



The Royal Main

A Christmas Story

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PROLOGUE

The wind drove the snow through the streets, past shutters of closed shops whose owners were probably having Christmas dinner with their families. Furthermore, the snow was blown, over sidewalks, past fire hydrants and into the porch of the Royal Main Hotel. Seven stories high, 55 rooms, built in 1920 a stone's throw from Wigly's Shopping Center and the Financial District. Twenty years ago, a guest had fallen asleep with a cigar in his hand and he and seventeen others had not woken up. It was the largest hotel fire ever in this medium-sized town on the Northwest Coast. The then owner turned out not to be properly insured, so bankruptcy was the result.

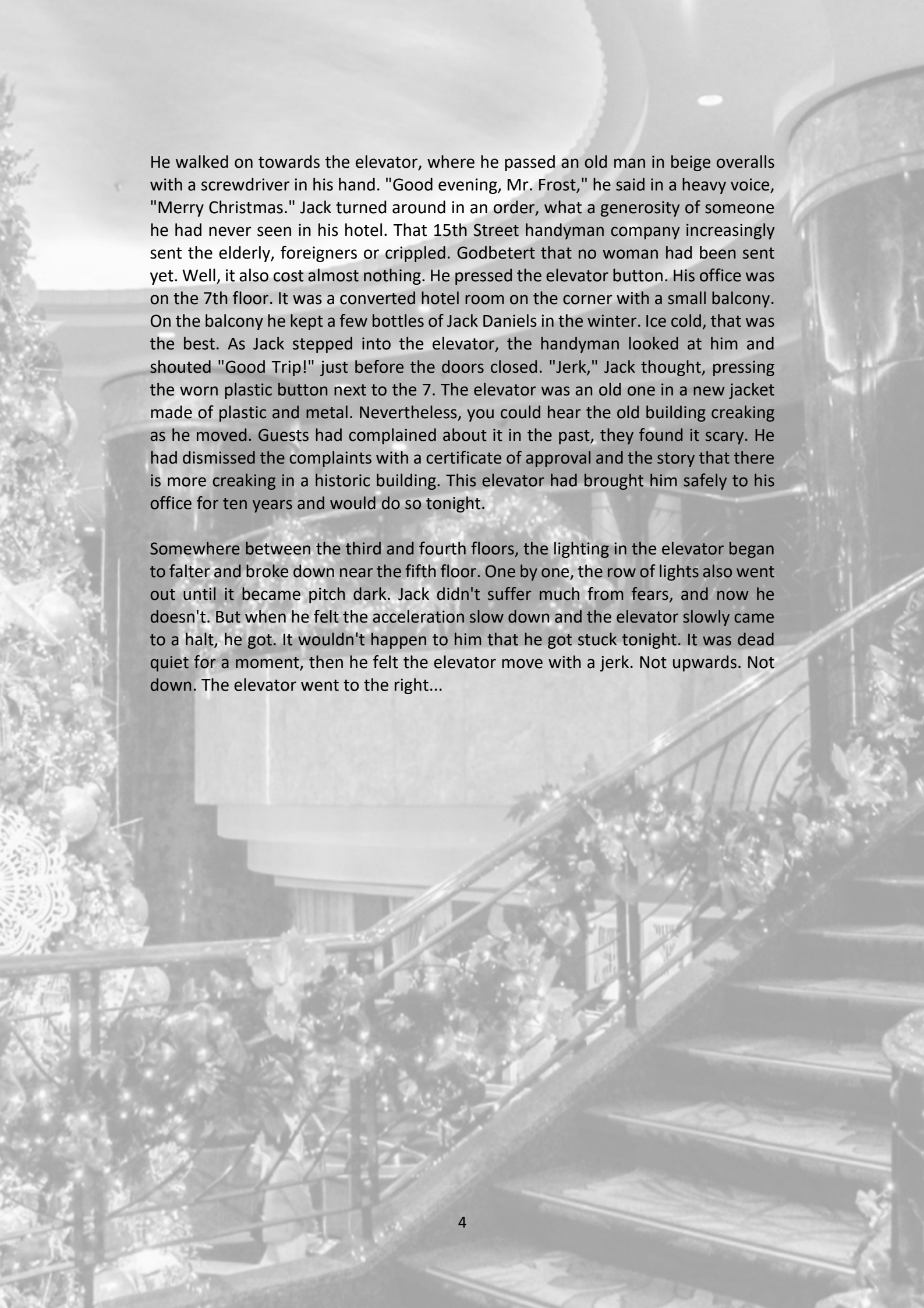
For five years the hotel had stood empty, with a blackened 4th and 5th floor, until it was bought by an Irish investor. He renovated the hotel and transformed it into a "middle-of-the-road" inn. From Monday to Thursday the guests consisted mainly of employees of the banking sector, the other days it was mainly tourists from villages in the wider area. The investor had appointed a regulator, who ran several hotels in the city and visited once a month. That supervisor, in turn, had appointed a General Manager: Jack Frost.

