doorstep. Perhaps this was her way to simply shield me from him because I remained hidden behind a door until he finally left.

Many, many years later—in January 2010—I took an innocuous, afternoon trip to the local birthday party supply store to pick out some colorful balloons for my beloved only son’s first birthday party. That’s where I saw my monster again. I looked up to see him behind one of the three registers at the front of the store. I had not thought about him in many, many years. I had not seen his face in my nightmares, couldn’t recall his voice if you paid me. I had to center myself.

I really believed that my mind was just messing with me for a minute, but my body knew. My core knew. And as I reluctantly drew closer, like a slow-moving conveyor belt, every inch of my being knew.

He must have felt my stunned gaze, as he looked up. Our eyes met for a split second, and I couldn’t hold the gaze. I instantly looked away, grasping to find something, anything on my smartphone where I could hide again—just like the door. I felt a sinking feeling as I simply mashed buttons and scrolled as feelings of falling riddled my adult body. Of course, once I got to the top of the queue his register became available. Without looking up from my phone, I spoke up and motioned for the lady behind me to go ahead. I don’t remember what I said, but I’m sure I made something up. It was all cloudy again.

I remained lost in my smartphone and refused to look up to see if he even knew that I was actively avoiding him. Thankfully, another register opened, and I skirted over to it in a flash.

Before we exchanged any niceties, I suddenly blurted out to the half-asleep cashier, “Hey, is that [name]?”

The cashier answered, “Yes, why? Do you want me to get him?”

“No!” I said emphatically, yet still, trying not to sound completely odd.

With that validation, the overwhelm only tightened its grip, as the daze completely engulfed me. It’s not lost on me that the store I was leaving supported parties, crafted memories, and manifested celebrations *for children* and now here I was trying to put one foot in front of the other while also stuffing what seems like a quadrillion stubborn, helium party balloons into the back of my SUV and gathering my game face for my son’s first birthday party. Funny how I can still remember that feeling. And those questions.

“How is this possible? Why did this happen? Oh, no! Oh my gosh, he works at a place that caters to kids. What if? What if my lack of action caused others to be hurt? Why didn’t I speak up? Is he doing this to others right now? What if it was just me and he was a dumb teenager? What if it wasn’t? What can I even do about it, 20-something years later?”

Well, after rallying to enjoy my only son's first birthday, I decided it was time to talk about what happened, to more than just my mom. I took to the Internet after I put my son to bed, wrote from my heart, posted the story to my blog, and shared it with a few close friends. I truly do not think this was a coincidence. This encounter happened for a reason. And by posting my story, it opened up doors (that's a theme you'll see here throughout my life) to connect authentically with moms across the globe and showcase my critical message of awareness and child safety to major media outlets. I'll talk about this more in a bit.

A few years later I saw my monster again (albeit online), ironically in the era of the #metoo movement. I Googled him after feeling empowered by my work at Bark Technologies escalating predators to law enforcement and saw that he had been repeatedly convicted of violent sexual abuse.

Technically, he was convicted in 2004 of "SEXUAL BATTERY (2ND OR SUBSEQUENT CONVICTION)—FELONY." As per Georgia Code 16-6-22.1, Sexual Battery is defined as intentionally making physical contact with the intimate parts of the body of another person without the consent of that person. The term "intimate parts" means the primary genital area, anus, groin, inner thighs, or buttocks of a male or female and the breasts of a female.

He was a known sex offender and had multiple mugshots posted online. And as of last look he was not behind bars, having either served his time or paid a really good lawyer. Those images of his face staring into the camera with his history deep behind his eyes will never leave my brain. His victims potentially could have been spared if I spoke up. It guts me to reflect on this, and I wish I could apologize to those survivors.

Admittedly, I still have never confronted him, but I did try to reach out to the authorities to report the incidents. Unfortunately, the statute of limitations for child sexual abuse that happened decades ago prevented any meaningful justice from happening. It was absolutely deflating.

I know I will continue to unpack this for the rest of my life. I do think everything happens for a reason, and I'm not angry with God or feel like He let me down. I know bad things happen to good people. And while I believe that I may have forgiven my monster, I certainly have not forgotten him. I lived a childhood where I was far more aware of my sexuality than I should have been and felt less than worthy in some instances as a result.

Why am I telling you this?

