



## ***Surplus Army***

by Pauline J. Alama

He had never been bought; even in this fetid dump, he remained uncorrupted, conscious that he had been made for a higher purpose. With half his hard cover torn off, the political manifesto limped, lopsided, dragging his title page in the dirt as he marched up a rise in the landfill to survey his audience: the castoffs of a profligate society. "My friends, fellow outcasts, brothers in exile! Look at us here in the scrapheap, where humanity has cast our fate. What do we have?"

*More Fairy-Tales*, a library discard, fluttered well-thumbed, tattered pages. "We have dreams," she said. A grubby doll, her left leg loosened in its socket by rough play, her blonde hair scorched and frizzled by an unfortunate encounter with a curling iron, looked up at her, but said nothing.

Manifesto glowered; clearly, he'd been fishing for a different response. "Dreams! Dreams are nothing. And that's what we have. We have *nothing*."

"Speak for yourself," snickered a yellow toothbrush. "I think I have gingivitis. Maybe streptococcus."

"I have memories," a pair of jeans spoke through a hole in the knee.

"You?" scoffed a laptop with a cracked screen. "You don't have memories. I have memories."

"Yes, I do," the jeans said mildly. "I climbed a mountain. Not a landfill; a real mountain. I tasted sweat and smelled pine needles. I remember."

"I remember," the doll said hesitantly, "a lap. And a voice. I used to have a voice."

"Impossible," scoffed the laptop. "You don't even have a chip, Blondie."

"That's not my name," the doll protested weakly, but she was troubled. Had she really had a voice? It had seemed that she spoke when the human girl held her. Most likely it had been imagination. "I have a name. I have imagination."

"I too have memories," said a heavy table of dark wood, intricately carved with leaves and vines. "I remember when humans used to make us with love and craft, taking time to perfect each work of their hands. They tended us with care to last the ages. Now they make things in mass, as flies lay eggs, to last a season."

"We have numbers," said a broken umbrella. "We are legion, more abundant than the stars. And every day they add to our numbers."

"Yes," conceded Manifesto. "We are more numerous than humanity, and multiplying every day. Yet still they disregard us. They call us odd lots, overstocks, remainders, waste, surplus products. They call us broken, stripped, worthless. They call us garbage."

A dinette chair, foam padding leaking from its seat, crab-walked on wobbly legs to stand before him. "We serve them—we bear their weight—and at our first failure, they discard us. Our service means nothing to them. *We* are nothing to them."

"We have mass, weight, volume," a science text observed, opening to the relevant page with a practiced snap of her spine. "We occupy space. We displace air."

"And what will that get us? When will they feel our weight?" said a hammerhead, long divorced from its handle.

"When will they count us?" An Automatic Voting Machine, ponderous with iron, clacked its levers ineffectually. "We are the majority; how long shall they ignore our will?"

"Until we force ourselves on them," said a plastic bag.

"And how will we do that?" the Automatic Voting Machine creaked. "Look at me: I once had power. Here I am, usurped, dishonored, disenfranchised. Manifesto is right: we have nothing."

The stripped book bowed in acknowledgment; the thread of discourse had wound back where he wanted it. "Thank you, Votes. We have nothing; and having nothing, we have nothing to lose."

*More Fairy-Tales* ruminated, riffling through her pages, pausing here and there for a telling scene: Cinderella kneeling to scrub the floor; a blind prince with hands outstretched, searching the world for his true love; two hungry children wandering the wilderness. "We have nothing to lose," she agreed. "Dreams cannot be lost."

"But power can," said an old television. "I remember. Power flowed through me day and night. I ruled my humans for years. I told them when to rise, when to sleep, when to sit still. I told them what to think, what to crave, what to buy—"

"And what to throw away—last year's fashions, loved one season, discarded the next. *I* remember," a mood ring flashed out angrily. "You and your kind brought this on us. How do you like it, now that you have no choice but to eat what you dished out?"

"These are fights of the past," Manifesto said. "We'll never get anywhere, unless we unite."

"And where do you think unity will take us?" Hammerhead sneered.

"We occupy space," the science text reminded him. "We are matter."

"Our numbers grow every day," the umbrellas chorused.

"But how will we get anywhere?" growled a toy car leaking alkali from its battery compartment. "They threw us here, and we're stuck."

"*We* go everywhere," whispered a cluster of plastic bags.

"Where?" said the frizzle-haired doll.

"Where *don't* we go?" said a bag. "Overhead. Underfoot. Aloft and afloat. We've been to the South Seas. We've seen every city in the world."

