

How It Can Be

By Martin Boso

In the mid 90's I had found a calling as a medical illustrator. In the Department of Surgery at Ohio State, I found work that combined all of my most passionate interests: Art, Medicine, and computer technology. My mentor, Dr. Ted Martin, had seen my complex diagrams of cellular processes in slide presentations and medical journals, and brought me aboard his program.

He was a world-renowned cancer surgeon who had invented a technique called RIGS, Radioimmunoguided Surgery. The instruments and methods he used in the Operating Room were as sophisticated and advanced as the name would suggest. Dr. Martin was determined to educate his patients and the medical community about the principles of cancer biology and physics behind this technology, and he worked diligently to train young surgeons in his radical techniques.

Multimedia and computer graphics had begun to blossom in those days, becoming accessible not just to exclusively trained specialists, but to anyone with a good PC, a moderate amount of computer literacy and the willingness to learn and innovate. Dr. Martin saw this technology as the vehicle to preserve and distribute his unique knowledge, and I was his right hand man.

His agenda for me was a dream come true: He encouraged me to observe every facet of his work -- examining cell cultures under a microscope, accompanying him on his hospital rounds, working on site with the engineers at Neoprobe, the biotech company which built and marketed the RIGS instruments. I sat in on lengthy brainstorming sessions where I was the only person not a Professor of Medicine or Physics. I helped the nurses analyze research data. And the greatest privilege of all, I spent countless hours in the Operating Room watching this great man apply his exceptional knowledge and skill, saving the lives of patients many other surgeons wouldn't dare to touch, his eyes blazing like a

wizard's above his surgical mask. Some operations lasted 12 hours or even more. The man *hated* cancer like a personal nemesis. He was on a mission.

My job was to explain all of this, to document it -- through pictures, diagrams, and video. He gave me free reign in the creative aspect of my work, trusting my instincts, my fresh eye, and my skill with the new digital technology.

I was enthralled, empowered, inspired. More often than not, I worked 7 days a week, 12 hours a day, the years I was with Dr. Martin. I couldn't stand *not* being at work. I eventually videotaped dozens of cases in the OR. Within a few months I had produced the first version of *The Body Electric*, an animated computer illustration of the anatomy of a human torso, created with Corel Draw software.

The Body Electric remains my favorite of all of my work, in any medium. It received a special award from Corel Corporation and was widely recognized as the most complex piece ever created with the software to that date. I won invitations on the national lecture circuit, and drawing techniques I'd invented were featured in books on computer graphics. It was a spellbinding, evolving work of art as well as a unique and accurate portrayal of human internal anatomy.

During my second summer on the RIGS project, I noticed in an email from a colleague the mention of a conference: The World Congress on Biomedical Communications. In Orlando, it was to be the mother of all conferences for people in my field - combining the national annual meetings of all the major professional organizations involved with medical illustration, photography, and informatics. The Guild of Natural Science Illustrators would be there. The major groups from Europe and Australia in these fields would be attending as well. It was a once-in-a-lifetime event for anybody who was into this stuff.

I found out about the World Congress on a Tuesday, and it had already begun. All of the best presentations, however, would be on Wednesday, and the hands-on workshops were Thursday morning. I convinced Dr. Martin and one of the directors at Neoprobe that it was essential for me to go.

I left work early, threw some clothes and stuff in a duffel bag, and found myself on a night flight that evening. Fourteen hours after learning that the Congress was happening, I was looking down from a third-floor suite into an aviary full of noisy tropical birds in the cavernous lobby of the Orlando resort hotel where the conference was being held. Then I collapsed into bed.

When I came down to register at 7:30 AM the next day, I found the event was everything I had anticipated and more. There were over a thousand in attendance, a gathering of all of the best and brightest in a broad field just entering its modern Renaissance. Excited chatter in a dozen languages filled the teeming halls. Masters of esoteric disciplines stood glowing, surrounded by clusters of fans they hadn't realized they had. Technology marketers, job recruiters, and publishing agents scurried everywhere, passing out clever gizmos and reams of colorful leaflets, brochures and booklets. Old colleagues embraced on chance encounters in the halls. Earnest young students sat with their hefty 3-ring Congress binders open in their laps, agonizing over which of the incredible parallel sessions to attend.