The more that people like me speak up, the less stigma that will be attached to this sort of abuse, and we can bring some of the darkest things that happen to kids into the light to unpack and prevent future instances.

Additionally, crimes that used to take place only in-person are now beginning, and sometimes remaining, entirely online. Thanks to the digital age, access and exposure to children is easier than ever for predators. According to the FBI, “There are more than 500,000 online predators active each day only and they all have multiple online profiles. More than 50% of victims are ages 12–15 and 89% of victims are contacted by online predators through chat rooms and instant messaging.”<sup>3</sup>

On top of that, children now can instantly access information that isn’t meant for their developing hearts, minds, and bodies. In many cases, the content and people children are exposed to online can make them more aware of graphic sexual content, violence, misinformation, comparison traps, and so many other complex adult issues that push good kids to make bad choices even sooner and faster than they otherwise would. This, right here, is the “why now” part of this chapter.

Believe it or not, this isn’t a book about bashing tech. There is a positive, beneficial side of all this information sharing and connectivity as well.

## **The Intersection of Parenting and Tech**

I’m a mom who has spent her entire career working in media—from traditional to digital to social. My focus has been the intersection of parenting and tech, with a specific mission to help keep kids safer online and in real life.

In fact, many years ago as a relatively new mom, I started a Facebook group called Parenting in a Tech World. Today, it has more than half a million parents as members. You might even be one of them. And any learnings that we can share with each other for how to do it better, I’ll take that. I’ll take all the help I can get, and this is an incredible group.

At the time, I was going to mom conferences and meeting brands, influencers, bloggers, and media outlets. I remember being awestruck and starstruck at first—meeting these vulnerable people in real life who shared very raw moments online with the world and offered (what I thought was)

true connection in the form of storytelling. I also saw the darker side of it. It was big business. So many of these momfluencers, family bloggers, and YouTubers had so many self-centered, narcissistic parts to themselves, and some were full on exploiting their children.

But the biggest reality was how these moms didn't have it all figured out. No parent has ever had to parent in a world like this. And while I came to the understanding that maybe they didn't know what they were really saying or promoting, they did have solid Instagram feeds and followings they were beginning to monetize. These people had insecurities just like me and also depended on audiences for revenues.

This idea of the self-appointed (lifestyle, fitness, parenting, you name it) expert happens a lot still. Especially in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, the reemergence of podcasting, the explosion of ChatGPT, and the constant drip of pro- and anti- everything in our society.

As I watched this user-generated content (UGC) lifestyle expert movement emerge and given my background in media and marketing, I dabbled in blogging but never really felt comfortable sharing photos of my son online. I eventually deleted 99.9% of his digital footprint from the Internet, the remaining 0.01% being things I can't find/can't remember existing or he's given me explicit permission to share or he's shared himself on his (hopefully) private accounts. I'm so thankful I didn't jump headfirst into the world of putting my son on display for the world to watch like *The Truman Show*, all while supporting our "lifestyle" with sponsored content. For a brief moment it made sense, and empowered moms and dads generated income while giving them the ability to stay at home. The long-term consequences though of putting child content online are still emerging, and my heart goes out to those children who did not consent or have no savings to show for it. My heart also goes out to the parents who now know better and do better and regret sharing so much of their children online.

To recap, right now, I'm the chief parent officer and chief marketing officer of Bark Technologies. We are a tech company that helps to keep kids safer online and in real life with an app that helps parents monitor and manage their children's digital world, an in-home physical device that helps to monitor and limit screen time on things like gaming consoles and smart TVs, free software for schools across the United States (our giveback) that has escalated credible school shooting threats and predators to law enforcement,

a safer smartphone for kids that I wish existed when my son was younger, and a smartwatch for those children who aren't yet ready for a safer smartphone.

Our mission is to keep kids safer online and in real life, and for my team, it's all-encompassing.

And because of my career in this space, because of Bark's massive, far-reaching footprint, I can influence and help people in a way that's far beyond my wildest dreams. I like to think that despite only having one biological child, I am still able to be a mother to now more than seven million children across the nation. Our work is heavy, but the fact that we are saving children's lives daily keeps us steadily moving forward.

## **Why Now**

So much has changed, and quickly. We're all still figuring out what it means for children and modern childhood (both good and bad) and what we could do about it to mitigate the harms and enhance the benefits.

