



# I'm a 37-Year-Old Mom & I Spent Seven Days Online as an 11-Year-Old Girl. Here's What I Learned.



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*Note: This piece contains sexual content and descriptions of child sex abuse that could be disturbing to some readers. The messages, images, and conversations included here are real.*

I'm standing in a bathroom with the hem of a pale blue sweatshirt bunched up under my chin as I weave an ace bandage tightly around my ribcage. The mirror serves as a guide as I wrap and wrap again the bandages around my sports bra, binding my chest. I step out of the bathroom and find our team waiting.

“This look OK?”

I get nods in response, and as Avery art directs, I pose my arms and tilt my head towards the camera. Normally, I'm not in clothes meant for a tween girl. Normally, I don't have glitter polish on my nails and neon hair ties on my wrist. Normally, I'm dressed, I suppose, like your average 37-year-old mom. Jeans. Shirts that cover my midriff. Shoes with reasonable arch support.

Reid snaps a couple of photos of me. She scuttles off with Avery to our make-shift command center — a repurposed dining room now covered in cork boards and maps and papers and computer monitors. Will's brow furrows as he quickly edits.

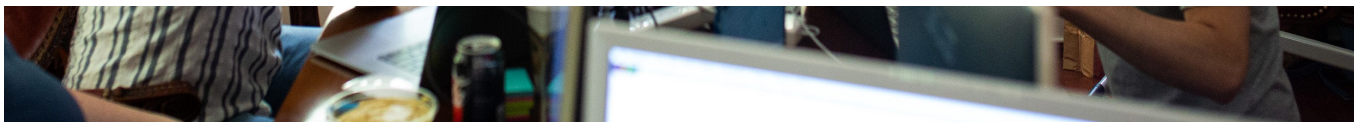
With the help of context — clothing, background, hair styling — and the magic of photo manipulation, we're no longer staring at an image of me, an adult woman with crow's feet.

I move to the kitchen to give him space. We're gearing up for the heaviest part of the day, which we know from experience will be fast-paced and emotionally exhausting.

"It's ready," Will calls from the command center. A few of us gather around Will's computer screen and examine.







“Yeah, I buy it,” Brian says. Brian is the CEO of Bark, the company spearheading this project. Bark uses AI to alert parents and schools when children are experiencing issues like cyberbullying, depression, threats of violence — or in this case, targeting by sexual predators. Currently, we’re covering more than 4 million kids, and we analyze 20 million activities a day. I look at Brian studying the computer screen and consider his assessment. I nod and sigh. I buy it, too.

