

The Christmas the lights went out

Five people, whose lives interrelate, live the build-up to Christmas in different ways in different places. A sudden blackout changes their lives forever ...

Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the article and do the exercise.

Preparation task

Match the descriptions (a–h) with the vocabulary (1–8).

Vocabulary

1. a plug
2. freezing
3. a power cut
4. a departure
5. cosy
6. a snowflake
7. Christmas decorations
8. boredom

Description

- a. leaving
- b. lights, tinsel, baubles and ribbons
- c. extremely cold
- d. the feeling of being bored
- e. the thing you put in an electric socket
- f. when the electricity supply is interrupted
- g. a little piece of snow that falls from the sky
- h. warm and comfortable

The Christmas the lights went out

Tom Jankowitz took his coat off and threw it onto the seat in the airport lounge. He sat down and opened up his laptop computer, keeping one eye on the small television which showed the departure times of all the flights from the airport.

Tom Jankowitz was tired. Tired and bored. It was Christmas, nearly. Tom hated Christmas. He only remembered that it would be Christmas tomorrow because there were Christmas decorations all over the airport, and he could see the date on the small television showing the departure times of all the flights. '24 December,' it said. 'Happy Christmas' said all the notices in the windows of the shops. The shops were closed now. It was late. Tom was going home. He had been to a business meeting in New York and had to take a plane back home. The meeting had been difficult. He had decided to close a lot of his company's offices. A lot of people were unhappy about his decision, but he didn't care.

Tom thought that he would rather spend Christmas on his own in a hotel room with his computer. He didn't really want to go home.

Anja Kohonen carefully checked the potatoes roasting in the oven, made sure the wine in the fridge was cold and that there was a bottle of champagne for later. She carefully checked the candles on the Christmas tree, as she didn't want them to set fire to the tree. She looked out of the window. The snow was starting to fall again. She looked at her watch again.

Guy Domville finished his beer and walked out of the hot, smoky pub into the cold night air. He thought about getting a taxi home, but knew it would be difficult to find one at this time of the evening, especially on Christmas Eve. Anyway, because it was a clear, crisp night, he thought he would enjoy the walk home. It was late and dark and cold. There weren't many people on the streets. A man came walking towards him. The man was only wearing a T-shirt. He looked like he was freezing cold.

'Are you all right?' Guy asked the man.

'I'm freezing,' the man replied. Guy took off his coat and gave it to the man.

'There you go!' said Guy. The man looked very surprised, but took the coat, put it on and went on his way.

'Thanks!' he shouted as he left. Now it was Guy who was freezing. He had no idea why he had just decided to give his coat to a complete stranger. Perhaps because it was nearly Christmas. Perhaps it was because Guy hadn't given presents to anyone else this Christmas. Perhaps it was because this year he had no one to give any presents to.

Leila came out of church into the night. It was much colder than she expected. Every other time she had been to stay with her grandmother it had been very hot. She had no idea it could get so cold out here in Damascus, out here on the edge of the desert. That was OK, though. She didn't think that Christmas in a hot place would seem right somehow. Christmas had always been cold for her. She was happy to be here in such a beautiful place, with her mother and her grandmother. It was a shame her father wasn't there, but she hadn't heard from him in months now.

Rudolf Lenk was bored. Very bored. It was Christmas Eve and he was stuck in an office, surrounded by computers, completely on his own. Rudolf could think of nothing more boring than this. It was only boredom, thought Rudolf later, that made him do the stupid thing he decided to do.

Rudolf Lenk pulled a plug out. It was only a little plug. It wasn't even hard to pull it out. That was all he did. He pulled a small plug out of a small socket. And then.

And then.

And then.

Rudolf Lenk watched the lights go out. At first he watched the lights go out in the office where he was. Then he looked out of the window and watched all the lights go out in the town where he was. And then he imagined what was happening.

All
across
the world,
one

by
one ...
the lights were going out.

Tom Jankowitz hardly noticed as the television screen with the departure times on it flickered, then went off. He looked up just in time to see it before all the lights in the airport went off too. For a few moments there was light coming in from the big window which looked out onto the runway of the airport, but then all the lights on the runway went out as well. Soon, everything was totally, completely and utterly black. The only light came from the tiny little lights on the wings of the aeroplanes and the light from his own portable computer screen. Soon, there was an announcement:

'Ladies and gentlemen, we regret to inform you that there seems to have been a power cut. All flights for the moment are cancelled. Thank you.'

A man sat down next to Tom.

'Looks like we're not going anywhere tonight,' he said. Tom didn't reply, but nodded in agreement. Not going anywhere, he thought. Not going anywhere. I'm not going anywhere. Not tonight, not ever. The only places I ever go are offices of GlobalPower International. He looked at the light coming from his computer screen. Some numbers looked at him. Numbers were the only thing that he was going to see on Christmas Day. Some numbers and his computer. Is that all there is to it? Nothing, thought Tom, is going anywhere.

