

# Phillip Next Door

Farmhouse in the City,  
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By Doug Cogburn

Once upon a time there were three little girls: Jessica, Lillie, and Lydia. They lived with their Mom and Dad in an old farmhouse that used to be in the country but now was in the city. They had a big yard with birds and squirrels and rabbits and a dog named Spice T. Dog and White Socks T. Cat.

A long time ago, when they had moved into the house, Jessica was the only little girl there. She didn't like being in this strange place and kept saying the first night that she wanted to go home. She was still very little. Soon Jessica and Mom and Dad started meeting their neighbors. One of the first neighbors they met was a little boy named Phillip Next Door. He lived in the white house across the fence with his Mom and his little sister named S. Her whole name was Esther, but Phillip next door always called her "S" unless he was especially mad at her.

The family first met Phillip Next Door when he and S appeared at the fence between the houses and said they were selling tickets to a show they were going to put on that evening. It was going to be a big event, with jokes and skits and a magic show. Phillip Next Door said that he might be a magician when he grew up. The tickets were only a quarter each and there would be refreshments; soon the evening's entertainment for the family was set as Mom paid for the three tickets.

Phillip's Mom was surprised when the family showed up in her backyard that evening. She'd known that Phillip Next Door and S were going to put on a show because they'd sold her a ticket and had been hanging up sheets and setting up tables and chairs and making koolaid and putting out cookies. She didn't know that they'd gone all around the neighborhood trying to sell tickets to the show. She was relieved to find out that the new neighbors were the only ones who'd actually bought any. Phillip Next Door and S put on their show. It was a rather elaborate effort, with special effect lighting that Phillip had rigged up all by himself. "He's always coming up with something," his mother said between acts, "you never know what he's going to make or invent or rig up next."

Dad and Phillip took a liking to each other. Dad saw in Phillip the same misunderstood creative genius that he liked to think that he had and Phillip saw in Dad a grownup who actually encouraged him to use his creative genius and told him that it was a good thing to come up with projects and special ideas. Phillip Next Door would call on Dad for help with those projects and

special ideas that his mother didn't always seem to understand. They might be over at Phillip's cutting out glass to fix an aquarium or plowing up a patch for a garden or planning out a water pond that involved Phillip's Granny and her truck hauling about ten ton of river rock and dumping them out in the backyard.

One of Phillip's favorite projects involved doing something mean to S. One of his more creative projects was boobytrapping S's toothbrush. He let it sit in hot peppers so she would toast her teeth when she tried to brush them. S came over later and told Mom and Dad about the toothbrush and how mean Phillip was. They both agreed that she was an abused little sister. Dad didn't bother to tell her that it was his idea and that he'd given Phillip the hot peppers.

Another of Phillip's projects was his school bus. He took the wheels off an old wagon and put them on a piece of plywood. He then added a red caution light to the back and hitched a little red wagon with boxes to carry around all the things they might need. Then he gathered the neighborhood children and he and S hauled them around the driveway and level parts of the neighborhood.

As Phillip got older his projects got more elaborate, such as the bunkbeds he built for the two little stepsisters who moved in when his Mom got married again or the outdoor stove and oven he made out of an old backyard grill or the eight-foot-long picnic table he made out of scrap lumber.

Also, Phillip stopped asking Dad for as much help and advice, and Dad started asking Phillip for more. Whenever Dad would start thinking about a project he would tell Jessica and then Lillie, "Go see if Phillip Next Door is home." Dad wasn't as handy as Phillip Next Door when it came to actually doing work. He could come up with ideas, but he couldn't always make them work unless Phillip Next Door was around. But Dad did manage to build a double closet with a window seat for Jessica and Lillie when they shared a bedroom and he didn't have any help. And it was nearly three years before both closet doors fell off.

With three new people in the white house, it got crowded and one day Phillip Next Door and his family moved into a bigger home across town. A variety of people lived in the white house across the fence over the next few years, and none of them really satisfied the neighbors. There were the young boys who liked to have parties and play loud music. Then there were the neighbors who were old and didn't like for Jessica and Lillie to come in their yard. Then there

were the neighbors who had a huge dog who liked to stand in the front yard and scare the ladies who walked in the community. The neighbors had put up an electric fence, but the dog was so big he could step over it. The dog liked to stand at the fence and wait for the ladies, especially the older one who was short because he could just stand flat-footed and look her straight in the eyes. Then he'd step over the fence and watch her run instead of walk. These were also the neighbors who moved and left the Momma cat and kittens that started the Cogburn Cat Collection that eventually numbered twenty-one or so wild cats that ate birds and squirrels and only pretended to be friendly whenever they could get cat food. They thought that they would get cat food whenever the back door opened and when they heard the door they'd come running and start meowing and the back stoop looked like the back alley at a tuna fish factory and you couldn't walk into the yard without wading through a sea of tails and whiskers.

