

# Algorithm of Grief

By Naro Alonzo

K'ima awoke from the warm light slipping through her eyelids. Her sleeping pod shook softly, unfolding its breathing arms. She stirred to her side and read off the pod's REST tracker which showed that night's reading: *Respiration - 9.2, Environment - 8.3, Sleep Quality - 9.7, Time - 7.8* hours.

A sigh escaped her lips, and she stretched happily. Judging from the lightness of her body and clarity of mind, it felt like it had been her best sleep since the last New Moon. The monitor flickers, and she sees a graph of her REST summarising the previous three weeks. It looked like a reading of the heartbeat from someone once dead. Surging skywards from a crawl – last night *had* been her best sleep.

It didn't make sense.

Thinking it was a temporary error to the pod system or a statistical issue, she let it slide and went on to start her day.

It wasn't noticeable at first, but as time passed, something started to feel off about her Espacio.

There was something so obviously different, but not enough to make her pinpoint what it was exactly. She looked around, wandering from room to room like a detective on a quest to find anything out of sorts.

Looking at her Life Lines, her digital social web, nothing seemed unusual. She had been receiving messages up until last night. The usual conversations. A grandchild asking for help with a loan, her children sending photos of stuff to fix or a new place they went to, a friend from the Senior Citizens Guild inviting her to play a hip and knee-friendly version of sepak takraw. Nothing was new or surprising. The world as it was – the entirety of it – was as usual.

Maybe it was the ordinariness that she could not just shake away. Or perhaps, she had forgotten something important. K'ima noticed that her memory had started to lose its edge. She once had everyone's Life Line numbers memorised. Now, it took her some time to recall a password, often memorable lyrics mixed with numbers and symbols. There were increasing occasions of misplaced keys or hissing plants that she'd forgotten to water. The latest sign of her ailing memory was forgetting the birthday of one of her grandchildren, who ended up throwing such a tantrum he even blocked her on Age Gap, a Life Line dedicated to support conversations between generations.

After scouring through her files, documents, and photo albums, seeing nothing missing or out of place, she looks even more closely at her digital devices.

It was with some disappointment that she finds her Histories all intact. The caches were uncleared. She could see the places and websites she had been on weeks before. No suspicious activity. Maybe, it would've been anti-climactic if the mystery had ended there. Instead of feeling let down by the absence of clues, her excitement grows.

She kept following her gut instinct to dig deeper. Bite into the urge and chase this all the way to

the end. It reminded her of her youth when she worked as a storyweaver for an alternative media station where she gathered community stories about people's Life Lines and wrote about their patterns. Stubbornly persistent, her stories had been a driving force for uncovering those odd goings-on that often went unnoticed. Many of them had made the village elders take notice and ultimately discuss, during assemblies. K'ima would proudly declare in family reunions that her stories were the catalyst behind some of the most progressive laws in the community. Stories which roused Mother's Spirit in every member of the commune.

Hearing her regale them with tales of her glory for the umpteenth time, her children and their children would roll their eyes, "can we please talk about anything else?".

There was a trail here. K'ima's long-unused, yet nevertheless, accurate nose could sense it.

With newfound energy, one she had not felt for many years now, she started to scroll through her different Life Lines. When she was a storyweaver, many revolutions ago, her protocol would always be to start by browsing and mapping through Life Lines. People shared their lives there, and she most especially. At first, society was apprehensive of the strange new technology but through the rise and fall of tides they had come around to find and co-create online spaces where people could share openly and safely about their private experiences and innermost thoughts. Things they were often too shy to share, even with a shaman.

She scrolled through her many Lines. Her many Lives. It was like history was playing out backwards. Before her eyes, her present devolves into past. She watches an old woman awkwardly dancing a folk dance, her gestures revealing a flower unblooming into a bud, retracing then erasing footprints she'd left on paths around the world, into the arms of one person after another, her back slowly becoming straighter, eyes less milky, laugh lines fading into shadows. She replays the most significant struggles, greatest successes, and the most ordinary days. Though she tried to maintain a professional distance, seeing herself as the subject of investigation, she could not help but feel like she was at the beach stretching out towards the horizon where waves blurred the line between land and bodies of water. And there, reflected in the water was herself. In her palms, she would try to fit as much of the ocean's volume of data, yet they would simply slip through her fingers.

