Sacramento, 1848

After the snow, after carved corpses exposed the icy survival of the last Donner Party members, the Belgian Keseberg boasted of eating the frozen flesh of dead companions, starved pioneers who'd stormed the Great Salt desert in five frantic days, depleted of water, oxen fleeing, only to face the High Sierras’ great face, a road no wagon could pass. They made it a day late, double-teamed, double-crossed by a scheming guide trying to cross that high pass before the first blizzard struck.

A day too late. They arrived the night. the snows began, flurries flying random as luck. Inside lean-tos and sheds, the log shanties with beds of straw and animal fur, the watch began: the slow erosion of food supplies, of skin that shrank on faces till masks of hunger hid all but the eyes.
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Breakfast at Tiffany's almost followed them into the land of black-and-white photos and bitter nostalgia. For 35 years "Jerry" had presided over the restaurant from the griddle, says Dee, who can point at the ghost seats where regulars he knew once perched. After Adan died, April Martin, his sister, wanted to take over (the restaurant is named after her daughter Tiffany). It may seem like the diner — the great American gathering spot — is dying off in San Francisco, a city that...