



“Like a donut in a break room:  
unexpected, surprisingly sweet,  
and totally made my day. . .

I devoured it!”

—SHELBY VAN PELT,  
*New York Times*  
bestselling author  
of *Remarkably*  
*Bright Creatures*

A NOVEL

**NATALIE SUE**

# I Hope This Finds You Well

A Novel

NATALIE SUE

The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive 'wm' monogram.

WILLIAM MORROW

*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*



# Dedication

*For Joanne. Thank you for everything you did.*

## Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Dedication*

This Could've Been an Email

Walk of Shame

Birthday Party for One

Hangovers Are a WIP

Bcc Bcc'ident

HR Stands for: Helpful Rarely

Real Talk

Aunt: Another Four-Letter Word

Conveyor Belt Artist

Power Move

But Who Will Watch Me Watch the Movie?

Dos and Donuts

Music Taste Is Raunch Rock

Armin & Rhonda EFFs

Minor Distractions

Milkshake Brings Nothing to Nobody

Missedcakes

Ungodly Hours

Bronze Medal Wife

Meet the Parents

The Prior Engagement

Can't Keep Meetings Like This

*Kidstreet*

Phone Plant

Archives Aren't My Own

Gutter Ball

It's Her Party, I Can Hide If I Want To

Curb Appeals

Getting Mugged

How I Always Pictured My Proposal

Somebody Had to Say *It*

Cliff Hanger

Finger Food

Delightful Fashionista

Alarming Answers

Gregory: A Man Named Gregory Who Works Here

Taarof-Off

Life Rated PG: Pathetic in General

Please Excuse My Wine

Gold-Plated Dinner

Extortion Portion

Irregular Business Hours

The Day Is Still Going

Party in the Boardroom

Walk of Shame 2.0

Important to Keep a Schedule

White-Text Conversations

Cleaning Up

Small Talk

No Outside Food Allowed

One Year(ish) Later

*Acknowledgments*

*About the Author*  
*Copyright*  
*About the Publisher*

## This Could've Been an Email

**T**here will be questions. Ones I don't have socially acceptable answers for. I know because today is my birthday, and a last-minute meeting has appeared on my calendar. A poorly disguised office cake party will be my supposed reward for turning thirty-three six and a half hours ago. Half the office will cram around a conference table, against our will, to eat dry sheet cake and force polite smiles.

The questions will be about my life and how I plan to celebrate. Answers: I don't have a life, and I will likely celebrate by drinking alone and going down Reddit rabbit holes researching random and upsetting things like fecal-matter transplants, or the Golden State Killer, while making myself regret everything. I'm not sure that's relatable, so I'll say I'm having dinner with friends. Oh, the lies I am forced to tell just to fit in at the western regional office of Supershops Incorporated.

The meeting reminder flashes on my monitor again, persistent as a pesky cold sore. My fingers tingle, and I take a few slow breaths, but I can't get air to settle in my lungs. So many office situations show no regard for people with anxiety, yet we're the bad guys if we can't cope.

I should just walk away from it all.

My eyes dart to the flimsy wall of my cubicle where my name card still faintly reads *Jolene Smith* after years of sitting beneath violently fluorescent lighting. Three pushpins pierce the industrial fabric; they've always been there, even though I've never felt the urge to



pin anything up. My workspace remains bare and beige in a sea of personalized cubicles. Yet those pins sit reassuringly in their same formation, day after day.

And I don't think I could ever leave them.

A new email appears in my inbox. It's from Rhonda, whose official title is "lead accounting administrator," but really she's just our boss Gregory's assistant, a role she's held for a thousand years.

Reminder, I've booked you for a meeting in boardroom 435 that starts in one minute. You don't want to be late.

This meeting has automatic reminders set up, yet she's emailing me from seven feet away. I peer over the half wall of my cubicle toward hers, which boasts a shelf lined with an assortment of dusty trinkets, inspirational quotes printed on crinkled yellow paper affixed to the wall, and a file box I know is filled with medications, tea bags, and biscuits that expired in 2012. It's as though she anticipates being trapped here one day and not only surviving the ordeal, but thriving.

I don't mean to lock eyes with Rhonda; I blame her excessive eyeliner and the green eyeshadow that could direct traffic. She notices and breaks the stare first, lowering her head so I can see only the tips of her spiky grey hairdo. Then her mouse clicks, pointedly.

Technically, she's to blame for this entire mess. She doesn't usually pay much attention to me, and when she does it's often paired with a scowl and a pointed gum-snap. But Rhonda runs the morale club, and with Brendan Fraser as my witness, there's nothing more demoralizing than the Morale Boosters. Her morbid obsession with birthday tracking, cake buying, and forcing people to sit through off-key renditions of the "Happy Birthday" song can't be out of love.

