

„The back and forth rhythm of the dialogue is entertaining, as is the back and forth between storylines. The writer does a great job of maintaining an appropriate sense of anticipation, not too little, not too much, as the reader explores the story and its entertaining facets. It all gives the narrative an effortless feel: a read that's an exceedingly enjoyable escape. Reading this was a joy, as reading should be, and it's that sort of exemplary writing that we need to bring young people into the literary fold. If we want to get them to get off twitter and Instagram long enough to read a book, this is the book to do it.”

Bradley Darewood, author of 'Unsung Heroes'

„Quite simply put, this is brilliant. This is modern-day Douglas Adams for a younger audience. Having said that, there are plenty of tasty tidbits in 'Midge Fly and the End of the World' that adults would enjoy too. Especially adults who love technology. 'Midge Fly and the End of the World' is smart and engaging, with strong characters and a truck-load of humour.”

Leah Broadby, author of 'A Dreadful Daughter's Spells'

„If you enjoyed 'Hitch hikers guide to the...', read this book immediately - in my opinion, this book is better! This is one of those science fiction novels where the universe isn't a big enough arena. This novel spreads across multi-universes and time as if a trip to a far distant planet, or the past, or the future, is as easy and accessible as a stroll down the lane to the neighbour. Sounds unlikely? Well, it isn't, not the way Ruben Fønsbo explains the principles and theories of time and space. He makes it sound so simple even mother would understand. But this isn't a story about dry physics, this is a succulent tale about aliens and unsuspecting humans all caught up in an imaginative plot that kept me turning the pages from start to finish. This is a fun read, far superior to most other books in this genre.”

James Field, author of 'Gathering Clouds'

Midge Fly
and
The End of the World

Ruben Fønsbo

Midge Fly and the End of the World

Written and published by Ruben Fønsbo

Cover art by Kim Bo

Copyright © 2017

Typeset in Book Antiqua

All rights reserved

No part of this book may be distributed, reproduced, transmitted, or copied in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, photographing, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the author, except where permitted by law. For information, please contact the author via www.midgeflybook.com

ISBN 978-1542828307

For my daughters

*Emilie
&
Emma*

With profound thanks to those who read,
corrected, encouraged, and commented

CONTENTS

<i>Chapter 1 – Touchdown</i>	13
<i>Chapter 2 – Tea with Mum</i>	15
<i>Chapter 3 – Showdown on the 15th floor</i>	17
<i>Chapter 4 – In the dark</i>	23
<i>Chapter 5 – The lock-up</i>	27
<i>Chapter 6 – A major blow</i>	29
<i>Chapter 7 – Midge in luck</i>	33
<i>Chapter 8 – Stranded</i>	35
<i>Chapter 9 – Snapshot</i>	37
<i>Chapter 10 – A spot of bother</i>	43
<i>Chapter 11 – A lot of time</i>	45
<i>Chapter 12 – Hitching a ride</i>	51
<i>Chapter 13 – An imminent threat</i>	53
<i>Chapter 14 – Time for a pint</i>	57
<i>Chapter 15 – Name dropping</i>	59
<i>Chapter 16 – Feeling light-headed</i>	61
<i>Chapter 17 – Big Bang Theory</i>	65
<i>Chapter 18 – An uncomfortable call</i>	71
<i>Chapter 19 – Small talk</i>	73
<i>Chapter 20 – Walkin’ in Memphis</i>	75
<i>Chapter 21 – Happy banter</i>	77
<i>Chapter 22 – Catching up</i>	81
<i>Chapter 23 – The King</i>	83
<i>Chapter 24 – Gentle pressure</i>	87
<i>Chapter 25 – Feeling less light-headed</i>	89
<i>Chapter 26 – Attempting to settle the score</i>	93

<i>Chapter 27 – City by night</i>	<i>97</i>
<i>Chapter 28 – Time for a pint II</i>	<i>101</i>
<i>Chapter 29 – An uncomfortable call II.....</i>	<i>103</i>
<i>Chapter 30 – Midge on a mission</i>	<i>105</i>
<i>Chapter 31 – An uncomfortable call III</i>	<i>107</i>
<i>Chapter 32 – The end of the world.....</i>	<i>109</i>
<i>Chapter 33 – Watching the video.....</i>	<i>113</i>
<i>Chapter 34 – Take-off time.....</i>	<i>117</i>
<i>Chapter 35 – An unexpected visit.....</i>	<i>119</i>
<i>Chapter 36 – Impending doom.....</i>	<i>123</i>
<i>Chapter 37 – Countdown.....</i>	<i>125</i>
<i>Chapter 38 – Bedridden</i>	<i>127</i>
<i>Chapter 39 – Dead or damaged?</i>	<i>133</i>
<i>Chapter 40 – A problem to be solved</i>	<i>135</i>
<i>Chapter 41 – A pity</i>	<i>141</i>
<i>Chapter 42 – In the news</i>	<i>143</i>
<i>Chapter 43 – First movers</i>	<i>147</i>
<i>Chapter 44 – Another blow.....</i>	<i>149</i>
<i>Chapter 45 – Hanging out</i>	<i>153</i>
<i>Chapter 46 – Seeing the light</i>	<i>155</i>
<i>Chapter 47 – Going shopping</i>	<i>159</i>
<i>Chapter 48 – Another fine mess</i>	<i>161</i>
<i>Chapter 49 – Making plans.....</i>	<i>163</i>
<i>Chapter 50 – ... and biscuits.....</i>	<i>167</i>
<i>Chapter 51 – Taking in the view</i>	<i>171</i>
<i>Chapter 52 – Attempting to land</i>	<i>173</i>

