
Results

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

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Do it now, do it later. Do it when you're twenty-five, do it when you're forty-five. Each choice involves risk. Each choice involves an element of chance. That's what her parents fail to understand. They don't realize that the world she faces is different from the one they knew.

Jess stands, feet apart, in the subway car. It's half full, but all the seats are taken, and she holds the metal bar. She loves this antique method of travel in a city that hasn't updated itself in any real way for nearly a hundred years. New York, she heard a colleague say, is becoming America's first European city, a lot of people in a small space, history crammed against the future, land buried so deep no one remembers what grass looks like.

She loves it here. The past mingling with the future. Making the present bright.

Her parents, stuck in Des Moines, surrounded by grass, just don't understand.

She leans her head against the metal bar. It's cool against her scalp. The clickity-clack of the cars along the old track is somehow comforting.

She should have called her folks last night. They paged her three separate times after the test. But she wanted to wait until she had results, until she had something new to say instead of going over the same old arguments. She's twenty-five, old enough to make her own choices. Old enough to make her own mistakes.

Her parents thought the testing was mistake number one. It certainly was expensive enough, but the doctor said he advised it for any couple about to get married. If they're genetically incompatible, he'd said, they have the choice of terminating the relationship, planning for an expensive future, or tying tubes—practicing irreversible infertility, as one of her friends called it.

Options. That's what her parents don't get. It's all about options.

And results.

Her stomach flutters. She wonders why tests are always a production, why now, in the days of instant communication, results must wait a day, a week, sometimes a month. The doctor said that while communication might be instantaneous, science is not. She wonders if that's true, but doesn't really know.

The train stops at Times Square. She gets off, walks away from the smell of exhaust, a smell that will remain on her clothing all day. As she emerges from the tunnel, the city assaults her: sunlight thin as it trickles between the buildings, cars honking, people yelling, a jackhammer rat-a-tat-tatting two blocks away.

Her mother asks, *How can you raise a child there*? *There are no lawns, no quiet places*, and Jess says, *There are plays and museums and concerts.* And her mother says, *How're you going to afford that, honey?*

A little boy on a leash stops in front of Jess, and she nearly topples over him. He's blond and curly-haired, with enormous blue eyes that twinkle as he investigates a spot of gum on the sidewalk. New Yorkers form a path around him, like a river diverted by a stone, but she glances over her shoulder as she passes, sees the young man who is his caretaker, a black-haired, blue-eyed man, who does not have the look of wealth. A nanny perhaps? Or a lucky man, a man whose genetic code needed no tampering at all.

She wants to turn around, go to the man, ask, *Did you choose the right options or did you wait and see what nature would provide? Did you trust the process?* As if there is still a process to trust.

She lets herself into a side door, an unmarked rusted metal door that has been on Broadway since time immemorial. She goes through back hallways that lead to the box office of a theater whose name has changed ten times in the last five years, each name with the claim of authenticity.

At the end of her hallway, the box office. Hot and squalid, air-conditioning fifty years old and inefficient. She puts on small headphones so that she can hear her phone conversations without interrupting anyone else. She actually works on an ancient keyboard, the office computer plugged into a dozen services from the venerable TicketMaster to the brand new E-SEAT. It is her job to take the calls requiring her to deny someone's pleasure, helping the angry, the frustrated, or the very wealthy find the right ticket to the right show and then, promptly at 5, go to the box office itself and do the same thing in person, hand out tickets ordered by mail, soothe the customers who arrive on the wrong night, and press a small button beneath the shelf to get the manager who will discreetly lead those who get angry onto the street.

The job pays very little and she only has it because human beings still expect to find, beyond e-mail and the digitized voices, a human face, a real person which, as her parents used to say, is becoming increasingly rare.

Her fiancé Bryan's job is marginally better. He is a short-order cook in a restaurant near the George Washington Bridge. He gets home as she's leaving for work. They only have evenings together.

She puts on her headphones, hands shaking, the day already seeming longer than it should. Results, she knows, could come today, tomorrow, or next week.

Results.

