

The Key in the Room

By Jeffery Greb

When Abigail Partridge died, we all came together to help clean out the house. The house and yard were a chaos of trash and miscellany, and it was in all our interests to clean things up, so the once valuable property could be sold. During this venture, a key was discovered in a drawer in the master bedroom. It was a padlock key without a ring or any identifying markings, and after a cursory survey of the premises for anything it might fit, the key was eventually discarded.

Although we referred to her as Abigail Partridge her entire life, that wasn't her actual name at the time of her death. Years earlier she'd married Bobby McLandy, a ne'er do well far beneath the station of a Partridge, even in the declined state of the family. We knew Bobby had swooped in at a particularly low period for Abigail soon after she'd lost both her parents in a terrible accident, and in spite our general disapprobation, she took him in and they married in a sudden civil ceremony. But we could never think of her as a McLandy.

When Col. Partridge built Partridge House, it was a grand residence on approximately two acres of flat land in the fashionable district of our town. However, over the generations the town shifted, and the fashionable district moved with it. The Partridges persisted as before as the state of their immediate area slowly deteriorated. Perhaps it was their famous stubbornness. Perhaps they refused to acknowledge the shift in the town's values. Perhaps the family's decline was steeper than we knew. It took a while for us to notice that once white walls were now more than a little gray, that once immaculate camellias were now unkempt, but eventually the lowness of the family was clear to all who looked. We used to say "Proud as a Partridge" to describe someone more prideful than circumstances warranted, and that Partridge pridefulness stayed in Abigail to the end, long after it should have fled. Although the family diminished, they behaved as though nothing could be further from the truth.

Abigail was an only child, as if her parents realized it required all their effort and concentration to raise a Partridge in such non-Partridge circumstances. No great beauty and haughty and dismissive as a child, she grew into a woman of the same qualities. Her parents' death left her so distraught that we feared for her safety for a time. Partridge House fell into even more obvious decay, and Abigail could be seen at night through uncurtained windows wandering

from room to room, upstairs and down. Public appearances by her were rare and brief, and she frequently wore the same clothes for days or even longer.

The McLandys were notoriously inveterate drinkers and gamblers. When the use of illicit drugs became more prominent, they embraced that vice as well. They viewed their line as one of fiercely independent individualists with wills so strong and unbreakable that even the combined weight of society could not bend them and bring them to heel. To the rest of us, however, they were shiftless scammers constantly on the prowl for easy prey. Few were ever gainfully employed in a wholesome occupation and then only briefly. They worked very hard at not working. Their faces, with porcine, rapacious eyes, revealed their natures. Bobby's nature was not discrepant from the rest, but with strong features and a head of thick black hair, for some he exuded a kind of snake-oil charm and charisma. Among his ilk, he was something of a bon vivant. When he eventually disappeared from Abigail's life, we all saw it coming. McLandys were known for abrupt departures, usually one step ahead of the law.

We understood what may have attracted Bobby to Abigail – even a fallen Partridge offered more than a McLandy, and much meat could be gleaned even from such diminished bones – but we were mystified by Abigail allowing him to surmount her superior position. Perhaps she chafed at the lot life bequeathed her. Perhaps she longed to be free from the yoke of expectation clamped around her neck by her parents. Perhaps she craved the distraction offered by novelty. Whatever the reason, once he insinuated himself, we knew Bobby McLandy would be as difficult for Abigail to rid herself of as boll weevils. We did not recognize, however, her susceptibility to the McLandy influence over her Partridge essence. Perhaps that is why we continued to think and refer to her as Abigail Partridge even as her transformation into something more McLandy became increasingly apparent.

We began to notice Bobby McLandy's dusky, dented sedan parked at Partridge House with increased regularity. When it stayed for good, we were taken aback. When we learned of their nuptials, surprise turned to shock. We saw less and less of Abigail as the property descended ever more swiftly. Trash of various strains began to litter then pile up around the residence. Damaged household appliances could be seen in the yard outside the back entrance. A hulk vehicle with no doors and a missing hood mysteriously materialized. Windows broke and were not replaced; the first of these were filled by cardboard, but later they were left as gaping mouths as if the house itself could not believe what was happening. Strange rages emanated from

inside the house with frequency. Each time we saw Abigail, she appeared less and less herself. From her red-rimmed eyes, multiple open sores, weight loss, and the completely disheveled nature of her hair and clothing, we recognized she was in throes of some addiction. Whether it was methamphetamines or opioids or both, we lacked the expertise to know for certain. Her staggering, feral demeanor filled us with despair and caused us to look away. Truly, she was McLandy now, but we called her Partridge anyway, perhaps through an unspoken hope that one day she might shed this new persona for that of the old.

