

## An Unbreakable Bond

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## Essay | An Unbreakable Bond

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#### April 2035: How It All Started

In the warm spring of April 2035, I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. As I held Alice in my arms for the first time in our hospital pod, the nurse made a small, pain-free incision first in Alice's wrist and then in mine. In a matter of seconds, the CNCT chips were in our bodies, creating an unbreakable, unalterable bond between us forever. I knew then that no matter where life might take us, I could guide and comfort Alice, and share in her moments of joy or sadness, regardless of any physical distance between us.

The CNCT programme had already been rolled out across a dozen hospitals in the region. It was made possible by the latest developments in both medical and microchip technology and was the latest innovation resulting from the local hospital's partnership with OvalTech. Although microchips were now a standard requirement in a variety of sectors, OvalTech believed in the potential of the CNCT chip to both enhance and augment human relationships. With much higher chances of success when implemented at birth, Alice and I were among the most privileged ones to participate in the programme.

Before leaving the hospital, the nurse and an OvalTech representative came to do a final check of how the CNCT chip merged with our bodies. Although there had been rare issues with other families, we responded well to the implant, and our vitals were optimal. The representative once more walked me through the main interface—a small, oval screen the size of a pebble which would vibrate gently whenever Alice's indicators became too high or too low. I could monitor her heartrate and possible hormonal imbalances and easily adjust them using the interactive features on the touchscreen. I could also choose to access her location, which would appear as a small flashing dot at the bottom of the oval screen.

The interface was simple enough, but I would have to study the accompanying manual. It showed me the optimal figures I would have to follow to make sure Alice would lead a happy childhood, regardless of external factors or incidents. I was told I could deviate from those figures and make changes as I thought fit. But following the OvalTech guidelines was deemed safer. At the end of our meeting, the nurse and the OvalTech representative reminded me one last time: once she turns eighteen, Alice will have three years to decide whether she wishes to have the CNCT chip removed. Beyond the age of twenty-one, removing the chip would be life-threatening.

#### April 2046: The Happy Years

The first ten years of Alice's life were the most joyful. Even before uttering her first words, I had access to some of the most intimate aspects of her life. Through the interface, I quickly understood which foods or

toys she seemed to like the most. In her early years, my ability to predict the situations in which she thrived helped me give her a seemingly happy childhood. But more importantly, I knew what Alice did not like. The night's darkness that enveloped her room in the evening hours made her anxious. The intense sadness she would feel on the many days her father was not around. On such days, the oval screen would keep me occupied, and I began to chart the patterns that might have led to Alice's discomfort almost obsessively. This ability, for which I was immensely grateful, meant I could adjust her indicators as they changed, and when doing so, Alice's expressions would almost instantly brighten. In these moments, I felt I had succeeded in constructing the ideal environment. For what greater purpose does a parent have to fulfil?

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I can confidently say that until Alice's tenth birthday party, there had been no doubt in my mind about the decision I had made. On that day, a few family friends and Alice's classmates came together to celebrate, bringing presents and Alice's favourite cake. One of my most vivid memories is Alice surrounded by her closest friends, her expression happy and without a care in the world. But then her father called to say he would not be able to come. Something had come up at work. This was not the first time he had let her down, but never on her birthday. Alice had seen me, standing a few feet away, as I tried to smile bravely but was not quite able to pull it off. Before I could reach for the vibrating oval screen, which showed an immediate dip in her indicators and her quickening heartrate, Alice realised something was wrong and began to cry, loudly and intensely, as though years of pent-up anger flowed out of her all at once. A few moments later, a deep silence fell onto the party, as everyone noticed my frantic reach toward the oval screen and Alice's perplexed, almost frightened, look in my direction. Within the next instant, she was smiling again.

I was committed to never making the same mistake again, to never let Alice see my interactions with the oval screen. And for this to work, for her to keep living the happiest years of her life, I had to make sure she wouldn't find out what lay beneath. There were still almost eight years for me to determine how to have the conversation, how to reveal to her that I had allowed something foreign to be implanted into her wrist. She wouldn't understand, at least not now; she was too young. I realised then that there was no OvalTech guidance for how to have this conversation, no hints or tips in the manual accompanying the oval screen. I would have to rely purely on my own instincts, on justifying myself to my daughter, and only hope that she would not decide to sever this unbreakable bond between us.

### **November 2051: The Conversation**

Since the day of the incident at Alice's birthday party, OvalTech had only grown in size and popularity, and with their technology now available across most of the world, the CNCT chip quickly became the most ubiquitous parenting tool. Their adverts beamed in maternity wards, with white-coat-clad OvalTech representatives smiling proudly as they recalled the simple convenience of their invention. The CNCT chip had become smaller and sleeker, the oval pebble even smarter. Representatives flaunted the privacy-preserving technology they had integrated, making children's data visible only to parents willing to take the ultimate step towards knowing and understanding them entirely. No one else would have access, not even OvalTech themselves.

Countless families began sharing their experiences, all of them praising the seamless integration between the CNCT chip and the oval screen, the way it allowed an almost-superhuman insight into their children's lives and how, as a result, none of them ever cried or protested. With the children's docility, it was as though the world had become quieter, less vivid. Of course, this was not something that seemed strange to me during Alice's childhood, not something to be noticed. But as the years went on, an artificial calm spread among schools, playgrounds, and parks in the same way a suffocating quietness might spread before the most violent storm. I began to feel a certain discomfort, that I had done something wrong. But this was always in conflict with my instinct to protect Alice by any possible means. And with Alice's father never around, the entire responsibility was on me. It was my decision to make.

