



Karuna, Inc
a novella
by Paul Di Filippo

He learned about pain and death from an ugly dying dog. It had been run over and lay by the side of the road, its chest crushed, bloody foam bubbling from its mouth. When he bent over it the dog gazed at him with glasslike eyes that already saw into the next world.

To understand what the dog was saying he put his hand on its stumpy tail. "Who mandated this death for you?" he asked the dog. "What have you done?"

--Philip K. Dick, *The Divine Invasion*

1.
Memories of the 37th

Maybe he should get himself a dog.

A dog--a pet, a constant companion, something to fuss over--might help.

But then again, maybe not. It was so hard to know, to make up his mind.

Considering his unique situation. His special troubles. His extra share of suffering.

Adding any unknown factor to the sad equation of his life might disguise its solution, remove any answer forever beyond his powers of philosophical computation. (Assuming his life--anyone's life--was solvable at all.)

But how could he know for sure without trying?

Yet did he dare try?

Foolish as the dilemma seemed, it was a real quandary, seemingly his alone.

Others seemed not to have such problems.

For instance. Everyone in Thurman Swan's life had a dog, it seemed. All the people he hung with daily at the Karuna Koffeehouse. (He felt odd calling them "friends," upon such short acquaintance, even though they were starting to feel a little like that.) Shenda, Buddy, Chug'em, SinSin, Verity, Odd Vibe.... They were all dog owners, every manjack and womanjill of them. Big dogs or little dogs, mutts or purebreds, quiet or yippy, reserved or exuberant, shaggy or groomed, their dogs came in all varieties. But one thing all the animals had in common, Thurman had noticed: they were inseparable from their masters and mistresses, loyal behind questioning, and seemed to

"No!"

Shenda Moore burst the shackles of her bad dream with an actual effort of will. There was nothing involuntary or accidental about her escape. No built-in handy mental trapdoor opened automatically, no cluster of ancient guardian neurons on the alert triggered its patented *wake-up!* subroutine. No, it was all Shenda's own doing. The disengagement from the horrifying scenario, the refusal to participate in her subconscious's fear-trip, the determination to leave the grasping fantasies of sleep behind for the larger consensual illusion called reality-- It was all attributable to the force of Shenda's character.

Really, everyone who knew her would have said, *So typical of the girl!*

Sometimes Shenda wished she were different. Not so driven, so in-charge, so *socapable*. Sure, mostly she was grateful every minute of every day to Titi Yaya for bringing her up so. Shenda *liked* who she was.

But being responsible for *everything* was really so much *work!* An endless roster of sweaty jobs: mopping up messes, straightening crooked lives, building and repairing, shoring up, tearing down, kissing all the boo-boos better. *Mwah!* And now: stop yer sobbin'.

Dancing with the Tarbaby, Shenda called it.

And there was no stopping allowed.

Especially now--with Karuna, Inc., taking off and demanding so much of her time--Shenda awoke most mornings with a hierarchical tree of chores arrayed neatly in her head, a tree where any free time hung like forbidden fruit at the farthest unreachable branch tips.

But even coming online to such a formidable task-array was better than waking like *this*.

Shenda's heart was still pounding like a conga, her shouted denial still bouncing around the bedroom walls. She clicked on a table lamp and swung her slim and muscular caramel legs out from under the sheets, sitting upright in her cotton Hanro nightshirt. She massaged each temple with two fingers for a while, lustrous and wavy black hair waterfaling around her lowered face, while contemplating the nightmare.

It was not the first time she had had the nightmare.

She was on a flat graveled rooftop in broad daylight, level with the upper stories of many surrounding buildings. Tin-walled elevator-shaft shack, a satellite dish, door to a stairwell, whirling vents, a couple of planters and deckchairs. Highly plausible, except that she had never

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