

SPECIAL INTEREST

Student opinions on AI in the classroom.

CITY NEWS

Walton County prom showcase.

SPOTLIGHT

Opinion on the death of nuance in language.

TEENS IN ACTION

Teen voter registration information.

Walton Youth Year in Action

A good year of progress; here's what we've done
by Charles (Mac) Ferguson

During the 2025–2026 school year, the Walton Youth Project expanded its impact across Walton County through student-led initiatives, community partnerships, and a continued commitment to elevating youth voices. Building on our foundation of advocacy, service, and journalism, we strengthened our presence in local schools and deepened our connection with the broader community.

At the core of our work is the Youth Advocacy Board, which led efforts to address issues directly affecting students.

Throughout the year, members organized events, coordinated outreach, and developed leadership skills that extend beyond the classroom. In addition to planning initiatives, we represented youth perspectives in the community and prioritized mentorship, ensuring younger members are prepared to lead in the future.

Student journalism remained a priority through the Walton Youth Newspaper. Despite its struggles, the publication provided a platform for students to strengthen their writing, editing, and communication skills. More importantly, it created space for student perspectives, encouraging thoughtful dialogue and stronger connections between schools and the community.

Our W.I.S.E. initiative remained a cornerstone of our programming. Through workshops, camps, and outreach events, students gained hands-on experience in collaboration, leadership, and problem-solving. The expansion of “WISE On the Go” allowed us to bring these opportunities into



Community engagement continued to play a central role in our work. We maintained a strong presence at local events, helping organize and support community activities while representing youth leadership. In addition, we focused on service efforts, particularly during the holiday season, to support local families. These experiences strengthened relationships within the community and reinforced our commitment to meaningful service.

Fundraising efforts also reflected our focus on engagement and creativity. Events like our “Fright Mic” brought the community together through performances and entertainment while supporting our programs. By combining participation with purpose, these events highlighted our ability to connect with the community in fun, yet impactful, ways.

Collaboration remained essential to our growth. By partnering with local schools, organizations, and community groups, we expanded opportunities for students to get involved in service and leadership. These partnerships allowed us to contribute to larger initiatives while ensuring that the perspectives of the youth remained part of the conversation.

As the year concludes, we recognize our seniors for their lasting contributions. Their leadership, mentorship, and dedication have helped shape our organization and strengthen its impact. While they will be missed, the foundation they built will continue to guide future members. Going forward, we are optimistic for continued growth. With strong leadership, expanding programs, and a dedicated group of new students ready to step up, we continue to be committed to empowering the youth and encouraging meaningful change for Walton County.

The Death of Nuance in Language

by J.T. Schay

Do Not Lose Your Words

Language is why humanity dominates the Earth. Yes, we're smart. We're curious and clever enough to tame fire and rocket ourselves to the Moon with it—we're incredible idea-havers. But no grand idea is useful without a way to communicate it. So, while our enormous brains are our greatest gift (and curse), language is our greatest invention: it is lubricant for our genius. Without language, we wouldn't have nations or borders or business—think how much of our world only exists because we agree it does; without language, there would be no pyramids or sea-ships or space shuttles, because no one would've been able to say, "I wonder". Without language, we never could have organized. Humans are like ants, squishy and irrelevant to the titanic forces that govern our world when alone, but together, we, you and I, are the ultimate source of all power on this Earth—a titan of our own to reckon with the gods. It is humans who have wrought every great and terrible thing of our past, every love story, every holocaust, every charity, every mundane logistics operation—our strength and our genius, our love and our passion, our hate and our bile, are impotent without language. Language is the ultimate vessel for power.

So to control language is to control power. The most terrifying aspect of George Orwell's 1984, to me, was the revelation that language dictates thought: to eradicate a thought, you eradicate the words to describe it. 1984's oppressive ruling Party understood this well, and didn't stop at suppressing only the English dictionary, but engineered their own language, scrubbed of anything misaligned to the Party agenda, and sterilized of a crucial threat to Party dominance: nuance. The Party hinged on a fickle, single-dimensional worldview that citizens had to blindly accept. All ideas beyond that narrative were abolished in order to keep the Party in power; all aspects of life had to be dedicated to the Party: work, hobbies, love, sex—all of it. Nuance, depth, complexity—the ability to listen, adapt and accept a world beyond your own nose—threatened that dominance, so the Party sought to destroy it, much like how the Soviet State pruned words pertaining to sociology to rob the people's ability to understand themselves. Educated people alone are not a threat; educated and socially aware people, however, are very, very dangerous indeed. In order to reap the fields of power, one must first sow ignorance. One must kill nuance.

