

Letters to a Kindred Spirit

The curious collection of written material that follows requires a bit of explanation. The years 2000-2001 were particularly unhappy ones. During the earlier part of that period I lost my job, got my heart broken, left my church, and lost my apartment. I ended up enduring a dank existence in the basement of my parent's home and working a low-paying dead-end job at a drug store. My escape from the despair of that life was music, solitary nighttime walks through the local fields and orchards, and the Internet. I spent long hours frequenting Christian chat rooms and web site forums. Those were the heyday years of dial-up service and Internet Relay Chat.

In August 2001 I met a young lady on a Christian Singles site who quickly became a special friend. It was clear from the beginning that we were kindred spirits; sharing the same tastes in music and literature, and love of nature, and possessing the same Wodehousian sense of humour. We never met in person, but over the next couple of months we exchanged a flurry of emails, letters and phone calls. I was interested in creative writing at the time, and our emails gave me an outlet for some of my more absurdist literary gymnastics, even if a large portion of what I wrote was merely a blatant imitation of P. G. Wodehouse.

Our correspondence ended abruptly at the end of October 2001, and I never heard from her again. I moved on with my life, but I saved most of the emails we exchanged on a couple of floppy disks, and tucked them away in my Treasure Box of Memories. There they remained for the next fifteen years, untouched but never quite forgotten. In the summer of 2016 I took them out, booted up my old computer, and read through them all again for the first time since 2001. It was an enlightening read; I remembered some of the things we had written and talked about, but a good deal of the material was fresh to me, as though I were encountering it for the first time. I laughed again at how silly we were, and cried again when it ended.

The selections that follow are excerpts from the emails I sent to her. For some reason I never saved those from August and the earlier part of September, but what remains is a sufficient glimpse into a side of Raymond Scott Woolson that has rarely been seen. It may never be seen again, unless God shows His mercy and sends me another kindred spirit. He hasn't yet.

These excerpts have been edited and revised, and some names and personal details have been changed in the interest of privacy. Also bear in mind that you are reading only one side of an ongoing conversation: the selections are from my emails only and not all of those have been utilized.

Sept 21, 2001

Oh, the agony I hath suffered, yea verily! Wednesday evening, after laboring over the mother of all emails to you, guaranteed to make you clap your little hands in girlish glee, I clicked "send" and what happened? Nothing. Nada. Nyet. My internet service provider Juno has apparently ended it all in the village pond, leaving me stuck (I shudder to even say it) offline.

Wednesday, Thursday, Friday...by the time I got home from ye olde drug store Friday night I was a wreck. Trembling like an aspen, starting at sudden noises, biting my nails, blinking my red-rimmed eyes 497 times a minute. I timidly approached the computer and, with butterflies doing Swedish exercises in my stomach, nervously clicked "connect". And when that dreaded "Unable to connect" message popped up with almost fiendish glee, I tell you, old girl, I nearly broke down and wept.

But you know me. The eyes behind my spectacles shine with the light of pure intelligence. I'm practically all brain. Smart as a whip, they say. Always cracking. I knew that a couple of big corporate fat-cat ISPs had been pre-installed on my Dell Dimension, and even though I had happily uninstalled them and flung their quivering remains into the trash bin, I also knew that, once ensconced within the bowels of my computer, these corporate fat-cats would not give up their limpet-like hold that easily.

Therefore, I began digging through directories and subdirectories, folders and subfolders, and lo! I uncovered a cowering yet defiant AT&T set-up file. Well, you can readily imagine that to pop open that file and spur it through its paces was for me the work of an instant.

Soon I was plunking down my hard-earned cash for 10 hours of access time a month. Scarcely had the "Connected" whistle blown than I was racing to MC.com to see if the immortal Hthr had left any messages for her faithful Hthrites. My heart leaped up with joy, just as it often does when I behold a rainbow in the sky, to see that, yes indeed, the dahling Hthr had sent best wishes to the humble Sctt who is honoured to call her friend.

With that mission accomplished, I then put my nose to the ground and soon caught the scent of a virtually free service provider with local access numbers. I jumped through a few more hoops, plunked down another purse of gold, and my golly, I was now securely online. O rapture! O joy! Oh Auntie Em, there's NO place like home!

Now I had to check my Juno email. Was it possible to access it through a Web site? Dunno; never tried before. I went to their home page and, woo hoo, there was a "get your mail" link. A quick song and dance later through various security checkpoints and whatnot, and I was up to my Yankee ears in spam, ads, offers, and junk.

But I cared not. For also before my wondering eyes did appear not one, not two, not three, not four...(or maybe it WAS four, I can't remember now, but who cares)...where was I?...oh yeah...emails signed variously and cryptically Geekmo, Nerdlet, and, of course, that world-famous nom-de-plume Hthr.

Thank you a million times and even more for all the stuff you sent. The pictures are beautiful. Just looking at them made me wish even more that I was within monster-hugging distance. (Er, that didn't come out quite right. I meant that I wished I was able to offer you a monster of a hug. In no way was I implying that hugging you would be comparable to hugging a monster.)

Ahem.

Anyway, uh, passing lightly over that and moving on to items of greater pith and moment, I've only had time to scan quickly through the various scribblings, but I saw enough to completely dispel any lingering doubts I may have harboured concerning your skill and talent as a writer.

Rest assured that a frank and forthwith (I don't even know what forthwith means, but hey, I won't tell if you won't) appraisal shall be forthcoming (I DO know what forthcoming means, so let's dispense with the smirking) in the fullness of time. That is to say, I'll let you know what I think when I've read everything.

Being a typical American, more concerned with being lazy and arrogant than with amassing a working knowledge of Eastern European time zones, I've entirely forgotten what would be the best time for me to try for an MSN chat with you. Oh wait, no I haven't. Sheesh. Forget my own name next. Well, anyway, let me know when you're all set up and ready to exchange wisecracks with your buddy from NY.

I promise not to neglect you so grossly now that I have not one, not two, but three internet service providers at my beck and call. I plight my troth that emails shall be sent, many and often. (Hmm, I think "plight my troth"

has more to do with jumping the broom, i.e. entering into a matrimonial contractual obligation, as Jeeves would put it, than with swearing upon my great-Aunt Edna's grave, i.e. giving a promise. Perhaps I should have said, "I make my vow". Well, either way, I gather you get the picture. You're a smart cookie. College education and everything. You can figure it out.)

Sept 22, 2001

"*Summertime*" is in my headphones as I begin hunting & pecking at ye olde keyboard. "Do some people wind up with the one that they adore? Do some people wind up with the one that they abhor?"

My golly, it sounds like you're practically one of the natives already. All this casual talk of zlotychs and whatnots, don't you know. I'm still left bewildered when faced with the occasional Canadian currency, having only lived next door to that noble country for the past 35 years.

Today, Saturday, was a fairly lazy day. I spent most of it reading and writing, then after a fruitless Internet search for meaningful employment opportunities I went for a moonlit walk through the orchards. Harvest is in full swing, and the smell of ripe apples brought back memories of my own years as an official orchard laborer. There were boxes and ladders scattered about, and I remembered all the thousands of nails I hammered repairing apple boxes; and loading the old green pickup truck with step ladders for twenty Mexicans, jouncing down the lane and cheerfully cursing a bit every time the ladders slid off the truck and clattered all over the ground.

I left the orchard job in 1996 but it still feels familiar to me. I could go back tomorrow and easily slip right back into the swing of things. I still remember that the small plastic boxes are called "lugs" and the big wooden boxes are called "totes." The lugs are lugs because you lug them around beneath the trees, picking up drop apples. I don't know why the totes are totes.

I also picked up a smattering of Spanish while working with the Mexicans: all words pertaining to the care and harvest of the domestic apple tree. You should have heard me back then, crisply snapping out orders with a bilingual fluency seldom to be matched: "Hey, *señor*, here's your *escalada*. Climb up that *arbol* and pick those *manzanas*. *Rapido* now! And don't pick any *verde* ones." The Mexicans always broke into happy laughter when I attempted a bit of Spanish. I guess it cheered them to see how proficient I had become.

Back home from my moonlit walk, I watched part of a Chinese film while gnawing on a hunk of Colby cheese and another hunk of pepperoni. And now here I am plopping down in front of the warm glow of modern man's best friend, his faithful computer. I think I'll just send an email or two, check out a couple of message boards, and pay a quick visit to the odd chat room or so. I don't really feel up to my usual 5 hour long internet session tonight. It feels like an evening for music and books and memories of yesteryear. I feel very strongly sometimes that I want to go back ten years and start over again from there. But I suppose I would just muddle through it all in the same confused and semi-aimless way that I did the first time round. So, what the heck, I might as well keep trudging onward from here, expecting the worst and hoping for the best.

Tell me, is Poland as you imagined it? I bet it's not grim and grey at all. Any place with a patch of green grass, a bit of blue sky, and a glimpse of stars at night is, as far as I'm concerned, a beautiful place. The few pictures I found of Czêstochowa look kinda nice at any rate. Tell me all.

Sept 24, 2001

I saw two red-headed woodpeckers today. They were hiding in a European-stamped envelope, but you know old buzzard-eyes me; I soon spotted them and drew them forth to be much admired. Thanks a million for this stuff! Awww gee, shucks, and all that sort of thing. I will protect and cherish your artwork forever...well, maybe not that long, but as long as is humanly possible.

Today was one of those grey soggy days where the rain rain rain comes down down down and...pardon me while I grab my copy of The World Of Pooh to see what happens when the rain rain rain comes down down down...ah, here we are...Chapter IX in which Piglit is entirely surrounded by water...to continue...and Piglit told himself that never in all his life, and he was goodness knows how old—three, was it, or four?—never had he seen so much rain.

After the rain, of course, Pooh and Christopher Robin rescued Piglit and there was a party for Pooh. Owl told Eeyore about it:

“Eeyore,” said Owl, “Christopher Robin is giving a party.”

“Very interesting,” said Eeyore. “I suppose they will be sending me down the odd bits which got trodden upon. Kind and Thoughtful. Not at all, don’t mention it.”

“There is an Invitation for you.”

“Ah!” said Eeyore. “A mistake, no doubt, but still, I shall come. Only don’t blame me if it rains.”

Well, it didn’t rain at all and...but where was I? Oh yeah, today was a soggy grey day. (Whew! that seems like a lot of work to go through just to tell you that it rained today. I’ll give the matter some serious thought before I attempt such an undertaking again. Hard on the old typing fingers and all, don’t you know.)

Well...um...er...hmmm...is that all I have to tell you? What a dull life I lead. Speaking of geckos...not that we were, but you should be getting used by now to the sound of gears grinding and crashing whenever I attempt a change of subject...speaking of geckos, isn’t gecko a neat word? I love oddly named animals like gecko and grebe and emu and halibut.

A weird guy down the road kept a flock of emus and rheas a few years ago. He claimed he was raising them as a cash crop, but I think he was just dotty. He packed up and vanished one day after filing a Police report that several of his birds had been stolen. I, for the life of me, can’t imagine anybody fool enough to try stealing a five foot tall flightless bird that could kick your head half a mile like a football without breaking a sweat, but then we do have some fairly feeble-minded folks living in the area, so who knows.

