

George 'The Actuary' Johnson

With an audible groan, George slammed his computer bag on his desk. His page-a-day calendar said it was Friday, which would have been great, except for the fact that he hadn't yet ripped the necessary pages to bring the calendar and his mind square with reality.

Monday. George hated Mondays. Sure, everyone hates Mondays. But George REALLY hated Mondays.

"Hey George!" exclaimed a muffled voice, emanating from a headful of messy, brown hair over the cubical wall adjacent to his. The voice sounded entirely too excited given the time of morning.

George responded in a muted tone, "Hey Braiden. How was your weekend?"

Braiden didn't so much reply as squeal with anticipation. George let out a soft growl, followed by the whoosh of air leaving his lungs as quickly as he left the office on Fridays at 5pm. "Let's get this over with," George grumbled as he pressed the power button on his laptop. Seeing this, Braiden scurried up and out of his chair and peered over the cubical wall like Mr. Wilson looking over Tim 'The Toolman' Taylor's fence.

The computer kicked on and...Peyton Manning's smiling face appeared on his screen. "Hey there, friend. Happy Monday here at GlobeCorp! Let's make this week great and TACKLE this workload together!"

As George's computer screen faded into his desktop, Braiden stood straight up and threw his hands in the air. "HOW GREAT IS THAT!!! HALL OF FAME QUARTERBACK PEYTON MANNING!!!"

George sighed, and carefully weighed his response. On one hand, he could play along with his young coworker, feigning excitement about how cool it was to start each week with a random celebrity easing him into another painful week of work. Or truer to form, he could respond with his typical grouchy comment about how simple things used to be when he started working for GlobeCorp as an actuary 30 years ago.

"Braiden, I really do like Peyton Manning, but that doesn't even make sense! How are we tackling my workload together? I'm 99% certain he's never even heard of a pivot table." He tried to keep his tone light but immediately realized he sounded like an old grump.

"George, I think Peyton was *pivotal* to the Broncos' Super Bowl victory! Lighten up, it's one of my favorite parts of the week! You know, other than hearing about the good old days like the time your team invented deferred annuities!"

George chuckled and smiled. "But don't you think GlobeCorp could spend our profits a little bit more wisely than paying celebrities to record a ten second greeting?"

Braiden shook his head, eyes alive with excitement and his unwieldy, mop-like hair flailing back and forth. "Nope, I love it! You never know who it's going to be!"

George snickered and shook his head. He grabbed his empty coffee mug and started off toward the office café. Slowly lumbering along, he glanced at his younger coworkers' computer screens. The first one that caught his eye belonged to Mark, who was speed scrolling through his Facebook feed. *What in the world?* George thought to himself. How can anyone scroll so quickly, and what was the point if you don't at least stop to comprehend what you're looking at?

Continuing down the hallway, he passed Jessica and smiled. He saw a spreadsheet on her monitor, likely for the GMG project that they had been working on together.

"Hey Jessica, can I ask you..." but his voice quickly trailed off as he noticed her head down. Her eyes were glossy and transfixed on her phone like a zombie, scrolling endlessly through pictures of food on Instagram. For a

moment, he considered breaking her out of her trance, but his empty coffee mug gave him enough pause to keep moving.

George reached the café and found a few coworkers standing around chatting and making their morning breakfast. As he poured his coffee, he began to think through his workload for the day, specifically his efforts to finalize the Centurion project that he had been working on for months. He added some cream and sugar and strolled over to Steve and Brittany, his coworkers on the project.

“Good morning, can I ask you two a quick question about our favorite project?” he asked as he sauntered across the café toward them.

As he neared, their conversation came into focus, extremely animated and frenetic. “Did you see what Hannah B. posted on Instagram last night....after she left the Bachelor she gained 10 pounds....but then she started on a low carb, high fat diet and now she looks amazing....well I can’t believe she’s dating Jeremy G. again...” As George politely waited for a break in their conversation, he took a sip of coffee and recoiled as the piping hot liquid burned his lips. Glancing back up, he realized that they hadn’t even registered his presence. Defeated, he shuffled back to his desk, deciding to catch up with them later.

