

# The George Explosion

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*The George Explosion*

## 2. Allen considers his situation

As the only Allen in a company filled with Georges, it's his responsibility to think outside the box. Not only is he in charge of casual Fridays, but all the unused nametags end up in his office. Boxes of them are piled from floor to ceiling and more boxes wait outside. Some boxes show signs of wear—grease stains, bite marks—but most are pristine. Only a two foot by three foot space on his desk is relatively clear: it is occupied by his computer monitor, keyboard and mouse; a large, black spiral notebook, the cover faded; and a math textbook. The textbook has a menacing looking equation on the front. The only floor space free is a small corridor of uneven width leading from the door to his desk, wide enough to let Allen roll his chair in and out if necessary. It is a corner office on the thirteenth floor—the Georges recognize but are leery of originality.

Sometimes, during the day, Allen pauses to ponder the origins of his situation. Perhaps an executive vice-president happened upon a brilliant way to save money. Perhaps all qualified applicants, except Allen, happened to be named George. Perhaps being named George was a qualification. Having never been outside the building, a hundred-story glass and steel skyscraper, Allen doesn't really know.

At these moments, Allen will peer as best as he can through the boxes, into the cerulean sky. Then he returns to his work, writing on the nametags with a felt-tip marker. Originally he'd written descriptions on the nametags, a defining characteristic. George the Old. George of the Bushy Eyebrows. George in the Northwest Corner Office on the Eighteenth Floor. When he started duplicating himself, Allen turned to his thesaurus, which has since been lost among the

## 1. It starts small

The potted plant in the lobby is missing half its leaves. Five of the six employees smoking in the designated area, walled off from the rest of the ground floor by translucent plastic walls, are named George. They stand in a rough circle, directly underneath the vent. There are chairs along the walls, but no one sits. Marigold sunlight, streaming through the exterior windows and double doors, hits the plastic and jaundices everyone inside. Outside the smoker cube, the lobby is busy, filled with employees rushing at a breakneck pace. Everyone wear beige slacks and a baby blue dress shirt. Folders, packages and binders change hands, presentations are discussed, and gossip exchanged. One or two of the employees is snacking on vending machine spoils.

The odd-man out, Allen—odd despite conforming to the dress code—is pretending to smoke a tube of Rolos, the chocolate candies with a caramel center. Rolos are squat and cylindrical, but the top face being smaller than the bottom face gives them a trapezoidal profile. Allen slowly unwraps the foil, eating each Rolo in turn as the Georges' cigarettes burn down to the filters.

Occasionally a George will ask him for a Rolo, at which point Allen will pull one of the extra tubes from his breast pocket and distribute candy as appropriate. The George who asked will take a moment to ash his cigarette and slowly chew the proffered Rolo. The Georges will grunt, acknowledging Allen's politeness, and all will resume as before.

boxes. George the Hoary. George of the Bristly Facial Hair. When that ran its course, he tried long words that made little sense. George the Immiscible. George the Symphonic. George the Unquenchable.

Allen was especially proud of that last one, but after naming thirteen and five-ninths floors of Georges his creativity disappeared. He now numbers the Georges instead. Out-of-the-box thinker that he is, he doesn't count by twos or fives or seventeens. He gives them prime numbers. George-1. George-2. George-3. 5. 7. 11. 13. 17. 19. When the numbers get big enough that he isn't sure if they're prime anymore, he starts over in binary. When he runs into the same problem, he starts italicizing. *George. George. George.*

Still, the lack of knowledge about prime numbers irks him and he spends six days rifling through desks on the thirteenth floor, until he finds an old math textbook in office 3-B. It's hiding underneath a phonebook. Out of curiosity, Allen opens the phonebook. Unsurprisingly, everyone inside is named George.

When Allen reads the math textbook he finds out that one is not, technically, a prime number, so he starts using imaginary numbers instead.

### **3. Allen considers the Georges**

The Georges are a nice lot even though Allen has trouble telling them apart. He isn't quite sure if the fact that George  $\pi r^2$  stirs his coffee clockwise while Mighty George Gershwin stirs his counterclockwise qualifies them as distinct, but his knowledge of each individual George is lacking. There are so many that he feels overwhelmed the minute he steps into the employee cafeteria on the eighth floor. The cafeteria is

perfectly rectangular. Fluorescent lights stripe the ceiling in regular, two-foot intervals. The food, presented buffet-style is visited by a steady stream of Georges, each with the same plastic silverware and tray. They are either waiting patiently in line or chewing quietly at the forest green picnic tables, and Allen unconsciously chooses to sit at the lone round table, in the southeast corner, and waits for the line to diminish. He's still surrounded.