Hmmm...Just thinking of the various non-indigestible...no that’s not the word I want...um indignant...no no...aha got it now, indigenous is the adjective for which I’m groping...indigenous animals people are keeping round these parts. There’s a small herd of elk a few miles away. Lots of llamas around. There’s even a pack of honest-to-goodness wolves living in a large secluded enclosure about 10 miles from here. And I just read in the paper where a nutcase about 10 miles the other way has a house full of apes and monkeys. I had a newt once. Just thought I’d mention it. Oh yeah, and I caught a baby fox one time. He was the cutest little furball, but I wisely decided to let him go.

How did I get onto the subject of unusual pets? Dunno. Anyway, to sum up, having been a Huckleberry Finn type of youngster, I had my fair share of turtles, tadpoles, praying-mantises (I fed them live crickets), minnows, frogs, field mice, and other odd assortments of wildlife while I was growing up in the rural wilds of the Niagara Frontier. I also had tropical fish by the dozen (cheaper that way, since my skill at being a total failure in keeping tropical fish alive for more than a month or two could have otherwise resulted in a substantial expenditure), two beautiful irreplaceable cats (Tommy and Coon), a hamster (Arthur Stubbserenzi: “Stubby” for short), two

gerbils (Gerbil and Gerbil), a mutt dog (Singer) and a mike dog (Mike). The Mike dog was really a beagle but *everybody* called him “the Mike dog.”

I also owned at least five bicycles over the course of a career which saw more than its usual share of hellacious crashes. I once popped a wheelie out on the road, only to have the front tire fall right off, leaving me with no choice but to cushion my impact upon the asphalt with my chin. And then there was the time I thought I’d ride my bike across a patch of ice on the driveway and lock up the brakes to skid sideways. Upon doing so the bike instantly slid out from under me and I cracked the ice with the back of my head. I even raced BMX bikes as a lad and was involved in a few mass accidents that should have killed us all. I’m not a competitive person, so I wasn’t much of a BMXer, usually coming in dead last or close to it. During the three years or so that I raced I won two trophies: 7th and 4th place. I don’t quite remember, but I wouldn’t be surprised if there were only seven and four riders competing in each race.

But, by golly, it was fun. I loved bicycles, and practically lived on them throughout summer vacation. I still love to ride, and it’s a source of great frustration to me that I don’t have a bike and can’t afford one either. My father has two expensive bikes, but they’re off-limits. He’s particular about people touching his toys; perfectly understandable of course. I throw a major fit anytime anybody other than myself even looks at one of my guitars.

I guess I’m all typed out for today. I don’t want to tell you my whole life story in one sitting anyways. I was impressed that you were able to condense your story into one document. I think I could easily spend 15 chapters just describing the terrors of my first week in Kindergarten. Maybe that’s why I’ve never attempted to write about myself at any great length; it’s just too daunting a prospect. But I suppose if you were to read all my song lyrics and stories and essays, you’d end up with a pretty accurate picture of who and what I am. A pretty bizarre specimen, no doubt.

Sept 28, 2001

Oh, alright alright, I’ll admit it. I’m secretly envious of your adventures and misadventures. Anytime *I* get lost or muddled or confused or whatever, I’m usually all alone in a semi-hostile environment. Remind me some day to tell you about the time I locked myself out of my car 40 miles from home in the middle of a Middle-class White American neighbourhood while dressed from top-knot to shoe-sole in resplendent hippie/punk/freak fashion.

Getting lost and stuff is much more fun when you’re with a friend or two. Remind me some day to tell you about the time this chap Scott and I (yes, two, two, two Scotts in one. I’ve heard all the Certs and Doublemint Twin jokes, thank you.) got rather mixed up trying to find another guy “just a Bill” in the middle of a huge Christian Music Festival campground, and spent the better portion of a cold night trudging throughout the grounds and discussing the relative merits of giving “just a Bill” a good biff upside the head if we ever found him.

I was just about to ask you how your training/orientation thingy went today, but I feel a strange sensation even as I think about it that you are writing to me at this very moment telling me all and sparing no details however sordid. Hmm, it’s about 11:30 your time, so it’s quite possible you’re slouching (with perfect Gen-X posture) over your little notebook pc even as I’m slouching before my behemoth Dell Dimension. It’ll be fun when we have our little home in the country; with His N Hers computers, sending witty emails across the room to each other.

(Pause while I log on quickly to see if by any chance you might be on MSN.....nope, probably curled up beneath the coverlets with your favorite teddy by now. Hey, hey, you're the one who admitted having a teddy in the first place, so my teasing is perfectly justified and should be expected.)

That pause lasted much longer than I had planned. So, three hours later, here we go again.

During that pause I thought I'd make a quick run over to Scum Town to...oh, let me explain that. I live, as you know, in Appleton, NY: Fun City USA. Appleton is a wide spot in the road that has a Post Office and...um...well...did I mention the Post Office? Anyway, we're right between two other slightly larger but still rinky-dink country towns. The one to the West is Snob Town, and the other, to the East, is Scum Town. I'd like to take sole credit for those descriptive titles, but I'm pretty sure my brother and sisters all had a creative hand in it. Anyway, all clear now?

Okay, to continue my *fascinating* narrative: I thought I'd make a quick run into Scum Town to load up on Mountain Dew, but as I was leaving the house I heard the train coming. I told you about the coal train that goes by across the road, didn't I? I think I did. Well, I thought to myself: "Self, you haven't watched the train go by in a while." So I made a mad dash down the road and across a small soybean field to the tracks, just in time.

I stood right next to the tracks while the monster cars thundered by, blowing bits of gravel in my face and making my heart leap every time a "rattler" went by. The cars are actually fairly quiet, just making a constant drone with a wish wish wish wish sound as the wheels go by. But there are a lot of rattlers. These are cars that rattle ("Duh," she mutters, "I could have guessed that much myself if you gave me enough time"), and they go wish wish rattle rattle RATTLE RATTLE rattle rattle wish wish. The rattlers are extremely loud, and it's exciting when they clatter past about five feet away from me at 60 miles an hour.

So, I watched the train, then I walked back home and drove into Scum Town for the Dew and a slice of pizza. The rain has stopped, and the weather is getting cooler, so I wore my black leather jacket. Like any conscientious small-town hoodlum I feel nearly nude without my black leather jacket, and I've been pining for it all this past summer. My current jacket is a fairly respectable looking one, not like a biker jacket with all the chrome studs and everything. I *have* a biker jacket that's liberally encrusted (if encrusted is the word I want), or festooned (which sounds a bit more civilised), with all sorts of studs and chains and pins and bits and pieces of leather and chrome and flattened insects (from riding through clouds of bugs on warm summer nights. I really was a sort of pseudo biker back in the days of my wild youth). But I would feel downright silly wearing the thing now at my advanced age, so it's hanging in the closet as a memento or souvenir.

Where was I? Oh yeah, Dew and pizza and jacket. Anyway, home again, home again jiggy jig, and I settled in front of the tv for a bit of Mad Max. You know those movies from the early 80's? Mad Max, The Road Warrior, Beyond Thunderdome? I like those, and I'll sit and watch all three of them sometimes. Tonight I only watched part of the original Mad Max, fast-forwarding through the boring stuff and just focusing on the car chases and smash up scenes.

Then, finally, I came back to the computer and got your latest emails. The 'Polish Blonde' one was a classic. Two thumbs up! And your second one? Well, after reading that, I, more than ever since we met, wanted to leap over tall buildings and swim oceans and offer you one of those extra-special 20-minute hugs. But I think you'll be just fine, whatever happens. Be strong, be British, but don't hesitate to run to our Father's arms any time you want. He's always there.

Sept 30, 2001

A teacher friend visiting at Christmas, eh? *Sigh*. I've lost her already. Cut off at the pass. Hornswoggled (whatever that means). Ah, I should have seen it coming. Fellow teacher and all...colleagues...shop talk over tea and bagels...sharing classroom horror stories...bound to form a bond. What chance has a failed musician freeloading off his parents have in comparison with that? Pardon me while I dig out my Neil Diamond's Greatest Hits and listen to "Solitary Man" again.

Ok, back to the real world. Today (Sunday) was a beautiful clear Fall day. I spent most of the afternoon wandering the woods and fields, ending up in the orchards, where I helped myself to a Mutsu. What's a Mutsu? It's a big green/yellow apple, known elsewhere as a Crispin. Why the local farmer calls it a Mutsu is a mystery to me. He even once had a bumper sticker on his truck that read: "What's a Mutsu?", so perhaps it was a mystery to him as well. Maybe he was hoping some kind soul would enlighten him before too much embarrassment set in.

Tonight I went out again for a long walk beneath the full moon. It was an "elvish" night, all silver-lit and mysterious, with a low mist drifting across the fields. I went out back behind the farms to a distant hayfield, where I sat on a hay bale, listening to the occasional cry of a night bird, watching the stars, and thinking of God's Creation and what my place in it may be.

I ended up again in a local orchard, a different one this time, and helped myself to a Red Delicious. Thank the Lord for simple country pleasures: a crisp apple in a quiet orchard beneath a bright moon. As I walked the train tracks back home I noticed my shadow: tall thin figure slouching along, hands in pockets, shirttails hanging, floppy hat. It reminded me of someone out of *Grapes Of Wrath*...the ghost of Tom Joad.

You know what I suddenly realised tonight? In all the years I've been walking the fields and farms of Appleton late at night, I've never encountered another person. Everybody around here retreats into the house and flops down in front of the tv as soon as the sun sets. By midnight every house along West Somerset Road is dark and silent. I have the entire night world to myself. Myself and the owls, the raccoons, the coyotes, and the occasional cow casting a placid eye at me from a nearby pasture. I like it out here.

I remember back when I was in high school, some unknown person went about Appleton at night scrawling "The Snow Dog was here" on doorways, road signs, and any flat white space on various houses and out-buildings. One night this mysterious unknown painted an evil grinning cartoon face and the slogan "The Snow Dog Strikes Again!!" on the wall of the local General Store & Meat Locker with red spray paint. Inquiries were made, but no suspect was apprehended. The night time marauder vanished from the district and the reign of terror was over.

The fact that my favorite Rush song at the time was "By-Tor & The Snow Dog", that I liked to draw pictures of evil grinning cartoon faces, and that I was using red spray paint at the time to touch up my old car, was pure coincidence. I was as baffled as everybody else as to the possible identity of the midnight vandal. To this day the mystery has never been solved.

I also have no idea who stole the Stop sign at the corner of Hess Rd and West Somerset Rd, or who broke into the unoccupied and completely empty house across the road from the Cold Storage, or, well, any number of minor acts of mischief that may have occurred in and around Appleton in the year 1982.

I expect it will be Monday night by the time you read this, so I do very much hope that your first day went smoothly and well. You will be in my thoughts and prayers throughout the day, O Super Teacher.

I will be spending the morning at the car dealer, wondering if the engine problems will be covered by warranty or if I'm going to be, once again, reduced to abject poverty. Dash and blast the infernal combustion engine to blazes and beyond!! Nothing in my life has cost me more money or given me so much frustration in return as the ever-accursed automobile. Oh, how I yearn for the day when I can live within walking or biking distance of all my earthly needs. Some day, Hthr, some day.

Oct 1, 2001

Hang on a second while I hurl curses to the wind in an uncouth tongue...

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There...I feel so much better now. Yea verily, my fears were confirmed. Engine trouble not covered by warranty...Scott now in poorhouse again. And I was just starting to feel optimistic, too. I had, much to my own surprise, managed to accumulate a thousand dollars in my bank account. But by the end of this week...after paying the service people, the insurance people, the finance people, and the credit card people, I will have a grand total of \$200. Ye gods, it's enough to make me turn my face to the wall and weep like a bottle-less baby.

