

TRACEY SLAUGHTER

## Consent

Let me tell you about consent.

I consented to smile at him. At least, the muscles of my mouth twitched for him as much as they did for any customer. He leaned on the counter, sideways, as I rolled the ice cream he ordered, triple-scoop orange-chocolate chip, and he tapped a twenty, folded horizontally, up and down on the metal trim. He was so tall he could look right over the counter, so tall that whichever way I bent his look would be all over my arse or boring right down the groove between my little tits. I tried to pull the apron loop up a bit round my neck, to jam it one side on the sliding glass so it didn't sag down again. But the ice cream was hard that day. All day I had been taking the metal milk-shake tumbler we kept the scoops in out the back to fill it with boiling water from the Zip. To roll from the carton he wanted, I had to bend right down, poke my skull into the cabinet, drop my whole weight on the scoop, rock it wrist-wise to get any kind of curl into it. He leaned over and told me he liked how I handled a cone.

I consented to smile again. My face kept moving in the way it had been trained when a twenty kept tapping on the metal counter. My boss had already torn strips off me for not smiling enough at the customers. 'It cost you nothing to smile,' he would say, 'a smile is free.' And anyway, a guy like that, so tall, a grown-up, with a rack of pens in his pocket and a huge coil of keys-to-the-world dangling from his other fist, wouldn't bother with a girl like me, highschool-ugly, still in my uniform checks with the logo on a pocket-coated boob, a spit-through blouse

that showed up the dimply singlets my mum wouldn't scrap in favour of training bras yet. That was who I was: a singlet kind of girl, a stringy hair criss-crossed with cheap clips, pulled-up socks and blue-bored eyes and pin-pricks of pus on the chin kind of girl, with a black-track of food-speckled band around my teeth winching them tighter and flatter. So I could smile more.

He held out his hand for the ice cream, with his keys now hooked over one big thumb, and I consented to pass it to him instead of propping it up in the white plastic cut-out tray like I always did. I consented to leave my hand trapped under his grip, the hot heads of keys grinding into it, for three seconds, four, while I stared down into the fat cage his fingers made, wondering how to yank my hand out, without the cone splitting, the ice cream toppling, the canteen of straws splashing out onto the floor, the boss huffing out from the back and finally axing me. And he laughed and let his fingers ease off a bit, not enough to let go, but enough for me to feel that he didn't even really have to try to keep my dumb hand buzzing with fear in there, the first slick of ice cream dripping, pathetic and sweet, down into my soft consenting little fist.

He said, I want you to take the first lick. And he flickered the folded twenty at me. And he gave a little nudge with the fingers that didn't even have to strain to keep me shackled. He steered the cone like an oozing microphone up to my face, and waited, grinning, for me to say nothing.

To say nothing. Just smile.

But even so I want to know what made me lean in and do what he said. I want to know every bit as much as you. I want to know, every step along the way, what it was that made me do what he wanted: fill my mouth with sticky cold so the bars froze and stung on my smile, drop my head in his lap and blink at his stench until the tears belched out of my face. But that came later. That first day he said, Keep the change. And I took

the scoops out back to the Zip, and I stared as the water fizzed out the way it always did, but I didn't avoid it, just let it splutter out and blister the hand that had squirmed there inside his. Because in some part of me I'd felt the change, and I didn't want to keep it.

I do know what made me consent to get in his car when he pulled over on my walk home the next week. It's so dumb I almost can't tell you. It's this. There was this guy in my class and I loved him. Don't you laugh when I say love, because this was all the love I could remember for any guy and it still is. I loved his head stacked with surfy curls and the mud that always seemed to be slung up his legs. I loved the way he wrote with black felt on his satchel and painted his fingernails with twink, and I loved the way he held his asthma pump as if it was a bird or an insect cupped in his hand and the way he made an o-mouth to suck down the vapour once he had punched it. I loved the way his thighs went purple in his school shorts in the winter and the way orange Cheezel dust always seemed to be brushed somewhere on his face. I loved the way he would pick up his little sister from primary and they would walk behind me singing or scrapping or, a couple of times, blowing bubbles of dishwasher from a plastic pod, and the globes swarmed over me and trembled and popped in my hair. And I loved the way I felt when I got home from school and dreamed how his mouth might flutter down to me, one day, humming wetly on mine, shiny wriggles like a bubble until all that hope burst.

I consented for the stupidest reason to get in the car when it pulled over then. I wanted to make the guy that I loved, but I'd never have the guts to tell that I loved, notice and be jealous.

You've got the picture about what went on in the car, about what I consented to. I've already let it slip. Down at the place where he always drove me there was a tonne of tame, slimy ducks, shuffling round to see if they could stab a feed from your hand. They had pink clumps of skin over their eyes like

tumours and holes in their beaks where some kind of liquid frothed. They flocked round on the grass to me, wobbling and gagging, when I went and sat outside afterward. I'd take little packets in my lunchbox for them, and the sparkle of the paper made them mental. Sometimes he'd be a nice guy after he'd zipped up. He'd mop himself and stroke my hair, laughing. He'd give me a smoke. He'd lean in and run a thumb under my eyes where the make-up I could never get right had oozed off. The first time he said I was beautiful. I do remember hearing that. But while he said it his hand sunk my skull till my choking made him flatten my spine with his elbow.

When I choked I would think of those ducks and their eyes almost buried in those scaly red growths and the foam on their beaks and the way he would kick at least one of them every time we pulled up but they never learnt and just came back begging and begging.

