

On Idealism

I was raised in a rural Virginia county that still ranks as one of the state's poorest. I grew up wondering why my family was so much better off than most. We had done nothing to deserve it. It seemed like dumb luck.

Our nearest neighbor, Ida Mae had no running water. At Christmas, she killed a chicken and brought it to us. We reciprocated with a food basket and money. My parents quoted the Bible: "To whom much has been given, much will be required."

Ida Mae's nephew Michael used to visit her from the Bronx every summer, and he and I would play together. Once, when we were fooling around on our bikes, Michael cut in front of me, and I fell. When Ida Mae heard me crying, she came running, and I told her what had happened. Then she beat Michael with a leather belt, right in the middle of the road.

How I wish I had lied to her. It had been an accident. I'd expected her to be fair and even-tempered, like my father, not to beat Michael like a dog in front of us. But I was a little white girl, and he was a young black boy, and Ida Mae was a veteran of Jim Crow and white expectations. How was I to know, at eight, about differences in race and class?

Another child who was with us just looked at me with disgust. Didn't I get it? Hadn't I known that was what would happen?

I still don't get it. I'm still surprised by violence and ignorance. I'm still looking for kindness and wisdom from those around me. And I'm still waiting to find it.