He pulls out and peruses his spiral notebook. In it he has been accumulating facts gathered from brief conversations and interoffice e-mail. George-II follows sports, especially ice curling, while George the Bespectacled loves nothing more than a game of Siamese Chess. George  $e^{i\pi} = 1$  is a crossword master and Gimpy George has an abscess on his right hip that needs to be drained every two weeks. George the Mooch is dating George the Batmobile and George Alexander, King of Prussia downloads porn on company time.

Allen's inquiries have gone no further because of insurmountable difficulties. Whenever he says "Hi" enthusiastically, all the Georges, consummately polite, wave back. Whenever he says "Hi, George" in a less enthusiastic but still hopeful manner, the same thing happens. Allen has tried calling them by name, but whenever his marshals his resolve, by the time he's able to read a nametag, that George is already gone, lost in the ever-shifting sea of Georges. The Georges are nothing if not industrious and Allen rarely sees the same George twice.

Even after reading through his notebook twice, the cafeteria line is still just as long and Allen eats some Rolos instead. Only thirty-nine-and-three-fifths floors to go.

#### 4. Allen considers his past

Allen doesn't remember anything other than the tiled floors, the glossy wooden doors spaced impassively, and the fluorescent lights with the yearning buzz. He doesn't remember being young but he doesn't feel old. No one is born middle management, but he's not sure if he's actually management. The Georges accept the nametags willingly, but they might simply be too polite to tell him off. He doesn't really know what they think. Sometimes he ponders ordering one to eat a booger just to see to what would happen.

The boxes of nametags are half gone, enough that Allen no longer has to crane his neck to see the sky. It is a crystal-line turquoise, clear enough that it seems like Allen can see for miles. He can't, because the surrounding skyscrapers loom claustrophobically, but if he climbs on the pile of used boxes and pressed his cheek against the glass he can almost see up into infinity. Almost. The sun, bronze, is frozen in place, an unwavering glare.

He knows he was hired to do more than write nametags, but he can't remember what it is and no one seems to mind that his other duties have been shirked. Allen tells time by the regular rounds of George the Licit, the maintenance guy. When George passes by his office with a mop, it's time to stop working. Allen clambers atop his nest, made from shredded boxes, and goes to sleep. When George the Licit passes by with window cleaner, it's time to go back to work. Allen doesn't need an alarm clock because he rarely sleeps. Sometimes Allen wishes it would be cloudy, at least once, or even rain.

But it never does and he continues writing names.

#### 5. Allen runs out of Rolos

This happens every so often and Allen must trek to the vending machines on the forty-ninth floor. While all the vending machines are supposed to have Rolos, all the closer ones are out, evidence of Allen's presence. He takes the stairs because he can't stand the classical Muzak played in the elevators, so it takes a long time. The concrete stairwell is immaculate. No chips, no dust, no cobwebs. Maintenance is excellent, though nothing less could possibly be expected of the Georges on the crew. The chromed steel balustrade, utilitarian, gleams. Allen often examines his hyperbolic reflection, comments to himself on his growing beard and bloodshot eyes, but always quietly lest the Georges hear. Surely he is as capable and competent as they and it wouldn't do to start rumors otherwise. Then, after making sure no one is looking, he intentionally smudges fingerprints.

For ease of reference, the doorframe on each landing is painted a different color. Chartreuse marks the thirteenth, his home floor; his destination is outlined in teal. Among the hues between are ochre, eggshell white, midnight blue, gold, and goldenrod—pleasant accents that give even the starkest surroundings a touch of home. The doorframes, too, are perfectly kept. Their colors are bright, implacable, and bold.

The trek often seems endless as Allen counts off each floor, but the Rolos are worth it even if he has to share. When he bites into the caramel, it tastes like freedom and he admires the manufacturer for packaging the candy so efficiently. Allen rations himself strictly. He is running out of Rolos faster than he is naming Georges. Thus, Allen is tempted to name the Georges he sees on the stairs, but doesn't because, always methodical, he started on the ground floor and is moving up.

The last thing he wants is to realize he skipped a George and have to start over.