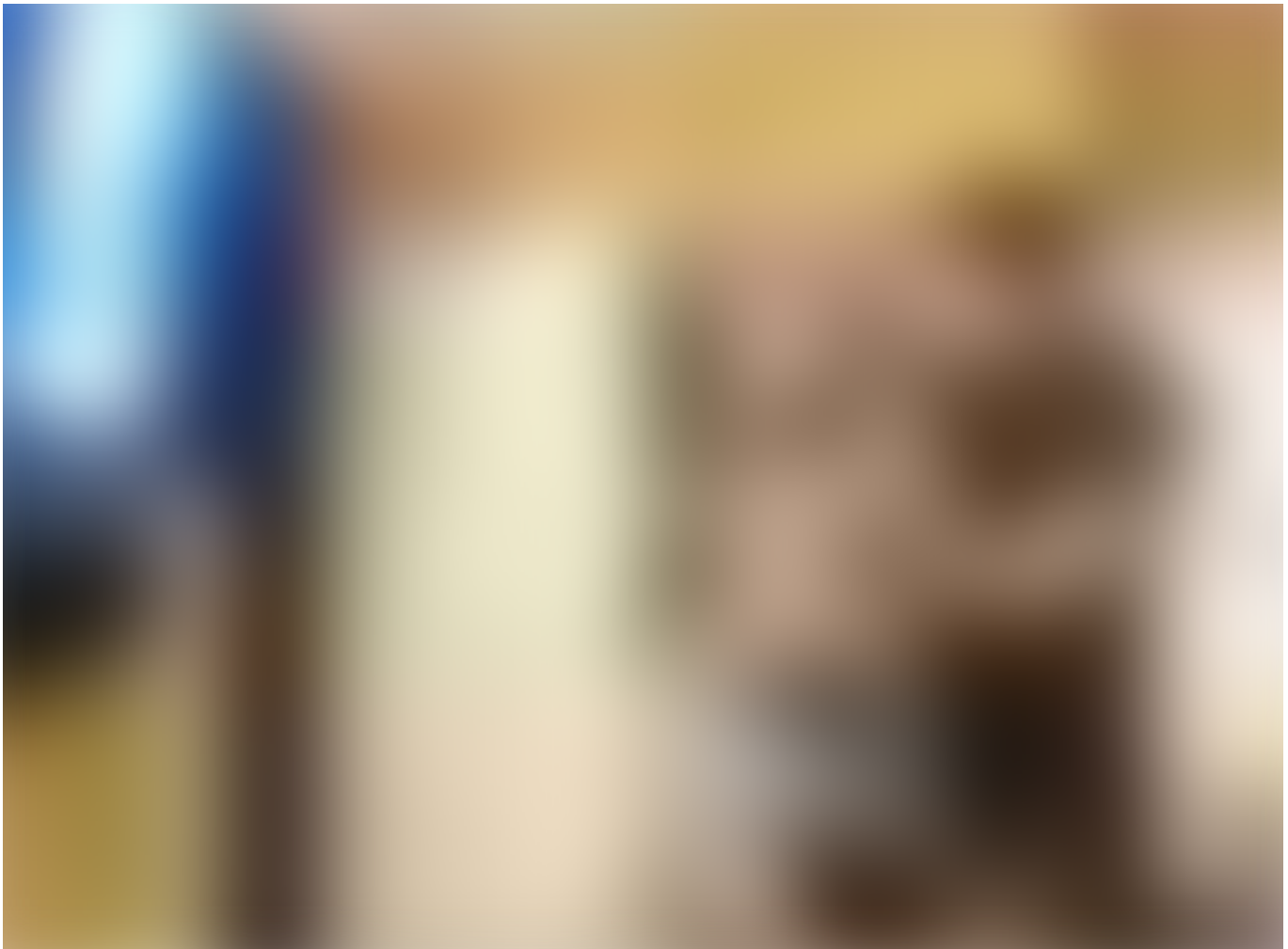
With the help of context — clothing, background, hair styling — and the magic of photo manipulation, we’re no longer staring at an image of me, an adult woman with crow’s feet. We’re staring at a photo of fictitious 11-year-old Bailey, and no matter how many times we do this, the results are still unnerving. Not because we’re creating a child out of thin air, but because we are deliberately putting Bailey in harm’s way to show exactly how pervasive the issue of predation is for Generation Z.

The majority of 11-year-olds are still prepubescent. Menstruation hasn’t started, and they’re generally not yet wearing bras that are categorized by letter-and-number sizes. Their hobbies and interests vary, but largely, they’re not thinking about sexual relationships or sex organs or sex at all.

But their predators are.

“Thanks, I hate it,” I deadpan, quoting a popular phrase on the internet and earning a sympathetic laugh. The mood in the room is always a little bleak, and the jokes trend toward the macabre. Maybe to an outsider, they’d sound crass, but to anyone who’s been working elbow-to-elbow with us, a little gallows humor is necessary to get us through our days.

With the photo ready to go, we all move to the media room where I pair an iPhone to the big-screen TV. We settle into couches and armchairs and Nathan adjusts a camcorder on a tripod pointed right at the TV. Evidence is precious, and we keep cameras rolling to make sure every interaction involving criminal activity has a digital paper trail for our contacts in law enforcement.



Nathan checks the lighting, then the audio. Josh drops a pile of hoodies on the coffee table, and I tell him thanks.

“You ready?” Josh asks me.

“Yeah,” I lie a little. I’m never quite ready.

During the day, we’re all hands on deck. There are calls to be made, photos to be edited, evidence to be cataloged. But at night, it’s me at bat. The work is often — if I’m honest — lonely. Isolating. Devastating. Tonight, we’ll share the burden, and I’m grateful for the company. But I’m still the one in the hot seat.

. . .

