

Exclusive Extract:

The Ally-chip

by Kelechi Okafor

“09:48pm. *Fuccckk*,” Emma Ikeji muttered under her breath. She could not wait for her shift to be over. Being a nurse in the Accident & Emergency unit had a way of making her days fly by, but it was a weird sort of contraction of time because being so busy also somehow made the days feel long as hell. Emma looked at her phone. Ten minutes left of her break and still no message from Dre. She chastised herself internally for her neediness. *That’s what you get for trying to change the vibe.*

The only task Emma wanted to preoccupy herself with for the next... nine minutes until she was due back on the ward was to wrestle her mind away from these apprehensive thoughts about her sort-of-girlfriend, who had a definite-husband who was happily aware of their relationship.

Emma’s eyes wandered up to the lopsided TV screen hanging on the worn-out green wall, permanently tuned, it seemed, to a depressing news channel.

“...And the Prime Minister has said today that he plans to tackle the growing numbers of victims suffering from Ally-chip Fatigue,” the reporter on the screen was saying. “The yet-to-be-fully-understood reaction to the groundbreaking emotional transplant technology is sweeping the nation...”

Emma watched as right on cue a montage appeared onscreen showing Tomiwa Folorunsho, the young Black woman who had invented the Ally-chip. Although Tomiwa was now nineteen years old, the media kept using pictures of her fifteen-year-old self, the age she had been when she invented the chip. A particular picture where she stood outside of a hut in a rural area in Nigeria was their absolute favourite to use. It all felt very deliberate to Emma, as if the underlying narrative was the world’s benevolence in entrusting the augmentation of their brain functions to a little Black girl in Nigeria who lived in such a dwelling. In actuality, Tomiwa was a robotics enthusiast from a well-off family. The hut she was pictured in front of was one of many on which her father had installed solar panelling in order to help rural families have electricity—but that was something never mentioned on mainstream media.

Before she had started dating Dre, Emma didn’t bother too much with engaging in these issues, but Dre’s consultancy on the roll-out of the Ally-chip to willing recipients as part of her charitable foundation work had brought Tomiwa’s innovation to the forefront of Emma’s mind. To keep up with Dre’s discussions, as well as her own growing curiosity, she’d made sure to find out as much as she could about the Ally-chip. It was actually from a Black social commentator’s page online that Emma had gained a more rounded understanding of Tomiwa’s talents and social standing.

From one of the very few interviews with Tomiwa that Emma had found online, she’d discovered that the chip had actually been created because Tomiwa wanted to help her parents’ relationship. She had told *Punch Nigeria*—a popular publication there—that she feared her parents were about

to break up, and her mother would often say her father just didn't understand what she was feeling. So the industrious young woman got to work creating the famous, tiny chip. Its function was to intercept neural pathways in the amygdala, an area of the brain which dictates behaviour and emotions. For the chip to function it needed to be programmed to either send or receive emotions, requiring both an Experience Donor—the person who the feelings belonged to, and an Experience Host—the person who would feel the emotion in their stead. The current version of the Ally-chip required the donor and host to be within four hundred metres of each other for the emotions to transfer effectively.

Emma was fascinated by Tomiwa's genius. When *Punch* had asked Tomiwa whether her parents' relationship improved as a result of the chip, she told them that her parents ended up not having the implantation surgery at all, and in fact her dad had now married a second wife, which Emma found hilarious.

Tomiwa told *Punch Nigeria* that although she had invented the chip, neither she nor her family had the capital and influence to bring it to the world. That was the work of billionaire and founder of major tech entity Plant8Con, William Bunker. Tomiwa's boarding school was fortunate (or unfortunate) enough to have William as a patron, in his efforts to "civilise Africa." When William had heard of Tomiwa's invention from the school board, he'd decided that the true function of the chip should be to eradicate inequality. He had many schemes on the go, one being the trialling of pod-like capsules intended for people to walk around in, because he was convinced there was a biotech warfare brewing. None of this made sense to Emma, but the Ally-chip she could at least *sort of* understand.

The thoughts of the Ally-chip's origins made Emma shudder and chuckle simultaneously as her attention was brought back to the screen. The montage had finished, and the news reporter had returned onscreen.

"Earlier today the Prime Minister spoke with our political correspondent, Ronke Abrahams, about what will be done for the victims of Ally-Chip fatigue, and the worrying reports of cases on the rise..."

Emma wished quietly to herself that she wasn't bothered by the frequent use of the word 'victim' in the news reporter's comments. These were the things that she noticed and others seemed to be able to ignore. A victim would require a perpetrator, and in this case she was worried about who the perpetrator would be framed as.

The report switched over to an interview recorded earlier in the day, and on the screen appeared the bedraggled-looking man who was currently running the country. As he began to speak, Emma couldn't help but wonder, as she had many times before, how the leader of the country could have been encouraging the public to trial a chip inserted into their brain with no intention of doing so himself. But the public were unwavering in their support of him, no matter how many times he proved he was not in support of them. And now he had the nerve to be complaining about the very chip that not so long ago he'd been advocating for as some easy-fix to addressing real issues?