But I knew my time was running out. I constantly thought of how my conversation with Alice might go, playing different scenarios in my mind over and over again. We would be celebrating her eighteenth birthday, again with friends and family and all of her favourite things. In the evening, when the party would disperse, with only she and I left behind, we would sit down. I would take her hand, look into her eyes and say:

*Alice, I have been keeping a secret from you. In your wrist, and in mine, a small incision was made when you were born. I have sheltered you from any discomfort, kept you safe from any sorrow...*

But then I would grow anxious. Yes, I had technically been keeping a secret, but it was for her own good. For *our* own good. How could I possibly reveal to her, explain to her, that I did not trust myself enough to care for her without the CNCT chip. That the CNCT representatives spoke only of the benefits, that I was to be among the first parents to *guarantee* a happy childhood for my daughter. Then it crossed my mind that maybe I would not have to tell Alice at all.

### **April 2053: Alice**

I still struggle to find the words to describe yesterday's events. All I know is that today I woke up with my heart pounding out of my chest, my fists clenched. I had been lied to my entire life. My mind drifted to all the moments in which I wanted to cry, to shout, to express myself but could never find it in me to do so.

After the party dispersed, my mother and I reminiscing in our back garden, I asked her about my tenth birthday, one of my most vivid memories. About why my father could not come and about the silence that followed. I noticed the worried expression on her face then, her reluctance to talk, but I insisted. She reached for the oval pebble that she always carried with her, but I stopped her. Growing up, I had never understood its purpose, never thought to question it. After all, I trusted my mother completely, more than anyone else in the world. But my instinct told me to reach for it instead, and I took it from her hand.

That was when she told me about OvalTech.

### **July 2060: A Story with No Ending**

I was no stranger to the beaming OvalTech adverts in our local stores or the bright voices of their representatives on TV. I had a suspicion that some of my friends' parents had adopted the CNCT chips, but we never truly discussed it among ourselves. We didn't find it was our place to do so, and I certainly never expected to confront the fact that such a chip had become part of my very existence.

Thinking back to my reaction more than seven years ago, if I can even call it that, I felt paralysed by my inability to feel something. As the years have passed, I realise that perhaps I should have felt anger, disappointment, and even heartbreak at the revelation that my mother had kept such an intimate secret from me all those years. But back then I barely knew the meaning of those words. For a while, I tried to justify the constant presence of this technology by telling myself that it's normal, and that maybe it's for my own good. After all, some friends might have the same chips in their wrists, and they seemed to be doing just fine. The OvalTech representatives appeared so confident in this technology and its revolutionary promise.

When I finally asked my mother to help me investigate whether it could be removed, she didn't object. But OvalTech told us that it was too late for the CNCT chip to be extracted, and that it could be fatal. There was nothing they or the hospital could do, it was simply too much of a risk, especially because there was no precedent. I now had to confront the consequences on my own, to find my own voice after so many years with no privacy, with little knowledge of how to manage the full range of my emotions and with the hope that I could connect with those around me simply by being "me." For this to work, I could no longer rely on my mother to use the OvalTech pebble, and she promised not to do so.

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Today, as I sit and write my part of the story, I still cannot say for sure whether what I'm feeling truly belongs to me or whether it is still engineered, false. The CNCT chip still sits in my wrist. It is the last item that connects me to my childhood, like a souvenir of those quieter years. I don't know for sure whether my mother still monitors me through the oval screen, and one of the biggest challenges I am facing is learning how to trust her all over again. Relying on her promise not to alter my reactions is giving our unbreakable bond a whole new meaning that I am still exploring. So, as I slowly and cautiously step into the world, I can only hope that our generation, and those coming after us, are given the opportunity to fully realise themselves on their own terms, rather than under the influence of the latest innovation.

## Research Statement

“An Unbreakable Bond” is inspired by, on one hand, the notion of *uberveillance* and, on the other hand, by more recent developments in worker surveillance on the basis of microchip technologies. *Uberveillance* is a term conceived by M.G. Michael in 2006 and refers to ubiquitous or pervasive electronic surveillance that may not be always on but that is always with you (Michael and Michael 2007). It is a form of bodily, invasive surveillance made possible by embedded devices that indiscriminately quantify and measure the self. *Uberveillance* through microchip technology has previously been explored in the context of healthcare, crime prevention, and worker monitoring (Michael and Michael 2014). In particular, the promise of the convenience and accessibility of microchip implants in the employee–employer relationship has prompted scholarly attention into its legal, ethical, and commercial implications (Ajunwa, Crawford, and Schultz 2017; Rodriguez 2019; Weinberg et al. 2015).

Taking these developments into account, “An Unbreakable Bond” makes a creative contribution to the potential, wider societal implications of *uberveillance* through microchip implants by taking them beyond previously explored contexts and placing them within a parent–child relationship. In doing so, it prompts a reflection upon the ways in which technology can mediate the closest relationships within our lives, for better or for worse. Through Alice, we are also confronted with the potential impacts that microchip implants can have not only on her relationship with her mother but also especially on her own emotional development. Through the mother's perspective, the story explores the instances that might lead to the adoption of such a tool, such as anxiety over parenting abilities and trends or familial circumstances and economics. In bringing both perspectives together, “An Unbreakable Bond” ultimately aims to contribute to a wider conversation on the types of societies we'd like to create and the role of surveillance (or *uberveillance*) within those structures.

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