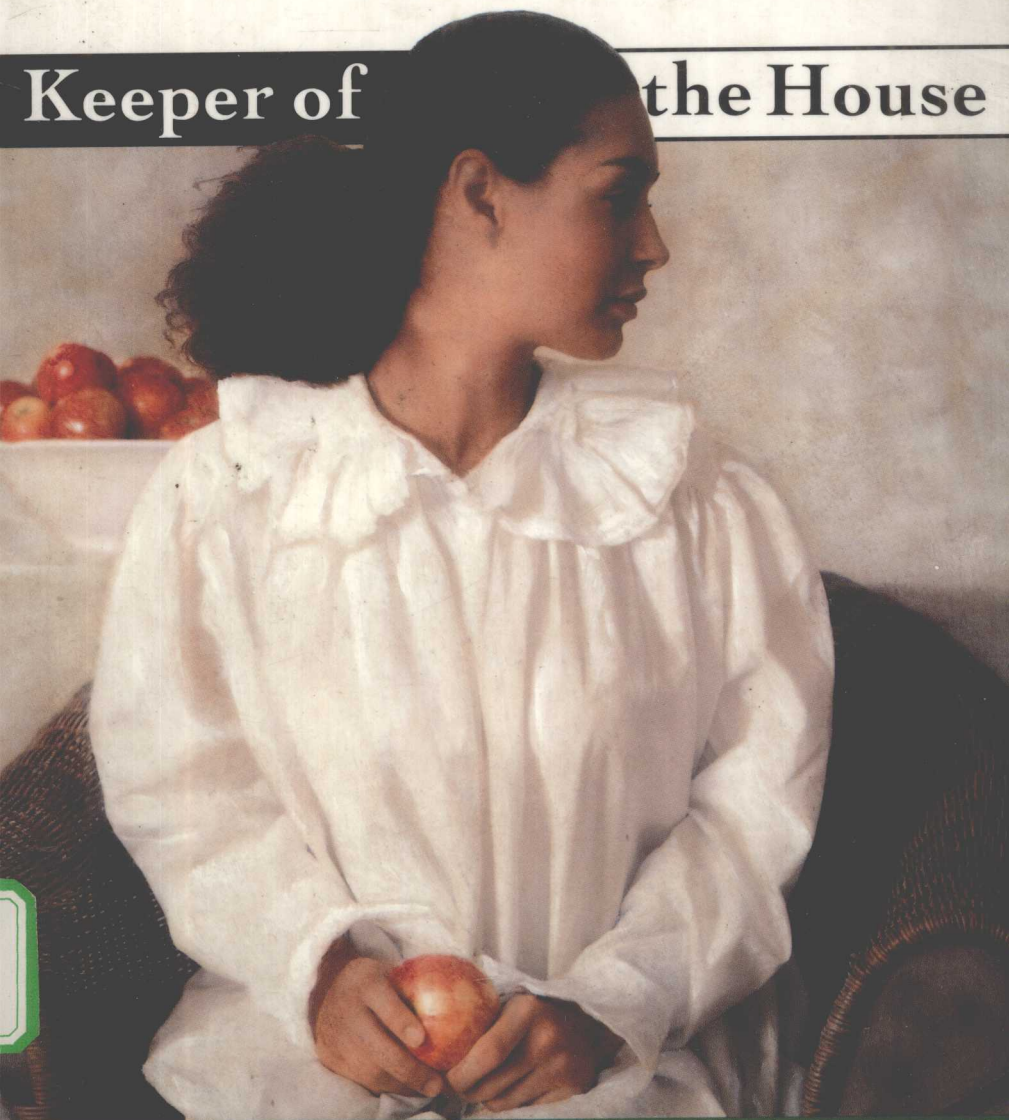


"A beautifully mesmerizing tale that will long be remembered.  
An absolute triumph."

—JILL McCORKLE

*A Novel*

# Keeper of the House



Rebecca T. Godwin

KEEPER  
*of the*  
*House*



*Rebecca T. Godwin*

St. Martin's Griffin  
New York



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Copyedited by Barbara Perris  
Design by Junie Lee

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Godwin, Rebecca T.

Keeper of the house / Rebecca T. Godwin.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-312-13529-7

1. Prostitution—South Carolina—Fiction.
2. Women domestics—South Carolina—Fiction.
3. Afro-American women—South Carolina—Fiction.
4. South Carolina—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3557.O3165K4 1995

813'.54—dc20

95-30213

CIP

First St. Martin's Griffin Edition: October 1995

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The author wishes to thank the National Endowment for the Arts, whose grant helped with the writing of this book.