In one second, everything went from light to dark for Anja. Her house, filled with light and warmth and the smells of cooking, went black. The only light and the only warmth came from the big fire that she had started. She looked at the fire which continued burning, filling the room with warm light. It looked good. It made her feel happy. It reminded her of when she was a child. She looked out of the window and saw that it was dark for as far as she could see. The flickering light from the fire illuminated the snowflakes that were now falling heavily outside. She wondered if anyone was coming to join her this evening.

It was completely quiet on the streets outside. Guy thought it was strange. Usually these streets were full of busy people. Now they were completely empty. The snow that had fallen looked like a carpet. Outside looked like inside. Walking home, lost in his thoughts and the snow, Guy hardly noticed that all the streetlights had gone out. The darkness around him was the same as the darkness he felt inside him.

Sometimes he could see into the windows of the houses that he passed. Most of the houses were dark, but some people had lit candles. The candles looked beautiful, he thought. They made the people's houses look warm and friendly and cosy.

Guy felt sad that he was now going back to a house where no one had lit any candles. He didn't want to go home. His flat was empty. It would be the first Christmas without his daughter and his ex-wife. He thought about how hot it would be where they were and wondered what Christmas would be like for them. He hadn't spoken to his daughter in over three months.

Guy didn't want to go home. He thought about how his wife always said he worked too much, that he never took time to do the simple things in life. Now here he was, walking along the streets where he usually went to work, doing nothing. He decided that he would leave his job

with GlobalPower in January. He wanted to walk these strange empty streets forever. Or at least until he could see his daughter again.

Leila looked up at the night sky so full of stars. She thought she had never seen so many stars in the sky when she lived in London. The city was so dark, it made it easier to see the sky. She walked with her mother along the narrow streets of the Christian quarter of old Damascus, all decorated for Christmas and lit now with candles. She was happy here with her mother and grandmother, but she still missed her father, even though he hadn't called.

Rudolf Lenk realised what he had done with a shock. He put the plug back in its socket. He hoped nobody would have noticed what he had done.

And
Very
Very
Slowly
One. By. One.
The lights
across the world.
Came back on again.

Like a breath at first, like a tiny whisper which nobody could hear, which grew and grew and grew, like the first ripple out in the sea which will become a gigantic wave, like the spark which lights a candle which can start a fire, like the first falling snowflake of a giant storm, like the first star which appears in the night sky and makes enough light for you to be able to see another, and then another, and another and more and more until the whole sky which covers the whole world is hung with starry, illuminated fruit, light connected to light until at midnight, the darkest point of the night, the whole world was full of bright, bright light.

Tom Jankowitz watched the lights going back on again in the airport and heard the sound of people cheering. He cheered as well and smiled at the man who was sitting next to him. He felt like someone had turned a light on in him too. He was looking forward to being home. 'I'm going somewhere,' he thought. 'I've got somewhere to go.'

Anja got up and turned the lights that had come on off again. 'I like the dark,' she thought to herself. 'I like the dark and the fire, just like this. That's how I like it.' She curled up next to the fire and fell asleep.

Guy was looking for a tiny piece of paper he remembered having put in his pocket months ago. It was so dark out here that he couldn't see anything. His hands were so cold that it was difficult to find anything in his pockets.

Then, suddenly, everything became light. He realised that he was standing under a streetlight that had just come on again. He found the tiny piece of paper in his wallet with a long number written on it. The number had faded, but he could still read it. He found some one pound coins in his other pocket. He found a phone box, but the phone didn't work. He walked some more until he found another phone box. He picked up the telephone receiver and heard the bleeping sound. It worked. He put the money in and began to dial the number.

Back at home in their flat with her mother and her grandmother and all the other Syrian branch of her Anglo-Arabic family, Leila heard the old phone ringing. Who would be calling at this time of night? She ran across the room to answer it.

Rudolf Lenk was writing a note on a piece of paper. He addressed the note to his boss at GlobalPower International and left it on his desk. 'Yes, it was me,' he wrote. 'And no, I don't want my job any more. Oh, and by the way, happy Christmas!'

Tasks

Task 1

Match the characters (a–e) with the descriptions (1–15). You need each character three times.

Description

1. works with computers
2. gives away his coat
3. makes a phone call
4. doesn't like Christmas
5. prefers the dark
6. used to live in Britain
7. is stuck in an airport
8. lives in Syria
9. decides she's happy on her own
10. leaves his job
11. her father is also a character in the story
12. is cooking
13. thinks about leaving his job
14. lives in the United States
15. pulls a plug he shouldn't have

Character

- a. Tom Jankowitz
- b. Anja Kohonen
- c. Leila
- d. Guy Domville
- e. Rudolf Lenk

Discussion

What holiday do you most enjoy celebrating?

Answers

Preparation task

1. e
2. c
3. f
4. a
5. h
6. g
7. b
8. d

Task 1

1. e
2. d
3. d
4. a
5. b
6. c
7. a
8. c
9. b
10. e
11. c
12. b
13. d
14. a
15. e