

WHO ATE MY MUFFIN?

A MODERN PARABLE ABOUT REACTIVITY,
REFLECTION, AND THE RIPPLE EFFECT
OF SMALL THINGS

ADVANCE EDITION

By Charleen Johnson





THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

This parable was inspired by a true story and first conceived more than twenty-four years ago.

At the time, I was working inside a very large organization as an organization development manager, certified to deliver the popular *Who Moved My Cheese?* change program by Spencer Johnson. One role in my job was to help people adapt when “the cheese” inevitably moved.

Then one morning, an unexpected lesson arrived when an email sent to thirty thousand employees asked a simple question:

“I had a muffin in the fourth-floor break room fridge, and it’s missing. Who ate my muffin?”



THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

What followed was a flood of replies, clarifications and apologies. A masterclass in human behaviour.

It turned out, the missing muffin wasn't about breakfast at all. It was about what happens when something small bumps a big, reactive system.

That tiny incident stuck with me and I knew someday I'd write about it. Over the years, it's evolved into the story you're reading, fictionalized for privacy, but baked from the same ingredients: overreaction, good intentions, and how a single muffin can reveal the systems around us.

So I moved the scene to Behaving Badly Incorporated (BB Inc.), a place that might look suspiciously like your own workplace, and made it part of the Behaving Badly Universe™.

This is a playful twist on *Who Moved My Cheese?*, – this time with crumbs on the carpet and a lesson worth laughing through.





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THE GATHERING

The story is often shared at BB Inc.'s onboarding sessions, usually by someone who's been around long enough to remember the day the feed went up in flames. It begins with Julie.

Julie was a mid-level project lead on a large transformation program. Competent, polite, and perpetually in back-to-back meetings. She prided herself on staying calm in a place where urgency was a lifestyle.

Until one Tuesday morning, when she opened the communal fridge to find her breakfast missing.





THE PARABLE

THE DISCOVERY

That morning, Julie stopped at the Good Café, the one around the corner from the office for her favorite blueberry muffin. A small ritual for big-meeting days.

She arrived early, logged in, and dropped her bag at her cubicle. On her way to grab coffee, she placed the muffin carefully in the communal fridge: second shelf, left side, the unofficial “safe zone.” At least in theory.

By midmorning, BB Incorporated was fully awake: the whirl of vending machines, the hiss of the espresso bar, the chorus of status updates from people trying to sound productive before ten.





THE DISCOVERY

Most of the noise drifted from the break room, the building's unofficial town square. It smelled faintly of performative ambition and burnt coffee. Every shelf in the communal fridge was labelled by department, neat plastic dividers promising order in a workplace where even chaos came with a procedure.

Julie opened the fridge, still half in her meeting notes, and did a double take.

Her beautiful blueberry muffin, with sugar crystals that always caught the light, was **gone**.

She stood there for a moment, staring at the empty space where it had been. A few coworkers drifted in and out, avoiding eye contact with the evidence. After a sigh that sounded like acceptance but wasn't, Julie headed back to her desk.





THE POST



At her desk, Julie tapped a short message into what she thought was her small project chat on Teams:

“Hey folks, a small thing, but my muffin disappeared from the fridge again. If you grabbed it by mistake, all good! Just a reminder to label your food. 😊”

She hit Send and took a sip of coffee.

A moment later, her screen blinked. Then blinked again.

The post didn’t land in her team chat. It appeared under a different channel to All of BB Incorporated.

Julie froze. The first reaction wasn’t panic; it was disbelief. She clicked, hovered, tried to recall the message, but the “Delete” option was already greyed out. Too late.

The tiny blue notification bubble began to multiply a cascade of emojis, replies, and reactions. Someone had already posted a meme. Within minutes, the office had a new topic.



THE SPREAD

Within minutes, emojis poured in: rows of muffins, shocked faces, prayer hands.

Then the statements began.

HR: “Thank you, Julie. Food security is everyone’s responsibility. We’ll review the fridge policy.”

Communications: “We hear you. We’re drafting a short video on Respect in Shared Spaces.”