Thus, we are left increasingly blind to the transgressions of the powerful, which now seem inseparable from all instances of government. Is this not calculated? Is this not control? Is this not power?



The Pale Blue Dot

Courtesy NASA/JPL-Caltech, Attribution,

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=86976246>

Words are little vessels of humanity, sailing upon the treacherous seas of time, sails filled by your breath as you let slip wisps of those who came before: *Love... hate... beauty... fear...* With each, you tug on a strand of the great human tapestry; you invoke those souls who spoke and sobbed and exclaimed each syllable in moments both mundane and monumental. You intimate the story of how that word came to be at the trading docks beneath the ballasts of the galleons or in the busy streets of Rome on a hot Summer's day or in the quiet homestead of a shepherd named Geoffrey. Each word was born, has evolved, and will die. They are just like us. They are mortal. They are alive. More than just tools: they are Humanity's children, and still we play with them, make beautiful things with them.

They are intimate things. They are uniquely human things. They are how we share ideas and fragments of ourselves; how we love and hate; how we describe beauty and fear. They are every bit as complex as the stories they represent. So it is a great shame that we might allow ourselves to forget their luster; that such a wonder of creation as language might be sterilized and robbed of us is an abomination. It is a revolting exposure of the dimmest, most power-lusting examples of humanity. It is a quiet but terrifying signal that we are turning the human experience—so full of synchronicity and heartbreak and nuance—into a droning, menial playbook of worn-out choices. The titan that we've become is crystallizing and forgetting that it is still made of ants.

So, to best the titan, to better the society you find yourself in, you must remember nuance. You must remember that you each have a place and a worth and that there is depth to everything. You must remember your words; you must remember to use them. Do not forget your words.

Your Voice Matters...

So Let it Be Heard

by Amberly-Aiana Ventura

No matter your age, origins, beliefs, or who you support, you matter. Despite what some may believe, your voice matters, greatly. Your voice not only impacts you, but your community and your country. Your voice can and will contribute to the change you want to see for yourself, your family, friends, and your community. And it's pretty easy to do. The first step to your voice being heard is registering to vote. Here's how to register in Georgia:

First let's look at the basic voting requirements:

- Must be a U.S. citizen.
- Must be a legal resident of Georgia and the county you would like to vote in.
- Must be 18 years of age to vote, but you may register to vote at 17 and a half years.

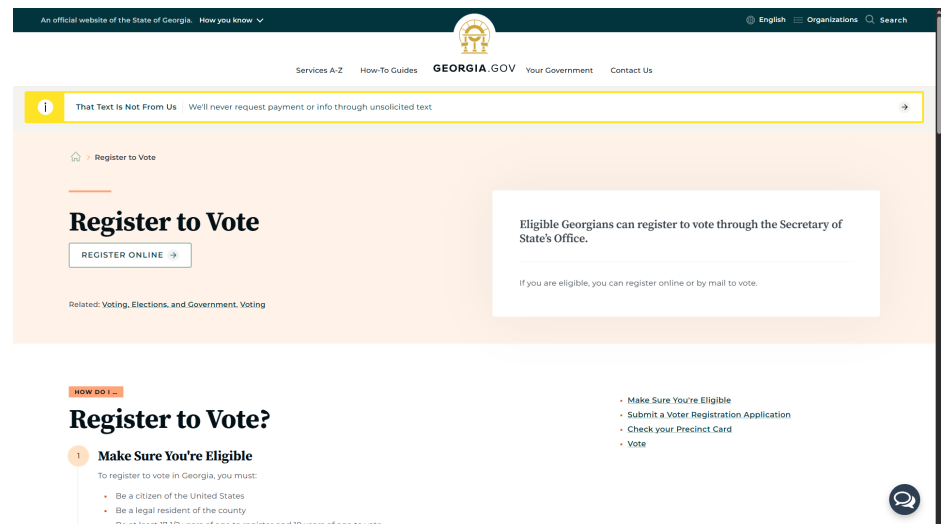
If you meet these requirements, we can start exploring the different ways to vote and see what best fits you. There are three ways to vote: online, by mail, and in person.