Books are available in quantity for promotional or premium use. Write to Director of Special Sales, St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010, for information on discounts and terms, or call toll-free (800) 221-7945. In New York, call (212) 674-5151 (ext. 645).

## Author's Notes

While the characters and events in *Keeper of the House* are fictional, the idea for the novel was born of fact. Sunset Lodge, a world-renowned house of prostitution, existed on the outskirts of Georgetown, South Carolina, from the 1930s until the mid-1970s. Growing up near there, I became more and more fascinated by the notion of that house and that town existing side by side for all those years. It was not until about four years ago that the way to write about it came to me, in the person of Minyon Manigault. In deciding to let her voice tell the story, I was guided by the words of Eudora Welty: "What I do in the writing of any character is to try to enter into the mind, heart and skin of a human being who is not myself. Whether this happens to be a man or a woman, old or young, with skin black or white, the primary challenge lies in making the jump itself." (Preface to *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*, 1980.)

I have taken liberties with the Gullah dialect of lowcountry South Carolina, intending to convey the richness, music, and humor of the language while retaining its accessibility for people unfamiliar with its patterns.

In writing this book, I have been supported and encouraged by many. I thank my family first of all, from my husband Deane to my daughters Lissa and Carrie, my parents Bumpy and Carolyn, my sisters Lynn, Claudia, and Caroline, and an amazing extended family of around seventy or so, including Uncle Jim, who taught me that life goes on from here. Thanks to my writing and reading friends, especially Tracy, along with the Women's

Weekend bunch and many other Bennington supporters; Pinky and Page; Lisa and Jane; and still, always, Martha and Temp. Thanks to my ninth-grade English teacher Flo Hanold, wherever you are, and to Sammy Crayton, who sat with me in his Winyah Bay backyard and shared his wonderful stories. Thanks to the National Endowment for the Arts for support on this work and others to come. To my editor George Witte, my appreciation for your careful, good reading. And to Colleen Mohyde, my agent, boundless thanks for your feistiness, faith, and hard work.

PART I

*1929*

*Setting Up House*





## *chapter 1*



“This here’s the girl you wanting.”

Why I’m standing here in the smack center of my Gannie’s front room all bathed, combed, and Sunday-dressed up, I ain’t for the life of me know. Just goes along with how strange she’s acting lately anyhow, looking some elsewhere than in my eyes when she talks to me and keeping to her room more instead of right in the middle of all us like usual.

Now Gannie’s old hand pushes square in my middle back. I feel her sharp knuckles digging in, never letting up pressure, pushing me, pushing. My eyes’re shut so tight I got black and red swirls inside my head, with some yellow busting out now and again. I plant my feet hard on the floor against her pressure and study on the insides of my eyelids. I ain’t looking, I ain’t moving.

Sure can still hear, though. “Not much for looks, Missus, but she’s strong and quick,” says Gan. “Smart as all getout, too.”

My mouth drops open, then—can’t help it, on account of Gan ain’t exactly one to be passing out such compliments on her grandchildren. Fixing to whip my head round to see how she looks after telling those words, but then I hear that one voice,



floating on the air light as the perfume I been smelling ever since she and Sheriff Dawson came into Gan's house:

"Not really in the market for a looker, anyway, Mrs. Tucker."

Voice don't sound a thing like Mizz Gertrude's or her Yankee friends' who come to the big house to visit, which's the only white women I about ever heard. They got high, thin voices come out through they noses, sound like screechy birds. But this one says words like she's singing sweet, low music. And's calling Gan Mizz Tucker, which I never heard white folks do before in my life.

"How old is she?"

"Seventeen next month." Which rocks me down to my shoes on account of never hearing Gan lie before. Shocks me so I let up pressure a minute, I guess, because next thing I know, Gan's made me lose my hold on the floor and's pushing me forward where I got to open my eyes not to knock into something. I don't wide them up, though, just squint, and all's I see is white and red; but between the smell and the voice and the little bit I spy, I can't stand not knowing, so I open them all the way, to see standing before me the whitest white woman in the world, with a white dress on to boot, and red shoes and a red belt and a big white hat pulled down low over a long head of hair that's no color I ever saw or even dreamed of before—looks like the sun fixing to set, evenings. My mouth drops open, can't get a sound out. Scared soul-deep, like I'm seeing the devil, else the angel of God Preach's always talking about, coming to fetch me for my sins.

