



# Infinite Monkey Hypothesis

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by Linda S. Buyer

“I can’t believe that I’m defending my thesis today.” Susan and her advisor, Sam, were seated in his paper-stacked office on the first floor of the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Psychology Department after lunch. He was leaning back in his chair, his Wallabee feet crossed on his desk, hands behind his head.

She was perched on the edge of her chair, nervously twisting the front strands of her shoulder-length brown hair around her forefinger. Her well-worn leather portfolio was folded open in her lap. Her pen ready. “Any last minute notes?” Susan eyed Sam’s teal plaid button-down shirt and the brown slacks she’d seen many times, worried she was overdressed in the new suit she had bought for the occasion.

“No.” He tapped his bald spot. “You know the literature. You designed a clever experiment. You write well.”

She smiled to mask the anxiety her clenched jaw betrayed. “You know... the Infinite Monkey Hypothesis says that given enough time and a typewriter even the monkeys in the colony you have in the basement could write *Hamlet*...”

Sam picked up his copy of Susan’s thesis. “For goodness sake, of course they couldn’t! Why are you so nervous? The deadline was last spring, and I thought it was ready then. Instead, you opted for probation, ‘because it needed more work.’ You’ve had all summer to polish it. It is done.” He smiled warmly. “It’s almost two. Time to defend.”



The committee was seated around the table in the glass-walled seminar room reserved for her defense. The Director of Graduate Studies opened the

meeting by asking Susan to describe her experiment. She hadn't gotten very far before Professor Phil Wilkins interrupted and asked about a table in the results section. After that, the meeting consisted of rapid-fire questions from all four faculty, each of which Susan responded to by fiddling with her hair before answering tersely. Ninety minutes later, all their questions answered, the committee asked Susan to wait outside.



Her watch indicated only fifteen minutes had passed when Phil motioned through the glass for her to return.

*Too soon! They hate it!*

Entering, Susan found herself holding her breath. She wanted Sam to give her a sign, but he was watching Phil stack papers.

*He's ashamed of me!*

Sam looked at Susan, smiled broadly, held up the signed *Certificate of Approval*, stood and extended his hand. "Congratulations!" Her jaw dropped. "You can submit your thesis. We don't want any changes. Go celebrate!"

Grinning widely, Susan almost skipped toward her office. Her elation quickly collapsed as she thought about all the times her parents had said she shouldn't make her little sister, Fay, feel bad about not being as smart as she. She'd never heard of "no changes" before. That was going to make Julie and the other graduate students feel bad. She frowned. She knew exactly how it felt to never be good enough. She didn't want to do that to anyone.

Susan's officemates and their Statistics professor, Kenneth Karlson, were waiting in the office, crowded into the small space in the center of the six desks arrayed around the walls.

Susan entered. Julie gestured toward the six bottles standing on Susan's desk, grinning. "Expecting good news, we each brought bubbly. And...?"

"They approved." Susan blushed, hugging herself, unable to suppress her grin. "I am so relieved. I didn't believe this would ever happen. Me. Barely made it through college: final GPA, exactly a C. Now this..."

"What'd I tell you?" Julie smiled. "What changes do they want?"

Susan tensed. "Um, none."

Proudly, Ken put his arm around Susan. "Told you you'd be fine. I wouldn't be dating you if you weren't smart."

Susan smiled up at him and congratulated herself; Ken really didn't seem to mind. Unlike her father who taught her to play chess, then never played with her again after she won the first time, furious a 12-year-old had beaten him.

Ken bent down and quickly pecked Susan's lips, then raised his glass. "No changes from a very tough committee," he toasted.

Susan stiffened. "It's just a magician's trick," she said. "Information-processing and Behaviorist predictions about creativity are directly opposed: restricting the search space vs. brainstorming. I just put them head-to-head. Even if neither was right, it'd still be meaningful."

Susan's committee, other faculty, and students who stopped by over the course of the next several hours all brought more congratulatory bottles.

Ken held up his nearly empty glass. "One more toast to Susan ..."

Susan leaned against Ken's arm woozily and smiled up at him. "Champagne's gone. More drinks at Riccardo's?"

Julie interrupted. "We've been drinking for hours. Let's eat there."

Susan turned somewhat unsteadily toward Ken. "Sweetie, may I use your office phone before we go?" He nodded.

"We'll catch up," Susan said. "I should call my mother."



Susan sat in Ken's office chair, leaned back, and triumphantly crossed her ankles between two towering stacks of papers on his desk. "Hi Mom," she slurred. "How're you?"

"Susan, are you drunk?" her mother asked.

"Yup!" Susan grinned at the phone. "It's over! They signed!"

"Go to bed. Tell Kenneth to take you home."

"Mom," Susan pleaded, no longer slurring and sounding much younger, "they didn't want a single change."

"Fine. Go home. Get some sleep."

"Fine! G'night!" She hung up, bowing her head for a moment, then, determined not to show her hurt, straightened, took a deep breath, and smiled too broadly at Ken.



