



Peanut Butter

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As girls, we sat on our swing set and ate peanut butter sandwiches. Slowly but surely, we made our way through the soft white bread as Gran watched us diligently from the window. The gooey texture made not smacking impossible. Dry bread and peanut butter cemented itself to our throats left our mouths dry like an Egyptian summer. Only a tall glass of milk could ease the constant need to swallow. Then we would be outside again, staring at each other through thin wooden slats, scaling walls, and fighting pirates.

Sometimes, when the sky danced from the heat, we sat under the ugly green tarp above the slide and made each other laugh. Not on purpose, we just loved each other so much and were so happy that even colors were funny. Her gap-toothed smile and tiny white teeth lit up the shade brighter than any sun, and her giggles shook us both so hard our bellies ached, and the world around us spun. Sometimes, if I looked at her just right, I could see the sunshine turn my baby sisters hair into liquid gold, and her brilliant eyes shine impishly with possibility.

By the time we had both started school, we were eating peanut butter sandwiches with jelly. Gran no longer watched from the window. The sweet grape goop made a world of difference and left our fingers sticky with glee. We didn't mind so much that the peanut butter still got stuck our throats. Instead of hiding from the sun, we ran toward it, shivering in the matching magenta jackets our mother had impulsively bought. As hard as we tried, there never seemed to be enough sunlight in the day.

Eventually, I outgrew the playset. Sprouting up six inches in one season meant that not only were my pants too short and shoes too tight but that squeezing under the tarp left no room from laughing.

“Don’t worry,” She told me, her smile still gaping. “We’ll just find somewhere else to play.” We tried the stairs, wedging ourselves against the wall, and moved our Barbies from one floor to the other. And then her bed, stuffed full of toys. The railing on the side was the only thing that kept it all together. It wasn’t the same, but neither of us had the courage to admit it.

At school, I found friends of my own to play with; only instead of dolls, we crammed ourselves into our parents’ desk chairs and watched YouTube until our eyeballs hurt. All the while, my sister ran around the yard in circles with her friends, taking turns on the rope swing and jumping from the ramp. Eventually, her voice echoed through the hallways of our home in the mornings, talking to a camera as she made videos of her own.

When I was in high school, we ate peanut butter with a spoon. Scooping mounds of the smooth, slightly sweet substance, off with our fingers and smearing it on to the roofs of our dogs’ mouths. Their bright pink tongues moved frantically, and we fell to the floor laughing, and it was almost the way it used to be. But we both knew the only time we spoke was during the few minutes it took to drive to school and back.

Her eyes didn’t light up the way they used to. I knew the gaps from her smile had been closed with braces but didn’t see it often enough to remember what it looked like. She laughed, but never with me.

When I came home from college, we ate peanut butter in our oatmeal. The Nutella our mom mixed in changed the texture, there was no need to smack, or compulsively lick the roofs of our mouths. Yet, the reality of what we had become stuck itself in the back of my throat. I had crafted a sweet illusion that she was fine, and nothing had changed. But in reality,

Giggles had been replaced by empty looks.

Her eyes held the fatigue of a thousand childhoods.

Silence left my head spinning,

The truth was too hard for me to swallow.