Of course you know this means war. If I can't find a better paying job to replace the drug store, then I can at least get another job in addition to the drug store. Maybe a rug store, or a bug store, or possibly a jug store. I'll become a workaholic. I'll give up my weekly trip to Arby's Roast Beef, I'll sell my guitars, I'll even...*gasp*...yes, I'll even give up drinking Mountain Dew!

Sacrifices will be made, belts will be tightened, and bullets will be bit. I make my vow, Hthr dahling, this is the last straw. I've been pushed too far. I will now assert my personality, and go forth into battle with an iron will and a steadfast resolve. I will save money, I will get out of my parent's basement, and I will visit my friend in Poland and win her heart with my irresistible charm, effervescent wit, and impeccable gentlemanly manners.

(Pause of about two hours while I fix grilled cheese for supper.)

Just got your Monday emails. Here I was, thinking you were gonna be overwhelmed with huge mobs of undisciplined kids hollering and shooting spit wads at each other, and you get one silent little boy in your first class? You go, Super Teacher! I suppose the adult classes are easier because the adults WANT to be there, and the kids probably HAVE to be there? Would that be the case?

You know, I remember when I was a Sunday School teacher for a year...the best days were when I had a handful of kids who really enjoyed discussing spiritual things. I could happily be a teacher if I knew I was teaching folks who were excited about learning. On a related note, I've been asked many times if I give guitar lessons, but I always say no because I can't read a note of music. I suppose, if I put my mind to it, I could quickly learn the basics. And if I had students who really loved music and wanted to learn the guitar, I could enjoy teaching them. Hmmm...something worth thinking about, at any rate.

No need to explain (or apologise) that your emails will be fewer and farther (sorry, I mean "further". Gotta remember my Anglo-Saxon.) between. I expected as much once you started classes. Fear not; I won't fade away without my daily Hthr fix...I'll just have more to look forward to on Wednesdays and weekends. But I, for my part, will continue, as much as possible, to send you daily installments of "The Continuing Saga Of Scott: Life In The Boondocks."

Oct 2, 2001

Tonight, after getting my car back, I decided to treat myself to a final night out and buy a few CDs, one last fling before I turn into the ant...or is it the grasshopper? Whichever one stored up his bread crumbs for winter, so he would be sure to have a nice big pile of frozen moldy bread crumbs to look at while his tummy growled in the dead of February. Crazy ant...or grasshopper. Whichever one it was.

It was a modest little spree. All in all I spent only 24 bucks, including the two roast beef sandwiches and large Dew I got on the way home from Media Play, that den of iniquity. I got \$15 taken off the price of the CDs by redeeming a few of my Frequent Buyer coupon thingies. I think I've accumulated about ten billion bonus points in the past few months. Remind me to tell you someday about my habit, some years ago, mid '80s through early '90s in fact, of shuffling off to Buffalo nearly every weekend to spend nearly every paycheck at the Home of the Hits record store. Ah, the joy of driving home on a Saturday afternoon with a cheeseburger and a handful of gleaming new vinyl records and CDs! Good times.

And th-th-that's all folks for tonight. Oh wait, no it isn't. I would like to take a moment to gently remind you, young Hthr, just why you are in Poland in the first place. Are you not there to be a teacher and a student? Is this not sooth? (I dunno what that means, but I read it in a book somewhere and was greatly impressed, and have always awaited an opportunity to use it, so there it is.)

This being the case, may I ask why you so gleefully send out reports of canceled classes, missing students, days off, and whatnot? After only two days on the job, my dear lass, you seem to be approaching your grand adventure with altogether the wrong attitude.

I ask you, is this the right spirit? Is this the big, broad, flexible outlook? Is this the will that wins to wealth? Come now, my young friend, let us attend to our duties with the proper mindset, shall we? Let us, in the words of some film character whose name escapes me at the moment, be happy in our work.

(Secretly Scott applauds Hthr's I-don't-wanna-work-I-just-wanna-bang-on-de-drum-all-day attitude. He wishes he were a man of means so he could build her a little house in the country and invite her to play to her heart's content and let him worry about providing the daily bread and all that sorta stuff.)

Oct 5, 2001

Hey, you never answered my curiosity question from a few weeks ago. Or maybe I never sent it. Maybe it was one of those scribblings that I accidentally deleted and never re-wrote. Anyway, whatever, I was wondering about your middle name. I don't know why I'm even asking; I'm sure you'll give me some wise-guy, or rather wise-girl, answer that has nothing whatsoever to do with reality on this planet or any other, and I'll never know. But I was just curious anyways. Not a matter of life and death.

Moving on to the latest news flash, I may have landed myself a second job already. I haven't heard back from them yet, but I may be going back to the fruit drying company I worked at prior to the drug store. If they hire me back I'll continue at the drug store part time in the mornings, and work full time at the drying place on afternoons or midnights.

Did I ever tell you about the fruit drying job? I was a kiln operator. There are 6 room-size kilns on the second floor. Below the steel mesh floor are huge propane blowers that send 180 degree hot air blowing up through the

steel. The kiln floor is first covered with a two-foot layer of peeled and sliced apples (or diced apples, or strawberries, cranberries, cherries, or apricots), then the kiln is fired up, and timers and temperatures are set.

The kiln operator goes into the room at timed intervals with a big scoop shovel and flips the fruit over and re-arranges it on the floor so it gets dried evenly. The apples are still wet and heavy for the first flip, so that takes about half an hour of back-breaking shoveling in the 120 degree heat (we get to turn the temp down a bit when we do a flip, and it DOES make a big difference dropping it from 180 to 120). The second and third flips go much more quickly since the apples are dry and light by then.

I enjoyed the job, at least when we were doing sliced apples. The other fruit was a slightly different procedure and not as easy to do. I got used to the heat, and was soon strong enough to really heave those apples around just the way I wanted them. I hesitated to quit that job, but there were personal problems involved, as well as increasing conflicts between the indifferent managers and the over-worked kiln operators. But that was more than a year ago: the company has new management now, and I've heard that it's a much nicer atmosphere to work in. No more of the arguments and high-tension moments that eventually drove me out last time.

Anyway, I might be going back to work there again. I'll probably know within a few days. It would be a much-needed lucky break if it happens. I'll make a lot more money there than at the drug store. Visions dance before my eyes: I am paying off my debts, I am getting my own apartment again, I am going to visit my Super Teacher in Europe.

It raineth. Yea, it raineth for two days now, cold and dark, wet and wet. It reminds me of a story, one of my favorite short stories. "All Summer In A Day" by Ray Bradbury. Ever read it? What a haunting tale.

My Junior High English teacher read this story to us in class, and I've never forgotten it and how it made me feel. Mrs McGreevy was a teacher in a million. She loved kids and she loved teaching them. She was a leftover bohemian hippie-girl stuck in a disco world. She wore long earth-tone dresses and had very long hair which swung in a thick braid behind her back. I was madly in love with her.

I was a chronic doodler during my school years. Every sheet of paper, notebook cover, book cover, whatever, was soon covered in cartoons and scribbles. I couldn't turn in a test or homework paper without adorning it with some great work of adolescent art. All my teachers gave me heck about this. All but one. Mrs McGreevy was amused, and she sometimes wrote little comments beside the doodles in the margins of my papers when she handed them back.

She told corny jokes in even cornier accents. She pulled her tennis racket out of the closet and pretended it was a ukulele, strumming away while she sang goofy songs. She caused a lot of kids, including yours truly, to cry in her class. Not because she was mean or harsh, but because she was so kind and gentle, and she taught us to think and to feel and to be deeply moved by beauty and sorrow.

She didn't stay very long. Mrs McGreevy was too left-of-center, too unique, too alive for our little one-dog town. She was gone by the end of the next year. When I was in Senior High, some kids somehow got to talking about her. They remembered her as this really weird person, and joked that she had probably moved to the planet Mars. Our teacher overheard them and got quite angry. Maybe he loved her, too. He said that she was living and teaching in New Jersey.

Jump ahead a couple of decades. I'm sitting at my computer, searching the Internet for a short story about a world where the sun only came out once every seven years. I couldn't remember the title or the author, but I remembered my beloved English teacher reading that story to me. Eventually I found the story. And then, on a

whim, I began looking for that teacher who had touched me so deeply so long ago. And there, buried in the depths of some obscure academic page in a back corner of some obscure web site about New Jersey public schools I saw a name....McGreevy. And I got a lump in my throat when I saw it.

Of course, I have no idea if it was her. Maybe she had moved again. But it doesn't matter. I believe that somewhere out there Mrs McGreevy is still touching lives and hearts, still singing to kids and moving them to tears, still awakening them to the beauty and sorrow of love and life. Some of those kids are still awake. I'm one of them.

Oct 6, 2001

The rain turned into a wild windstorm overnight, but when I finally hauled my lazy carcass out of bed it was a glorious sunny day. So I guess my parents-gone-a-camping will be okay after all.

I woke up thinking of Halloween. Oh, I know this isn't the proper contemporary evangelical Christian attitude, but I like Halloween. I like the spookiness and pagan-ness of it...bonfires and goblins...scarecrows and jack-o-lanterns.

I remember trick-or-treating back in the days of my wild boyhood. Shuffling through piles of dead leaves, trying to see through my mask, nervously ringing doorbells. My mother always took us to the old neighbourhood she grew up in, so I had to endure a lot of, "Is this Nancy's boy? Is this little Scottie? My, my, aren't you getting tall! What grade are you in now?"

I went all out with my costume one year, and built myself a robot outfit. It was a big cardboard box that I covered with tin foil and drew crayon renderings of tape reels and dials and buttons on. Then my father rigged up a battery-powered set of lights on the costume, and I went stumbling about in the darkness blinking and glowing. I still have a photo of myself in the robot suit.

My favorite Halloween photograph is one of my sisters and I carving pumpkins (properly pronounced 'punkins' around here of course) and drawing Halloween signs. We're standing at the kitchen table, wearing our masks and holding up our signs. I had on an astronaut mask and my sign said, "Hapy Holween". My older sister was a princess whose sign said, "Happy Holween". My younger sister was uncharacteristically wearing a creepy spider mask, but her sign was the best one. It merely proclaimed, "Hapy Holwee." With that kind of positive spirit, what does correct spelling matter?

You notice how white American married couples call each other "honey" and black American married couples call each other "baby"? But British married couples call each other "old thing". I think those Brits have the right idea. No risk of disillusionment with a pet name like that.

Did you get to bed at a decent hour? You probably nodded off while sending emails and racked up ten million zlotychs of telephone time. I *do* humbly apologise if I was one of the reasons that you stayed up all night Friday. You should have told me to buzz off.

You would have been proud of me today. The Kinko's where I got my photocopies is just a few blocks away from Media Play, that den of temptation for us music/movie/book addicts. And indeed I was tempted, oh sorely tempted. I confess to you that I even started to make a left turn as I pulled out of the copy center lot. Luckily, it was a right-turn-only, so I guess the angel of the Lord was standing there with a flaming sword, steering me away from the primrose path to perdition and leading me back to the straight and narrow.