Planning these thirty-minute-long office parties and telling people about the mundane interactions she's had with service people are big portions of her personality, but her primary passion is her "grown-ass son," whom she visits every weekend. He's some rich

dick who supports her. In her eyes, he is on the brink of curing all human ailments, keeps the transit running on time, and has about a million matches on Tinder. Although, judging by the framed picture of him on her desk, he could be the stock model used in advertisements for plain bread and mayo.

I keep my expression deadpan as I turn back to my keyboard and type:

Hello Rhonda,

Thanks very much for reminding me about the meeting. I must say, your reminder is so much more personal and well received than the default one that the computer gives. I almost feel that one is pointless when I've got you in my corner.

Best regards,  
Jolene

Adding extra sugar to the part that's visible helps make the invisible part so much more satisfying. I change the font to white and type the stuff that's just for me:

P.S. Deep in my core, I find you insufferable. There are times, when you're on the phone fake laughing or retelling someone the same story about your toenail surgery, that make me consider joining a cult as a preferable alternative to staying here with you. Also, I'm fairly certain you can't legally brag about your son since you named him "Carl."

As I click send, I halt my breath. The rush of adrenaline hits as a flutter in my abdomen. It's a safe high, since she won't actually see the message. The knot in my chest loosens. This is truly the second-best coping mechanism to survive the peril that is my colleagues.

I creak out of my chair to begin the walk to the boardroom. Rhonda's shimmery nails continue to clack across the keyboard as she peeps up at me from beside the corner of her screen. I smile politely in her general direction.

As I pass behind Caitlin's desk, the scent of the vanilla-icing hand cream she applies seventeen times daily wafts my way, microdosing my irritation. The same scent always transfers to the documents and

envelopes she handles, like a dog marking her territory. She tilts her chin toward me and gives this little brow raise but doesn't look directly at me. Something uncertain bubbles in the pit of my chest. She's been watching me all day, and I trust her less than my Wish.com recommendations.

Caitlin and I have worked adjacent to each other for three years in the same admin role. We were destined to be best friends, but because of who we are as people, our years of forced proximity have instead culminated in a specific form of petty hatred. The problem is Caitlin tries *way* too hard. She's still talking about how this job is a "jumping-off point" for her to step into a larger role at Supershops, while I gave up on that notion after less than a year here. Her violations include: cc'ing Gregory when she notices any of my errors "in case it becomes a relevant pattern" (which is a good point, and I've made sure to include him when calling out her mistakes too), forgetting to add my mug when she runs the dishwasher (I can never find space for hers either), and interrogating me when her yogurt goes missing from the office fridge (as if blueberry Dannon is something I'd mess with). It's reached a healthy point where our only communication is via curt emails, and we gleefully mix up anything the other sends to the printer. It's unfortunate because I like to think I support my fellow women in the office, or at least I stay out of their ways as much as everyone else.

More lifeless eyes seem to pull toward me from each cubicle I pass. I curl my arms around myself, to limit how much I'm perceived. I catch my reflection in a glass door and jolt at my frizzy brown hair and puffy eyes. I may be entitled to compensation for that. It's not that I'm a terrible-looking person, but I haven't slept well this week, and I always seem to look my worst when I don't expect myself.

And it's not like I care about making a great impression here. This is not one of those cool places to work with free snacks or standing desks or nap pods. My office is sort of like a recent time capsule. If someone wanted to travel seven to nine years into the past, they could come view our poster of men eating lunch on a plank, the fax machine still plugged into the wall, and the sagging yoga ball chairs.

We politely ignore the decade-old coffee stains on the industrial carpeting near Larry's coffeemaker and the fact that Larry sleeps here a few times a year.

When I reach the dusty bird of paradise plant that Rhonda snuck into the office five years ago that's both plastic and dying, a familiar dread sets in. I take a breath and open the door to the boardroom.

Seated closest to the entrance is my boss, Gregory. He's got the same hair as a golden retriever and dresses in clothes that were likely issued by someone who got them during a rushed grocery shop, and at least once a month he mentions that he championed getting the complimentary dollar store tampons placed in the bathrooms. He's not just a regional manager; he's an ally. The single most notable thing about him is that he often discreetly touches his penis (via his pockets, but we can all see the movements) and then openly touches the door handles, printers, and Nespresso buttons, leaving his penis dew that seeped through the pocket fabric everywhere. Because he's the boss, there's no stopping his dick fingers, and that's why no workplace is ever truly equal.

Next to him is Anna, our office manager. She's frowning at her phone and stabbing at the screen with a French-manicured finger. She's all business and sharp angles with her black pantsuit and blunt bangs.

But she doesn't normally come to these gatherings.