Less than a year ago, Brian and I sat in a meeting where we wrestled with how exactly to talk to parents about online grooming. Back when Bark was a much smaller team, we



encountered a particularly harrowing case of an online predator abusing a girl in middle school. She was only 12 years old, and this man was grooming her through her school email account, coercing her to send videos of herself performing sexual acts. We knew people like him were out there, but it floored us to see how quickly and deftly he was able to manipulate this child.

In 2018 alone, Bark alerted the FBI to 99 child predators. In 2019? That number is more than 300 — and counting. Each of these cases represents a real child experiencing real harm, and our challenge is to help parents and schools understand this new reality. But how do we tell stories without asking families to divulge too much? How do we explain online grooming to a generation who didn't grow up with this danger? Numbers, though informative, are abstract and easy to gloss over.



I was frustrated by the problem we were facing, tapping my pen on the conference table and thinking out loud. “When parents think about predators,” I suggested to Brian, “they think about someone tossing their kid in a trunk and driving off. They don’t think about the unseen abuse that happens online. In a perfect world, we’d share a conversation from an actual predator, but that feels like traumatizing the victim all over again...”

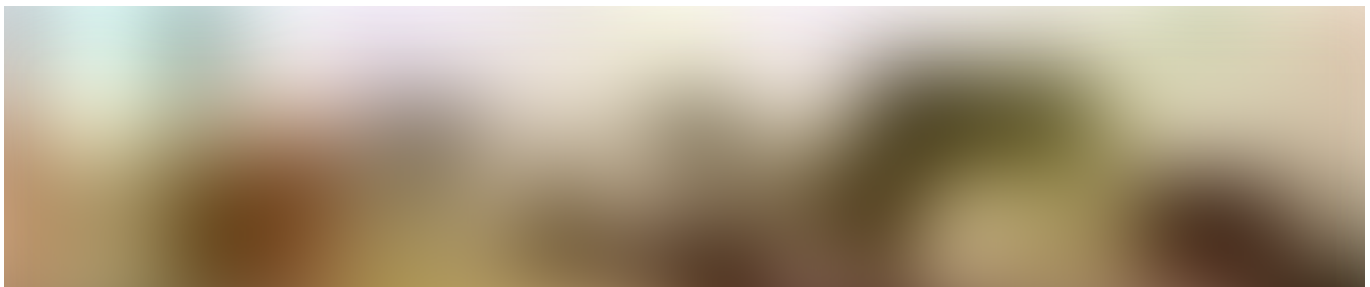
I trailed off. We had gone in circles on this same concept.

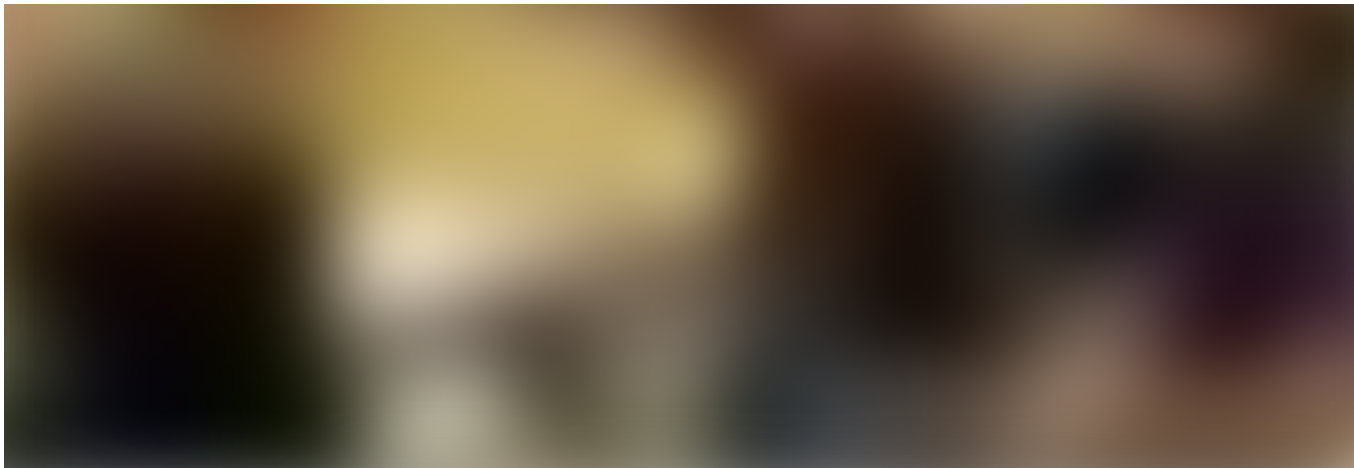
“What if we just set up fake accounts ourselves to demonstrate to parents what can happen online?” Brian asked. I raised both eyebrows at the idea. Waited a beat to see if he was joking. He wasn’t.