And the sessions *were* incredible. There was an auditorium the size of a small concert hall, and at least a dozen more which most hotels would prize as their main venue. In every room, hour long sessions featured speakers who were the acknowledged gurus in their fields, presenting their best work with video, slides and live computer images projected onto 15-foot screens -- candidly discussing how these marvels were achieved, all trying to outdo each other:

The Art Director of ADAM software (which inspired *The Body Electric*), explaining the project management, the logistics of 50 artists in different cities working on a single piece, the technical coordination of thousands of individual illustrations into a single cohesive model...

The Principal Investigator responsible for the Virtual Human Project, in which a human cadaver was the subject of state-of-the-art Magnetic Resonance Imaging, CT scanning and high resolution photography of fixed serial sectioning, with all of the data analyzed by a

supercomputer and converted into a 3 dimensional model which still remains the benchmark in digital anatomical imagery...

The Chief Surgical Videographer from Johns Hopkins, showing off footage from the most intricate and dramatic cases over his tenure at that hallowed medical institution, giving tips on lighting, camera placement, and post production...

Those were a just few of which I chose to attend. Remarkable, amazing, inspirational stuff. Among a staff of thousands at the OSU College of Medicine, I was nearly alone at the time in my pursuit of this particular type of instructional artistry and technology. And yet, there were hundreds of people here who shared this passion, many of whom were describing achievements I only dreamed of emulating. At the end of each session, most of the presenters would greet a small crowd of admirers from the audience who would gather to ask questions, exchange business cards, or just gravitate toward the celebrity of the speaker.

I went up for a close look at several of these speakers myself, and once or twice managed to ask a relevant question. I recognized several prominent illustrators and a few well-known physicians in these groups, and as the day passed, I noticed that there was one person whose agenda seemed to correspond exactly to my own. We had chosen all the same sessions to attend.

She was young, dressed in a padded navy blue business suit. She wore nerdy horn-rimmed glasses with minimal, austere makeup, her fine blonde hair pinned up in a tight bun. She asked good questions, had an intensity of focus about her, and walked with an unusual sense of purpose, seemingly oblivious to the mass of humanity around her. I had seen her several times before I realized... if you were to take off those glasses, let that hair down, dress her in something other than a masculine suit... she would be a real knockout. The cliché Librarian type -- takes all kinds I guess. A science geek shouldn't have such a cute butt.

Just after the day's sessions had ended, I was browsing the poster gallery when I ran into Jane Spring, whose acquaintance I had made at another conference. She was on the

faculty of the University of Connecticut, Secretary of the Guild of Natural Science Illustrators, and kind of a fan of my work.

"I have some students with me," she said, "I really wish I could show them some of your illustrations."

"I just happen to have a carousel full of slides up in my room," I said. "Think you could round up a projector?"

She smiled.

By the time I had come back down, she not only had a projector, but had requisitioned a screen and cleared out a fair-sized area of floor space among the booths. She had even had the fluorescent lights turned off in that section. There were a dozen young people sprawled in a semicircle on the carpet.

So I fired up the slides and started my spiel. They were great slides, and nobody else was doing anything like them. Back then, most medical illustrators were formally trained in traditional media and textbook clinical medicine, whereas I had taught myself, worked exclusively on a computer, and had invented the graphics techniques I used. The anatomy and physiology I learned on the job from physicians and scientists. It was unique work, and I had developed a good lecture style from my own presentations at conferences.

I discussed my drawing techniques, composition and color, labeling and sequential images, contrast and consistency, and went off on tangents about the biology and anatomy being depicted. I rhapsodized, and gave those students just what Jane had wanted them to see. Naturally, a crowd of passersby gathered over the course of this informal little show. I noticed The Librarian off at the edge of the crowd, staring intently at the projected images.

I ran out of slides after an hour or so, and the crowd drifted off as I chatted with Jane and her students. Before I knew it, this day of the Congress had ended.