For the following weeks, K'ima focused on mapping her timelines. The dates where she was, the people she was with, what she was doing, what she was feeling: video clips, words, audio recordings. Much like time travelling, her mind drifted to occupy the moments she captured. So many rants about the most mundane things. Taxes, knees, liniments, the neighbour's new pets. There was so much life to trudge through. What she was looking for was not just the needle in the haystack, but making sense of the haystack.

Even after pouring through those different Life Lines of hers—from Lines where her children would upload dance videos to those meant to connect citizens with the elders or Counsels—nothing seemed particularly amiss. Her life seemed to brim and overflow with events, people, and colour. Ticking her first checkbox, she moved on to the next, which was to investigate and look at the advertisements found across her Life Lines.

When she was a full-time storyweaver, she wrote a popular piece about why women refugees from nearby exploded stars all ended up doing the same kind of work. Even after revolutions, women from the recently extinct star Centauri A were all doing some form of work related to fabrics and clothing. In contrast, women from Centauri B, all 100%, ended up in kitchens across the archipelago. Interstellar laws weren't as inclusive as they are now, and Centaurians were classified as Type A or B back then. She remembered interviewing Axii, now a member of the Inner Counsel, about why she ended up starting a career as a seamstress despite being a well-

regarded scholar on her Star. While ze finished up sewing the buttons of a uniform, Axii said that ze Life Lines, "—juz' kept on showin' dis job. All of 'em.' If not to sew, to laundry. Can't afford to be picky now ya."

It was downplayed by the founding Life Lines, who though few, controlled the ads that would and wouldn't show up, who then defended that they only wanted to help Centaurians find work quicker. It didn't take long for K'ima to uncover that the counsels guiding the first Life Lines did not have any Centaurians on them, nor did the heavily advertised jobs in very limited sectors pay a fair wage. At first, even K'ima couldn't quite believe how something as seemingly inconsequential as an ad you scroll past could possibly alter your world. But it does. Many Centaurians would live until their twilight years doing the same kind of work, feeling stuck and voiceless. It was the story K'ima was most proud of. Years later, after the 400 day revolution, Axii along with many of the Centaurians K'ima had woven with were asked to partner with and counsel Life Lines for the Wider World Web.

Advertisements. K'ima knew it was a long shot given the many changes to Life Lines that she hadn't kept up with, but she was convinced that they must have left some form of crumbs that she could trace.

Going through her Life Lines one at a time, she started to map out the different advertisements that had shown up in the last couple of weeks. She had expected it to be a lot more difficult, but since Life Lines had been required to commit to full Ad Transparency, it had become pretty easy. She had expected to have thousands of them, relishing the idea of spending the next months pouring through each one, but was disappointed to note that there were only a few hundred, many of which were dated revolutions ago, back when Life Lines and K'ima herself, were still in their beginnings.

There was an ad about the latest Air Rider, named after the ancient typhoon Yolanda, which had the highest carbon negative output of all the other models on the market. K'ima wondered if she had had a sudden urge of leaving and going off somewhere. In the bucket list that she had found, written by her then-teenage self, she had written that she wanted to one day "air-surf through the Westerlies."

She'd been having impulsive desires the last couple of months, which had grown more frequent. She'd suddenly be completely swept up about something new. Just a few weeks ago, she had set up an aquaponic garden for some extra-terrestrial plants she had specially requested to be imported, and even bought a new ice cream maker that freezes using an unstable element that added a unique flavour. Could she have spontaneously decided to air surf?

Another ad was for an upcoming film by an independent director, a historical romance, set during the Age of Migration and played by a famous young actress. Maybe, even though she hated romance, she had wanted to watch this? Yes, the plot sounded absolutely cliché and boring to her. Yes, none of the cast were familiar or exciting. But maybe, she had wanted to go nevertheless? Had someone invited her, and she had failed to mark it in her calendar? Or maybe the actual clue was the Age of Migration, that during this epoch in humanity a secret was being kept, raging from the depths of her subconscious? Well, it didn't feel like rage. But whatever she was looking for, did make her feel uneasy.

