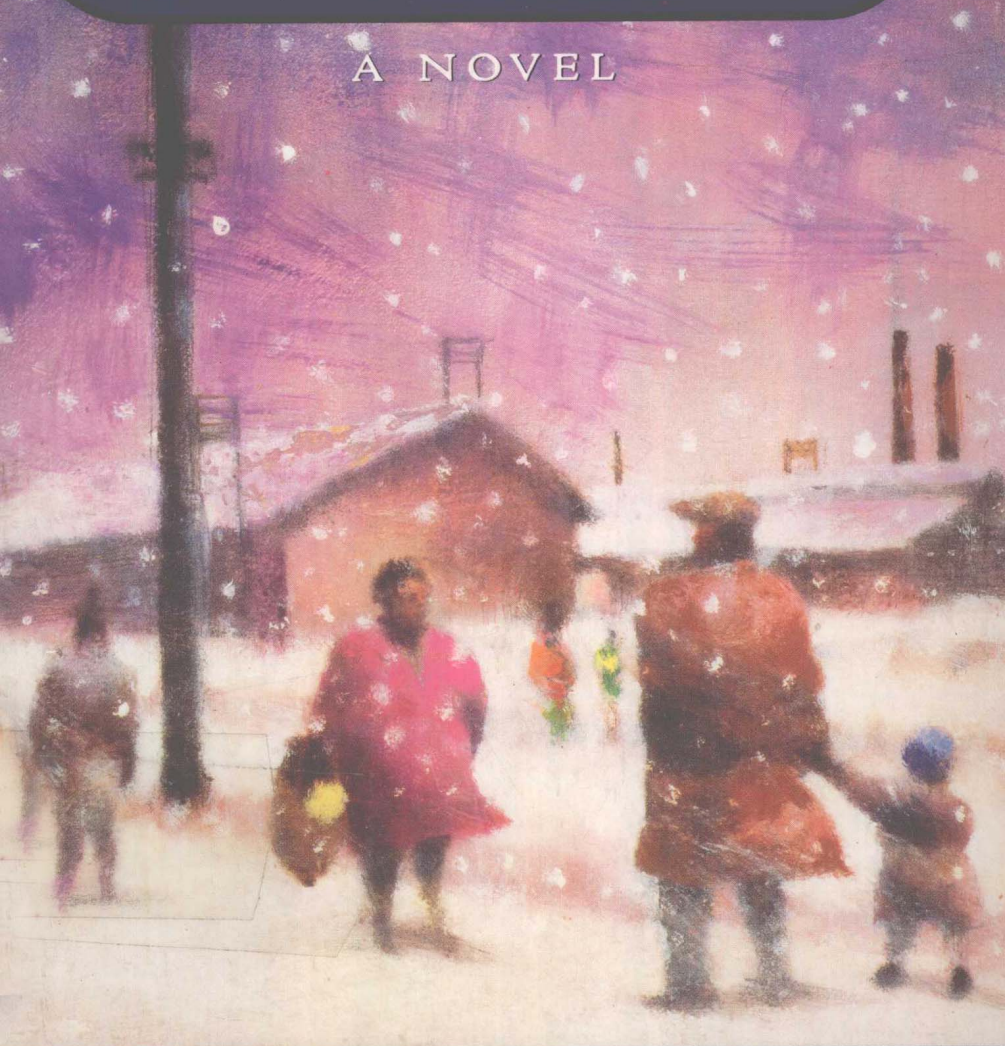


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ALL-BRIGBR COURT

A NOVEL



CONNIE PORTER

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ALL-BRIGHT COURT

CONNIE PORTER



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For Mama and Malcolm

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I want to thank everyone whose support and understanding I've had over the years: my eight brothers and sisters and the rest of my family; Mrs. Gist, Mrs. Drajem, and Mr. Soffin; Moira and Rodger for believing in me when I didn't believe in myself; and Freddie for his help. Thanks to Milton Academy for giving me the time and space to write this book, and to Lisa and Sid for *Seboyokani*. Above all, thank you Lynne, Ellen, Janet, and Larry. Without you this book would still be a dream.

1

ALIGHTING

AT EIGHT in the morning Samuel Taylor was eating eggs. There were three of them, sunny-side up, the yolks softly set. He had cut them up, and when he slid pieces of the slick whites into his mouth, yolk ran down his chin. He was making a mess, but he did not care. All the men, the steelworkers, who came to Dulski's ate like this. They were not kind to food. They sat at the counter, grunting, slurping, talking.

