

THE INVENTION OF PEANUT BUTTER (AND WHY IT CAUSED PROBLEMS)

Matt Haig

In the beginning everyone was happy.

There was only one village in the whole world as far as the villagers were concerned, and because there was only one village they didn't need to give it a big fancy name or anything, so they just called it *Village*.

5 Everyone in the village felt safe from outsiders because of where the village was located. There was a thick forest of jamba trees all around, and to the north there was a mountain. The village was hidden. Everyone felt free to be themselves without any fear.

10 Everyone cared for each other but didn't pry too much into other people's business. If people wanted to talk to people, they left their front doors open. It was a simple system. There was no crime; no robberies, no violence; and generally most people died in their sleep at a very good age. No one was the leader, because everybody made the big decisions together. No one was in the army, because there was no war. No one worried about death, because they saw that they were part of the whole, like a leaf on the tree, and if the tree still survived they didn't worry too much when leaves had to fall.

15 Everyone ate just pineapples and peanuts. But no one complained.

The economy was also very simple. People bought things with peanuts. People never worried about eating their currency because there were lots of peanut trees so there were always enough peanuts to go around.

20 People had no names at first. They were known simply for what they enjoyed. The Woman Who Swims in the Lake. The Boy Who Likes Frogs. The Man Who Likes the Smell of the Air Just After it Has Rained. And so on.

But after a while, when the sixty-sixth baby in the village was born, they - well, her parents - decided to give the baby a name.

25 The baby was a girl and the name they gave to the baby was Charlotte. After that, everybody gave their children names.

Then a boy was born. His name was Solomon.

But people called him Sol, because his bright open face reminded them of the sun. He was a clever boy, who liked to make people laugh with his impressions of animals. He was also very fond of food.

30 Well, he was fond of peanuts.

You see, the only unusual thing about Sol was that he didn't like pineapples. Not at all. He complained that they made his mouth feel sore and that they gave him stomach aches, so after the age of seven he never ate a pineapple again. It was an exclusive diet of peanuts. He didn't mind, because he liked peanuts. Even though his mother joked, "Now, Sol, come on, if 35 you carry on eating so many peanuts you will probably turn into one!"

Of course, Sol never did turn into a peanut.

40 But then, when he was ten years old, he woke in the middle of the night with a terrifying thought. What if I become bored of peanuts? Food is my only joy in life, and peanuts are the only food I enjoy, but earlier today I ate a peanut and it didn't feel like anything at all. It was just like breathing air. If peanuts stop being interesting to me, then maybe life will lose its interest too.

Sol was so petrified by this idea that the very next day he started to work on making something *different from* peanuts that was made *out of* peanuts.

45 No one in the village had ever thought to do this before. People made things, yes. They made chairs and tables and wooden bowls. They made friends and they made promises, and sometimes, when they were old enough, they made love. But they never made food. Food may need to be peeled or shelled, but it was, essentially, eaten with the minimum work done to it.

50 But Sol decided to grab as many peanuts as possible and put them in a large wooden bowl that he found in his parents' kitchen. He then headed towards the mountain just beyond the village, and he found a rock and he crushed the peanuts. He tasted the crushed peanuts. It was an incredible discovery. Crushed peanuts tasted even better than ordinary peanuts.

He returned to the village with his bowl of crushed peanuts and everyone agreed. Crushed peanuts were amazing.

55 Over the next few days he kept on crushing the peanuts and sharing them around. But soon Sol became dissatisfied. The peanuts, he believed, could be better. They were a bit too dry. They stuck to the mouth too much. They were hard to swallow. So he decided to do an experiment. He took some olives and crushed them down in the same wooden bowl. Oil came out. The oil tasted quite nice, so he put it with the crushed peanuts.

60 Then he had an idea.

What if he didn't tell people about the oil? Wouldn't that make it more special for them? A mystery ingredient. Then, if they didn't know how to make it, he could get them to pay him *in peanuts*. Peanuts were, after all, the main currency in the village. As it took fifty peanuts to make each jar, and as jars cost five peanuts, he would sell each one for a hundred peanuts, keeping the profit all for himself.

65 He started to sell the peanut butter in jars.

People were happy to pay, because they had never tasted anything as good.

"What is the secret ingredient?", they would ask.

"That would take away the mystery."

"Ah yes," people said, "the mystery! We wouldn't want to lose the mystery, that is true."

70 Pretty soon, Sol found himself with enough peanuts (47,000) to buy the best house in the village. It was big enough for him to have a little peanut butter factory in his living room. But the trouble was, the biggest house in the village had the biggest windows and people always looked in when they walked by. Sometimes a boy called Luno would sneak along and stare in at the window, trying to discover the secret ingredient.

75 This is no good, thought Sol. I am becoming too successful. I will need a bigger place, away from the village.

80 So he decided to build a house on top of the hill, just north of the village, where the pineapple plants grew. He paid ten of the strongest men in the village to make it. They were happy because they got a thousand peanuts each, and a free jar of peanut butter. However, it was a bit unpopular with some of the other villagers, because of all the trees that were needed to make it.

