

Prologue

I'm sitting on the kerb of a cobbled pavement, not far from the bus stop, feeling as old as I am: sixty-four. And I have felt like I was waiting for something my entire life. Even as a child I'd stare out the window, expecting something where there was nothing other than the cars lined against the road and the black bin bag on the ground, uncollected, because Mother had gotten the day muddled again. At first I thought it was a sign that things would fall into place and I could simply put my life on autopilot until they did. Perhaps it was a psychological thing. Lately I've come to accept it's more likely my mind playing tricks on me. Old age? Some kind of progressive disease? Who knows.

There is a breeze today on Hornton Street. I've counted thirty-one chewing gums on the ground, varying shades of dirt-marbled pink, grey and coal-black. People come and go, and I try to look for patterns. I always find patterns in every-thing, much like some people see the face of Baby Jesus or George Washington in potatoes. There have been four blonde ladies, so a brown-haired one must come soon. Or three men have walked past, so a child should be coming next. I'm try- ing to figure out after which sequence of passersby the one

I'm waiting for will appear. And what he will say? I have been through it in my mind a hundred, a thousand—more than that—times.

'Hello,' he might say. Or, 'I've missed you.'

Maybe, 'So this is where you are.'

I'd like him to simply say, 'You came.'

Smile wide. Or perhaps with a serious face.

Of course, I know he won't say any of these things. People never say what you expect them to.

While I'm thinking, someone does come up to me. It's a gentleman who works at Whole Foods on Kensington High Street.

'How are you today?' He hands me a five-pound note and walks on before I have time to answer the question or object to the note now nestled in my hand. I'm not broke. I'm broken-hearted.

Only two more hours until home-time now, when I board the bus and head back to the warmth of my house where my son will lecture me until he decides it's no use and gives up. I ate the plate of lasagne he'd left me before I headed out this morning (it was a better breakfast than the lamb stew we had last week), moved my crossword to a new place and left a half-drunk cup of tea on the living room table. I even pulled off and flushed half a metre of toilet paper down the loo. Extreme? Trust my son to notice any little trace I leave behind. Like this, for all he knows, I've had a productive day at home, eaten my lunch and had a bowel movement. As long as I'm back before he comes through the door I'll be fine.

I glance at my watch. It's 15.14, on 8 June, 2023.

I've been waiting twenty-seven years.

Sophia

Svedala

When you kiss someone, as many as eighty million bacteria are transferred between mouths. This is for a ten-second kiss. Don't get me started on those long, slobby affairs that happen in, say, backs of cabs or on doorsteps after a fourth date. But wait – it gets *worse*. Couples who kiss more than nine times a day (first of all, who are these people? Do they not have to work? Or like, *eat*?) actually share communities of bacteria. So you don't just share a home, you also share a saliva community. Which is, to cite my teenage self, *GROSS*.

It's all I can think of as the perfectly handsome man in front of me who's just treated me to dinner and half a bottle of wine leans in and tries to slide his tongue between my lips. I press them firmly shut. Because, well, *bacterial transfer*. He kind of moves to the side to see if there's an opening there, and I'm forced to twitch my face to withhold. He gives up, draws back and looks at me.

His name is Ed, and he has brown eyes and hair that kind of shines without any hair product. He likes travelling and cars, works for a digital creator brand and wouldn't mind settling down with the right woman. He seemed great; I was even willing to overlook his very clear *You don't seem Autistic at all*

greeting. On paper he looks good for me, a twenty-five-year-old woman who has blue eyes and hair like unruly yellow straw, is taller than most men, owns her own florist shop and wouldn't mind having her first boyfriend right about now. Or yesterday. In fact, I've been trying for God knows how long to have my first boyfriend. But looking good on paper doesn't always translate to real life.

'Are you okay?' he asks, shifting his weight back and forth as if he needs a wee.

'I am okay.' Roof over my head, no ongoing war or conflict threatening my livelihood, and I just ate a bowl of pasta. Sure, I very much wish I had one and a half million kroners to buy my brothers out of my flower shop so that it was mine alone, but I can't claim to not be *okay*. I'd call my current mental state *slightly unhappy*, but then lots of people go through their whole lives that way. My mother's words come to me: When there are those worse off, we don't complain. Sure, there are those worse off—some single ladies may not yet have discovered the Le Wand 3.0 vibrator.

'We had a good date just now. And the one before.' He starts to recap our dating history. Which, although brief, has shown great promise. He has only a few annoying habits, chews with his mouth closed and, as opposed to the man I dated previously who I spotted in the town centre wearing socks and crocs and thus immediately cancelled, wears sneakers.

