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*Old Wadaslaw was too mean to live. So, very suddenly, old Wadaslaw died. . . .*

by JOHN D. MACDONALD

# Black Cat in the Snow



WHEN I got the phone call from the State Police Barracks that Trooper Jerry Jackson was on his way to pick me up, I cut old Mrs. Agnew off in the middle of a symptom and told Alice to let the folks in the waiting room know that they could take their chances on sticking around, but I didn't know just how soon I'd be back.

"Accident in the woods?" Alice asked.

"Not this time. Martin Wadaslaw got himself shot."

I saw a little gleam of satisfaction in Alice's eyes. She certainly wasn't hypocrite enough to make any noises of regret. And I was pretty certain that gleam would be repeated in most of the eyes in the village. Up here in Pattenberg, in the wildest part of the Adirondacks, there's only nine hundred of us in permanent residence, and we get to know each other pretty well. In the summer the influx of campers keeps things stirred up, but after the hunting season is over and the snow stands deep on the hills that ring the town and the ice is as blue and hard

as steel on our three lakes, we live in each other's pockets.

I am as charitable toward my fellow man as anybody, but I'd never been able to find a trace of good in Martin Wadaslaw. He was born mean and he lived mean. He had been a lumberjack, and when a chain broke about twelve years ago, he lost a leg and got a pension from the lumber company. At that time he had a bunch of halfgrown kids and a wornout wife. Before his accident he drank heavy enough to keep his family on short rations, and so the kids old enough to work were doing what they could. Good kids. Bright and hardy and energetic. The accident should have killed Martin—would have killed a normal man—but he was too mean to die. There's some say that the men who had to work with him had something to do with that chain breaking, but maybe that's just gossip. After Martin began to spend all his time home, his wife lasted about two years before she died, and then the kids began to scatter.

I knew there was just six people living in the home place. Martin, and one of his older boys, Stanley, and the only unmarried girl, Rose. Then there was Stanley's wife, Helen—she was one of the Ritter girls—and Stanley and Helen's two small kids. I'd delivered both of them. And Helen too.

The Ritters didn't go much for Helen marrying a Wadaslaw. Thought it beneath her or something. But she got one of the best in town. Stanley owns and operates the big fishing lodge on Crossbow Lake. During the winter he closes up and they move back into the home place, and in between building boats in the barn, he works on the County snow plow, the one they keep here in Pattenberg.

I'd heard the old man was getting worse, if anything, and that things were pretty tense out there at the Wadaslaws. I knew the old man had beat Rose up pretty bad because I took care of her. And I'd heard that Stanley had changed his mind about wintering at the lodge just so Rose wouldn't be left alone with the old man.

I had what I thought I'd need in the bag and when I saw the trooper car coming, I went out to the curb. The tires squeaked on the snow and Jerry swung the back door open for me. Trooper Dave Devine was in front with him.

"How bad is he hurt?" I asked.

"Don't know, Doc," Jerry said. "We just got the call from Stanley Wadaslaw saying he'd shot the old man."

"It's time somebody shot him," I said, "but that's a hell of a mess."

We went into town, fast, and turned onto the Little Karega Mountain Road. When we pulled into the driveway some neighbors were there, and Deputy Sheriff Bob Trable was there, and it was a good thing he was, because he'd kept anybody from trampling on the marks in the snow in the side yard.

They hadn't wanted to move old Martin much. You could see where he'd fallen, just outside the side door to the kitchen, and the footprints where they'd picked him up and lugged him inside the door and put him on a blanket on the kitchen floor. They'd unbuttoned his shirt and the front of his long johns. He was so hairy it was hard to see the small hole, just under the rib cage and dead center. His color and his breathing were bad. They said he'd been like that ever since the bullet hit him twenty minutes ago. While I was fudying around opening my bag the hoarse shallow breathing stopped. I lay my head on his chest and listened to dead silence. I gave him a shot to try to jolt the heart back into action, but he was dead and gone. I folded the loose part of the blanket over him, and Rose gave a little whimper, but her eyes were dry.

Stanley, as big as his father had been, stood with his feet planted, face completely expressionless. There was just Bob Trable, the troopers, Rose, Stanley and me in the kitchen. I could hear a kid crying so I guessed Helen had herded them to another part of the house.

"What happened, Wadaslaw," Jerry Jackson asked.

"It was an accident."

"You shot him."

"Yes, I shot him, but it was an accident."

"You better tell us about it."

Stanley Wadaslaw told us, and he showed us. He had a Winchester .22, a bolt action. He said he'd been in the kitchen and seen crows out in the side lot, beyond the barn. So he'd put on a jacket, taken the rifle and gone out. We were able to follow his footsteps in the snow to the fence. He said the crows had moved out of range. So he had started back to the house.

"I had a shell in the chamber. Our black cat ran from the corner of the barn there over toward that shed." We looked and saw a lot of cat tracks back and forth. It seemed to be a regular winter route for the cat.