The signs said there was a dinner for medical illustrators in an hour, and I didn't feel like eating alone in any of the posh restaurants surrounding the lobby of the resort. I went

up to my room to dump the day's hoard of literature and toys, showered, changed into something cool and casual, and headed down to the banquet room.

As luck would have it, one of the few spaces left was at a table full of cute girls. Not just cute girls, I learned a moment after I sat down, but *Australian* cute girls. Do you know any Americans who aren't completely mesmerized by that accent? And of course, they were all medical illustrators. One of them had seen part of my impromptu presentation, and was gushing with compliments. This seemed to raise my stature considerably with the rest. Our table's conversation was lively over the four-course dinner.

By the time we were digging into the Key Lime pie, a couple of them had initiated that universal unspoken dialogue of lingering looks and casual touches on the arm. My interest was piqued -- after all, a big convention in a resort, ships passing in the night and all that, eh? It had been a year since I had left my last serious relationship, and omigod, that *accent!* I had begun to take the flirting seriously before each of them managed to drop the poisonous phrase 'my boyfriend.' Dude, I don't care if he's 10,000 miles away... if you're spoken for, just don't start with me.

After dessert, the wait staff started clearing away some of the tables and chairs at the front of the room. They were setting up a dance floor, and there was going to be a DJ. Cool. I decided to step out for a smoke while they were getting things ready.

Outside the doorway into the banquet hall, I leaned against the wall by the chrome-and-sand canister ash tray. Alone for the moment, I stared across the white marble tiles and out the wall of windows into the evening, noticing for the first time the gorgeous landscaping dotted with palm trees outside. Then she came walking down the hall from the main lobby. The Librarian.

The glasses were gone. Her blonde hair was down and styled, she was made up, and she was wearing this simple off-the-shoulder raw silk dress, grey, cut high to show off her legs, just snug enough in all the right places. Snazzy little white strap shoes. Completely sophisticated and sexy. She was stunning.

She walked up to the doorway where I was standing, to enter the banquet hall. We made eye contact for the first time. Her irises were the color of an old penny.

"I think we have a lot of the same interests," I said.

"I noticed."

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"I don't drink," she said.

Then she looked up into my eyes again. "But you can buy me a Coke."

She took my arm and we walked into the banquet hall together.

Erika was one of *those* women. When she walked into a room full of people, the men couldn't stop looking at her, and thus, most of the other women hated her. I will never forget the expressions on all the Aussie chicks when I walked in with her on my arm. They were *pissed*. It was priceless. No wonder she wore that silly disguise to all those sessions.

We got our drinks at the bar as most of the dinner crowd filtered out. We sat at an empty table and had just started to get acquainted when the music started. The DJ was playing *good* stuff. I asked her to dance.

"I'm not a very good partner," she said.

"Neither am I, but I'd love to dance with you anyway."

We laughed.

You know about me and dancing, right? Good music reaches some deep place in my soul, and I just have to move. I can't help myself, and as long as the music is good, I can't stop. Lost in the rhythm and grooving on the melody, my spontaneous choreography is certainly inelegant, probably ridiculous. But I don't *care*. It feels too good. If I'm making a complete fool of myself, at least I'm having a damn good time doing so. I think the saving grace is that I'm having so much fun it's infectious.

It turned out that Erika danced the same way. She was infinitely more graceful than I could ever be, but she wasn't dancing to be looked at, she was dancing for the sheer exhilaration of it. She wasn't worried about trying to coordinate some clever pattern of

steps with me or with anyone else, she was just letting the music wash over her and abandoning herself to it completely. Not that I was watching her too much or anything. But she did stay right there with me, ignoring everyone and everything else, and favored me with a smile when our eyes occasionally met. When it became obvious that neither of us had any intention of leaving the dance floor, my Aussie friends made a few valiant attempts to distract me from the music and from Erika. As if.