RIGHT AWAY

Jack shook the snow off his umbrella and walked through the revolving door into his hotel. It was very quiet, at least the reception staff had time to watch television with a bowl of popcorn on their lap. 'Sorry ladies, that's really not possible, how many more times do I have to say it. Staff are not sitting in the lobby watching TV.' "But there's no one," said Susan, the more outgoing of the two, not unattractive thirty-somethings. 'It's not possible, it's not allowed, and if you want to watch TV, you just thunder up. You don't have to come back tomorrow.' Sighing, the ladies got up and walked back to their workplace, staring out in front of them with an extremely grumpy look.

Jack looked around, it was very quiet indeed. But what do you want, who is going to sit in a hotel without a restaurant on Christmas Eve. He didn't have to be here himself, at home his wife sat with her parents and the two teenagers at the annual turkey. With the excuse that his hotel needed him (after all, who provided the income!) he could have happily escaped that annual "feast". The weeks before Christmas were always very busy, only to have to do social things on Christmas Eve. No, thank you.

He ran the company like a machine and ensured a constant income stream. He succeeded because he closed gaps in the income by saving costs. Generating new business through good marketing and innovations took much more energy and effort than having a local dry cleaner paint and repair stained and worn bedding. Old desks in the hotel rooms were regularly given new placemats to hide the scratches and worn chairs could easily be replaced by recycled ones. The fact that all the rooms looked different didn't matter to him. After all, a guest only saw one room! Nice vintage too, by the way. His talent was his ability to maintain the balance between income and expenses as well as possible. The staff was used to it and only worked for the salary. Over the years, he had also ensured that overpriced people were thrown out and that critical specimens were pruned. Threatening single mothers with dismissal was generally very effective. The chambermaids had to clean an extra room every year in the same time. His watertight argument was that because of their increased experience, they could work more effectively. If it did not work out within the time, they were of course free to continue working unpaid. The fact that a customer sometimes complained about a spot left and right did not interest him. What could you expect for 80 dollars a night at this A1 location. He walked through the lobby and pulled the plug out of the wall at a large Christmas tree. Those seven guests, well, suckers, who were inside were all in their rooms and didn't need an illuminated Christmas tree in the lobby. Well, that Christmas tree. Plastic of course and bought for a living at the estate auction of a bankrupt retirement home.



He walked on towards the elevator, where he passed an old man in beige overalls with a screwdriver in his hand. "Good evening, Mr. Frost," he said in a heavy voice, "Merry Christmas." Jack turned around in an order, what a generosity of someone he had never seen in his hotel. That 15th Street handyman company increasingly sent the elderly, foreigners or crippled. Godbetert that no woman had been sent yet. Well, it also cost almost nothing. He pressed the elevator button. His office was on the 7th floor. It was a converted hotel room on the corner with a small balcony. On the balcony he kept a few bottles of Jack Daniels in the winter. Ice cold, that was the best. As Jack stepped into the elevator, the handyman looked at him and shouted "Good Trip!" just before the doors closed. "Jerk," Jack thought, pressing the worn plastic button next to the 7. The elevator was an old one in a new jacket made of plastic and metal. Nevertheless, you could hear the old building creaking as he moved. Guests had complained about it in the past, they found it scary. He had dismissed the complaints with a certificate of approval and the story that there is more creaking in a historic building. This elevator had brought him safely to his office for ten years and would do so tonight.