And at the end of the table is a guy I don't recognize—a guy who is openly sketching a small doodle onto a faded yellow legal pad. Beneath his trimmed beard I can see the beginning of a smirk. He's wearing a hoodie that says *Warhammer*, which would not be my weapon of choice in a war. The sleeves are pushed up, and I take the obligatory tenth of a second to appreciate his forearm flexing, as is my right.

I glance back toward the open door, but Rhonda isn't trotting in behind me balancing a cake against her bosom. There aren't even discount decorations in here—no wispy paper streamers absently taped under the buzzing light fixture or silvery birthday sign that is well past retirement. I take another tentative step inside the room, visibly stirring up the dust in the stiff air.

My mouth dries and my brain starts to swim. Just three hours ago, the office stress case, Larry Goodwin, was all sweat sheened and breathy in the copy room as he warned some guy in payroll that massive layoffs were on the horizon.

But I shrugged it off.

The doodling man lets his pen fall onto the notepad and he grins uncertainly at me. I don't know why they decided to invite a high school gym coach to help fire me—unless the goal is maximum shame? Maybe he'll yell at me about my three-croissant lunches and have me attempt a push-up.

"Please have a seat." Gregory's voice is stern, absent of its usual shameless bubble.

My heartbeat jumps into high gear as I plunk into a seat across the table from the three of them.

Gregory broadens his shoulders in this showy way before speaking. "We wanted to discuss a concern that was brought to our attention." He scrapes a single piece of paper across the plastic-top table, driven by his callused fingers. Caitlin's pink cursive email signature flashes from the bottom corner.

My heart stops.

Gregory continues: "I'm sure you're aware of our corporate policies about interpersonal communication."

I nod, realizing my neck has gone stiff. A shuffling motion to my right distracts my attention. The gym coach is writing something down on his pad.

"Did you include additional text in your April seventeenth email to Caitlin Joffrey?"

Three sets of eyes bore into me as realization dawns. I try to think of what to say, but my mind can only race through random thoughts that blur together, garbled and incomplete.

"So no cake is coming" is what ends up coming out of my mouth. They glance at each other in confusion. "Never mind," I mutter, as I look down at the paper in front of me. My heartbeat overtakes the sound of Gregory's mouth breathing.

Hello Caitlin,

Per my last email, reports are due Wednesday.

Regards,  
Jolene

We always choose the most violent form of business casual communication with each other.

Gregory leans across the table to tap his finger on the page. "Right there, can you please review the additional text on the bottom?"

I blink rapidly as the words come into focus.

P.S. What is wrong with you? You're eating that puke soup to deliberately torture us, and you left a trail of destruction from the microwave to your desk.

Sincerely,  
Everyone

Admittedly, when I scribed it, I was having a particularly shit day and Caitlin had been getting to me all morning. But she was the one with the gall to microwave an actual bowl of fish vomit and slurp it in front of us with no regard for the fact that I was nursing a hangover. Writing that note was the only form of therapy I could afford.

All the joints in my fingers stiffen.

All I can think up as a defense is "I don't understand how that got there?"

Except I do. I messed up bad.

Until now, I've never forgotten to change the font color to white before hitting send.

The gym coach's mouth twitches again before he turns his gaze to the window. I'm here dealing with an actual nightmare, and this guy has the audacity to laugh.

"Maybe I left my computer logged in?" I mutter.

Nobody on the panel will look directly at me.

My ancestors overcame plagues, poverty, and war so that I could be here. My mom separated from her family and risked everything to emigrate from Iran to Canada without even knowing English,

because she wanted more for me. All those sacrifices, all those brave acts, just so this could happen. All of it leading up to this moment, to this boardroom at my very *meh* job, so my managers can address how much of a fucking weirdo I am.

My legacy was taken down by a bowl of trout soup heated for one minute and thirty seconds on high.

An unfortunate phlegm sound tears through the silence as Gregory clears his throat. "We know you wrote it, Jolene." His jaw ticks twice. "And as this was an alarming message, we considered having our IT coordinator track your computer activity for instances of threatening behavior."

"What?" I blurt out. "That wasn't a threat. You can't search my—"

I cut myself off, probably my first wise move since I entered this meeting. I've always felt like someone at corporate was watching everything I did on my work computer anyway. I imagined they could see my search history and were plotting little dots on some graph to show the higher-ups how absolutely disturbed I am.

I never expected it to be true.

A chair creaks as Anna, who has never been one to show solidarity, adjusts herself and stares stonily at my forehead. Maybe it's some type of corporate head office protocol on how to look at an employee you're about to fire.

Gregory rubs his chin, every scratch of his nails against his stubble audible. "Our new HR analyst has looked things over, and although the letter contains a threatening tone, he agrees that it isn't a threat." I now understand the presence of the coach, who flashes another small grin my way. His smile has far too much sympathy tinting the edges. In his line of work, he should be as unfazed as a three a.m. Uber driver.