What are you going to do with them? Her father asked. *What if there's nothing catastrophic? What if you're somewhat compatible? Then what will you decide? Will you base your entire future on a set of numbers, on percentages that have no meaning?*

She had no answer for him when he first asked the question, and she has none now. She goes through her morning's backlog, checks to see if she must return calls, and finds no personal messages. Then she deliberately fills her mind with times for this season's remake of *Fiddler on the Roof*, the latest Oscar Wilde revival, the newest—and probably last—play by Mamet, the one that deals, unsurprisingly, with the indignities of manly old age.

By the time the call comes, she has put the test out of her mind and is surprised to hear Bryan's voice. He knows that personal calls are forbidden, so he speaks fast:

“The results are in. Meet you at our special place at one."

“How bad are they?” she asks, voice breathless. She hasn't realized until now how shallowly she's been breathing, how much she has invested in this single moment, in knowing what the future will bring.

But he does not answer her. In deference to her work—and how much they need her paycheck—he has already hung up.

She takes another deep breath, feels the air go in and out of her lungs. Only once before has she been this conscious of her body, and that was when the lab tech pricked her finger—painless, the woman had promised, but a prick was a prick, sharp and sudden and a little bit invasive. Jess watched the blood well, a dark, rich, red, and she wondered what secrets it would reveal.

Now she'll know.

Bryan already knows.

And he is going to make her wait two hours before he tells.

* * * *

Their place is Washington Square Park. She used to work in the neighborhood, and went there for lunch, sometimes a dog or a knish from a vendor, sometimes a sandwich bought a nearby deli, sometimes a banana brought from home. What she ate then wasn't important, it was the brief moment outdoors, even if it meant sitting in a park more concrete than grass with trees that were spindly because of the dirt in the air.

Bryan worked nearby too, and they sometimes sat on the same bench. They never talked, not until some tourist—coincidentally from Iowa, like they both were—couldn't figure out how to use her new camera and desperately wanted a picture to e-mail to her uncle Syd.

They still laugh about that. *Technology*, Bryan says, *is what brought us together*.

Technology, Jess always adds, *that most people don't understand.*

Now they are facing another side of technology. One she is sure will tell her if the life she wants is something she can have.

She almost splurges and takes a cab, but at the last moment, she remembers how many more expenses there could be. The subway is old. It creaks and groans and her friend Joan swears it'll one day just fall apart, but it gets Jess to the park with time to spare.

She does not buy lunch. She knows she will not be able to eat. She sits on their bench and waits for Bryan who is uncharacteristically late.

He has chosen this place for its symmetry. Symmetry is important to Bryan. It is, in his mind, an element of perfection. Only she cannot guess exactly what the symmetry is.

Are they here because they will decide what their child will be? Or are they here because they will commiserate together, knowing that to bring a child into this world will either be too costly or too dreadful?

She does not like the waiting. Fortunately she told her boss she might be late. He knows that this is an important moment for her, and he understands.

The park is full of children: in strollers, in parents’ arms, running around the benches. These are not the

perfect children she usually sees. They have bad skin, mismatched features, eyes that are slightly crossed. They are not perfect. There is no intelligence in their faces.

These are the children of the poor, the desperate, those who will not listen to their doctors or cannot afford one. Those who believe that they must go through with a pregnancy no matter what. Those who cannot afford in-the-womb enhancements. These are the children who will be, in the-not-too-distant future, A Burden On Society.

Maybe that is why Bryan chose this place. To remind her about the costs of making the wrong choice.

She sees him emerge from the subway, head down. He is balding ever so slightly, just a lighter spot at the crown of his head. He used to joke before they got the test that he will make certain none of his children will go bald.

He hasn't made that joke in weeks.

He makes his way to the bench without a second glance at the children. When he reaches the bench, he does not touch her.

Instead, he hands her his palmtop. On it is an e-mail already opened. She skips the salutation and the signature, reads the body instead.

Percentages fill her brain. She glances at the high ones first, expecting something awful—a high chance of spina bifida or Alzheimer's Disease. Instead she sees none of that. The high percentages are silly: 97 percent chance of child having blond hair. 96 percent chance of child having brown eyes. 98 percent chance of child being tall.

It is in the middle percentages that the problems strike: 47 percent chance of having an IQ above 120. 36 percent chance of having artistic talent, acting talent, musical talent. 24 percent chance of having strong athletic ability.

Mediocre. The test results show that their child will be mediocre. At best.

