

New Fiction from Andria Williams: "Polecat"

Camp TUTO, Greenland
1960

When Paul, a nuclear operator, had arrived in Greenland, the reactor at Camp Century was still not fully assembled, so he and a dozen other men were being held temporarily at another camp a hundred miles south. Everything he could see on the edge of the polar ice cap was white and brown like some kind of visual trick: dirt, and snow, and snowy dirt, and snowy air, and sometimes blowing dirt. The snow and dirt were constantly changing places.

He was in the mess hall when Master Sergeant Whitmore appeared at his elbow. Paul hopped to his feet, and Whitmore asked, with no preamble, "You ever drive a D8 Cat?" Whitmore had buggy, vein-scraggled blue eyes that seemed to intensify anything he said, giving any question he asked an oddly moral implication.

Paul hesitated. "Not yet."

"Well, you're gonna have to fill in," Whitmore said. "It's just like driving a tractor, except it's a giant one. You've driven a tractor, right?"

Paul had not.

Whitmore forged on. "You'll be towing a fuel canister. All you got to do is stay behind me and follow the bamboo markers. Do not fall asleep and drive into a crevasse. We drive six hours on, six hours off. It'll take about a week."

Paul was relieved enough to simply get on the road, so he nodded, and when Whitmore left, his friend Mayberry appeared

beside him.

"King of the road!" Mayberry said, grinning at Paul. Mayberry was the camp geologist, and this was his fifth tour in Greenland. Tall and thin, with a scientist's buzzing mind, he worked in an underground lab below the base, surrounded by rows of ice samples stored in what looked like oversized poster tubes. Because he spent his working hours alone, he seemed perpetually delighted to encounter other people. He said that Camp Century was a dream compared to his first base in Greenland, which had been called Fistclench.

"How bad will it be?" Paul asked.

But Mayberry was watching Whitmore, who stood across the room talking to the camp cook. Cookie, as they called him, had been in Greenland for who knew how long. He was as thin as a Confederate zealot, and while the men ate he stood smoking in his stained apron, watching them as if it gave him either grim pleasure or unabated pain.

"Good!" Mayberry said. "We get to bring Cookie."

"Should make for great conversation," said Paul.

"Oh, he talks," Mayberry promised. "You'll see."

The Polecat was idling next to several others just outside the camp's garage. They rumbled in concert, swathed in plumes of steam and exhaust. Paul identified his by the orange fuel canister attached to the rear and mounted on skis. The Polecats were Swiss innovations, specially adapted vehicles with huge track frames – Paul guessed twenty feet – and wide track pads that could traverse uneven ice without tipping or breaking through.

There would be three other Polecats like his, carrying various types of freight in the middle of the caravan. Whitmore's D9

led the line, with a blade attached, to help clear a path. Then there was the Command Train, a huge tractor that pulled the cook shack, radio shack, and three refurbished old boxcars on skis called wanigans, where the soldiers relaxed or slept. Finally, there was the last boxcar on the whole train: the latrine, that foul caboose, following them like a bad thought. What an absurdly human predicament, Paul thought, having to cross the polar ice cap lugging literal shit behind you.

Whitmore strode up and slapped Paul on the back. "Good luck," he said. "Don't drive into a crevasse." This was becoming a common theme with the master sergeant, and Paul was beginning to suspect he wasn't kidding. To Mayberry, Whitmore said, "Quit smoking by the fuel rig. Here're your keys."

Everyone climbed into their tractors. Slowly, Whitmore pulled his D9 out into the lead. At this rate, Paul thought, we will never get anywhere. Then he pulled his own tractor in line and found it moved even slower than the boss's.

It seemed unbelievable they'd travel at this snail's pace for an entire week. Paul tried not to think about it. He wondered when he would break down and allow himself a cigarette. He wondered what his wife, Nat, back in Idaho was doing. He thought quite a lot about what they would do if they were together. Meanwhile he squinted to keep track of the pointed tops of the bamboo poles they followed, many almost buried beneath the moving glacier. Sometimes the poles would be so hard to see that an impossibly-bundled man would have to walk ahead, locate them, and then wave in the direction the trucks should go. Paul's Army career had started in petroleum supply, and stunts like this were one reason he'd left that field. Lugging massive canisters and a shitter across the ice felt like some Neanderthal gig, the work of people without bright ideas.