There were a few political ads meant to boost the images of those running for Inner and Outer Counsels, which K'ima had long chosen to block off from her Life Lines. Other ads were about the most random things—a bioluminescent bouldering centre, a Tibetan musical instrument, an anti-gravity slipper, a karaoke machine that claimed to read minds, and even ergonomic socks "whose thread count can boost your walking pace by up to 0.5 mi/h!" She noted them all down,

categorising them, noting their distinct features, and her own impressions of them. None called out to her. As much as they sounded...interesting...in their own way, with her imagination making her think of ways she could try them out, whatever she had forgotten couldn't possibly be about any of those products or services.

As a storyweaver, it's important to be detailed. One can't ever be too sure. Everything requires evidence. And so she unpacked each ad, trying to understand what they meant, where they came from, how they were selected to show up in her Lines – information all easily requested from the Lines. Yet, even with the information that they gave her, she remained unsatisfied. It was not enough.

It comes to a point where she starts reaching out to the businesses and companies that pushed the ads, something that would have been a wild goose chase during K'ima's career. She even visited their stores to look at their wares and products. She spent hours just staring at and then trying on a pair of Levit8 shoes that her grandchildren had been raving about, trying to spark something in her memory. The store clerks were fascinated with her tale, and said they knew their company had advertised through three Lines for a few months to jibe with the holidays. Had she, coming across an ad, wanted to give someone a present?

Continuing with mapping her past, she came upon a decades-old ad shared by a friend. Long ago, back when "viral" was a living word in the many languages. It was titled, in a clickbait fashion, "Want to Delete Your History?" and the ad talked about an "advanced, state-of-the-art technology that can help people forget certain memories." It was initially meant to help those with lived experiences of trauma, promising them the therapeutic benefits of forgetting.

K'ima tried to make sense of all this. Had she, perhaps, deleted a part of her memory? A fear came over her in waves, along with a thrill that rose from her aching feet. Could she have deleted a part of her? She tried calling the Life Line of the contact person on the poster, yet no one answered. There was also no available information on the Web about it, with few articles written about History Deletions.

Could this be a high security secret?

It was absurd. Yet, it was like an itch. Could she have done it, actually deleted something herself and then left such a thrilling mystery for her Future Self to find? Like a treasure hunt masterminded by her. "Oh Ima, still looking for trouble you old girl!", she'd say to herself every time, "you smart girl, I'll show you!". On the other hand, it could've been someone else. Was she forced to be Deleted? Was this even possible? Regardless of which, what was it that was missing, that had been taken away?

Hitting a stumbling block, K'ima decided to ask K'ael for help. He was her youngest and the only one in the clan who had decided to pursue the same career as her. K'ael was a known and beloved storyweaver writing about newly discovered plants and animals across star systems. Fortunately, he was on an extended work break and was resting a few islands away.

By K'ima's request, he came early the next day. Too tired to even do the proper greetings, instead, he made his way inside with just a few quick whispers on K'ima's open palms.

K'ima excitedly led him to the dining area, showing off her paperwork and other documentation. Stacks of them. Proudly hung on the walls were her story maps—highlighting her observations and findings on the ads.

"—it feels like I'm getting close to whatever it was that I had forgotten."

K'ael sighed deeply. This was the last thing he wanted to do while on his Leave. As much as he wanted to be honest and tell her to move on to other things, he also knew how stubborn his Ma' could be. She was the storyweaver who "dug her heels six feet into the ground", never letting go. Thinking this would be resolved more quickly by giving into her curiosity, hoping her ignited passion would fizzle out sooner, he let her speak.

It was obvious to her that K'ael didn't share her level of excitement, but she rattled on and on nonetheless.

"—those are my guesses. I think I came upon this ad, then did something to have myself Deleted. Either it was me, or someone else."

"Ima, I don't know what to make of them," K'ael looked like he was more interested in the stew boiling on the stove that gave mouth-watering whiffs of herbs and chilli, "This is not my field of expertise."