Susan swung Riccardo's heavy door open and bowed Ken through with a flourish, almost overbalancing. She steadied herself using the door handle while she looked around the interior. The department members were seated on the far side of the room at a long, white-clothed table punctuated by open wine bottles.

"Julie," Susan said, plopping into the empty seat next to her. "So self-centered, I didn't ask. How'd your fiancé's first sermon go Sunday?"

"Congregation seemed impressed. I was really proud of him." Julie raised her left hand and smiled at her small, still unfamiliar diamond. "You should be really proud, too. Amazing your committee didn't want any changes."

"No big deal. I banged two hypotheses... hypothesis... theories together like a monkey's nuts. Monkey's gonna jump no matter what... see?" She smiled broadly, cocked her head and shrugged, hands spread, palms up. "Shh." Forefinger upright on pursed lips, Susan leaned closer to whisper. "Rhoda's defending Thursday. She'll feel bad." She pulled back and continued normally. "Cool the congregation was impressed!"

Julie smiled gently. "It's harder to design research to ensure meaningful results than you think. Lots of people don't; they can't."

"You said this morning you don't know what to do about a wedding dress. I have one I bought in an antique store when I was 18. It's an Art Nouveau style, ivory satin with a long train. I'm pretty sure it would fit you. If it does, you're welcome to wear it. Doesn't look like I'm ever going to." She smiled ruefully. "Ken's not interested in getting married a third time."



Susan made herself comfortable on her couch, stuffing a throw pillow between her back and its boxy arm and propping her journal against her upraised knees. Taking a deep breath, she began her entry, reviewing the facts for the millionth time in the last six weeks: ninety minutes, committee signed off, no changes. "If I can do it, a monkey could." Susan thought about how many times she'd said just that since she defended and put down her pen. The brief thrill of defending successfully was long gone. It no longer felt like anything.

Wondering if this happened to everyone, she easily conjured up contradictory examples: middle-aged men defined by a high school touchdown that won the game, Ken's pride that his 1974 *Psychological Review* article was accepted without revisions, Harvard grads who always let you know where they went to school.

*Why don't I feel anything? Don't think about it.*

She continued writing. Dinner at Riccardo's. Ken's proud of me.

*I earned my first monkey pellet. So what?*

Susan froze. *What the hell is wrong with me? I put together the toughest committee I could. No changes: undeniably good.*

*Why don't all graduate students understand that comparing competing hypotheses is pretty well guaranteed to produce significant results? It's obvious!*

*What if Julie's right and it's not obvious?*

She panicked. *I'm becoming mom. Never happy. I've tried so hard not to be her.*

*What if I can't help it?*

*What can I do?*

*What is there to do? Go back to the guy Stanley and I saw for couple's counseling in college? No! Too expensive. Ignore the whole thing? Yes!*

*No... something's really wrong. I have to do something! University Counseling Center?*



Susan seated herself where she couldn't see "Don't Stop Until You're Proud!" one of several motivational posters unconvincingly duct-taped to the bare concrete block walls.

*This is a mistake.*

A short, slight man with a rolling limp and a bad toupee entered the waiting room and squinted at the clipboard in his hand. "Susan?"

"Here."

"Walk this way." He turned and rocked down the hall toward his office. She grabbed her bookbag and grinned at his back while she momentarily considered imitating him.

He sat behind his industrial gray metal desk and gestured toward the guest chair opposite. He smiled. "I'm Dr. Bob Angevin. Tell me why you're here today."

Susan, her purple bookbag thumping heavily on the floor, sat cross-legged. "I just defended my thesis. I'm really messed up."

"Did a problem at your defense lead you to think that?"

"Unh-uh. This sounds nuts, but, I'm not happy about it, and I should be." She tried to smile, but could only make the right half of her mouth curl upward.

"Tell me ..."

"My committee didn't want any changes, and I keep telling people if I could do it, a monkey could." Her face crumpled. "Why can't I be proud of myself?"

Dr. Angevin smiled gently. "A question we can explore together. Would you like that?"

She nodded.

"Let's start with a little history. Tell me about yourself."

Susan eyed the bookshelves behind him, speaking in a soft monotone. "I have one sister, Fay. She's ten months younger than me. My parents divorced when I was around eighteen. My dad and I both moved out when I was sixteen, him first. Me, to start college. He remarried after the divorce. I wasn't invited. I was twenty-one when my half-sister was born. My dad moved to my stepmother's hometown in northern England when Fay was four. I haven't seen him since. She's eight now. My mother and Fay still live in Evanston, where I grew up. I see them a few times a year."

Dr. Angevin made some notes, then looked up. "I have lots of questions about all that, but they can wait. That was primarily about other people." He smiled warmly. "I'd like to hear more about you."