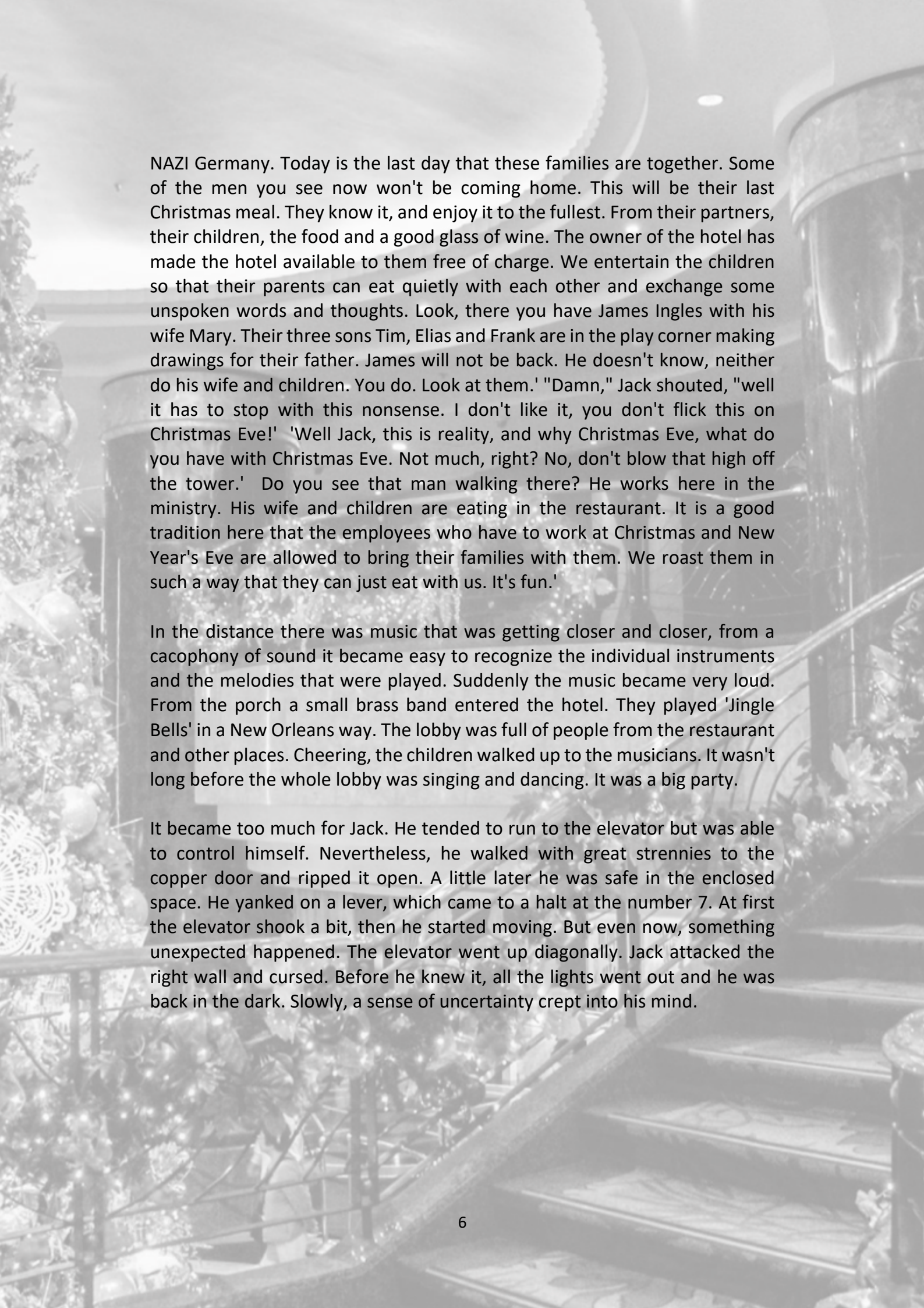
Somewhere between the third and fourth floors, the lighting in the elevator began to falter and broke down near the fifth floor. One by one, the row of lights also went out until it became pitch dark. Jack didn't suffer much from fears, and now he doesn't. But when he felt the acceleration slow down and the elevator slowly came to a halt, he got. It wouldn't happen to him that he got stuck tonight. It was dead quiet for a moment, then he felt the elevator move with a jerk. Not upwards. Not down. The elevator went to the right...