Emma caught herself as her thoughts prepared to spiral into an internal rant about the state of the world. She was determined to use the rest of her break time *not* sinking into that bad habit, though the drab green walls and the wonky television, along with the overly sterile smell of the break room, weren't helping.

"Let me be clear," the Prime Minister was continuing. "A pioneering group of people have done a brave thing by having these chips inserted, so that they can genuinely empathise with what the

Blacks of this country are going through. However, we will not hesitate to hold Africa accountable for the fatigue and discomfort that these well-meaning people are now experiencing.”

And there it was. The perpetrator in this narrative had been announced.

Ronke interjected. “Surely, Prime Minister, a whole continent cannot be held responsible for the innovation of one young woman in one country? But more importantly, you must be aware that the issues being felt by the white people who have had the chip inserted is due to the sheer magnitude of racism in this country? And is that not, indeed, what they signed up to experience?”

Emma couldn’t help nodding at the reporter’s questions. The more she thought about the whole Ally-chip furore, the more she considered that people’s attentions were being misdirected from the person they *should* be focusing on if they really wanted someone to blame, and that person was William Bunker. Unable to stop watching, Emma could see the Prime Minister was perplexed by being asked direct questions that made sense. The expression on his face was gone within a second though, and replaced by more bravado and a slimy smirk.

“Right,” he began. “Well, I can see how this might be hard for you to understand. However, we are following the science on this, and it’s possible that the Blacks are feeling these feelings more deeply *so that* it might be a more intense experience for their allies.”

“Or it could be that those feelings have always been this intense, due to the persistent nature of racism?”

Suddenly the image of the Prime Minister and the reporter juddered as the camera began to shake, and shouting could be heard off-screen. The camera then haphazardly tilted upwards, and Emma could make out the legs of the camera man—who appeared to have been hurrying towards the Prime Minister while still filming—launch into the air.

The image on the screen returned quickly to the reporter in-studio. “Now, we want to apologise to our viewers who saw this live earlier. However, we decided to show the video again in its entirety in order to demonstrate the severity of the issue we’re discussing. The cameraman who was filming was in fact an Ally-chip recipient, also known as an Experience Host, and he was overtaken by the emotions evoked during that conversation. We have been told that his Experience Donor was in fact nearby during the interview and had felt rather distressed by the Prime Minister’s comments. You can be assured that the cameraman is resting, and nobody, most especially the Prime Minister, was harmed during the altercation.”

Again Emma thought about the pointed mention of the ally and not the Experience Donor—the person who would actually have been affected by the horrendous comments made by the leader of the country. She smiled despite herself, remembering a phrase that Dre would always say when she could see Emma getting worked up about something. “*This world turn mad yunnuh?!*”

The world truly did have a weird way of turning. Peering over Dre’s shoulder late at night as she drafted comms ideas for the Ally-Chip rollout over the past few months, it seemed to Emma that it was much more of a challenge to get Black people to donate their emotions than it was to get white people to want to experience them. Emma’s curiosity would have her reading the feedback from Dre’s focus groups and noting that Black people still very much cited medical racism as a reason to not have any unnecessary surgery. She knew firsthand as a nurse that their fears were not unwarranted. Often when the two women would finally lay down to sleep, her girlfriend’s mind would still be racing. They’d lie in the dark talking about Dre’s feelings of conflict at using her own cultural knowledge to convince fellow Black people to do something that she wasn’t entirely sure of yet herself. But Dre genuinely believed that it could be possible to make change as a result

of the Ally-chip, even if the people she had to work with to bring about that change sometimes seemed very shady in their motivations.

Emma took in as much air into her lungs from the breakout room as was possible. She needed to feel invigorated, or at least convince herself of such, if she was going to be the calm authoritative person providing comfort to strangers for the remaining part of her shift. She held her breath for a moment, and then a moment longer, until it felt as if her lungs were burning. Then Emma expelled the air wrapped around one word as she thought about the news programme she had just watched:

“Dickhead.”

Now there were only two minutes and forty-four seconds left of her break, and Emma wanted to relish every second. Once she was back on the ward, it would be another five hours of chaos before she could finally drag herself home and into her bed. She decided to turn her back to the screen as she scrolled through her social media feed, an expert way she had found of wiling away time and avoiding eye contact with any colleagues who might come in and make the wrong assumption that she was up for a chat.

Suddenly the tannoy blared. *“Could nurse Emma Ikeji report to the entrance please.”*

Hearing her own name surprised and irritated her, because Emma knew that meant the premature ending of her break. Being summoned specifically by name was rare, so Emma let curiosity quell her irritation. She took one final quick glance at her phone’s text message screen—still nothing from Dre—before popping it back into her locker and returning to work.

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