Love bug

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 24, 2000](#) issue

A bore, they tell us, is someone who, when you ask him how he is, tells you. "Let me tell you about my operation," he says. To that familiar definition, our culture has added another: a bore is anyone who relates the details of an airplane incident. You've overheard these stories during your own travels: "So since Detroit was snowed in and the computers at Cincinnati were a mess, I had no choice but to . . . And then you would never believe what happened next." When you take a peek, you see that the listenee has dozed off, presumably to await the moment when, awakened and refreshed, she can start her story: "So since Anchorage was snowed in and the computers in Atlanta were a mess . . ."

One could add weather-inspired topics as a third category of the boring. Unless you are reporting on or warning about a tornado, hurricane or blizzard, or want to give praise and thanks for another beautiful day, don't talk about the weather to people who have their minds set on higher or lower things.

During the past ten years a new group of boredom-inducers has come upon the scene: reporters on what happened or did not happen while they were laptopping, word-processing or surfing the Net. Most of us are much more interested in what gets transmitted on the Internet than in the mechanics of using it. Having said all this, I'm going to comment on the technical side of the Internet world—in order to bring up a humanistic point. Recently a young man in the Philippines set loose a virus that infected computers worldwide and may end up costing $1 billion in lost sales and virus-removal costs. As you know, the code word atop the infected message was "ILOVEYOU."

I had just received an e-mail from an acquaintance to whom I had sent a book at her request. She e-mailed me her pleasant but routine thanks. I thanked her for thanking, as a means of letting her know that a transaction went through. Five minutes later I received an e-mail with her name on it and the suggestion that I download a message from her: ILOVEYOU. She is not the sort to share intimacies lightly, so I assumed she was thanking me for thanking her for thanking me, thus

letting me know that a transaction went through.

I tried to download it—not out of lovestarvedness or even curiosity, but as a courtesy and to be sure that the transacting was over. Being a klutz about such things, I somehow failed to bring it into my computer. By the time I returned to the inbox there were a half-dozen more ILOVEYOU messages awaiting me. But at the top of the list was a dire note from still another messenger: "There's a virus loose! Don't open ILOVEYOU." I didn't, and hope I'm uninfected.

The May 5 *Chicago Tribune* quoted a marketing manager for Network Associates, maker of antivirus software: "Users have to be aware of things that look too good to be true, like a nice Thursday morning love letter in your inbox."

How sad. We have to keep our anti-virus screening devices updated and alert, because something "that looks too good to be true," like a word of love or grace or friendship or hope to help us start our day, could harm us. Of course, one can still start the day with a prayer, one way of exchanging an ILOVEYOU. Or speak personally to those within range. Or surprise a customer, a boss, an enemy with some word that, all too seldom spoken or written, both looks and is good and true.