Arriving back at his cubical, George flopped into his chair. He blew gently into his mug and took a small sip. He closed his eyes for a moment, and his mind raced with the laundry list of projects that needed attention today. He tried to block out the impending weight of his workload, to trick himself into believing that he didn’t have a care in the world. Easier said than done. He began to run through his morning routine, when he glanced up and noticed that his boss had arrived for the day and was sitting in his office. Hurrying to his feet, he raced to the open office door. Giving a quick knock on the door frame, he entered cheerfully. “Hey Bryce, did you have a good weekend?”

No response. George always found it odd that Bryce insisted on positioning his desk so that his back was to the door, allowing everyone walking by to see what was on his monitors, which rarely seemed to be any form of work. This morning it looked like he was easing into his day by scrolling through the local news. Growing frustrated, George knocked more loudly this time. “HEY BRYCE.”

Bryce put his index finger in the air but didn’t turn around or say a word. Instead, he continued to slowly and methodically scroll through his news article. Typically, this would have annoyed George, but he somehow felt satisfied in the moment to have gotten any response at all. Spinning around leisurely in his chair, Bryce turned to face George.

“George! What can I do you for, buddy? Wow, Dudeski, you aren’t looking so hot. Didn’t get much sleep last night, huh? Hold on, before you begin. Have you seen this story about Moe Zilla running for Mayor?”

George slightly recoiled and responded, “Do you mean the weather guy from Channel 4, that Moe?” He immediately realized that this was a stupid question, seeing as there was likely only one person in the world named Moe Zilla.

“No, my brother Moe...yes of course that Moe!” Bryce continued, “I LOVE THAT GUY. It’s like he always says. MOE. KNOWS.”

George shuddered a bit, saying, “Yeah, I mean, Moe might know weather, but what the heck does he know about running for Mayor?”

Unphased, Bryce immediately responded, “Well, people like him, George, and a lot of people trust him too.”

George mentally scoffed at the idea of a trustworthy weatherman, but he pushed forward, stuttering as he tried to get to the point of his visit. “Sure Bryce...anyway...the reason I’m here...I was hoping to see if you had a chance to approve my expense request.”

Bryce's smile turned into a look of confusion. It was obvious that Bryce had completely forgotten about his request. After a few seconds, Bryce's confusion turned to recognition, and he addressed George with a more serious tone. "Well, I'm going to be honest with you, Bud. Those new headsets are not cheap. Could you imagine if everyone in the company requested one?" George was fairly certain that if Peyton Manning had requested a new headset, Bryce would have instantly approved it. After a few more minutes of discussion without any progress, George conceded and went back to work.

The next day, George reluctantly found himself back to the grind. Yet somehow immersing himself in a spreadsheet filled with mortality tables felt mildly soothing. His concentration was broken by the flashing indicator of an incoming message. It was Bryce, asking him to swing by his office. On the short walk over, George played one of his favorite games of counting how many social media sites he could count open on his coworkers' monitors. Two points if he could identify the site, and an additional point if they tried to use ALT/TAB to instantly replace it with a spreadsheet. Five points later, he knocked on Bryce's door.

"George, have a seat, pal. Great work on the Centurion project. Really quality stuff. I honestly don't know what we would do without you. As you know, we've gotten all of the necessary approvals, and we're ready to take it to market. And you're going to LOVE this."

There was a long pause as though Bryce wanted George to respond, but in his experience, the only thought running through George's mind was that he was most certainly not going to love it. He managed to stutter a muted reply. "Wow. Okay. That's great to hear. What is it?"

Bryce exclaimed, "You're never going to believe who we have lined up to promote The Centurion. Think BIG. That's right, you guessed it, The ROCK!"

Stunned, George stared blankly at him. Bryce continued, "George of the Jungle, you don't look so good, my man. Looks like you've seen a ghost. Did you hear what I just said? Imagine how many policies we're going to sell!"

"Bryce, what the heck does The Rock know about selling life insurance, especially policies with complex long-term care riders like ours?"

Bryce leaned back in his chair and laughed loudly. "Well first off Georgerino, The Rock is successful at literally everything he has ever tried. The man has the Midas Touch. I started drinking dandelion root tea in the afternoons after seeing his Instagram post last month. But I didn't say The Rock, I said Kid Rock."

