

THE BEAUTIFUL WISHES OF UGLY MEN

—Stories—

Adam Prince



Black Lawrence Press
New York

To Charlotte—who never thought I was ugly to begin with.

What the world needed, it seemed, was a traveler who would stay right there in the bedroom, or open the door and walk slowly about his own house. Who would sound a note, perhaps, on the piano, raise the blinds on the front-room windows, and walk with a candle into the room where the woman sleeps. A man would recognize this woman, this stranger, as his wife.

—Wright Morris, *The Works of Love*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Big Wheels for Adults	11
 Action Figure	35
 No Women Tonight	61
Island of the Lost Boys	63
 Tranquility	93
Six Months in, Another Kind of Undressing	119
 Ugly Around Him	121
 Keener	139
Bruises and Baby Teeth	161
 Kink	185
A. Roolette? A. Roolette?	189

BIG WHEELS FOR ADULTS

TIME PASSED, AND Peter didn't know what to do. He'd never liked long hugs, not even from women, and this was soon becoming one of the longest of his life. He was getting squirmy, uncomfortable, while Jocko just kept hanging on, pulling so tight that Peter could feel the density of his old friend's fat. It was maybe a full minute before Jocko let out what seemed a conclusive sigh. Peter started to loosen his arms. But Jocko went in for one more clinch. It was to make some point, thought Peter, some claim about who was the better friend, the better man. And though he'd never examined precisely why he didn't like long hugs, a reason appeared to him now: There was something coercive about them.

"I've been doing great," said Jocko, though he didn't look it and Peter hadn't asked. His eyes had gone wider and he'd put on more weight; his skin had the tint of a yellow crayon. He was thirty-one but might have passed for forty-five. Peter felt sorry for his childhood friend and at the same time proud of himself for having

Adam Prince

gotten through his own thirty-one years looking so much better.

Carli joined them in the entryway, and Jocko bent to kiss her hand. “Lovely to see you,” he said, and then in a completely different tone, as if Peter’s girlfriend had gone from a princess one moment to a cocktail waitress the next, “How about you make us some Jack and Cokes?”

Carli played along. Made the drinks. Peter smirked to himself, knowing that most women with her education and career would probably have told Jocko to eat shit. But she had never been that way. Unlike Jocko, she seemed to have nothing at all to prove.

Soon the three sat together in Peter and Carli’s catalogue-looking living room with its celery and azure color scheme. She had put the room—the entire apartment—together and paid for most of it, too. It was the first nice apartment they’d ever occupied. Peter was cozy there and restless within that coziness, much the way he would get in the midst of a long hug.

Jocko talked and Carli humored him. He told her about the seven thousand dollars he’d just made selling a guitar he’d bought at a pawnshop back when he was on the road. He snapped the cash out of his gold Harley Davidson money clip. “That’s a lot of money, huh?” he prompted, and Carli agreed that it was.

Peter knew that Carli was avoiding his glance so as not to give herself—her amusement—away. And this made Peter want to catch that glance all the more. Still, even as he tried, he knew

Big Wheels for Adults

it wouldn't happen. So he looked on with a mix of tenderness and quiet hilarity, the joy of being on the inside of a joke. It was when other people were around that Peter loved her best, and these moments often fueled him through the others.

Not until after Peter had kissed her goodbye did Carli finally relent and look at him. It was a couples' kind of look. An arch in one eyebrow, a private smile communicating how, when he got home tonight, the two of them would review his entire evening, would say to each other, "Can you *believe* that guy?" and agree that no, they could not.

THE LAST TIME Peter had been to a strip club was with Carli on a winter break trip to Montreal back when they were still in college. It was an all-nude place where the women were beautiful in that French way: full lips, easy slenderness, a naked, liquid prowl. And then there was Carli, short and rounded in her puffy orange sweater. They had taken a table far from the stage, Peter facing it and Carli across from him, so that he had to look over her shoulder to see.

While all the other patrons were either catcalling or stewing in a quiet, lustful daze, Peter and Carli had an academic discussion about how, in a strip club, things like power and sincerity were hard to gauge. "It's not the whole objectification thing that bugs me," said Carli, while a dark-skinned blond poured oil down her breasts and stomach. "Or I mean it is, but that's too boring to

Adam Prince

bring up. It's more this falseness." She pointed out a girl all in pink: high heels, garters, very short skirt. A young girl with her ear to the mouth of a shriveled old man. Her head bobbed along in sympathy to whatever he was telling her. Carli felt bad for the girls, she said, since play-acting along to male fantasy didn't allow room for who they were. Peter tried to see Carli's point and made a counterpoint about how every job involved some acting, whether it was selling real estate or being a U.N. ambassador. It wasn't much of a discussion, really, more a verbal fidgeting, a way of insisting on the world of ideas when the world of things pressed in too hard. Peter couldn't stop staring at the girls, couldn't manage to pull what he knew was a wide, shit-eating grin down off his face.