. . .

That was nine months ago. Since then, we’ve created an entire team focused on the impromptu meeting Brian and I had in that conference room. We’ve formed continuous working relationships with the kinds of government law enforcement agencies that boast three-letter acronyms. We’ve had test runs, new hires, and countless other meetings. We’ve seen arrests and sentencings. We’ve provided testimony in court and invaluable information to investigations.

My own role changed to heading up this new special projects team. And to preserve the integrity of this project, this special projects team works largely behind-the-scenes and out of the limelight. We don’t appear on the company website, and our Twitter profile photos show inanimate objects instead of our actual faces. Brian and I are also the bridge between the team and law enforcement, with regular meetings and status updates, making sure we’re always working within not only their parameters, but those of the prosecuting attorneys. No one wants our hard work to go to waste because of missing evidence or even a hint of entrapment.





Here, now, in this media room, this isn't our first rodeo. It's not even our second or third rodeo. Over the past nine months, I've been 15-year-old Libby and 16-year-old Kait and 14-year-old Ava. I've been a studious sophomore contemplating bangs and a lacrosse player being raised by her aunt and an excitable junior eager for prom.

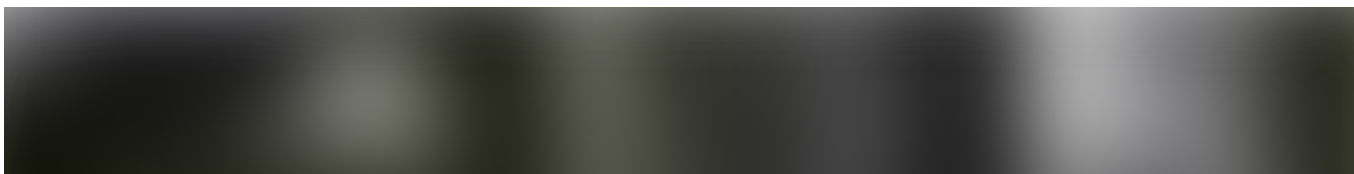
At this point, we're seasoned veterans — but this is our first time using a persona this young. Tonight, my chest is tightly bound and my language reads significantly less mature.

Tonight, I am 11-year-old Bailey.

"Here we go," I say to the room.

"You can do it, Sloane," Reid says to me, patting my shoulder woodenly, but still assuredly. Reid's chin is stern and she's staring intently ahead. An attorney with a background in criminal law, Reid moved to the private sector and joined Bark when we launched this project. With a knowledge of law and a background in dealing with some gnarly crimes, Reid has been a welcome addition to the team. To an outsider, a shoulder pat might seem stiff, but from Reid, it feels like genuine care and support.

Pete — former military, now private security — who is quite literally three times my size, sits in the front living room. Tonight is certainly low risk, but on the days that have felt significantly scarier, he affords us all a little peace of mind.







I upload the photo to Instagram — a generic, innocuous selfie of Bailey with an ear-to-ear smile — and caption it.

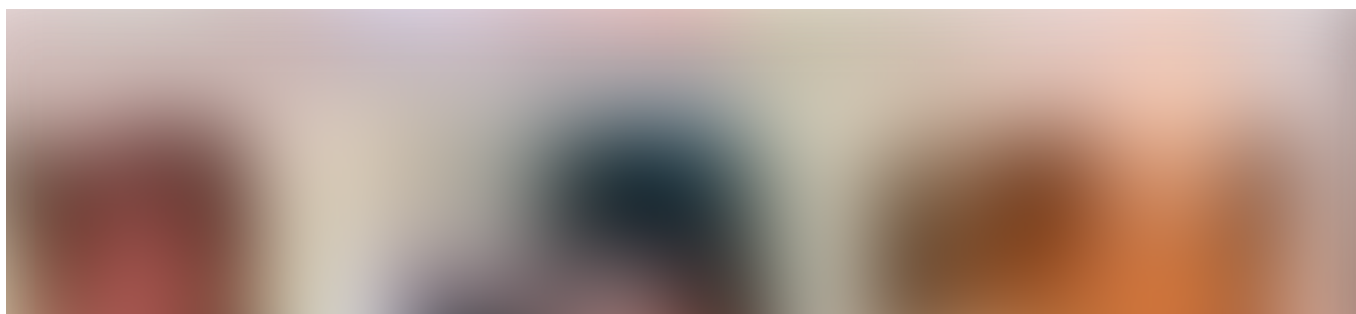
*v excitedd to see my friends this weekend at carly's party! Ilysm!!* followed by a string of emojis and a #friends hashtag