Bryce would have noticed George's upper lip curl in disgust, like Elvis Presley smelling a rotten peanut butter and banana sandwich, had he not been preoccupied with strumming his air guitar, yammering something that sounded like BA-WITTA-BA. George regained his composure and said "Okay, well I guess that's good news. As long as we can sell policies that are actuarially sound, it's a win-win for everyone." Bryce gave George a quick smirk, clearly amused by George's lack of enthusiasm.

"Georgy-boy. On a more serious note, have you taken my advice about expanding your social media presence?"

George's stomach began to knot like a pretzel. Give him a spreadsheet that needed some Macro updates or a detailed review, and he was in his comfort zone. This? Not so much. "Bryce, I promise I'm doing my best. I've retweeted every one of our GlobeCorp marketing posts. I'm working on it."

On a dime, Bryce lowered his voice and leaned forward. "George, listen, you're an amazing actuary. I'm pretty sure you invented commutation functions. But you need to get with the program. Take Braiden for example. The B-Raid gets it. He absolutely crushed the Neil Patrick Harris push on Social last month, and he got close to 1,000 likes on his platforms and has over 3,000 followers."

George's anxiety was quickly replaced with anger, and it began to swell like a firecracker on the Fourth of July. And not a firecracker for the city's well-orchestrated annual show. George felt like the firecracker of a drunk's backyard firework show. The fuse was lit, and George felt his head begin to pound.

George raised his voice in frustration, saying, "Bryce, you know I did most of the work. And I love my team. Braiden is great and has a ton of potential, but I'm not sure he's ever even going to get credentialed." Bryce walked over to the door and quickly shut it.

"I know what you contributed to this project, and it turned out really well, so you need to calm down a bit. All I'm saying is that we need you to step up your game."

George listened intently but his eyes dropped firmly to the ground.

"George-a-saurus Rex. You're the man. You're probably the best actuary in the office. But churning out technical analysis isn't everything these days. We've got to get you on board! KID ROCK BABY!!! Rocket ship emoji!!! Dollar sign emoji!!! All of the emojis!!!!!!"

George had no idea what Bryce was talking about, but he did know that he needed to leave the conversation ASAP. He briskly walked back to his desk, never once glancing at a computer monitor.

After two relatively quiet days of work, George finally felt like he was able to calm down and fully focus on his projects again. Challenging, yet satisfying actuarial work. The kind of work that justified his years of studying to earn his actuarial credentials. Spreadsheets. Reviewing formulas. Technical discussions via email. A Centurion project meeting in 5 minutes. *Oh no*. A nauseous feeling in George's gut came over him like dark cloud when he saw the flashing reminder pop up on his screen. He took a deep breath. *Let's get this over with*, he thought.

George shuffled into Team Room B with his head down, careful not to make eye contact with Bryce so that he didn't get pulled into his animated conversation. Bryce was in the middle of narrating his story to Braiden, half shouting, "So get this! I was out last night having dinner at Casa Fiesta. Amazing enchiladas by the way. And guess who walks in and sits a few tables away? You'll never guess. Nicolas Cage! AHHH THE BEES!!!!"

Braiden leaned back in his chair, grinning ear to ear. "No way! Please tell me you got a picture and his autograph!"

Bryce paused for dramatic effect, looking around the room to engage anyone new that had just arrived. "Of course I got his picture! But I wasn't about to bother him during his meal to get him to sign my receipt or anything. Check this out!" Bryce scrolled through his phone, enlarged the picture on the screen, and held it up to show everyone. "Me and the Cage Man!"

"Whoaaaaa that's so cool," gushed Braiden, leaning closer to get a better view. A few others in the room seemed to be equally as awestruck. George nodded his head to outwardly show his approval, but internally he was in utter disbelief. The phone was displaying a selfie of Bryce. His head was taking up most of the screen, with his long arm shooting into the air to snap the picture. And in the background was Nic Cage. Or possibly a female patron enjoying her burrito dinner. It was anyone's guess at that distance and point of view. George was slightly annoyed that so many of his coworkers seemed to find this impressive.

"OK guys, enough fun, let's get back to business," said Bryce, turning off his phone as he paced near the front of the room. "As you know, I've asked you all to push the Centurion project ads and articles to your Social feeds. Let's hear an update of how that's going. Braiden, you know we're starting with you." Bryce spun around quickly to face the whiteboard behind him. He grabbed a marker and listed each team member's name in all capital letters.

