

WILLIAM EDDY

Jacob, I been thinking. Wagons, children, folk that're sick, elderly, well, they're all snowbound until the spring thaws. And there's nothing we can do to help them here. That about how you see it, too?

JACOB DONNER

Yes.

WILLIAM EDDY

Well. What if we send the heartiest on ahead? Maybe find a path and return with food.

JACOB DONNER

I've thought about that. Would you go with me?

WILLIAM EDDY

No, not you. No offense, Jacob Donner, but only the strong can go.

JACOB DONNER

Only the strong. I'm not sure I even have the strength to protest. You want to go?

WILLIAM EDDY

Not a question of want. I have a family I left behind, and I have to survive to California if they're to have a chance. If you give me some of your food, I'll lead a rescue party and maybe return in enough time before, in enough time to save your family.

JACOB DONNER

Well, I don't have any food. I don't think anyone does. Even secret stashes. But if you're willing to make a run for it, I'll...I got a tarp I've been stitching, and you can have that. How many days do you think we are from Sutter's Fort? By foot.

WILLIAM EDDY

No idea. Three weeks out, four weeks? Same coming back.

JACOB DONNER

Six weeks then.

WILLIAM EDDY

Eight. Ten.

JACOB DONNER

We're not going to make it, William. Whether you go or stay.

WILLIAM EDDY

I'll take Patrick and Whitney and Milt. And Virginia.

(WILLIAM EDDY leaves. DONNER alone.)

JACOB DONNER pulls out the map which REED was examining. **17. A Map.**)

JACOB DONNER

A MAP. THIS MAP.
PAID DEARLY, ALL OF US,
PAID DEARLY WITH OUR DOLLARS,
PAID DEARLY WITH OUR TRUST,
FOR THIS MAP.
THIS MAP!
WHAT KIND OF MAN
FOR FOURTEEN DOLLARS
WOULD LET EIGHTY PEOPLE
MARCH TO DEATH?
THIS MAP. THIS MAP!
NONE OF THE PLACES WE HAVE BEEN TO,
NONE OF THEM,
NONE ON THIS MAP.

AND THERE'S ONE MORE PLACE
ONE FINAL PLACE WE'VE NOT YET BEEN
A PLACE NOT ON ANY MAP.
GOD FORGIVE US
GOD FORGIVE US THE STEPS WE TAKE
BEFORE WE VISIT THERE.

GOD --
NO ANSWER.
NO GUIDANCE FROM HIM.
NO GUIDANCE FROM GOD.
ONLY GUIDANCE,
GUIDANCE FROM ME.

IF WE RUN OUT OF FOOD...
WHEN WE RUN OUT OF FOOD...
AFTERWARDS...
GOD, FORGIVE US
GOD, FORGIVE US FOR WHAT WE ABOUT TO DO.

(Lights fade to:)

A frozen mountainside; snow is six to ten feet deep here. Late afternoon; weak sunshine. The party has fashioned some crude, awkward snowshoes

out of some leftover ox-yokes, the kind which MILT was working on many months earlier. WHITNEY trudges awkwardly still, but VIRGINIA, WILLIAM EDDY, PATRICK DOLAN and MILT ELLIOT have all grown fairly accustomed to them. **18. Snowshoes.**)

VIRGINIA

If my family had ever told me I'd be walking the top of a mountain with a pair of leftover ox yokes strapped to my feet, I'd a said they was lunatics. Well, I'd a said they was lunatics with or without the ox yokes, but that's a whole other conversation. You coming, Whitney?

WHITNEY GALLIARD

Still can't get them...going...forward....

VIRGINIA

Just pick up your feet and plop 'em back down.

WHITNEY GALLIARD

I keep catching the tips and --

(HE falls over. VIRGINIA finds this funny.)

VIRGINIA

Whoop! You look a sight, Whitney Galliard! Here, let me help you up.

(SHE helps him up. The other men stop in their tracks and conserve their energy. VIRGINIA herself slips, and falls on top of WHITNEY.)

VIRGINIA

Whoop! Now I'm down! Fat lot of help I am!

WILLIAM EDDY

Can we...a little less laughing. It's about to get dark again.

VIRGINIA

Oui, mon capitaine!

