

Continental Drift



Russell Banks

**"A GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL...
a lesson in history...It is the most
convincing portrait I know
of contemporary America."
James Atlas, THE ATLANTIC**

CONTINENTAL DRIFT

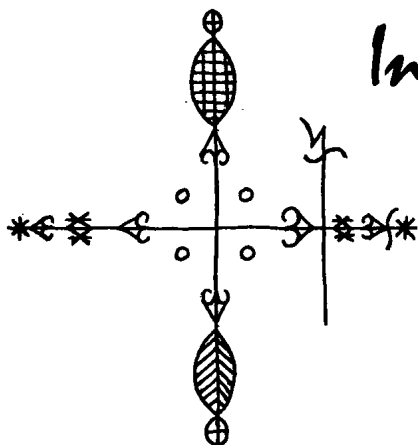
Russell Banks

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

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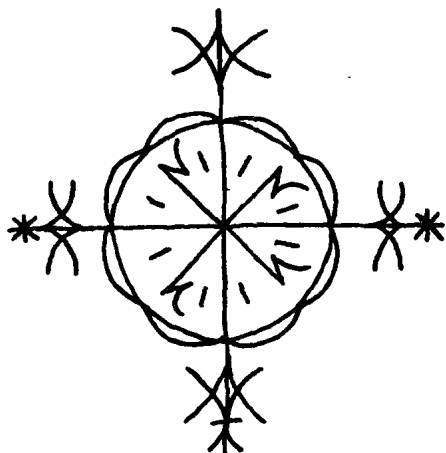
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Invocation



It's not memory you need for telling this story, the sad story of Robert Raymond Dubois, the story that ends along the back streets and alleys of Miami, Florida, on a February morning in 1981, that begins way to the north in Catamount, New Hampshire, on a cold, snow-flecked afternoon in December 1979, the story that tells what happened to young Bob Dubois in the months between the wintry afternoon in New Hampshire and the dark, wet morning in Florida and tells what happened to the several people who loved him and to some Haitian people and a Jamaican and to Bob's older brother Eddie Dubois who loved him but thought he did not and to Bob's best friend Avery Boone who did not love him but thought he did and to the women who were loved by Bob Dubois nearly as much as and differently from the way that he loved his wife Elaine. It's not memory you need, it's clear-eyed pity and hot, old-time anger and a Northern man's love of the sun, it's a white Christian man's entwined obsession with race and sex and a proper middle-class American's shame for his nation's history. This is an American story of the late twentieth century, and you don't need a muse to tell it, you need something

more like a loa, or mouth-man, a voice that makes speech stand in front of you and not behind, for there's nothing here that depends on memory for the telling. With a story like this, you want an accounting to occur, not a recounting, and a presentation, not a representation, which is why it's told the way it's told. And though you, too, may see it with your own eyes and hear it with your own ears—as if you, the teller of the tale, sat in the circle of listeners, attentive, hoping to be amused, amazed and moved yourself—you still must see it with eyes not your own and must tell it with a mouth not your own. Let Legba come forward, then, come forward and bring this middle-aging, white mouth-man into speech again. Come down along the Grand Chemin, the sun-path, all filled with pity and hardened with anger to a shine. Come forward, Papa, come to the Crossroads. Come forward, Old Bones, full of wonder for the triple mystery of men and women clamped to one another, of blackness and of the unexpected arrival of gods from Guinea. And come forward eager to cast shame all about. Give body and entitledness and boldness to this white mouth-man's pity and anger by covering his shoulders with a proper cloak of shame, and give him pure, physical pleasure under the slow, close sun among people and gods whose evident difference from him and from his one big God brings him forward too, finally, unto himself and unto everyone present as well. And let this man tell what the good American man Bob Dubois did that was so bad in the eyes of God and les Mystères and in the eyes of the mouth-man himself that Bob Dubois got left lost to his wife Elaine, who had loved him for a long, long time, and his son and two daughters and his friend Avery Boone and the women Bob Dubois had made love to and the men and women who had lived and worked with Bob Dubois in Catamount, New Hampshire, and in Oleander Park, Florida, and on fishing boats out of Moray Key. Again, Legba, come forward! Let this man speak that man to life.