Whenever I hear “Mysterious Ways” by U2, I invariably think of Erika, her hair flying in the blue light, her shoulder rolling out as she tilts her head back to one side, her full lips bursting apart and her teeth flashing as she laughs... *while you can stand there, you can move on this moment follow this feeling...*

We danced until midnight, when the DJ stopped spinning. There were only a few people left in the room.

“Let’s go hang out by the pool,” she said.

“There’s a pool?”

It was outside, just beyond the foamy mounds of azaleas. We sat under the palm trees at the edge of the pool, our shoes off and me with my pantlegs rolled up, dangling our feet in the blood-warm water. It was a balmy June night, clear skies brightly lit by a full moon. We had the place to ourselves.

Having just graduated from Cornell, she was spending the summer at her parents’, trying to decide where and when to go to graduate school. She was fascinated by medicine and biology but had the soul of an artist, yearning to find a creative outlet in the field. She was big fan of Ayn Rand and a voracious reader of science fiction, a bit of an eccentric, quite the individualist. She knew a lot about computers, spoke with vision and enthusiasm about the potential for art, knowledge and interpersonal communication that multimedia and the Internet had to offer.

All the subjects that have ever been my obsessions, she brought up first. She *got* it. She was *into* it. I felt an intense magnetism with her, and it was far beyond the chemistry between a man and a woman. We were kindred spirits.

She must have felt the same toward me, because as the hours progressed we talked about everything: our childhoods, our dreams, aspirations and insecurities, intimate details most people would never share with someone they had just met. But each of us was so intrigued by the other in that timeless tropical night, that anything could be said.

"Where's the most exotic place you've ever been?" I asked her.

"A few years ago I went to Hawaii, to compete in a triathlon," she said, and went on to describe the purity of the sand on the beaches, the luxurious vegetation of the jungles.

"So how did you do in the triathlon?" I asked.

"I won." she said matter-of-factly, no big deal.

Of course.

"What time is it?"

She dug in her handbag and pulled out a strapless Mickey Mouse watch. "Almost four!"

"I wanted to go see that Disney guy in the morning... That starts at eight."

"Yeah, I was going to go to that too," she said.

"I guess we should get a *little* sleep. Can I walk you to your room?"

"Oh, I'm staying up at the youth hostel. I couldn't afford this place."

"The youth hostel? Where's that?"

"It's up north, about a 45 minute drive."

"Each way?"

"Yeah. Don't worry, I can stay awake 'til I get there, no problem."

"That wasn't the point. You're not going to get any sleep at *all*."

"It's OK."

"You could come up and stay in my room. There's a couch."

"No, I couldn't do that."

"C'mon, I feel bad for keeping you up so late. I'm just trying to save you the trip. I'll be a good boy, I promise."

"No, I should stay up there. Just walk me out to the car."

The parking lot wasn't far from the pool. I saw that we were across the street from Sea World.

"It's right over there," she said, pointing at a brown rental sedan, "I'll be OK. Thanks for hanging out with me."

"Hey, it was great. Listen, if you change your mind, I'm in Room 310. Or at least stop by in the morning and we can go down to the session together. I'll wait for you."

"OK. 310."

She walked to the car. I reluctantly went in the side door of the hotel and took the stairs up to my room.

I washed my face, stripped down to my boxers and flopped onto the bed. But there was no way I was going to fall asleep. I was wired from the day's stimulus and still buzzing with infatuation over Erika. I picked up the Bruce Sterling paperback I'd brought with me, hoping to read myself to sleep. Then there were three quiet little knocks on the door.

She was carrying an overnight bag and her Congress binder.

I made some room for her things and tried to figure out if the couch was a hide-a-bed. It wasn't. I told her I'd sleep there, but she insisted I take the bed. The couch wasn't really long enough for me anyway, so I lay back down. She walked over beside the couch.

"What time should we get up?" she asked, pulling her dress up over her head. She was wearing a modest lacy bra and skimpy white panties. And she was an athlete, all right. She lay down on the couch and wrapped herself in the blanket I had set out for her.

"I dunno, 6:40? That gives us half an hour each, and plenty of time to get down there."

"Sounds good to me."

I reached over to the nightstand and set the alarm. It was 4:20. I turned off the lights and curled up.