WHEN

After an indeterminate number of seconds, the horizontal movement of the lift stopped. Jack was so confused that he had no idea what had happened. He took a deep breath when he felt the elevator creaking again and go down. Suddenly, to the left and right of him, a pair of lamps flickered on, emitting a yellowish light. With disbelief he looked at the lamps, copper ones with incandescent lamps in a graceful shape. Only then did he notice that the elevator no longer consisted of metal and plastic. He stood in a wooden elevator cage that was ornately carved. At the top of the elevator he saw a meter walking back: 3, 2, 1. And with a tinkling sound, the elevator announced that it had arrived.

With a rattling sound, the door opened. He saw a surprised face looking into the elevator. A boy of about 16 years old in a green suit, with white gloves and a flat cap. 'Hmm, apparently I didn't get in anyway.' Before the boy could close the elevator again, Jack slipped out of the elevator. He was standing in the lobby of his hotel. His hotel or not? It was a hustle and bustle of interest. In the porch, two gentlemen in livery were receiving the guests. Next to them, beautiful Christmas decorations of dark green branches provided with bright red ribbons. In the middle of the lobby was a huge fragrant Christmas tree with dozens of lights. In the place where a few sofas with a flat screen had just stood, there were now miniature furniture and at least ten children were playing. He saw a man and woman with a few children enter the hotel. They walked to the reception. 'Welcome to our hotel, Mr. and Mrs., and of course you too!', said the receptionist. He saw the children looking at the candy canes that hung in the Christmas tree. 'Go on guys, just grab a few!' At that moment, Jack realized he was an outsider, an invisible one in the midst of another world, and began laughing hysterically. First he thought of a practical joke from his employees, then of such a TV program. He even began, rarely, to doubt his own head.

Then he saw the handyman in his beige overalls. And he looked straight at him. He walked, somewhat relieved to the man. "What is this now, are you from some television show. Am I being fooled?" "No," said the man, "you may be the main character in this story, but it's not a television show. This is all real. It's Christmas Eve 1942. The people you see around you are trying to celebrate. Almost all of them are families of men stationed nearby at an air base. Tomorrow they leave for England, to be deployed in the fight against

The background of the page is a grayscale photograph. On the left side, there is a Christmas tree decorated with lights and ornaments. On the right side, a staircase with a metal railing leads upwards. The overall scene is dimly lit, creating a somber and nostalgic atmosphere.

NAZI Germany. Today is the last day that these families are together. Some of the men you see now won't be coming home. This will be their last Christmas meal. They know it, and enjoy it to the fullest. From their partners, their children, the food and a good glass of wine. The owner of the hotel has made the hotel available to them free of charge. We entertain the children so that their parents can eat quietly with each other and exchange some unspoken words and thoughts. Look, there you have James Ingles with his wife Mary. Their three sons Tim, Elias and Frank are in the play corner making drawings for their father. James will not be back. He doesn't know, neither do his wife and children. You do. Look at them.' "Damn," Jack shouted, "well it has to stop with this nonsense. I don't like it, you don't flick this on Christmas Eve!' 'Well Jack, this is reality, and why Christmas Eve, what do you have with Christmas Eve. Not much, right? No, don't blow that high off the tower.' Do you see that man walking there? He works here in the ministry. His wife and children are eating in the restaurant. It is a good tradition here that the employees who have to work at Christmas and New Year's Eve are allowed to bring their families with them. We roast them in such a way that they can just eat with us. It's fun.'

In the distance there was music that was getting closer and closer, from a cacophony of sound it became easy to recognize the individual instruments and the melodies that were played. Suddenly the music became very loud. From the porch a small brass band entered the hotel. They played 'Jingle Bells' in a New Orleans way. The lobby was full of people from the restaurant and other places. Cheering, the children walked up to the musicians. It wasn't long before the whole lobby was singing and dancing. It was a big party.


It became too much for Jack. He tended to run to the elevator but was able to control himself. Nevertheless, he walked with great strennies to the copper door and ripped it open. A little later he was safe in the enclosed space. He yanked on a lever, which came to a halt at the number 7. At first the elevator shook a bit, then he started moving. But even now, something unexpected happened. The elevator went up diagonally. Jack attacked the right wall and cursed. Before he knew it, all the lights went out and he was back in the dark. Slowly, a sense of uncertainty crept into his mind.

