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Opening extract from
**This Isn't What it Looks
Like**

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Please print off and read at your leisure.

Max-Ernest arrived at the hospital at exactly 7:59 p.m.

A nurse waved cheerily from behind the front desk. "Hi, Max-Ernest! Just in time, as usual."

Visiting hours ended at eight. If he got there any later, he wouldn't be let in since he wasn't part of the patient's family. At least not the way the hospital defined it.

Max-Ernest waved back half-heartedly.

"C'mon, honey – let's see you turn that frown upside down. Don't forget—"

The nurse pointed over her shoulder to a poster of a puppy wearing a red clown nose. "LAUGHTER IS THE BEST MEDICINE!" it said.

Max-Ernest gritted his teeth and forced himself to smile.

That doesn't make any sense, he almost said. How can laughter always be the *best* medicine? What if there's a medicine that would save your life – like penicillin? Wouldn't that be the best? And what if you have a broken rib? Or lung cancer? Or asthma? Laughter would make it worse, not better. And *whose* laughter are we talking about, anyway? Your own or somebody else's? What if somebody is laughing *at* you instead of *with* you – is it still medicine then? How 'bout that? (This was a distinction that Max-Ernest – who'd always wanted to be laughed with, but who was far more often laughed at – was only too aware of.)

Oh, and by the way, dogs don't laugh. Some scientists think that gorillas and chimpanzees laugh. But not dogs. Not even puppies with clown noses...!

But, and this will surprise you if you know anything about him, Max-Ernest didn't say a word. He just kept gritting his teeth and headed for the third elevator on the right.

The one marked **PICU**.

Every time Max-Ernest saw those four letters, he made up new meanings for them...*Primates Invade Curious Universe...Penguins, Icelandic, Carry Umbrellas...Pick Icky Cuticle Up...Purple Insect Crawls Underground...Principals In Colourful Underwear...People I Can't Understand...*and so on. But the wordplay was simply an old habit, a mental tic, rather than a way of amusing himself. Not even the thought of principals in colourful underwear could make him laugh now, whether laughter was the best medicine or not.

He knew too well what the letters stood for.

PICU: Paediatric Intensive Care Unit.

Perhaps the least funny place on the planet.

Max-Ernest had a lot of experience with hospitals.

His childhood had been one long battery of medical tests. Skin tests. Bone tests. Eye tests. Hearing tests. DNA tests. IQ tests. (Too much ability, they said, is a disability.) Rorschach tests. Psychological evaluations. Neurological evaluations. Cardiological evaluations. X-rays and CAT scans. They'd tested all his reflexes and tested him for all the complexes. They'd watched him eat and listened to him sleep. They'd measured his dexterity and quantified his creativity. He'd given blood samples and urine samples and even once (though he'd like to forget it) a *stool* sample. (If you don't know what a stool sample is, please ask somebody else. I'd rather not have to explain it myself – it's too distasteful a subject.)

That Max-Ernest had a condition, everybody was certain; but what the condition was, nobody knew. The only thing the experts agreed on was that the main symptom was his ceaseless talking. Of course, it didn't take an expert to tell you that.

A funny thing had happened recently, however. Funny *weird*, that is. Not *funny* funny. (Another distinction that Max-Ernest, who'd always longed to be *funny* funny but who was most often funny *weird*, knew only too well.)

Max-Ernest, the talker, had stopped talking. Not entirely. But almost. Most of the words he uttered now were single syllables – like *yes* or *no* – and they came out in little grunts, hardly recognizable as language.

It wasn't so much that he *couldn't* talk. There were still plenty of words in his head, and he could still push air out of his lungs and move his lips and tongue. It was just that talking had become a tremendous effort. Even more of an effort than it used to be for him *not* to talk. Words used to come out of his mouth in a non-stop torrent; shutting them off was like trying to dam a river. Now, suddenly, the river had switched direction, and talking was like trying to swim upstream when it was all he could do to swim in place.

This new condition, this unwilling silence, had fallen over him ten days ago. The day Cass had gone into the hospital. The day she had fallen into a coma