

*Son of Man*

You're walking by the ocean, hundreds of miles from home. The sea is flat, yet the sky looks like pewter. You're walking along a stone wall near the sea when you notice a friend of yours, who you haven't seen for several months. You have wanted to find him, but no one knew where he'd gone, not even his wife, and now here he is. 173

There's an apple right in the middle of his face. You don't really know what to say.

You quickly check to see if everything else about him is the same, and it is: his spotless white shirt, his muted red raw silk tie that seems to float, its knot just covering the top shirt button, the slight lordosis of his right shoulder that causes the almost unnoticeable vertical crease in the gray fabric of his otherwise impeccable bespoke overcoat, the dark gray suit, the black calfskin captoe oxfords, and of course the perfect fur felt bowler hat, always almost imperceptibly darker than the overcoat but exactly the same shade of gray as the suit. You would be even more alarmed if he wasn't dressed like this. He always dressed this way—he told you when you first met him that he always dressed in a white shirt, red tie, gray suit, bowler hat and overcoat, and he also told you that some people thought he was insane for doing so but he wasn't, he'd just rather do other things than worry about what to wear. You have seen his dressing room. There are exactly twenty-four of each item.

Everything else about him seems the same as before. His hands still seem strong, but oddly delicate somehow, his hair is still short, his face is still smooth, hairless and almost nonporous, like pink sea-glass, and he still has the saddest eyes you've ever seen, eyes that seem to have seen every kind of abuse and punishment, eyes that are beyond anger, beyond tears, weary eyes that have absorbed unspeakable amounts of pain and still look on, waiting to monitor the next disappointment. Everything is the same except the apple.

The apple makes you uncomfortable. It is not supposed to be there.

He doesn't greet you by name or make trite comments about the weather or how long it has been since you've seen each other. The

first thing he says is that he woke up one morning after his wife had been yelling at him the night before and an apple was part of his face. He touched it, and he could feel his fingers through it as if he was touching his own nose. He was alone in his house and this was a good thing, because he didn't want anyone else to know. He felt ashamed and embarrassed, as if this apple-nose was somehow his fault, and he wanted to fix things before he was discovered. He grabbed a meat cleaver and tried to cut the apple off. The pain was the same as it would have been if he had buried a meat cleaver into his own flesh, but there was no blood, just a gash in the apple, which inside was like an onion, containing increasingly smaller copies of itself in strange hues, magenta, puce, gold, black. As soon as he peeled one layer off, though, the apple-nose grew back to its original size. The worst color was crimson: it made him look like he had a clown nose. He cut and peeled frantically for twenty minutes, filling his bathroom sink basin with multi-colored apple skin, and when a green apple finally presented itself again, he kept it. He couldn't imagine trying to explain the apple to his wife or employer, so he packed clothing, some small valuables and jewels, toiletries, and some cash into a leather suitcase, then dressed and left without leaving a note or anything. The only people from his old life aware of his whereabouts, he tells you, are his tailor and now you.

He tells you people are already talking about him as if he is some sort of metaphor, perhaps for alienation within conformity, and he wants you to know he is just a man with an apple-nose, that's all. He disagrees with the idea that he is faceless. He tells you that it's just a trick of perspective that makes you think his face is completely taken over by the apple: he can still see well and even eat, and tells you if you don't believe it to put an apple up against your own face and you'll understand. About the only things he can't do anymore are see clients or kiss his wife, and he's relieved, he tells you with the smallest of smiles, that he doesn't have to do either anymore.

You realize now that something about your friend is slightly different other than the apple-nose: you realize that there's just the slightest bit of hope and contentment that you'd never seen before in your friend's profoundly sad eyes.