He usually passes thirty on the stairs. Three Georges just need some time to themselves, five talk to the walls, and the other eleven smoke weed of various qualities. The others hate the elevator Muzak as much as Allen. When he sees a George he doesn't remember, Allen adds information to his spiral notebook. Most of the Georges have nametags—they're always good sports—but a few don't. Seeing those, Allen suppresses an urge to jump over the banister. After all, he is currently midway through the sixty-first floor, an impressive accomplishment. Barring a major reorganization, with Georges shuffling back and forth between offices with binders and office furniture in tow, he should be finished in three months.

Besides, the stairs were built efficiently. Each half-flight is directly above the half-flight below so he'd only fall, at most, ten feet before colliding with more stairs or an unsuspecting George.

## **6. Casual Fridays**

After twenty-six weeks of neglect, Casual Friday is back. Allen sends one-hundred e-mails, one to each floor to avoid a hellishly long CC list, outlining his demands. Georges that are numbered must wear Hawaiian shirts. Georges whose names are less than half italicized must wear one half of a BFF (Best Friends Forever) necklace and find a George whose name is more than half italicized to wear the other half. Georges whose names are exactly one-half italicized may opt out.

George the (fill-in-the-blank)s must wear a button-up shirt with the top two buttons undone. (fill-in-the-blank) Georges must wear fluorescent hot pants, preferably lime

green. Georges who are individuated by mathematical symbols must wear clip-on nose rings and sweatband wristlets. All remaining Georges with nametags must walk backwards for the entire day, and all untagged Georges must crossdress.

Allen doesn't know how to feel when the Georges comply. Every seven days thereafter, they comply again.

## **7. Allen dances**

All of the other offices on the thirteenth floor are empty, so it's okay for Allen to dance. It has to be. He rolls out his chair about two hours after George the Licit passes by with the mop, singing off-key showtunes at the top of his lungs. He swings the chair around, often slamming it into the off-white walls, while throwing his head back and flailing his limbs. He sings until he's shouting and shouts until he's hoarse. The noise echoes everywhere and Allen stops only when it feels like the building itself is shouting back. Then, chastened, he rolls the chair back into his office and loads the spreadsheets he compiles in his spare time.

For the past two weeks he has been sending out e-mail questionnaires. The responses, while not unexpected, have been illuminating. Blue, or variants thereof, is the favorite color of 12.3% of the Georges. 55.5% of the self-professed creative Georges wrote "transparent" and the more surly ones wrote "none of your business." As for religions, there is a relatively even mix of all, even the rarer ones like Jainism and Asatru. 26.5% think falling in love is the most wonderful thing in life. 86% of the others think it's sex. Tonight Allen must add to the Music Spreadsheet. One of the Georges, possibly George Tuberculosis, responded that nerdcore rock was his favorite. Within three hours the total in that cell rests at 35.

42% of the Georges wear ties. Of those, 5% wear tie clips. 18% are in various stages of baldness and 89% wear cologne. The height of the Georges follows a bell-curve distribution—Allen learned this from the math textbook—even though George 8’10” is 8-foot-10-inches. While the dress code, except on casual Fridays, requires the beige slacks and baby blue shirts, there is a remarkable amount of customization. Shoelace length especially seems random.

Allen knows that once he catalogues every George, he will no longer be faced with waves of similarity. They won’t even need nametags. They will exist, each in their individual splendor, and then he will finally know why he is the only one different. No more pointless naming. No more slavery to self-imposed convention. Finally, freedom! Allen eats a Rolo in anticipation.

He is often frustrated because his polls are incomplete. Only 23% of the Georges have returned his e-mail questionnaires, giving his samples a margin of error of  $\pm 0.76\%$ . He scours the desks on the thirteenth floor for books on statistical analysis—the math textbook isn’t cutting it anymore. He finds nearly everything else: party favors, first editions of Dr. Seuss, pirated DVDs, putty knives, and more.

He stays up for days straight, compiling, expanding, and revising his spreadsheets until he realizes that it will take longer to complete his survey than to finish the nametags. Uncaring, he eats five packs of Rolos in the next two hours, exhausting the vending machine on the seventy-second floor.

Fifteen floors of Georges have yet to be named.