"I've sorted them out for you, here—" K'ima shows him what looked like a complex analysis of the contents of the Deleted History ad along with the outcomes of her research so far, "I'm noticing a few probable patterns. Ael, refresh my memory. Did I ever mention a story I was chasing, or something I wanted to forget? Have I been behaving strangely the last weeks?"

K'ael sounded irritated, "I just got back so I haven't seen you that much, Ma'. The last time we spoke through Lines you were just talking about visiting K'aya. But I'm sure you've never been interested in any of these, much less talked about any story with me."

Not liking his tone, K'ima mimicked it, "and what do you know of my interests?"

It was her usual way of starting an endless debate, and K'ael was not in the mood for it. "Ima looks like all this...with the Life Lines and the ads and the Deleted...they are getting to you. I can't answer your questions. Maybe you will have more luck with the Dighea?"

K'ima felt frustrated at being told such an obvious answer. She knew she could have gone to the Digital Health Centre or Dighea directly. But for some reason, she had wanted to ask K'ael first. There was something that she couldn't voice. In the same way that there was something she wanted to tell K'ael before he had left but it was left stuck like a fish bone in her throat. Whatever it was, she set it aside, vowing to come back to it. Right now, there were more important things.

Afterwards, K'ima immediately got ready. Wearing her favourite storyweaver outfit that had been skulking in the back most corner of her drawer, beside beads of leftover moth balls, she made her way to Dighea. She felt like she was young again, wearing her silk headwrap, which despite its age, still shone beautifully in its loud turquoise colour that made her long silver-white hair look like Talon, the majestic waterfall.

The nearest Dighea was only a hundred wingspans from her Espacio. Every commune was required to have one. It was usually located in the fourth Petealth, a flower-shaped hanging structure that held other health centres, such as the Menhea, for mental health, Physea, for physical health, or Mathea, for maternal health. Larger communes had more centres, and recently, a competitive spirit had been sparked, with communes trying to outdo each other with the number of Petealths they could offer. So far, Pa'rjab, which holds the renowned Lotus Petealth afloat between two cliffs was the envy of all, and whose Lotus-health model might soon be replicated in other communes.

K'ima queued for her turn in the triage of their humble Ixora or four-Petealth Dighea. From the giant wooden desk, she saw a familiar face and started to wave her shawl to one of them. It was Nejj, her 5th-degree cousin just a few Revolutions younger but with whom she had spent most of her childhood making up stories with, sparing no one.

"Nejj, why, how many orbits has it been?!" K'ima greeted loudly, holding their face close and kissing over their dark eyelids lined like tree rings. Their skin showed the marks of age. Sunspots covered them from head to toe like a galaxy painted with stars.

"Ima, how strange, how far has our time been?" Nejj was teary-eyed, and K'ima felt infected. It dawned on her that it had been so long since she had visited Nejj. So long in fact that she couldn't tell how much time it had been.

Nejj led K'ima into a separate Espacio where they sat on the soft flooring woven from alpha centaurian leaves, ochre-dyed pillows, with a centre table that held various devices. A calming incense burned from a clay pot nearby that relaxed K'ima. It smelled like the Balete tree she had once whispered the names of her secret crushes to while she was studying.

"I know we have much to sing about," Nejj joked, "But the Dighea's quite busy. So let me assist you first, and after my duty, I'll visit your Espacio."

K'ima happily told Nejj about her investigation with much flare and drama. Nejj looked hooked and captivated, and it felt like they were children again crafting myths about their aunts and uncles, or inventing conspiracies about the communes.

"I've only heard about Deleting Histories from Earthians, have they actually imported that tech here?" Nejj said, "Wait, let me check the ad first. Let's go over the consent agreement—"

After the Ceremony of Consent, Nejj expanded their screen so that K'ima could see better without using their lens.

"Here is the ad you were talking about. From our examinations, they've appeared across your Life Lines only once. See this Attention dimension here, your first visual contact with them is only in the past week, when you started your investigation. All our tests also show that they have no data on you, and that, as far as your Life Lines are concerned, you haven't engaged with them in any way—including for any trade or business."

K'ima could not help but peel the dry skin from her fingers, a nervous habit. "Could I have been Deleted without me knowing, maybe by someone else? Illegally?"

