

# This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things



"A wonderful  
writer."  
— MATT HAIG

# Naomi Wood

"Complex, powerful, relatable, hilarious, REAL tales of modern motherhood—  
but mostly so, so funny. I loved it." —Emma Jane Unsworth, author of *Animals*



# **This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things**

**Naomi Wood**



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# **Dedication**

*for*

*Cathryn Summerhayes*

*and*

*Francesca Main*

*thank you*

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## Lesley, in Therapy

Though their babies were very different ages, Lesley and Irina had returned from maternity leave at the same time: Irina had taken all of her allowance, plus holiday, but Lesley had cut hers short. This meant they were in the same session of Group Therapy for Returning Parents, which was the worst possible outcome for Lesley, because who wanted to attend group therapy with an ex-friend lost to the momzone? Plus, Irina knew things about Lesley that she didn't want anyone else to know.

The timing was bad. Lesley was pitching her new game to Jerry this afternoon, and Group (as the veteran mothers in the company called it) would take the whole morning. Ordinarily she'd have thought the chances of getting her game greenlit were positive, but she'd returned to a saturated market, in a slumped economy, with redundancies on the horizon. Frankly, it was a surprise Group was still running—but such was the power of Rise, the equal ops initiative distributing seed funding to the video games industry, which made training sessions like this compulsory.

Lesley exited the lift of IX Games at the sixth floor. It was a finance floor, something unsexy—maybe Procurement? Lots of dudes, anyway. The counseling room was through an annex, and the carpet—mole-coloured and furry—made her stacked heels sink. Irina was already there, as was Li Jing, who was on her phone. They were all recent mothers.

Irina smiled as Lesley took her seat. Since their mutual return Irina had been trying to reheat their friendship. “Funny that we're in the same

session,” said Irina.

“Yeah.”

“How’s baby Max?”

“He’s good,” said Lesley.

“Is he at Little Jungle?”

Lesley nodded. “And Zeppe?”

“With my mum.”

“Nice to have family help,” Lesley said, turning away.

The room was a homely space, especially for a building as high-tech as IX. It had the air of a doctor’s waiting room, or a pre-mortuary; upholstered chairs, laminate signs, a plate of cookies on the table resembling dark, inert phones. Maybe, thought Lesley, sniffing the air for the lemon aerosol she’d once huffed in the high school toilets, they were in the cleaners’ break area? She heard a sound, possibly from the radiators. A faint decay. Lesley wondered why they hadn’t been put in one of the meeting rooms—but then they were glass-fronted, and she suspected there would be tears, dysregulation, feelings.

She was pleased to see that out of all the women here she looked the most put together.

It was weird that the therapist was late. Lesley had often been late to meet Christina, an unsmiling psychoanalyst of the classical school. Though it had cost her £75 an hour, Lesley had gently but consistently sabotaged the sessions. Anyway, she had long ago abandoned personal growth in favor of meeting the costs of childcare. Little Jungle did not come cheap.

Li Jing’s phone was making whooshing sounds. She hadn’t said hello, or even looked up as Lesley had walked in, and Lesley wondered if she too might be against all this. “Do you know how long we’re here for?” Lesley asked her, but then the counselor bundled in.

“Hello, everyone! I’m Tina,” she said, shaking their hands, apologizing about a stuck train at Moorgate. Tina’s skin had a powdery silkiness to it, like latex. Under her scarf was a low-cut top, which, with her straightened blonde hair, gave her the racy aura of a late-night TV host.



Tina asked them to write their names on labels.

Lesley wrote “Les,” which always stuck in people’s throats.

“Right,” Tina said, panoramically taking them in. “Quite a few of you have had babies this year!” She went on to talk about confidentiality, a safe space, what Group looked like, yadda yadda yadda, then, without warning, she launched into the session.

“What are your anxieties,” Tina asked, “about coming back to work?”

Li Jing said managing her workload, and Irina said missing her connection with her baby, since she was still breastfeeding. Zeppe, she added, was fourteen months, and had started to bite.

Don’t you mean toddler, Lesley wanted to say.