<i>Chapter 53 – It’s crystal clear</i>	<i>175</i>
<i>Chapter 54 – A cheap ploy.....</i>	<i>181</i>
<i>Chapter 55 – Waiting for nightfall.....</i>	<i>185</i>
<i>Chapter 56 – Getting directions.....</i>	<i>187</i>
<i>Chapter 57 – A spot of bother II.....</i>	<i>189</i>
<i>Chapter 58 – Going sightseeing</i>	<i>193</i>
<i>Chapter 59 – Take-off.....</i>	<i>203</i>
<i>Chapter 60 – Another fine mess II.....</i>	<i>205</i>
<i>Chapter 61 – Strangers on a bus</i>	<i>207</i>
<i>Chapter 62 – Track and trace</i>	<i>213</i>
<i>Chapter 63 – Erasing the tracks.....</i>	<i>219</i>
<i>Chapter 64 – Doing the maths</i>	<i>221</i>
<i>Chapter 65 – Mission statement</i>	<i>223</i>
<i>Chapter 66 – A slightly less uncomfortable call</i>	<i>229</i>
<i>Chapter 67 – Heading for the stars</i>	<i>231</i>
<i>Chapter 68 – Shopping time</i>	<i>233</i>
<i>Chapter 69 – In a tight spot</i>	<i>241</i>
<i>Chapter 70 – Arrivoal.....</i>	<i>243</i>
<i>Chapter 71 – Gentle pressure II</i>	<i>245</i>
<i>Chapter 72 – Rude awakenings.....</i>	<i>251</i>
<i>Chapter 73 – Pardon my</i>	<i>255</i>
<i>Chapter 74 – It’s getting complicated.....</i>	<i>257</i>
<i>Chapter 75 – A drive in the country.....</i>	<i>259</i>
<i>Chapter 76 – No drive in the country.....</i>	<i>265</i>
<i>Chapter 77 – Matters of the heart.....</i>	<i>267</i>
<i>Chapter 78 – Negotiations in progress.....</i>	<i>273</i>

<i>Chapter 79 – Rude awakenings II</i>	277
<i>Chapter 80 – Rude awakenings III</i>	279
<i>Chapter 81 – The end of day</i>	281
<i>Chapter 82 – The end of day II</i>	285
<i>Chapter 83 – Time for a pint III</i>	289
<i>Chapter 84 – A friend in need ...</i>	293
<i>Chapter 85 – Late in the ... night</i>	295
<i>Chapter 86 – Breaking the bank</i>	303
<i>Chapter 87 – The long and winding road</i>	305
<i>Chapter 88 – Rude awakenings IV</i>	307
<i>Chapter 89 – Dispersing gravity</i>	313
<i>Chapter 90 – On the road again</i>	315
<i>Chapter 91 – Cutting a deal</i>	317
<i>Chapter 92 – Planning ahead</i>	321
<i>Chapter 93 – Change of plans</i>	325
<i>Chapter 94 – A walk in the park</i>	329
<i>Chapter 95 – Up and away</i>	331
<i>Chapter 96 – Fine-tuning the plan</i>	335
<i>Chapter 97 – Up and away II</i>	341
<i>Chapter 98 – Reaching for the stars</i>	343
<i>Chapter 99 – Dressing up to the nines</i>	345
<i>Chapter 100 – Making sure</i>	357
<i>Chapter 101 – Up and away III</i>	359
<i>Chapter 102 – Waiting time</i>	371
<i>Chapter 103 – Nothing out of the ordinary</i>	373
<i>Chapter 104 – Beyond time</i>	375

<i>Chapter 105 – Change</i>	<i>379</i>
<i>Chapter 106 – Fooled again.....</i>	<i>385</i>
<i>Chapter 107 – Losing track</i>	<i>387</i>
<i>Chapter 108 – A walk in the dark</i>	<i>389</i>
<i>Chapter 109 – On track</i>	<i>393</i>
<i>Chapter 110 – On track II.....</i>	<i>395</i>
<i>Chapter 111 – Arrival II</i>	<i>401</i>
<i>Chapter 112 – Staff Meeting.....</i>	<i>403</i>
<i>Chapter 113 – Going down.....</i>	<i>405</i>
<i>Chapter 114 – On track III</i>	<i>423</i>
<i>Chapter 115 – Showdown.....</i>	<i>425</i>
<i>Chapter 116 – No news is good news ..?.....</i>	<i>437</i>
<i>Chapter 117 – Striking a deal.....</i>	<i>439</i>
<i>Chapter 118 – Radio-activity.....</i>	<i>443</i>
<i>Chapter 119 – Radio silence.....</i>	<i>447</i>
<i>Chapter 120 – Taking up positions</i>	<i>449</i>
<i>Chapter 121 – Having a blast</i>	<i>451</i>
<i>Chapter 122 – Finalizing the deal</i>	<i>453</i>
<i>Chapter 123 – Home safe</i>	<i>459</i>
<i>Chapter 124 – Zorba revisited.....</i>	<i>461</i>
<i>Chapter 125 – Truth be told</i>	<i>467</i>
<i>Chapter 126 – Project plans</i>	<i>471</i>
<i>Chapter 127 – Time to say goodbye</i>	<i>473</i>
<i>Chapter 128 – Handover.....</i>	<i>475</i>
<i>Chapter 129 – Handover II.....</i>	<i>477</i>
<i>Chapter 130 – Final words.....</i>	<i>481</i>

GROBUT OPENED HIS eyes, shook his head and immediately regretted it. It hurt badly. His vision blurred, and he could hardly make out the instruments on the panel in front of him. The shatterproof wind-screen lay shattered in what looked like millions of tiny pieces all over the cockpit, and he had no idea how long he had been unconscious.

As his vision cleared, he could see that his UPS seemed to be intact. He reached out and removed it from its slot in the dashboard, and after having checked that it still hummed reassuringly, he tucked it in the inside pocket of his long leather coat. Then he released the seat belt and clambered out of the cockpit.

The small Shuttle was stuck some three feet above the ground where the force of the impact had driven it halfway through the solid concrete wall of a large building. It was totalled, no doubt, but Grobut really didn't care, since the craft wasn't his. His only concern would be to find another craft for the rest of the journey, or maybe hitch a ride with one of the Stellar Cruisers which passed through this remote corner of space with surprising regularity and frequency.

Well, maybe not his only concern. The owner of the craft would probably be looking for him in a rather insistent manner by now. When Grobut had stolen the craft a few hours ago, it had immediately alarmed both the owner and a highly violently inclined parking lot guard force, and the guard force had taken up pursuit, doing what appeared to be their best to blow Grobut out of the skies. They had succeeded at this just as Grobut passed a tiny, blue, not entirely unfamiliar planet circling around a yellow sun, and despite Grobut's attempts at bouncing off the planet's atmosphere and leap back into space, the angle had been too steep. Being caught by the planet's gravity, it had only been a matter of minutes before Grobut would find himself at the receiving end of a very violent and unpleasant encounter with the surface of the planet. He had pressed all the buttons on the dashboard, yanked every lever and handle, and flicked all the switches while the surface of the planet loomed ever larger in the centre of his field of vision, but to no avail. In the very last few seconds before impact, however, he had managed to find a tiny joystick next to his seat, which seemed to have at least some effect on

the movements of the Shuttle. He had pushed and twisted it, and the gravitational forces when the craft pulled out of the near-vertical dive almost made him pass out. He was brutally revived, though, when the craft hit the ground with a huge thud, slid off the surface, and continued with insane speed towards a tall and very solid-looking building.

