

Paul and Mindy 1960

How many of you reading this story are under 30 years of age? How many under 26? Those under 26, I think, will be able to relate the most to my participation in these two events. The rest of you will have to rely on your imagination.

Fifty-four years ago, in the late 50's, I was addressed as "Brother." In fact, I was a teaching brother, a member of a Catholic religious monastic order. My first teaching assignment was at Garces High School in Bakersfield. The high school was a co-instructional high school, which means we shared one campus, but the nuns taught the girls and the brothers taught the boys. The only exception to this strict rule was the after-school extracurricular activities, such as yearbook, newspaper, language clubs, and speech and debate. In these extracurricular clubs, boys and girls could be together and the moderator could be either a nun or a brother. In my case, I was the moderator of the speech and debate club. As I remember it, there were a dozen or so students in the club, more boys than girls, and throughout the year, on various weekends, we traveled to the Los Angeles area to participate in speech and debate tournaments.

One Saturday morning, I was sitting at my desk in the classroom, reading and grading papers, probably one of my English classes. The door opened and Mindy walked in. Mindy was a sophomore and a member of my speech club. She lived only a few blocks away from the school campus in a very upscale area of Bakersfield, near Panorama Drive. She was a thin, tallish girl, with strands of hair combed down her forehead into bangs. It was a smart-looking late 50's hairstyle. She came over by my desk, sat down in one of the front-row desks. The light flooding in from the windows behind her enveloped her. We chatted for a while about nothing in particular, just the usual student-teacher banter. I turned my attention back again to the papers on the top of my desk. The room became silent, too silent. I felt it coming. In a tone of voice I will never forget, Mindy said, "Brother, my uncle raped me." I heard it. I paused for a minute and looked up into the bright light at Mindy.

A year or so later, I was teaching at Sacred Heart High School in downtown San Francisco, at Franklin and Ellis Streets. It was an all-boys' urban high school with a postage-stamp-size schoolyard for 800 boys, only slightly larger

than two basketball courts. It was so small that we had to schedule two separate lunch periods to have enough standing room to accommodate those who wanted to go outside. I lived next door to the school in the Brothers' residence, which was located on the second and third floors. The chapel and the refectory were located on the first floor. My bedroom was on the third floor. It was a Saturday morning when the front doorbell rang. I was alone at my desk in the common room on the second floor, so I went down the stairs to answer the door. I opened the door; it was Paul, one of my junior year students. He was a talented writer, and I had published some of his work in the student literary magazine I had founded, called *The Syndic*. I knew something was wrong. He looked me straight in the eye, "Brother, my mother jumped off the bridge."

You could not convince me then, and you cannot convince me now, that my response to either Mindy and Paul was adequate, or caring enough, or even helpful. All I will admit is that I was there, and each of them chose to speak to me. Why me and not someone else more qualified, more mature, more experienced? I don't know. They chose me.