The thing that had always made the villagers feel safe from outsiders was the jamba trees all around, and now, without them, they felt vulnerable.

"The jamba trees scare off the thieving monkeys," the villagers said.

85 Sol had never heard anything so ridiculous. "Monkeys love trees! Don't be silly! And anyway, this means each one of you will get a free jar of peanut butter!"

Everyone loved peanut butter more than they feared monkeys, so even though some people said they would stop buying peanut butter, they never did, because it tasted too good. People began to wonder how they had ever survived without peanut butter. Ordinary peanuts 90 just weren't the same. They were mundane and boring. They tasted cheap.

Everyone loved heading to Sol's peanut butter shop in the centre of town. Selling, as the sign said, SOL'S PEANUT BUTTER. This was the first time an apostrophe had been used anywhere. You see, as well as inventing peanut butter, Sol invented the apostrophe. Without apostrophes it would have been impossible to know who owned what. Apostrophes put that 95 straight. This was Sol's peanut butter. No one else's. There was even a peanut butter day now, and that was called Sol's Peanut Butter Day. And a peanut butter festival called Sol's Peanut Butter Festival. Sol was in charge of all of it.

These things took a lot of organizing, so Sol gave himself the title Head of Village Organizing, and everyone was fine with this because they were too busy fantasizing about 100 peanut butter.

Sol was happy. Or he had a lot of peanuts. Which probably amounted to the same thing. Who needed friends when you could have so many peanuts? He was now twenty years old.

But late at night he would worry. He'd imagine he could hear noises.

People are trying to break in and find the secret to my peanut butter! he thought. When he 105 went to get the olives, he started to look over his shoulder, imagining someone was following him. He now decided to change his title from Head of Village Organizing to Head of Village, as it was easier to say and it might make people a bit more scared of him.

"I am now Head of Village!" he told the villagers at a meeting in the square. "And I will make this village great."

110 "This village already is great," said one of the villagers.

"But I will provide more peanut butter festivals," said Sol, and there were no more complaints.

Then one morning when he opened up his shop he was horrified to find the front window had been smashed and all the peanut butter had been stolen.

115 He was angry.

"Who is the thief?" he shouted out loud, right there in the main square.

He then began knocking on all the doors.

"Who stole my peanut butter?" he asked over and over again.

120 I don't know," Charlotte said when he asked her. "But it certainly wasn't me." The others said the same.

Sol grew angrier and angrier. And then he reached the last house. The house that belonged to an old woman who was born before the era of names.

"It wasn't me," she said. "But I don't blame those who did it. Your peanut butter is the source of all our problems."

125 Sol felt an anger grow inside him. What are you talking about?"

"We are running out of peanuts. You have taken all the peanut trees and used them for your own purposes. You have put a very high fence around them." (This was true.) "And yes, there are other peanut trees, but not many – and now there are not enough to go around. By the time the villagers have paid for their peanut butter they are broke. No one ever used to be broke."

130 Sol was hardly listening by this point. He was too busy losing faith in humankind.

What if there is a way, he wondered, of watching everyone all the time?

So here is what he did. He built a watchtower. He stayed up all day and night, forcing his eyes open. When he could take it no longer, when his eyelids couldn't be kept open any more, he started to interview for guards.

135 With the promise of a free jar of peanut butter for every nightshift there was a ready stream of guards. Things worked for a few weeks. But then, one morning, Sol saw that the peanut butter shop had again been raided, after the guard had fallen asleep. So Sol walked through the land that used to be the forest and thought about how to make the village understand. The first part of making them understand would involve stealing something from each of the

140 villagers.

So that night, at three in the morning, he and a few of his most trusty guards went out and stole items from every single house - simple items such as bowls or spoons or chairs or paintings of the lost forest.

Then the next day Sol's plan really got going. He held a meeting in the village square.

145 "Villagers, there is a thief in our midst. We must be vigilant at all times. We have been naive for too long. We must all watch our neighbours. We must never stop watching each other. No one can be trusted. Whoever catches the thief will be given a lifetime supply of peanut butter."

And so everyone left the meeting and went back to their homes vowing to watch each other and stay suspicious of everyone.

150 "Can't you see what is happening?" asked the old woman. "Can't you remember how it used to be? There was none of this."

But no one could see anything any more, because they were too busy watching. And the village changed for ever that day. Everyone watched each other for ever more. And the thief was never found.

155 Well, that is not quite true.

One night, Sol accidentally fell asleep in Sol's Peanut Butter Shop. He heard a sound. And woke up to see the place full of monkeys, each holding jars of peanut butter.

"The villagers were right. You really were scared of the jamba trees. Shoo! Get out!"

And the monkeys did get out, but the truth never did.

160 Because what good could that possibly do?