I nod automatically like a keen employee engaged in an important business discussion, instead of whatever the hell this is. Gregory slides the printed email away from me and shuffles it back into a manila folder as he winces the next words out. "We know you don't often, uh . . . socialize with other employees, and that you aren't one to participate in team-building activities."

Heat rushes up my neck, my humiliation hitting new peaks.

“But when you start to engage in actively inappropriate behavior,” he continues, “we have to get involved for the comfort of all.”

I nod again. Now would be an appropriate time to inquire if NASA has any rockets scheduled to launch, so I can hitch a ride directly into the sun.

Anna shifts higher in her chair. “Miss Joffrey came to us feeling quite jostled and rightfully emotional.”

I’ll bet. I focus all my energy into controlling my ocular muscles, as my body is physically overcome with a need to roll my eyes. The only emotion Caitlin felt was glee over an opportunity to get me in here.

Something shifts behind me, so I turn slightly toward the still-ajar boardroom door. I catch Armin, the other accounting admin, darting out of view as he pretends to scan something at the printer. He is the fourth member of our cubicle pod, sitting next to Rhonda, Caitlin, and me. The very fact that he’s standing at a printer and repeatedly pushing buttons gives him away. The guy is a serial printer breaker who walks away when faced with any adversity from IT equipment—or any minor challenge, really.

Gregory continues where Anna left off. “We want this to be a comfortable environment for all.” A fresh wave of bitterness washes over me. If Caitlin had shown the most basic regard for communal microwave etiquette, we’d all be sitting at our desks right now, trying to ignore our thoughts for the rest of the afternoon.

Gregory was right. I’m not one to engage with these people. I haven’t spoken to anyone in the office unless absolutely necessary for most of the eight years I’ve worked here. I spend more time with them than anyone else in my life, yet I remain hardly visible, like my name plate.

“Since this is your first incident of this nature, you won’t be terminated as long as you meet certain conditions.” My head swims with his words, trying to decipher their meaning. “There will be mandatory security restrictions on your computer, including flagging of emails with certain key words, and”—he glances toward the coach—“Clifford will assist with your progress through an anti-harassment course.”



The Clifford guy gives a small wave, which accidentally knocks his pen out of his hand. It rolls onto the floor, and he disappears under the table to retrieve it.

Gregory lets out a heavy breath. "If you agree, the restrictions will take place immediately upon your signature, and you'll be scheduled to attend five sessions with Clifford over the next few weeks."

"Do you agree?" Anna pipes in with a breathless monotone.

I try to steady my hands into fists on my lap.

I can't lose this job—I'm barely making rent as is.

And my lifestyle can't take another hit. I'm down to seven-dollar wine and one single *macro* fiber towel. I can't move in with my parents and become the shame to my worldwide network of aunties. There will be a tongue clucking heard far and wide.

But it's more than that. If I have to live under my parents' roof again, it could literally end me this time.

The room and the world compress in on me as the panel of shame stares me down.

I nod stiffly. The only one to smile is Clifford.

Gregory claps once. "Great."

Anna pushes a small stack of papers secured with a binder clip across the table, then offers me a silver pen. The cool pen is too heavy for my shaking fingers, but I manage to flip straight to the last page of the packet, which is marked by a Post-it flag, and sign on the line.

Gregory and Anna shuffle out of their seats as Clifford waits behind me, collecting the documents. Gregory pauses and leans against the doorframe, his pants creased in all the wrong ways, his left hand *very* anchored in his pocket. "Clifford, you're going to have to set up Miss Smith's computer security today. Our IT service is on a work order. We'll show you the way." Then he marches out the door, Armin scurrying from his post at the printer in his wake.

Oh my god. They're doing it now? In front of everyone? My mouth sours, and Clifford, who is still arranging my paperwork, scrunches his shoulders guiltily toward me, which I don't buy. His whole career is shame centered.

I peel myself out of the chair and head toward the exit, but my feet stop at the doorway, once again contemplating leaving for good and becoming a shepherd, or moving into a wax museum and pretending I'm a figurine.

Clifford shifts the papers in his arms and says, "I noticed here that it's your birthday. Happy birthday! You're thirty-three. Same as me."

I force a smile. What is it with HR people always being so . . . in people's business? Like you have to be part sociopath to go into that line of work.

"Thanks," I reply, and dryly add, "This is exactly how I pictured it."

His laugh is way too loud, and I try not to encourage it with a smile. His notepad is tucked under his arm, and the doodle he was working on presses heavily into the page.

"Nice cat," I say. "Glad you found the time for some artwork during my professional misconduct meeting."

His mouth drops as his eyes slip away from mine.

I'm out of the room before he looks up.

May the procession of shame to my desk commence.