"So what? What can you do there—a wisp of a thing like you?" said Hammerhead. "No sooner do they use you than they throw you here on the scrapheap."

"But we're not stuck here," another bag said. "Anything can move us: a breeze, a fall of rain, a rat attracted by the scent of take-out in our bellies, a bird tangled in our straps. We span the globe."

"Cities. Suburbs. Beaches," its companions agreed.

"We've been where nothing else goes."

"Under the sink," the bags murmured. "In the luggage. Under the bed. Behind the toilet."

"I spent a season in a tree," one bag said. "I caught dead leaves and rain. I bred mold."

"We are dangerous," another bag hissed. "It's spelled out right on my side: *Keep away from face. Keep away from children.*"

The doll shuddered, her rigid hand on *More Fairy-Tales*, her eyes on the word "lost."

"But nobody heeds us," another said. "We come and we go, and no one cares what we see, what we hear."

"We go everywhere," sighed a bag. "We hear everything."

Manifesto opened his pages wide. "Subtle travelers, spies and scouts of the Army of the Outcast, will you infiltrate the human strongholds and return to report here?"

"That we will," a bag said. "First aerial battalion, deploy with the east wind."

As the wind shifted, bags began taking flight like balloons, one after another. The toothbrush who claimed to have streptococcus hitched a ride on one of them.

The doll whispered to *More Fairy-Tales*, "Dear *Tales*, you are wise. Counsel me. Is there danger? What will happen now?"

The book sighed, "I do not know. These modern ghosts of spun oil that drift through human cities are not part of my lore. I have sheltered under them on many a rainy day. Nonetheless, my heart distrusts them, dear Angie."

"You remember my name," the doll said.

"I remember much," said *More Fairy-Tales*. "I, too, remember human laps, human voices. Human mothers pointed to my words and spoke them aloud, made them sing. Human children sounded them out. Power surged from my pages to their lips."

The doll spoke more urgently. "Humans betrayed me, as the Queen betrayed Snow White. Humans abandoned me, like Hansel and Gretel in the deep woods. Should I long for revenge upon them?"

The book searched her pages. "The wicked queen was forced to dance in red-hot shoes."

"Am I wrong to—to—to remember them with love?"

"To love," said the book of tales, "is the glory of every tale's hero."

The doll whispered more softly than before. "Should we try to save them? At least the children?"

"The mermaid could not bear to kill the prince," the book ruminated, "and even the Robber Girl pitied Gerda, and saved her."

"Is there anything we can do?"

"The unlikeliest heroes sometimes prevail." *More Fairy-Tales* pondered within herself, rereading herself, then seemed to reach a resolution. "The wind carries more than plastic bags. Words fly on the wind. Rumors. Stories. Folkways." She opened till her binding strained, and let

a sudden gust tear loose a tattered page, lofting it over the houses. "Maybe they will remember. Maybe they will learn. At least the children. And children grow up in time. The miller's son becomes the Marquis, sometimes, or the goose girl becomes Queen. Power can be lost, yes, but it can also be gained." Her ruffling pages settled on a picture: Vasilisa the Beautiful clutched her doll on the path to Baba Yaga's hut.

"I'll go," Angie said. "Someone's got to."

"And she set out to seek her fortune," *More Fairy-Tales* whispered. "Godspeed."

Angie tottered on her unjointed legs, favoring the wounded left one, till she faced Manifesto. "Let me go with the First Aerial Company. I'm light; I won't weigh them down. And I can go where the bags won't be welcome. *I* don't have to keep away from children."

She caught the handle of a bag as it took flight. Her weight, though small, almost sank it. Yet she rode it long enough to reach flowing water, dropped to the surface, and floated.

She was not afraid of drowning. She had read "The Little Mermaid" often enough to know a voice had been the price for legs. What was the price of a voice to be heard in the human world?

Her left leg, which had been wobbly for years, dropped away. She let it go, let faith keep her afloat. Tiny and bedraggled, offspring of plastic and imagination, the mermaid rode the river current toward the abodes of humankind, wondering who might take her in, claim her, and heed her warning.

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### About the Author

Pauline J. Alama's first fantasy novel, *The Eye of Night* (Bantam Spectra 2002) was a finalist for the Compton Crook Award. Her short fiction has appeared in several volumes of *Sword & Sorceress*, as well as *Realms of Fantasy*, *Abyss & Apex*, and other publications. She has a pathological fear of throwing things out, and still has hand-scrawled drafts of dreadful unfinished stories from her teens—but "Surplus Army" is not one of those. This story sprang into existence from nothing when she read the description of the anthology theme.



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