"What's her name?" She's asking Gannie, but looking at me the whole time, the ends of her mouth curling like she's fixing to bust out in a grin. Next her's standing a big old white man I know to be Sheriff Dawson, who's looking not at me nor anybody else, can't tear his eyes off that hair.

"Minnie," says Gan. When I hear that, inside my head comes a roar and my throat closes up like I'm fixing to choke. Feel like if I don't say it now, ain't gone be another chance, so I stand

myself straight up as I can get, though my knees's knocking some.

"No, Missus." My voice sounds like Willy the cat's first-thing-in-the-morning meow, all rough and razzy. "It's Minyon." And I ain't know where to put my eyes so I close them up again. But I got to finish.

"Minyon, like the very best cut of meat, Missus. Dark and juicy and expensive." Been saying the same words about my name long as I can remember, on account of Gan told me they the very words my mama told when she named me that, before she went off up north, same as all Gan's children, leaving me and Clarence and our big brother Jesse. "Minyon Manigault."

Her laugh rings like bells, makes me open my eyes back up. "Hope you're not too rich for my blood, Minyon Manigault."

She turns to Gan, and I squint through closed-up eyes to watch her lips move—looks like the inside of my baby brother Clarence's mouth, where the skin's shiny-wet and red.

"I believe Minyon here will do just fine, Mrs. Tucker." And for one second I don't think about what that might mean, just wondering how in the world I manage to do just fine for this fancy white woman.

She keeps looking at Gan. "Pay is two dollars a week." Behind me Gan draws her breath in sharp, like she's scared.

"And of course, she'll be fed and clothed, and so forth. Kept up."

"Take her with you now." Gan's voice sounds like some stranger's, rough and mean, makes my heart sink to my feet. "And don't be letting her visit none."

Too much for me. I turn on my heel to see Gan's face. Pinched and thin, like stone it looks, color and life draining out before my eyes. Makes me want to bawl like a baby, that pale stony face. How can it be that the one I figure to love me most in this world's gone shed me like old snakeskin, tell me to not even come visiting?

“Gan,” I cry, finally, that name tearing out my throat. But she only turns eyes away and stares at the door behind me.

“What’d I do, Gannie? How come you so mad?” She says not one word, just keeps looking past me, skinny self trembling like a leaf in a windstorm.

White lady tells me, “Get your things, Minyon.” I take a last look at my Gan, who just shivers and stares off.

A cold-as-winter wind blows through me. “I got nothing, Missus.” Which ain’t exactly true, I got some drawers and my day dress, but I don’t want a thing from here now, except for away from this old woman who don’t want me no more. Ain’t gone cry, neither.

I stand stick-straight and stare at the lace and frills on this lady’s dress, not at her face, on account of Gan says white folks don’t like us looking them eye to eye.

“What you want me to do, Missus?”

“I want you to call me Miss Ariadne, for starters. Or Miss Fleming, if you’d rather. And I want you to go get your things.” Something in that voice I ain’t even thinking about arguing with.

Not looking at Gan, I turn and walk down the skinny hallway to the room where me and Clarence and our cousin Farina sleep, along with Aunt Millie’s baby Christina, just got sufficient big to get out her crib. Right in the middle of my sleeping mattress is a squared-up bundle that I untie to see’s got my clothes and a toothbrush and a brand new comb, black and shiny, all put together inside the pale soft blanket Gan made me when I was a new babe, that I slept with ever since.

Out the one window of my room I see the dirt road runs through the mid of Little Town, the only place I ever lived from the time I was born, fourteen years back, right upstairs in the room Gan sleeps in; where my brother Jesse was born, too, and my mama and the rest of Gan’s children, and Gan herself; where our people’s lived since slave times, Gan says—her mama and daddy both belonged to the white folks that owned this plantation called Arcadia. That was back before we was free to come

and go as we please, she says. Now some please to go far away as New York, like my mama and her sisters, who don't come back but sometimes send a reminder of themselves, like when Clarence showed up with Lally's sister passing through, sent by my mama for Gan to raise up. Then there's those of us's stayed behind, who ain't tend to go much of anywhere, besides to James-ton some Saturdays. Got what we need right here, Gan says, no need to go looking for trouble some elsewhere.