Online:

To register online you must provide a valid Georgia drivers license number or ID card number. If not, you have to register by mail or in person. You can find where to register online at georgia.gov/register-vote and it will take you to the Georgia Online Voter Registration page/ website. There it will tell you what steps to take and get your registered.

By Mail:

You can also find the mail in form on that same site. Scroll down on the [Georgia.gov/register-vote](https://georgia.gov/register-vote) page and click the register by mail tab. It will give a link to the form and all the information to mail it in. You can fill it out, print it, and mail it in.



<https://georgia.gov/register-vote>

In Person:

Find your nearest election office, which you can find at georgia.gov/locate-county-registrars-office, and go there to register.

As part of your community, it is important that your voice is heard and recognized. So let your voice be heard through voting this election season. Register to vote, make an informed decision, vote, and play a role in the change you want to see.



<https://www.peachvote.com/>

Survey: Student Opinions on AI in the



ChatGPT



Gemini



Claude

by Ella Masterson

We are living in the future, a cliché, but with the introduction of AI, it is feeling more and more true and with all of the discourse surrounding how it will change jobs, art, and those who aren't used to it, it may be easy to forget that there exist children who are growing up with it and will one day enter the work force. It may not be as urgent, but it is definitely interesting to ask the question how the use of AI will affect the ethics of those who've have in since childhood.

And it is also interesting to see how effective teachers are at stopping the use of AI to cheat when they have just as much (or sometimes less) experience with it as the students do.

I asked 45 Highschool students 5 questions about their AI use pertaining to school to discover how effective (at least in my area) teachers are at stopping the use of AI in classrooms and, if it really is the wild west out there, what ethical lines in the sand have students begun to draw on their own?

Beginning with the first question, students had a lot to say about being falsely accused. It is well known within the school system, though perhaps not among the workforce, that AI checkers utilized by teachers are currently in their, for lack of a better term, "awkward stage." Much like how computers were once the size of entire rooms, AI checkers will one day be very efficient and without error, but for now, students and teachers pay the price. Once, a student claimed their work was deemed "100% AI just because [they] used a semicolon." Luckily, teachers are usually able to figure out the correct from the incorrect reports, but not only does this put more on the plates of overworked teachers, but it also makes students' grades almost reliant on someone else's skills of deduction, which seems less than ideal.

The next statistic speaks for itself: over 86% of students in the sample admitted to using AI when they weren't supposed to and getting away with it. None of the teachers who gave statements about the results of the survey were surprised by the results of this question.

Although a few did interject that the results themselves call into question the validity of the students who claim they were "falsely accused of AI," since the same students admit to using it unethically. If anything, though, the results further call into question the capability of AI checkers.

Survey Results

Have you ever been falsely accused of using AI by an AI checker?

Yes	No
34	11

Have you ever used AI on a school assignment and not gotten caught?

Yes	No
39	6

Do you think using AI on school assignments is wrong, specifically when the teacher doesn't want you to use it?

Yes	No	It Depends
6	3	36

To what degree, as a student, are you able to use AI productively and ethically?

1	2	3	4	5
7	8	13	8	6



Gauth



Continued: Student Opinions on AI in the Classroom

Enter Text Here. The third question is where most of the discourse between students and teachers lies. Only 6 students claimed that using AI on school assignments was outright wrong, and some of these students didn't even think so because of the cheating aspect. A few students who answered claimed AI was always wrong, no matter what, because of its environmental impact. A statement from one student, "Things like ChatGPT are generative AI, it doesn't matter if you're using it for images or not,... which means they use a copious amount of water...so there really is no ethical way of using AI." As admirable and informed as these students are, they remain in the minority, as opposed to the 36 students who claimed, "It depends." Several students in the group echoed the same sentiment. Paraphrased: "If we are in a school system that puts all our grades on a resume that directly affects our chances at scholarship and getting into college, then if a teacher is outright bad at their job, it should not be considered wrong to use AI in order to pass the class. Especially when you take the HOPE and Zell Miller Scholarships into account, this one final grade could mean tens of thousands of dollars." This adds an interesting situational argument, but a teacher makes the rebuttal that even within this argument, believing that your resume is the only thing that matters, works together with AI, to undermine the importance of putting effort into your work, and therefore deserves the outcome. Ironically, both these statements, both the student and teacher, bring up the same fact that the school system incentivizes students to only care about what ends up on their transcript, which therefore encourages AI use. Now we've reached a point within the nuance of this conversation where it seems like AI might be the thing that finally gets the school system to reconstruct into something that encourages effort instead of numbers, but one has to wonder if that is even possible.

