





SCRIBNER

1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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*For my mother, Linda Wilson
For my father, Allen Bachelder
and
For my sister, Lisa Bachelder*

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Lord Clifford says, “The smallest worm will turn being trodden upon.”

— *King Henry VI*, Part I

Kurt Vonnegut Jr. says, “This is meant to be optimistic, I think, but I have to tell you that a worm can be stepped on in such a way that it can’t possibly turn after you remove your foot.”

— Address to graduating class
Bennington College

Bear v. Shark: The Preface

Bear v. Shark: The Novel is based on a true story.

Or, rather: It is *based on* a true story.

Imagine a true story. Imagine this true story in a solid, middle-class neighborhood, modest and truthful. Imagine its joists, its beams, the steady, cautious slope of its shingled roof. Imagine its crisp, righteous corners, those near-perfect 90-degree angles, knowing as you do that a perfect 90-degree angle — like a perfect circle or a perfect butt — doesn't really exist in the Real World, but knowing that these angles have aspired to perfection, nonetheless (or else what's a heaven for?). Imagine the clean closets, the sensible floor plan, the utter lack of luxury or flourish. Imagine that the materials are first-rate, chosen and guaranteed by men who care about doing a job right dammit. Imagine that everything checks out, yes the basement is unfinished and dank, but it's the truth, take it or leave it.

Good.

Now, imagine, based atop this monument to forthrightness and plain dealing, imagine a ramshackle unit constructed willy-nilly, catch-as-catch-can, higgledy-piggledy, all pastiched together with hyphens and the thin, colorful threads of ideas, a motley edifice, part bungalow, part high-rise, part rambler, there's stucco and brick and wood and vinyl siding, not unplanned, *not* unplanned, *charming* or *interesting* being the absolute best way to describe this place if you're standing on the bushwhacked front lawn of Truth, not unstable in its own right but perched upon, based on, the cautious, steady slope of the shingled roof of Truth and teetering, teetering, the whole damn situation fixing to collapse into tainted wreckage, in which wreckage lie nearly equal parts Truth and Lie, Irony and That Which Is Not Irony, such that context and purity are forever lost, and the pieces are indistinguishable.

How shall I regard that naily 2 by 4? Is it a metaplank, a superplank, a plank self-referential? A complex and ambiguous plank, and all the more so for its apparent simplicity, its garish honesty regarding its own dimensions? Has anyone even bothered to measure the 2 by 4? In short: Is this a postmodern stick?

Say, are we to look *through* or *at* that cracked window?

Linoleum: Authenticity or the death of authenticity?

Imagine that.

and now this . . .

Part One

*The Broad, Flapping
American Ear*

Parlor Game

So it's kind of like a parlor game, then? In essence?

I guess so.

Well that sounds fun. Bear against Shark.

It's Bear v. Shark. What's a parlor?

Oh . . . You know, a parlor. A *parlour*.

. . . ?

Um, like a salon.

What?

A lounge, essentially.

A *lounge* game?

Well, you know, it's like where you play it.

What's a parlor?

Like a living room. Technically.

Parlor?

Yes.

In a building?

In a home.

How big a TV you put in there?

Whiteout

The Television, the couch, the main character (Mr. Norman) asleep, twitching in the strobe glow.

The Television says don't you go away, we'll be right back.

Mr. Norman is all twitch and mutter. He doesn't go away.

There's American-style shag carpet and there's wood paneling wallpaper, I couldn't tell the difference, you fooled me, where's the seam?

It's morning, rise and shine.

And then from dreams grainy and edge-blurry, cold-sizzling with synaptic crack and static, Mr. Norman opens his eyes into the titillating snow-white throb of a cordless vibrating pillow, the Vibrateam Plus, not available in stores, order today.

This blindingly white pillow, for which operators are standing by, cradles Mr. Norman's face and curves seductively, ergonomically, up to his ears, into which it purrs and coos like a lover.

The pillow-lover says, "Three easy payments."

She says, "For a limited time only, void where prohibited, ergonomically designed."

She says, "Check the cordless pillow aisle at your local grocer."

On Television it's the same thing.

Ergonomically: from the Latin *ergo* (therefore) and the French *nom* (name).

Into the soft white fleece of his virgin lover Mr. Norman says, "Therefore name?"

She (the pillow) doesn't care whether Mr. Norman used Visa or MasterCard, or whether he ordered by toll-free number or via the Internet or even through the painfully and deliciously slow U.S. Postal Service. She (the pillow) just wants Mr. Norman to rest easy after a long day at the office. She understands. She cares. She grazes his earlobes when she speaks.

With her thrumming tongue, her tingling lips, the pillow-lover says, "Therefore name." It makes sense.

Her design? Well, her design combines Old World Comfort with Space Age Materials. She is the official cordless pillow of Bear v. Shark II.

Mr. Norman's neck hurts, but she (the revolutionary pillow of tomorrow) says, "You be still, big boy."

She says, "Stain resistant, lab tested, stylish durability."

Mr. Norman, penis erect and warranty expired, remains facedown on the couch in the big Television room of his suburban home, his eyes squinting into a whiteout of sexy sleep technology, a hot blizzard of affordable comfort and Yankee can-do know-how.

In a manner of speaking: Mr. Norman wakes up.

Ohms and Amperes

A wife (Mrs. Norman) and two boys all asleep upstairs.

We got ourselves a quiet house. This suburban house is completely and blessedly silent.

One thinks of wind-kissed meadows. One thinks of bomb shelters.

The house is completely silent, except only for those trifling noises against which we recognize and understand the very idea of silence, the rustle and pulse that we might say define silence, yes, bring it into existence and lock it into a paired opposition that confers meaning and context.

The silent house: silent, that is, except for the chemical hum of the central air-conditioning, except for the hiss of dehumidifiers, except for the Babelic chatter of Televisions.

Silent but for the synthetic pulse of coaxial cables, converters, underground fiber-optic lines. The crackle and pop of electricity, currency, frequency — the ohms and amperes, watts and volts.

All silent except for the thud of the *Land Swaps & Divorces* against vinyl siding, except for the clicking of the hard drive, the murmuring of Web site authors — Charles Lindbergh deniers, child pornographers, auctioneers, insomniacs, quilters, Captains of Industry, professors of Canadian Literature.

Except for the gunshots, the sirens, the gunshots, the choppers.

Except for bear banter, shark schlock.

Except for the inexorable grind of continental plates miles below the earth's surface.

Miles?

Silent except for the utopian drone of the Vibra-Dream Plus and the sweet, sweet morning songs of electric birds installed in the imitation dogwoods in the backyard of Mr. Norman's suburban cable-ready home.

Fax, scanner, cell phone.

You shoot a bear so many times and it still doesn't die.

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