There was nothing he could do to avoid hitting it, so he hit it, and now, here he was. Shaken, but alive, and even more important, the UPS was intact. Without it, he would have no chance whatsoever of returning to his own universe and his own time.

‘MIDGE, FOR THE last time, switch off that computer and drag yourself down here, or else there’s no tea!’

Midge rolled his eyes, tapped the keyboard a few more times, and then did what his mother had told him. When he had settled at the table, he reached for the toast, and his mother handed him a cup of tea.

‘So, what’s new on the Internet?’ she chirped while he added a generous amount of sugar to his tea.

‘Basically everything, Mum. That’s what’s so clever about it.’

She raised an eyebrow. ‘Don’t be smart with me, young lad, or else I’ll have them disconnect the ... Internet thingie.’

Midge rolled his eyes again before taking a big bite of his toast. ‘Weww, you fee, I’m wunging fis vewwy awwanfed fimuwafion ...’ Another raised eyebrow made him chew a few times before he swallowed and cleared his throat.

‘Sorry,’ He took a big gulp of tea before continuing. ‘I’m running this very advanced simulation for my physics project, trying to determine the factors which influence the frequency and prominence of solar protuberances.’

‘Are you talking dirty to me?’

‘No, Mum, I’m not. A solar protuberance is a large, bright, loop-shaped feature which extends outward from the Sun’s surface from time to time, and it affects the Earth’s atmosphere and its magnetic field.’ He took another bite of his toast.

‘Quite the clever one, are we?’

‘Well, certainly I am, Mum. I’m not sure about you, though,’ he grinned. She smiled back at him as he sipped more tea.

‘Has the postman been around?’

Midge’s mother shook her head. ‘No. Why?’

‘Oh, it’s just my tablet computer. It’s been more than three weeks since I sent it to Computer Depot’s repair shop, and I really need it back now.’

‘Might I suggest reading a book instead? More tea?’

Midge nodded. ‘Thanks. I have read a book. Quite a few, actually, but I’ll need the tablet for the physics project presentation in school. I called the repair shop like a thousand times.’

His mother poured the tea and watched as Midge added milk and a few large teaspoonfuls of sugar and stirred the hot, greyish liquid. Then she said, 'Whatever happened to pen and paper?'

'Really! The next thing I know, you'll be suggesting PowerPoint.'

She nodded. 'The thought had crossed my mind. What's wrong with that?'

'Nothing. Except everything is wrong with that. It's so ... old-school.'

'Which is quite inappropriate in Year Nine, I take it?'

'Exactly. I really didn't think you'd understand.'

'I don't,' she said. Midge shook his head and took a sip of his tea before lapsing into a gloomy silence.

'Don't worry, honey. Maybe he'll bring it around tomorrow. Or the day after.'

'Great. And the presentation is in three days. How am I supposed to prepare for that? Can you imagine how this will look on my application form to Cambridge University?'

'Blame it on the Royal Mail. Cambridge will understand. Besides, that's all years from now.'

'Yes, but I don't want to miss out because the Royal Mail messed up. Do you really think Cambridge will understand?'

'I think you should finish your tea and prepare your project presentation the old-school way, just in case. I'm sure Cambridge will appreciate your efforts.' She ran a hand through his unruly hair, and he shrugged away.

'Don't touch the hair!'

His mother smiled and reached out again, but Midge jumped up and made his escape while grabbing his tea cup and grinning at her.

'Any more toast?'

AN ALARM BELL rang out, but Grobut paid no attention. He looked across the large hall. It was empty, so he took out the UPS and switched it on while striding along one wall of the hall.

‘What is this place?’ he asked. The screen of the UPS flickered momentarily, then the answer came,

‘Planet Earth, a category 21 planet approximately 26,700 light years from the centre of a small spiral galaxy locally known as The Milky Way. Current location is City of London, the British Isles, in the northern hemisphere of the planet, and ...’

‘I’ve been on Earth before,’ Grobut snapped. ‘It’s a dump, and a primitive dump at that. What is this building, and how do I get away from this planet?’

The UPS paused as it scanned the immediate surroundings; then it replied,

‘It is the office building of a company named Computer Depot. The nearest exit is some 30 yards from your current location, and it may be possible to hitch a ride on a Stellar Cruiser from the square in front of the building.’

An arrow on the screen indicated the direction, and Grobut switched off the UPS as he headed for the doors. Suddenly, a small, thickset man in a black uniform jumped out of a doorway. He pointed a metal baton at Grobut and looked extremely tense while assuming a position which was intended to come across as intimidating and threatening. It failed, in part because he wasn’t very tall, and in part because Grobut, who was well over 8 feet tall, apparently didn’t intend to take any notice of him.

He yelled something which Grobut didn’t understand, and Grobut cursed to himself for having bought last year’s model in InEar Communicators. Obviously, this person’s language hadn’t been included in its translation software.

The man yelled again, his hands shaking, and Grobut looked at him while tapping the screen of his UPS. A mere nanosecond later a translation of the guard’s words was transmitted in Grobut’s not entirely up-to-date InEar Communicator. ‘Stop right there, Mister!’

'Or else?' Grobut asked with polite interest. The words, sounding to the guard like the clatter of a shovel being dragged through a heap of gravel, were instantly translated by the UPS which rendered them in a gentle English female voice. Grobut looked at the UPS, annoyed. Someone ought to check its speech circuits, he thought to himself. The guard, however, seemed to grasp the meaning.

'Or else ... I will ... ' The guard's eyes flickered from Grobut to the baton. A froth had built up in the corners of his mouth, and his hands shook even more violently. Grobut didn't slow down, and by the time the guard looked up again, Grobut had reached him, lifted him off the ground, and tossed him aside. Grobut picked up the baton, looked at it, and placed the UPS in one pocket. Holding the baton with both hands, he examined it, and then, very slowly, while eyeing the fallen guard intently, he bent it to a u-shape. Then he threw the baton at the guard, nodded briefly, and strode off. And stopped again. While the incident with the guard had been dealt with, a massive anti-terror police force, which had been alarmed instants after Grobut's crash, had gathered at the front door of the building. Judging from their guns and equipment, they were not the average friendly welcome committee. In fact, they looked positively aggressive, and among them Grobut could see at least two men kneeling down while lifting something that looked like grenade launchers to their shoulders. The alarm still rang in his ears. Quite stressing it was, he thought.

One of the policemen yelled something which the UPS translated, 'Do not close any more, or I will fry your fish!' The translation probably wasn't entirely accurate, Grobut assumed.