On the wall behind the counter was a sign: NO CREDIT, DON'T ASK! A frame containing a one dollar bill was next to it. Underneath the frame was a picture of Dulski on the day he opened the diner. He was holding the bill that was now framed. None of the men quite knew when the diner had opened. It seemed as if it had always been there, hunched in the shadow of Capital Steel. Dulski still looked the same. But the men joked that if you looked close enough at the picture, you could see that the eagle on the back of the bill was still inside its egg.

The years of frying had left a permanent film of grease on

everything in the diner. At least once a year the stove caught fire, and one or two of the men seated at the counter had to help douse it. No one would have been surprised to show up at the diner on any day and find it had burned down.

But the men kept coming. Though Dulski's smelled of rancid tallow, old fried onions, stale cigar and cigarette smoke, it was a place to alight, to stop on the way home or to work. Samuel still stopped in out of habit on his way back to All-Bright Court at the end of his shift.

As Samuel sat at the counter, a group of men came in, black men and white men. They came to Dulski's for breakfast and coffee and talk before they went home to their separate worlds. As they stomped through Dulski's door, they brought in with them the cold and snow swirling softly outside.

"Kennedy's going to take the election," one of the men was saying.

"I don't know," another said. "The union's talking about backing Nixon."

"Nixon, that bum!"

"That bum got us out of the strike last year."

"Get outta here. The U.S.W. can back who it wants. It's Democrat all the way for me, and Kennedy's going to take it."

"Hell, if they let them vote for him in Canada, he'll take that too."

"We're going to put him in, and then we're never going to let him forget it."

All of the men laughed.

"Damn right. He'll owe us."

"Bullshit," a wheezy voice called out, and the men became quiet. "The U.A.W. is going to put him in. That's where the power is," the voice said, breaking into a barking laugh.

"Yeah, but where would the U.A.W. be without the U.S.W.A." It was a statement, not a question. "It's the U.S.W.A. This country would be nothing without us, the brotherhood."

"Yeah, the brotherhood."

"Damn straight."

Samuel Taylor had first come into Dulski's two years earlier, fresh from Tupelo. He'd stood out front on the sidewalk, staring through the window in disbelief. Black men were sitting at the counter elbow to elbow with white men. They were all eating.

Just seeing the men had stopped Samuel cold, left him fluttering just outside the door, hesitant to enter, until one of the white men waved at him, inviting him in. Back home this would never have happened. Black and white men did not eat together, not there, not then.

They had not eaten together at the lunch counter in the five-and-dime where Samuel had washed dishes after he dropped out of high school.

He was a boy then. Both of his parents were dead. When Samuel was ten, his father had been struck and killed by a hit-and-run driver. Five years later his mother died, he wasn't sure why. All he knew was that she had female trouble, and she spent the last month of her life in bed, moaning like a ghost. Her sister tended to her. After his mother died, Samuel and his older brother went to live with their mother's sister and her husband.

"I'm not feeding ya'll" was the first thing the uncle said when the boys moved in. "We done raised our own, and I don't want you here."

The aunt shooed the boys into the back room, which was dark and smelled of kerosene. "He drinking. Don't pay him no mind."

The uncle meant what he said. The aunt fed them out of the money she earned as a domestic. She usually was not home at dinner, but she left a pot of beans or greens on the stove for the boys.

One night when Samuel's brother came home from shining shoes, he found that Samuel had already served himself from the pot. The brother looked into the pot on the stove, then into Samuel's bowl. Without saying a word, he punched Samuel in the face. He hit Samuel so hard that he knocked him off his chair.

"Who you think you is? Taking all the meat." He reached into Samuel's bowl and took Samuel's piece of fatback.

Samuel did not say anything. He lay on the floor, his nose bloody, his lip cut.

When he awoke the next morning, he found a quarter by his pillow.

Within the week his brother was gone.

"That make one less mouth for me to feed," the uncle said. "All we got to do is get rid of you," he added, nodding his head toward Samuel.

Samuel hated his brother, not for leaving, but for leaving him behind.

He did not know if his brother had gone north or if he had gone into the fields and sold his future for a handful of seeds. Young as he was, Samuel knew he would not trade in his dreams for cottonseed, dry and hard and borrowed. He would go north when he was older. It did not matter where.

Samuel knew what he knew of the North from men who had never traveled beyond the boundaries of their dusty towns, men who had spent their days sharecropping, bent over in fields of cotton. These men claimed word came to them from those who had gone. A brother, an uncle, a neighbor, a friend's third cousin.

