



Steven Hill

Shorts

First date strategies

“God, could you imagine being a dairy cow?” said Sheila. “Your sole reason for existence being to fill up your udders and disgorge all that white, sappy, um, *body fluid*, for so many others then to *drink*? How perfectly odd.” I arched my eyebrows, my eyes darting between Sheila and the line of Holsteins, their udders pumping mechanically and the flanks of the great beasts looking like they had been tattooed with black and white maps of the world, and I realized that this is perhaps a distinctly female concern. No, in fact I could *not* imagine, well, having udders... especially ones that disgorged all that white, sappy...well, never mind, for she continued developing her thesis.

“It would be bad enough if you were just providing milk for your own kids. But to be reduced to one bodily function as the core of your being...harvested to fill up the mouths of so many beyond your own kin; repeatedly impregnated and separated from your own kids—I mean calves—until your body gives out—as a commercial enterprise run by your other-species overseer, no less—to be hooked up to a machine that sucks it all out of you—why, you can't separate the cow from the machine, at that point. The cow *is* the machine...nothing more than a machine. Talk about being kept barefoot and pregnant.”

Hmmm, yes, of course she had a—rather obvious—point. But one that nonetheless I found that I did not want to concede. I'm not generally one who easily ignores crass commercial exploitation, even of cows, and it wasn't just that I happen to like milk. But it seems to me that life is a series of concessions, following disappointments, following daily doses of humbling reality that at times borders on humiliation. We all eat, and we get eaten. Hasn't that always been the case? Didn't Plato or Machiavelli or someone write a play or dialogue about that? I tried to think of something apropos to say, if for no other reason than to hold up my end of our conversation, which unfortunately already seemed destined to be our first and last date (memo to self: no more first dates to a dairy convention. One can try too hard to stand out from the dating competition). I groped—perhaps too desperately—for something clever but also impressively insightful to say.

“Hmmm, well, yes, I suppose that's true. Being a dairy cow is no stroll in the pasture. But...it beats being a beef cow, doesn't it?”

Sheila and I got married eight months later. And divorced four years after that. She finally got tired of my clever shallowness.

Crosswalk

My car at the stoplight...edges forward a few inches into the crosswalk, annoying a pedestrian who raps with knuckles on my hood. My bad, sorry, I'm running late. I look to my left, monitoring the traffic. Saw her coming toward me, her legs scissoring the zebra lines of the crosswalk. Our eyes make contact, but I was more focused on scanning the traffic than her. Still, I see her seeing me, and she sees me seeing her, and she immediately prepares her face. She fluffs her long chestnut hair with her fingertips, raises her chin ever so slightly (almost imperceptibly), rolls her shoulders back and slightly thrusts her cleavage forward, assuming the pose. She had lost her anonymity, her stride suddenly acquiring self-importance and ambition. Our gazes tracked, engaged indifference among our faded glory, and then I, searching for the traffic signal, look away. And so her expression changes yet again, as if I had been a mirror with bad news. She glances down the length of her body, checking to see if some part of her parade was amiss. She adjusts her blouse at the V neck pointing toward her bosom, she brushes away seemingly nothing from her sleeve, all little gestures, anxious genuflections and careworn dreams at the corners of her eyes. I felt a sad desire to harbor her from the swirling world's judgments we were surrounded by. She gives me another look, but by now our briefest intimacy has resulted in a bitter spurning, and I had this sudden, strange upside-down sensation that we had loved and hated, hated and loved, even though nothing had been said.

All of this occurred in the span of about 3.7 seconds. Sometimes we live at the speed of light. Our personal histories and lifelong momentums bounce off each other like zinging electrons and baggy hadrons, colliding among strangers in space. Then the light turns green. I step on the gas, she reaches the curb, and the curtain closes on this smallest, dramatic chapter of a human animal story.

Do you like the pie?