1

IT'S DECEMBER 21, 1979, A FRIDAY, IN CATAMOUNT, NEW Hampshire. It's late in the day, windless and cold, bits of snow dropping from a dark, low sky. At this latitude at this time of year, the sun sets at three forty-five, and Catamount, a river town laid north and south between a pair of glacial moraines, settles quickly without twilight into darkness. Light simply gets replaced by cold, and the rest remains the same.

A half foot of old crusty snow has covered the ground since the first week of the month, followed by days and nights of dry cold, so that the snow has merely aged, turning slowly gray in yards and on rooftops and in heaps alongside the streets, pitted and spotted along sidewalks and pathways by dogs and mottled everywhere with candy wrappers, beer cans and crumpled cigarette packs. The parking lots and sidewalks, plowed and salted weeks ago, are the color of ash, so that new snow gently falling comes as a cleansing fresh coat of paint, a whitewash that hides the old, stained and tainted world underneath.

Robert Raymond Dubois (pronounced locally as "Doo-boys"), an oil burner repairman for the Abenaki Oil Company, walks slowly from the squat, dark brick garage where he has parked the company truck, walks hunched over with careful effort, like a man in a blizzard, though snow is falling lightly and there is no wind. He wears a dark blue trooper coat with a fur collar, and a black watchcap. In one hand he carries a black lunchbox, in the other an envelope containing his weekly paycheck, one hundred thirty-seven dollars and forty-four cents.

Dubois thinks, A man reaches thirty, and he works at a trade for eight years for the same company, even goes to oil burner school nights for a year, and he stays honest, he doesn't sneak copper tubing or tools into his car at night, he doesn't put in for time he didn't work, he doesn't drink on the job—a *man does his work*, does it for eight long years, and for that he gets to take home to his wife and two kids a weekly paycheck for one hundred thirty-seven dollars and forty-four cents. Dirt money. Chump change. Money gone before it's got. No money at all. Bob does not think it, but he knows that soon the man stops smiling so easily, and when he does smile, it's close to a sneer. And what he once was grateful for, a job, a wife, kids, a house, he comes to regard as a burden, a weight that pulls his chin slowly to his chest, and because he was grateful once, he feels foolish now, cheated somehow by himself.

Dubois parks his car on Depot Street facing downhill toward the river and tight to the tailgate of a salt-covered pickup truck. It's snowing harder now, steadily and in large, soft flakes, and the street is slick and white. Black footprints follow him across the street to a brick building where there are apartments in the upper two stories and a used clothing store, a paint store and a bar at street level, and he enters the bar, Irwin's Restaurant and Lounge. The restaurant is in front, a long, narrow room the size of a railroad car, filled with bright green plastic-covered booths and Formica-topped tables. The room is

brightly lit and deserted, but in back, through an archway, the bar is dark and crowded.

The bartender, a muscular woman in her mid-fifties with a beer-barrel body and a large, hard, lipsticked mouth and a mass of bleached blond hair arranged carefully to resemble a five-and-dime wig, greets Dubois and shoves an opened bottle of Schlitz across the wet bar to him. Her name, unbelievably, is Pearl, and she is Irwin's help. In a year Irwin will die of a heart attack and Pearl will buy out his estate and will finally own the business she has run for decades.

These northern New England milltown bars are like Irish pubs. In a community closed in by weather and geography, where the men work at jobs and the women work at home and raise children and there's never enough money, the men and the women tend to feel angry toward one another much of the time, especially in the evenings when the work is done and the children are sleeping and nothing seems improved over yesterday. It's an unhappy solution to the problem, that men and women should take pleasure in the absence of their mates, but here it's a necessary one, for otherwise they would beat and maim and kill one another even more than they do.

Dubois is sitting at a small table in a shadowed corner of the bar, talking slowly in a low voice to a woman in her mid-thirties. Her name is Doris Cleeve. Twice divorced from brutal young men by the time she was twenty-eight, Doris has nursed her hurt ever since with alcohol and the company of men married to someone else. She is confused about where to go, what to do with her life now, and as a result, she plays her earlier life, her marriages and divorces, over and over again. As in certain country and western records on the jukebox by the door, Doris's past never fails to move her.

