Help from the Neighbors

A Short Science Fiction Story

By Maryanne Peters

It was obvious to Simon Gartside that the Smithanders has chosen to live at the end of Caughley Street for privacy. There was a gulch on one side and there was only a high fence to Simon’s house on the other, and an equally high fence at the back where Patrick Doak lived. But in happier times Simon and his wife Hannah had considered it a duty to make the new arrivals welcome, so that had called by.

The Smithanders were strange, and they described themselves as “foreign”. Simon even joked with Hannah after the first meeting that they “seemed to be from another planet”. As it turned out, that was true, although he had said it in humor.

He discovered the truth by sheer accident. The had added to the small workshop out the back so that it came up right to Simon’s and they had been carrying out work inside which generated a magnetic field which had pulled all of the nails out of that part of the fence.

After some attempt to invent an explanation John Smithander simply decided to confide in Simon and ask him to respect their privacy.

“We are simply visitors to your planet,” he told Simon. “We are here to study the lifeforms and to report for science. We have no interest in coming here to conquer earth or to interfere in any way. We are only scientists. We are studying by immersion in your society. We have almost finished our report and w will be leaving shortly. All we ask is that you tell nobody. If you will keep our secret, then we will be very grateful.”

Simon just nodded. It struck him that there were two possible explanations. First, they really were aliens in which case they had chosen to trust him rather than kill him, so perhaps he should leave them be. Or, they could be crazy, but likewise they meant him no harm so perhaps don’t interfere. Either could be true, but Simon had no time to fully consider either. He had other things to worry about.

The afternoon of the fence incident and the strange meeting, Simon learned that Hannah was very sick. She had suffered from glioblastoma before, and a tumor had been removed just after the birth of Jade, their daughter, a younger sister to Jasper. But the cancer was back, and it was deep in the brain and growing quickly.

Brain cancer comes in many types, but glioblastoma is a killer unless it can be removed. And as it grows it shuts down sections of the brain. Hannah would slowly lose her motor functions and her cognition and pass into a coma.

Wanted to shave off her beautiful hair, regrown since the previous operation, but Hannah refused. She said “Leave me as I am until you have a solution. No probing. No chemotherapy. No radiotherapy. Nothing unless you can tell me it will cure me.”

But the truth is that there was no cure. As the lead neurosurgeon said – “There is nothing that medical science can do for you, Mrs. Gartside. Nothing within our technical capacity anyway.”

The words must have burned into Simon’s mind, because he was to recall them days later when she had passed into a coma and he was squeezing her hand and talking to her, trying to get some response. It seemed to Simon that the problem was technical capacity, and that medical science was insufficiently advanced to help his beautiful wife. But what about the Smithanders? They were advanced enough to travel across the galaxy. Could they cure her?

He decided to visit them. The man who called himself Dr. Smithander was in the backyard repairing the fence somehow.

“I am grateful to you for keeping our situation to yourself, Simon,” he said. “Because of that I would like to help. Perhaps we could visit your wife and talk to the doctors about it?”

Simon was desperate. He was going to take Jasper and Jade in to see their mother and try to explain that she would never be coming home, but he asked that his neighbor accompany them.

Dr. Smithander was able to engage in conversation with a neurosurgeon and convince him that he was a proper person to review the data, just as a favor to Simon as a family friend. While he did that Simon sat with Jasper and Jade as they looked at their mother and cried.

He felt a very cold hand on his shoulder, and he turned to face Dr. Smithander.

“Things are not good for Hannah,” his alien neighbor said. “But there is one possibility. How far would you go to see your wife live, Simon? Would you give up your life to let her live?”

“In a millisecond,” said Simon. “The children need her. I am only earning an income, and with insurance that is assured. Children need a mother.”

“I understand,” said Dr. Smithander. “The problem is that we cannot bring back dead tissue.”

It never occurred to Simon what he was talking about, and he did not even bother thinking. He was in grief and desperation. All that he could do was to implore this man from outer space, to do whatever he could.

Perhaps it was in that moment, or later but with no specific memory of when, but for a moment that world went black. The next thing that Simon knew, he was in bed, and the neurosurgeon was standing over his bed.

“Hannah, can you hear me?” the doctor was saying. Simon turned his head to see whether he was lying next to his wife being spoken to. It seemed that he might be. Her honey blonde hair was on the pillow, but where was she?

“She seems to have recovered consciousness,” the doctor said. He was talking to others. Several people were standing around the bed.

“I thought that she was supposed to be brain dead,” said another, a young man in a white coat standing behind the doctor Simon knew.

“What is happening?” said Simon. But it was not his voice.

“Incredible,” said the doctor. “Can we just check motor function? Can you squeeze my hand? Can you wiggle your toes? Do you know where you are?”

“I am in hospital.” Again, it was him speaking, but not his voice.

“I have always avoided using this word, but this is a miracle,” said the doctor. “It appears that all tumor in your brain has disappeared. And you clearly have both cognitive and motor function. You are alive and well, Hannah, but sadly I have to tell you that your husband is dead. Apparently, a brain aneurism, right here in hospital. There was nothing that we could do. I am sorry for your loss.”

As he listened to the words, he realized what had happened. Dr Smithander had asked “Would you give up your life to let her live?” and he had said yes.

“Do you have a mirror?” the patient asked. Simon wanted to see her. He wanted to be sure that she was alive. He didn’t matter. She did. And there she was, touching her face with her hand with a total look of disbelief. But then her hand shot up almost involuntarily to smooth a well-shaped eyebrow.

