

Excerpt from *One-Eyed Cat*

by Paula Fox

Ned loved snow, the whisper when he walked through it, a sound like candles being blown out, the coming indoors out of it into the warmth, and standing on the register in the big hall through which the dusty, metal-smelling heat blew up, and the going back out again, shivering, cold, stooping and scooping up a handful to make a snowball, packing it
5 hard with wet mittens, hefting it, tossing it as far as he could, and the runners of his sled whispering across it as he sleighed down the slopes which were smooth and glittering and hard, like great jewels.

On the first of December, there was a heavy snowfall. When Ned looked out of his window the next morning, the river glowed like a snake made out of light as it wound
10 among the snow-covered mountains.

He ate breakfast hastily, too preoccupied to read the story on the cereal box. Mrs. Scallop¹ was broody this morning and left him alone, her glance passing over him as it passed over the kitchen chairs.

On the porch, he paused to take deep breaths of air which tasted, he imagined, like
15 water from the center of the ocean, then he waded into the snow, passing the Packard,² its windows white and hidden, the crabapple tree with its weighted branches, down the long hill trying to guess if he was anywhere near the buried driveway. By the time he reached Mr. Scully's house, his galoshes were topped with snow and his feet were wet. Mr. Scully's shades were drawn; the house had a pinched look as though it felt the cold.

20 Ned went around to the back until he could see the shed. There were boot tracks in the snow leading to it and returning to the back door. He guessed the old man had taken in the cat's bowl; it was nowhere to be seen. You couldn't leave anything out in this weather, it would freeze. Mr. Scully had told him that finding water in the winter was a big problem for animals. Licking the snow or ice could make them sick.

25 Ned stared hard at the shed. Perhaps the cat was inside, squeezed in behind logs in a tight space where its own breath would keep it warm. He was going to be late to school if he didn't get a move on, but he kept looking hard all over the yard as though he could make the cat appear out of snow and gray sky. Twice, his glance passed over the icebox. The third time, he saw that the motionless mound on top of it was not only the quilt but
30 the cat, joined into one shape by a dusting of snow.

¹ **Mrs. Scallop:** Ned's family's housekeeper

² **Packard:** a brand of car that is no longer manufactured

Ned held his breath for a moment, then put his own feet in Mr. Scully's tracks and went toward the shed. The tracks had frozen and they crunched under Ned's weight, but the cat didn't raise its head. Ned halted a few feet away from it—but of course, he realized, it wouldn't hear him because of its deaf ear. He could have gone closer to it than he'd ever
35 been but he had a sudden vision of the cat exploding into fear when it finally did hear him.

When he got back to the front of the house, he saw fresh footsteps on the road. He could tell it was the road because of the deep ditches which fell away to either side. He guessed they were Billy's tracks. It was odd to think that Billy, huffing and puffing, had
40 gone past Mr. Scully's place, thinking his own thoughts, while he, Ned, only a few yards away, had been searching for the cat. He found Evelyn's tracks, too, and later on, Janet's, the smallest of all. He felt ghostly as if he'd been left alone on a white, silent globe.

Somewhere in the evergreen woods, snow must have slid off a bough, for he heard the loud plop, then the fainter sound of the bough springing up, relieved of the weight. He
45 thought about the cat, visualizing how it had looked on the quilt. How still it had been! Why hadn't he gone right up to it, looked at it close, touched its fur? Why had it been so motionless—still as death, still as a dead vole he'd seen last summer in the grass near the well? He came to the snow-covered blacktop road upon which a few cars had left their ridged tire tracks. He had a strong impulse to turn back, to play hooky for the first time in
50 his life. Mr. Scully, with his poor eyesight, might not spot the cat on top of the icebox, might not, then, set food out for it. Fretting and shivering, his feet numb, Ned went on to school.

He tried very hard to concentrate on his lessons, to watch Miss Jefferson's plump, even handwriting on the blackboard as she wrote out the lines from a poem by Thomas Gray
55 that the class was to memorize that week, but try as he might, the image of the unmoving animal on the ragged old quilt persisted. Last week, on a rainy afternoon, the cat had looked at Ned, had cocked its head as though to see him better. Its one eye, narrowed, had reminded him of a grain of wheat.

"The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
60 The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea . . ."

Ned read the lines several times before copying them down in his copybook. The words made no sense to him. It was this that had made his hours in school so hard ever since he and Mr. Scully had seen the cat last autumn, this drawing away of his attention from everything that was going on around him. He was either relieved because the cat was
65 where he could see it or fearful because he didn't know where it was.