

STEPHEN GRAHAM JONES

The Guy with the Name

THIS IS THE STORY of when I stopped trusting people.

I'm seventeen, living the life. Work all day, drink all night, never worrying about bills or tomorrow. The songs I was listening to were my script. We've all been there; I don't need to go into it. What happened, though, was that one bleary bright morning I run into a guy in a parking lot who tells me somebody I know got raped last night, maybe at a house I'd been in for a few minutes. I know the girl well, go straight to her, and her face has been pounded—eyes swollen shut, lips hamburger, the works.

What I do then is get a little steel bat, go back to the house it's supposed to have happened at. A guy with no shirt answers, rubbing sleep from his eyes with the heel of his hand. This is Tim K. He's maybe four inches shorter than me, buzz cut like's the fashion for some, tats up and down his arms like's coming in fashion in 1990, pants slung low. I show him the bat, tell him what happened here, and does he know who did it, or who this girl might have been with last night? He thinks, thinks, squints into the darkness of the living room and then eureka's it up, puts it together syllable by syllable: a name.

"He was with her?" I ask, saying the name of the girl I know.

"All night, man," Tim K says, peeling his lips back from his teeth like he should have seen this. "*Shit.*"

I don't know the guy with the name, but Tim K maybe knows where we can find him, so he pulls the door shut behind him and we go out into the morning in my truck, that bat down by my right leg the whole time, because I'm going to make this guy look worse than my friend. And then do it again, in a way he feels for the rest of his life.

We wake the people at one house, at a trailer, at a trashed-out apartment that I think I used to live in. We cruise parking lots looking for a certain truck. Come ten or eleven in the morning, though, there's no more doors to knock on, no more sleepers to wake.

"We checked everywhere?" I ask.

The town I grew up in's not so big.

“Everywhere I know,” Tim K says. “You know anywhere else?”

“I never even heard that name.”

“She doing all right?”

I watch a car I know feeling down the road like the road is hot and its tires are delicate.

“I hear from him—” Tim K says, and pops his right fist into his left hand.

I drop him off at his house, and he tells me to wait while he goes in, checks every room, because that would be too stupid if the guy with the name was sleeping it off under some pile of laundry, thinking nothing can touch him.

A minute later Tim K’s back on the porch, doing that apologetic kind of shrug I can see from the curb.

I wave thanks to him and ease away, park the bat back where it goes, and, two weeks later, maybe two and a half, when my friend who got raped is starting to talk, she tells me it was Tim K who did it. Tim K who rode around with me all morning, Tim K who looked everywhere. Tim K who’s not living in that house anymore. Tim K whose name my friend won’t give to the cops, because what would it change?

I think, somewhere in that morning, I bought Tim K a burger.

I never looked at his knuckles while he was eating that burger, though.

So if you ask me do I believe you about this or about that, understand if I consider this proposition for a moment, would you?

I know 100 percent I can’t trust you. That I can’t trust anyone. I still remember having to guide my friend’s hand to her cup of coffee, because her eyes were too swollen to see out of, and while I’m thinking about her, I’m wondering where my bat from all those years ago is, and I’m remembering how useless it was that morning, and how useless I was, because, like her, I trusted the wrong person.

I know it’s probably best for a lot of reasons that I never found the guy who raped my friend.

But that doesn’t mean I had to ride around with him all morning.