Tina turned to her. “Les?” Tina had that immaculately generous air that Lesley always thought a great giveaway of internalized anxiety.

Lesley lied, saying she had a bad back and her chair wasn’t ergonomic.

“Lovely,” said Tina, though she was obviously disappointed. “Sometimes, it can be helpful to reflect on where we have come from, so that we know who we are. Would anyone like to share their birth story?”

Irina was the first to talk, but Lesley had heard it all before and tuned out. Lesley and her husband had heard birth stories from new parents at the NCT group they had joined and swiftly left. The other couples had been unbearable, simultaneously sentimental but also domineering; Charlie had agreed they needed to be out of there, pronto. To the NCT leader they said they wanted to find a group in London with more Americans, but to each other they acknowledged the group’s intolerable emotionality.

Now Li Jing—who perhaps would prove more willing to participate than Lesley had anticipated—was giving a synoptic précis of her first labor, which amounted to her campaigning for an elective caesarean the second time around, threatening her midwife with a self-laminated page of the NICE guidelines. Li Jing made a slicing gesture at her waist and then another, which was like throwing water from a bucket. Was that the baby coming out? “You think midwives are on your side, but they’re not,” Li Jing said. “They minimize your pain like it’s *nothing*.”

Lesley thought of her midwife, Sandra, who'd been very kind to her after baby Max had ripped her up good from V to A. The birth had made him impossible to carry. Imagine having a baby, and not being able to carry him! The thought made her feel so sad.

“Les?”

She could see Tina was trying to get in; Irina too was leaning toward her in a posture of active listening. It was like a game she might design; cat, mouse; reward, trap. “No,” said Lesley, “thanks.”

Lesley participated vaguely, and only when called on. An hour passed. The talk soon grew fetid with bodies and babies, and Lesley had to sit on her hands, just as she had at the NCT group.

Soon enough, Irina was crying. She used to be so fun, Lesley's drinking buddy, her pal, the person she WhatsApped about office gossip, but now Irina was almost entirely consumed by motherhood. “You know sometimes,” said Irina, a rag of tissue in her hand, her face a baleful knot, “I lie awake with Zeppe in the night. My husband tells me to get *in* and get *out* of there, but when Zeppe is crying for me, *Mama, Mama!* I can't help but hold him. Sometimes, I actually get in the cot and fall asleep there. The next morning I'm so exhausted, and I have no idea,” Irina gestured to the upholstered room, “how I am meant to attempt my new role.”

This is why they'd fallen out with each other some months ago: it had started with an argument about Zeppe's sleep.

“You should never feel ashamed of giving your baby what he needs,” said Tina. “You can't spoil a baby.”

Irina's cheeks were red and her eyes were puffy. “My husband says we need sleep! That Zeppe doesn't *need* feeding in the night. But what can I do? I can't just ignore my baby!”

“I mean, you could,” said Lesley.

Irina was looking at her, as if Lesley was better than this, and Lesley knew she was better than this, but still she couldn't stop herself.

As Tina talked, Lesley took in the scene. Here they were. From all of their bodies, babies had been born; bluish, bloody, a disco smell of iron on their

vernixed skin. This was the only thing that held them together. And so what? So what if they had?

As Irina's crying turned into actual sobs, Lesley wondered how she might turn the conversation toward employment rights. Jerry had given her a full slate of client-facing jobs, though Rise suggested returning parents start off at 80 percent then be "phased" up to 100. If she could be on 80 percent, she could spend more time on developing new games.

"Is this right?" she said, interrupting Irina, probably at the worst possible moment, going by the way the others looked at her. "On the Rise model I should be on an eighty percent client load. My boss is trying to argue I am, but I was so overworked before I left they've actually just put me back on one hundred percent?"

"I'm not familiar with your company's policy," said Tina. "If we could focus on how your *feelings* affect—"

"Rise means nothing," said Li Jing, a biscuit crumbling between her teeth. "It also tries to get men to take their paternity leave, so, you know, ha ha ha. Who's your line manager?"

"Jerry."

"Yeah, so: good luck with that."