That reminds me of the time I pulled out of Barnes & Noble the wrong way one dark and rainy night. Thinking of other things, I absent-mindedly turned left, and didn't remember that it's a divided highway until I suddenly saw myself confronted with a solid wall of cars, all barreling straight toward me. My heart leaped right out of my mouth and out the window, my eyes popped cartoon-like from their parent sockets, and I made the fastest U-turn in the entire history of the automobile. I found myself heading the opposite direction, a sea of cars surging round me, my hair standing on end and a shell-shocked look on my ashen face. It was exhilarating to say the least. For a week afterwards I slept standing up with my eyes wide open.

Ok, I don't remember now what old 18th or 19th century English author you like...was it Emily Brontë? I'm too lazy to go searching through all the files in my Hthr folder to find out. Anyway, I just thought I'd mention that I started reading Jane Austin's "Pride & Prejudice" today, in an effort to improve my soul or something. I just barely started it, but it seems witty enough in a stiff, dry, long-winded way.

You'll notice I said author and not authoress. I think that male/female distinction is a bunch of nonsense. If a person is an actor, then that person should be called an actor, not an actress, as if they aren't quite good enough for the proper title. You, Hthr dahling, are a teacher, not a mere teachess or minor-league teacherette. Right? Right. And so I think it should be with all things.

Oct 7, 2001

Well now then there, how's my favorite nerdlet? (The fact that you are the only person I know who isn't horribly offended by being addressed as "nerdlet" should have no bearing upon the fact that you are still my favorite nerdlet. And anyway, the name is of your coinage in the first place; I would never think up something so silly.)

I hear the train whistle blowing down at the Hess Road crossing, but it's still daylight, so I'm not gonna make a spectacle of myself for the neighbours by running down beyond the pasture and across the soybean field to watch it go by. I'll just stand at my living room window and watch like any other sane man.

Oy, I finished cleaning the house from top to bottom, but it's rather cold outside, so I'll let the car go. I kinda like that lived-in look anyway, although in my case the car has nearly achieved that lived-in-for-20-years-and-eventually-died-and-decayed-in-the-wilderness look.

Say, speaking of telephones, not that we were, but we are now, would you mind terribly if I had your number? Maybe we could plan a short (extremely short, alas) call every now and then. Sort of a friendly-voice-from-o'er-the-seas kind of thing.

Also, while we're on the here-to-there subject, would you also mind terribly if I sent you a CD or two every now and then? I'm not sure what your preferences would be, but I would gladly (sincerely gladly, because I like doing this sort of thing) put together CDs of favorite songs and/or favorite artists from my own collection.

Yes, yes, I know I'm supposed to be on a saving-money-not-spending-money kick, but this wouldn't be very expensive (I've sent packages of CDs to Russia before and lived to tell the tale), and it would tickle me pink to be able to brighten your days with an occasional present from the decadent land of plenty.

Hmmm...I'm sure I had more to tell you about, but it's slipped my mind. Forget my own name next. I'll send this along now in the hopes that you'll still be up and about when it arrives. I'll probably send another one later.

PS: Yes, it is true: I am a few watts short of a bulb. For a brief second there I wondered if you would have classes on Monday, since it's Columbus Day. Then I realised the folly of my thoughts. Probably your students have no idea who old Cristo Columbo even was.

Oct 7, 2001

Told you I'd send another one later. After a nutritious and refreshing dinner of Swanson's Salisbury steak, with whipped imitation potatoes, apple crisp dried to a crisp, and green things that may possibly have been some type of vegetable matter in a previous life, washed down with a foaming tankard of tugging ale, or rather a cold can of Dew, I was ready for a cozy evening before the warm glow of the fire.

Well, as there's no fireplace, I had to make do with the cold glare of the tv. I wanted to watch something funny, a good comedy. But alas, the networks were too busy analyzing and dissecting every minuscule scrap of information about the military strikes in the Middle East to be of much help, and all PBS had to offer was one of those snooty English mini-series. I tuned in just long enough to hear some insufferable voice proclaim, "I am, of course, a good Christian woman, and I do not approve of frivolity." Click.

Ok, let's see what the video library has to offer. Drat. You know, between my parental units and myself, there are at least a hundred movies to choose from, but are there any decent comedies? No. Not a thing, except "What About Bob?".

As long as I'm on the general subject, I looked up "The Gods Must Be Crazy", and you know that film is long out of print. The average bid on eBay for a decent tape copy is about \$30, so, alack, I won't be seeing it any time soon. Too bad. I've heard good things about it, besides what you've told me.

Where was I? Oh yes. Well, I slid corny "What About Bob" into the vcr, and settled down with my sewing.

Huh? What's that you say? Did you hear me correctly? Of course you heard me correctly, old thing. I settled down before the tv with my sewing. You see, most of my shirts are of the button-up variety, and occasionally, in the course of an eventful life, the odd button parts moorings from its parent garment. It must be re-attached, don't you know, and as there is no suitable helpmeet around to cheerfully sew my buttons back on for me, the task must be accomplished by the bachelor of the house.

It only took me an hour. And the first half hour was spent in finding a needle. Now, hear my tale and tell me if I am not justified in occasionally expressing myself with a generous warmth in such trying times as these. My mother is a sewing freak, and no doubt has been since early childhood, and in her sewing & ironing room there is a closet packed full of shelves, each shelf fairly groaning beneath the weight of sewing supplies. But are there any sewing needles? Not a one. Perhaps in these enlightened times the humble needle has been deemed archaic and obsolete, replaced by a computer application or maybe by the mere power of intellectual thought itself. Who can say? I don't know, but I do know this: in that sewing closet there resided not a single solitary sewing needle.

Oh, the agonies I suffered in my increasingly desperate search for a needle. I wandered from room to room, filling the air with thunderous oaths. "A needle!" I cried, "My kingdom for a needle!" Such was my agitation that I was on the verge of attempting the button-re-attaching project with a safety pin, when a sudden thought struck me. In the aforementioned sewing room there is an old dresser, which usually contains baby clothes and blankets and whatnots that are made useful in my mother's daycare business. It was possible, I thought feverishly, that, with perfect though incomprehensible mother's logic, a store of needles may be found within

the recesses of that dresser.

And so it proved. I opened a small top drawer, and there before my bulging eyes was a gleaming treasure trove of needles, a veritable ocean of silver needles stretching out to the far horizon. The Queen of Sheba, were she to drop by for a look, would have declared: “The half was not told unto me.”

Well, it was the work of a moment for me to snatch up a promising-looking specimen, grab a length of black thread, and finally settle into my chair for a half hour of poking and twisting and jabbing until finally I had the needle threaded. Five minutes later the button was nestled securely against the home shirt, and I was wiping from my forehead the honest sweat of a hard-laboring man.

Oct 8, 2001

Shiver me timbers, Hthr, it’s cold outside. My hands don’t work very well when they’re cold, so I’ll wait until I warm up a tad.

Okay, that’s better. It’s not really all that cold out, but it dropped so quickly from the 50s to 30s that it seems downright wintry. It’s not *brrr* cold, but just plain cold. There’s no cold colder than *brrr* cold, but of course I don’t need to inform an Alaskan igloo girl about that, do I?

Oh, by the way, my cup runneth over. Two long & entertaining emails by the immortal Hthr! And not just quickly scribbled “hi—no time to talk—bye” emails, but classic Geekmo material, the kind that gets better with each new reading.

The reason for my shivering a bit and rubbing my ears is because I made it down to the train tracks in plenty of time tonight. I had to stand there waiting and waiting for the train to make up its mind whether it was going to come by or not. I could hear it clanking cars together and generally fooling about a mile away for the longest time. When it did finally roar and rattle by, it made me leap convulsively like a gaffed salmon when the engineer chose to blow the whistle right on top of me. Scared me out of a year’s growth.

Yup, I started making up a couple of CDs for you. Not exactly sure yet what I’ll pick out, but I’ll try to stick to rather obscure groups, so you can have the dubious pleasure of hearing a bunch of weird stuff by a bunch of weird groups you never knew existed. Sort of a “Scott’s Selected Soul-Twin Softies” or something along those lines.

Hmmm, I was sort of expecting a phone call from the fruit dryers today, but maybe the office snits were off for Columbus Day. I’m sure the factory drones were slaving away as usual. I shouldn’t count it a sure thing that I’ve got the job, anyways. I have a nasty habit of assuming things...setting myself up for a lot of disappointment and heartache. The good Lord knows I’ve done it enough in the past, and suffered greatly because of it. I am working on curbing this tendency, but I still have the odd relapse or two. (Usually when dealing with what Bertie refers to as the “delicately nurtured.” ‘Nuff said ‘bout that.)

Today, for the first time since February, I felt the loneliness that comes from the absence of a church home and family. I miss them, and I dearly, *dearly* wish all that nonsense that resulted in my leaving the church had never happened. But I can’t go back now. Well, I guess there’s nothing to be gained in pining for the impossible past. Maybe it’s finally time to put the whole sad affair behind me and start hunting for a new church.

Oh golly!!! I just discovered how to customise my keyboard!! Look, I can type ð and æ and even 🎵 without

having to jump through half a dozen hoops! Cool! It only took me a year and a half to figure it out. Thanks Microsoft for giving me a dancing paperclip instead of a cohesive and logical help application. I remember when I was writing my little book thingie on my sister's computer, way back in 1995, how much fun it was to set up my own customised keyboard layout in WordPerfect. And I had a nice thick instruction manual to flip through anytime I had a question. None of this "Online Help" rubbish. That Bill Gates is such a greedy sneaky weenie.

Well, the hours are ticking by and I still have a few duties to attend to. And my Jane Austen is beckoning. I'll save my comments until after I finish wading through it, but, yes, at the moment it's rather slow going. Elizabeth and Darcy are still pretending to dislike each other immensely, but I admit I already have a semi-crush on the spirited Lizzie and I hope Darcy gets flattened by a runaway hack.

Yrs, as ever,... ☺

Oct 9, 2001

A crisp Red Delicious was enjoyed in your honour on my evening walk down the tracks and through the orchards. I received your order for a genuine train-flattened penny and am more than willing to do the deed, but alas, no train tonight, so Abraham Lincoln can rest easy for now.

So far my favorite sentence in "Pride & Prejudice" is: 'Even Lydia was too much fatigued to utter more than the occasional exclamation of, "Lord, how tired I am!" accompanied by a violent yawn.'

And I *do* so agree with you about those *most* tiresome *italics* that pop up so *very* often throughout old literature. But I believe *my* complaint is *chiefly* with the fact that they *often* seem to emphasize the *wrong* words, making for frustrating and awkward reading.

For example, suppose some chap says, "Oh, but Jane, I wish you wouldn't make such a fuss over this!" You would think, being sensible and all, that the emphasized word would be *fuss* (or possibly *wish*, if the speaker were British). Say it aloud. There, you agree? Sounds natural, normal? But these old bounders of authors would *insist* (or *would* insist, if British) on italicizing *wouldn't*, thereby forcing the poor modern reading public to say the bit of dialogue over and over, trying in vain to make it sound like natural speech.

Say, what kind of vocalists do you prefer? I mean, male or female? I ask because I don't wish to repeat a *faux pas* of several years ago when I made a compilation tape for a female pen friend, only to receive an indignant response which stated, more or less, "Why didn't you send me any bands with *guy* singers? Why on earth would I want to listen to a bunch of stupid girls?"