"Nothing to say really. We moved here from New Jersey on June 29<sup>th</sup>, 1964. My eighth birthday. I did third and fifth grades in Chicago." She started fidgeting with the Victorian fob bracelet she inherited from her great-grandmother and wore most days. "I skipped fourth."

Susan looked at Dr. Angevin and smiled, her cheeks pushing her large almond eyes to slits. "I thought my parents had been called in because I flunked the third-grade IQ test."

Dr. Angevin leaned forward, putting his elbows on his desk, and rested his chin on his hands. "I'm confused. You thought you flunked?"

Puzzling over his odd gaze, Susan realized his left eye was glass. *Reassuring.*

"Yeah." She twisted her hair around her forefinger. "Mine were the only parents in the whole school that were called in. I was sure I'd messed up."

"But, you skipped fourth grade? How did you understand that?"

Susan wondered why he was harping on her thinking she'd flunked the IQ test. Did he disapprove? He didn't *seem* angry, but you never knew until it was too late.

She shrugged, trying to explain herself. "No one ever said I did well, so I thought I was being skipped because New Jersey's curriculum was ahead of Chicago's."

She paused to see if he was going to argue. That's what her high school shrink had done. He even gave her an IQ test, and then wouldn't tell her the score. She was convinced that meant her score had been average and he just didn't want to admit to being wrong.

When Dr. Angevin simply looked at her after making a note, she continued with a grin, "I was a straight-A student through eighth grade, then started getting really bad grades freshman year."

"Did something happen between the end of junior high and the beginning of high school?"

"No. Except I spent the summer with my mom's sister in Seattle. She had two little kids. I was sent because I was trouble, and she needed free babysitting."

"What did you do that made you 'trouble'?"

Susan stared at him in astonishment. She'd never asked herself that question. "I don't know," Susan said slowly. "My mom said so."

"Why do you think she said that?"

She shrugged.

"Why do you think you started flunking?"

"Don't know; being perfect wasn't working so I tried the opposite? Fay would come home with Bs and Cs and they'd jump up and down. I'd have all As and they'd ignore *my* report card. Mom said it was so Fay wouldn't feel bad about not being as smart as me."

"How did you feel about that?"

"It was true." She shrugged again. "What's there to feel about it?"

She crossed her arms, hands clutching her shoulders, her chin tucked in the nest they made. "Their response to my flunking out was, I could either see my mom's shrink or be sent to boarding school. I chose boarding school. They made me see her shrink instead."

She looked up and frowned. "He was an asshole. He was always explaining my mother's side to me. Told me things she told him in confidence. I didn't trust him as far as I could throw him." She fell silent, wondering if Dr. Angevin would defend a fellow clinician.

After pausing to see if she'd continue, he said, "Not trusting your therapist must have been difficult."

She shook her head and grinned. "I just never told him anything I didn't want my mother to know."

She paused, eyeing Dr. Angevin uncertainly, then continued. "I got pregnant when I was 14, between freshman and sophomore years. Tried to commit suicide." She smiled. "Another failure."

He smiled gently. "I'm glad you 'failed' at that. A good failure. How were you feeling when you tried to kill yourself?"

"Scared. Couldn't tell them I was pregnant. They would've killed me. Sad. My dad and I had a big fight over dinner about Vietnam and the draft. He said *my* opinion didn't matter!" She bit her lower lip in an effort to maintain her composure. "I thought they'd be sorry."

"You wanted your parents to be sorry?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. Maybe." She averted her eyes.

"What did you do?"

"Waited until everyone was asleep and took all their prescriptions. Don't even know what. Just took them all."

"Then what?"

"I was still awake about an hour later." She chuckled. "I thought they'd be really mad at me for taking all their pills if I didn't die. I called my shrink. Even though I was whispering, my mother heard me. She came in just as I passed out. I woke up in the hospital."

"How did you feel then?"

"Scared they'd be mad. When they found out I was pregnant, everyone thought *that* was why I took the pills, even my shrink, so I never had to explain about the fight. My parents just wanted to know who the father was so they could get his parents to share the costs. They didn't care how *I* felt about an abortion. Just told me I was having one." She fidgeted her bracelet, eyeing the floor.

"How did you feel about that?"

"I wouldn't tell them who the father was. I never even told *him*." She cocked her head, smiling seductively. "I barely knew him. Just a neighbor's older brother."

"I'm sorry, we have to stop. Can we make this time your regular appointment?"

"You think I can feel better about my defense? Then yes."

“I do.” He smiled, and stood up. “You’re here. That’s an important first step. You’re a smart young woman.”

Susan rose, slinging her loaded bookbag over her shoulder. For a moment, she hesitated, looking like she wanted to object. Instead, smiling tenuously, she squared her shoulders and left without closing the door.

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## DR. LINDA BUYER

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Linda retired from teaching psychology in 2016 and started writing short stories. When she’s not writing, she’s an avid photographer and Director of Special Projects for Schakowsky for Congress. Her short story, *My Turn*, was published by Crow Woods Publishing early in 2020.