

Senior Science Project: Earth

by J. Michael Squatrito, Jr.

A weathered man stood on his proverbial soapbox, clutching a Bible, and preaching to anyone within earshot. “Repent, for the end of days is now at hand!” he shouted. People bustled past the poor soul, paying him no attention. Taxis whizzed by, trying in vain to get their occupants to their destinations.

The disheveled man scanned the city streets again. Horns beeped, brakes screeched, everyone oblivious to their surroundings save for their critical personal agendas. “Repent! Repent! For our time is close at hand!”

A twenty-something urbanite wearing an expensive designer suit walked past. “Get a job,” he said out of the side of his mouth, eyes narrow, cellphone clutched in his hand and pressed against his ear, rushing off to an obviously important meeting.

The July heat beat down upon the poor soul, the city’s summer stench filling the air. Something, though, tugged at the man’s spirit. It’s a bit too warm he thought as he gazed skyward ...

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Johnathan B. Carson High School boasted the brightest students in the county and today three of their finest students waited impatiently for their teacher. Jimmy, Megan, and Matt alternated gazes at the clock and the window. Megan waited for the digital number to turn from 11:02 to 11:03. Jimmy felt it was time for lunch. Matt fidgeted in his chair, knowing his teacher would review his science project today.

A spunky young woman, all of 5’ 2” tall, bounded into the classroom gracing her students with a wide smile, just as the time changed to 11:03. “Sorry I’m late, kids,” she said in her high, nasally voice, “but Principal Perkins’ meeting ran late.”

Ms. Angelina Kowalski, with her tight button-up blouse enhancing her already ample breasts, sashayed to the front of her desk, resting her hands behind her for support, crossing her legs in the process. Green eyes gazing through a pair of black-framed glasses, she said, "All the teachers know how much time and effort you put into your world creations and we're happy to wrap things up today."

"Why are we all here?" groaned Megan, leaning forward in her desk. Outside, she could see her friends leaving the school's grounds, their summer vacation starting early.

Ms. Kowalski furrowed her brow. "You're here to support Matt. It's his big day and he was here for yours and Jimmy's presentations." Megan sat up, crossed her arms across her chest, shook her head, and looked longingly into the distance. Summer vacation was still an hour away.

"Matthew," said the teacher, startling the nervous boy. Matt had taken the opportunity to gaze down the length of Ms. Kowalski's legs, right down to those black heels.

Shaking his head and pushing his glasses firmly against his nose, he muttered, "Yes, Ms. Kowalski?"

"Are you ready to present your science project?"

Sweat broke across the young man's brow and his armpits were soaked but he was ready. Anything for Ms. Kowalski. "I believe so."

Matt's teacher beamed. "Great!" she exclaimed, her pearl white teeth gleaming. "Why don't you come up to the front of the class and get yourself started?"

Ms. Kowalski moved in her heels with the grace of a dancer, taking a seat behind one of the desks near Jimmy, allowing her pupil the head of the class. Jimmy leered at Ms. Kowalski, mesmerized by her ... assets.

Matt shuffled to the front of the room carrying with him a large open box. He positioned himself next to the gadget near his teacher's desk and, flicking a couple of switches, activated the Simulated Anti-Gravity Starlight System (SAGSS). A low hum

resonated throughout the room as the simulated star shined its soft light. Using extreme caution, he gingerly removed his science project from the box.

He placed the biosphere as close to the SAGSS as possible before the anti-gravity simulator sucked the globe into place and began to rotate ever so slowly. Matt adjusted the artificial starlight to work with his designated planet's atmosphere and environment. A couple of minutes later, his world reached 100% biological optimization.

Turning to face his peers, the young man exhaled his nervous energy before beginning his speech. "As you know," he said, gazing directly at Ms. Kowalski, "you tasked us all with creating a living, breathing world and challenged us to document our findings on life." Matt pressed a finger to his glasses, pushing them higher up the bridge of his nose, having slid a bit due to his nervousness. "However, I chose a different path of scientific exploration."

Ms. Kowalski crinkled her brow. "Different path? What do you mean?"

The teenager knew his teacher would ask this question first and he was ready with his answer. "I granted my creations free will." He closed his eyes and then waited for the barrage.