Except for her slightly underslung jaw, which makes her seem pugnacious, she's a pretty woman and not at all pugnacious. She wears her ash blond hair short, stylish for Catamount, and dresses in ski sweaters and slacks, as if she thinks she is petite, though in fact she is

merely short. In the last few years she has put on weight, mainly because of her drinking, but she hasn't admitted it to herself yet and probably won't, until she discovers one morning after she turns forty that she is a fat woman, as fat as the rest of the women she works with down at the cannery. She has slender wrists, though, and small, delicate hands, which is why she still thinks of herself as petite, and having just lit her cigarette (actually, Bob lit it for her, with a flourish of his butane lighter), she jiggles and admires her bracelets while he goes on talking.

Bob Dubois in most ways is an ordinary-looking young man. You'd pass him in the Sears tool or sporting goods department without a thought, a tall, bulky workingman in good physical shape. Stiff, short, light brown hair that resists combing, square features, pale blue eyes, small ears and, because of his size and build, a surprisingly delicate mouth—Bob's face is an easy face to ignore, so long as he is ignoring yours.

But if he's not ignoring yours, if he's slightly curious about you or attracted, sexually or otherwise, or threatened, his broad face changes and becomes extremely expressive. Bob's face is like an intelligent dog's, unable to hide or effectively disguise his emotions, and it's forced him into being fairly honest. He's learned to disguise his thoughts, of course, his strategies, plans and fantasies, but not his feelings. He doesn't know this, however, because whenever he looks at himself in a mirror, he seems to have no feelings whatsoever. He wonders what he really looks like. Photographs can't tell him—he looks into a camera lens the same way he looks into a mirror, as if he were an actor portraying a corpse. If he truly were an actor and could portray a living man, then perhaps he would know what he looks like.

When he's not trying to act, when he's himself, he has a curious, good-humored, friendly face, or else he shows you a closed, hard, angry face. One or the other, with not much in between. Because this shift from open to closed, from good-humored to angry, from kindly to cruel, is abrupt and is wholly unchecked along the way by degrees of coldness, anger, and so on, the extremes

seem extreme indeed, opposites, even though, as Bob himself feels and understands it, the shift from his being a happy man to an unhappy man is one of only slight degree.

It's the same regarding his intelligence—that is, how it appears, how it feels to him and how he understands it. One moment he looks positively brilliant and feels it and believes it; the next moment he looks downright stupid, and he feels and believes he is stupid. The shift from one to the other, however, seems to him only a matter of degree—mere inches.

"My wife doesn't understand me," he says to Doris Cleeve.

"You probably don't understand her, either."

Bob smiles and lights a cigarette. "I don't make enough money." To her, as he says this, Bob looks good-humored, friendly and smart. Better than anyone else in this place, who is in a bad mood, unfriendly, stupid or all three. Also, he's handsome, in a way.

"So? Tell me who does. Especially at Christmas. You wanna hear *my* problems?"

She has large, healthy teeth. A fleck of tobacco from her unfiltered cigarette clings to a front tooth, and for an instant Bob wants to lick it off. "I don't get enough sex," he says.

She laughs out loud and looks down at her drink, gin and tonic. As if satisfied, Bob peers across the smoky, crowded room and smiles at no one in particular. Someone has played the Johnny Paycheck song, "Take This Job and Shove It," on the jukebox, and at the chorus a half-dozen customers join in, singing loudly, happily along, slapping backs and grinning at one another.

IT'S DARK OUTSIDE. GIGANTIC RED AND GREEN ELECTRIC candy canes and wreaths dangle from lampposts while shoppers hurry anxiously along the sidewalks from store to store. The snow is falling heavily in fat flakes that turn almost at once to gray slush beneath the boots of the Christmas shoppers and under the tires of the cars.

Bob Dubois stands stiffly at the pay phone in the

hallway that leads back from the bar to the rest rooms. A burly, unshaven man in a checkered wool shirt and overalls squeezes past, touches him on the shoulder and says Bob's name, then hitches his pants and returns to the bar, as Bob goes on talking into the telephone.