"Sorry, what's Rise?" said Tina.

"Rise is the equal ops and gender parity program," said Li Jing. "But it's a total hoax."

"How so?"

Li Jing swiped crumbs from the corner of her mouth. "You're not actually meant to ask for what it promises. And this is definitely not the time to stick your neck out."

Tina checked her watch. "OK, mums, let's focus on the here and now, and what we *can* change." She handed out mini whiteboards and markers. "Coming back to work from maternity leave can be joyful or challenging. No way of doing things is wrong." She asked everyone to write down four words describing their leave, without judgment, without censorship. Lesley looked blankly at her board and the ghosts of corporate language under it. She'd

had two good runs at postnatal depression, and, after Max, Sandra had easily persuaded her back to work much earlier than expected.

Lesley had learned her truth: work saves.

She felt Tina's eyes sweep her empty board. "How did you feel you bonded with your baby, Les?"

"Fine."

Irina's eyes were still damp from crying, or were they welling up again, filmy with empathy? Lesley had told Irina about her postnatal depression: her inability to feel the love she wanted for her baby, which had sprung forth, so effortlessly, for her friend. With both babies Lesley had had a hard time. Charlie said she was being harsh on herself, but nothing seemed to come naturally to her, and she knew sometimes he pretended to be more negative than he actually was, just to make her feel normal.

"It must be very hard; wanting a career and wanting a family."

"Yep," said Lesley.

"Lesley, I think Tina's just trying to work out if there's some kind—"

"They're just babies, OK, they're not UFOs," said Lesley, letting the whiteboard pen press into her eyelid. "It's not *trauma*. We don't have PTSD. We have not come from a war zone. We are not *refugees*, or something. All we have done is have children."

"It can be a trauma response—"

"No—"

"To avoid the pain, to avoid the memory of what happened during a birth."

"No," said Lesley, almost shouting. "I just wanted—"

"Because trauma doesn't happen *in* language," said Tina, "it can't be expressed *by* language."

Lesley watched herself, also beyond language, as she threw the whiteboard pen at Tina as hard as she could. It bounced off Tina's forehead and fell on the nylon carpet.

"I just wanted to come back to work! OK! That's all!"

“Oh my God,” said Li Jing, after a silence. “You just threw a missile at the counselor.”

Irina looked at her aghast, but Lesley felt radiant.

Tina took a few moments. It was quiet aside from the whine of the unbled radiator. There was a red mark where the pen had hit her.

“Les, could you pick up the pen, please?”

Lesley stood, dignified. She retrieved the pen and took her seat.

Tina rearranged her top and took a breath. “I’d like to dial down the emotion, if we may. Can I ask you all to close your eyes? We’ll try a guided meditation. Can we think of our babies, and make them present, without guilt? Can I ask you, please, to do that?”

Lesley liked her anger, and didn’t want it dialed down, but she also didn’t know what else to do.

“Now I’d like you to substitute your baby with a golden light.”

Lesley tried to imagine Max replaced with golden light, but he was too heavy for her imagined orb, and within seconds she opened her eyes and became distracted by where the hell they were again. This room made no sense: it was like a brown cave in one of the most modernist buildings in London. She thought of the song from *Frozen II* when Anna is in the cave, and she’s alone and sad because everyone is gone; everyone is dead. Lesley’s daughter, Emily, sang it all the time. How did it go?

“And let this light expand through your whole body,” said Tina, “until it spills out and reaches the walls.”

Lesley had watched the movie like a thousand times. The low-rent song of despair always made her cry, and as she watched Princess Anna stumble in the dark, without Elsa, without Kristoff, without even Olaf, she always had the same thought: I know this cave; this terrible cave.

All that heat, all that anger, replaced with sadness. Here she was, in this room: the old Lesley, deep in pain.

She could not cry. Tina would love that. Instead she felt her breasts tense and her bra moisten. “Oh, shit.” She pressed down on her chest. “I’m not being disruptive. Not deliberately, anyway.”