(SHE suppresses her laughter, but another stumble causes her to slip again, and now the more SHE stifles her laugh, the more it wants to burst forth.)

VIRGINIA

I'm sorry. I'm trying! Get up Whitney, c'mon, no laughing now.

(SHE gets WHITNEY onto his feet. But HE has his snowshoe pressed on top of hers, and when SHE tries to take a step, SHE falls, causing him to fall. SHE loses control and laughs, giving way to hysteria; more from fatigue than amusement. The four men watch her, worried whether she's holding together. Lights fade to:)

(Donner Lake; late afternoon. NELLIE REED, gaunt, desperate, approaches JACOB DONNER, who stitches back the sleeves of a worn coat, to make them fit a child's body. Neither has much energy left.)

NELLIE

Jacob.

JACOB DONNER

Nellie.

NELLIE

There's something I need ask you. Old Man Gunneson died a fortnight ago.

JACOB DONNER

God rest his soul. But his coat lives on.

NELLIE

You menfolk, you buried him?

JACOB DONNER

In snow. Ground is ten feet below us by now.

NELLIE

Will you show me where?

(Deep silence; NELLIE doesn't flinch from DONNER'S scrutinizing gaze.)

NELLIE

Aye. I'll tell you in advance, so it's not on your conscience, it'll not be for the purpose of grieving.

JACOB DONNER

Have we come to it, then?

NELLIE

You have children. I have children.

JACOB DONNER

Certain...limits...must....
(can't finish the thought)

NELLIE

Is there a difference taking a coat from a dead man and anything else he might have to give, to keep the living alive? Society must first of all survive; everything else follows after that.

JACOB DONNER

And morality?

NELLIE

Our morality caused us to banish the strongest man in camp and send him away with three bags of food. I say we meet up with our morality again in Sutter's Fort. But until that time we do what we must to survive. Will you show me where you buried Old Man Gunneson?

(Pause.)

JACOB DONNER

I'll not partake.

NELLIE

Not asking you to.

JACOB DONNER

But neither will I judge those who do. I'll show you.

(HE gets up and leads to the north; SHE follows. Lights fade. They rise on Donner Pass. Bad weather; bitter cold; snow; wind. Bleak light. MILT ELLIOT has become partially snowblind, and has a hand on VIRGINIA'S shoulder to guide him, for she is doing marginally better than the rest. PATRICK and WILLIAM EDDY are numb, unaware of anything but the next footstep. The worst off is WHITNEY GALLIARD, whose legs and feet are no longer functioning properly.)

VIRGINIA

How much farther now, you reckon?

MILT ELLIOT

Just one more step, then another, then another, then another,
till there are no more steps to be taken.

PATRICK DOLAN

(last vestiges of pluck)

The mountain can't keep going up forever. Soom pint it must coom
down.

WILLIAM EDDY

Let's just pray when it does we're on the west face of it and
haven't gotten turned round.

(WHITNEY has stopped walking, not entirely
voluntarily.)

VIRGINIA

Come on, Whitney.

(WHITNEY tries to move his legs; finds he can't.)

WHITNEY GALLIARD

We've been at this six nights. At this rate, probably, eleven
more to go, would you say? I think, I think you'd cut that to
about eight if...if I stopped slowing you down.

PATRICK DOLAN

Now, now, Whitney, you're going as fast as the rest of us.

WHITNEY GALLIARD

We all know that's not true. I'm holding everyone back. And you
have, what, maybe five days left in your own bodies anyway. You
won't make it eleven more days with me, but you might make it
eight more days without me.

PATRICK DOLAN

Absolutely not. Won't hear of you turning round.

WHITNEY GALLIARD

Nope. I wouldn't make it the six days back. And I won't make it
the eleven days forward. Not on no food.

(HE starts removing his pack. MILT, his sight
impaired, listens acutely, his nostrils flaring.)

WHITNEY GALLIARD

So. I'm going to set down right here, and I'm going to have
myself a smoke. And then another one, and then another one after
that, and so on until the smoke doesn't go in and out of me
anymore.

(No one has an answer to this. WHITNEY pulls a pipe and tobacco out of his pack.)

PATRICK DOLAN

Whitney. I won't have ye giving up.