So I said to her (*in response to her usual glares of remonstrance*), You see each person is like a pie chart, with each slice of the pie being a particular activity or part of your personality that takes up your time during a 24-hour day. Each day is composed of the activities and personalities we become for those split moments or hours, and taken together that's your pie chart for the day. So maybe one person combines working as a CEO with being married to a philandering husband and a drug addicted teenager who was sent off to prep school and increasingly you find yourself short of breath and your doctor says you need to slow down. So this person is a Master of the Universe who can't even control her own universe. Or maybe you are a tobacco-wrapped cigar of a personality who works as a bartender under an ogre boss and is a dad of a Ritalin-raised child and married to a princess of a wife who's a paraplegic. So you are exploited, harried, both happy and sad, and feeling under the thumb of an uncertain future. Another person might be native Mississippian, and the owner of a media empire who can't hail a cab in New York or get respect from Sean Hannity or keep your wife from screwing that NBA star, no matter how much you beg, plead or threaten. You're not afraid of black helicopters, but you do walk around constantly looking over your shoulder, wondering when the white hoods might sweep in. Or maybe you are a divorced professor at a private preppy SoCal college with a crummy joint custody situation and a fishing trip planned with old buddies that you aren't looking forward to and three female students who often dress in hot hot shorts and halter tops, two of whom appear to be making passes at you and one of whom has asked you to lunch and you know you aren't supposed to do this but you tell yourself that you should encourage her initiative but you know you have a tendency towards self-delusion and a certain recklessness has walked itself into your life because the marriage you thought would last forever and the perfect life that you had was shattered when your wife had a short fling with an old boyfriend that turned into a longer fling and finally a middle fingering and off she went with your precious wee daughter to a new life that left you stranded on your tiny little wreck of an island.

(hopefully that last one didn't bite too close to home).

The point is, *I said*, We are all pie charts, composed of parts and slices and components. And if we could quantify how much time we spent on which activities, and what percentage of our split

personalities show themselves for a certain amount each day—or week or month or year—even our secret, closeted personalities and activities (*you know what I mean by those, right?*)—and put all of that into a colorful pie chart, certainly then one could "Know Thyself" as the ancient Delphic Greeks commanded and all would be revealed. We could draw a pie chart for ourselves, for each other, we could even do it for whole societies and nations. Yessiree, a colorful pie chart could be made for a whole nation, because wasn't it Arnold Toynbee who said "Countries have characters that are as distinctive as those of human beings"? Indeed, pie charts should be drawn for each and every person, like we go to the doctor or get our palms read; in a civilized society it would be required and our individual pie charts would follow each person around, we would wear them pinned to our blouses or around our necks and each of us could see each other—really see each other—in a glance. But for some reason God made it so that self-observation is the toughest thing in the world, and besides, who among us is willing to be that honest?

Ouch—suddenly she spit her ice cubes at me and then tried to stab my hand with her fork, then texted someone frantically on her cell phone and walked out. I reached into my vest pocket and pulled out the pie chart I had for her, and with my crayons began coloring it in. I used flaming red to color in the wedge labeled "anger and resentment," and it was by far the biggest wedge of her pie. But it had always been that way, ever since she was a little girl. I don't know what her mother and I did wrong. Divorce is tough on the collaterally damaged.

Steven Hill is a Caveat Lector principal and contributing writer. He is a journalist and the author of seven books of political non-fiction. His essays, articles and media interviews have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Wired*, *Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *Die Zeit*, NPR, PBS, BBC, C-SPAN, Democracy Now, and many others. He is the chief editor and contributor to the online publication DemocracySOS. He has published short fiction and poems in a number of publications, including *Columbia Journal*, *Minnesota Review*, *San Fernando Poetry Journal*, *Struggle*, *Prophetic Voices*, and the anthologies *Sparkle and Blink*, *Grasp the Rainbow*, and *Poets for a Livable Planet*. His plays have been produced in New York City (Off-Off Broadway), Washington, D.C., and San Francisco. His website can be found at www.Steven-Hill.com.