It was true, word sometimes came, but more often they created it. As the men worked stooped in the fields, they changed the dirt that passed through their hands into flesh, breathed life into it, and proclaimed its truth.

"A colored man up north live like a king. My cousin live in Chicago, in a brick tower. Got running water. Gas heat."

"I knows a man what buy a new car every year."

"I'm a go north one day," someone would invariably add.

But one day never came for these men. They did not have one day to call their own, not yesterday, today, or tomorrow. They had borrowed against all the days of all their lives, and it seemed that even in death they worked in the blue haze of night, rising from the earth, their sacks on their backs, picking until dawn, until the light of day pushed them back into the ground.

If Samuel was going to escape their fate and make it north, he would need more than borrowed seeds. He would need money. He stopped going to school and began walking the streets of Tupelo looking for a job.

It was nearly a month before he found one, washing dishes at the five-and-dime.

Samuel had walked past the store before and had seen white people eating, sipping pastel shakes from tall glasses, artificial light bouncing off the counter, giving everything a heavenly glow. He had gone into the store only once before. When the quarter had materialized, he had gone in to buy candy.

It had been lunchtime. The stainless-steel counter stretched almost the entire length of the store. It ran right up to the front window, ending in a graceful curve. The stools were stainless also, topped with red padded cushions. On the wall behind the counter were pictures of meat loaf platters, burgers and fries, slices of pie, shakes. Each picture had

the price of the item written in a circle in the lower right corner.

There was a picture of a banana split, and in its circle was the price. Twenty-five cents.

Samuel had stood mesmerized, the warm quarter closed in his hand. A string of saliva dripped from his mouth and onto the polished tile floor. It broke his trance, and he quickly turned from the counter. He was going crazy. Thinking of sitting on a stool. Thinking that he had the right to eat there in the splendor and glow of the counter. He still wanted to buy the candy, but he did not know where to find it. Instead of looking for it, he left the store, went to the grocer, and bought sardines and crackers.

But the scene at the counter, its shining splendor, stayed in his mind, and he found himself in front of the store again a month later. As he stood there on the sidewalk he saw a black man wearing a white uniform turn into the narrow alley between the five-and-dime and the drugstore. Samuel followed him, and to his surprise the man turned to him. "They hiring," the man said.

Five black men worked in the kitchen. Four cooked, and one did the dishes. The manager, a young white man with a red butch, supervised them, and four white waitresses worked out front. Samuel was taken on as a second dishwasher. In addition to washing dishes, he swept, mopped, and put out the garbage.

He was a clumsy boy, breaking dishes, slipping and falling on the greasy floor. The men laughed at him. One of them, a cook with two gold front teeth, said, "You one of them boys going to follow the drinking gourd. I can tell you got your eyes turned north."

"Yes, sir," Samuel said, surprised and pleased that someone had taken notice of him. "I'm a be going north soon's I can."

"Boys like you be coming in here all the time. But let me tell you something. The way you be working, you liable not to make enough money to cross the street."

"Sir?" Samuel said. He was annoyed.

"Boy, keep your mind on your work. Watch what you doing, 'cause if you keep on this way, the closest you going to get to the North is in your dreams."

Samuel did not say anything, and he became more mindful of his tasks, but he decided he did not like this cook. Who was he, anyway, and what did he know?

But each day the golden-tooth cook, whose name was Parker Bell, would have a plate of food waiting for Samuel at the end of the day, after he finished cleaning. Parker made meals the likes of which Samuel had never seen. Each meal was a Sunday dinner, fried chicken, liver and onions, smothered pork chops. Samuel would reluctantly accept the platters Parker put before him. Though he ate from the same white plates the customers at the gleaming counter ate from, he ate standing by the sink in the kitchen, devouring his food like a starving animal.

One evening after everyone else was gone, Parker said, "Don't eat standing up. Food go right to your feet that way. Don't you know that?"

"Naw," Samuel said, his mouth stuffed with mashed potatoes.

"I believe you don't. You act like a boy ain't got nobody to learn you nothing. You a boy ain't got nobody to learn you nothing?"

Samuel glared at him. "You the one don't know nothing. I know enough to leave here. You won't catch me standing in no kitchen when I'm a grown man."

