

Protagonist Corner

Her Name Was "Fifi"

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Her nickname among the junior high students was "Fifi." We called her that out of early teenage insecurity and cruelty. She was not a person to us—only a teacher. There were teachers so charming and seductive that we forgave them for being teachers and admired them anyway. Fifi was not such a teacher. She was easy to ridicule because we found her appearance comical, and because her eagerness to be our teacher was not matched by our eagerness to be her students. And we human beings never look more ridiculous than we do when we are trying hard to mean something to other people, and it is just not working.

We called her Fifi because she loved the French language, and she made heroic efforts to throw in French phrases, and pronounce them in proper French style, and explain to us what the French phrases meant. We thought she was just showing off. We snickered behind our hands, and traded malicious glances, and dismissed Fifi as an inherently ridiculous person.

The malicious merriment became acute when Fifi began to rhapsodize about her trip to France over the summer. There she had seen Mt. Blanc, the highest peak in Europe. It was obviously, for Fifi, also the loveliest sight in the known world. She pronounced it "Moan Blawnnnnnk," as if the drawn out nasal sounds were part of the beauty of the mountain, and inseparable from it. We sensed that the alleged beauty of this mountain, and its lovely French name, and Fifi's self-esteem were all tied up together. We were instantly prepared to ridicule the mountain itself, as well as its elaborately pronounced name, simply because we were so sure that Fifi herself (and therefore anything she prized dearly) was self-evidently ridiculous.

For the better part of a term it was "Moan Blawnnnnnk" this and "Moan Blawnnnnnk" that until we all went into a frenzy of heartless hilarity every time Fifi honked the name. I don't think Fifi ever dared let herself wonder why the class broke up every time she mentioned her beloved mountain, or alluded to her peak experience of actually *being* there, and *seeing* it. She remained convinced that if these incomprehensible young people could have stood where she had stood, and seen what she had seen, and felt what she had felt, the silly laughter would give way to sheer wonder at the magnificence of it all.

So Fifi announced publicly that she had resolved to bring color slides of "Moan Blawnnnnnk" to class. Now, at last, we would see this obviously ineffable wonder for ourselves. The snickers would cease. We, in our turn, would be overcome by beauty and would share Fifi's experience at proper depth.

No matter that the very announcement sent Fifi's class into still another protracted paroxysm of wicked glee. The color slide would speak for the moun-

tain, and Fifi was certain the mountain would speak for itself.

The day came. The projector was set up and focused on the silver screen. Black fabric shades were lowered over the windows, darkening and hushing the room. The lights were turned off. Tension mounted. The projector bulb was at last switched on. And all the imps of hell could not have matched the screech of laughter that greeted Fifi's ears from her hysterical students.

There stood Fifi, in her inimitably ridiculous profile from head to foot, filling at least three quarters of the screen. If you looked upward to the left, you could see a tiny snowy triangle, perched saucily on Fifi's voluminous bosom. The tiny snowy triangle, we were told, was none other than "Moan Blawnnk," glittering in the background.

Then, if ever, Fifi must have come to believe in the Calvinistic doctrine of the total depravity of the human race. Or at least in the total depravity of the pubescent fraction thereof. Even if they found her own person utterly ridiculous, how could they possibly extend their scorn to a vision so self-evidently superb as her beloved mountain?

It is only recently that I have gained the maturity to wonder how Fifi managed to cry herself to sleep that night. What storms of rejection and failure and personal defeat she must have faced in her room, alone, with the memory of that hellish laughter not only tearing her apart, but tarnishing beyond recognition her fleeting experience of the sublime!

Forgive us, Fifi, wherever you are. We didn't know. . . . I personally beg your forgiveness, because I grew up to become a Presbyterian parson. It is now my turn to try to express to other people what I take to be transcendent wonder. In my heart of hearts, when the clarity of faith is on me, I cannot imagine any wonder remotely comparable to the victory of God's self-giving love for this world in Jesus Christ our Lord. I wonder, in my turn, how anything so self-evidently magnificent could appear trivial to anyone else. Yet every time I stand to proclaim the wonder, I am painfully aware that it is my comic figure, and my ridiculous words, that confront people in the foreground. I have to hope that people can somehow concentrate on the snowy triangle of the gospel, perched somewhere indecorously on my person, and perceive the wonder in spite of me. I have to recognize that my particular enthusiasm for the gospel, and my strange way of pronouncing it, never pointed anyone to the mountain. It is not important that they duplicate my feelings for the mountain. Then they would only become as ridiculous as I. But God help me see it clearly, and point to it without standing in the way. God grant that my next slide-show will let the mountain fill the screen, and let the magic of the mountain do its own marvelous work on those who see it clearly, for its own sake.