Oh no, thought George, sinking into his chair. He had a feeling that this meeting was likely headed in this direction, but he didn't think it would be the main topic of discussion. George spoke up, "Bryce, before we jump into this, can we discuss the mortality assumption that we used? I emailed the team about this days ago, but I haven't heard a response."

Bryce continued on, apparently not hearing a word George had said. "Braiden, go ahead."

Braiden glanced at George, then back up at Bryce, saying, "Um, before I start, I think George has a question?"

Bryce looked puzzled and turned to George. "What's that George? You need to speak up." Bryce crossed his arms across his chest, waiting for a response.

George spoke more loudly, saying, "It's like I mentioned in my email to the group. I really think we need to take a closer look at our mortality assumption and how we're applying it across our various groups. We should discuss the possibility of running an experience study on some of our previous projects to see if we can't improve the accuracy of the assumptions."

Bryce stared silently at George for a few seconds with a disinterested look. "I promise, we will look at it when we have some time, but that's not the point of today's meeting, okay?"

George fell silent and dropped his eyes to his notepad. Clearly flustered, he felt his face flush with embarrassment. "Sure Bryce, sorry about that."

"Not a problem, George Clooney, but let's hear from Braiden!"

Braiden stuttered a bit, feeling slightly sorry for George, but he quietly began, saying, "Well, I worked through my usual platforms. Shared the news articles on LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook. I was sure to add comments and remind my followers to like, subscribe, and tag me on their own platforms. As I mentioned in our previous meeting, the algorithms on these sites really seem to factor that in. On those three platforms combined, I'm up to around 2,000 likes, retweets and shares."

Bryce nodded in approval. "That's awesome. Anything else?"

"Well, in addition, I thought I would try something new. I created a TikTok video for my Channel promoting Kid Rock. The response to that has been great! I've really been growing my subscriber base. The key is really to get them to engage with..."

"Now hold on one minute," George interrupted. "You created a TikTok video promoting our work? Life insurance policies? And people watched this?"

Braiden cackled loudly. "Well, technically I promoted Kid Rock. He's the one promoting the policies. People don't care about our policies, George. They care about Kid Rock."

Frankly, George couldn't understand why anyone even cared about Kid Rock either, but he continued. "Okay fine, but does this even work? We can have all of the repost tweetshares in the world, but does it even translate to sales?"

Bryce forcefully jumped in. "Now what kind of a question is that George? Why would we be doing it if it didn't?"

George considered a few sarcastic comebacks to that, but before he could say anything, Bryce circled the conversation back around. "Okay George, have you made any progress?"

Frustrated, George replied, "Of course I have. I managed this project from start to finish. We created profitable, actuarially sound policies, benefiting both the policyholder and..."

“George, I’m going to stop you right there, I’m talking about your follower base. You’ve been working in this industry for decades. You have plenty of connections. We really need you to take some pointers from Braiden. I need to see you put a better effort into this. Okay, who wants to go next?”

George sunk into his chair, defeated. From there, the meeting continued in more of the same manner, with Bryce going around the room, tallying up everyone’s progress on the whiteboard. Disengaged, George stared blankly out the window, not really looking at anything in particular. He felt his anxiety continue to mount as he fumed over Bryce’s comments.

As the meeting came to a close and everyone filed out of the room, Bryce walked over to George, still slumped in his seat.

“Everything okay there, G Man?”

George shifted in his seat and continued to gather up his things. The room was now empty except for the two of them. “Yeah, Bryce, I’m fine.”

“Well, I’m a little worried about you, buddy. It doesn’t seem like you’re with us lately.” Bryce paused and gave an almost imperceptible sigh. “You might need to take some time off to clear your head. I saw an Instagram video recently of Snoop Dogg relaxing on a beach in Jamaica. Might not be such a bad idea to take some time off to enjoy some R&R.” Bryce knocked lightly on the table next to George, spun around, and left the room.

Back at his desk, George tried to clear his head, but the stabbing pain behind his eyes continued to intensify. His anxiety was pressing down on him like a heavy blanket, and he wanted nothing more than to lie down and shut his eyes. He glanced outside and peered up at the sun as it broke through from behind a wall of white, puffy clouds. He took a deep breath and leaned back in his chair. The sun’s warmth on his face felt soothing, and he closed his eyes and began to daydream.