Phillip Next Door had grown up and graduated high school and gone into an electric and general purpose handyman business. He gave Dad one of his cards, but Dad said that he thought he'd wait and see whether Phillip burned down anybody's house before he did any work on the farmhouse in the city. One day Jessica and Lillie came running back from the white house in a state of excitement. It wasn't that unusual for Lillie to get excited, but it was different for Jessica to be that way. "Guess who our new neighbors are going to be!" they shouted when they got to the edge of the yard, "Phillip Next Door said that he's moving back in there himself!"

Phillip Next Door did indeed move back into the white house across the fence. He was taller now, and had a moustache that you could actually see, but otherwise, he hadn't changed much. He immediately started working on various projects around the house, painting this, redoing that, talking of rebuilding his backyard fishpond that Dad referred to as "Phillip Next Door's Mosquito Farm." He had started cleaning out the fencerow between the houses, but Dad told him that wasn't a good idea: "That's where the little birds like to live," which didn't make much impact on Phillip Next Door, "besides, that's the only thing blocking our view of each other and I don't want to see you walking around in your bloomers and I don't think you want to see me walking around the kitchen in mine." Phillip stopped cleaning out the fencerow and found another project that needed doing.

At one time he even spoke of jacking up the whole house and building a new ground level underneath the old house. Dad didn't think much of this idea, either, especially when he found out that Phillip was planning on having him help work the jacks. The only other bad idea Phillip had

was parking the school bus he was driving for the county in the back field next to Mom's flower beds. It rained, the bus sank to the bumper and the school department had to send a tow truck.

Relations between the farmhouse in the city and the white house across the fence were pretty much the same as always. When Phillip got an idea for a new project he'd send for Dad to see what he thought about it and if he had any books on the subject. Dad started his projects by sending the children to see if Phillip Next Door was home. He'd come over and look at what Dad had done, say "Oh, my goodness!", then make Dad hand over the hammer or saw or drill so he could take everything apart and start over. Since Phillip never burned down a house with his electrical work Dad started using him for all such jobs around the house.

Mom liked having Phillip Next Door back home and would often call him up and ask if he had a hot date (he didn't) or what he was doing for supper. If he wasn't working on a job, he'd be getting ready for a meeting at his church so he'd be planning on having something like a can of mustard greens or, for an especially rare treat, cooking a frozen pizza or T.V. dinner. She'd invite him over for real food and he'd usually hurry right over. If he didn't have time to stay and eat, she'd send him a plate to warm up for later.

Most of the time he'd find the time to stay and eat and pronounce everything delicious. It was almost worth the after-dinner entertainment when Lillie would appear with her violin or Lydia would burst in wearing her dance clothes and Phillip would be told he had to watch the show they were putting on. Phillip would try to escape, but Dad would tell him, "At least their shows are free, I used to have to pay a quarter to watch you." The girls would play and sing and dance and introduce each other, and everybody would applaud, which only encouraged them to do more.

Jessica didn't participate in the shows. By now she was too old to even stay and watch. Her last show had been a musical rendition of "George of the Jungle" starring her in an old Tiger dance recital costume as George, and featuring Lillie and Lydia as a whole cast of supporting actors and various jungle animals. The show took place outside on their trampoline and there was a second performance immediately following the first.

Phillip Next Door would have been too busy for the entire show. He would still have time to help Jessica and Brie with their homework that Dad didn't understand, like math, but he was always on the go. One day Dad remarked to Jessica, "Let's see, when Phillip Next Door was a boy he was always working a project around the house, playing with electricity, and taking you children around on that little school bus. Today, he's still working on projects around the house,

he plays with electricity for a living, and he's still taking children around in a big school bus. Things haven't changed much, have they?"

Phillip Next Door and Dad still managed to have an occasional adventure, such as the time they went to Johnson City in Phillip's van to pick up some lumber for landscaping projects. Phillip had a big van that he used for work. It was filled with all sorts of tools and wires and necessities and looked like a hardware store had sneezed. They hitched up a trailer to the van and came back with about a hundred 8- to 10-foot long 4X4's to use in various projects. As is typical of their different approaches to life, Phillip put his to use right away, sawing and nailing and soon had his project finished. Dad planned his out on graph paper and three years later most of his 4X4s are still piled up in the field waiting on him to get around to finishing his project. Dad claimed that a person can't rush into big jobs like that, but it seemed to everyone else that not only did he never rush into a job, he was usually in full retreat away from it.

