More Than Just My Neighbor

by Lauren W.
My friend Jemma tells stories about her neighbor Anthony. Anthony is a policeman and has shaken hands with the president. My cousin Lucas has introduced me personally to his neighbor Lila. Lila can captivate us for hours with her dramatic tales of being a Broadway actress. My neighbor’s name is Bert. Bert is a retired bus driver.

So I was less than thrilled when my mother thrust a brown box at me and said, “Deliver this to Bert.”

Everything about Bert is boring. His small round face, his little spectacles that hide his cloudy gray eyes, even the patch of gray stubble on his chin.

“Even his house is sort of boring,” I mutter as I approach the squat brick home. His yard hadn’t been raked like all the other yards on the street. Only his living room window was new because he had just had it replaced after a neighborhood boy broke it.

I rap on the door. “I’m coming. Hold your horses!” Bert opens the door and grimaces. “What do you want, Ava?” he wheezes. He looks almost disappointed to see me. Like he had been expecting someone else but got me instead.

“Mom said to give this to you,” I say, and I invite myself inside. I set the box and myself down on a rocking chair.

The interior of the house is old-fashioned and looks like a parlor from the 1920s. But maybe the old man is from that time period. I admit I don’t know how old Bert is. Bert is rifling through a stack of mail. Nothing seems to excite him much in the letters, and he scowls at them.

“Sit there while I get a letter opener,” he growls at me. Once he’s out of the room, I feel obligated to look at the mail he ignored. I do what I always do when faced with a serious job. Pull my hair back in a ponytail and shove a stick of gum in my mouth. I look through the letters, glancing towards the stairs every so often to make sure Bert isn’t coming.
“Bills, bills, ads, oooh free coupons!” I pocket the coupons and open a colorful envelope with an eagle stamp on it. Inside is a card written in loopy cursive. It explains that the writer can’t visit Bert on his birthday because she got a big promotion at work with a lot of meetings to attend to, and she apologizes. That’s probably what the box from mom was for. It’s Bert’s birthday! I’m about to slip the card back in when I turn around and gulp. The birthday boy is staring right at me, with my hands on his mail.

I brace myself for a wave of shouting, but it doesn’t come. Actually, is that a tear behind those glasses?

“It’s the same story every year. Big promotion, meetings, huge project, opportunity of a lifetime. My own sister hasn’t visited me once since we were kids. I don’t know where she is or how she’s doing and I’m starting to think she doesn’t care about me anymore,” Bert pours out. He collapses on the sofa and puts his head in his hands. As heartbreaking as this is, I’m kind of uncomfortable seeing a grown man cry.

I want to do something for this poor old man with no family left to visit him. The next thing out of my mouth is hard to say to someone you’ve made fun of secretly and avoided all your life.

“Don’t be upset, Bert. Have dinner at my house tonight. We’d love to have you.” The smile that grows on his tearstained face makes it all worth it.

I rush home to find my mom cooking a delicious-smelling dinner.

“We’re having a dinner guest!” I declare to her.

“What’re you talking about, Ava?”

I quickly explain what happened at Bert’s house. Mom isn’t happy, but she hands me a broom and I set to cleaning our home. Some spots are dark with dirt and you can’t see out of a couple of windows, but I manage to clean the whole house. The doorbell rings just as my mother finishes scooping mashed potatoes onto the spotless china. She runs to the door and greets Bert kindly.
“Hi Bert! Ava is so happy to have you over. Happy birthday!” she says. Mom helps him through the doorway. There is a bit of softness in Bert’s grunted response to her greeting.

We laugh, and talk, and eat. I learn things about Bert I never knew. For example, he won an award for exceptional service to his bus passengers. It’s like I’m meeting someone new.

So you think you have the best neighbor? You haven’t met my neighbor Bert.