Over the years, George used to exercise in North Park every weekend, and he would often see all sorts of wildlife on his run – deer, rabbit, duck, horse, and if he was lucky, the occasional hawk. But the real hidden gems of the park were the buffalo at the Game Preserve. He loved to pass by the area for a quick break in his workout to visit the lumbering creatures.

The buffalo were fenced into a large area set into the side of a grassy hill. From the parking lot at the base, the enclosure sloped upward about 300 yards at a steep incline to reach the summit. Typically, George would join the other visitors at the bottom of the hill near the feeding tanks, but occasionally he would climb to the top to find some peace and quiet away from the crowd.

As George drifted deeper into the warm embrace of his calming thoughts, his breathing began to slow and the knot in his stomach loosened. In his mind, he eased himself down to the cool grass and laid on his back. He closed his eyes as the perfect weather in his soothing meditation merged with sun’s comforting rays through the office window.

A cool breeze stirred the air, bringing with it a familiar, yet oddly welcoming scent. George sat up and smiled as he saw a large buffalo emerge from some nearby trees into the grassy, open area nearby. He could see the rest of the herd halfway down the hill, slowly meandering their way to the feeding tanks below. It was strange to see one of them separated from the rest of the pack like this. George smiled again at the imposing creature, who seemed to acknowledge his presence, walking toward the fence between them.

HRRUMMPHHH. The buffalo let out an audible whoosh of air from his lungs, which sounded like a mix between a grunt and a sneeze. George let out a heavy sigh as well, as he tried to rid himself from the frustration of the day.

As the buffalo slowly turned to walk down the hill toward the rest of the pack, George felt a rush of envy toward the creature. The buffalo didn't have a care in the world. He didn't have to worry about Bryce's next big project. Or submitting his timesheet on a Friday afternoon before going home to enjoy the weekend. Or building his social media presence, posting company articles day after day. And the buffalo certainly didn't have a clue who Hannah G. was dating, or how many eggs The Rock had for breakfast each morning, or what kind of beer Snoop Dogg was drinking on the beach that he would never get to visit.

For a brief moment, the wind shifted, and the buffalo paused and glanced in George's direction. He gave one last HRRUMMPHHH and set off down the hill. Tears had begun to well in George's eyes, and he closed them tightly. The breeze gained strength, and George felt as though he could fade away into the wind. Slowly and methodically, he calmed his breathing. He eased back into the grass, and the pain in his head gradually began to fade.

"GEORGE 'THE ACTUARY' JOHNSON!!!" proclaimed Bryce, entering George's cube with a giddy excitement.

George startled awake, flailing his arms and legs, and coming within inches of kicking Bryce in the process. His heart began beating out of his chest with the intensity of a drum solo in the movie *Whiplash*. His hands found the armrests of his chair and dug in as he pulled himself upright. In a panic, he hurriedly scanned his cubicle desperately trying to regain his bearings.

"Bryce, what is wrong with you? Why are you screaming?!?!" George shouted back, unable to control the volume of his own voice.

George looked to his left and saw the all-too-familiar mess of brown hair and wild eyes over his cubical wall, glistening with anticipation. *Oh no*, thought George. *This can't be good*. He looked back over to Bryce, and to his dismay, he looked equally as enthusiastic.

From over the cubical wall, Braiden tossed Bryce a cowboy hat, who shoved it eagerly on George's head. "Georgio, you are going to LOVE this!" George recoiled a bit with shock. "We had a surprise planned for you for tomorrow, but you seem like you need a pick-me-up after today's meeting." Smiling ear to ear, Braiden tossed Bryce some tinted oversized sunglasses, who leaned in and placed them clumsily on George's face.

Braiden grabbed his phone and held it up to take a picture. Bryce reached around the side of the cubical wall and grabbed a life size, cardboard cutout of Kid Rock. He shoved it next to George, his jaw practically on the floor with disbelief. Bryce pointed at Braiden's phone.

"Look at the camera and say BA-WITTA-BA!!!" shouted Bryce.

Braiden snapped the picture, his smile as bright as the sun. "I hope you're ready George, you're going viral!!!"