"Martin?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks." Her breathing grew deeper and slower in only a minute or two.

A few minutes later, I was asleep myself.

Another thing it turned out we had in common is that we were both big fans of the good old snooze button. I smacked it a few times, and at least a couple times she was up off the couch and beat me to it. We took turns playing straight man in the classic morning conversation:

“Nine more minutes?”

“Uh huh.”

When I finally bothered to look at the digital display, it was after 7:30.

“Erika?”

“Yeah?”

“If we’re going to this, we gotta get ready *now*.”

There was no time for modesty, and no time to take turns in the bathroom. We each brushed our hair and teeth while the other showered, passing towels to each other over the curtain, not bothering to close the door while finding clothes and getting dressed.

It was remarkable how comfortable we were in each other’s presence during our rushed morning routines. Like a brother and sister, I thought, but realized later -- no, a brother and sister wouldn’t be so relaxed and unselfconscious. More like an old married couple. Who *was* this woman?

We made it to the session just in time, and the last two seats were on opposite sides of the room. This was the special two-hour presentation by one of the lead artists at Disney Animation Studios.

He gave a historical perspective of the life and career of Walt Disney, complete with rare old films. He covered the entire history of animated film, and showed us a number of models and a few rare cels from the classics. In charge of landscape animations and effects for the upcoming Disney feature, Pocahontas, he shared the secrets of animating majestic waterfalls and huge trees swaying in the wind, with video that looked like moving pencil sketches. His knowledge and love for his work were obvious.

I met up with Erika in the hallway afterwards. Her eyes were sparkling. She had dressed like a hippie today, with an ethnic-looking peasant blouse, damp hair in a ponytail, ragged jeans and sandals. What a chameleon.

"That was *awesome!*" we said simultaneously.

"I can't wait for the tour," she said.

The organizers of the Congress had arranged for a special trip that afternoon to the Disney Animation Studios. And unlike the regular Disney World tourists channeled through glassed-in walkways overlooking the sprawling workspace, you got to go down inside, be shown around by the artists, ask questions, play with their toys. All afternoon long. It was *the* day trip. Tickets had been expensive.

"You're *going* to that?" I exclaimed, "You're so lucky!"

"You're not going?" she asked, crestfallen.

"No," I said, "It was sold out by the time I found out about it."

"Let's see if we can get you a ticket anyway," she said, "Maybe somebody cancelled or something."

"I couldn't go anyway, Erika," I said. "I have to be at the airport at 5:30, and the bus won't get back here 'til after 6."

Erika ran up to the room to take her bag back out to the car, and then met me at the next session. It was one of the last of the conference, Medical Illustration With Photoshop, a two hour hands-on class, two people to a workstation. The instructor was an expert on the tools *and* on anatomy.

Erika was my partner, and I marveled at what a quick study she was. She had natural talent, and picked up everything without hesitation. We would lean in to take a closer look at the monitor, examining the airbrushed highlights on an arterial branching we were creating together, and I could feel her breath on my arm. And then, all too soon, it was over.

It was past noon, and the tour bus was leaving promptly at 12:30. I walked downstairs with her, across the lobby and out the front door.

“What are you going to do all day?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I have to check out by 12:30, and then I need to catch a cab to the airport by 5. I’ll probably just hang around in the lobby and read or something. They’re supposed to have a nice gym here, maybe they’ll let me work out.”

We had reached the curb where the tourist coach was parked, idling. She got out her ticket.

“It was really great getting to know you,” she said, and then hugged me and got on the bus.

I went inside and up to my room. I changed into shorts and a t-shirt in case they would let me work out, grabbed my paperback and plane tickets, stuffed everything else into the duffel, and called down to the receptionist. He checked me out over the phone, and I had just made the deadline. He told me, yes, sure I could use the gym. He said I could leave my bag on the bellman’s cart in the hall and they would take care of it until I left.

When I got downstairs I saw her standing alone on the other side of the lobby. She had a head of lettuce in her big macramé purse, and was tearing leaves off of it, absently munching on them. It was charming, in an oddball sort of way. She hadn’t seen me. I went to her.