The final results of the question also reflect what we know about the future of AI within the school system: unclear. Some students use it and know it's wrong, some only use it to generate flashcards, some students state they'll never use it, saying "generative AI is morally wrong," and some others have drawn their own lines in the sand. One student who admits to using it claims, "[But], I don't let it write my papers, it's not my vibe."

I'll end this article with a quote from the ethics teacher at the high school in question, "I encourage students to use [AI] as an outline or as a framework, but to use it to intentionally do your work for you to take away the thinking aspect of, which is the whole purpose of school, which is to get your brain to think in a cognitive way and to develop the brain. So, does it surprise me that a lot of students have used AI: No. Some students have even told me straight up that they use it, but I don't think it's a bad thing, and we need to learn to use it in the right way." But this quote begs the question: Is learning to use AI in the right way something we'll even be able to learn to do as humans?

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Eco Corner: Ecobricks

by Amberly-Aiana Ventura

I know we all try to limit our plastic usage, but it's virtually impossible to avoid. I also know that living sustainably and being eco friendly has always been, and still is, expensive. And with the cost of living becoming increasingly more expensive, it's even harder now to keep up with everything. Products that eliminate plastic or use recycled plastic cost more, so it's more affordable to buy the plastic products. Recycling services are also expensive and aren't an option for many. Recycling is also not a complete solution to plastic waste either. Most recycling services don't accept small, flimsy plastics, and different centers only accept certain plastics. So, we're left with more plastic and no way to get rid of it "properly." This means most plastics will still have to be thrown away to landfills. These obstacles may make your efforts in reducing your plastic waste seem or feel hopeless. But I promise that not all hope is lost. We can not entirely eliminate our plastic waste and microplastic waste, but we can reduce it in another way; "no borax, no glue!"



Plastic is always going to exist and it's all going to break down and harm our eco systems anyways, but we can contain it, reduce the current waste, and prolong the harmful effects. It sounds like a tall order. And you may ask, how do we do that? We do this from ecobricks. The idea of ecobricks is to take thicker, heavier plastics that take longer to decompose and stuff it full with thinner, lighter plastics that break down faster and easier. The thinner plastics that take only months to years to break down will stay contained in the thicker plastics that would take hundreds of years to break down.

This means less plastics and microplastics invading our eco systems for longer. This is a great way to reduce your impact, especially if you don't have recycling services. It's also something you can do with the plastics if your recycling services don't take them. It's incredibly easy. You can use water bottles, juice jugs, softener bottles, etc, as your container (just make sure to thoroughly wash it out if it contains food or drinks) and compactly stuff it with literally any plastic waste you may have. Grocery bags, snack wrappers, product labels, zip lock bags, bubble wrap, you name it, can stuff your ecobrick. What could be scattered across our eco systems, harming our wildlife, can be "safely" contained and locked away for a long time.

The concept of ecobricks can be more, and is more, than just about recycling, though. It's about rebuilding. Ecobricks are such a beautiful and innovative way to turn destruction into construction. Many use ecobricks to build and create something new, something that often benefits communities. Ecobricks are the sustainable legos for big creations. From benches, colorful pathways, garden beds/ planters, to even houses; ecobricks can do it. They protect our precious world while also rebuilding a better one. You too can also build, create, and contribute to something that betters your life, your community, and your world. To see some of these ecobricks in action and learn more, you can visit the website, Ecobricks.org.



There's always something we can do to help our community and our planet. Make sure to come back to learn more ways that you can help.