'You're done for. I'll waste you, you dumb piece of scrap,' he muttered to the UPS which immediately translated his words. Somehow, they came out rather differently, but with surprising strength and clarity.

'You've had it! I'll kill you, you dumb heaps of crap!' This response was met with a brief silence which was then broken by the commanding officer's shout.

'Fire!'

The UPS immediately translated the single word. It was, however, quite needless since Grobut saw bursts of flames erupt from the two grenade launchers, followed by trails of smoke and sparks rapidly moving in his direction. He threw himself to the floor while the two grenades passed noisily over his head, missing him by only a few inches. Two violent explosions followed when the grenades hit the wall at the far end of the hall, scattering glass and concrete in all directions.

Grobut leapt up, flung himself in the direction of the doorway from which the guard had appeared, and rushed up a flight of stairs. Another pair of grenades slammed into the wall next to the door, and even though Grobut had by now reached the second floor, he could still feel the stairs tremble beneath his feet. A door in front of him was locked, but he kicked it in with a violent blow of his boot, and entered. The room was huge and dark, with row after row of office cubicles, and he ducked behind the partitioning walls while sneaking in the direction of a door at the opposite end of the room. The steps of the welcome committee echoed from the stairwell, and he switched off the UPS and put it in his pocket to avoid having his whereabouts revealed by an undesired translation of anything anyone might say.

Soft murmurs, whispered commands, and the sound of weapons clattering against body armour reached him as he slipped into a cubicle and ducked under a table while holding his breath. This was ... well, annoying. He didn't doubt that he could make a quick getaway; he always could. It was only a matter of time. And casualties, of course, but Grobut was never one to shy away from violence. Not even where huge opposing forces were involved. This time, however, he would prefer to make less of a fuss and attract only a minimum of attention. Any trouble involving beings from other universes tended to upset inhabitants of most planets, and Grobut knew from past experience that getting caught would mean possible incarceration, examination, and isolation. Also, rumour would spread, and this would cause most Stellar Cruisers to choose different routes, thus making it very difficult to hitch a ride to anywhere else once he regained his freedom.

More whispers. He breathed slowly and quietly. Then he heard two loud cracks in rapid succession, and a fraction of a second later the top of a partitioning wall exploded in a ball of fire, metal, and brightly coloured hessian. A postcard, slightly scorched at the edges, fluttered to the floor. It depicted a beach hotel somewhere warm and sunny. In bold, colourful letters against a clear, blue sky were printed a few words in several languages, one of them vaguely familiar to Grobut from previous visits. The words read 'Wish you were here'.

'So do I ...' muttered Grobut, but his words were drowned out by another pair of explosions, this time from the far end of the room. His pursuers were obviously firing blindly at whatever caught their attention. Judging from the rain of debris and shredded paper, a filing cabinet must have fallen victim to the latest barrage. Slowly, Grobut crawled out from under the table, along the smouldering partitioning wall, and out into the aisle. No-one there, it seemed, so he hurried along the row

of cubicles towards the door through which he'd recently entered. Before leaping up another flight of stairs, he caught a glimpse of the combat-clad policemen near the opposite end of the office. Obviously, they hadn't seen him.

On the 15th floor he found an open door. He tiptoed into a small ante-room equipped with a counter, a time-clock, and a rack of punch-cards. This was obviously a very primitive corporation, Grobut thought to himself, but what could one expect from a very primitive civilisation? A door next to the time clock gave way to a large workshop with innumerable tables covered with electronic equipment, tools, and computers. He looked at one of the computers and shook his head. Definitely an extremely primitive civilisation. Suddenly he stopped. A sound from the stairwell had caught his attention. Primitive though they were, they were also on to him. He cursed under his breath and trotted towards the far end of the room. The sounds grew louder, and he increased his speed while looking frantically for an exit. There wasn't one. Apparently, the only door was the one through which he'd entered. He stopped, pulled out the UPS and switched it on. It would be able to tell him if there was a Gate anywhere nearby, or if there was any other way out. The screen flickered for a second while the UPS ran a scan; then the soft voice whispered, 'Sorry, Mr. Grobut. The only way out is the only way in.'

He looked at the UPS in bewilderment. 'What?' he asked, dumbfounded. The UPS began humming a tune, and suddenly the voice of a male singer rang out at an alarmingly loud level.

'Sir Cliff, Mr. Grobut. Cliff Richard. Staggeringly popular around these parts, I gather. A pop singer.'

'A pop singer? How the hell is a pop singer going to get me out of here, you stupid thing?'

'He's not. I just thought the tune appropriate for the occasion. Besides, I'm not stupid, and I think we both know that, don't we?'

'Look, there's a bunch of savage, heavily armed, homicidal maniacs in extremely close pursuit of me, and you think pop music will cheer me up?' Grobut was furious. The UPS was his only means of finding a way out, and all it could think of was pop music, which had probably already warned his pursuers of his whereabouts. In fact, probability suddenly turned into certainty as a policeman flashed his torchlight in the ante-room. The UPS hummed another few bars of the pop song.

'Shut up!' Grobut hissed while banging his fist against the screen of the UPS. He ducked and started running again. The room was dark, and the floor was littered with electronic components, computer parts, cardboard boxes, and cables. He lifted his feet high while running in order

to avoid stumbling and falling, and as he ran, he continually searched for exits or places to hide. The policemen were spreading out behind him, their torch-lights piercing thin shafts of light through the darkness, and he narrowly avoided being seen by ducking behind a large plant as the light of a torch swept across the aisle. He bent forward, running on, turning down another aisle, and suddenly found himself facing a wall. He had reached a dead end. Cursing, he turned around and started in the opposite direction, but had to take cover again as the beam of one of the torches hit the wall behind him. Seconds later he was on his way once more. Heart pounding and fists clenched, he crossed an aisle, passed a table, turned right and sped towards the door. Suddenly he was caught in the beam of a torch-light, and a voice yelled, 'You! Stop right there!'

Grobut didn't stop. But even though he increased his stride, he remained caught in the light. Another beam from a different direction connected with the first, and seconds later, four or five policemen had their torch-lights trained on him, and he was blinded. That didn't stop him. What did stop him, however, was a bunch of computer cables lying in an untidy heap on the floor. Suddenly, both his feet were caught, and with arms flailing, he stumbled forwards. He grappled for support while trying to regain his balance, but to no avail. Momentum thrust his body forwards, but his feet were still caught in the heap of cables, and a fraction of a second before his head slammed against the floor, he realised he had let go of the UPS. Then darkness engulfed him.