Nejj searched through the Web, "See here Ima, this is the record of all activities on Delete History compiled by our Dighea activists, business, and government sectors combined – as far as we can see, Delete History has never been practised here, in any commune. In the Earthian Web, same thing, it never went beyond non-human experimentation. The ad is classified as fake news and false advertising, and the technology never really became more than a rumour."

K'ima deflated at that. Yet even with the rock solid information Nejj had given her, she couldn't let go of the thought. "This information, could it have been tampered with? Remember in our Ashen Days, Life Lines were all just free to do whatever they wanted?"

"Sure, long ago before Petra lost its rings Ima," Nejj patiently explained, showing K'ima the timeline of the Silver Revolutions, "Life Lines, who were secretly partnering with traders or merchants, would harvest all they could from us. Always, everything was about what could be

sold, and they would incite even our Mother's Spirits just to make a sale. They would even show you ads of whatever they felt would make you react. Remember Tio K'Mhall?"

K'ima remembers K'Mhall, her mother's eldest brother who had sworn off Life Lines completely.

"It was soon after losing K'ilthu. Each day he would find his Life Lines full of advertisements about funeral parlours, memory vials, or new models of urns. Even during Tia K'ilthu's 50 Songs of Sorrow, he was bombarded by ads about mate finders and pheromone perfumes."

Back then, K'ima had just thought K'Mhall could not handle the loss and decided to stay away from any form of Life Lines. That it was his form of mourning. She recalled him burning all the Lines he had in the backyard, looking proud at the massive crackling bonfire. For her, it was horrible and sounded like bones breaking.

"And now—?" K'ima tried to steer Nejj back before moving farther from the answer she sought.

Nejj flashes a different picture on the screen, showing K'ima's digital health assessment report, "I'm afraid, there's no trail here for your Story. No crumbs. An ant wouldn't even bother. Beyond the Dighea Pact, where all Life Lines are blood compact partners, there are layers of regulatory systems which make sure no one is harmed by any tech or any Life Line. We'll draft a report on this too, but for now, this is all I can give you Ima."

As though a valuable lead was taken away, K'ima wanted to berate herself for wasting so much time. To end up with nothing. "It's just that there's something there, Nejj. Something I am missing, and I cannot say precisely what it is."

"There's no technology capable of deleting histories or memories. I can assure you of that. Even if there were, you've never been the kind of person to do that, Ima. Remember the name of your column when you were a storyweaver, 'Never Forget?'"

Before they parted, Nejj had whispered a tender poem over the characters sewn in K'ima's shawl, one passed down orally in rituals between soulmates and sisters, "*My I, my other. My ink, my paper. What are we if not the full and empty. Don't we find ourselves only when we are missing?*"

After her appointment and the fun get-together she and Nejj had after duty, K'ima was tiredly fixing the mess that was her Espacio. An ache of acceptance had settled in the pit of her stomach. It was like a rock thrown into a dead river, and after the flurry of disturbed sediments, had finally sunk to the bottom. Now, even the sediments were quiet.

It was in this solitude that a clear, laughably simple answer emerged. She had missed this. She had missed being like this—consumed by Mother's Spirit and passionately searching for questions, for things unknown, for stories. She had so desperately longed for a mystery, for an itch to scratch, for a purpose again, that she had created one out of her life.

Surrounding her were hundreds of pages, hundreds of thousands of words from the investigation. She had never realised that she had woven so much. Forgotten were the usual aches of her joints and early bed-times. Similar to Life Lines, she had lived most of her life making connections about people's lives. Archiving, telling their tales, and ensuring theirs were carefully and meaningfully preserved for the future of communes.

Looking at her disorganised living room, with papers strewn everywhere, looking exactly like her workstation from long ago, she kneels, careful of her bad hip, and opens a dusty old trunk that

kept her trusty word-loom. It was bulky, rusty, and smelled of massage oil – undoubtedly already an antique, a relic, yet still looking incredibly sturdy and reliable. Ready.

Fingers slow and creaky, but alive with muscle memory, start to press and reach for one letter after another. Slowly, K'ima starts to weave a story. She is not done yet done with being a storyweaver.