Opinion: High School is the New Adulthood

by Ella Masterson

I believe it really is an age-old complaint that high school does not really prepare students with life skills, as I myself have heard so many of my friends or online skits claim that they'd rather learn how to do their taxes instead of what the powerhouse of the cell is. This is a sentiment that my parents and millennials have made as well, but now, a new problem is occurring, one that defines high school as the beast to prepare for and not adulthood, one that seems to have just affected its first generation and has made no plans to stop.

I remember when I was showing my father my selected schedule for my Junior year, which was riddled with AP classes, and he gave me a bewildered laugh, married to the sentiment that he had nothing of the sort when he was in high school. They just gave him his schedule, and he went to class. And now, I am graduating after what feels like a process that took years off my life just for trying to lay a foundation for it, and I watch my younger brother, a freshman, begin his high school career. I take a break from staring at my own mountain of college to watch him, and I reflect back. In my own experience, you take harder and harder classes, join all of the clubs, run for office, be in at least 2 varsity sports, maybe an instrument as well, volunteer anywhere you can, wonder if you're generous or selfish because all of this is going on your resume anyway, start studying for finals a least a month in advance, get sick because of how stress you are but show up to the exam anyway, console your friends when they're stressed and tell them grades don't control them even though they control you and finally when summer comes, lie down with your eyes open and realize you are not used to falling asleep on purpose. Instead of trying to catch it, you are used to trying to keep it from catching you, textbook in hand. So you get an internship until summer is over, take the SAT in June, and wait till July, not for your birthday, but for AP exam scores.

Now obviously. I am being a little dramatic here, as this is an opinion piece being written during exam season, and I should mention that not only did I attend an incredibly lovely high school with a lot of supportive friends and family, but I should also mention that a lot of these things I did out of hope as much as I did them out of fear. And yes, I am very tired, but it's almost over, and I am only one story

I know children who were more social than me in the early years of high school and were definitely not stressed, but I also know that sometimes they have one grade from Sophomore year plaguing them and their GPA, which brings up the question, "Is it worth it?"

Unfortunately, or fortunately for a small percentage, the high school to college system has changed so that now decisions you make from the age of fourteen onward start to matter and may even affect where you end up as an adult. Choosing to hang out with your friends too many times before you are even trusted to drive may decide your eligibility for the HOPE scholarship. And once again, I feel the need to point out that because Gen Z is the transition generation, we do not have parents to go to for counsel. I could also bring up the fact that (despite the fact that CollegeBoard is a registered non-profit) just about everything costs money. Taking the SAT, AP exams, and sending scores all cost money. The SAT alone is \$60 each time, which can add up, considering it's required for HOPE and Zell Miller scholarships.

And yet there exists another side of the argument, the side that (I can only assume) was the reason for implementing AP and Dual Enrollment in the first place. Does it not seem incredible that a child in high school can take college classes for a fraction of the price, enter college further along, and with an expectation of difficulty? It gives intelligent students the opportunity to enter college early without leaving their friends behind, and in that way, you could argue, it actually fosters childhood.

And yet there exists another side of the argument, the side that (I can only assume) was the reason for implementing AP and Dual Enrollment in the first place. Does it not seem incredible that a child in high school can take college classes for a fraction of the price, enter college further along, and with an expectation of difficulty? It gives intelligent students the opportunity to enter college early without leaving their friends behind, and in that way, you could argue, it actually fosters childhood.

Or does this system place too much pressure on students who are, at best, 7 years from their frontal lobe developing, and create a harder new normal for all high school students, because after all, a rising tide lifts all boats? Does having the option of college classes create an inescapable pressure for all students to have them, even if they are technically optional and more accessible to students who come from money? And does it also force students to hang onto failures from when they were barely teenagers?

Unfortunately, I have no answer for you. On one hand, I feel a strong but underdeveloped sense of morality telling me this should not be the norm, and yet, at the end of the day, I played the game by their rules, and I got my reward. It seemed to me like my only option. The one thing I do know is that not once in high school did I complain about not knowing how to do my taxes; I've been too busy.

Senior Spotlight: WYAB Graduates

Meet our seniors!

(In order from left to right)

Elauna Robinson - Loganville Highschool

Ella Masterson - Loganville Christian Academy

Johnathan Tobler - Loganville Highschool

TJ Lockett - Loganville Christian Academy

Amberly-Aiana Ventura - Georgia Cyber Academy

Luke Colbertson - Loganville Highschool



***Congratulations to our senior graduates.
The tassle was worth the hassle!
Thank you for all your contribution
to the board and our community over the years.***

Best wishes for a future as bright as you all!