Dad and Phillip Next Door had another memorable adventure. One year there was a screech owl in the neighborhood, and they both kept trying to see it. One evening Dad stepped out in back yard and made a call like the screech owl. To his surprise, the owl answered back. Dad started easing toward the fence, calling to the owl. When he got to the fence he found that Phillip Next Door had also eased over there and was looking up in the trees and bushes.

"Did you hear that owl?"

"Sure did, I've been calling to it."

"Me too, sounded like it was right around here."

"He must be close."

"Did you see him or hear him?"

"I heard him and then called back to him. He sounded like he was in your backyard."

"That's funny, when I first heard him he sounded like he was in your backyard."

They stood there and looked for the owl a little long, then Dad stopped and looked at Phillip, who was still staring into the evening sky.

"That wasn't the owl you heard in my backyard, that was me calling back to you!"

Phillip looked at Dad, then looked back at the sky. Dad looked at Phillip, then looked back at the sky. They decided they'd had enough owl watching for one night.

As Phillip Next Door moved into his twenties, he found more interesting things to watch than owls: he figured out what girls were. It was easy to tell when he had a date. He'd be all dressed up and he'd run up and down the road in his van in bursts of nervous energy that kept remembering something that needed doing and he'd blow the horn at the farmhouse in the city every time he drove by. Once or twice if nobody was outside, six or seven times if there was actually anybody around to wave back.

One day Jessica and Lillie and Lydia came running back from the white house in a state of excitement. It wasn't that unusual for Lillie and Lydia to get excited, but it was different for Jessica to be that way. "Guess what Phillip Next Door is going to do!" they shouted when they got to the edge of the yard.

"Jack up the house?," Dad ventured.

"No!"

"Open a can of greens for supper?"

"No!"

"Build the mosquito farm?"

"No! He's going to get married! She's over there now!"

Now it was Mom's turn to get excited. "Oh, how exciting! Is she pretty? Did you see her? When it's going to be? Where are they going on their honeymoon? How many children are they going to have? Oh, Douglas! Isn't this exciting? Oh, how romantic! Oh, how sweet! Oh, I can hardly wait! Tell me all about it!"

"So far you haven't given them a chance to tell you all about it."

It turned out the children had already told all they knew about it and Dad thought it was a bit early to get all excited. "Does Brie know about this and has she been to talk to him yet?" Brie lived on up the street but spent most of her time with Jessica or Phillip. Brie was a junior in high school and felt wiser than her years. She also considered herself to be the expert on Phillip's love life and took it upon herself to give him advice on who to see, who to break up with, and what to wear when he did either. Phillip didn't always listen, but that never stopped Brie from telling him. It turned out that Brie approved of Brandis, so the wedding was still on.

It was a short courtship and shorter engagement, and the day of the wedding Brie and Jessica were at Phillip's Next Door, helping him get dressed and spraying his hair and getting it to

stay in place and no doubt giving him advice on how to behave on his honeymoon. Mom went over to take pictures and to find out when and where the wedding was so she could take pictures there too. Mom didn't need much of a reason to take pictures, and for a big event like this she took two cameras. Finally, having been properly dressed up, slicked down, photographed, interviewed, and advised, Phillip couldn't stand to wait any longer, and he jumped in his van, shouting out directions to the church as he went, and he roared off toward Rogersville, blowing his horn wildly, bouncing up and down in his seat, and waving at nobody in particular.

Mom and Dad soon followed in their van, although they didn't blow their horn or bounce in their seats (except for Mom) or wave. They were actually early and got to watch Phillip and talk to him. He was still bouncing up and down, giving out directions, and waving at nobody in particular. He and Brandis got through the wedding without much difficulty except for having to repeat wedding vows that were roughly as long as passages from the Gettysburg Address.

Dad hadn't planned on going to the wedding reception since he didn't know very many people there and he was wearing a tie and button-up shirt that he wanted to take off, but after Mom went to the greenhouse, spent all his money and then announced that she was hungry and would have to be fed, he didn't have any choice but to take her back to the reception where the food was free. "We won't stay long," she promised, but he knew better than to believe that. Three hours later, after Mom had gone through line twice, tried to get Dad to dance, had at least one piece of every cake there, talked to everybody she knew or thought she knew, and used all the film in both cameras, she told Dad that he could take her home now.

Dad splashed some water in his face, went outside for fresh air, stretched his legs and was finally sufficiently recovered to be able to drive home. He wears out at parties quicker than Mom does. He and Mom came home, she collected the children, and they gathered back at the farmhouse in the city to wait on their next adventures at the white house across the fence with Brandis and Phillip Next Door.