You see, I have a preference (perfectly natural, too, I should think) for female vocalists; therefore my CD collection, as a matter of course (what exactly is the purpose of a phrase like "as a matter of course"? It doesn't seem to perform any really useful function other than to expose the author as a priceless snoot of the first water), displays this particular propensity (now I bet you didn't think I even knew such a priceless snoot-esque word like propensity, did you?). And I would hate to send you a CD filled to the brim with girlie girls warbling away in sopranos voices and skirts and hosiery and whatnot, if such chirping chickadees caused you to recoil in horror and disgust.

My golly, the time has run away from me. It's getting rather late and I'm beginning to yawn violently. I had intended to ramble on for a while and give you an eyeful to peruse on your easy Wednesday, but alas, I made do

with about 3 hours of sleep last night, and I missed my bit of a lie down this evening after work.

My humble apologies, rare young Hthr, but I must bid thee farewell for the nonce. Yet be of good cheer, for I shall return to you in the same manner in which I was taken away from you.

Oct 10, 2001

You know how a dog, when it knows it's done something that displeases Master, kind of cringes around, tail between it's legs, eyes mournfully averted sideways, the very picture of abject pathetic-ness?

That's what I'm looking like right now. You see, Hthr, I...um...I...er...well, I bought a CD today. **sob** I'm sorry!

sniff Ok, I've regained my composure, **sniff** sort of. Here is the whole shameful story. I went to town to deposit my paycheck. I intended to turn left and head back home, but something, probably the devil, made me turn right. A voice, probably the devil's, whispered insidiously to me, "You know, you better not wait too long to go buy that CD sitting in the used bin at Media Play. It's an out-of-print album from a defunct record label, a collector's item, and somebody else is gonna snaffle it unless you act swiftly."

So, my car, probably steered by the devil, made it's way to that opium den of a music store. I piously told myself I was only there to grab the CD, that's all, nothing else. But, of course, it was gone already. Disappointed, but philosophical about it, I began heading for the store exit. But then a voice, probably the devil's, whispered to me, "C'mon, you drove all the way out here. You can't leave empty-handed. Just look at all these shiny new CDs smiling up at you. They love you. They want to go home with you and make your life bright and happy."

Well, to make a long sad story mercifully short, I ended up with a Portishead album. And, having already degraded myself to this level, I proceeded to completely lose my head and stopped off afterward for a Roast Beef and large Mountain Dew.

Can you ever forgive me? I don't know if this will make any difference, but the fast food turned to ashes in my mouth when I belatedly came to my senses and thought of my little friend in Eastern Europe practically starving herself and going without new music for months on end. (I'll discretely decline to mention that I really like the Portishead album.)

Oct 13, 2001

Okay, let's get all the mushy stuff out of the way first. It was *awfully* (note annoying Victorian-esque italics) nice to speak with you on the phone. I shall call you again as soon as I can; which is to say, as soon as I know how much this half hour international gab fest cost me and how long before I can afford such a rash act again. Hopefully, it won't be too long a wait until you hear a Yankee voice breaking through the static, "Hello, this is Joe's Pizzeria. About that large cheese and pep you ordered...uh, I'm not sure if we can deliver it overseas within the promised half hour. Not still warm, anyways."

Well, that wasn't too mushy, was it? Now, on to other things:

Hmm, I thought I was planning to go hiking in the swamps today (I'm still referring to Saturday here, although

it's really 2:00 am Sunday), but I never made it. I was halfway there when I suddenly looked down and exclaimed, "What the heck do I have on my feet!" I had forgotten to change into my hiking boots, or even my walking shoes. I had absent-mindedly put on my drug-store shoes, rather nondescript flat-soled things more suitable for an hour at the library than a muddy slog through the wilderness. So, about face and head back home, and by the time I got here I didn't feel like driving all the way out to the swamps again.

This reminds me: Remind me to tell you some time about the time my uncle told me about the time he...wait, let me try that again. I'm reminded of a story my uncle once told me, about the time he was in the middle of a large department store and suddenly realised he was wearing one brown shoe and one white shoe. He said that getting out of the store and back to his car was the longest walk he ever made in his life.

So, after a short bit of a lie down, I spent a while putting together the CDs for you and chatted online a bit with Chief (he has a microphone, so he talked in his Alabama drawl and I typed in my nervous New York). By then it was time to attempt my first overseas telephone communication. After hearing, "*Boop Beep BEEP. We're sorry; your call cannot be completed as dialed. Please hang up and try again, this time dialing a number that actually exists in the known universe, you half-witted boob.*", I finally hit upon the right combination of numbers, and was rewarded tenfold for my efforts.

After we forced ourselves to say goodbye already and hang up, I went back online and talked about you behind your back with Chief again for a short while. Poor guy, he got online at 7:00, telling himself he would stay for ten minutes only, and at 10:30 he was still there, juggling three or four chats at once. Luckily he DOES (note absence of Victorian-esque italics, due to author being too lazy to move his mouse an inch sideways and click the italics icon) have a few friends offline, otherwise I would feel bad for him not having a social life beyond the Internet.

(Wait a sec! *I'm* the one who doesn't have a social life beyond the Internet! He should feel bad for *me*! Hmm, maybe he does. Maybe he talks about me behind my back. I wouldn't be surprised. I mean to say, I'm talking about *him* behind his back. Say, does everybody talk about everybody behind everybody's backs? I wonder what would happen if, at the count of three, we all turned around?)

Hark! I hear the train whistle.

(10 minute pause)

Ok, my first instinct was to leap to my feet, grab the little stack of pennies I have in readiness for just such an occasion (that turn of phrase reminds me of when Foghorn Leghorn gets blown up or something and he says, "Luckily, ah say, luckily ah keep mah feathahs numbahed for just such an emergency.") and race down the road and across the soybean field. But reason prevailed and I merely went upstairs to watch it go by from the porch. I mean, it *is* 2:30 in the morning, very dark outside, and I'm not wearing any shoes at the moment. But it wasn't the whole train anyway, just the engines going down to the power plant. So maybe they'll hook up the empty coal cars and come back through in a couple of hours. Then I'll either be ready for it, or asleep. I'll keep you posted of any further developments that may occur in this gripping drama: "Mashing Pennies For Hthr".

Western New York State is under attack. The enemy has flown in by the millions and is currently launching an all-out assault on our homes and businesses. I'm speaking, of course, of the plague of Ladybugs and Box Elder Beetles that are swarming all over the place. I've never seen so many in my life. There were thousands of them on the back porch alone. And they're in equally huge numbers all across the county. It's weird, like some Old Testament plague, only more cute and harmless. But this is altogether too much of a good thing. I like Ladybugs as much as the next guy, but I tend to get annoyed upon finding that four hundred and seventy three of them

have crawled down inside my shirt in the nine seconds it takes me to walk from my car to the back door of the house.

Well, I don't know if this is a classic "Sctt" email or not, but I trust it will provide you with some light entertainment for a Sunday afternoon. It's going on three o'clock in the morning now, and I can feel myself starting to lose a bit of that pep and ginger that usually keeps me prancing along into the wee hours.

My golly, Hthr, it just occurred to me that at this time in Poland you were probably pacing back and forth, glancing at the clock and muttering to yourself, "He calleth not!" I had forgotten about the time difference. I hope nobody calls me in the next half hour; I'd more than likely snarl viciously at them for disturbing an honest man's peace. You're a better woman than I am. ...Wait, that didn't come out quite the way I meant it. Oh well, I think you know what I mean; and if you don't, well, just remember that it takes all kinds to make a world and we are all of us flowers in the gardens of God.

On a final, and more serious, note, I would greatly appreciate it if you could spare a prayer or two on my behalf. I'm really nervous about finding a new church, and about getting back into the habit of going to church at all. I'm still in a deep spiritual valley, and I do need help getting onto my feet and trudging back up that hill again. The hardest part is taking that first step, and I'm honestly scared to do it.

Oct 14, 2001

You did better than me in your church shopping. At least you got out there and checked it out. And I suppose you still got something out of the service, despite the long-winded preacher and the Pentecostals. I'm afraid I chickened out and didn't go anywhere. I *did* get as far as looking through the newspaper church listings on Saturday night, but it just made me feel bad. I don't *want* a new church. I want to go back to my old church and have everything the way it was before. Oh Auntie Em, there's no place like home! Well, keep praying.

Thanks for your kind words regarding our all too few phone chats. I know what you mean, too. That sense of disappointment when you realise you've been unknowingly looking forward to something that can't be there. A rather empty feeling. I wish...well, I wish a lot of things, don't I.

Honestly, I've been turning into a ghost throughout this past year. I really was losing the will to live. Everything had gone so horribly wrong in the past two years, on top of all those years (decades!) that came before, and I got to the point where I felt like all I was ever going to be in this life was a failure and a loser. I saw myself in the future, always poor and alone and unhappy, and I was so tired. I didn't care any more. I think I'd been in a state of depression since last Autumn.

Then, one August night, on a web site message board, I met a unique young lady who calleth herself Hthr, and a tiny spark of life began to glow inside me. I'm not gonna get all mushy on you here, but I'll just say how glad I am that we met and became friends. More than friends: Kindred spirits. Soul-twins, in fact.

You know what? You might be an answer to a prayer of mine dating back a couple of years. I had just had my heart broken, and the agony was made even worse when I realised that it was entirely my fault that it got broken so badly. I realised that I didn't know how to be friends with a girl without falling madly "in love" with her. She wanted to be friends, but I didn't know how to be content with that. I made a major nuisance of myself, until she really had no choice left but to basically tell me to buzz off and remain buzzed off.

In the aftermath of that disaster I poured out my woes to a couple of men friends, older married guys who had

taken me under their wing. I remember telling one of them that I wished I could meet a nice girl who was interested in getting to know me, but whom I had no choice but to get to know in return via long-distance. A friend I couldn't drive away by always hovering around, making the nuisance of myself that I couldn't help but make whenever I met a girl I liked. I wanted a chance to learn what I had never been able to learn before, the chance to learn how to be real friends with someone I cared deeply for.

Maybe God knows what He's doing after all. Maybe He's saying, "Scott, you bonehead, pay attention. I'm answering your prayer. I know what you need, and I'm going to give you what you need. I'm NOT going to tell you My future plans for you and her, but I AM going to give you what you asked for. A chance to make a friend, and a chance to BE a friend." (I might add that He may also be whispering, "And try not to completely blow it this time, okay? I'm getting tired of cleaning up the mess." but I'd better not go too far with this "maybe" business lest lightning from Heaven start playing about my head.)

Hmmm, glancing back at what I just wrote, I see it starting to hover around the borders of mushiness, so I better quit while I'm ahead. And now, do I dare send it? I better read through it again before I say anything I might regret in the morning.

Hmmm again, I think I'll take the chance. I do believe that Hthr will understand what I'm blathering about. She's a smart girl, and I think she and I understand each other, at least a little more than most folks can. Soul-twins, you know.

Oct 15, 2001

Your 'Midnight Ramblings' was a highly entertaining and insightful read. Setting aside the contents and focusing on the style for a second, I think you have a very skillful and, dare I say, unique, writing style. At the least, there is a consistent style evident throughout your scribblings, an easily-identifiable "voice". Unlike my own writings, which often seem to be written by someone with a multiple-personality disorder. My style and tone and vocabulary change, chameleon-like, depending on my mood, the topic, and to whom I'm writing at the moment.

That's not to say that your style is for everyone. I find it attractive, but then I find lots of odd things attractive. And of course my own reading habits have gone far to pave the way: I read my Wodehouse, my Saki, and my O. Henry, long before I dived into the deep and ever-swirling waters of Hthr. By the time you came analogizing, metaphoring, and parenthesizing along, I was well-prepared for literary gymnastics.