So why's that woman set to send me off from the only place I know? My eyes fill, I can't help it, and I fall to my knees next to my bed, cover my face in this old blanket to keep crying in. Holding softness to skin, I think on Gan's softness, how she makes all her hard skinniness go round-edged when I crawl up on her lap—still do, big as I am—and she goes to rocking and crooning, singing sweet songs I ain't ken the words to, songs come all the way from Africa, she says. That's the soft side of my Gan. The hard side's the one keeps after us to read our lessons and never miss class where Mizz Ruby Kinross teaches us mornings, in our little church by the river Waccamaw; to tell the truth every chance we get, to stand up straight and proud, to be strong, especially in the face of what she names adversity. Trouble comes with the territory, Gan says. Never too early to learn that.

I tie this bundle neat once more and stand myself up again. Out the back window of this room's the loblolly woods that's been my ground, where me and Farina's played since we could walk, where Big Robert and Preach and the rest of the men work—now even Jesse—timbering the land for Mr. Waldo Carnelian, that rich Yankee who came down here and bought up all this land and woods and Little Town too, I reckon. Not us, though, Gan says. Not us, ever again.

"Min." Gannie's voice ain't sound a bit like her own, seem like's coming from deep inside a well, thin and hollow, and it strikes my heart hard as a pick. Holding my worldly goods before me, I walk back down the hall and stand straight as I can, keeping eyes right at frill level.

"Please go and get into the car, Minyon. It's out front."

"Godamighty." That just slips out. If Preach heard it, he'd cuff me good. So'd Gan, before. Now she says nothing.

But godamighty, I fixing to ride in a car. And for just a sec, that one thing makes me forget all else.

I don't turn to Gan nor change words—two can play at this meanness. My legs move me to the screen door and it slams shut behind me, makes our dog Mingo set up and take notice.

And here it stands, parked in the dirt of Gan's yard—the sheriff's car, named so on the side. I've seen it before once, when they hauled Junius off that time he cut Lutie wide open, her big as a watermelon with somebody's baby. Seeing that, I'm all a sudden wondering if I'm going to jail for something, and my head runs wild trying to think what; then I know not, on account of this particular lady's got nothing to do with jail. She wants me for something—what I ain't know yet—but it ain't jail.

So out I go and look that car over a minute. Fine looking, even though's some dirty. I ain't know the best way to get in, but the window's open and that seems easy and quick. And just as I clear it and go head first into the back seat I hear something, look over by the side of the house, and there's standing my brothers Clarence and Jesse and about six or eight other children. My cousin Farina's got one hand clapped over her mouth, eyes shining white at me. Rest of them's laughing and slapping they knees, except for Jesse. He's the biggest of the bunch, eighteen now, and the look on his face puts me in mind of a snake, eyes burning into my head till my breath comes short.

Then the screen door slams and out walks the white lady and the sheriff. Quick as spiders them children draw up tight together and push against the house where you can't hardly tell they there, unless you know where to look. But I see them—even Clarence's little burr head smack in the middle of the rest. Sucking on that thumb again, already got his teeth sticking straight out from his mouth. If I was over there, I'd slap that hand away, and he'd look up at me with those big browns, and grin. But who'll take care of that now?

The white lady gets in the car and turns herself around in the seat. On account of thinking about thumbsucking, I'm near to crying, eyes swimmy.

"If you don't want to come, Minyon, say so now." Voice's cool as winter marsh grass, ain't he. She looks at me and I look at Sheriff Dawson's ear on account of he's looking at her. "I don't have the time nor the patience for tears."

Blinking like crazy, trying to hold in. I turn my head back to the house a little. Can't see Clarence now, just a dark blurry circle of arms and heads by the side of Gan's house. Tall Jesse still sticks out, though. And through the screen door seem like I see the outline of Gan's head. While I watch, it droops forward like she's maybe studying on her hands, or the floor, or the ground beneath.

I look back at Sheriff Dawson's ear, it seeming a safer place to rest my eyes.

"No, Missus." Voice comes out croaky, but I sit with my back straight as a rod, how Gan taught me a long time since, and I blink, blink, blink. "Ain't gone be no crying here."

Then the sheriff's ear moves and my head's full all a sudden with the noise of this car—which, godamighty, *I am riding in*—and then we're moving on down the road, out of Little Town first, past the big house, then loose from Arcadia altogether, and onto the wide road.

And I ain't looking back.