"Yeah, I already been to the bank and cashed it. Listen, I'll . . . I'll get home in a couple hours or so; it's the only chance I got to shop. . . . I know, I know—white. White figure skates, size four. I'll try Sears first. I know it's late, I just haven't had a chance, you know that. . . . I dunno, a couple hours, maybe. . . . I'll get something to eat down here. Okay? Okay. . . ."

He hangs up and moves slowly down the hall to the men's room, where there is a small spotted mirror over the sink, into which he will gaze for a few seconds, wondering what he looks like, wondering if his lies show, or his fears, or his confusion. Giving up, he will try to comb his stiff hair, posing once or twice as the man he saw last night on television in a Christmas perfume ad, tuxedoed, dark hair graying at the temples, parking his Lancia on a moonlit street in Aix-en-Provence, leaning down to kiss the long neck of a lovely, smiling blond woman in an evening gown, whispering a compliment into her pink, perfectly shaped ear.

On the floor above the bar there are three apartments, two studio apartments facing Depot Street and a larger unit at the rear facing an alley, and on the floor above that three more. In the tiny kitchen of one of the studios on the top floor, Doris Cleeve, having served Bob Dubois a Schlitz, is fixing herself another gin and tonic.

"How many times you been here now, Bob? A dozen? How come I always hafta tell you to make yourself comfortable before you make yourself comfortable? Tell me that."

Bob draws the curtains over the pair of windows that face the street, and as they close, catches a glimpse of his car below, the roof and hood white with snow. "C'mon, Doris," he says. "You know how I feel about this."

"About *me*?" she asks. "You mean how you feel

about *me*?" She sits down at the table facing him. He is standing in front of one of the windows and next to an upholstered platform rocker.

"Well . . . yeah. I guess so. But I meant about being here, like this." He looks stupid again, and he knows it. Holding his beer in one hand, he tries knocking a cigarette free of the pack with the other and dumps a half-dozen cigarettes onto the floor. "Look," he says, kneeling to retrieve the cigarettes, "I love my wife. I really do."

"Sure you do, Bob. Sure you do."

He sits down in the rocker, sets the can of beer on the maple step table next to it and lights a cigarette. "Well . . . I do." He turns the can slowly with his thumb and forefinger, leaving wet, spiraling rings on the tabletop. "You and me, Doris, that's different. That's friendship. Know what I mean?"

The woman is silent for a few seconds. "Yeah. I know what you mean." And she does know, because at this moment their thoughts, though they cannot be uttered, are essentially the same. Both Bob and Doris are struck, amazed, even, that such a simple event as a man and a woman in a room together can turn out to be so complicated that neither is able to say why he or she is there. They have been in this room together enough times to know that it's not because they are friends, for their friendship is not the sort that demands privacy in order to thrive. And it's not because they are in love with each other, for Doris still loves her second husband, Lloyd Cleeve, who broke her nose and three ribs one night and on another gave her a concussion and on five or six more bruised her face, until finally she left him and he moved down to Lowell, Massachusetts, and started in on another woman. And Bob still loves his wife Elaine, who nags a little but is kind to him in all the important ways and most of the unimportant ways as well, who does understand him. And though Doris is more able than Bob to separate sexual pleasure from the pleasure of being loved by someone, neither of them has come to this room to satisfy his or her sexual needs. Elaine Dubois, after seven years of marriage, is still

attractive to her husband, and she thoroughly enjoys making love with him and does so frequently and with great, uninhibited enthusiasm, which enthusiasm happens to operate on Bob as a powerful sexual stimulant, arousing him to levels of endurance and spontaneity he's never reached with other women. And Doris, who, as mentioned, is more able than Bob to separate sexual pleasure from the pleasure of being loved, perhaps because she is thirty-five years old and has been living alone since she was twenty-eight, frequently visits and is visited by a tireless nineteen-year-old plumber's apprentice with a scraggly blond beard and shoulder-length hair, a hard-muscled, dope-smoking kid named Rufus, called Roof, who rents the studio directly beneath hers. He usually shows up at her door, barefoot, in tee shirt and jeans, late at night when she can't sleep and has been pacing the floor. They smoke a joint together, and then he goes to work on her, until, hours later, exhausted, she falls asleep against his hairless chest, and when she wakes in the morning, he is gone.