SHORTLY

Almost inaudibly, the elevator stopped. Above him, the lamp turned on. Well, lamp. It was hundreds of LED lights that created light patterns. Then lights went on, on the sides. After recovering from the worst shock, he observed that texts and photos were represented by the lights. 'CITY TAXI, NOW 20% OFF FOR GUESTS OF THIS HOTEL, click #CITYTAX on your Communicator!' Under the text, which slid along all the walls of the elevator, a yellow car drove. Jack turned around and only then saw that the elevator door had opened inaudibly. He got out of the elevator. Again his hotel, and yet not.

There were men and women walking around with fast passes. All in tight, tight-fitting costumes and suits. They seemed to be in a hurry. The reception was gone. In its place were four computer screens, which, tilted at an angle of 45 degrees, were fixed at a height of one meter. In the middle of the lobby was a Christmas tree made of glass, the baubles changed color continuously. Sometimes there were pictures of taxis, sometimes the phone number of an Italian restaurant. The old furniture had been replaced by white plastic bucket seats with black cushions, the wooden floor and the clothes had been replaced by a kind of springy plastic or rubber. It was black. There was no speaking and due to the damping effect of the plastic you heard virtually no footsteps. Although Jack saw several dozen people, he had no idea how many rooms would be occupied. In the midst of all the dark suits, he saw beige overalls. He ran to the old man. Almost enthusiastically, he grabbed the handyman's arm. 'It's great that you're there too. What is this. What do I have to do with this again. Where am I?'

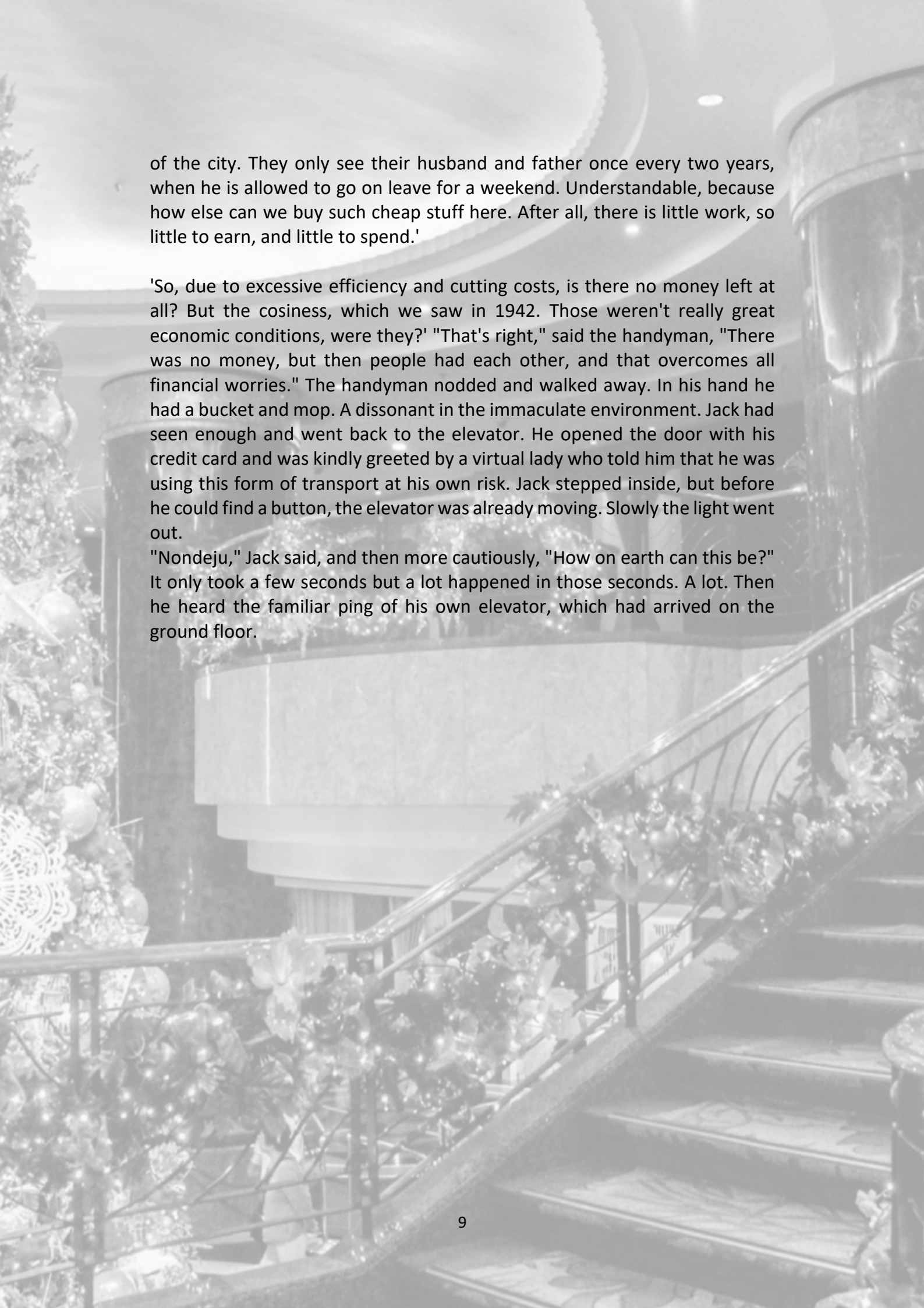
The handyman laughed faintly. 'Well, we are now a hundred years further. It's 2042. Efficiency and personal freedom is now the norm. Where people could be replaced by digital solutions, that has happened. It's practical, fast-forward, and you don't have to have unnecessary social conversations with others. Just walk around and you'll see how the world has changed! Jack walked past the Christmas tree, behind the elevator to the stairwell. He thought it would be good to avoid the elevator. At the stairwell hung a card reader, next to a placard that read: "We strongly advise you to take the elevator and use the stairs only for extreme emergencies. If you fall on the stairs or in the stairwell, the hotel management does not accept any liability.'" Jack looked at the card reader. Well, which card? On good luck he tried his American Express and it worked wonderfully. He walked up the stairs to the