She scrolls through the e-mail, searches for anything positive, anything that will negate this bizarre news. She sees instead the layman's explanation of how the figures are arrived at. Her IQ, lower than Bryan's, brings down the total score. His physical abilities mismatch with hers; her talents do not go with his. They are genetically incompatible. Already they are, before her first pregnancy, failures as parents.

She does not raise her head. She doesn't want to see the children playing across from her, screaming, laughing, not knowing that, in some undefinable future moment, their poverty will catch up with them and hold them back.

Their parents' decision to bring them into the world will make them Burdens that no one else can measure.

What you don't understand, honey, her father said when she told him of the test, *is that there is more to children that statistics.*

I remember your first real smile, her mother added. *Whenever I'm sad, I think of that.*

Sometimes, her father said, *the best accomplishments are small ones*.

Bryan takes the palmtop from her hand. He puts a finger under her chin, looks into her eyes. His are brown, just like hers. They both have blue-eyed great-grandparents, hence the small percentage chance

of a blue-eyed child.

“Maybe we should just go home,” she says. “Forget the museums and the parks. Our parents will love a grandchild, any grandchild—"

He puts his finger over her lips. His skin smells of lemon polish and garlic.

“It won't work,” he says softly. “We aren't the right choices for each other. You need someone who'll add to your scores. So do I."

She inclines her head back so that his finger no longer touches her mouth. “Let's think about it."

“No. I want a child I can be proud of. I don't want—” he grimaces at the baby in the stroller beyond, the baby with ears too big for his tiny face “—something I'll always regret."

Besides, her father said. *Statistics are just that, statistics. They're not proof. What if they're wrong?*

They can't be wrong, Daddy.

All right, he says, *but sometimes people beat the odds.*

“Maybe we should try,” she says.

He puts the palmtop in his pocket. “I was afraid of this. I was worried that you wouldn't believe the results. We can't afford a lot of enhancements, Jess. We have to go with our combinations. Maybe if we were rich—"

“We can wait,” she says. “You'll get a better job. So will I. Then we can try."

He shakes his head. “Don't you remember what the doctor said? Your eggs will deteriorate with time. We'll have to have more enhancements rather than less."

Her eggs and his sperm. Deterioration isn't just a female thing. But she doesn't say that. She knows him too well. He has made up his mind, and has done it without her.

“You can do what you've always wanted,” he says. “You can act now instead of work box office. You can become someone."

Someone who can pay for a child who will be perfect. A child she wants to share with Bryan who will, by then, be gone.

“It's all about chances,” she says. “Risk. Maybe we should just do it the old-fashioned way. Our parents did."

He nods, but doesn't look at her. She flushes. Suddenly she realizes how he read the report. The failures are not his. They are hers. The way her body combines with his will produce a result he will be ashamed of. Whenever he looks in his child's brown eyes, he will always see this report. 47 percent chance of IQ above 120. And if the child is not as intelligent as Bryan wants, he will blame her.

He will always blame her.

No matter how many museums she goes to, or how often their child smiles. No matter how much simple joy that young life will bring them, Bryan will always see the failure.

He gets up, kisses her on her crown where she—and all the people she has descended from—have a full

shock of hair, and makes his way through the crowd.

She sits on their bench, knowing now what the symmetry he sought was. It is over. Sure, they will divide possessions, figure out who inherits the apartment, maybe even sleep together for old times sake. But the future, the bright shining future, is gone.

She sits on the bench for the rest of the hour, watching the children, searching for their parents. Women sit on other benches, occasionally look toward the playing children, smile, and continue their conversations. The smiles are warm ones, contented ones, as if the children's high spirits are infectious.

What would their results have looked like? 98 percent chance of brown hair? 75 percent chance of gray eyes?

Nowhere on that form was an area for percentage chance of bringing joy. Nowhere was there a space for all the years of laughter, now denied.

She has choices of her own to make. All of them involving risk. All of them involving a world that has changed even beyond her understanding.

This morning she thought it irresponsible to have a child without knowing the risks. But she hadn't known the greatest risk of all. The risk of believing the statistics, reading too much into the numbers.

Perfection is not possible.

Would Bryan have been satisfied with a 53 percent chance of an IQ above 120? She never thought to ask.

Until an hour ago, she hadn't even known the answer for herself.