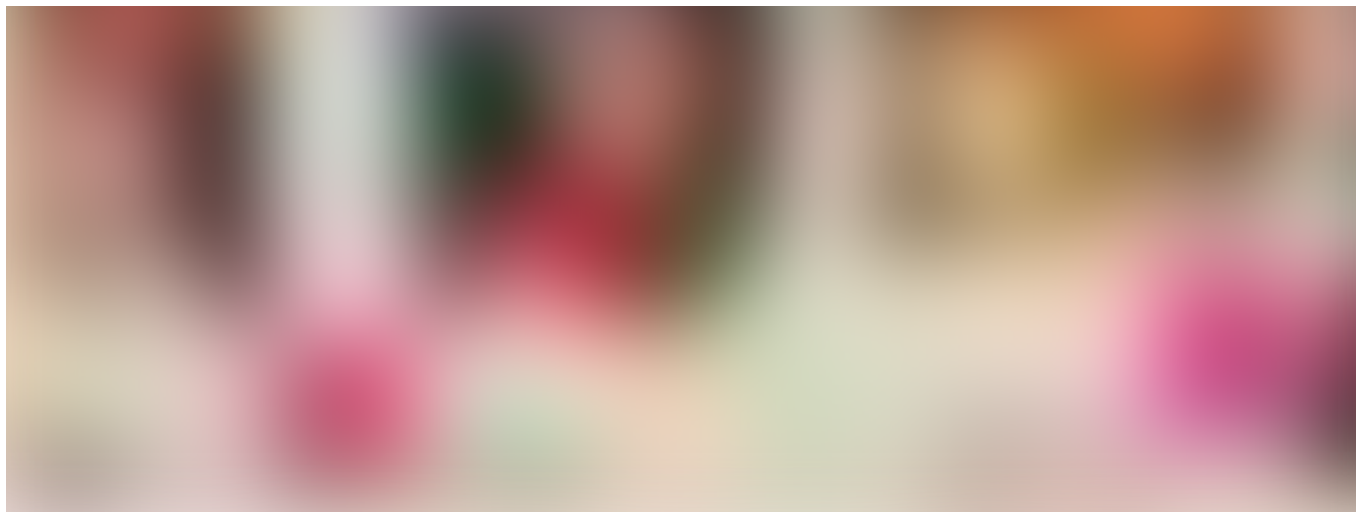
The photo publishes on Instagram and we wait quietly for something on the big screen to change.

This part never takes long. It's always unnervingly fast.

At the beginning of the week, on the very first night as Bailey, two new messages came in under a minute after publishing a photo. We sat mouths agape as the numbers pinged up on the screen — 2, 3, 7, 15 messages from adult men over the course of two hours. Half of them could be charged with transfer of obscene content to a minor. That night, I had taken a breather and sat with my head in my hands.

Nine months of this, and we still continue to be stunned by the breadth of cruelty and perversion we see. I imagine this trend will continue tonight.





“Incoming,” Avery says, and we all look up at the TV. The Instagram notifications show that Bailey has three new requests for conversation.

*“Hi! I was just wondering how long you’ve been a model for?”*

“lol! im not a model,” I type quickly, hitting send.

“No!” he types, full of false incredulity. *“You’re lying! If not, you should be a model. You’re so PRETTY.”*

@XXXastrolifer appears to be in his early 40s, but tells Bailey he’s 19. When she tells him she’s only 11, he doesn’t flinch.

The next message is from another man who greets Bailey harmlessly enough.

*“Hi! How are you doing tonight?”*

“Hi im good hbu”

*“I’m doing alright, thank you. You are a very beautiful girl.”*

I hear Josh next to me mutter. “Like clockwork.”