Bob stands in the darkness by the bed that a few minutes ago was an orange sofa and pulls off his clothing. Then, quickly, as if the room were cold, he yanks back the covers and slips into bed, stretching his naked body out and folding his arms behind his head.

In a few seconds, Doris emerges from the bathroom wearing only her panties, which, when she reaches the side of the bed, she daintily removes. Then she slides into the bed next to Bob and puts her arms around him and kisses him softly, gently, on the mouth, the neck, the shoulders. Her mouth and her little moans, to his relief, arouse him (not that he's not easily and regularly aroused; it's just that once in a great while for no reason he can name he is not able to convince his inert penis to rise up and please, and the experience, painful, humiliating and bewildering, has had an effect on his self-confidence all out of proportion to its frequency). To Bob, Doris's body is more attractive naked than clothed. She is round and smooth and soft to the touch, her nipples are pink and hard, and her thatch of light brown

pubic hair is dense and surprisingly silky as he runs his hand over the swell of her belly and out along the inside of her thighs.

Soon she has her legs wrapped around his waist, her head turning from side to side on the pillow, her hands digging into his shoulder muscles, as he slides in and out of her, swiftly and smoothly, and then her breathing becomes loud and rapid, and she cries out and yanks her head forward to his face and kisses him frantically on the mouth, grinding and mashing her lips against his, while he goes on moving steadily in and out, as if nothing has happened, as if he were a machine. He knows, of course, what has happened—it's how it happens with Elaine—and sometimes, if he keeps on pounding steadily away, as if he can do this all night long, it will happen again, and that will make him a better lover to her. So he keeps on going. And yes, it happens again, and he's pleased with himself and begins to move against her more swiftly now, to take his pleasure almost as if it were payment for hers. He goes on, and it goes on. But nothing happens. On and on, with Doris trying to help out by moving around him, swinging her legs up his body, locking her legs against his back and shifting her buttocks higher. But still it goes on, and nothing happens. He feels no buildup of heat, none of the usual tightening in the groin and belly, and eventually he finds himself worrying about the time and thinking of his wife's face and his daughter Ruthie's ice skates, white, size four, and Sears, which will close at nine, until his penis, still stubbornly erect, feels as if it belongs to someone else, and he feels like a man out walking a stranger's large, energetic, badly behaved dog. He wants to stop, but she'll know—he's not sure what she'll know, but he doesn't want her to know it—so he goes on, only to discover, at last, that he's lost all his force and that his penis, still large and thick, is doughy. He has no choice now. He pulls his hips away from her, and she unlocks her legs and draws them down to the bed.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"Nothing. Nothing. That . . . that was wonderful."

He rolls over onto his back and studies the luminous hands of his watch.

"Is everything all right?" She's not really interested or even curious; she's just being polite and isn't quite sure how to go about it.

"Yeah, fine. Of course," he quickly answers. Then, more slowly, "It's just that . . . I dunno. I was getting kind of worried, about the time and all, you know?" He lights a cigarette and inhales deeply and lets the smoke trickle from his lips. He's not really worried about the time, and he doesn't exactly feel guilty toward Elaine. After all, he's had up to a dozen occasions before this to test his capacity to feel guilt for having committed adultery, and it hasn't worked. All he's felt is fear of getting caught at it, like a child cheating at Monopoly. He knows he's supposed to feel guilty, but he simply does not feel guilty for sleeping now and then with other women than Elaine, so long as he knows that he is not in love with the other women and that, therefore, he has in no way jeopardized Elaine's position as his wife. That would make him feel guilty—to imagine another woman than Elaine, to imagine Doris, say, as his wife.