"But don't you feel sorry for them?" Carli asked, sounding pitiable herself.

"Yeah," he said, but knew it wasn't convincing. And how could it have been coming through that grin? They went on talking—about how much or little money the strippers probably made and about the possible evolutionary impetus behind the appeal of a woman's legs spread wide. But Peter's grin and stare would not leave him, even though he knew Carli was getting even more uncomfortable, her eyes flitting around the room for somewhere safe to look: from the girls, to Peter's face, to the black wall behind him, and down into her plastic cup of lousy red wine.

It had been Carli's idea to go there. She'd been a virgin until Peter, and the first time they'd had sex was just the night before.

Big Wheels for Adults

Now, looking back, all Peter could guess was that by going to the strip club, Carli had wanted to show how easygoing she could be, how game, and the whole thing just turned out harder than she had imagined.

The two of them walked back to their motel through a light, persistent snow. Peter took off both their clothes and made love to her in the dark. Now, years later, Peter could remember the exact mood of it, a touched and poignant sadness, a need to make everything up to her. And in her own attempt at a conciliatory gesture, Carli had imitated the strippers in the wide way she spread her legs—her thicker, more ordinary legs.

HOPE WAS THIS one's name. All trim curves and youth. A wide-eyed pixie with a mess of dark hair. Braless and perfect in a thin white t-shirt and what seemed to be men's underwear but baby blue with a decal on the front that said, "No Dice" accompanied by a picture of two dice. She wasn't a very good dancer: too routine, and from that bored, half-there look on her face, she might as well have been stirring her morning oatmeal. Still, she was one of the best-looking women Peter had ever seen in real life, and the curve of her waist flaring to hips gave him an instant and painful erection.

He wanted to get lost in the wanting, to fix the whole of his recently preoccupied attention onto the way she was finally, mercifully peeling off that shirt, but Jocko wouldn't shut up.

Adam Prince

“Whole lot of options on the table,” he was saying. “I got an offer from this producer buddy of mine, Bill Boyd, to manage the Steppenwolf reunion tour. You remember Steppenwolf? ‘Born to Be Wild’? Hell yeah, I was. Sober three years and it bore the shit out of me. So the Steppenwolf thing, but then I’ve got all these ideas, too, this stuff I’m working on. Like Big Wheels for adults. Bigger Big Wheels cause they’re for adults. Wait till Crystal gets here. You’ll love her. Smoking body and she’s got this clit ring . . . I haven’t fucked her yet, y’know, because when I’m in a relationship I’m *in* it, but now, you know, *now* . . .” He slapped the table, waved around his beer.

Jocko and his girlfriend had just broken up, so this was a night of proving that he was better off without her. He often had dramatic breakups, but what made this one particularly hard for him was the fact that his now ex-girlfriend was Simone White, the famous folk singer, and over the year or so he’d been with her, Jocko had started thinking of himself as famous by association. Simone had even made him her tour manager, despite the fact that his work experience up to that point had been limited to odd jobs in the service industry, selling coke, transporting coke across the Mexican border, and laying tile with a company connected to his rehab. So now Jocko was out of a job too and putting money he probably couldn’t afford to lose into strippers’ underwear.

“Hey, Pete,” he continued as Hope crawled by with her t-shirt in her teeth, “did I tell you I’ve got this whole other name?”

Big Wheels for Adults

Yeah. I'm really someone else, man. Kyle Windward. My real mom's part Chippewa Indian. I found out all about her. I could stalk her or whatever. God, Pete, you wouldn't believe all the pussy I got back when I was dealing. I'd show up at a chick's apartment and maybe she wouldn't have all the money, so, y'know, what I'd do is . . ."

And Peter almost said it. Almost interrupted with, "Listen, Carli's pregnant." Not because he wanted Jocko to know, but because he wanted Jocko to stop talking, and this was the only thing he could think of. He put that thought down and grabbed another. "So what happened with Simone, anyway?" he asked. "What's the story?"

Jocko took a swig of beer and looked into the middle distance between Hope's legs. "We're just on different paths right now," he said. And Peter knew that this was the only explanation he was going to get.

MORE GIRLS STARTED to arrive. They came in jeans and t-shirts, then into the women's bathroom and out again in white lingerie, in pigtails, in nighties and knee socks, in cheerleader outfits, in panties made of fine, shiny chains.

Peter was reminded of a night when, flipping channels, he had lingered on a women's wrestling match between a nurse and a schoolgirl. Carli was surprised he could be interested in such a cliché, and Peter had explained to her—only realizing the