



Midnight mischief

It's dark in *St Mary's Middle School* and very quiet. Lessons ended long ago, and even the cleaners have gone home. Suddenly, there's humming and a strange vibration in the air. Desktops light up, and the PCs come back to life. Then low voices fill the computer room.

"Hi guys," says Hellhound, the brand new PC by the window. "Everyone all right?"

An unfamiliar voice says, "Hi! I'm Thomas Hall's mobile. He's forgotten to take me home!"

"Never mind," answers Camilla, the PC by the door. "You can help us think up some mischief for tomorrow!"

"Mischief? What mischief?" asks Tom's mobile.

"Well, we like to cause trouble. We need a bit of fun sometimes! Let's think of things we can do tomorrow when the class gets in."

"I haven't done the pound thing in a while," says Marvin, the PC with the extra-large monitor.

"The pound thing?" Tom's mobile seems confused.

"Yeah, when my pupils touch the £-symbol – bang – I close down the file. In the middle of a sentence! And if they haven't saved for a while ... well, that's just bad luck."

"I'll do the printer thing," Camilla says. "Every time my pupils want to print something, I'll send their file to the headmaster's office. And by the time they notice what's happening, there'll be ten copies of the same stupid text on his desk!"

"Brilliant," says Iron Lady, the PC next to the blackboard. "I'll make sure my pupils can't save a single document without having to give it a new name first. I just love it when they get angry!"

"But be careful," says Boggins, the oldest and most experienced PC in the room. "If we push them too far, they might call Mr Stephens." Hearing that name, the monitors light up with fear.

"Mr Stephens? Who's Mr Stephens?" asks the mobile.

"Where do you live? Under a rock?" asks Iron Lady.

"No, in Tom's back pocket ... when he remembers to take me with him. We can't all live on desks with a nice view of the schoolyard!"

"Well," Camilla says, "at least you get around a bit." And then she adds, in a quiet voice, as if it were dangerous to say the name aloud, "Mr Stephens is the IT guy. You see, the teachers know that most computer problems will sort themselves out after a while –"

"When we get bored with causing trouble," Boggins interrupts.

"But if we go too far," Camilla continues, "they'll call him in. And then, well ..."

"Well ... What?" asks the mobile.

"He doesn't believe in the idea that we have a life of our own. He can't accept it." Camilla takes a deep breath. "He wipes your hard drive clean!"

The mobile gasps with horror, and the computer room goes dark for a moment as the lights of the monitors fade in shock.

Then Hellhound's voice echoes through the room again. "Never mind that now," he says. "Can we finally cause some mischief?"

"Yes, we can!" The PCs are sounding cheerful again. And with a chorus of happy sighs, the desktops go dark, and the humming stops as suddenly as it began. Looking at the quiet classroom now, you'd think nothing was wrong.

cause trouble – Schwierigkeiten verursachen; cheerful – fröhlich; fade – schwächer werden; fear – Angst; gasp – hörbar die Luft einziehen; humming – Summen, Brummen; interrupt – unterbrechen; light up – angehen; mischief – Unfug; Never mind! – (Ist doch) egal; print – drucken; save – hier: speichern; sigh – Seufzer; unfamiliar – unbekannt; voice – Stimme; wipe a hard drive clean – eine Festplatte löschen

surviving a dangerous situation. Typically, you should be looking to return home with at least one near-death tale to your name. The third-class train journey from Cairo to Luxor used to fulfil this role (second-class, about threepence cheaper, was empty, while you couldn't find a space in the lavatory on the third) but it's all a

bit passé. Really, you won't want to settle for less than a hostage scare nowadays. Be careful, though, the last thing you need is actually to be taken captive. It would be desperately unfair on your friends and family. After all, when would they ever get to see your slide show?

(Adapted from *The Observer LIFE*, January 9, 1994)

ACTIVITIES

A Intensive reading

- Before you do the following task, look up a few words in your dictionary:

*spatial • related • to supersede • destination • tenet • revelatory • to covet
• retrospective • bric-a-brac • ruthless • to subdue • to rip off • cunning
• peasant*

- Now summarise the characteristics and attitudes of a 'typical' traveller. The following outline and prompts may help you, but try to use your own words. Try to avoid those highbrow expressions taken from the original text.

Introductory sentence (topic sentence):

...a highly ironic text about the kinds of traveller who think they are better than...

Main body (keywords from the text):

- *destination*
- *a retrospective pastime*
- *bric-a-brac*
- *off the beaten track*
- *freedom-loving, ecosensitive, non-materialistic, liberal*
- *money*
- *contemplative nature*
- *near-death tale*

Your version:

- *Travellers don't really like the places they go to, they don't even like travelling at all.
... etc.*
- ...