I admit I sometimes get momentarily befuddled as I wend my way through the maze of your rabbiting and "hthr-ing". But usually a second read, or a quick search for a tell-tale parenthesis, restores my sense of bearing and directs me back to the main, though sometimes unclearly marked, trail. (I suppose my fondness for long, liberally comma'd, meandering sentences has the same confusing effect on innocent bystanders as your penchant for parenthetical asides. It's fun, though, isn't it, to see the look of bewilderment come into their eyes as they realise, but don't dare admit, that they no longer have a clue what we're talking about?)

There are so many places here in your Ramblings where I had to sort of shake myself and remind myself that you weren't writing about ME, or even TO me. The similarities are eerie, as I think we've already noticed on more than one occasion. Soul-Twins, you know.

I think, to save myself the trouble of writing some big long confessional exposé about myself, much of which would border on the redundant and ridiculously boring, I will simply add a few of my own comments to your

ramblings:

I can go for hours or even days without saying a word. But get me in the company of “my kind of people” and my conversation may become a downpour. A lot of my chronic silence has to do with a personal hatred of shallow, empty, small talk, and also the sheer scarcity of “my kind of people” who share common interests.

I’ve seen it so many times: Some well-intentioned person will ask me, “So, what have you been up to lately?”, and I’ll start telling them about my latest music project, getting all animated, and within a few minutes their eyes glaze over and their smile becomes fixed; and I get that sinking feeling that tells me, “This person couldn’t care less what I’m talking about. They wanted me to stick to empty throwaway subjects like how my car is running, or all the rain we’ve been having.” And so, I’ve learned to simply say “Not much” and leave them with the impression that I’m an unambitious, dull-witted clod, mindlessly plodding my life away.

My humour tends to be self-deprecating (that is, when it isn’t busy being utterly absurd). It is often misunderstood, but for me it’s a way of dealing with the more serious problem of being overly self-critical. There are few things more frustrating than being a perfectionist who knows all too well that he never will be perfect. Drawing attention to my imperfections and making them the subject of jokes is, perhaps, my way of accepting them.

My appearance is what I dislike the most about myself. I’m not downright ugly, but I’m not handsome. The Lord didn’t make me very masculine either. I’m gawky and clumsy and uncoordinated. I hit that awkward stage at age 13 and never grew out of it. So, even though most people don’t run away screaming at the sight of me, they also don’t stop to take a second look. And that can hurt just as bad.

When stuck in social situations I have to inwardly jerk myself to attention every few minutes, otherwise my mind wanders far away. It’s partly due to the other person talking about something that I have no interest in, like their new lawnmower, or the rainy weather, or football. And a lot of the time it’s due to my chronic daydreaming. I daydream ALL the time. I have a VERY hard time keeping myself focused on outward things, because the little stories and narratives and fantasies and Walter Mitty-esque adventures are always running non-stop inside my head. I remember sitting in classrooms staring out the window at the clouds, completely oblivious to what was happening inside the school, and being startled back to reality only when the teacher’s hand clamped down on my shoulder with a stern, “Raymond!! Pay ATTENTION!!! I’m TALKING to you!!”

I am introverted and self-centered. Being introverted isn’t a problem with me. There is room in the world for introverts and extroverts to live in harmony, just as long as those noisy extroverts please refrain from loudly asking me, “What’s the *matter* with you?? How come you’re so quiet? Aren’t you having any fun? What’s wrong?” Well, nothing WAS wrong until you came along asking me what’s wrong. Being self-centered is a problem. But you know, it’s difficult to be “turned outward” when there is seldom anyone else around to turn outward to. There is a lyric in one of my songs: “When you’re always by yourself, your life becomes no one else.”

Overall I’m not a very sociable person. There have been times when I’m the life and soul of the party, the class clown, the court jester. But then, without warning, the light in my eyes goes out, I sidle to the door, and an hour later people are wondering, “Hey, where did what’s-his-name go?” By that time I’m home with the curtains drawn, the door locked, the phone turned off, and I’m the perfectly content recluse, the hermit alone with his books.

And my parents were never able to fathom why, when I came home after a traumatic day at school, I didn’t want to stand around shooting the breeze with them. I didn’t even want to say hello, but I wasn’t being

deliberately cold or rude; I just needed to get away from people for a few hours, or a few days. I'm a lonely person most of the time, and being around my kind of people makes me happy, but I also need lots and lots of time alone to be happy, too. Figure that one out.

Oct 20, 2001

Ok, I still don't have the foggiest idea where you are. Last you mentioned, the hedonistic chipmunk girl was dragging you out of the cyber café...but on your way to where? Back home or ever further into the unknown? You said you had gotten as far as Jasna Góra. I'd been worrying about that all day long, you know. I kept asking myself, "Did they get as far as Jasna Góra?" I mean, it'd be a shame if you hadn't even gotten as far as Jasna Góra. (Ignoring for now the fact that Jasna Góra appears nowhere on my map of Poland; nor, for the matter of that, does Jabba the Hut or Jiminy Cricket. But Katowice, Gliwice, and Czêstochowa are present and accounted for, if still defiantly unpronounceable, so I at least have a dim idea of where in the country you're currently plodding about.)

Okay, this Soul-twin thing is getting rather beyond uncanny. I mean, the idea that you would figuratively take me along with you on your walking tour of the town is...well, let me tell the tale in my own way and you'll see: While you were busy invading Eastern Europe, I spent this afternoon just wandering around in the thick brush behind my parent's house. All familiar country, so to stave off boredom (not really boredom, since I always encounter something new) I sorta *figuratively dragged you along with me*, keeping enough distance between us so you wouldn't be smacked by branches and vines whipping back after I charged my way, Bigfoot-like, through the undergrowth. I have a tendency to do this sort of thing, that is, to lead imaginary tours around my favorite haunts, giving the local history as I know it, relating humorous anecdotes and pointing out objects of interest along the wayside.

So here is the Twilight Zone kicker: while you and imaginary I were slouching along behind the merry troops on their way to adventure and excitement amid the bright lights of giddy Jasna Góra, I and imaginary you were also not-so-stealthily wending our way about the back forty, you doing a good job of feigning interest while I excitedly pointed out that the impenetrable tangle of wild apple trees and grape vines that I insisted we force our way through was probably the site of a long-dead and forgotten orchard from 100 years ago. And what with the time difference, I wouldn't be surprised if all this imaginary wandering about in each other's company took place simultaneously. Not a bad day's work for a couple of kindred spirits, eh? We didn't even have to resort to the cheap parlor trick of mental telepathy.

Meanwhile, after walking the woods I ended up lounging on the couch finishing up my Jane Austen. I was disappointed with the ending, even though I saw it coming a mile away. I was hoping for another almighty row or two between Elizabeth and Mr Darcy before they inevitably fell into each other's arms. But I was much gratified by the scene where our Lizzie very properly tells off Lady Catherine.

Altogether I think the entire lot of them were a bunch of stuck-up snoots, except the dryly hilarious Mr Bennett and possibly the carefree Lydia. I don't think a vulgar commoner of no great standing or hopeful prospects like myself would survive very long under their sneering snobbish scrutiny. But then, I'm sure I wouldn't be noticed at all by the simpering socialites of that society (Gee, I'm really sowing the "s's" with a liberal hand here, huh?). Probably the best position I could hope for in such a class-system would be as the Substitute Coal Shoveler, or Second Assistant to the Senior Pig Slopper.

And on that cheery note I shall bid thee adieu for the nonce (I think *adieu* is pansy French for goodbye, but I confess I haven't the slightest what *the nonce* is. Possibly a small European car, or an archaic expression once

used to describe the sound of a person blowing their nose in hay-fever season.)

Oct 20, 2001

Here's the famous WWI flying ace typing yet another letter to Hthr.

Way back in 5th Grade I learned that my first name, Raymond, supposedly means "wise protector". The "wise" part has provided me with many a rueful chuckle over the years, but the "protector" is fairly accurate. Anytime I hear of a loved one who is troubled or worried about something or other, I get this "mother hen" feeling, like I just want to hold them close to me with one hand, and brandish a sword with the other, shielding them while I battle the fire-breathing dragons.

I just thought I'd mention that that's how I feel tonight after you told me about your anxiety. It's very frustrating that I can't really do anything concrete for you, but just so you know, you're always in my thoughts and prayers.

Pianoforte? Harpsichord? Are either of these the instrument you were trying to think of? Hope you didn't lose *too* much sleep over them.

And guess what? Nope, guess again. Ok, ok, you know already. I shouldn't even have to mention it, but I will anyways. That chapter where the Pevensie children come across the ruins of Cair Paravel is one of my favorites from the Narnia series. I get that sad feeling whenever I come across the ruins of an old farm house or barn. I wonder about the people who built it and farmed the land long ago...what it all looked like back then, and whatever became of them. I like exploring those old fallen-down places, and finding little things here and there that tell me a bit about the lives of those people.

Hey, I finally got a flattened penny for you!! Harken now to my tale: Just a little while ago I was sitting at the table, fruitlessly reading the Help Wanted ads, when I heard the distant train whistle. I didn't even stop to think, just leaped up, ran downstairs to grab the pennies, charged back upstairs and pulled on my shoes, banged out the door, down the driveway and onto the road, running like a lunatic. Only then did I notice that a couple of the teenage boys who live across the road were standing in their front yard. It was dark but I'm sure they were staring in bewilderment at the crazy man from across the road.

I galloped across the soybean field and onto the tracks in plenty of time. I set four pennies on the rail and crouched in the bushes to wait for the train. While waiting I saw a car pull out of the neighbour's house and slowly cruise by. The train came roaring past, just two engines without any cars. The pennies were gone when I slid my hand along the rails afterwards. It was too dark to see, but I felt around in the gravel and found two of them, nicely flattened and smoothed.

As I walked back across the bean field I saw the car cruise slowly by again, back to the neighbor's house. I'm sure they were dying of curiosity about what on earth I was up to. They couldn't see me at all, of course. And, of course, I couldn't see them either, so I was just as startled as the two boys when we almost collided with each other in the darkness. I remained outwardly calm and said, "Good evening", but they were honest enough to leap convulsively and exclaim, "Holy ___! You scared the ___ ___ out of us!" (Nice boys, but a bit lax in their vocabulary.) Still, I felt rather like an idiot, so I said, "Sorry if I scared you" and walked into my driveway. They laughed nervously, and that was that. I'm sure the local gossip mills will grind exceedingly fine for a week or so after this, but, by golly, I got your penny. It will be winging its merry way to you on the soonest possible flight.

Oh, about the chat thing. Chief got a computer mic for \$10 at Walmart, and I used one of my recording mics.

Just plug it into the computer mic input, crank up MSN Messenger, and click the little yellow telephone. It was neat. Our voices came through loud and clear, although there was just enough of a delay that I could hear my voice echoing through the speaker as it was picked up by Chief's mic on his end. Since it's going out over the Internet there are no long distance phone charges.

I wouldn't recommend you immediately running out to your local Hyper-mart (is that what it's REALLY called??) or wherever they sell computer gadgets, what with your current financial uncertainty and the cost of your internet service. But, it's an idea that may come in handy. I would certainly enjoy hearing your voice without wondering if I'm putting myself into the poor house with long distance charges.