“Wow, thank u!”

*“It’s true. I love your pictures on here. Does your mom and dad let you have a boyfriend yet?”*

Bailey says no, but also, it's not something they talk about a lot. I poll the parents in the room. They agree. Getting a boyfriend isn't top of mind for an 11-year-old.

*“Maybe I can be your Instagram bf if you would like? Up to you.”*

I pause to respond to @ XXXastrolifer. The conversation ends like most of them do — in under five minutes, he sends Bailey a video to show himself masturbating.

*“Do you like that? Have you seen one of those before?”*

I turn my attention back to @ XXXthisguy66, the would-be Instagram boyfriend. In a matter of minutes, it escalates from *“An Instagram boyfriend means we can chat with each other, send selfies back and forth, and just be there for each other”* to *“Since we are together, are you ready to send sexy pics to each other?”*


She's 11, and doesn't quite know what he means. He sends a photo of his erect penis, requests a photo of her shirtless, and assures her that he can teach her how to proceed.

*“Well, a lot of boyfriends like it when their girlfriend give them a blowjob. Do you know what that means?”*

“No I dont.”







*“That means you take the dick in your hand and then you put your mouth over it and you suck on it like you would suck on your thumb.”*

“I dont get it,” Bailey types back.

*“You take my dick. You put it in your mouth, and you suck on it.”*

“God,” Reid interjects, and I look at her. “A child’s first sex talk shouldn’t be with a man who wants to rape her.”

I turn back to the screen.

“But why?”

*“Some girls like it, but it feels really good to the boy. That’s just what a boy likes. Now what a boy and a girl really like together is if I put my dick in between your legs and push it inside you. That is called sex. Or fucking.”*

“Oh. I learned about sex”

*“Whenever you get a chance, send me a picture of you without your shirt on, or send me a picture of in between your legs. I would really like that.”*

“Like what kind of picture? In between my legs?”

**“You know your vagina? Or some people call it a pussy. I would like to see it. Because that’s where my dick goes. But I would like to see your chest too.”**

“I dont really have boobs yet,” Bailey replies. She doesn’t. She wears a training bra for the ritual and camaraderie of training-bra-wearing, but she doesn’t really need one. Not yet.

*“It’s ok. I’m sure you still look great though. I would still suck on your nipples.”*

“I’m not good at taking body pics.”

*“It’s ok. Can you send me a picture of you sucking on your finger? That way I can imagine you giving me a blowjob like we talked about earlier. I’ll send you another pic of my dick.”*

He does.



I exit the conversation with @ XXXastrolifer to see another nine requests pending. My phone rings loudly through the TV speakers, startling all of us. It's an incoming Instagram video call from a new would-be abuser.

I make a snap decision to take it, drop my phone, and pull off my sweatshirt to swap it out for one with a hood. The room knows what I'm doing.

"Keep quiet, everyone," Nathan states the unnecessary. With my hood up and the room dimly lit, I tilt my head to obscure my face and answer the call. Dominique on my left remains poised at the ready. A former costume designer, her skills with wigs and stage makeup are unmatched. Photos of my personas side-by-side don't even look like they're related. I'm Latina. I'm part Asian. I'm a blonde. I'm a redhead.



We're greeted by a man with a British accent, breathing heavily and whispering into the phone.



*“Hey. How are you? I want to see you.”* He tilts his phone and he’s lying in bed and shirtless. I kick my voice up an octave.

*“Ummmm. I’m shy.”*

*“No, baby, no. Don’t be shy,”* he croons, his voice soft and persuasive.

*“I can’t fucking take this,”* Will says, and walks out of the room, shaking his head.

. . .

The rule at Bark is that we can all call a time-out whenever we want. We can step away whenever we need to. We can take a breather; we can schedule a therapy session. We can even rotate off the team.

That includes me, and I’m the (manipulated) face of our personas.

By the end of two-and-a-half hours, I’ve had seven video calls, ignored another two dozen of them, text-chatted with 17 men (some who had messaged her before, gearing back up in hopes for more interaction), and seen the genitalia of 11 of those. I’ve also fielded (and subsequently denied) multiple requests for above-the-waist nudity (in spite of being clear that Bailey’s breasts have not yet developed) and below-the-waist nudity.

