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Tribute

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I remember sitting in the law auditorium late in our first semester of law school. Listening to a handful of professors, we heard about the electives offered for second semester. I am not sure how I felt prior to entering the auditorium that day. I do remember how I felt afterwards -- I was going to get into Professor Clark's class. From what I've heard, her legal history seminar was by far the most highly coveted of the first-year electives. That's no surprise, though -- you could almost feel her excitement as she spoke about the course. On hearing that I had been admitted to Professor Clark's class, a friend who had not been so fortunate said, "You're so lucky." She was right. Absolutely.

Early in the semester Professor Clark sought to impress upon us the fervor with which Southern Baptists attended and participated in church in the early 1800s. Pausing, she described the experience as "orgasmic." Heads popped up, ears perked up, smiles creased our faces. She had caught our attention. And she kept it. Professor Clark always seemed to know exactly with whom she was speaking. She knew her audience and knew how to convey her ideas to us. She was vivid and descriptive in and out of the classroom, and moved effortlessly between one student's interest in teleological empiricism and another's heartfelt disdain for a fellow classmate's argument. "Why do you think you 'feel' that way?" she once asked. The question made me smile.

I spent a lot of time in Professor Clark's office that semester. She listened to my arguments, critiqued my drafts -- she ripped them apart -- and refused to let me take the easy way out. And she was a brutal questioner. "Why?" she would ask, always "why?" And the one that always added layers to my onion, "What makes it self-evident?" Aargh.

I remember one conversation with Professor Clark with particular clarity. "Are you looking for a summer job, Jeff?" Why, I asked. "Well, do you want one?" What do you mean, I responded. "Would you like to be my research assistant?" I was flattered and a little giddy, and overwhelmed. But I couldn't accept. "I mean I'd love to," I stammered, "but I'm going to travel in Central America this summer." Immediately something changed in Betsy. In that moment, another side of her sprung out at me. "Cool!" she exclaimed (a direct quote). "My parents have a place down in Chiapas in southern Mexico, you must go visit them." We spent the next hour or so speaking of Chiapas, Mexican politics, and travel destinations in the neighboring Central American states. We spoke of places that made us happy -- Betsy spoke of Maine and long walks in the woods. I don't remember leaving her office that day. Yet I remember that conversation and her seemingly boundless enthusiasm. And I remember her smile.

First year ended in a whirlwind, as it tends to -- final exams, the writing competition, then a long nap. I left for Central America without my nap, not having made time to return to Professor Clark's office to collect her parents' address and telephone number in Chiapas. I blew it -- or so I thought.

After a week on the Yucatan peninsula, I began the trip south, then west to San Cristobal de las Casas, the capital city of the state of Chiapas. En route, I stopped in Chetumal, a small town on the coast, to change buses for the westward trip into the highlands of Southern Mexico. I called my parents, who hadn't heard from me since my departure. "You're never going to believe this," my Dad said, "but one of your law school professors called here [New York] for you. She said that she knew you were in Central America, and that you should look up her parents in Chiapas. She left a number and their information."

It had been over a month since we had had that conversation. I had almost completely forgotten about it. Betsy had not. So to Chiapas I went with a fellow law school classmate. There we looked up the Clarks, who had no idea we were coming, and spent a wonderful day with them at their home, touring the colonial city of San Cristobal de las Casas, and drinking margaritas. Days like that,

when traveling, are exceptionally rare. With a little bit of effort, Professor Clark had managed to make me feel completely comfortable thousands of miles away from home.

In the Sonnets to Orpheus, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, "Silent friend of many distances feel how your breath enlarges all of space, let your presence ring out like a bell into the night." I carried those poems with me while backpacking through Central America that summer. Since her death, I have occasionally been reminded of Betsy when I think of that poem. Recently, however, I've been remembering Betsy a little differently. A bartender in a honky-tonk bar in Tom Robbins's *Skinny Legs and All* described a character named Randolph Boomer Petway in this way: "When Boomer danced, he looked like a monkey on roller skates juggling razor blades in a hurricane." For some reason, this springs to mind when I think of Betsy. It makes me smile, like Betsy's memory does. It's a full ear-to-ear grin for me, with a touch of sadness that will probably fade with time.

Betsy Clark was a whirlwind. I will miss her.

- Jeffrey L. Salinger