'Yes.' It's true. I've enjoyed getting to know him. I may have even fantasised about pushing my body against his, feeling my chest stop heaving for a moment, grabbing his hand and placing it somewhere I'm practically aching to be touched and—'But somehow you're not that into me . . . ?'

'That's not it, Ed.'

I realise I have to give a reason. And that when I do, this will be over. Much like my teenage years when I would sneak

back into my parents' house even before curfew, tonight I'll go back to my flat still *unkissed*. I don't like labels. Like *Autistic or control freak. Anxious. Eating disorder. OCD*. Those types of things. Somehow I collected these kinds of labels throughout childhood the way others collected Brownie badges. Hence I've made it my mission to appear as normal as I can to avoid accumulating more of them in adulthood.

So here I am. With the chance to get rid of one of my most stubborn labels: *unkissed*. It's meant to be good, isn't it? Otherwise people wouldn't brave the bacteria. *The eighty million of them*. An army. An invasion. Foreign bodies in my body. Well okay, I wouldn't necessarily mind that last one. Can we skip straight to it?

Ed leans in again, and I finally blurt it out, ending any prospects of Ed and Sophia ever creating a bacterial community or any other form of community.

'I'm sorry. I can't do this.'

'It's okay, we can take it slow. Just kissing.' He leans in again, completely unaware of, and not intending to find out, *what* it is I can't do. I put my hand on his chest, and it drums against my palm. I don't like it. It feels too excited—like a dog's tail wagging. Drumdrumdrum.

'I don't *kiss*. I thought I could, but it turns out I can't. I wrote it in one of my messages to you?'

He looks genuinely confused.

'I thought that was some pun or turn-on technique. Hot girl wants to skip foreplay? Any guy is all in and down with that.'

Great. Remind me to add it to *The Autistic's Guide to Life's* chapter on getting the attention of a man: *How to make your quirk work and really turn them on*.

'Well, no, it's an *actual* no to kissing.' We stare at each other for an awkward minute, as if we're children checking who will

blink first. I think about placing a hand on his body but am not sure where I'd put it. I leave my arms hanging by my side. He attempts a joke.

'Sure you're not some kind of a prostitute?'

It's not a funny one, so I don't reply. He shifts uncomfortably on the spot.

'The no kissing. You know, *Pretty Woman*? I thought that's what working girls do to not get attached.'

'Ed, I am trying very hard to get attached. However, I do not wish to attach my lips to yours. That is the point I am desperately trying to make here. All other body parts would be okay to attach.'

'Gotcha. Erm, listen. I'm all for attaching stuff and all, but . . . we may have different goals here.'

I want to argue that no, we do not have different goals (we both want a relationship) but rather different paths and ideas about how to achieve them (no lips versus lots of lips). But then I think of all the inspirational quotes I've ever been fed that say things like *Enjoy the Journey*. I think how others are usually uninterested in my different-looking journey. And it's clear Ed won't be coming along with me on *my* journey.

'I'm going to go now,' I say. 'Thank you for the dinner, the wine and the ice cream.'

I am about to turn around and leave him there when I have second thoughts. Kissing is essential for getting attached. I can't meet someone and get them to like me without that part of the deal. I pep-talk myself. *If this is what you need to do, then go and bloody do it, Sophia*, I hear my uncle's voice saying. I'm fairly sure he wasn't talking about kissing men named Ed, but I think his words apply in this scenario too. I have tried a lot of things in order to advance my life, to become a happier, more fulfilled version of myself. The one thing I've failed to try so

far is a relationship. And I'm convinced that it's the answer to this nagging feeling of not quite having it all. It *must* be.

So I decide to try. At least once. I'm twenty-five and getting a little antsy, not for love and marriage and cute babies and getting to romanticise sleep deprivation. But for someone to like, hold and do *those things* with. I will look up how long bacteria live, and I will survive it. There's always mouthwash. I have it at home. Perhaps if I do it once he will be satisfied, and we won't have to do it again. *Okay. Ready.*

I lean towards him, and that's all the encouragement he needs. Excited to have changed my mind, to have converted me, he puts his hand behind my head intertwining my long hair with his fingers, and I can sense all my follicles protesting. Then he ravishes my mouth. Devours it. Heads into battle, bending open my defence and rushing his army of bacteria in via a wave of saliva. He tugs at my bottom lip, and I stiffen. It's wet and horrid, and my brain can't anticipate where his tongue will move next so every touch is a bloody horrendous surprise. A shock to my nervous system and a complete sensory overload. And there are so many *tastes*. A hint of fresh mint. Deep tones of arabica coffee.

It's awful.

And in that moment I promise myself to never kiss anyone again.

This is the first and last time.

I'm Sophia, collector of labels, and my most recent one is Single—*Unhappily*—for Bloody Life.