

# “A Very Good Year”

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From “Black Swan”, Essays on the Civil Rights Movement in  
St. Augustine in 1963 and 1964

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Daniel stopped at the corner and considered his options carefully: Should he go directly home to Lincolnville and do his chores as promised, or go get a fountain drink at Woolworth’s first? He made his decision quickly, as he did all routine decisions. He enjoyed solving problems as well, especially math problems presented by his teachers at the local public school for blacks. Math was understandable and predictable, whereas people were not. He began to make his way downtown to Woolworth’s, thus satisfying his need as a teenager to rebel. As he walked, Daniel focused his mind on questions of greater importance, such as where to secure more cigarettes and catalogs of women’s lingerie for his friends, thus satisfying his need as a teenager to conform.

Daniel had spent the day under the gentle instruction of black teachers at a segregated school before taking this leisurely late afternoon walk to where the white businesses were. His school lacked the infrastructure and educational tools of its white counterpart, but was nonetheless diligent in preparing the minds of its students and lived up to the standard as a “high” school in a time when a high school diploma was a noteworthy credit. Daniel was also well schooled on the subject of “social studies”. For example, Daniel was quite aware that segregated schools – such as his school - were illegal in all 50 states. He sometimes wondered - on those rare occasions when his mind wandered from thoughts of the opposite sex - how this was possible in a nation of laws. In school he learned that local authorities, unmoved by the Supreme Court’s decision to end school segregation in 1954, simply ignored the Federal Government and got away with it. Now it was 1963. Daniel was also fully aware that local authorities overlooked the more excitable white citizens in St. Augustine who apparently thought that the Constitution protected their right to burn the homes of black families whose children were sent to be schooled with their own. It did not escape Daniel’s attention that those black students were no longer in attendance. It was common knowledge that those black families had been run out of St. John’s County.

Still, Daniel enjoyed his black schoolmates well enough and walked unmolested, as he passed restaurants, businesses and churches used by whites. And as he imagined the milk shake that he intended to order from Woolworth’s, he was – for the moment - unconcerned that none of these businesses would let him sit to eat, provide a service or help facilitate his connection with God. He had adapted to the situation, having known nothing else but knew it was wrong. He knew that segregation was a nice clean word; a mild word for something sinister. Daniel followed the continuing magazine and TV coverage of the civil rights movement in other states with growing interest. Many of the marchers, he noticed, were not much older than himself. Some of them were even white.

Daniel's black teachers were consistent in explaining how this all came to be; in reinforcing his belief that his was an equal; that his inferior status as a citizen was not his fault but was thrust upon him. In his home and church he learned that he was equal before God. But in a remote corner of his mind - a corner that he would have denied if he knew it existed - there lived a small dark force of doubt and self-contempt that sought to produce a long, fine crack in the way he saw himself and cull the future that he thought was possible for himself. He was clever, studious and confident and still this dark force existed. His parents were knowledgeable and hardworking and still it lived. It spoke to him when he failed at a task or saw other blacks fail, inviting him to hold himself in contempt for being black. If pressed, Daniel would not have been able to put this all into words, but he felt lighter and taller when he listened to King's recorded voice. King illuminated that dark corner and for a while the still, small voice of doubt was silenced.

Buoyant and relaxed, Daniel entered Woolworth's confident that they would honor his money. He placed his order at a spot at the counter for "coloreds" and waited patiently for it to be produced for him to carry out and drink elsewhere. The lunch counter was for whites only. Two years earlier, a few black students had sat at that very counter in peaceful protest, requesting service and were quickly arrested.

Against his better judgment, Daniel had consumed nearly a half-gallon of Kool-Aid before he left school. He now contemplated this error in judgment as he waited at the counter and fixed his eyes on the restroom door. He could buy out the entire store if he had the money, but he knew better than to even consider using the restroom. It was for whites only. Segregation was the law and was strictly enforced by police. Entering that room would no doubt be easier than getting out. And if he used it, what would be waiting for him when he opened the door? A fine? Reform school? A beating? Daniel's eyes moved from the restroom door directly onto the amused face of blond-haired, blue-eyed kid roughly his own age behind the counter, who said: "Don't even think about it ... boy".

Daniel interrupted his little walk home to Lincolnville with a short stop behind a bush that he irrigated with a sigh of relief followed by the nagging self-admission that his response was inadequate. He should of at least spoken back to the kid even if it got him arrested. He could not escape the memory of the kid's smile. He could hold his water - his bladder was fit enough - but why was the kid so happy at the prospect of his humiliation? The nice, clean sign on the door had read "whites only" but its real message was this: "No academic achievement; no feat of athletic prowess; no demonstration of selfless bravery; no commitment to military service will relax the laws that remind you of your inferior status, for this was the intention of the law".

Daniel gave the matter more thought on his way home. Why did the kid's smile haunt him so? He had been instructed by his church to hate the sin and not the sinner. But he had also been instructed by the mainstream culture in nearly every movie he had seen, in every book he had read, that to be a "man" is to stand up for yourself. He had failed himself and the still, small voice of doubt whispered to him again, mocking him. From a distance he saw his father returning home from work; work he clearly did not enjoy for a white man he despised. Daniel had never spoken the words "love" and "father" in the same breath and yet he did love his father. He loved him even as he was bewildered by his father's evenness; his reticence; his refusal to help the local NAACP. "Who is this man" Daniel had asked himself "who rejects the idea of standing up?" If Daniel were older he might have known what to ask his father. If his father were a man of words he might have answered, saying: "Do you think I like the situation? My job is to stay employed and earn money. You're only as free as you are able to make money. How would I explain a shoeprint on the side of my face and a mouth full of broken teeth to my boss? How would I justify an empty wallet to your mother or to the landlord? You have known nothing but the full belly and the dry house that I gave you and now you doubt me? You child – you think you know what evil is, having glimpsed it from a distance, without walking up to it, without staring into it? You know nothing!" Then, he might have lowered his voice, placed his hand on Daniel's shoulder and said "I have been saving for your college one dollar at a time, since you were born ... I would die for you but not for the NAACP". But these are words they would never speak.

King had given a voice to everything that Daniel had been taught and believed. But part of King's appeal was his apparent fearlessness. King was a family man who had been beaten and stabbed and then pushed on. The front of his home had been fire-bombed with his family inside of it and still he pushed on. In Daniels's imagination, King emerged from every attack stronger, more confident and eloquent than before. Daniel had heard adults in his church speak amongst themselves of bringing the struggle to the streets of commerce that he had just walked on and smiled at the thought of joining in. Something had happened in St. Augustine recently to stir things up; something to do with the anniversary of the founding of the City. Some of them wanted to follow King's model of peaceful protest. They called themselves "foot soldiers".

1963 was abundant with possibilities for Daniel to test himself against the mother of all teenager grievances: The hypocrisy of those who hold you in their power. For the aspiring teenaged foot soldier with a disciplined mind and an underdeveloped fear of civil authority, it was a very good year.