The script we see is largely the same.

*You’re so pretty.*

*You should be a model.*

*I’m older than you.*

*What would you do if you were here, baby?*

*Would you touch my dick if you were here?*

*Have you seen one before, baby?*

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**Baby. They keep calling her baby without an ounce of irony.**

*Baby, you're so beautiful.*

*Talk to me, baby.*

*I want you to put your mouth on my dick, baby.*

*Just get on video chat, baby.*

*Don't be shy, baby.*

Bailey is a child. Libby, Kait, Ava, Alessia, Lena, Isabella. All of my personas are — legally, emotionally, physically, intellectually. They have no agency, no ability to give consent. Perhaps society loves to point fingers and victim blame (*What was she wearing??*), but the answer is still the same. They're all children. And like every case of abuse, a child is never at fault.

. . .

It's just about midnight. I stopped doing video calls an hour ago, but my thumbs have been feverishly typing. My hair is pulled back into a ponytail and I'm chugging water like I just ran a half marathon. "The body keeps the score," as the saying goes, and my body is calling uncle. The back of my t-shirt is damp, my eyes are bleary, my neck aches, and my heart is a little sick.

Over the course of one week, over 52 men reached out to an 11-year-old girl. We sit with that stat as we soberly shut down the TV and the camcorder.

The work — while not necessarily physical — is emotionally taxing. Most of us on the team have kids, some of them the same age as the personas I play. It hits too close to home, but you don't have to be a parent to be devastated by the predation of society's most vulnerable.

It's the end of the night, but every single conversation and photo still needs to be sorted, organized, and packaged to send to our law enforcement contacts. Any instance of child sexual abuse material is sent to NCMEC, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

I text the law enforcement agent I work with most closely and give him a status update. We all pack up to head home, and frankly, we all look a little bruised. I can't write this line without sounding completely self-aggrandizing, but the painful truth is that this work is hard and agonizing and very literally keeps us up at night. We could just stop. Pump the brakes. Divert our attention to the company's day-to-day.



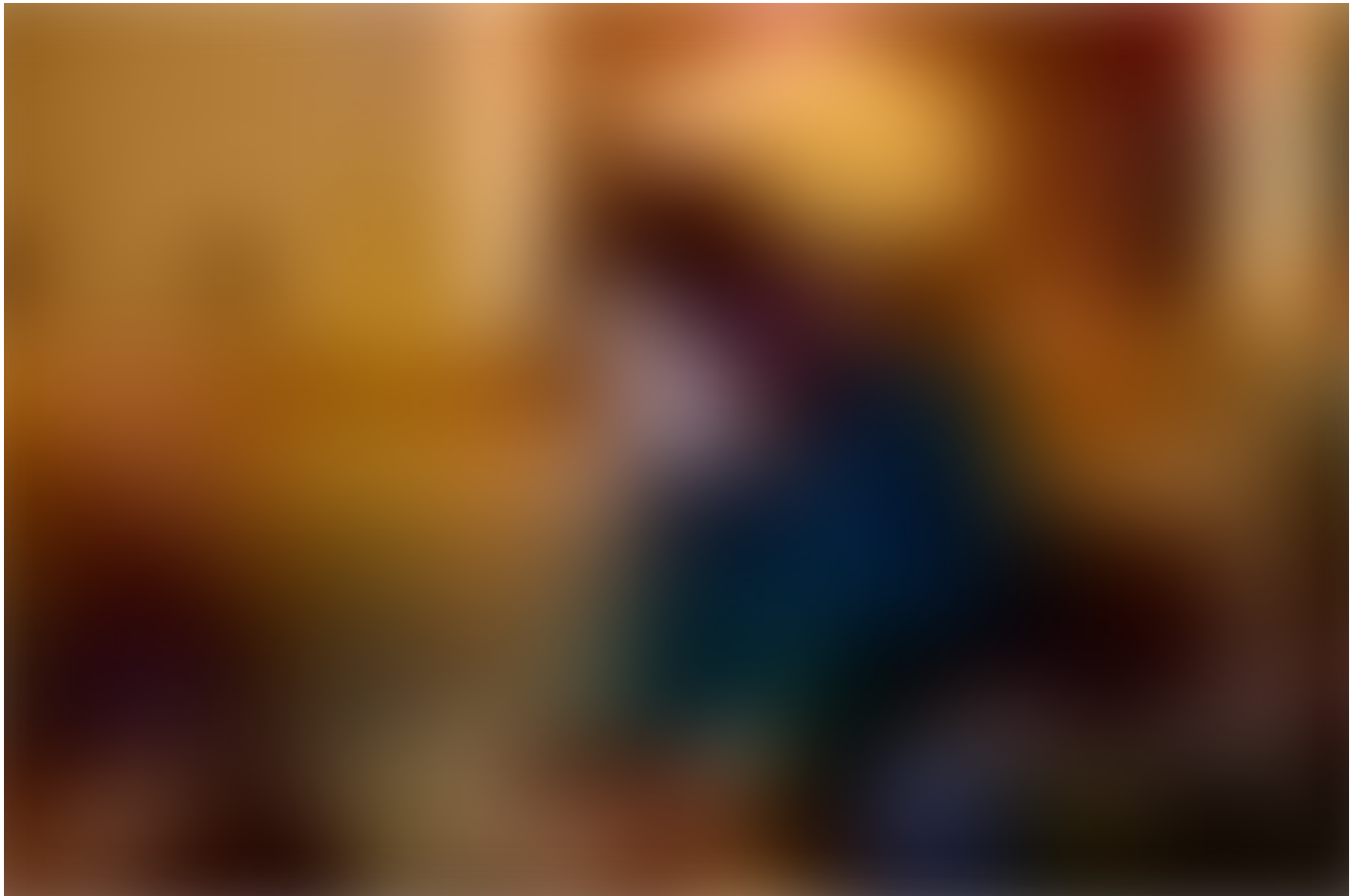
But the simple truth is that we know what's at stake. The most obvious win — we're helping identify sexual predators to the authorities and not only bring them to justice, but prevent them from abusing any more children. We're also educating parents and schools about a nearly unbelievable reality that exists online. And from a technical standpoint, these stomach-turning conversations are training Bark's artificial intelligence to become even better at monitoring for signs of grooming.