No other parent in the history of parenting on this planet has had to do what we're doing. And we can't turn to our parents and ask for advice in the same way they could ask their parents for typical childhood developmental milestones. I can't call my mom and ask her for advice on when I should let my child have Snapchat or how I should navigate conversations with him about online pornography because she didn't have to deal with this, nor did my grandmother.

What I can do, however, is ask my network on LinkedIn who I should talk to about growing up online. And boy did my network come through with an introduction to Dr. Carl Marci, physician, scientist, entrepreneur, and author. He's a board-certified psychiatrist and has been seeing patients through Mass General Hospital in Boston for more than 20 years. He says it's an incredible field, and part of what attracted him to it is that there weren't two psychiatrists who truly practiced the same way.

In his 2022 book *Rewired: Protecting Your Brain in the Digital Age*, Dr. Marci uses a metaphor about the 1908 Model T—the horseless carriage. Remember the famous quote from Henry Ford that reads “If I asked the people what they wanted, they'd have said a faster horse”?

Well, the car was the revolutionary new technology that was all the rage around the turn of the century. But through his innovation in mass production and the simple law of increasing supply, the early car immediately

became more accessible for the masses. See, prior to the Model T, the cost equivalent in today's dollars would be more than \$100,000. In short, very few people had cars.

But Ford's Model T changed all that. Almost overnight, the car was affordable for tons and tons more people. So, there was this massive influx of cars—cars everywhere with no rules of the road. Children died. Adults died. Farm animals died. It was pure chaos. It took 10 years before there were any rules set.

In fact, 10 years went by before the first stop sign was introduced and made. It was another three years before the patent for the stoplight was filed. America went on a 100-year journey of making roads safer with better signage, better lights, airbags, sensors, power brakes, seat belts, and so on.

The crazy thing is that vehicle death numbers went down and down continuously year after year until 2016 when they started to tick back up.

Can you guess why?

Because people now had smartphones in their cars. In other words, people were distracted.

What technology has brought us has been transformative. And it's also been too much, too fast, and too soon. A massive positive is, ironically, how screens have also helped us connect with loved ones in real time in other time zones and even heal with telehealth opportunities. Think about the boom of Zoom over the COVID-19 pandemic. Sure, the majority of its growth came from business simply trying to stay afloat, but why did we need to see each other? Friends and groups of people and families set up Zoom calls to see and hear from the people they cared about.

Zoom was a vital lifeline for so many people. Formally, educators and helping professionals like physicians and psychologists changed their entire practices so they could do it over a video conference. This technology helped the helpers help us during that time and through today. It helped us all heal from it, heal from each other, heal overall. But there's a good reason why we could benefit from seeing and hearing a caregiver over perhaps just hearing their voice on a voice call.

I also think about my own unique journey. I'm one of the few who had an analog childhood, then a digital transition in high school, college, and my young twenties. My career started in traditional media, and while I was in the traditional media space, it quickly became digital, Internet, social media. I know that social media exacerbates the innate need to fit in, jump on

bandwagons, and copy the influencers. And so I lived it in real time, but thankfully through an adult lens.

As the information economy has exploded, we (adults, society, legislators, healthcare professionals, educators) have neglected to prioritize the physical, mental, and—if it's important to you—spiritual well-being of our most vulnerable population: children who were born any time after the year 2000.

I've had the opportunity to be on a lot of big stages, whether it's talking to Fox News, NBC, CBS, ABC, you name it, I've been there. And most people would think that would be slightly terrifying, and during some of those instances, it very well was. But nothing to date has been scarier than trying to raise my son in this over-connected, under-protected age.

So in summary, I've been through the wringer personally, I've spent more time analyzing the state of childhood today as it pertains to the rapid digital transformation over the past few decades than most, and I've dedicated my life to helping others, especially children.

While I'm not a doctor or a neuroscientist, people keep asking me to share what I know and what they can do to help their kids—and so I will do that for you here, now, and over the next few chapters.

Occasionally, I'll reflect back on my life to date—both personally and professionally—to add color to the contrast of how we got here and why we need to do something about it.

Ultimately, the contents within this book can help you make the best decisions you can with the information we have at this time. That's all any of us can really do—control what we can and lean on others to help us along the way.

Thank you again for joining me. Let's do this together.

## Notes

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