## *chapter 2*



Don't know if's haints in this place or not, but might be, so I pull my knees way up close to myself and wrap my arms round tight. Preach says that's a sure-fire way to keep old ghosty haints out, nights—wrapping yourself up to where they can't find a way to creep in. That, or else keeping a pure heart, he says. So just in case, I grab a tighter hold of my knees and squeeze my eyes shut.

Never had a whole bed to myself before, much less a whole room, though this really's a porch. Still—to myself. I'm more used to fighting arms and legs all night, listening to Clarence's thumbsucking, or Christina's crying, or else Farina's teeth grinding back and forth, back and forth, else one of our cats stealing in and out the room, quiet and secret as haints. Else Jesse.

Not gone dwell on such, though.

Last night I was too tired to dwell on much of anything. It was dark by the time we drove up anyhow, after we left Sheriff Dawson in Jameston and drove out here in another car, big old black, rich-smelling one, must be hers. Never saw a woman drive before.

"You'll sleep here for now," she said, pointing to this bed.

Then out she walked, leaving me. I didn't even change words, just lay me down to sleep, holding my Gan's blanket close up to keep me safe and hoping not to dream.

First light, I woke like a shot, had next to no idea where I was. Saw the sun trying to shine through bushes, heard one dove calling sad and low to her babies, else maybe to her mate. Then I recalled yesterday, and Gan. Remembered car riding and how the sheriff's ear goes round and round like that big seashell Gan keeps the door propped open with.

Sadness swept over me like a wave; but in the meantime, my belly was growling about no supper the night before, and my head was saying I got to see where I am. Trying to keep both them quiet and hold that sad far off as I could, I got up for a look around.

My bed was pushed up against the house on a little porch with screen wire all round. Couldn't see out, on account of high bushes. Ain't much breeze getting through either, and already's hot as the hinges, still and piney-smelling.

Feet stepping light as they could, I crept round the bend of porch, and directly found another porch stretching wide and grand cross the house front. Still there's high bushes I couldn't see around, all the way to the door at the end, where the steps came up. Slipped myself down there, floorboards squeaking every step. Wasn't anybody anywhere.

The yard's big, with grass grown high as me, most. When I peeked round the corner of the house, I spied some shanties out in the side yard, round back. They're grown up, too—weeds climbing the sides like they looking to hide something ain't supposed to be there.

Peered through the window of the house, but even pressing my nose flat against it, it's too dark to see much of inside. Door squeaked fierce as floorboards as I opened it, but I wasn't about to quit now. Anyhow, my belly was making as much noise as the floor and the door put together.

Inside was a big dark room. Two windows, but still not much light—not much light anywhere round, far's I could tell. Room's



about big as Gan's whole house, though not much furnishings in it—one big old couch and a couple chairs. Smelled old and lonely.

I kitty-cat stepped through, into a long hall, dark as pitch, but with a light coming from a door at the back. Floor squeaks counted time with me. Seem like the house breathed round me—in, out, in, out—whining soft and steady every time I stepped on it. Made the hairs on my neck rise up.

Opening the door at the end of that hall, I was greatly glad to find a kitchen. On the table by one wall's a bowl with apples in. Ready to cry, I appreciated that so. Good and hard, too—first bite set the juices in the back of my mouth to squirting, jumping for joy. Gobbled that down fast and grabbed another, taking my time.

By the back door stood a tall white closet. When I opened the door, cold air rushed out at me. Icebox's what it was, but no ice in it; which beat all, but I was too hungry to wonder overmuch. Inside was a bottle of milk and a hunk of cheese, and when I held that bottle to my lips the milk was so cold and sweet going down, I thought to myself I'd made it to heaven without having to go to the pain and trouble of dying first.

Broke off a hunk of cheese and headed back down the dark hall. It's so quiet I was wondering if I was the only one round. Didn't seem near as scary with food in my belly, though.

Sat on one end of the big couch, gnawing on the cheese, letting each bite get soft and warm in my mouth so I didn't even have to chew. Old couch, looked like, but pretty cozy. My mind went wondering what my folks's up to over there in Little Town, Gan and Farina and those. Little bub Clarence, even Jesse. Balled myself up tight, and in a minute my eyes got blinking slow, and I reckon I fell asleep.

"Didn't come to this stinking hole in the wall to set up shop in a fucking fleabag." Heard a woman's voice, not much more than a whisper, but mean and bitter. Foul-talking. "Fucking tricked us, is what."

I stayed still as a turtle, opened one eye to a bare slit. Standing