"Free will!" exclaimed Jimmy, a wide smile stretching across his rotund face. In his southern drawl, he exclaimed, "You should've asked for an F and saved us all a lot of time!"

"Hush, Jimmy!" said Ms. Kowalski.

Megan stared at her teacher, mouth agape and a hand outstretched toward her classmate in front of her. "Ms. Kowalski," started the redhead, her green eyes round, "we discussed free will and you said it was a waste of time! Why did Matt get to study it?"

Ms. Kowalski pursed her lips before answering. "He wasn't supposed to."

Matt raised his palms to his audience. "Please, if you let me explain my findings, I think you'll change your minds."

His teacher leaned back in her chair, folding her arms across her chest. Matt's classmates did likewise, albeit with grins compared to his teacher's scowl.

"Your grade is on the line, Matt," said Ms. Kowalski. "You best do a good job."

Matt nodded repeatedly. "I will, I will!" The young man then closed his eyes and focused, regaining his composure. "OK, the first thing I did was to create a world that could withstand multiple environments."

The student gestured toward the spinning globe. "As you can see there are land masses and seas, deserts and ice caps, forests and jungles." Matt allowed his audience to gaze at his rotating sphere, then continued. "Once I stabilized the atmosphere and brought the habitat to an appropriate temperature, I introduced my life forms."

Ms. Kowalski, arms still folded, cocked her head, squinted, and said, "How did you introduce your life forms?"

Matt's eyes widened, knowing he had the right answer. "I used the microbes that you supplied for us and added it to the biosphere. Everything worked great!"

His teacher remained skeptical. "How much microbial life did you use?"

The boy's sweat glands kicked into overdrive. "A lot." Dark patches expanded from his armpits and beads of liquid formed on his brow.

His teacher's expression did not change. Head still cocked, she pressed, "Matt, now much is a lot?"

The young man contemplated how he would answer the question and, after a few excruciating seconds of thought, thrust his arms out by his sides with his palms up and shouted, "Enough to begin the evolutionary process!"

Megan's eyes almost popped out of her skull. "What?"

Jimmy clapped his hands together and laughed, then said, "Evolutionary process! You're killing me!"

Ms. Kowalski pivoted in her seat and stared at the laughing student. Leaning forward, she shouted, "Hush, Jimmy!"

The force of her statement caused the top button of her blouse to pop off and float harmlessly through the air toward the awaiting boy's desk. As if in slow motion,

the miniature projectile landed hard on the desk's resin surface, then bounced a couple of times before falling to the floor. A quiet fell over the room as the button rolled away.

"Oops," said Ms. Kowalski before returning her gaze to the already nervous boy, revealing a bit more cleavage, and a new challenge to his attention.

Without missing a beat, the teacher continued. "You were NOT supposed to commence the evolutionary process for obvious reasons."

The student took a hand to his head and closed his eyes. "I know, I know, but by the time I figured out what happened it was too late!"

Ms. Kowalski shook her head. In a forceful voice, she said, "I ought to stop your presentation right now, but I know you spent all year on this project. I'll let you continue but your grade has already taken a serious hit."

Regaining his composure, Matt said, "Thank you, Ms. Kowalski. OK, having established an evolutionary cycle on my world, things began to evolve quickly."

"You used the life accelerator, right?" said Megan, giving Matt an incredulous stare.

"Duh, of course I did!" he responded in a snide tone.

"What became of your microbial life?" asked his teacher, her arms pressed against her chest, pushing her breasts up higher.

"It exploded, creating an infinite number of single cell bacteria before evolving into more complex life." Matt stopped, almost wishing that he did not have to continue.

Ms. Kowalski, recognizing the awkward pause, leaned forward and said, "And?"

Unable to hold back anymore, Matt exclaimed, "Life exploded on my world! First there was marine life that filled the seas, then they migrated to the land where they took on the form of insects and reptiles and amphibians ..."

"What about plant life?" asked his teacher.

Matt pointed to the globe where dark patches of green cascaded throughout the planet. "I couldn't stop that from spreading either! It was a botanist's dream!"

Ms. Kowalski knew where Matt's evolutionary process was heading. Looking down, she exhaled and interlocked her fingers in front of her, placing them on the desk.

Slowly lifting her gaze to meet her student's, she asked, "Matt, can you explain what these creatures looked like?"