It did not sink in until a little later that it was Hannah that was dead. Her soul was gone even as her body remained. He worshipped her body, but he had fallen in love with her soul, and it seemed that was no more. A tear escaped.

A nurse standing beside the bed offered a tissue, with the words – “It is a terrible thing to lose somebody that you live.”

“Yes”. Simon was thinking of her. But only for a moment. The next words were not his. “Where are my children. I need to get home.”

To his regret in moments when he did, Simon rarely thought of his children, so this must be her. Somewhere inside was a maternal instinct, and there might be more. “We cannot bring back dead tissue”, Dr. Smithander had said, but only part of her brain was destroyed by the glioblastoma. There was hope.

“We should really keep you in for further observation,” the doctor said. “We don’t know what we are dealing with. We have the scan from yesterday, and the brain function tests, and then we have the data from today. This is truly remarkable. We should study this first.”

“I am not a guinea pig, I am a mother,” the impatient patient snapped. That was definitely Hannah. It warmed Simon.

“We cannot keep you here against you will.”

“Good,” said Hannah, but Simon added – “Perhaps I could come back to see you in a few days?”

Hannah’s clothes were brought to her, and it was she who sat down on the toilet and changed into her clothes, slipping on the bra automatically, and the dress, and applying a little makeup. It was all foreign to Simon, but he was happy that she was still here, the woman he loved still alive, but with his intellect – his rationality. It was no bad thing.

Hannah had left the children with her friend Abbie as she headed to hospital, and she greeted her as she always did.

“I can’t believe it,” said Abbie. “You look so well. Where is Simon?”

“It’s a tragedy, Abbie,” said Hannah. “Just as I recovered, he died. It was like the shock killed him of something. Something exploded in his brain …”. And then Simon seemed to add for clarification – “A cerebral aneurism.”

But Hannah was keen to hug her children and get them back home, and bathed and into bed. They shared a moment, looking at pictures of Simon and talking about “how best to remember Daddy”.

They were young and confused about death, but then so was Hannah and so was Simon, or were they the same person? It was not as if there was conflict. She did her things, seemingly without much thought at all, and Simon was left for the moments when there was nothing left to do. He was curious as to which parts of the brain had been lost? And how the parts of his brain had been used to fill the holes? And what had happened to the cancer.

When the children were asleep, it seemed that the time was right to visit the neighbors.

The fence had been repaired so the route to the front door was from the street and up the driveway. No lights were on. There was no response at the door. There was no sign of life. There was no vehicle parked in the garage to be seen through the side window. The place looked deserted. It looked as if the Smithanders had left.

Simon watched in the mirror as Hannah prepared for bed, brushing out her hair and applying her face cream. She was beautiful. Too beautiful for him. But now she was alone.

She did not seem depressed. He thought that whatever part of her that remained must feel comforted by his presence. How could she e alone with his consciousness ever present. They were together in the way that no other couple could be. They slept soundly.

It the morning the children were ready for kindergarten. It was an established ritual and Hannah was being Hannah. People had heard about Simon. She was somber but stoic. Life had to go on. There were the children to think of. The whole thing was so sad. She was well and he was dead. Who would have thought?

She got back to the house and did all the things that she would do.

The doorbell rang. She checked herself in the mirror in the hall. She was happy to deal with whatever awaited her. She opened the door. On the porch stood Patrick Doak, the other neighbor – the one from behind.

“I have just heard,” he said. “I can’t believe it. You look great. I mean, I thought that I was going to lose you. And Simon? Dead?”

He had stepped inside, She let him. Simon was present and confused. What was going on? He was going to lose her? And then he felt Patrick Doak’s strong around his slim waist and the man’s hot breath on her face.

“No, Pat! No.”

“Is it too soon, Darling,” said Pat. “We don’t have to tell anybody until some proper time has passed, but this changes everything, doesn’t it. I mean, I liked Simon. Well, I didn’t really know him, but he was a nice guy. I know that is what made it hard for you. But now, or very soon, we can be together, the way we wanted to be.”

He hands were on Pat’s chest pushing him away. It was what Simon wanted. He was in shock. He needed time and space. Everything had changed. He thought that he knew his wife, but now it seemed that he never had. This had been going on for God knows how long? Unless the man is deluded?

But as if to rule that out, he felt the aching need to have this man, Patrick Doak, make love to the body he had adored. It was a feeling that was too deep to dig out and discard, and too strong to exist.

Hannah threw her arms around Pat’s neck and kissed him like a woman possessed.

Patrick knew the house as he knew her body. With practiced skill Hannah was naked and lying on the marital bed, and Pat was naked to, and rampant.

They did not need to say anything. The heat of their bodies screamed at one another. This was passion beyond anything that Simon had ever experienced. He was nothing but a bystander, watching the launch of a rocket from less than an arm’s length way.

He looked up and Patrick was entering his body with a huge part of his own, and there was nothing that could be done.

And as Pat bucked and groaned and spurted, Simon Gartside finally gave up his life, but in a moment of pleasure that would linger on until both of them had left this world.

And the Smithanders had already.

The End

© Maryanne Peter 2022

Erin’s seed (she loves alien stories): “A guy moved to the suburbs a few years ago and discovered that his next door neighbors are aliens … the guy keeps their secret … later his wife gets sick she goes down hill fast, and he knows she is going to die - they've tried everything so he finally goes to his neighbor and says – “is there anything you can do to help my wife” - they have kids and he doesn’t want them to end up without a mother. The aliens agree to do something to help but they are vague … in the morning he wakes up hungover and identical to his dead wife, and the aliens have moved out.”