The other women watched her warily before they saw the two rings of darkening milk on her dress. Li Jing found some breast pads in her handbag. “Here. Have these,” she said quietly, as if she too had been subdued by Tina’s ionizing care.

“Sometimes your body wants your infant and you don’t even know it”—Tina tapped her head, where the pen had landed—“up here.”

“Right,” Lesley said.

Wasn’t therapy meant to make her feel better, more optimized? Why was it making her feel so shitty? The plangent radiator had stopped its noise. “Sorry: can you tell me what this room is?”

“The room?”

“Like, where the hell are we?”

“*Please!*” said Tina, finally cracking. “*Please* will you just let us continue?”

But Lesley eyeballed her for the rest of the meditation, wondering how much Tina invoiced.

Restarting work had been a sensuous experience. On her first day back it was as if she were coming up. Lesley had seen other women—even the short-lived female CEO a couple of years ago—return to work like wounded Spitfires; a threat to themselves and others. Lesley had resolved to be different. She wore Scandinavian tailoring; she extended her eyes with liquid liner; she shellacked her nails dark gray. In the workplace she felt reassimilated. She had pictures of both kids tacked to her Mac: one of Max (held in “the Sandra”) and one of Emily, happy on a swing. The photo always made Lesley think, with some astonishment, that she too used to be like that, a little girl, so idly inventive and wholly intact; a small person who hadn’t yet had anything taken from her.

Because of her answers to the mental health questions in the booking-in form, Sandra stuck around for weeks after Max’s birth, quietly making sure Lesley was not having a breakdown. Charlie liked Sandra. Lesley liked Sandra. Sandra, a Jamaican woman in her sixties, with graying hair at the

temples, was everyone's favorite person; mostly because whenever she came over Max magically stopped crying. Sandra had a way of holding babies, laying the spine up her arm with the head in her hand, which always calmed him. Even with Max, who was so heavy, she could do this.

(After that photo was taken, Sandra had discreetly made the sign of the cross over him, and Lesley, tears burning, had thanked her silently, because it might just give Max the protection he needed against his own mother.)

Colleagues had asked if everything was OK, given she'd returned to work so much sooner than expected. Lesley said she'd been bored.

Tina and Christina—the same name!—would think her attachment style highly ambivalent, but it had been Sandra—a woman who literally spent her life with babies—who said she was better off at work than wanting to dash the baby's brains out on the kitchen counter. "Don't worry," she'd said, "every mother at some point thinks about killing their child."

After Group, Lesley returned to her desk. She opened the package for her new game, "Air." The main graphic, a sphere, was colored in bitmap green. Gently she teased the sphere bigger. She knew from art school the relationship humans have to depth and shading; people genuinely thought "flat" animation lacked moral capacity. The game's central question was how to make the sphere big enough to float but compact enough to navigate the roads and buildings. Lesley dropped in the city footage. Now the sphere must be guided around skyscrapers and crowds without touching anything.

She played around with it, then texted Charlie, telling him she'd misbehaved at work, but he didn't reply. Charlie made mathematical models at an investment bank. Babies, he said, would make terrible data, because they refused to ever get into a pattern for very long. He was always very busy, and his work life had continued almost as normal between Emily and Max.

She turned back to the game: no narrative, no levels; "Air" was tend and befriend in the sweetest sense. The sphere's surface had a soft epidermal stretch. Even watching it in beta gave Lesley the feeling of pleasurable unavailability that she thought female gamers in particular would love, if

only she could persuade Jerry, and the rest of the Exec, to resource her with a team. What people actually want, she thought, was absence. Thinking caused unhappiness. Not thinking was actually deeply pleasurable. The lure of a phone was that it was actually tantric. Her new game would offer, in the language of the nursery, the means to self-soothe. It was a bit kooky, but she could usually persuade Jerry on board. He used to call her the Office Wellspring.

Jerry had been a little distant with her since her second maternity leave. Sometimes he gave her this look as he walked past her desk: half pitying, half disappointed; like, where did my old gal go?! Where's my old wellspring?! What was the saying—one kid's a hobby, two's a chore?