photo by Ray Hansen

Between their shifts, the drivers sat in the rocking but well-heated wanigan, paging through month-old newspapers someone had brought from Fort Andrews. There they were joined by Cookie, who had never stopped smoking, his legs crossed and one foot jittering up and down. Cookie would wait until the men around him began to engage in any kind of interesting conversation—about sports back home, their previous tours of duty, anything—and then he'd suddenly interject his own litany of complaints against the Army and life in general, as if that had been the topic of discussion in the first place. "I wasn't meant to be here," he'd say, sucking on one cheek, his small eyes blazing. "I'm from Mississippi. No way was I meant to be here." He alternated this thought with its close cousin, "I wasn't meant to be in the Army" (he had initially attempted to get into the Navy) and also, "I was never meant to be a cook" (he had hoped to be a machinist, but failed some critical aptitude test). Cookie and his quibble with destiny had rapidly become tiresome, and it was impossible for the other men not to occasionally respond with wiseacre remarks.

"I was meant to be here," Mayberry said as he flipped the pages of the classifieds. It was the only section everyone had

not yet read multiple times. "This, here, is the point in life I was born for." The wanigan gave a lurch and someone in a bunk cursed.

Cookie ignored him and continued, "I was a runner in high school. I ran cross-country. I wasn't meant to stand in one place, flippin' burgers."

Mayberry was reading the classifieds aloud. "Here's an ad for a home dental care system. It says, 'Polish Your Teeth on Your Own Time.'"

"That's what I've always wanted to do with my own time," said Benson from a folding chair across the room.

"We could let Cookie drill our cavities," said Mayberry. "Maybe he was meant for that."

"I had three ladies back in Mississippi," said Cookie. "Three of 'em, who loved me. They cooked for *me*."

"Hmm," said Mayberry, in a placating way.

"I had five women," said Benson. "They polished my teeth for me."

Cookie snapped to attention. "You did not," he said. "That's stupid." Then he lapsed back into thought.

The wanigan hit a deep groove, and the men steadied themselves. "Jesus," said Benson. "And people think they get seasick in the Navy."

"I was meant to be in the Navy!" Cookie said, with sudden interest. Then he stood from his chair and looked at the boxcar door with a focused expression, his hands on his hips, knobby elbows sticking out from white shirtsleeves. "Forget this shit," he said. "I'm going home."

Mayberry rattled his newspaper so it wouldn't slump. "Great,"

he said, without looking up. "Tell your three ladies we said hi."

"Forget you," said Cookie, very loudly, leaning over Mayberry who looked over the top of the paper in surprise. "Forget you, all you stupid food-eaters, who just sit around eating my food. Complainin' and complainin'. I am a man! I was not meant for this shit job!" He stepped back and glanced around with flashing eyes, muttering, "Maybe you should cook for your damn selves is what."

"Geez, I'm sorry," Mayberry began, but Cookie strode to the boxcar door, unlatched it, and heaved it open. The air that entered the room felt as cold as rubbing alcohol.

"Whoa," said Mayberry, getting to his feet also. And then the cook, in only his short-sleeved white uniform, jumped right out.

For a moment everyone stood and the room was silent. Paul looked around, as if this had just been some optical illusion, and Cookie would actually be sitting back in his chair where he'd been a moment before. But the chair was empty. The wanigan door creaked slowly toward closing.

"Holy shit," Mayberry cried, and he and Paul scrambled. They reached the door at the same time and yanked it open. Mayberry leaped out first, and Paul followed. The force of the cold nearly spun him around, and it took him a second to gather his wits and begin running. He heard Benson hit the ground a few beats behind him. Cookie had taken off across the ice, surprisingly fast, heading for the white horizon.

"He's a runner," called Mayberry as they sprinted after the cook. "He ran cross-country."

"He's gonna die," Paul cried. Any second he expected Cookie to slip from sight into the narrow cradle of an unseen crevasse.

The ice was hard and slick, and their feet slipped every few steps. Cookie, on the other hand, appeared to have magic shoes. He was loping ahead at a steady pace, his body a slim, efficient machine.

"Go back, Benson," Mayberry said over his shoulder.

Paul could hear Benson's heavy breath like a zipper being yanked up and down. "Someone will radio the boss," he shouted encouragingly.

"That someone should be you!" Mayberry said.