A glazed look overtook the boy's face. "They grew, and they grew, and they grew ..." Matt's voice trailed off as he gazed off into a far corner of the room.

Jimmy followed Matt's line of sight before snapping his head back at his friend. "How big we talkin'?"

"Monster sized," said Matt, still in his far away land, recalling the joys and horrors of his creations. Bringing his focus back to his audience he said, "The plant-eaters ate everything. The meat-eaters ate them. I had massive creatures in the sea, on the land, in the air. It was uncontrollable!"

"But you did control it, right?" asked his teacher.

"I tried everything, but the evolutionary cycle was too strong, so I forced a cataclysmic event." Matt lowered his head.

"Matthew!" exclaimed his teacher. "You know that goes against the Prime Directive! Even for school projects!"

"You are so screwed!" said Megan with a laugh, snapping her gum.

Matt tried his best damage control. "I understand, but I did it to allow for a different evolutionary path. One that would result in a better outcome."

His teacher narrowed her eyes behind her glasses. "That is NOT a good enough reason!"

"Please, hear me out!"

"You're on thin ice, Matt," said his teacher, crossing her arms again and leaning back in her seat. "What precipitated this cataclysmic event?"

"I introduced a solid mass into the orbiting sphere," said the boy, his head hung low with his chin resting close to his chest.

"Woohoo!" howled Jimmy, slamming his palm against the desk time and time again, laughing in hysterics. "You probably killed everything in your world!" The

chubby boy peeked at his teacher, hoping she would have another tantrum due to his outburst that would result in another miniscule projectile hurtling his way.

“90% of all life,” answered Matt, his head still hung low.

Ms. Kowalski kept a cold demeanor. “This is atrocious, but I need to know what you did to rectify your situation.” Her buttons remained intact to Jimmy’s dismay.

Matt once again composed himself, then said, “Before the event, I introduced a smaller life form, one that had a bit more intelligence.”

Ms. Kowalski again cocked her head as she had once before, and said, “And?”

The young man shook his head in disbelief. “These creatures exploded as well, but this time I tried to slow their advancement by moving around the tectonic plates, introducing ice ages followed by hot spells, and more.”

“You didn’t destroy them with another one of your *events*, did you?” asked Ms. Kowalski.

“No,” said Matt. “I watched them very closely and their actions pretty much have doomed themselves.”

“Elaborate on these *actions*,” said his teacher.

Matt nodded as sweat continued to bead on his forehead. “Right, actions. Well first they huddled together to hunt and gather, but they didn’t evolve very well. I made them small and scrawny but their brains were bigger. After some time I gave them the ability to really think and that’s when things got out of control.”

The teenager held his head in his hands, shaking it from side to side. “They learned how to speak and build civilizations, but they were real mean. They started fighting over food, land, females, greed, you name it! They started killing each other, over and over!”

Megan’s eyes went round. “They killed each other? For their own purposes and not for survival?”

Matt nodded repeatedly. “Then I did something stupid.”

“Sounds like your whole world’s stupid!” exclaimed Jimmy.

“At least my creatures evolved and flourished,” shot back Matt. “Your dumb water world had sea creatures that grew only fins and swam around and around and around.” The teenager mocked his friend, pulling his arms close to his sides, mimicking a swimming fish.

“Enough, boys!” cried Ms. Kowalski. Shaking her head, she said, “I’m afraid to ask, but what stupid thing did you do?”

Matt sighed and hung his head low, again. “I gave them religion.”

Megan’s eyes widened. “Oh my God!” she exclaimed, covering her open mouth with her hand in the process.

Jimmy could barely contain himself. In between guffaws, he bellowed, “At least I wasn’t dumb enough to give my creatures religion!”

Ms. Kowalski’s innards simmered. Narrowing her eyes, she asked Matt, “Who was the God in your world?”

“That would be me, Ms. Kowalski,” said Matt, swallowing in fear, knowing that this petite bombshell of a teacher was about to explode. “And I created them in my image.”

“You!” exclaimed his teacher, practically jumping out of her seat. “Oh, I can’t wait to hear how this goes!” She gestured in her student’s direction. “Continue.”