"Let me tell you something," Parker said. "You don't know your ass from your elbow. I ain't got to cook for you, boy. But I see you come here, a raggedy-ass boy, raggedy as

a bowl of sauerkraut. I see you boys coming in here. Dreaming. Dreaming. Them *my* dreams ya'll got in ya'll eyes. Ya'll daddy's dreams. Ya'll grandaddy's.

"We ain't made it. I ain't going to make it. Look 'round here," Parker said, waving a spatula. "This my life, boy. This how big it's ever going be. And let me tell you something. I chastise you 'cause I'm trying to teach you something. Think ya'll got dreams men my age ain't never had." Parker took off his apron and folded it.

A biscuit was swelling in Samuel's mouth. He watched Parker put on a thin cotton jacket.

"Put the light out when you finish, boy."

Samuel forced himself to swallow the pasty biscuit. He scraped the food left on his plate into the garbage can and washed his plate and fork.

When he went home, the uncle was sitting in the living room in the dark, listening to the radio. "Your aunt sleeping at work tonight. She be back tomorrow night," he said.

Samuel stood staring at him, his figure, the hole it punched in the darkness.

"What you looking at, boy?" the shadow asked.

"Nothing," Samuel said, and he went to his room and wept.

The next evening at work Samuel stood over the sink trying to finish up rapidly. He had not been able to bring himself to look at Parker all day. But when he was getting down to the last few pots, a hand slid a plate of food onto the drain board.

"Thank you," he said softly. He dried his hands on his apron, pulled up a stool, and sat down.

"That's better," Parker said. "Since you know how to sit down and eat, I might can have you over to the house sometime."

Parker invited him the next week, to church and Sunday

dinner. Samuel had one suit of Sunday clothes, the one he had worn to his mother's funeral. When he tried it on, he discovered it had shrunk. The pants and jacket were both too short. The jacket was too tight across the chest, and he could not get the pants zipped. He had his own money, so he dipped into his savings to buy a pair of pants, a new shirt, a new pair of shoes, all of which were too big.

Parker waited until dinner to comment on Samuel's clothes. "Let me tell you something, Sam. A colored man in the South got to know how big he is."

"That ain't right," Parker's daughter said. Her name was Mary Kate. She was a girl with skin as shiny and black and purple as eggplant. "It ain't right," she repeated, her voice rising. "We can't even try on clothes."

Samuel sat staring at her. The gold in Parker's mouth was not his only wealth.

"In the North a colored man ain't got to know his size. In the North a man can be as big as he want," Parker said.

"I hear you going north," Parker's wife said.

"Yes, ma'am," Samuel said.

"What your mama think? You still a young boy."

"I don't have no mama. No daddy neither," Samuel said flatly.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Parker's wife said.

"I'm going north too," Mary Kate interjected. Samuel looked at her and smiled. He was picking at his food.

"What's wrong with the food?" Parker asked.

"Nothing. It's real good."

"Well eat up, boy," Parker said.

"Parker," his wife said, "let the boy alone."

Samuel was too nervous to eat. He would always believe that he had fallen in love with Mary Kate on this very first day.

"You ain't going nowhere till you finish high school," Parker said to Mary Kate. "And you might not go then."

"We could all go, Daddy," she said, and then turned to Samuel. "My daddy got a cousin living in Cleveland, living real good."

"Columbus," her mother said. "And don't be bragging."

"We could all go someday," Mary Kate said.

"We'll see," Parker said.

Samuel began coming over to Parker's every weekend. For nearly two years he would come by on Saturdays and take Mary Kate to the movies, and he would have little gifts for her that he'd bought at the five-and-dime, candy, nuts, satin flowers, perfume. He even brought her two goldfish once. Mary Kate placed them in a shallow bowl on her bedside table, but when she woke up the next morning they had disappeared. At first she thought maybe they had turned themselves into birds and flown away. But when her feet touched the ground she saw them lying on the floor looking wide-eyed and surprised.

On Sundays Samuel and Mary Kate would go to church with her parents, and then have dinner. He first kissed her on a Sunday. They were hidden in the canopy of a peach tree in her back yard, supposedly picking peaches. Surrounded by the dark greenness, he discovered the insides of her cheeks were like cantaloupe, wet and soft and slick.

Parker knew the time had come for Samuel to leave, and as they were finishing up work one evening he said, "You slowing up."

"No, sir," Samuel said. "I'm the fastest dishwasher in Tupelo."

"Yeah, and if you keep it up, you can say that for a lifetime. I ain't talking 'bout your work, son. You sweet on my daughter, and she slowing you up."