Things progressed in this manner for more than a year until suddenly such imprecations abruptly ceased. All about Partridge House grew quiet. Bobby no longer called on his known haunts, like Sherman's Pool Hall and Grier's Roadhouse. A neat part appeared in his black hair, and he tucked his travertine work shirt into his trousers. Ah, we thought, the Partridge has conquered the unconquerable McLandy, and when Abigail made an appearance after months of seclusion, we understood. She incarnated one day at the convenience market, her clothes clean, her eyes shining with their original luster, her aura of aloofness restored. Hair still wet and straight from washing, she purchased a loaf of bread and a carton of milk. When she departed, her gait was steady, albeit with a slight wobble due to her newly protruding abdomen. She was with child.

Our initial delight gave way to reticence. Of course, this change could not be sustained. And surely enough, one Thursday night Bobby was spotted back at Sherman's drinking beer and shooting pool with his old retinue. Abigail was no longer seen outside the house, but the rages from inside began anew. From the sound of things, the hostilities between her and Bobby grew more heated and violent, and we wondered how this could end any way but badly for her. When her presence was finally noted, it was clear she had lost the child. Eventually, the day came when Bobby was seen no more. His dilapidated sedan no longer blackened our streets.

As expected, Abigail fell into a dark downward spiral. We hoped she would find her way out of it, as she had managed before, or at least arrest her descent. We searched for an opening to talk to her about her one remaining article of value, Partridge House and the land upon which it stood. The vagaries of fashion were shifting again, and her district was beginning to gentrify. Selling her two-acre parcel could provide her with enough means to live comfortably, certainly at a level above which she had grown accustomed, for some number of years. But the opening never appeared, and we grew anxious as the gentrification drew closer to the sad, once grand old

house and its sunken, still proud occupant. During a cold snap in early spring, sheriff deputies performing a welfare check found Abigail Partridge on the floor in an upstairs room, her hands clenched before her like a tiny boxer, her face a grimace of rigor. She lay dead of a heart attack induced by years of maltreating her body with drugs.

And so we came together in a civic spirit to clean out Partridge House, to get a glimpse of what life was like near the end for poor Abigail, and to survey whether the tired old skeleton beneath the house's peeling skin could support renovation. Later, bids were secured, and the house sold. The new owners set about restoring the residence. They also split the parcel into separate lots and prepared to erect a new house in what had been wild immemorial, since the property now bordered a roadway nonexistent in the time of Col. Partridge that facilitated access to the rear lot.

During the excavation of the rear acre, one of the workman made a discovery that sent him scurrying for the foreman. His broken English fracturing even more in his excitement, the foreman went to look for himself, and then called the owners to receive further direction. The owners came to the site, and we followed along eager to learn the source of the excitement. The workman had been digging with a shovel when he encountered a piece of plywood slightly below the surface. This discovery in itself was unremarkable; the property was riddled with discarded objects. When the wood refused his efforts to dislodge it, however, he cleared it to the edges. The plywood sheet was a rectangle approximately five feet by three. Two hinges were affixed to one of the long sides, and a hasp with a padlock was affixed to the opposite. Inspection of the edges revealed the board to be a lid to a plywood box buried below the ground. The owners gave the order, and the lid was forced.

Inside lay what later proved to be the remains of Bobby McLandy, clotted with gore and decay, a portion of his forehead caved in, presumably by the steel hatchet next to the body. The odor released to the air by the prying of the lid was so foul and terrible that some of us literally staggered back, while others leaned bravely forward, eyes watering, fingers pinching nostrils tight. Eventually, we noticed what we came to recognize as a bloody t-shirt. Wrapped inside was the last of the Partridge line.