No, something else is oppressing him tonight. He's felt it physically, like a hard-skinned bubble in his gut, since he left work. He looked at his paycheck, and he felt it. He got into his car, studied for a few seconds the torn, faded upholstery, the clutter of tools, toys, food wrappers, kids' mittens and empty beer cans, and he felt it. And then at Irwin's, standing at the bar chatting with Pearl and nodding and listening to men he knows from work and others he knows solely from having drunk with them, workingmen and out-of-work men and a few old drunks who once had been workingmen, he felt that heavy bubble there, too. And he felt it when he first spotted Doris in the corner sitting alone, where he knew she'd be, because she was there almost every Friday night at this time, waiting, if not for him, then for the next-best man in the place. (Doris is not a whore, she's not even promiscuous; she's one of those women who are waiting and who once in a while get bored waiting,

so she pretends for an evening that the man she is talking to is the man she happens to be waiting for.) And a few minutes later, when he found himself crossing the barroom toward her, again he felt the bubble, but now it felt painful to him, so that he wondered for a second if he was sick, and he tried to remember what he had eaten for lunch. But it went away as soon as he started talking with Doris, kidding her and being kidded for a while, then asking her if she had any beer in her refrigerator, to which she answered yes, did he want to come up?

And now, after making love to Doris, he feels the hard, metallic bubble once again, still located low in his belly, but expanding toward his chest and groin now and rapidly growing heavier. He suddenly feels frightened, but he doesn't know where to aim his fear—and that only makes him more frightened. What if he has cancer? He's panicking. Jesus H. Christ, what's wrong? He's pulling his clothes back on, slowly, carefully, as if nothing's wrong or unusual, but he's thinking in a wind: My God, I'm going to blow up, my life's all wrong, everything's all wrong, I didn't mean for things to turn out like this, what the fuck's going on?

Bob Dubois does not know what is going on, because, on this snowy night in December in a dark, shabby apartment over a bar on Depot Street, as he draws his clothes back on, he does not know that his life's story is beginning. A man rarely, if ever, knows at the time that his life's story, its one story, is beginning, especially a man like Bob Dubois. Until this night, except for the four years he served in the air force, Bob has lived all his life in Catamount and since high school has worked for the same company, Abenaki Oil Company on North Main Street, at the same trade, repairing oil burners. He is thirty years old, "happily married," with two children, daughters, aged six and four. Both his parents are dead, and his older brother, Eddie, owns a liquor store in Oleander Park, Florida. His wife Elaine loves and admires him, his daughters Ruthie and Emma practically worship him, his boss, Fred Turner, says he needs him,

and his friends think he has a good sense of humor. He is a frugal man. He owns a run-down seventy-five-year-old duplex in a working-class neighborhood on the north end of Butterick Street, lives with his family in the front half and rents out the back to four young people he calls hippies. He owns a boat, a thirteen-foot Boston whaler he built from a kit, with a sixteen-horsepower Mercury outboard motor; the boat he keeps shrouded in clear plastic in his side yard from November until the ice in the lakes breaks up; the motor's in the basement. He owns a battered green 1974 Chevrolet station wagon with a tricky transmission. He owes the Catamount Savings and Loan Company—for the house, boat and car—a little over \$22,000. He pays cash for everything else. He votes Democratic, as his father did, goes occasionally to mass with his wife and children and believes in God the way he believes in politicians—he knows He exists but doesn't depend on Him for anything. He loves his wife and children. He has a girlfriend. He hates his life.

2

BECAUSE THERE'S NOTHING DRAMATICALLY OR EVEN APPARENTLY wrong with his life (many men would envy it), and because Bob Dubois was raised as most poor children are raised (to keep a wary eye on those less fortunate than he, rather than to gaze hungrily in the opposite direction), he is not inclined to complain about his life. In fact, what he hates about his life is precisely what he usually points to with pride: he has a steady job, he owns his own house, he has a happy, healthy family, and so on.

The trouble with his life, if he were to say it honestly, which at this moment in his life he cannot, is that it's over. He's alive, but his life has died. He's thirty years old, and if for the next thirty-five years he works as hard as he has so far, he will be able to stay exactly where he is now, materially, personally. He'll be able to hold on to what he's got. Yet everything he sees in store win-