So I guess I have to call it consent. But I've been reading about consent lately and it seems to me when they made up that idea they left spaces for way too much pain, too much pressure. There's part of the word that sounds okay and is all about feeling and thinking the same, about two bodies and minds just sharing themselves because, I don't know, they match, they touch, and their skins light up in some kind of agreement. But there's this other side of the word which doesn't sound right to me at all: to yield, it says, to acquiesce to what is done or proposed by another, to comply. There are ways in which that could still hurt. It sounds to me like there's stacks of ways you could get yourself thrashed black and blue under cover of that word. And they could say it that way: you get yourself.

You get yourself dressed up, for instance, when he calls you that last time. You actually fork out some cash for a dress because he says this time he's going to take you somewhere nice and the idea of not just parking up and scorching your

cheek on the steering wheel because he's got hold of your head and bounces it like there's nothing left inside it, like it's a ball of bone he could dribble and dribble, the idea of not just getting dealt to like that is like something straight out of a magazine where teenagers hold hands or sit in a convertible car with their white teeth flashing out pure public love while they suck from the same vintage Coke and watch the sunset. You spend cash, you spend hours hanging over the sink to get your eyelids tricked out with glitter. You sway the razor up and down over your legs, you jab your lobes with over sixteen kinds of studs till you decide on the right ones, lock on the butterflies looking at the frosted strangeness of your face in the mirror, so fluorescent and tapered and spangled, dusted to adulthood with a can of cheap shimmering atoms. He is right: you are beautiful. And so you stalk, jiggle, stalk, down the front steps toward his car when he finally pulls up and honks.

His car is always so clean. There are no flowers or lovesongs or shit like that, but it seems that he cleans it just for you. Just so your pulse-points, tapped with your mum's best Poison, smoke with such narcotic prettiness you almost cry.

He smiles. Gear after gear, he smiles. He has a scent also, and it grows with the distance, the miles of light that spurt through the window before the tarseal gives out to stone and then instead of lights there's the anti-lights of long trees croaking and hissing in the black outside. It's a real, thick, out-of-town black. Admit it: you are a little spooked. The car is sleazy on the loose-metal corners, your heart is a fraction off in the sorting of your blood. But he smiles. So you smile back. Painted as cutely as you are it feels like the muscles on your face consent a little easier.

You keep on smiling as he pulls up. Oh, it's just like a magazine, a sweet teen movie: he circles round and clips open your door, extends a hand. There's so much meat in that hand,

but you forget that, because the car and his keys and his smile are so clean, a whole clean confident world of right shines in them. You consent to put your twitching hand into his. So he leads you up a gravel drive to a house you'll never really find your way out of. You smile as the front door opens and the five men inside all smile back at you.

Since when did a smile cost you anything?

It's free.

Step inside.

Now isn't that consent?

Can I put you in my shoes just for a minute? The heels are high and when they're unstrapped and swung at your eye they knock you quite dazzlingly blind. Blood will run down that side of your vision for years with a light bulb squealing through it. All the faces and the walls are now elastic and come at you in bouts. Can I put you in my head? There's actually the sound of beer tabs spitting because someone has packed for the event. You hear the flop of a chillybin lid: it's a picnic. Can I put you in my hair? It's a leash, tied to so many fists that you feel your scalp split, you see a stick of gelled hair come away in a hand, a gleam of flesh still icing it. Can I put you in my hands? They're taped like a lever, a handle, to push you around. You're spun, you're spun, then you're hung on them. You're hung on the hook of your own bones and scream at the pipe you're strapped to until it howls back at you. Six men laugh, they assemble, they're organised, they're a convention, a ring, a society. Count them: six men, just smashing you calmly, with snarls of entitlement, corporate in their bloodied suits. Would you let me put you, just for a minute, right here inside so you go through it with me . . . ?

No, of course not.

Who would consent to that?

Silence, they say, is a kind of consent.

The least you can do then is stay here with me, just sit with me in the silence that comes next.

There are seconds, just a few, lovely, numb seconds when I first wake, when I think I am a child, that I must have dozed off and my parents scooped me up and shifted me in the night. Somehow I think, if I lie still and listen, the house will not be totally strange because I'll tune into the trickle of my parents' voices, the murmuring sameness of Mum and Dad, clicks and drones and scuffing as they chat and clear up. They must have picked me up, they must have rocked me, late, down some dark hallway, taken off clips that might prick in the night or buttons that dig or beads that might tie me up. They've tucked me in, chuckling lightly, tripping on the room's unfamiliar shapes. We have been somewhere new, on a holiday, we've had a picnic: I remember the flunk of the chillybin lid. It's morning and if I listen, even in this strange motel, I will still hear my father, my mother: the toaster will still ching, there'll be the scratch of her buttering, the sound of slippers, of the seal unwrinkling from the fridge. There is a knot at the top of my head where my baby-hand always drowns and fiddles: if I just reach up that tuft will be there, that warm hoop of habit, that murky smooth curl and I can weave in my thumb and turn and turn . . .

I reach up. But in that place, as you know, I am balded and blooded.

Pain is a crown and if I move the nerves will spill out from it in a gush.

Pain is a crown and it will be hard to stand in it, hard to balance, hard to walk under its throb. It will be hard to move down the hall, so hard to carry that sliding red crown, trying to find slivers of clothing, find an exit, find home.

Finding instead a mirror, where everything I am has ruptured.

And then, later, in court, as you know, they will only crown

me again. I will stumble, I'll swerve through those rooms too, as I veer down this bright hall. Because somehow they'll think this shredded dress is a sash, they'll think that I painted my smile like a target just for the clapping of fists, that my pain is a prize, my shame a reward I asked for. I'll stagger again as they crown me. Miss Consent.

So just let the silence go on a little bit longer.

Just let me lie here and remember when consent was a word that still had something in it. Something that sounded like sympathy, that seemed like a sharing, even a kind of compassion. Something that sounded like my parents' voices, their morning exchange of dopey gentleness, lazily pacing and mumbling in the ordinary distance of love.