WHITNEY GALLIARD

Well, Patrick Dolan, that's mighty heroic of you. Only. It isn't up to you. It's my choice. Either I stay with you and slow you down so much you don't reach Sutter's Fort and all hope of rescue for my wife and two children end right there. Or....

(HE sits, with his pipe.)

WHITNEY GALLIARD

I stay here, and you have a chance of getting to Sutter's Fort. Now. What you do after that is on your own conscience, but it's the only hope my family has, is my smoking this pipe.

MILT ELLIOT

I admire you so much, Whitney Galliard. Your dignity, your serenity.

WHITNEY GALLIARD

Sometimes serenity is easy.

(HE smokes. **19. Love's Redeeming Work.**)

WHITNEY GALLIARD

(sings)

LOVE'S REDEEMING WORK IS DONE,
FOUGHT THE FIGHT, THE BATTLE WON.
DEATH IN VAIN FORBIDS HIM RISE;
CHRIST HAS OPENED PARADISE.
ALLELUIA, ALLELUIA.

LIVES AGAIN OUR GLORIOUS KING;
WHERE, O DEATH, IS NOW THY STING?
ONCE HE DIED OUR SOULS TO SAVE,
WHERE THY VICTORY, O GRAVE?
ALLELUIA, ALLELUIA.

Leave me now.

(VIRGINIA weeps. SHE, PATRICK, WILLIAM and MILT all leave WHITNEY, alone.)

WHITNEY GALLIARD

SOAR WE NOW WHERE CHRIST HAS LEAD,
 FOLLOWING OUR EXALTED HEAD;
 MADE LIKE HIM, LIKE HIM WE RISE,
 OURS THE CROSS, THE GRAVE, THE SKIES.
 ALLELUIA, ALLELU --
 ALLE --

(HE breaks. Lights fade to black.)

(Sullen, JACOB wraps a package, marks a letter on
 it with the stub of a pencil, while NELLIE
 watches. JACOB hands her several of these
 packages, counting them out.)

There. JACOB DONNER

Thank you. NELLIE

Thank Mr. Gunneson. JACOB DONNER

I will. We all will. NELLIE

Not all of us. JACOB DONNER

Not even -- NELLIE

No. But those of us who...we'll not stop you. JACOB DONNER

Why not? NELLIE

God has failed us. We cannot afford to fail each other. JACOB DONNER

(SHE turns to leave with the packages.)

Nellie. JACOB DONNER

NELLIE

What, Jacob?

JACOB DONNER

You're not to give the ones they've marked with a G to anyone in the Gunneson family. Do you understand?

NELLIE

(nods)

(JACOB hands NELLIE some other packages which came from another pile.)

JACOB DONNER

And...similarly...I asked them....

NELLIE

(looking at the letter on them)

D.

JACOB DONNER

She was my eldest.

(NELLIE nods; leaves. Lights fade to higher in the Donner Pass. Packs are on the ground. MILT tries to make a fire with a flint, but his eyes are bad, and his fingers unbending. VIRGINIA and WILLIAM EDDY huddle for warmth, but they are grayed and deadened. Everyone's skin is frostbitten. PATRICK's eyes are wide with madness; HE is sweating.)

WILLIAM EDDY

Milt?

MILT ELLIOT

Can't hold the flint. Not sure my fingers are still attached to the bones.

VIRGINIA

We don't make fire tonight, we....
(trails off; too weary to finish)

PATRICK DOLAN

Fire? Who needs fire? I'm hot.

VIRGINIA

Here, can I try?

(SHE takes off her mittens. Her fingers are blue and pustuled, crusted with sores and broken skin. WILLIAM EDDY winces.)

WILLIAM EDDY

Ginnia, your fingers.

VIRGINIA

Ghhhhh. Well. It's not like I can feel that.

WILLIAM EDDY

I can only imagine what our feet are like. Anyone looked?

PATRICK DOLAN

(suddenly rising and pointing)

I looked, and saw. There, there! It's a gate! Isn't that a gate!?

(PATRICK races twelve feet to the west but stops up short, barred by some imaginary gate.)

PATRICK DOLAN

I can't feel it. Let me in! Hallo!

WILLIAM EDDY

There's no gate there, Patrick.

MILT ELLIOT

Give him some food.