The Chief of Something Important: “Integrity is what we do when no one’s looking. Even near a fridge.”

Then one reply cut through the emojis.

Jim (a colleague): “Julie, please be mindful of using the All of BB Incorporated channel for minor personal matters. Many of us are already behind on critical updates.”

The feed went silent for twelve seconds. Then someone wrote, “This is exactly the lack of empathy that causes muffin theft.”

Another wave of responses followed.



THE SPREAD

By mid-morning, **Facilities** had laminated a new poster:

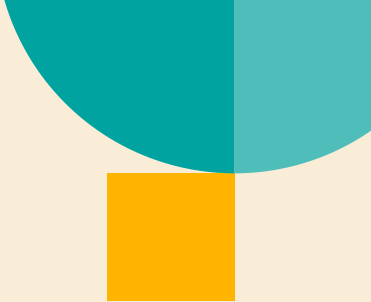


By noon, someone **started a poll**: *Team Muffin* or *Team Croissant*?

By three, **IT** reported the internal feed had hit record traffic.

Julie sat at her desk, watching the notifications multiply. The entire company seemed to have found purpose in her pastry.





And just like that,
the muffin was
gone.

But the noise stayed.





THE PAUSE



By five o'clock, HR had booked a mandatory training for the next day titled *"Learnings from the Muffin Communication."*

Communications had already sent an all-staff email referring to it as *"The Incident."*

Julie closed her laptop, grabbed her lunch bag, and wandered back to the break room.

She stopped short. A new box of muffins sat on the shelf, each one carefully labelled JULIE'S MUFFIN in bold marker.

For the first time that day, she smiled. Maybe the company wasn't hopeless after all? Just hungry for connection.

She picked up a marker and wrote on the box:

Thank you, enjoy! FYI, I'm bringing oatmeal tomorrow.



THE MEMO ON THE FEED

A week later, someone posted a short message on the internal channel.

No author, no emojis. Just five lines.

THE MEMO ON THE FEED

Preserved in the archives of BB Incorporated.

- Small things test big systems.
- Urgency isn't leadership.
- Calm is a strategy, not a delay.
- Notice before you notify.
- The system always replies all.





THE REFLECTION

Every organization has its version of the muffin.

A small disruption that reveals how reactive we've become, how quickly empathy turns into theatre, how every act of noticing becomes a campaign.

At BB Incorporated, they still tell the story of the missing muffin. It's part of onboarding now, half joke, half cautionary tale.

The muffin wasn't the problem.
The reaction was.

Because in a system built on constant visibility, even a smallest mistake can become a mirror. And sometimes the most productive thing you can do is nothing at all.

BB Incorporated learned that day that culture doesn't live in values statements or laminated posters. It lives in the pause between trigger and reply. It lives somewhere between a policy update and a shared muffin.



THE REFLECTION

For Julie, it was the moment she realised that real accountability isn't about who ate the muffin. It's about who can stop the cycle before it burns the next batch.

QUESTION

- When something small goes wrong at work, do you react, repair or reflect first?
- What does your team tend to do when something goes sideways? Take time to understand it or jump straight to creating a solution?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Charleen Johnson is a leadership and organizational development strategist turned satirist of modern work and life.

After two decades inside large systems navigating transformation, culture, and the occasional corporate absurdity she founded Behaving Badly HQ, a creative bureau exploring what happens when human beings meet complex workplaces.

Through **Behaving Badly Books™**, Charleen writes modern parables that reveal how people think, react, and perform inside the systems they've built, invites readers to laugh while they recognize themselves.

Who Ate My Muffin? is her first Field Tale in the **Behaving Badly Universe™**, a short, satirical story showing how small things can spark big patterns in motion.

Beyond the workplace, Charleen investigates how systems, technology, and everyday life keep testing our human capacity, and how we might evolve to meet them.



UNTIL WE READ AGAIN, FRIENDS

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Behaving Badly Books™ collection,
where we explore how humans behave
(and misbehave) at work and beyond.

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Behave Badly Better.