Jerry's kid—Carla? Carlo?—also went to Little Jungle, but Carl(a)(o) was always perfectly contented, unlike Max, who, his key people said, often cried uncontrollably. Anyway, Carl(a)(o)'s behavior was—she told herself—symptomatic of psychopathy. She'd seen the “Strange Situation” on YouTube, and children who waddled into nursery without a backward glance at their parents could, decades later, just as well slay them in their beds.

Often she had to leave Max still crying on the spongy floor. She thought it was bad to leave him like that, but in her haste to get to work she could never find anyone's arms to put him in.

As she finished the vertical slice she noticed the leaked milk had left doughnut shapes on her dress. Funny to think she had stopped breastfeeding months ago, and yet her body had chosen that moment to betray her. Funny, too, to think she'd thrown a pen at Tina's head, and, in the face of Tina's carnivorous empathy, she had not even apologized.

Lesley treated herself to lunch at Benoit's. Sexy people at alfresco tables drank tumblers of red wine, snapping breadsticks from paper holsters. Benoit brought her sparkling water. “*Signora*,” he said, ironically, because this was the part he played with other customers, not her.

Benoit was Senegalese, handsome, tall; a grandee of Charlotte Street, and he had a thoroughness that she always admired. For a moment she longed to



take his hand, but did not. She ordered a plate of seafood. Over the linens Charlotte Street's lunch crowd packed into the restaurants and cafes. The office workers here were all so white, it was practically precolonial.

She used to come to Benoit's with Irina for boozy lunches before they'd fallen out over text. Irina had been complaining about Zeppe's sleep, and Lesley—given Zeppe had been persecuting her friend for over a year now—had told her about “graduated extinction,” where you left your baby to cry while gradually withdrawing support. It had made Max sleep beautifully, but Irina had been angry. Later, after indexing her sadnesses about Lesley's negligent parenting in paragraphed messages, which Lesley had to click “Read more” to finish, Irina had gone quiet, and Charlie had to restrain Lesley from replying honestly. She and Irina hadn't talked for a while, though she was making all the effort now they were both back at work.

She didn't think they were the type of women to have fallen out over sleep training. It didn't seem a big enough thing, but it obviously was, to Irina. Charlie often said kids made people become people they would have previously loathed. Lesley wondered if she had stuck with the therapy she might not have had to go through her postnatal depression a second time, which was not a rodeo she'd had any desire to revisit. She felt that if she had tried harder, she might have been able to prevent it.

“Where is your friend?” Benoit said, placing the antipasti on the table. “The Italian.”

“Romanian. She's working.”

“And how is your baby?”

“He's very cute.”

The seafood suddenly appeared shockingly dead, like a Dutch still life; a mess of octopus, silky fish, prawns with anxious grins.

“Here.” She showed him a picture on her phone.

He smiled at the photo of Max but looked mostly at her. “You're slim again. The bump was very big!”

Benoit, she thought, Benoit, the feeling cresting again that she wanted to tell him something. But Benoit was already at the next table, and besides,

what could she say? After Max was born, I wanted to die? Worse, I wanted to kill my own baby? She couldn't tell a stranger that. In fact, she hadn't even told Charlie; only Sandra. Lesley looked at her big open handbag on the tiled floor. For a moment she thought Max was inside it, but then she blinked and he was gone. She remembered what Tina had said: about wanting your infant without knowing it.

Charlie finally texted, asking what happened. She told him about the therapist, and the pen, and the parabola, and he texted back with the monkey emoji, the one with its hands over its eyes. "It was probably her fault," he said, and she wondered if it was a good thing that he was always on her side against the world, but she took her reassurances where she could.

The seafood was so vinegary it made her mouth sore, and as she ate she felt sexy. Maybe someone would pick her up; leave a hotel key card on her table. That had happened to her once, a long time before Charlie, and the kids. It had been late, after work, and everyone had been drunk. The sex, in the mirrored room, with the faintly bullying Greek businessman, had been insane. The bedsheets afterward had been more disgusting than the ones on which she'd birthed babies; stiff with sperm from a man whose name, just now, as she placed a silver dart of anchovy onto her tongue, she could not remember. "What are you doing to me?" he'd asked in the hotel dark. Years later, Sandra had asked almost the same question of Max: "What are you doing to your poor mum?"

