

No Take-Backs

“Dead,” she said anchorwoman-style. Layla just *had* to look up the ending. Just *had* to spoil it for anyone who walked by her in the cafeteria that morning. We’d been reading *The Outsiders*, and Dally was going to be shot today. Like no take-backs. Like he’ll only ever be alive in certain pages, in yesterday’s class when the desk-gum was still wet Play-Dough, not rigor-mortis stiff.

“I guess I can’t wear my hood up anymore,” Karter said, leaning on the lockers. “Or walk to the corner store.” He preached to the line waiting to enter Ms. Baker’s room. “Or buy Skittles or Arizona iced tea.” Karter’s bubbly laugh sprinkled through his pre-braces teeth. He looked so much like Trayvon when he smiled. Like the picture with the red Hollister shirt. No. 22 and Malibu. The numbers and places and dates that nobody could grasp but we wore to bowling birthday parties and Dress-Down Fridays anyway.

All the seventh-grade girls huddled around the school computers, claiming their favorite boy from “The Outsiders” movie. A popular pick was SodaPop. Some Ponyboys. A few Johnnys. But I was a Dallas Winston kind of girl. Like Cherry. Like “I hope I never see Dallas Winston again. If I do, I’d—pro’ly fall in love with him.” Like what could’ve been.

Karter only knew how to laugh about it, and the white kids were offended. So disgusted that he could joke about #trayvonmartin, #justicefortrayvon, Instagram caption: “Such a tragic loss. Fly high, Trayvon. RIP” under the famous black-and-white photo, the post deleted after a month and the white boys’ profiles left to the abyss of stock-image basketball players, memes, and the latest Jordans campaign.

Did you know Dally was white-blond and blue-eyed in the book? So different from Matt Dillon’s brown-on-brown brand of tall, dark, and handsome. Did you know he was only eighteen when they were filming? Ya know the author? Yeah, S.E. Hinton. Well, she played the nurse. The nurse that Dally tells to “Get out, just get out. You’re making my stomach sick.” And that’s all before “Let’s do it for Johnny, man,” the rumble, Dallas’s return, Dallas’s... well, Layla told you.

Karter’s jokes dripped with bitter acceptance from waking up cold behind the starting line, five-am again, and two Septa buses to the music magnet school; ball-and-chained by history and a cellphone for a hand; stuffed with homework and deadlines and “which boy do you like?” when faces like his lit up the TV at night.

All the girls squirmed when they realized these on-screen boys had morphed into middle-aged creatures. They made SodaPop their screensaver. The *young* Rob Lowe, they insisted. They had forgotten we could age, could be more than assigned seats and forged book logs. That we were a part of the world, the one passing through the grated window. That we fogged up the glass with our nose imprints when it was raining or snowing because we were surprised. Surprised there was life past this seventh-grade classroom.

Karter laughed not at Trayvon but in recognition, in “not again,” in “this is what my mom was talking about.” He sprouted an Exorcist head, always spinning for another Zimmerman, more watchmen, several calls to a nonemergency number: “These assholes always get away.” “Are you following him?” said the dispatcher. “Yeah.” “We don’t need you to do that.” So, Karter held himself close, kept his true fear and anger locked in his chest. “He said this man was watching him,” his girlfriend said. The last phone call. “I asked Trayvon to run... but he said he would not run.” Karter would not allow anyone to decide his character for him but still his

freedom narrowed and burrowed like the bullet in Trayvon's chest, like his face muffled in the rainy grass only seventy yards from home.

On my jean jacket, I have a name tag patch. Cherry. Like Cherry Valance. Like Dally. Like the world is still Ms. Baker's seventh-grade classroom. Like we still say goodbye with "Stay gold, Ponyboy." Like I'm a kid. But I'm not and I don't know where Karter is now, but I know that I'm twenty-one and Trayvon will always be seventeen. Like no take-backs. Like he'll only ever be alive in news clips when the hashtag was still fresh and not yet lost to the internet void, in the crackling voice of the last phone call, in "What are you following me for?" before the headset cut.