first floor and went into the hallway. Here, too, the floors were made of a kind of rubbery material. He saw that the doors were still in exactly the same place where they were supposed to be. Only, they were aluminum sliding doors with a small window of 10 by 10 centimeters. Around that window was a border with LED lights, some doors were red, others green. He walked up to a door with green lights and tried to get it open. "Welcome guest, use your card to open the door. If you open the door with your card, you are complying with this room and the corresponding payment obligation." Jack opened the door and stepped inside. The room was decorated in a minimalist style. There was a bed, a seat, a closet and a small desk. Everything was made of white plastic. He heard the voice again: "Dear Mr. Frost, with your card you can open the left cabinet to grab your sterilized linen package. You must make your own bed. The now automatically cleaned bathroom is steamed again for your convenience. This hotel is proud that our bacteria and virus indication is below 1%. If you want food, you can select it on the monitor."

Jack had seen enough. He wanted to walk out of the room again but was first warned about leaving valuables in the room. Horrifying, he walked back down. Before he could go down, he first had to identify himself again with his card. In the lobby he met the handyman again. 'And?', he asked, do you like it? This hotel is super efficient, no unnecessary staff. In fact, the guests generally do not see employees, they do not need that. Nor to plants, art, music and fancy colors. Guests want to make quick and efficient use of a clean, tidy hotel room, so that they are well equipped to perform in the office again tomorrow.' 'And the day trippers, who want to go to Wigly's Shopping Center?' The handyman laughed: "Wigly's no longer exists of course. People buy everything online anyway. No one wants more things that others in stores have put their fingers on. Moreover, China is now the biggest power, all stuff comes from China and is shipped directly to customers all over the world. In this society there is no longer any place for craftsmen."

It became too much for Jack. He had fled Christmas Eve to go to the office for a cozy get-together with his namesake Jack, Jack Daniels. And now this. His head filled up and he was spinning on his legs. He glanced outside and saw a woman walking in front of the window with a child. Both had their heads bowed down. "Why is that, why, are these people so gloomy?" 'Well, that seems logical to me. There is almost no work left. Certainly not for people who are good at working with their hands. That girl's father works in China, where by working 16 hours a day, he has enough money left over to send to his wife and daughter. They can just afford a 1-room apartment in a bad part



of the city. They only see their husband and father once every two years, when he is allowed to go on leave for a weekend. Understandable, because how else can we buy such cheap stuff here. After all, there is little work, so little to earn, and little to spend.'