GEORGY STAZL LOOKED at the hole in the wall where his Shuttle had until recently been firmly lodged. Now, all that could be seen were small pieces of debris on the ground behind the police barriers.

His Shuttle had been parked in its usual spot in the parking lot where he had left it after a long day of taking tourists on taxi flights to the moons of his home planet Imboid. Shortly after, as he was snoozing in his armchair, he had been woken up by an alarm message informing him that an attempt had been made to steal his Shuttle. Unfortunately, the attempt had been successful, but the parking lot guard force had taken up pursuit and immobilised the Shuttle as they came within firing range. Delighting in the knowledge of a job well done, they had performed a series of victory rolls, informed Stazl of the coordinates of the crash, and headed back home.

The parking lot security cameras had captured several minutes of excellent footage which clearly identified the culprit as a certain very notorious Traveller by the name of Grobut. Stazl had been fortunate enough to hitch a ride on a Stellar Cruiser shortly after receiving the crash coordinates, and now, here he was, alone in the dark and the rain, determined to retrieve his Shuttle and in the process make Grobut suffer in the most extreme sense of the word for his deeds.

Only two problems remained. Well, three, actually, but the third might not have been critical. Problem number one was that the Shuttle was gone. Stazl had watched uniformed men dislodging it from the hole in the wall with heavy machinery and equipment, and then taken it away under strict security precautions. And problem number two was that Grobut was nowhere to be found. That was what made problem number three critical. Stazl had bought the Shuttle on a high-interest payment plan, and he had expected to be able to make the daily payments with money earned by offering sight-seeing trips to the various moons of his home planet. The current location, position, and state of the Shuttle made flights impossible, and that called for some hard-handed action directed at Grobut in order to ensure suitable compensation of a pecuniary sort. The current location, position, and state of Grobut, however, were so far unclear.

One thing was clear, though. Problem number three was the Shuttle dealer, Arsenio Saddlebrook of Shuttle Emporium on the planet Smetack. As soon as news reached him that the Shuttle had been stolen and probably damaged beyond repair, he would be knocking on Stazl's door to collect the remaining payments, since the Shuttle, which had so far served as security against the loan, most likely no longer would. In fact, as its current location, position, and state were unknown to Stazl, it would serve no purpose at all. And with Stazl's usual luck, Saddlebrook would be accompanied by a couple of Minion Droids; the meanest, toughest, evilest droids in the known universes. This would almost certainly result in severe bodily harm as Stazl had spent every single Quacent he had in order to make the down payment on the Shuttle, and he had no way of meeting the dealer's impending financial demands. Prospects were grim, he thought to himself.

He was about to signal the Stellar Cruiser to pick him up when a movement in the outskirts of his field of vision caught his attention. It was a human, staggering across the open square in Stazl's direction. The human looked quite intoxicated, and as he came closer, Stazl could clearly smell the sharp odour of stale beer. He called the human.

'Ahoy, there!'

The human, almost certainly a male of some thirty years of age, stopped and struggled to remain standing upright while focusing on Stazl. Stazl repeated,

'Ahoy there.'

Like Grobut, Stazl carried a UPS which, unlike Grobut's UPS, was equipped with excellent speech circuits and therefore delivered a fluent translation in a plain and gentle male voice. The male of some thirty years of age squinted.

'Wha' ..?'

'I say, do you know what happened here?'

The man looked from Stazl to the craft in the wall, then back to Stazl. He nodded. 'Yesch ... ' The voice was slurry. Stazl felt a surge of delight and relief. Maybe he could still track down Grobut.

'Really? Well, could you tell me a bit about it?' He paused, then added 'Please.'

'Yesch ...'

The man didn't elaborate, so after a few moments of waiting in vain, Stazl pressed on. 'Please do!'

It seemed to require considerable mental effort on the part of the man, but after some deliberation he nodded. 'I wasch just schtrolling ... by tsche building when all of a schudden ... BANG!'

Stazl nodded in encouragement, and the man continued. 'There wasch this crasch ... Bang! You know ...' His voice trailed off as he tried to gather his thoughts. They were few and far between, it seemed.

'Well, and then schome shooting. You know ... Bang!' He appeared to enjoy the sound of the last word and said it a few more times.

Stazl tried to remain calm and encouraging. 'Yes?'

'Yesch. Well, and then thisch huuuge man was dragged off by the po-lease ... You know. To the schlammer.'

'I see.' Stazl felt like attacking and maiming the man in order to beat a quick, clear answer out of him, but decided against such action.

'Yesch. They dragged him off juscht like that,' the man nodded.

'Could you possibly tell me where I might find the local police station?'

The man nodded again.

'Then do, please.' Stazl could hear the tension in his own voice, and apparently, so could the man.

'Schteady on, old bean. We're all good friendsch, are we not?' He waited while Stazl nodded frantically despite his not feeling very friendly, then continued, 'The easchiest way isch ...' He pointed. 'In that direction. Only a few hundred yardsch, and then the schecond schtreet on the left. It'sch called North Schtreet, and there'sch a neon schign in front of the ..., po-lease schtation. Can't misch it ...' He had obviously intended to elaborate on this, but suddenly he realised that his one-man audience had set off in the direction of North Street. He shook his head, and with a shrug of his shoulders he turned around, struggled for a moment to regain his balance, then continued his staggering journey across the open square.

GROBUT OPENED HIS eyes, shook his head and immediately regretted it. It hurt badly. His vision was blurred, and he could hardly make out the shapes in front of him. It certainly wasn't the instruments of a cockpit, so obviously, he hadn't crashed this time. So far, so good. He squinted and tried to identify the objects that he could only dimly see. They seemed to be striped ... Odd, he thought. Then, slowly, as his vision cleared, it dawned on him. The stripes were bars. He'd been caught by the police while trying to escape after having crashed a stolen Shuttle, and it would seem that the escape had failed spectacularly. Oh, yes ... The cables. He had stumbled and fallen. And banged his head against something. Probably the floor. Definitely the floor. And he ... He'd dropped the UPS! He started violently and frantically searched his pockets. They were all empty. Not even a piece of chewing gum. Or lint. It took quite some effort to get to his feet, and in a strange way it felt comforting to hold on to the bars which separated him from two policemen sitting at a desk, typing on ancient computer keyboards.

'Hey!' he yelled. Both policemen looked up.

'Hey, you. Look, I really need some of the stuff that was in my pockets.'