This is ridiculous, Paul thought. He knew he had to give the chase all he could. He focused on pumping his arms and legs as fast as possible. He narrowed his vision on Cookie and raced all-out, his lungs burning with an intense pain.



photo by Ray Hansen

Cookie might have actually gotten away, run off to the top of

the world, if he hadn't hit a ripple on the ice and stumbled. He caught himself and straightened, limping slightly, and Paul, feeling delirious and oxygen-deprived, gave his last burst of speed. The gap between himself and the cook narrowed. Paul took several long strides and flung himself against the cook's lower back, pulling the two of them down onto the ice with a painful slap.

The second Cookie hit the ice he began yowling. He fought like a wildcat. He kneed Paul in the gut and smashed the flat of his hand against Paul's nose. Paul realized that his only advantage was his greater size, so he fell forward onto Cookie and clung to the wiry man for dear life. It was like wrestling a greased snake. All he could see was Cookie's white-shirted abdomen, into which his face was pressed, the muscles twisting and bucking against his cheek. He gritted his teeth and waited desperately for Mayberry to reach them.

A moment later Mayberry sprinted up and fell on top of them both, and from a distance it must have looked like some ecstatic reunion, or the winning touchdown in a football game. "Sit on his arms," Mayberry grunted, and Paul, dazedly obedient, tried to find one to sit on. He crawled up Cookie's body and fought to pin down the cook's skinny, flopping limb, which jumped over and over again just out of Paul's reach like a fish on land. Finally, Paul pegged the arm and sat on it, and Mayberry sat on the other, and then there they were, gasping for breath, the cook writhing and screaming on his back beneath them.

Benson finally jogged up, looking ill, and in the distance they could see Whitmore's D9 turn slowly, slowly, to come and get them. This seemed absurd; they could walk faster than it drove.

"I'm sorry, Cookie," Mayberry was saying. "We'll show you we care. We'll bake you a cake."

"We need to stand up," Paul said. "We'll freeze." He was concerned about Cookie's bare elbows on the ice.

They waited for Benson to catch his breath, and then they all grabbed onto an available part of the cook and lifted him to his feet. Cookie screamed; Paul winced to see the two lines of blood on the ice where his arms had begun to freeze to the ground. "Sorry," Paul said to the cook, and "Start walking," to the others. With mincing, difficult steps they made their way toward the line of tractors.

Sergeant Whitmore leaped down from his idling vehicle, waving his arms and shouting, "What the hay, Cookie?" for he was a man who did not curse. "What did you think you were doing?" Cookie stared at him defiantly, and Whitmore made a sound of disgust. "Tie him up," he said, "tie him to a bunk til we get to Century. We'll decide what to do with him there."

On the count of three, Paul, Mayberry, and Benson heaved the slender cook up into the wanigan and over to a bunk. Whitmore fetched a coil of rope. "Don't you tie me," Cookie began to shout, "don't you dare tie me!," but they did anyway, binding him to the bunk in a seated position with his arms behind his back. From there, he yelled half-sensible platitudes at them for hours. "You can't keep a man where he don't want to be," he said, and "This is my life, not yours, you rat bastards," and, cryptically, "You're just like all them, you know what." He hollered until he wore himself out, and then he stared at them despondently from where he sat.

That night, after a dinner of cream of wheat and tinned milk, Paul tried to sleep, but every time he opened his eyes he could see Cookie's own, glittering back at him. Paul rolled onto his side to face the wall. Cookie's gaze crawled up his back. He yanked his wool blanket to his shoulders. "Cut it out, Cookie," he said.

Cookie's voice came across the room, plaintive, almost

mewling. "I ain't doing nothin'," he said. "I'm just sittin' here like a good boy." A moment later he hissed, "Come on, untie me. I won't go nowhere. I'll sit just like this."

"Can't do that," Paul muttered.

Cookie's voice was hoarse. "My Leroy's itchin'."

"Sorry."

"Untie me, please," Cookie begged. "Come on now, you're the only nice one of them in here. You're the nice guy. The best one." A minute later he said, "Never mind, you're the worst one. You a priss is what you is. You prissy!"

Paul had never been called this before and felt actually startled.

"A man's body is his own," Cookie said. "It's the only thing he really got. You know, someday the rules are gonna be here for you when you don't want them, either."

Paul screwed shut his eyes. The wanigan lurched and groaned, and a coffee cup slid off a table, hit the ground with a thud, and rolled hollowly across the floor. Outside, the pitch of the wind rose and fell, a sound both strange and familiar: a waning alarm, distant machinery, blood roaring in the ear.

*

photos by [Ray Hansen](#)