WILLIAM EDDY

I ran out the night we left Whitney behind. Got any food, Virginia?

(VIRGINIA has fallen over without a sound.)

MILT ELLIOT

Virginia, come on, stay with us now.

VIRGINIA

Did I fall over?

PATRICK DOLAN

Look, I can see through the gates, there's a light! There's a village.

(calling)

We're here! Let us in! Open the gates.

WILLIAM EDDY

No gate there, Patrick. I'm telling you.

PATRICK DOLAN

Sure there is. Help us! Let us in! I can't -- I can't squeeze through the bars. These clothes be too thick! Gotta take 'em off. It's hot anyway.

(PATRICK pulls off his coat.)

MILT ELLIOT

Patrick, get back over here and help us start a fire. Patrick!

PATRICK DOLAN

Got the coat off. What's this, a shirt! I have a wool shirt on!? In this weather? Off, off!

(PATRICK tears at his shirt.)

PATRICK DOLAN

Got to get thin, got to get through the bars of the gate. Off! I'll peel my skin off if I need to, t'get through!

(PATRICK is now naked to the waist, and starts pulling off his boots. WILLIAM EDDY goes over to him.)

WILLIAM EDDY

Come on, Patrick, come over here now....

(PATRICK fights him off fiercely, like an animal under attack.)

PATRICK DOLAN

Hands off me! I'm going to get through the gate, and it's not you be stoppin me.

WILLIAM EDDY

Patrick, there's no gate....

PATRICK DOLAN

Not for a sinner like you, no! But I'm going through! I'm going to the other side!

(PATRICK is about to remove his first boot, when WILLIAM grabs him in a bear hug, pinning PATRICK's arms to his side. PATRICK screams in terror; subhuman.)

PATRICK DOLAN

Gaaa! Let me go through! Let me go through! Gaaa! Gaaa!

WILLIAM EDDY

I got you. I got you. No one's going anywhere.

(PATRICK grows utterly desperate to break free; the struggle grows violent and terrifying to both WILLIAM and PATRICK. VIRGINIA watches, but hasn't the strength to enjoin.)

WILLIAM EDDY

Milt, get his legs!

MILT ELLIOT

I can't see very well.

(But MILT succeeds in finding PATRICK's legs, and HE and WILLIAM finally subdue PATRICK, who gasps, then begins to weep. His sobs subside, and HE grows calm at last.)

PATRICK DOLAN

I'm so cold. Cold unto death.

WILLIAM EDDY

There you go. Want a coat? Patrick.

PATRICK DOLAN

(his head clearing)

Oh. I had the most terrible dreams. A gate made of fire. Why am I so cold?

(PATRICK begins to shiver violently. WILLIAM EDDY wraps him in his coat, rocking him. PATRICK sinks into unconsciousness. WILLIAM releases him and goes for a pack to pull out a blanket.)

MILT ELLIOT

How's the fire?

VIRGINIA

I can't feel my fingers to hold the flint.

(WILLIAM places a blanket over PATRICK, who suddenly returns to consciousness with a gasp.)

PATRICK DOLAN

(some deep breaths; then:)

Listen, lads. I'm not going to make it through the night.

WILLIAM EDDY

Shh...I know...I know...shh....

PATRICK DOLAN

On the verge of madness, we all see that. An' you'll be next if ye don't find -- if you don't get --

(grabs his knife)

Listen to me now. 'Taint the madness talkin. Take my knife an use it on me, and sustain yourselves with me. What's left of me. Come on, William Eddy. It's what I want. And it'll save the three of you. Here. Take it.

(WILLIAM EDDY takes PATRICK's knife.)

WILLIAM EDDY

We could wait.

PATRICK DOLAN

Wait means delaying you.

WILLIAM EDDY

All right. How do you....?

(Pause.)

PATRICK DOLAN

Have it right across the throat. I can't feel anything anyway.

WILLIAM EDDY

You're a good man, Patrick Dolan.

VIRGINIA

I can't look.

PATRICK DOLAN

Write my family.

WILLIAM EDDY

I will.

PATRICK DOLAN

Oh God, commend my spirit up to thee.

(HE bares his throat for WILLIAM EDDY, who holds PATRICK's forehead back, and places the knife against PATRICK's neck. WILLIAM hangs his head.)