The two policemen looked at each other in bewilderment, and it took Grobut a few moments to realise why. They didn't understand what he said. Without the UPS he was unable to communicate with them, which in turn meant that he had no way of asking them whether they had found the UPS and brought it with them to the police station. One of the policemen took a sip of tea.

'What's he saying?' he asked his colleague. The other policeman shrugged.

"e banged 'is 'ead something awful against the floor. Maybe 'e's 'ad a brain injury,' he suggested, looking at Grobut. 'Should we call a doctor, you think?'

The first policeman shook his head. 'Naaah, he's fine. He's upright and making noises. That's good enough, I reckon.'

His colleague nodded in agreement, then bent over his computer keyboard again as if searching for appropriate places to put his fingers.

'Hello, you two dimwits!' Grobut yelled. Both policemen looked at him again, but neither of them seemed to understand. Grobut pointed at the man with the tea cup, and the man looked down to check if his fly was open. It wasn't. He looked up again, and Grobut slowly raised one finger. Then he bent it in a beckoning gesture as if trying to drag the policeman nearer by sheer force of will. He repeated the gesture, but the policeman didn't move.

'What do you think he wants?'

The other shook his head. 'Dunno. Tea, possibly?'

'Oh. Yes, of course. He hasn't had anything since the anti-terror chaps brought him in. I'll just go fetch him a sarnie and a cuppa, then I'll call them and tell them he's awake.' He stood up, put down his cup, and, much to Grobut's consternation, left the room.

'What? You numbskull! Come back here. Don't leave. I want to talk to you!' Grobut yelled, but this only caused the other policeman to raise a finger to his pursed lips and utter a 'Shhhhh'. Stunned, Grobut went quiet. A moment later the first policeman returned with a sandwich in one hand and a cup in the other. He moved closer to the cell, and for a brief moment Grobut considered grabbing his arm, dragging him toward the bars and threatening to kill him if his colleague didn't let Grobut out. Two things stopped him. One was that the policeman put the cup on the floor and placed the sandwich on top of it, and then pushed the cup slowly and carefully in the direction of the cell while staying just out of Grobut's reach. The other thing was that Grobut was actually rather hungry.

THE MALE OF some thirty years of age had been right, Stazl realised. He couldn't miss it. The black and white neon sign clearly stated that this was North St. Police Station, and Stazl considered his next move. The easiest and most obvious one would be to kick in the door, kill the policemen on duty, find Grobut, and drag him off to the Stellar Cruiser still hovering overhead. This plan was severely flawed by the fact that Stazl was unarmed, and the policemen almost certainly weren't, which moved odds uncomfortably in their favour. Instead, Stazl tiptoed through a narrow alley between the police station and the adjacent building, and in a matter of moments he found himself in the dark backyard of the station. All the windows facing the yard were barred, and only a few were lit. Stazl took out his UPS, switched it on, and turned the face of the UPS towards the building. Almost instantly a small bleep indicated that it had successfully scanned the building. Stazl looked at the screen.

The thermographic layer of the image showed seven major heat sources, and the biographic layer indicated that all were organic life forms of some sort. The petrographic layer revealed that only two of the heat sources were located in small, confined spaces, meaning that one of these would in all likelihood be the incarcerated Grobut. But which one? Stazl pondered this question for a moment. The surveillance cameras in his Craft Dock had clearly shown Grobut to be at least eight feet tall, so most likely the larger of the two would be the culprit. The fact that he was placed in a cell on the second floor did not bother Stazl; he had borrowed an anti-gravity unit from the cargo hull of the Stellar Cruiser, so reaching the cell would be easy. He had also borrowed two tiny thermo-cellular explosive devices which to the untrained eye resembled lengths of sticky rope, and they would be able to remove most obstacles when applied. He made a decision. The larger heat source it was.

After switching off and pocketing the UPS, Stazl took out the anti-gravity unit and flicked it on. Moments later he found himself suspended nearly twelve feet above the ground, trying to peer through a small window. The window glass was frosted, though, so all he could see were blurred shadows and shapes. A small ventilation shaft next to the

window also provided no view into the interior of the building. Never mind. This was it, he decided. He took out the thermo-cellular explosive devices and placed one end of one device on the wall to the left of the window near the ventilation shaft, stretched it to what he considered the appropriate length, pressed the device firmly against the wall, and repeated the process with the other device to the right of the window. He took a step backwards to admire his handiwork, and quite pleased with himself, he finally stuck the igniters to the devices. They had been set to five seconds delay, and he watched with fascination as blinking red lights indicated the passing of time. The thermo-cellular demolition went off practically unnoticed and without a sound. Suddenly, every atom and nucleus located between the two devices dissolved in a dense cloud of dust, debris, and smoke, and when the dust had settled, Stazl could see the square hole in the wall left by the thermo-cellular reaction. He stepped closer and looked through the hole.

He didn't see what hit him. It was, in fact, Grobut's huge, clenched fist which emerged from the inside of the building at what seemed like supersonic speed, and it landed with massive and brute force in the middle of Stazl's face and immediately knocked him unconscious. He hurtled backwards, but remained suspended in mid-air by the anti-gravity unit as Grobut stuck his immense torso through the gaping hole in the wall. Grobut looked around and saw Stazl hovering a few feet from the wall; then he picked up a handful of debris from the shattered window frame and threw it in Stazl's direction. Some of it fell to the ground, and some settled on the near edges of the anti-gravity field which turned out to be less than two feet away. Without further hesitation Grobut climbed out and leapt from the demolished window, landing somewhat brutally on top of the fallen Stazl. He rolled off, sat up, and began to search Stazl's pockets. Oh, miracle of miracles! A UPS! He felt a flood of relief and switched the unit on, waiting for the familiar bleep which indicated a connection to The Universal Network, but nothing happened. He pressed the button again. Still nothing. Then he saw the cracks across both the screen and the backside of the UPS and realised that his landing on top of Stazl had totalled the UPS and thus ensured that he would probably be stuck on this crummy planet for infinity. He pounded the UPS with his fist, which did nothing to improve its condition, and with an angry curse he flung it at the wall of the police station. Damn! Just when it seemed his luck had changed, it hadn't after all. The only upside was that he was no longer imprisoned. It was extremely fortunate that he had recognised the characteristic smell of the thermo-cellular explosives drifting through the ventilation shaft,

and had been prepared for the demolition, but he was unable to figure out why this strange character had decided to demolish that particular section of the wall. A further search of the fallen man's pockets revealed a Link which Grobut instantly pocketed since it would enable him to communicate with most other civilised beings in the Universe. He also found two holographic prints showing himself stealing a small Shuttle, and suddenly it dawned on him. This was the owner of the Shuttle! What an unreasonably persistent character. Why couldn't he just call it quits and buy himself another Shuttle?

