

# Fleece or flannel?

It is not true that because I was raised in Texas I have nothing good to say about winter. I can say, for example, that winter as a season is superior to fried okra as brunch or George Bush Jr. as anything.

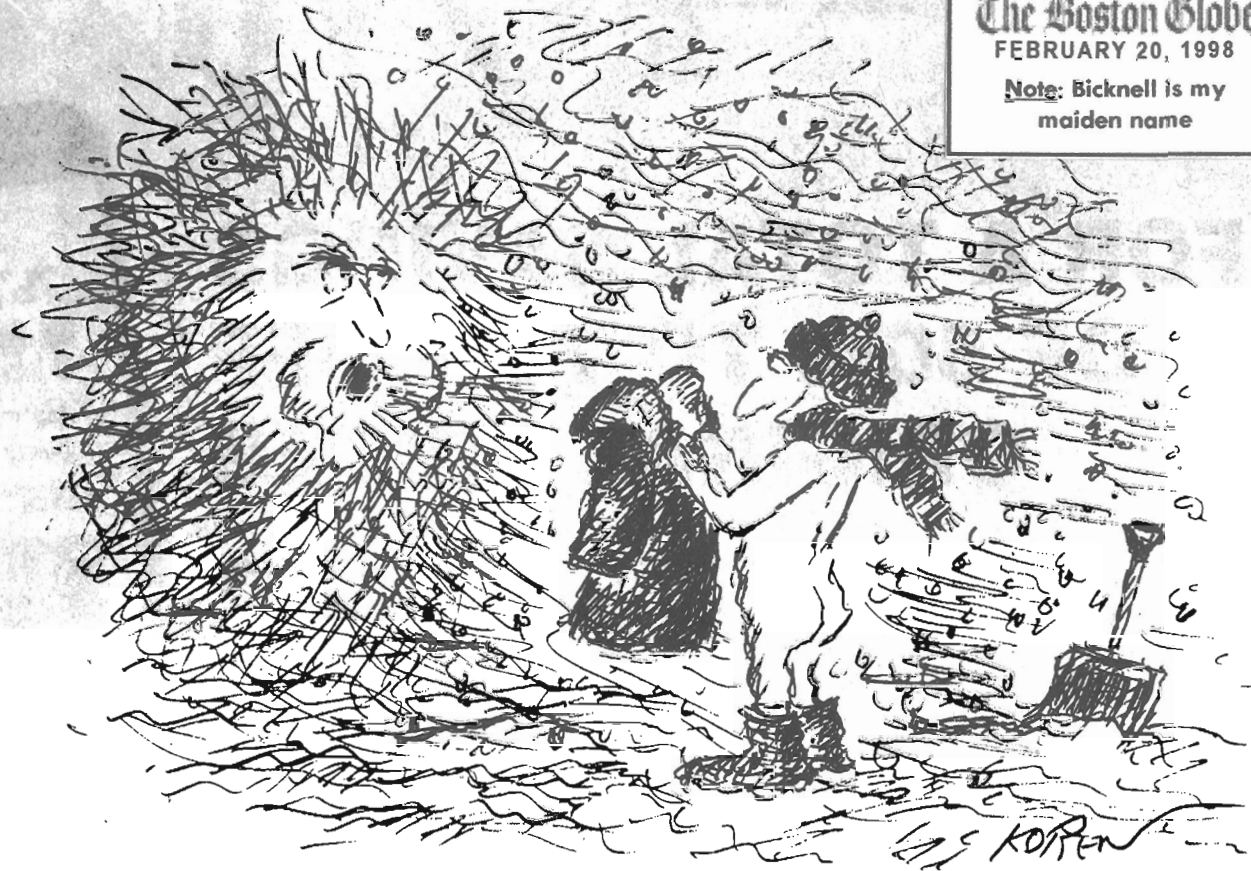
I can also say that thanks to winter the June bugs are just bearable during the summer, although I cannot say the same for the governor. I can even say something good about the winter misfortune that is specific to my adopted home of Seattle, which periodicals from the East periodically mistake for one or all of the Seven Cities of Gold but which in truth suffers from what the natives call simply the Rain and I call the Chill – a period lasting roughly from September through August with the exception, in some years, of Flag Day.

The good thing that I can say on account of the Rain-Chill is that I finally understand why Seattle's liberals have fought so long to prevent the warm, the clear, the militia-ed eastern half of Washington from seceding and entering into a Luddite confederacy with Idaho and Utah.

Nevertheless, I did not become an actual supporter of winter (or, necessarily, of Seattle) until I discovered polar fleece. Polar fleece, as you are already aware, is the fabric made by applying a Weed Eater to the bathroom rug. The plush yet cropped result is impossible to stain or soak and has the thermal properties of a Victoria's Secret catalog. Until global warming renders winter obsolete, any approach to the season that does not involve enough polar fleece to dress a pterodactyl can only be described as masochistic.

Within this rule, there are, of course, gradations. In months with fewer than five letters, it is permissible to wear only a fleece cap, earband, neck warmer, jacket, gloves, pants, socks, and slippers. In months ending in "y," fleece undergarments must be considered. Really. In times of doubt, use fleece as you would garlic.

These rules notwithstanding, I have had misgivings of late about the hegemony of polar fleece, which, after all, has brought the decline of all things flannel. Flannel, you will remember, was the fabric created by taking the table-



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cloth off of the picnic table and putting it on your back. Flannel prospered because, like fleece, it was all things to all people: Chic. Yet pedestrian. Colorful. Yet drab. Flannel folded the optimism of Leon Leonwood Bean into the pessimism of those who were fated to be married to Courtney Love so that the rest of us wouldn't have to be. Most of all, you could buy flannel anywhere.

Nowadays, with the exception of the campaign trail, where flannel is worn the way cars made in Flint, Mich., are driven, the only place you will find free-range flannel is at a coffee bar. Partly this is a matter of style. Mostly it is a matter of shopping at Value Village, home of pre-owned flannel and home away from home for the service professionals who work at coffee bars.

And *this*, I hardly have to point out, is the problem polar fleece's predominance poses. To wit: out-year fleece, unlike out-year flannel, is ratty. In fact, after five years of acid rain and basic chill, fleece hunches up like something

that has been left in the back of the refrigerator too long and that will get out and carry off small children and domesticated animals. This, I tell you, is the millennium: a generation covered in purple mange handing us our morning caffeine.

Flannel posed no such hazards to society. Old flannel, in fact, was better than new flannel: a little frayed, warmly faded, soft. It was, in a word, cozier – both to touch and to sight. Say what you will of grunge, flannel permitted you your morning Joe' from a downwardly mobile yet aesthetically pleasing (overlooking the lip rings) twentysomething. I cannot say the same for the future.

Trust me.

I had the good sense to trade winter in Texas for winter in Seattle.

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