The Promenade at Walton County

From masquerades to the Met Gala, Walton County 2026 Prom Highlights



Loganville High School

2026 Prom

A Roaring Night

LHS Prom 2026

Saturday, April 18th, 7:00-10:00 pm

The Towers at Snows Mill

4750 Snows Mill Rd, Monroe, Ga 30655

WYAB senior Elauna Robinson (pictured to the right) roaring with her date at the LHS prom.



Walnut Grove kept it mysterious this year with their "Moonlit Masquerade" theme



Joy Prom is breaking the old Hollywood streak with their "Color Explosion" theme!



George Walton had the very glamorous prom theme of "Met Gala," so students showed up red carpet ready! In attendance, WYAB member Mac Ferguson (in black) and new member Isabelle Cho (in pink) (pictured above)



WYAB senior Amberly Ventura and WYAB Junior J.T Schay shimmering under the moon as they met at midnight for the MAHS Prom (pictured to the right)



Short Story Spotlight: "Nuclear War"

by J.T. Schay

"That one," he said.

"This one?" the store clerk asked, picking up the wooden train. "But it's the display."

"I don't care," he replied, digging into his coat pocket. He threw down his credit card. "And the doll, too."

"It's—"

"Don't tell me the price." He glanced at the clerk, who calmly picked up the doll from the top shelf and placed it on the counter alongside several other colorful items.

"Your total is \$284.48."

"Have you checked the news recently?" he asked while inserting his card into the machine. The clerk smiled at him.

"Aw, no. I don't look at that stuff anymore. Stresses me out."

"Check it," he said before shoving himself out of the small toy-store and into the busy, snowy street of D.C. He checked his watch. He had time.

The whole walk to his apartment, he cursed himself. Curses curses curses. The streets weren't too busy, but he found a way to bump into a few people; he apologized, and they stared at him like an alien. He even said a hurried "Merry Christmas," to one young lady.

He checked his watch again. Still time.

The streetlamps became lighthouses as the snow picked up. A blizzard, the news had said. A curtain of white, now broken only by the dimming incandescence pinpricks and the occasional headlights; they kept him off the road, and that was all he needed. The way home was second nature.

He bumped into another bundled-up man, and they both dropped their shopping bags in the piling snow. "Sorry," he huffed.

"No, no, I'm sorry," said the man. He groaned good-naturely as he bent down to pick up his bag. "Christmas shopping?"

"Yeah, yeah," he said, sorting what was his and what wasn't.

"Last-minute as well," the man laughed, "Can't have the kids knowing Santa couldn't afford one of those Polly-dolls without a few extra shifts."

"A Polly-doll?"

The man handed him a bag. "Yeah. They're popular right now, and my Lucy has been asking for one the whole year. I couldn't find one for her, s'all. Well, haven't found one." He wagged his finger. "But I'll get one yet."

"They the ones with the pink hair?"

"Yeah, and they're bloody expensive—"

He handed the man his brown paper bag. "Here," he said.

"What?"

"It's fine. The wife got her something too." He couldn't see the man's expression.

"Are you... sure?"

"Absolutely. Hey, you live around here?" he asked.

"Yeah, why?"

"Get home. See your kid. It's the holidays. And check the news." He began walking away.

"What station?" the man called after him.

"Any," he yelled back.

His apartment complex was nice, he realized. Brick and mortar, good neighborhood, strong heater. He wanted to spend more time here. Not bothering with the elevator, he went up the stairs. Then he checked his watch; he ran up the stairs

He knocked on his own door. When his wife didn't immediately answer, he dropped his bags and fumbled with his keys. "Blasted," he cursed. "Bloody," he cursed again. "Never should've come to this damned country."

Heat washed over him as the door opened and his wife beamed at him. "Babe!" she said. "You're home already?"

He kissed her, dropping his keys. He cupped her face and pulled away. He took in her gorgeous eyes and magnificent smile. "You're as beautiful as the day I met you," he said, and she grinned, confused.

"David, you're covered in snow—"

He kissed her again. "Even more beautiful," he decided. Then he picked up his bags and stomped inside. Linda staggered out of his way. "How are the kids?"