## 8. Allen conjectures a George

Sometimes, during his bleary off-hours, Allen wonders if he could get one of the Georges to take over for him, then almost immediately reconsiders. None of the Georges possesses the necessary creativity, the necessary panache, or the necessary dedication to handle the job. They’d probably name everybody George. The thought disturbs Allen as he stumbles to his desk to write, in ragged handwriting, George the Panachious. On some level he realizes he’s making up words but he doesn’t care. He scrawls George PQuaxVt5 and stumbles back to his nest in the boxes. They’re nearly gone now and he’s found his thesaurus.

Other times, the thought excites him. Not of everyone being named George, but of one man named simply George. The George in whose image all other Georges are created. The uber-George. The primordial George. George Prime. In Allen’s dreams, this original, unadulterated George is twenty feet four inches tall with flaming indigo hair. His eyes glow brick orange and his beige slacks open onto butterfly feet. George Alpha-One speaks with a voice deeper than the echoes in the stairwell and his silver halo radiates more fiercely than the bronze sun frozen outside. This George can make it rain. This George won’t fit in a spreadsheet. This George doesn’t need a nametag. And, most touching of all, this George is kind and generous with an unlimited supply of Rolos.

But when Allen wakes up, he worries that he’s already used that name, in the beginning, before he learned to think outside the box. He didn’t keep records well then so there’s no way to tell for sure. He could e-mail the Georges and ask but they seem to be growing restless lately. Annoyed by his questions. Not that they’re rude enough to let him know, but Allen

knows that any accidental duplication spells disaster.

He could simply designate The George, write it on a nametag and pass it out at random, but, if nothing else, Allen is a professional.

## **9. Allen's job is done**

After long months of struggle, Allen can rest triumphant. The last George on the hundredth floor, George Omega 526 The EnD THank God The ENd, has been named, and didn't seem to care that his nametag was illegible. Allen sprawls, exhausted, in the employee lounge on the hundredth floor, in the orange chair next to the coffee table. The math textbook and spiral notebook, both overflowing with notes and meaningless scribbles, are at his feet.

Word of his accomplishment spreads fast and the next few hours are a blur. Over the PA system a George congratulates him. George the Marketeer expresses amazement and interest in his spreadsheets. George after George shakes his hand and tells him how proud they are. George Esperanto offers to buy him a drink from the instant coffee machine, George-110101 gives him quarters for Rolos, and George the Fury Unleashed slaps him on the back. George puts him in the company newsletter, George says he's a shoe-in for employee-of-the-month, and George acknowledges him respectfully. George says "Congratulations," George says "Gratz," and George says "You damn overachiever. Just kidding."

Allen is strangely exhausted. He always pictured himself superhuman, leaping off the roof and flying away into the sky, at his moment over victory. But the door to the roof is locked and the stairwells have no roof access, so he rides the elevator back to the thirteenth floor, math textbook and spiral notebook

in hand. The classical Muzak is unable to penetrate the glow of his success. His is an achievement that will be venerated in perpetuity.

Grandparents would call grandchildren over to their feet. "It's time for us to tell the story of a man called Allen, who named one-hundred floors of men, all named George!" Kids would want to be him when they grew up and people everywhere would name boats, pets, and children after him: Allen. Possibly George, in honor of his accomplishment.

It was inevitable, he reasons, and he'd never really doubted himself. After such an accomplishment, Allen is sure to get a promotion. Alone in the elevator, he smiles.

## **10. The George explosion**

The elevator opens on the thirteenth floor and Allen nearly faints. Every office door is open and out of every office files a horde of Georges. Big Georges, little Georges, skinny Georges, fat Georges. Georges with salt and pepper mustaches, Georges with different colored eyes, Georges that continually squint. Mouth-breathing Georges, unibrow Georges, buff Georges, high-functioning autistic Georges, rebellious Georges with piercings everywhere, wunderkind Georges, Georges with half their shirts tucked in, and more. Each hands him a blank nametag as the deluge of Georges sweeps past, threatening to drag him under and crack his skull on the rocky heads of the Georges kneeling to tie their shoes. The Georges fill the floor from George to ceiling, drowning the fluorescent hum in a loud, George drone. Allen presses his palms to his Georges when he can't take the George anymore, and Georges to his knees when that proves George.

The George pressure overwhelms the exterior Georges

and Georges stream into the empty, George sky. Under the bronze stare of a Georging sun the Georges ignite like fleshy fireworks, spraying little bits of George in resplendent patterns. Some Georges are filled with confetti, others explode, like piñatas, into candy, others shower blood, and still others dissolve into rainbows. In the nonexistent wind they mingle identical, indescribable, unique.