“Erika! What happened? Did they postpone the tour?”

“No,” she said, “I just decided I’d rather be with you.”

Wow.

We decided to go lift weights, and we went to her car for her to get a change of clothes.

“You sure have a lot of clothes in this car,” I said.

“I keep *everything* here,” she said. “I don’t want to leave my stuff sitting around in the hostel.”

I started warming up with dumbbells while she changed in the locker room. She came out and we spotted for each other lifting weights, and then did the treadmills for a while. It was a pretty even matchup, I'd say. I was a really big guy, thirtysomething and in fair shape, she was a 22-year-old athlete, average size but in peak condition. Even though she was damn strong, I still managed to outlift her. But she kicked my ass on the treadmill.

Again, we had the place to ourselves. Our conversation was even more intimate than the night before. We shared a few private confidences, I'll leave it at that. I did learn that her dad was a psychiatrist and her mom a physicist. Interesting combination, I thought.

"You know, I was kind of surprised you decided to stay with me last night. I'm glad you did. Thanks for trusting me."

"Oh, I could tell," she said, "and besides, I figured if anything happened, I could always open the window and scream."

"I'm glad you had a contingency plan," I chuckled.

"Let's go to the pool," she said.

She had brought in a swimsuit from the car. I hadn't even packed one for the trip. We went out into the sunny afternoon, and Erika luxuriated in the jacuzzi, blissfully floating on the bubbles, her head leaned back and her hair spread out like a rippling halo around her classic features. I sat at the edge with my feet in the water, adoring her. Suddenly she jumped up.

"I'm going to swim a few laps, OK?"

"Sure," I said.

That girl was a natural swimmer. She cut through the water with confident, disciplined strokes that threw only the smallest arcs of droplets to shimmer and sparkle in the sunshine; her smooth, rhythmic kicks propelling her to surprising speeds. Every muscle stood out in stark relief, gliding under her glistening tan skin. What a magnificent specimen she was.

"Watch this," she called to me, treading water in the deep end.

"OK."

She jackknifed and dove for the bottom, reaching the 10-foot floor easily, bubbles streaming behind her. She flipped over abruptly and lay flat on her back at the bottom of the pool, arms straight out from her sides. A few stray bubbles zigzagged upwards from her nostrils. She lay completely still for so long I started to worry. Then she flipped over again and began swimming rapidly, not for the surface, but angling straight toward me underwater. She erupted from the pool with a huge splash and landed lying across my lap. She laughed as I spluttered for something to say, soaked and astonished. She rolled off me and back into the water, splashing me again.

“That was nothing,” she said, “watch this!”

She backstroked out to the same spot she had been treading before, and floated on her back there, arms pressed to her sides, straight and still as a plank. Then she did something incredible.

Her diaphragm and ribs contracted as she exhaled, and she slowly sank, her body still straight and parallel to the surface. She was sinking to the bottom, tiny twin streams of bubbles rising to the surface as she regulated the amount of air that was leaving her lungs. Then she *stopped*. She was suspended there, halfway down, absolutely straight and horizontal. She had such precise control of her buoyancy that she was able to remain completely motionless for a full minute, like a perfect rose captured in a crystal paperweight. The image will remain burned into my memory forever.

Then she swam over and sat chatting with me by the poolside as I waited for the sun to dry my clothes.

She offered me a ride to the airport. It was getting to be that time. I went inside to get my bag, then walked out to the parking lot. She had already changed and was in the car, drumming on the steering wheel to Pearl Jam. I tossed the duffel in the back and got into the passenger seat.

“You know,” she said as we drove across town, “There’s a really cool multimedia conference in Atlanta next month. I was thinking about going. I would definitely go if you were going to be there.”

"Erika, you don't know how much I wish I could. But we have a big grant application due in August, I have tons of work to do. I was lucky to get the time off for this."

"It's only a few days. And part of it is a weekend anyway."

"Well," I said, "I'm also really broke. I called in favors just to put *this* trip together."

"You work at a University right? It would only be like 50 bucks for you."