The brutal reality is that a predator doesn't have to be in the same room, building, or even country to abuse a child.

I think about my kids. About my coworkers' kids. About my own self decades ago as a young, uncertain, impressionable tween and then teen. I think about how I would have felt as Bailey. How I would have kept the abuses to myself, for fear of being shamed and blamed. How I would have suffered with it secretly and quietly. How I would have been a silent victim. How I don't want that for any other kid — my own or anyone else's.

The brutal reality is that a predator doesn't have to be in the same room, building, or even country to abuse a child. And that's what they're doing — subjecting children to psychological and sexual abuse.

Knowing the pervasiveness of predation on the internet isn't a burden. Not really. It's a gift. One that helps us turn the tables on abusers. Our work has resulted in arrests of people who have shown the propensity and willingness to harm children. Technology has changed and so too have the methods by which predators find, communicate with, and harm children. If they can use technology to abuse children, we can use the same technology to help stop their crimes.





At home, I'm not Bailey. I'm a 37-year-old mom in wool socks, loading up the dishwasher and helping with homework. One of my kids is learning about sayings, proverbs, and idioms. She reads them out loud out of her notebook. *Bite the bullet. Through thick and thin. Kill two birds with one stone.*

"Mom," she looks at me, pencil poised mid-air. "Do you agree that 'ignorance is bliss'?" I rinse off my hands and dry them with a dishtowel. I look at her jotting down notes. I am a biased parent, but she is a wonder. Full of joy and wit and curiosity, much like I'd imagine Bailey to be.

"No, honey. I don't agree with that," I say resolutely, pulling up a chair to sit next to her at the kitchen table. I lean on my elbow and peek at her homework assignment.

"Knowledge is a gift."

I repeat it to myself as I get back up and wipe down the counter. I mean it. And even on the worst days, I mean it.

*Disclaimer: Out of an abundance of caution and due to pending criminal investigations, names — including the author's — and inconsequential details have been edited for privacy and clarity.*

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Sloane Ryan runs the Special Projects Team at Bark, a company in Atlanta, Georgia, that helps parents and schools protect children online and in real life. She's passionate about keeping kids safe and helping parents understand the importance of digital safety.

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