"For no reason at all," Stanley said, "I decided to fire close behind her. You know. Startle her a little. I was aiming toward the house, of course, but into the snow. I'm a good shot. The old man came out of the house just as I shot. The cat jumped up in the air and ran twice as fast. The old man gave a funny kind of grunt and sat down in the snow and rolled over on his side. I didn't know what happened. I thought maybe he had a heart attack. After we got him in the kitchen then I saw the hole in his shirt and a little blood. So I phoned right away."

"Why didn't you call the doctor first?"

"I tried, but I couldn't get the line."

"You aimed pretty high, didn't you, Wadaslaw?"

"No. I saw the snow kick up from the slug. It must have ricocheted."

Jerry Jackson stared at him. "Off snow?"

"Off snow," Stanley said stolidly.

The troopers and Bob Trable checked exactly where Stanley had been standing. Midway between his footprints and the back door, near the cat tracks, they found the foot-long mark of disturbed snow.

"Let me see that rifle," Dave Devine said.

He checked the clip and he walked over until he was about the same distance from the side of the barn as Stanley had been from the side door of the kitchen. He aimed at the snow halfway to the barn. We saw the snow kick up, and we heard the after-crack of the slug smacking into the side of the barn. He emptied the clip. We walked and looked at the side of the barn. Of the five slugs, three had tumbled and kicked out big splinters, and two had hit squarely and bored through. All were in a pattern about as big around as a bushel basket, and about where a man's chest would be had he been standing against the side of the barn.

"I'll be damned," Jerry said softly.

"The autopsy will check it out for sure," I told them. "If the slug ranges upward from point of impact."

Rose verified Stanley's story. He had been looking out the kitchen window and spoke about the crows, and gone out. She hadn't seen the crows or the cat. She had heard the shot and heard Martin Wadaslaw grunt. Helen and the kids hadn't been in the kitchen.

Harvey Burnbridge took the body to his place in his combination hearse and ambulance. I went back and finished up my office calls and went over to Harvey's place in the evening and opened Martin up. The nippers wouldn't handle those big ribs so I had to saw. The entrance wound was a little raggedy as though the slug was starting to tumble. It had ranged on an upwards course, ripping a hole in the heart sac and coming to rest snug up against the left side of the spinal column. A normal man wouldn't have lasted five minutes.

So that was the end of it. There was no B.C.I. investigation called for. They said Stanley had been pretty damn careless. The old man was buried, artificial leg and all, next to his wife and two of the kids who hadn't lived long enough to grow up. I didn't attend, but I heard that even the Reverend Dudley Simeon had an awkward time putting in a good word for Martin Wadaslaw.

I guess one of the penalties of a country practise is that you get too much time to think, and you get too curious about people and the way their minds work. I spent a lot of time last winter with a book open in my lap, just staring into the fireplace and thinking about Stanley Wadaslaw. Stanley had been trapped. He couldn't arrange to get the old man put away. Rose had no place to go, except move in with Stanley, and that would have left the old man alone, unable to care for himself.

And the little facts kept adding up. Like Helen bringing the three year old boy in saying he fell. But if he fell, he must have bounced, and neither Helen nor Stanley nor Rose would have pummeled a little guy like that.

And I remembered that when Stanley came home from Korea, he was still in uniform and he wore a distinguished marksman's badge. He was known as a dead shot, but the only hunting he ever did was for meat.

Then I remembered another thing about Stanley. He got pretty upset about unnecessary cruelty. There was a story about him knocking some kid off the dock at the fishing lodge when the kid kept right on skinning a smallmouth bass while it was still alive, after Stanley told him to kill it first.

I couldn't see Stanley firing at a cat just to scare it. Or firing in the direction of the house.

On one of the first warm Sundays last spring, I knew I had to get it out of my system. It used up nearly the whole day to find what I was looking for. But I found it in the late afternoon, a mile beyond the Wadaslaw place. It was a big billboard set back from the road, so weathered that you couldn't make out what it used to advertise. On the back of it I found three places where it had been struck repeatedly by small caliber slugs. Some of them had tumbled and torn the old wood. All three groups were pretty well centered, at chest height. I guessed about three hundred rounds had been used up. All had apparently struck at an upward angle.

After Alice had washed up and gone home that night, and I was alone in the big old lonely house, I tried to think it out.

So how had Stanley arranged to have the cat in the right place at the right time.

Then it struck me. The cat didn't have to be there. Just the tracks.

The house was getting chilly. I went over and stirred the fire up and put another log on. Stanley was working hard to get the lodge in shape for the new season. Helen was looking happy. Rose was going to help out at the lodge this season.

And I was a busybody. I was just an old man with too much time on my hands and too much curiosity. It wasn't any of my business. I would put it out of my mind.

But I looked into the flames and I saw the kitchen in the Wadaslaw house. I saw Rose at the sink. She looked out the window and she saw Stanley where he said he would be.

And above the hiss of the flames I seemed to hear Rose say, "Poppa, will you please step out and call Stanley."

The old man grumbled, hoisted his great weight out of the kitchen rocker.

He opened the door slowly and stepped out into the snow.