But I'm not sure though if I'd feel too comfortable with this internet-phone chatting thing when my parental units are in the house. I'm one of those old fashioned chaps who think they have to practically shout into the phone to help carry their voice over the miles. I think yelling into a microphone, alone in my basement, would give Ma and Pa even more reason to look askance and wonder if they shouldn't have just settled for a puppy back in their early days when the family-raising urge hit them.

Speaking of games (not that we were but YOU were), I too am very good at word games. You and your brother might even be the first truly worthy opponents I'd come across, if ever we could sit down and glare menacingly at each other over the card table. I can't remember the name of this particular word board game at the moment (something like Catch Up maybe?), but the several times I played it I actually lapped all the other players around the board. My little guy would go around twice before everybody else went around once. Eventually nobody wanted to play with me anymore. My smug grin and tendency to cackle with unholy glee as I passed them by probably didn't encourage them much, either.

I used to enjoy Monopoly years ago, but that was before I learned that you were only allowed to put ONE hotel on a space. I would crowd five of them together, and completely wipe out every luckless player who landed there, grinning smugly and cackling with unholy glee all the while.

Card games don't thrill me one bit. I never had any interest, and it was always irritating to attend some church social, only to see that the main event was some incomprehensible and utterly boring card game. The only group game I liked that involved cards was Spoons. I'll explain this madcap free-for-all to you someday if you don't know it already.

Getting back to ancient ruins and whatnot, I often feel like I've been cheated. I've never seen a night sky that wasn't at least partially obscured by city lights. I've never heard an outdoor silence that wasn't broken by the distant noise of a car or tractor or airplane. I've never seen true wilderness, untouched by man. I daydream and try to imagine what my corner of the world looked like before the Europeans in their ox carts came clumping along the old Indian trails. I try to imagine the unbroken forest as it was when the Iroquois and the Neutral natives slipped silently through the trees and paddled canoes along the shore of Lake Ontario. Even further back in time, before any humans had wandered this far, and it was home to bears and wolves and mountain lions. There were even bison living in the woods in those days. I'd like especially to see what it looked like back at the beginning, before the Flood, while Adam and Eve still walked in the Garden, when giant animals and plants flourished in a world-wide tropical paradise. That would be a sight indeed.

Maybe someday we WILL get to see such things. Whether we'll get to see a glimpse backward into our own history, or it will all be made new again and even more marvelous than the original, I don't know. But it would be great to see.

I just scrolled up and realised how much I had written. I'm not exactly blathering (that's a purely Hthr-

copyrighted exercise) but I am chattering on a tad, aren't I? Some times I draw a blank and other times I keep thinking of more things to say. Maybe I should save some of them for those long cozy winter evenings by the fire when we have our little home in the country.

PS: Aha, of course. Yes. Right. Absolutely. Jasna Góra is the local monastery. Yes. I knew that. You told me. Weeks ago. I didn't forget. I was just...um...testing you. Yeah, that's the ticket. Just a little test to see if you would remember that I have absolutely no recollection of you ever mentioning anything even remotely resembling the name Jasna Góra in any of your previous email epics.

PPS: Not that I bothered to check.

Oct 21, 2001

With a mighty sigh of relief I announce to you that I found a church to visit this morning. Yea verily, but not without a struggle. I was terribly worried about it last night, and even had a weird dream in which I was sitting in a cardboard box, propelling myself across the church parking lot with my hands, while a man in a white car flipped me the middle finger all the while. What do you make of that? I suppose some Freud freak would read all sorts of suppressed symbolism in it, but I think it was just a weird dream. So there.

And, of course, this morning I was very nervous. I knew my queasy stomach and urgent need for a Gent's Room was merely psychosomatic and would vanish as soon as I got into the church, but it was unpleasant nonetheless.

I ended up going to the largest Baptist church in town. I figured I could blend in with the crowd, but I was surprised to see the congregation of the second service (all of the evangelical churches around here have two morning services) was actually smaller than the one at my former church. I arrived way too early, and ended up driving around the block three or four times before summoning up enough courage to pull into the parking lot. Of course I entered the Exit by mistake and faced another car head on, so a quick red-faced reverse into traffic didn't help me maintain my inconspicuousness very much. I slunk around the corner and parked on the street a block away. This is one of those large old churches that have had innumerable building projects and additions over the years, so the sanctuary was hidden within the depths of the building somewhere. I had to go up a flight of stairs, around a corner and down a hall before I finally found it.

The "stuff & nonsense" part of the service was typical. A few announcements, a handful of hand-clappy choruses, the inevitable hokey Children's Chat, and the usual "waiting-for-the-sound-guy-to-cue-up-the-tape-like-he-should-have-done-BEFORE-the-service" special music number. I could happily dispense with all of this stuff. I wish I had the audacity of C. S. Lewis, who arrived in church just in time for the sermon, and walked out during the final hymn.

Finally the senior pastor went forward and gave the message. I liked this guy. He was scholarly-looking, with glasses and a salt-and-pepper beard. The Scripture was Acts Chapter 13 and the main subject was "A Hunger For The Truth". He spoke well, in a clear, easy to follow voice (a welcome change from my former pastor, who was notorious for inaudible mumbling). I had forgotten how much I enjoyed a good sermon. He included a liberal sprinkling of stories and illustrations, always a plus with me, and obviously really loved what he was telling us. I mean, he wasn't just doing his job, he cared deeply about the message he was giving.

A final prayer and hymn and I was able to slip out without being ambushed by any visiter-seeking zealots. I did see one guy that I used to know a couple of years ago; and I hoped he wouldn't say anything to me, mainly because I couldn't remember his name. He spotted me and I'm sure he recognised me, but luckily his back was

turned when I sidled past him on my way out.

So, there you have it. I'm not sure if I'll go back to that church next week, or try out another one, but I'm glad I took that first step of going in the first place. I even caught myself humming one of the songs as I drove home. You're a good woman for giving me that little lecture last week. If anything, it stirred me to action.

Now I have to race around frantically restoring the house to it's original condition before the parental units return home. Then maybe a walk in the woods or just slacking off in front of the tv. I found a BBC mini-series of *Pride & Prejudice* on the video shelf, so as long as I have the book still fresh in my head, I might as well give the film a look.

Oct 22, 2001

Oh, I'm so sorry I didn't send out a quick 'lil email to you last night, just so your inbox wouldn't be empty today. Isn't that the saddest sight? I had six messages in my box earlier today, every one of them bearing a subject line like "How to earn MILLIONS online!!!", "Bad credit? We don't care!!!", "Thousands of Sleazy Gurls Are Waiting 4 U!!!" and other lovely things that make me click the DELETE button faster than you can squeak "spam spam wonderful spam!"

Oh, I'm tickled pink that you're tickled pink by the CDs. I figured you would get them today. Now I have to wait patiently for you to listen to everything before I get to know if they meet your approval. It was difficult (but in a fun way) choosing which songs to put on the 'Various Pop' disc. I really strive to mix songs together that establish a certain mood, or progress in a specific direction. Maybe next time you'll get a collection of dark Goth rock and swoony dream pop.

Oh, I'm glad your brother has come to your rescue. Having a few more dollars in your account should lessen your anxiety a little bit, I hope. I did devote quite a bit of thought to you today at work. I think you have the right attitude about the sudden uncertainties: giving your worry to God and letting Him bear the weight of it. But don't be ashamed to be human either. Unsettling news and/or rumour is bound to...well, unsettle you, I guess.

Oh, I very much enjoyed your descriptive imaginary walk with me up to the Nelson Place. I can picture it in my mind very vividly (although certainly completely inaccurately ((I've often wondered if it was poor grammar to sling together more than one or two words that end with "y". It wouldn't stop me if it was, but it's one of those useless bits of information that I'd be interested to know, and happy to add to the vast store of Knowledge of No Practical Use that already takes up a sizable portion of my brain.))).

Oh, I know that what I just typed looks ridiculous, but I think it's more or less correct. The first period and double parenthesis closes the parenthetical aside within the original parenthetical aside. The second period and parenthesis closes the original parenthetical aside. And the final period ends the original sentence, which modestly demurred that it was really far too short to deserve such a weight of asides, though it did admit afterwards that they made it look much more impressive and important to the untrained eye.

Oh, I know what you're thinking now. You're shaking your head in exasperation and declaring: "For crying out loud, Scott! Here I am, a million miles from home, basically trapped in a foreign country probably on the brink of a communist revolution, practically broke, hardly knowing where my next meal is coming from, certainly not knowing where my next class will be, or if it will even take place at all, wondering if I've been hoodwinked and taken for a ride by some shady Polish teaching scam, half out of my wits with worry because they keep

changing the schedule on me every other hour, being dragged half-asleep to every seedy pub and cyber-café in Eastern Europe by a chipmunk girl would seem to live for pleasure alone, risking a broken neck every time I walk into my own bathroom because these idiot people don't believe in shower curtains; and here you are devoting entire paragraphs of precious email space to half-baked explanations of previous paragraphs which needed neither any explanation nor further comment at all because they were hardly entertaining enough to be worth the reading of in the first place! I want my mommy, and you, you big lunthead, are cracking lame English 101 jokes!"

Oh, and what did I do today? Nothing much, but it's only 10:00, so there's still time to kick my heels up and let my hair down. After work I finished watching the 5 hour video series of *Pride & Prejudice* that I had started just yesterday, I think. And I admit, I kinda liked it. Jane was too soppy and romantic for me, kind of a mild version of Madeline Bassett, but I liked Elizabeth very much. The story was easier to follow, having just finished reading the novel; and the style of speech, the formal language and long sentences, flowed smoother when listened to rather than trying to read.

Oh, and afterwards I took a brisk walk down the tracks to the orchards, thinking mostly about how I compared to these snooty rich English gentlemen of yesteryear. Well, I have no money, I have no property, I have no education, I neither ride nor shoot nor fence nor dance quadrilles at fancy dress balls, I have not a well-proportioned frame nor a handsome countenance,...but....I think I am still a gentleman. I know I have good table manners and I open doors for ladies. And I'm working on all the rest of it. So there.

PS: The use of the word "oh" at the beginning of each paragraph was entirely intentional. By the way, what kind of word would you call "oh" when used in such a manner? I mean, it's not a participle or adjective or conjunction junction or anything like that. Maybe it's one of those weird dangling diphthongs or whatever they are of which I've heard tales but was always too embarrassed to ask about. I just don't know. It's a mystery that I'm sure has baffled brighter minds than mine.

PPS: Yes, Hthr, I do SO know what a diphthong is! I would never wear one in public, of course, but in the privacy of my own...alright, alright, I know that was a bad joke, but you don't have to wallop me on the noggin with your "Gringley's Grammar for Greeks, Geeks & Geckos, Annotated Edition, 1907 Popgood & Grooly Publ.". The word "oil" contains a genuine diphthong. So does æoliphile. Golly, if a guy who can casually toss diphthongs around like so many adverbs doesn't cause a college-educated gal's heart to flutter, well, all I can say is, that there be a dad-gummed shame.

Oct 22, 2001

Hey, I *did* think of something else to say. When we last talked you mentioned that, even if you end up having to come home sooner than expected, the experience won't be wasted. God can still make use of it. I was thinking to myself at the time, "Yup, I remember you saying this to me before."

But then, a day or two later, I realised that you *hadn't* said anything like that to me before. I thought a bit, urging the treadmill-running hamsters who power my brain to run a little faster, and then I remembered. It was that girl I told you about, the one who broke my heart into kabillions of tiny broken and bleeding pieces, some of which are still strewn across Niagara County, who had said this to me a few years ago.