Matt swallowed hard, again. “Ok, I chose a region in the world where there appeared to be the most suffering and injected a code of rules, commandments, so to speak. Something that would help straighten out their wicked lives.”

“And what happened?” asked Ms. Kowalski.

“They fractured into hundreds of religions! No one believed one another! They all twisted their teachings to fit into what suited their personal agendas best!”

“This is so much fun!” said Megan with a wide smile, peering to Jimmy who was hunched over his desk, his shoulders heaving, unable to contain his laughter.

“It’s not funny!” said Matt.

“Oh, yes it is!” said Jimmy, his head remaining down, muffling his voice.

“Stay focused, Matt!” said his teacher. She then glared at her other two students, raising her right index finger into the air. “You two are walking on thin ice!”

“Thank you, Ms. Kowalski.” Matt regrouped for the umpteenth time. “With everything spiraling out of control, I decided to grant these creature free will as well. I decided to let them evolve and see what became of them.”

“Go on,” said Ms. Kowalski.

“They never stopped their bloody ways. They kept killing and killing, but they got cleverer as time went on. They developed cities and empires, and expanded all over the globe. They learned technology and developed sophisticated machines and weaponry. Their population exploded and they consumed more and more natural resources. Then came the hydrocarbons.” He shook his head, holding his face in his hands. “Oh, the hydrocarbons.”

“This world you created is a mess, Matthew!” said Ms. Kowalski. “What’s the current state of your biosphere?”

“These creatures are all over the globe, no one is getting along, and they’re killing off the other species, consuming all their resources, and have no population control. They’re literally killing themselves.” Matt raised a finger in the air. “And did I mention their nuclear technology?”

“I have heard enough!” said Ms. Kowalski, rising from her seat and walking to the front of the class. “Your biosphere experiment was reckless and not well thought out, Matt. Allowing for free will, evolution, and religion? All in one world? I ought to give you a failing grade right now.

“However, you did go through great lengths to try and fix things, but these little creatures sound horrible.” Ms. Kowalski leaned against her desk, placing her hands on it for support. She then looked up into the air, her mind racing in thought.

“Since you did well in your other courses and you need a passing grade to graduate, I’m giving you a C. A gentleman’s C, so to speak.” Ms. Kowalski winked at her student.

Matt sported an expression of shock before his teacher's comments sunk in. His eyes then bulged from behind his glasses. "You mean I'm getting a passing grade?" The teenager could not hide the grin from his face.

"What?" exclaimed Megan. "That world is atrocious and he still gets a C?"

Ms. Kowalski glared at the redhead. "You got an A, you little smarty pants, what's it to you?" Megan pursed her lips and crossed her arms across her chest, unamused.

"And not a peep from you," said the teacher, pointing right at Jimmy. The chubby lad feigned zippering his lips, not tempting fate.

"I hope you learned a valuable lesson, Matthew," said Ms. Kowalski, looking at the nervous teen. "You can't just go around allowing species to evolve unsupervised. Free will is a very dangerous thing." The buxom blonde gestured for her two other students to rise from their desk.

"Now we all know what we must do with our creations. It's the humane thing to do."

Megan and Jimmy went to a pressurized vault to retrieve their class projects while Matt removed his from the SAGSS machine. After the students retrieved all three biospheres, Megan went about starting up the incinerator.

"I can't believe you got a C," she lamented, waiting for the flames to get good and hot. Within a minute, the furnace's flames roared, ready to accept the students' projects.

"I guess it's better to be lucky than good," said Matt with a smile, as he watched Megan dump her sphere into the flames.

"Better to be good looking than dumb!" said Jimmy, tossing his water world into the fire, nearly extinguishing the flames.

Matt allowed the incinerator to heat up again before bringing his globe to the furnace's opening. He peered into the red-orange glow a second longer, then said, "Goodbye you wretched souls!" A second later, his blue-green world dropped into the depths of the raging inferno.

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The prognosticator pointed up into the reddening sky. "It's too late! We're all doomed! The hour of God is at hand!"

All those around him looked skyward as the world around them began to burn. Men, women, and children shouted and screamed, running in every direction, shocked that the crazy man's prophecy had come true.

The wretched soul lowered his hand and maintained his gaze on the descending fireball. Then he smiled. "I'm coming home, Father. I'm coming home."