That afternoon, Jerry and the rest of the Exec were making her wait. This was fine: this was textbook. Through the glass wall she saw Jerry talking to CFO Steve, so named because there were two other white Steves on the Exec. The boardroom was outfitted in mahogany, with tubular steel chairs and black upholstery.

Jerry was always so casual in his attire: unzipped hoodies, dirty trainers; sometimes he smelled. She'd liked him, a long time ago, but after becoming a dad he was unbearable. He had, Irina told her, attended Group when he hadn't even taken any paternity leave. He always gave Lesley a raking smile

at Little Jungle as they dropped off their kids with the Ryes, the Rivers, the Atlases, and she knew the smile meant: *I know it's Charlie's pay packet funding this*, before dodging away quickly, so that they didn't have to share the same tube carriage.

Finally Jerry waved her in.

"Hey, Jerry. Hi, everyone." She logged on to the presentation computer, and the guys woke their iPads.

Lesley pulled up the package, and, as the sphere inflated, her nerves disappeared and she felt the familiar feelings of beauty/mourning that had some roots in the eighteenth century. The sublime? Kant? Just as she was about to begin, there was a knock.

"Sorry I'm late."

Lesley looked up: Irina. What was Irina doing here? Her heart began to race. Was she here to tell the Exec that Lesley had assaulted the counselor? That she should be first in line for redundancy? But Irina took a seat near the window and pulled out her notepad. Irina, who was always so cheerful, hadn't yet smiled.

Jerry must have seen Lesley's confusion. "Irina's on the Exec now. Didn't you know?"

"No," said Lesley, trying to soup some warmth into her voice. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," said Irina, without looking at her.

"Irina's in charge of Product and Personnel."

"Right," said Lesley. "Of course."

"You gals all chilled after 'Group'?" said Jerry.

"It was cathartic," said Lesley, getting in there before Irina could answer. "I'll begin," she said, suddenly wanting this over. She launched the demo and began moving the sphere around the skyscrapers.

"So what's the loop?" Jerry said.

"The tension is: how big can you make the sphere, without endangering its safety?"

"Does it pop?" asked Irina. "If it touches something?"

“No. Think of it more as a flight simulator than an inbuilt set of VSRV.”

“It doesn’t get harder? Over different levels?”

“It’s designed to get us out of language.”

Lesley thought of the baby books that had promised a bond that went beyond language, and Tina, who said that trauma too was beyond language.

Jerry had that hungry-to-learn look, which she immediately knew was fake. “I get it,” he said. “Like a Zen coloring book?”

She felt insulted that he thought her game was in any way like a Zen coloring book. “The only thing you must do is care for it. This sphere. It must simply be kept whole,” she said, feeling oddly as if she might cry.

Jerry swiped his tablet. All the other guys were looking at her. “So it’s a dot that you push and pull to varying thicknesses, that you take for a walk?”

His description made her think of manipulating her cervical mucus when they had been trying for Max. “Thinking is suffering,” she said, watching, visibly, all thoughts fly from Jerry’s mind. “Therefore ‘not thinking’ can be understood as a pure hedonic moment.”

Jerry looked at her, expressionless.

“What’s it called?” Irina asked.

“I thought ‘Air’?”

“‘Air’?”

“Yup.”

“You know there’s an ‘Air’ at Little Jungle?” Jerry said.

“No. I didn’t know that.”

Irina cleared her throat. “I don’t think this one’s for us, I’m afraid.”

“I agree with Irina,” said Jerry. “It’s tough since you were gone. Much tougher. We can’t gamble like we used to.” He made a few commands on the iPad that she couldn’t translate. “Are you having any more?”

“Ideas?”

“Babies.”

Lesley looked at him, horrified. Was he allowed to even ask this? Despite Irina’s new hard edge, she winced, and would not look at her.

“No,” Lesley said. “No more babies.”