She had her Bachelor's Degree, and had been planning to go onward and get her Master's (in Speech Pathology, the pronunciation of which I royally stumbled over the first time I attempted it. In my nervousness, caused no doubt by her effervescent beauty, I called it Peach Spastology, much to the amusement of all within hearing

range. I recovered quickly, and in a display of great humility and wit, volunteered to be her first client when she set up practice.), but suddenly she felt like God was pulling her in another direction. At the time I'm remembering, a few years ago, she was in great confusion, doubt, and anxiety, because she had no idea what was going to happen next, or what decision she should make. But she did conclude that, no matter what happened, all the time and effort she had put in getting her degree wouldn't go to waste. God would make use of that experience somehow, as long as she allowed Him to continue guiding her.

I have no idea where she is today, or what she's doing. The last I heard she was thinking of being a missionary. Now, if that happens, maybe the skills she learned in school won't be *explicitly* useful in her new career, but certainly the learning process itself, the discipline and effort required, would be put to good use.

So, we conclude then...um...what? What did I start out talking about? Oh yeah! How your Poland experience could be used by God. Hmm...now I'm questioning why I'm going through all this bother, even to the point of dredging up the painful past and all, to tell you something that you already know, seeing as how *you* were the one to mention it to *me* in the *first* place.

See what happens when you try to think and type at the same time? You tie yourself into knots and start wondering what on earth you're thinking and typing about. Well, anyways, I know you're used to my driveling by now, so I'll just continue striding forth boldly, ignoring the occasional cow pattie I slop into, and tell you that, as the "other girl" of yesterday trusted the Lord to work everything out, so too the Hthr of today is showing herself wise by trusting also that her Father has the matter well in hand.

Well, to sum up, I *think* what I'm trying, and probably failing, to do is simply offer you a bit of encouragement and support. Advice I have none, because you're smarter than me. But I'm your friend. I'll be here cheering for you no matter what.

And hey, if you end up fleeing the country, either because the bloody communist revolution erupts and you find yourself sprinting down the tram line with the howling mob at your heels, or because your student teacher's version of Solidarity backfires horribly and Tatiana is preparing a set of shackles for you in the dungeon, or because the Phone Cops are after you about your internet charges, you can always come over and camp out with me down in my parent's basement. They wouldn't even notice you were here. When you walk into the house, just slouch and talk in monosyllables. They'll think it's me.

Oct 24, 2001

That plague of ladybugs that descended upon an unsuspecting Niagara Frontier seems to be over. I don't know if Moses stood forth and struck a rock with his mighty staff, or if the increasingly cold weather simply drove the 'lil guys (or is it gals? Hmm, now that opens up an entirely new and hitherto un contemplated line of thought, which I may very well return to at some later date, but not right now because I'm already starting to forget what it was I was going to say before I started this Hthr-esque aside) into the woodwork.

I've been noticing a few expired ladybugs here and there around the window sills and so forth. I was told that they hibernate and come flying back out in the Spring, full of vim and vigor. (I wish I could do that sort of thing.) But I wonder why there are dead ones, if they're all supposedly snoring away within the inner recesses of the walls, snug as bugs, so to speak. Maybe a few of them were despondent and decided to end it all in the village pond, except that, there not being any village ponds within an easy fluttering flight's distance, they chose the window sill as an acceptable if unorthodox substitute. It's a mystery, it's a mystery.

Speaking of which, did you ever see that movie about David I-forget-his-last-name, the gifted though unbalanced pianist? After watching that film, and being deeply moved by it in places, I went about talking like him for a few weeks. I mean, it's a mystery, it's a mystery. "Is it a mystery? It must be, because it's so dusty. It's unthinkable. Practically undrinkable." I still lapse back into it on occasion. I like borrowing speech mannerisms from film characters. I definitely sometimes talk like Rainman. "Of course, it's 9:02 pm Thursday, it's definitely 9:02 pm Thursday. Of course, now it's 9:03 pm Thursday."

Actually, what brought all this to mind (the speech mannerisms, not the deceased ladybugs for which we shed a passing tear) was something from ye olde drug store today. I was in the back room, engaged in the thankless task of pricing boxes and boxes of worthless junk, and stacking them to the ceiling in rickety towers that occasionally fall over, not that anybody really cares too much; and one of the girls walked in and cried out, "*Scott! I'm going insane at a very young age! It's definitely Tuesday, it's definitely Tuesday.*" I got a major kick out of that. I was chuckling about it all through the long dreary afternoon. It's little absurdities like this that keep me going.

Today started out warm and sunny. I went to work without my ever-present leather jacket, although my other faithful companion, a not-quite-cowboy-esque black hat, was planted firmly upon the old bean as usual. By mid-morning the temps had dropped 20 degrees and it was raining heavily. By afternoon the customers walking in were chattering excitedly about the sleet rattling against the ground. Welcome to Autumn in New York.

I went walking again last night, and it's still early enough tonight that I may venture forth after I finish this "Epic To Hthr." No longer raining or sleeting or anything now. A nice, crisp evening. Housekeeping had to come first though. Laundry night and tidy up the monk's cell that I laughingly refer as my living quarters. Amazing how many books and CDs get scattered across the floor in the space of a week. It don't even remember hauling them off their shelves in the first place.

And another thing. I was lucky tonight, but more often than not I go through the whole tedious affair of washing and drying and folding my modest wardrobe, only to find that, yes indeed, once again I ended up with an odd number of socks. Tell me, O Hthr dahling, for you are a woman and therefore possessing greater insight into the conundrum (I'm not sure if I'm using that word in the right context, but it looks cool, so what the hey) of the Vanishing Sock. Where do they go? Why do they go? I mean, I treat my socks well. I keep them clean and folded nicely. I don't mismatch them. I practically wear them with pride. And yet they leave me. One by one. Hmm, maybe someday I'll come across a story in National Geographic about the Secret Sock Burial Grounds, where all good socks go to die.

Which reminds me. You know how, when you're driving, you sometimes see a boot or shoe lying rather forlornly along the side of the road? Ever wonder about that? Did somebody toss it out a car window? Were they jogging one morning and it slipped off, and they thought to themselves, "Ah well, what's a shoe more or less to a blithe spirit such as I?" and just ran on with one nude foot brazenly exposed to the world?

And why, oh why, only ONE? Where on earth is the other shoe? You know, just between you and me, I have never in all the years of my life lost or left a single shoe, sneaker, boot, or even, ye gods, a flip-flop by the side of the road. It boggles the mind. Well, *my* mind at any rate, but then again I suppose my mind is easily boggled.

Oct 25, 2001

While flipping idly through a few old Wodehouse classics, I came across a scene in "Something New" describing the character Ashe Marson doing his morning exercises in full view of the local populace, much to

their amusement. It immediately brought to mind your vivid account of your morning runs throughout the non-exercising streets of Czêstochowa. Unlike poor Ashe in the book, I hope it doesn't take three months before the American Running Girl is an accepted part of the daily landscape.

I hath just finished mine own nightly exercising, if it can be called that, happily without an audience. I had started a walk beneath the stars an hour ago, but a cold wind drove me back inside before I had managed a hundred yards. The wind in the trees makes a different sound this time of year. I never thought of it before, but I guess the absence of leaves is what give it that hollow, whistling sound in winter. It's a cold, bleak sound, but I'm fond of it.

One thing I liked to do when I was a boy was go outside during a howling blizzard and just enjoy stumbling through the blinding snow in the woods behind my parent's house. In fact, I used to pretend that I lived way up North somewhere, and I was walking the trail through the wilderness between towns. I always liked seeing the warm yellow glow of house lights through the falling snow.

That reminds me of other favorite boyhood pastimes. My father used to keep chickens and rabbits in a shed out behind the house. He built a miniature loft in it to store straw bales. I liked going out there on winter nights, climbing up into the loft and watching the mice. Yup, the mice. If I sat still enough, within a few minutes little grey mice would come scurrying out of their holes and rummage about, eating up spilled chicken feed and whatnot.

I can still see myself, crouching upon a straw bale, bundled up in coat, mittens and ski cap, feeling warm and cozy beneath the single light bulb even as snow drifted in through various cracks and holes, watching in fascination as the mice scampered here and there. Sometimes I would crawl into the built-in dog house and sit there, perfectly content, with a floppy-eared hound or two sleeping across my legs.

Oct 26, 2001

I walked into the house after work today to be greeted by a tiny little girl industriously whacking a doll against the floor. Whack! Whack! Whack! She looked up briefly as I walked in, then returned to the business at hand. Whack! Whack! Whack! I bent down to tickle her tummy for a second. That brought a smile, but as soon as I straightened up, she turned her attention back to more important matters. Whack! Whack! Whack! I tell you, it cheers my heart to see such dedication and perseverance in the younger generation. This girl couldn't have been more than two years old, but already I could see promising signs that she'll make a fine juvenile delinquent in the due course of time. She's upstairs even as we speak, standing on a chair and scattering oyster crackers far and wide with a confident hand.

My sister called to tell me about a possible job opening at a company near her house. It doesn't sound too promising, but I'll look into it anyways. I was hoping maybe I could get hired at the tractor parts store nearby. I don't know much about tractor parts, other than I used to break a lot of them back in my farm laboring days, but I could make myself useful in other ways. I once drove a pick-up truck through a huge glass window at that same store. Not on purpose, of course. I was picking up some tractor parts (naturally) for my boss, and when I put in the clutch to back up away from the store, the truck rolled forward a foot or two. Not very far, but far enough to smash that window to smithereens.

It was a depressing moment. I sat there for a few minutes, waiting for my heart to stop racing and my ears to stop ringing, while a dozen or so employees in green John Deere hats came running out from their hiding places to gawk and point. I wasn't sure what they were going to do, arrest me or take me out back and shoot me or

what. Finally one bold fellow came up and spluttered, "That's a five hundred dollar window!" I shoved the truck into gear, barked out the window, "Well, be more careful where you put it next time!" and sped off in an oily cloud of smoke.

No, that's not true. I'm fibbing like a regular heathen. Actually he just asked me who I worked for. I shakily replied, "George", and he relaxed and said, "Ah, George. That's okay then. I'll give him a call." Good old George. I must have been the most incompetent, chuckle-headed kid he ever had work for him, but he was always most forgiving and usually just laughed off my many mishaps with a typically corny farmer's joke. So if you are ever in trouble, moments away from being clapped in irons and frog-marched off to the hoosegow, just mention George, and your captors will probably burst into good-natured guffaws and set you free with a cigar and a hearty slap on the back.

Well, time for me to head out and wander beneath the stars for a while, to enjoy the quiet and the solitude, the peace and the calm. In your honour I shall wear a plaid shirt and bite into a crisp apple, and think about the possible future, when maybe we can walk the fields and woods together, sharing that perfect harmonious mutual silence which only kindred spirits and Soul-twins can understand and appreciate. God bless you, Hthr. Talk to me when you can.

Yr hmbl frnd Sctt

Note from August 2016

A couple of days after this last email was sent, "Hthr" ended our friendship and vanished from my life forever, leaving behind an empty space that has never entirely gone away. I remember her now as a shooting star, who blazed into my life briefly and brightly, igniting my flagging spirit with a spark of her own flame. Wherever in the world she may be now, I hope that flame still burns.