"Dan's playing with his model train from your parents," she said. She stopped him by the arm and whispered, "But he's missing that one car."

He smiled at her. "I got him a whole extra set."

"What?"

"How's Martha?" he asked.

"She's fine—doing a puzzle in the living room. David, is everything alright?"

"Of course it is, of course," he insisted. "I just wanted to spend some family time on Christmas Eve."

"Is it work?" she whispered.

"Honey," he said, "Let's not talk about work right now."

"But you've been so stressed—"

"It's Christmas!" he exclaimed.

Evidently hearing this, Dan and Martha came running from the living room, together yelling, "Daddy! Daddy!"

Martha barrelled into him first, clutching his legs, and he bent down to hug her. "You're home!" she said.

"I'm home," he said. Then he saw Dan standing off a little ways, and ushered him over. For a moment, they hugged, and he thought of how nice this was, and how he should have spent more time here, in this homey apartment, with his young family and beautiful wife.

Continued: "Nuclear War"

Linda turned around and squinted at the clock. “2:45. You’re right.” She turned back to him. “Now, please, why should I call my mother?” She read his face. He was still smiling. She saw the tear roll down from his eye. “No.”

“Yes,” he said.

“No,” Linda staggered back into the kitchen and leaned against the counter, putting a hand to her head. “That—no, David. They’re wrong.”

“They aren’t wrong.”

“They’ve been wrong.”

“They aren’t this time.”

“They must be wrong,” she asserted. “They must be. They wouldn’t do it on Christmas Eve—would they?”

“Darling,” he whispered, sidling up to her. “I’m so sorry.”

“They wouldn’t do it on Christmas Eve,” she whimpered.

“I’m so, so sorry.”

“How long?”

“3:20 at the latest.”

“The latest?”

“Call your mother.” He kissed her forehead. “Then come into the living room with Martha and Dan and I.

“Will she know?” she asked. “Or will I have to-”

“She watches the news like a hawk,” he said. “She’ll know.”

“Then why hasn’t she called?”

He thought about it, then nodded. “Better call.”

He came into the living room with his bags, and Dan said, “Daddy, look! Look at the train!” It was a little metal train that ran along tracks at the push of a button. It was from Dan’s grandparents. They had money. It wouldn’t save them.

“Yeah!” he said. “Lookie here, Dan. I’ve got something for you.” He reached into his bag and produced the new train set.

“OH!” squealed Dan, who hugged David again and said, “Thank you thank you thank you!” over and over.

“Merry Christmas,” David said. “Open it up!” He turned to see Martha, not usually so quiet, stewing patiently over her puzzle. She knew she wasn’t forgotten.

There wasn’t a doll anymore, but there was something better: “An electrical set,” he explained. “You plug these little things into each other to make a circuit.”

Martha’s eyes went wide. “Woah.”

“I know, right? Merry Christmas, Martha-bug.” He ruffled her curly hair and she ran off to the little area off of the sofa she’d cleared of Dan’s clutter for her puzzle and, now, Frankenstein lab.

Linda came in from the other room, and he saw her dry her tears on her shirt. He smiled as if nothing in the slightest was wrong and she said, “She told me to come in here with you all.”

David straightened and hugged her again, letting her fold into him. He had the luxury of knowing hours ago. He spent forty precious minutes in denial: Linda couldn’t afford that.

“Was there any-” she huffed and wiped her eyes for the kids, “Was there anything you could do?”

“There was nothing even the president could do,” he said. He couldn’t tell her the truth—that the president could have given in to those demands, even if they were horrible; that the gamble had been deliberate and they’d lost.

“Why?” she gagged, suddenly. “Why?”

He wanted to say that it was for posterity, for principle—he wanted to say that this was staring down the face of the barrel and telling the mugger off—but he didn’t wholly believe it, as much as his heart pumped the idea through his veins; there was a cancerous doubt, leeching into him, and it made him say, “I don’t know.”

Linda finally dried her tears, and David pulled just a little away. He saw the clock in his periphery; it was 2:59. He smiled to Dan, fiddling with his trains, and Martha, no longer testing her circuitry but staring bug-eyed at her mom, crying, and her dad, holding her, and he said, “How about we watch a movie?”

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