The Internet of **** things

Mind the app.

Karen had had a very good week. Sales of her start-up's Integrated Life Management app had passed half a million in its first 30 days on the market, so she had treated everybody to dinner. Tuesday it was beer and pizza for the coders and design team. Wednesday it was tapas and wine at a bistro for the sales and marketing team. Thursday it was a special dinner at Pierre's with cognac and single-malt scotch for the board. The cash hadn't started coming in yet, so she had charged it all to her personal account.

All she wanted on Friday evening was a bowl of chocolate-fudge ice cream and a good night's sleep. She went into the kitchen and peered inside the freezer. "Where is the chocolate ice cream," she asked the refrigerator. Her app should be tracking her food.

"It was past its use-by date and has been discarded," the refrigerator answered.

"You are to reorder important perishables when they expire," she said, annoyed. "Where is the fresh ice cream?"

"There will be no replacement," the refrigerator said. "Your health-care app blocked purchases of high-calorie foods because its bioprofile monitor detected serious overeating."

Karen had been running the app for three months and hadn't seen this bug before. At 130 pounds, she was a svelte size 10, and the insurance company had nothing to complain about. "Override," she demanded, reciting her ten-character supervisory code.

"Override request submitted," the refrigerator replied, transmitting the code to the cloud server. "Override request

denied. Terms and conditions of your health-care policy allow intervention in the event of an eating disorder."

"That's nonsense, you stupid machine!" Karen shouted, and slammed the freezer shut. "I just want a bedtime snack."

"You are authorized to have half a stalk of celery, without dip." The refrigerator hatch opened, and a robotic arm offered her a limp yellowish-green thing.

She batted it away and glared. She should be able to debug this problem herself. "Why do you think I am overweight?"

"Excessive calorie consumption and no input on weight or excretion for 15 days."

Had it been that long since she weighed herself? She sighed and walked to the bathroom to weigh herself. She slipped off her smartphone and shoes to avoid carrying any extra weight before she stepped on the scales.

"Thank you for weighing yourself," the scales said. "Please remember to weigh yourself daily to keep your bioprofile current."

Your new weight is 131 pounds, up one pound in 15 days."

Karen slipped on her shoes and smartphone and walked back to the kitchen. "Are you satisfied now?" she asked the refrigerator.

"Processing," the refrigerator said.

"Phone, note to self, tell coding team to improve response time," Karen said, impatiently.

"Food suitable for your new dietary restrictions has been ordered and will be delivered tomorrow morning. Health-management system has determined that you need no further food tonight."

"Debug Mode: explain decision," she said.

"Imputed calorie count for past week of meal purchases and home consumption is 140,713, indicating bingeing. No input on excretion. Purging or serious metabolic imbalance suspected. You are not using the biosystem monitoring features of your

smart toilet. Under terms and conditions of your health-care plan, you must comply with toilet monitoring for metabolism assessment. Household toilet monitoring has been enabled, overriding your privacy setting. Please enter your personal identification code whenever you use a toilet outside of your home."

"Your stupid smart toilet gives false alarms," Karen said, rather loudly. It had misread alcohol metabolites and disabled her phone's car-key app for an entire day.

The refrigerator said nothing.

"I took people out for dinner the last three nights," she pleaded.

"Payment from personal account is assumed to be for personal consumption."

"My business account is maxed out!" This was not going well.

"Health-care supervisory app has limited personal food purchases to calorie-controlled portions," the refrigerator said. Karen recognized the phrase. The health-care app had taken over the life-management app. She would have to call in some heavy tech help to fix this.

"Dammit," Karen muttered. Walking out of the kitchen, she asked her phone: "Walk to chocolate fudge ice cream, open for the next hour."

"Those data not available due to health-maintenance system restrictions," the phone told her.

Karen would not be defeated. "I'm going for out for a brisk walk," she said, and slipped out the door. The convenience store on the corner was a bit grubby, but it did have ice cream. But when she brought her carton of chocolate fudge to the counter, her smartphone refused to pay for it, she didn't have a penny in cash and the clerk wouldn't take an IOU.

Furious at the humiliation, she swore at the clerk and stomped out. The smartphone made a satisfying smash when she hurled it at the concrete pavement outside. She felt quite satisfied until she tried to get into her apartment and realized that without the phone she had no keys, no money and no identification. It was going to be a very long weekend.

JEFF HECHT is Boston correspondent for *New Scientist* and a contributing editor to *Laser Focus World*.