MILT ELLIOT

Do it.

PATRICK DOLAN

Have mercy and get it over with.

WILLIAM EDDY

I can't.

MILT ELLIOT

Do it.

WILLIAM EDDY

I'd rather lay my own life down than take someone else's.

(WILLIAM proffers the knife to PATRICK.)

WILLIAM EDDY

Here.

PATRICK DOLAN

No.

(WILLIAM proffers the knife to MILT.)

MILT ELLIOT

Told you you'd need me one day. No.

WILLIAM EDDY

Virginia. Someone, please. I'm begging you.

VIRGINIA

I'm willing to go, too, but I'm not willing to send someone else.

MILT ELLIOT

Same.

(WILLIAM EDDY puts down the knife.)

MILT ELLIOT

Cowards, all.

WILLIAM EDDY

We'll draw lots, then. We'll draw lots to see which of us will go first and save the others. Aye?

MILT ELLIOT

Aye.

PATRICK DOLAN

Aye.

WILLIAM EDDY

I'll tear three strips from my journal. Two long, one short.

VIRGINIA

Three long, one short.

WILLIAM EDDY

You're not drawing one, Virginia.

VIRGINIA

We're all a part of this, William Eddy. None more, none less.
Four lots. Short one gets the knife cross his throat. Agreed?

WILLIAM/PATRICK/MILT

Agreed.

(It is an eternity for WILLIAM to finish tearing
the strips. His hands shake. He gives them to
VIRGINIA. SHE palms them and them to MILT.)

VIRGINIA

Milt, draw one.

(HE pulls one.)

VIRGINIA

Long.

(SHE proffers to WILLIAM EDDY. HE draws.)

WILLIAM EDDY

Long.

(Another eternity between VIRGINIA and PATRICK as
they brave the pulling of the remaining lot.)

PATRICK DOLAN

(drawing)

Long.

VIRGINIA

(eyeing the remaining one)

Short.

(SHE hands the knife to WILLIAM EDDY.)

VIRGINIA

Make it quick.

WILLIAM EDDY

I can't.

VIRGINIA

We agreed.

WILLIAM EDDY

I can't. Neither you nor Patrick nor Milt. None of you.

VIRGINIA

Milt.

MILT ELLIOT

No.

VIRGINIA

Patrick.

(PATRICK stands, pulling his coat off to put his shirt back on, then his coat.)

PATRICK DOLAN

Here's how it's going to be. Since none of us can bring ourselves to murder, we'll all get on our feet and walk, and walk until one of us drops and never gets up again. Whoever dies first shall freely and willingly give of himself to the others. I'm starting out....

(HE picks up his pack and heads west.)

PATRICK DOLAN

Walk. Whoever dies first....

MILT ELLIOT

Virginia, lead me.

(VIRGINIA looks at MILT, gets her pack and heads off after WILLIAM EDDY.)

VIRGINIA

Whoever dies first.

(MILT is alone. His eyes are failing him, and HE is suddenly terrified.)

MILT ELLIOT

Virginia! Don't leave me!

(MILT scrambles to find his pack, and heads off after VIRGINIA, in slightly the wrong direction. WILLIAM EDDY hangs his head, and goes to MILT, pointing him in the right direction.)

MILT ELLIOT

I thought you'd gone.

WILLIAM EDDY

I've -- I'm not going to help you, Milt.

MILT ELLIOT

I know. I just -- I wasn't ready.

WILLIAM EDDY

Get yourself ready.

MILT ELLIOT

I will.

(WILLIAM trudges on ahead after PATRICK. MILT does not yet notice he is alone.)

MILT ELLIOT

William. Thanks.

(But WILLIAM has left him. MILT follows dimly after. Lights fade to black. When they rise again, the snow has not abated. VIRGINIA, PATRICK, WILLIAM and MILT trudge through the snow, slowly, one step at a time, driven to the end of their endurance. VIRGINIA no longer allows MILT's hand on her shoulder. MILT's eyes are squinting, squeezing slits, barely registering light. Lights fade to black.)

Lights rise. EACH is half sunk in coma. Madness is close upon them all. But they trudge step after excruciating step after step after step.