'So, due to excessive efficiency and cutting costs, is there no money left at all? But the cosiness, which we saw in 1942. Those weren't really great economic conditions, were they?' "That's right," said the handyman, "There was no money, but then people had each other, and that overcomes all financial worries." The handyman nodded and walked away. In his hand he had a bucket and mop. A dissonant in the immaculate environment. Jack had seen enough and went back to the elevator. He opened the door with his credit card and was kindly greeted by a virtual lady who told him that he was using this form of transport at his own risk. Jack stepped inside, but before he could find a button, the elevator was already moving. Slowly the light went out.

"Nondeju," Jack said, and then more cautiously, "How on earth can this be?" It only took a few seconds but a lot happened in those seconds. A lot. Then he heard the familiar ping of his own elevator, which had arrived on the ground floor.

PAST PRESENT FUTURE

Jack stepped out into his own lobby with the familiar plastic Christmas tree and the still bored receptionists behind their counter. They looked exactly the same as before he had gone. He ran out of the elevator to them. "How are you! Fantastic to see you again. I'm glad I'm back. Boy what an adventure on this Christmas Eve!" The women looked at each other frowning, after all, their boss had only stepped into the elevator to get out again after the doors had closed and opened again. But still, this was a different chef!

Jack danced around and figured out what to do. According to the story, he had to hand out money. Well that works. He emptied his wallet for the receptionists, thanked them and told them that they could go home and didn't have to start again until December 27. He kissed them on both cheeks, and not long after, the ladies leave with red butts and a surprised and dazed look in their eyes. Then he went looking for the guests. They were indeed in their rooms. "Come out, come out, he said to them. This hotel will close for Christmas. I will take you to the Waldorf at my expense, where at least they have a real Christmas tree. By the way, they have a hundred!

An hour later, he locked the hotel door and went home. But not before he had bought a small, but nevertheless real Christmas tree. Half an hour later he stood in front of his house, reluctantly. He opened the door, and a little embarrassed he said, "I'm home. Surely it's more fun to celebrate Christmas with you..." He didn't have to say more. His children flew on his neck and his father-in-law, with eyes that looked suspiciously like those of the handyman, smiled kindly. He received a kiss from his wife, and for the first time in years, he cut the turkey. As a happy person.

EPILOGUE

After Christmas a lot changed in the hotel, the restaurant reopened, and the rooms were equipped with new furniture. On weekends bands played and a pianist was playing in the lobby. The employees received new company clothing and salary increases. Each employee also received ten hotel nights a year, for themselves, or to give away to friends. And something happened to the hotel. In the hotel. The rooms were efficiently furnished, and maintenance-friendly. From now on, electronic systems were used everywhere. Easy for registration, easy for accounting. Nevertheless, there were no cuts in personnel. On the contrary. Because the business operations ran a lot more effectively and efficiently than before, there was more time for communication. Real communication.

The bartender had time for a chat with a customer, even if it took longer than 5 minutes. The chambermaids had time to clean well and occasionally drink a cup of coffee. They were able to go home in time to take care of their children. And what happened financially? The hotel flourished and grew like never before. Reservations increased every day. It soon became known throughout the city that the Royal Main was a hot bath. Guests couldn't explain why. What was clear is that they had money for it, the room rates had tripled. Although, Jack had instructed his staff to keep 4 rooms from the walk-in audience. Every day, four free rooms were given away. That's how it went from that moment on in the Royal Main, that's how it still goes.

And Jack, ah, a year later he celebrated Christmas Eve again in the hotel, but this time with his whole family and the families of all the employees. They sang songs around a real Christmas tree and ate the most delicious dishes of the fantastic Chef who had been employed for six months. In the evening everyone stayed asleep. With their keycards they entered their rooms. And there, there was a Christmas present for every guest. A simple book, leather cover:

'A Christmas Carol, by Charles Dickens'.