"Plus hotel. And airfare."

"Drive down and stay at the youth hostel, fifteen bucks a night."

"I didn't think they took guys over thirty at *youth* hostels," I said.

"You could stay there with me."

"They let you do that?"

"We'll tell them we're married," she said.

I began to consider jeopardizing my dream job and hocking my worldly possessions, just for the opportunity to *pretend* for a few days that this woman was my wife.

"I'll try to figure something out, Erika," I said, "But even if it isn't that, I want to see you again."

We had arrived at the airport.

"Give me your address and phone number," I said.

We couldn't find a pen or pencil anywhere in the car. Cars behind us in the passenger drop-off area started honking.

"Listen," I said, "There was a directory of all the attendees of the conference in the back of the binder. It has address, phone, all that stuff. Are you in there?"

"Yeah, I should be," she said.

"OK, I'll get it there," I said. "I am so glad I met you."

"Me too."

"I'll talk to you soon."

I kissed her goodbye and got on the plane home.

I went in to the hospital early the next day. I stayed in the lab quite late into the evening, catching up on accumulated work, typing up my extensive notes from the Congress, and responding to my backlog of emails. The next day was Saturday. I slept in, and then decided to call Erika before going in to work. Her number wasn't in the book.

Where did she say her parents lived? Massachusetts? Long Island? Had she mentioned their first names? How did she *spell* her last name? My own name hadn't been in the directory. I hadn't registered until after the conference started and the books were distributed. She had no way to find me either.

In the following weeks, I threw myself back into my work with my usual intensity and passion. I met my goals, explored new possibilities, learned new techniques and applications. I would think of Erika once in a while with affection, and wonder what she was doing. The multimedia conference in Atlanta came and went. I couldn't go.

Months and then years passed, and I never found her or heard from her. The funding for the RIGS project dried up, and I changed jobs. I had professional disasters and triumphs, had intimate relationships, casual encounters and treasured friendships with women, never finding quite the right circumstances to build something permanent.

Over the years, I have become close to a number of women who were every bit as talented, energetic, intelligent and beautiful as Erika was. But if, at the end of my life, I were asked to name all the women I had ever loved, she would be on the short list.

"How can you say that?" people have asked me when I told this story, "You only knew the girl for a *day*. You never even slept with her."

I've learned to point out their misuse of this euphemism. In fact, we did *sleep* together for a few hours, in the midst of the 21 inseparable hours during which we shared so *many* things. A little less than a day.

If we had found each other again, it would have been good, at least for a while. But I believe now that it was better this way. Wherever she may be now, there is still one person in the world who carries a memory of her as the glorious, unique and brilliant vision she was during that particular moment of her life. The impression she left upon me is untarnished. I think of it as a perfect bubble – fragile, transparent, encapsulating two spirits, swirling around us in a hypnotic spectrum that held us in thrall for that one precious day.

But aren't our lives nothing but a long series of days? Of moments? Even if you spend a lifetime with someone, how many of those days are spent so immersed in that kind of complete acceptance, approval, admiration and understanding of each other? How many are spent instead in wishing, planning or reminiscing about those moments that *were* perfect, or might have been? How many are spent without conflict, disappointment, or unrealistic expectations? How often do you look at that other person and wonder, after all the years, if you really know them at all? How few of those countless moments you share are truly important enough to define what you know and love about each other?

And if you are fortunate enough to create some of those moments with someone, how long does that deep empathy last before it becomes a memory or expectation, and not a genuine experience? Before you take it for granted and thus invalidate it? Before it is transformed into a means to an end? This most fleeting of emotions is all too often overshadowed and even forgotten in the very act of its physical consummation.

Short and innocent as it may have been, the bond we shared was still substantial and complete. Children must be as such before they are conditioned to the possessiveness and pretense of adult relationships. If only we could learn to relate to each other more often like children! To cherish the joy and resonance to be found solely between two minds, for just a day or even a moment; to hold *that* as a separate and worthy passion, beyond the pale of more common pleasures of the flesh. I know now that it's possible. Erika showed me how it can be.