The search also revealed the anti-gravity unit which Grobut examined carefully. It was standard issue, he realised, so he would be able to operate it effortlessly. Having thus relieved the unconscious Stazl of his immediate usefulness, Grobut gave him a fierce kick which threw him off the safe haven of the anti-gravity field, and with a profound lack of interest Grobut watched Stazl fall and smash through the lid of a garbage container twelve feet below. Then he turned the knob on the anti-gravity unit and slowly descended to ground level.

THE PHONE RANG. Even though it was only 9 o'clock and he had just settled at his desk with a cup of tea, Rollins felt tired. The open office landscape and his office cubicle seemed even more of a mess than usual, and the entire building actually looked as if an office party had gotten slightly out of hand last night. He sighed and picked up the receiver.

'It's Rollins.'

'Mr. Rollins, young Midge Fly is on the line. Again.'

Rollins sighed again. He had stopped counting the number of times young Midge Fly had been on the line in order to inquire about his tablet computer.

'Right. Put him through.' He waited a few moments, then he said, 'Hello Midge. How are you doing today?'

'Not bad, Mr. Rollins, but not as well as I would be doing if I had my tablet back. And yourself?' Midge answered.

'Until just now, quite fine, thanks. Look, Midge, I haven't had any news yet, and I expect that very shortly one of my colleagues will just drop your tablet on my desk and tell me everything is right as rain. Or something.'

'Well, have you checked?' Midge asked.

For a brief moment Rollins considered answering in the affirmative, but truth be told, he hadn't checked. He glanced cursorily across the desk, shuffled through the content of the letter trays, moved a few pieces of paper; then he answered, 'I have. Sorry, Midge. No luck today either. Why don't I just call you as soon as I have news for you?' His voice trailed off as he finished the sentence.

'Sorry, I didn't catch that last bit, Mr. Rollins,' Midge said, but Rollins didn't answer.

'Mr. Rollins ..?'

Still no reply; then Rollins came back. 'Midge, I may have news for you. I just noticed that there's a tablet here which had slipped under some papers. The repair chaps must have dropped it off sometime after I left yesterday.'

'Really? Are you sure?' Midge could hardly believe his ears.

'Absolutely. That's the one. Tell you what, I'll wrap it up and drop it

in the outbox, and by tomorrow you should have it back.' Rollins had already opened a drawer and taken out a large padded envelope, and while squeezing the phone's handset between his shoulder and his ear, he put the tablet in the envelope, sealed the envelope, and found a ball-point pen.

'Let me just take down your address, and then I'll see to it that it's sent to you straight away.'

'Thanks very much, Mr. Rollins.'

STAZL OPENED HIS eyes, shook his head and immediately regretted it. It hurt badly. His vision was blurred, and he couldn't remember what had happened to him. He tried to move. It hurt badly, too, so he stopped trying. He decided to run a quick mental check of his condition. Alive? Check. Fortunate, that. Unharmed? Hard to tell, even though he had been wearing body armour. Now, Stazl realised, he was lying on his back at the bottom of what appeared to be a rectangular, smelly container, surrounded by an unpleasant assortment of waste and debris. Streaks of greyish daylight filtered through the smashed lid of the container.

His nose hurt madly, and judging from the way it impaired his vision, it had swollen to at least twice its normal size. He gave a jolt as the painful memory of what had happened, suddenly came back to him. Grobut! It must definitely have been Grobut in the cell of the police station, and somehow, he had seized the opportunity to escape the instant opportunity arose. And Stazl had been the one to provide that opportunity while at the same time happening to be the only obstacle left in Grobut's path to freedom.

Stazl decided to skip the rest of the inventory check. The jolt had made it clear to him that most vital functions were intact, though bruised, and painstakingly slowly, he rolled over and came to his feet. Practically every move hurt as he climbed out of the container and found himself in the backyard of the police station. The hole he had made in the wall the previous night, had been boarded over, and the yard was empty. Stazl groaned as he slowly raised his hand and tried to locate his UPS. He couldn't. He tried his other hand and the remaining pockets, but to no avail. Also, his Link and the anti-gravity unit were gone. With a growing sense of panic he realised that he might now be stranded in a strange and unfriendly world very far from his own with no chance of ever finding a way home. He almost wished Arsenio Saddlebrook would find him and drag him off this awful and forsaken planet.

MIDGE ENTERED THE kitchen, closely followed by Stick, his best friend. The first thing he noticed, was the brown envelope on the kitchen table.

‘Whoa! Hey! My tablet’s back from the repair shop!’ he grinned.

Stick looked at him. ‘You should have bought an iPad. They never break down.’

Midge shook his head. ‘No way. iPads are overrated. Android rules.’ He tore open the envelope and carefully pulled out its contents. Holding the tablet computer in his hand, he searched for the ‘on’ button on the right side of the unit, then froze. The button wasn’t there. He turned the tablet and looked at its side, but where the ‘on’ button used to be, there was nothing. He checked the other side as well, but found nothing.

‘Strange ...’ he murmured. ‘This can’t be my tablet. The silly nincompoops must have sent me the wrong tablet.’ He ran a finger along the edges and sides of the tablet again; then found a small button on the top. Puzzled, he pressed it, but nothing happened. He pressed the button again. Still nothing. Then he shook the tablet. This also produced no visible result.

‘Really! I buy this incredibly expensive tablet, it breaks down, I send it to the shop, and they send me this piece of ... Whatsit? It’s completely worthless!’

Stick shrugged. ‘Like I said, iPads are a lot better.’

‘Actually, that’s not what you said,’ a soft female voice announced. The two boys looked at one another in amazement; then stared at the tablet.

‘Did that say that?’ Stick asked incredulously. Midge shrugged, obviously not sure what to say.

The tablet answered, ‘I most certainly did. And you did not say that. You said ...’

‘I know what I said,’ Stick interrupted. ‘But how do you know?’

‘I heard you say it, obviously.’

‘How can some no-name Android tablet understand what I’m saying? I know that whenever I ask my iPad a question, the answer’s always so far off that I’m sure the silly thing can’t hear a word.’ Stick snapped.

The soft female voice continued, ‘It can’t. That’s why. It merely comprises a microphone and some astonishingly incapable speech-recognition

software which can only come up with a limited number of pre-defined answers. There is no actual comprehension involved. Only comparison.'

Stick raised an eyebrow. 'Do you mean to say that you actually understand what we say?'

'I might be inclined to say that it is far from obvious whether you actually understand what I say, but yes. I do.' The soft female voice was slightly less soft in the emphasis of the personal pronoun.

Midge looked at Stick. Then he looked at the tablet. 'You're no ordinary tablet.'

'I know. Or to be specific, I'm not ordinary, and I'm not a tablet.'

'You're not a tablet?' Midge asked.

'You're stating the obvious. I just told you. I am, in point of fact, a UPS.' The voice was still soft, but an edge of annoyance had crept into it.

'I knew you were,' Stick interjected. 'Some secret new Apple product, right?'

'Wrong. UPS is short for Universal Positioning System, which in your language roughly translates into a friendly, efficient guide for travelling the world. Any world, in fact. Or any universe, for that matter. Hence the name. I was not manufactured by Apple, but come from a fairly remote place by your standards.'

Stick scratched his head. 'That means the Far East? Not Ireland, anyway.'

'Neither,' the UPS continued. 'I was manufactured by a company whose name in your language would be something in the region of 'The Friendly and Extremely Huge Computer Corporation'. However, both the words 'Computer' and 'Corporation' should be interpreted in the broadest possible sense, as they do not begin to represent the actual meaning of those words in my native language.'

'What is the actual meaning of the word 'computer' in your native language?' Midge inquired. The screen of the UPS lit up, and the word 'computer' appeared in round, pleasant letters.

'Trust me, you wouldn't understand. However, in your language, and, might I add, in your world, a computer is an extremely primitive piece of hardware which can basically do only one thing. It can sort the numbers 0 and 1 in different orders. And that's it. Your software engineers are rather adept at utilising this, but still, your computers can't even tell you the time of day.'

'My iPhone can.' Stick said.

'Well, no, it can't. It can inform you of the result of a number of calculations based on the order of zeros and ones. It can't read a watch.'

'Neither can you,' said Stick.

'Ah, but I can,' said the UPS, its voice again surprisingly gentle. 'Do try me,' it continued.

'All right. Take this!' Stick unstrapped his wrist-watch and held it in front of the screen.

'According to your watch it's 4.46 PM, which is not entirely correct. According to your time zone, it's actually 4.47.52 PM. Incidentally, your watch is a Casio Pro Trek PRG 40 which will have cost you some 140 pounds. You should have bought the Pro Trek Tough Solar instead. It is radio controlled, so it will keep time quite accurately. All things considered.' The screen flickered; then an image of a Casio Pro Trek Tough Solar appeared.

'How on earth did you do that?' Stick asked in disbelief.

'I can actually do it anywhere,' the UPS stated. 'Not merely on Earth. And the question about how is quite easily answered, but I sincerely doubt that you'll understand that either.'

'You just checked Google,' Midge said, even though he was beginning to realise that the actual method was not quite that simple.

'Oh, Google. Yes, quite nifty, that. But no, I took a look at your friend's watch, checked my database, my geographical position, your currency system, the local radio signal system which certain watches tap into in order to be able to tell the correct time, and then, yes, I Googled the watchmaker down the road to find the most current prices and the best alternative watch.' The UPS seemed to take a deep breath and then lapsed into a quiet, steady hum as the screen went black.

Stick looked at his watch. 'I knew I should have bought the Solar ... Typical.' He put on the watch again, still not quite convinced.

'Look, that trick you just did ... It could be done by some clever piece of software. It still doesn't prove that you're actually able to think. Maybe your software just happens to be slightly better than Apple's.'

'I should say it does. However, proving my capabilities should be a small matter.'

'How?' Midge asked. The screen of the UPS lit up again. For a fraction of a second, it flickered. Then an image appeared, and both boys looked at it, puzzled.

'What is this?' Midge asked.

The soft female voice answered, 'If you look closely, you'll see yourselves and a woman in the picture. Right?'

They nodded, and Midge said, 'It's Mum. When was this taken?'

'In about two minutes,' the UPS answered. A short, slightly uncomfortable silence ensued.

Then Stick said, 'In about two minutes ..?'

The image on the screen changed as the UPS zoomed in on a small detail. 'This is the clock on the wall. Feel free to check the current time.'

Both boys did. The hands of the clock on the wall showed the time to be 4.49 PM, but upon close inspection of the image, they could both clearly see that the time was 4.51.

'Mum is not in. She's probably on her way home now. How did you do that? Is it some Photoshop trick? Are we on Candid camera?'

'Neither,' the UPS replied as the image zoomed out again. 'I have, for the sake of verifying that I am actually able to think independently of programming languages and software, taken the liberty of arranging this little demonstration. As you will know, I have spent the past many hours in a heavily padded envelope, so there is no way I could have taken this picture on a previous occasion.'

This sounded logical, but it still didn't explain how the image appeared on the screen. The UPS continued, 'Furthermore, I have certain capabilities pertaining to both the word 'universal' and the word 'positioning'. An explanation might seem due, but I fear it would be a waste of effort at this particular moment in time. In plain terms and at the obvious risk of repeating myself, you wouldn't get it.'

Midge was inclined to believe the UPS; this seemed both uncanny and incredible, but Stick still looked doubtful. 'It's a trick, right?' he asked.

The UPS purred contentedly. 'Yes, and a rather clever one at that. Let's see which one of you will first figure it out. Or ... Actually, I already know the answer to that.'

'Do you mean to say ...' Midge paused. Then he took a deep breath and continued, 'Do you mean to say that you can foresee the future?'

The UPS seemed to pause and think for a moment before answering. 'That is a very good question. Unfortunately, the answer is not all that simple, since it involves thinking of time in an entirely different manner from what you are used to. The word 'future' implies that time is linear and unidirectional, and both these predicate adjectives are, as you will shortly see, entirely misleading.'

Midge was about to speak when they heard the sound of the front door opening. Moments later a voice rang out, 'Midge, it's me, Mum!'

Midge held up the UPS in disbelief as he turned and stared in the direction of the kitchen door. It swung open, and his mother entered. 'Hello, boys. What's wrong with you? You look as if you've seen a ghost. Everything all right with you?' She looked at them quizzically. They both nodded.

'Oh, you've got your tablet back. How nice. How's the physics project coming along?' She placed a bag of groceries on the table and began

unpacking it without waiting for a reply. Midge and Stick looked at one another, and then at the clock on the wall. 4.51 sharp. They both looked at the UPS. The screen was blank, but slowly, the image reappeared. A frozen repetition of the moment where Midge's mother put the bag of groceries on the table beneath the clock while the two boys stared at her. Then a text appeared. It read,

'Told you so.'