

The Meadow

by

Dino Ladki

Excerpted from John Steinbeck's
The Winter of Our Discontent

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INT. DANNY TAYLOR'S SHACK

ETHAN HAWLEY (early 30's, well-groomed, middle class, unassuming) enters DANNY TAYLOR's shack. It's a dark, dingy, kennel of a place **lit only by an old-fashioned candle** that sits beside an Army cot where Danny lays under a filthy comforter.

Danny is a drunk and in his mid-thirties. He's in bad shape - blue and gaunt and sick. His skin has a pewter sheen to it. His eyes are open and glazed. He sits up once Ethan has entered. As he begins to speak we expect him to babble in delirium. It's a bit of a shock when he speaks quite clearly belying his drunken state.

DANNY

What do you want here Eth?

ETHAN

I want to help you

DANNY

You know better than that

ETHAN

You're sick

DANNY

Think I don't know that? I know it
better than anyone

Now that Danny's engaged we notice that even in his sorry state he's got a kind of nobility about him, like the king of the gutter. He reaches behind his cot and retrieves a bottle of Old Forester Whiskey, one-third full.

DANNY

Have a shot?

ETHAN

No, Danny (pause) That's expensive
whiskey

DANNY

I have friends

ETHAN

Who gave it to you?

DANNY

That's none of your business, Ethan

Danny takes a drink and keeps the liquor down, but for a moment it's not easy. Another moment later, the color returns to his skin. With a laugh he says:

DANNY

My friend wanted to talk business but I fooled him. I passed out before he could get it said. He didn't know how little it takes. Do you want to talk business Eth? 'Cause I can pass out again real quick.

ETHAN

Do you have any feeling about me, Danny? Any trust? Any - well, feeling at all?

DANNY

Sure, I do, but when it comes right down to it I'm a drunk, and drunks feel strongest about liquor.

ETHAN

If I could raise the money, would you go to rehab?

DANNY

I might say I would Eth. But you don't know drunks. I'd take the money and drink it up.

ETHAN

Well, what if I paid it right to the hospital, or wherever?

DANNY

I'm trying to tell you. I'd go with the best intentions, and in a few days I'd get out. You can't trust a drunk, Eth. That's what you can't understand. No matter what I did or said - I'd still get out.

ETHAN

Don't you want to get well Danny?

DANNY

I guess I don't. And I guess that
you know that.

He takes another swig. The effect is nearly instantaneous.
His senses and perceptions become visibly sharpened. So much
so that it astonishes, even frightens, Ethan. Danny not only
notices this, he practically reads Ethan's thoughts.

DANNY

Don't trust it. It's only for a
little while. Alcohol stimulates
and then depresses. I hope you
won't stay around to see that.
Right now even I don't believe
it'll happen. I never do when I'm
up.

His eyes, wet and shining in the candlelight, look right into
Ethan.

DANNY

Ethan. You're offering to pay for
rehab. But I know you don't have
the money

ETHAN

I could get it. My wife.. Sara..
She inherited some from her brother

DANNY

And you would give me that?

ETHAN

Yes

DANNY

Even though I told you never to
trust a drunk? Even if I assure you
I'd take your money and break your
heart?

ETHAN

You're breaking my heart now,
Danny... I had a dream about you.
We were kids. We were out at the
old place - remember?

Danny raises the bottle but before he takes a swig he says:

DANNY

No, not yet - not yet. Eth, never-
ever trust a drunk.

(MORE)

DANNY (cont'd)

When he - when I'M - horrible - a dead thing, there's still a clever, secret mind at work, and it's not a friendly mind. Right now, right at this moment, I'm a man who was your friend...I lied to you about passing out. I mean I did pass out...but see I know about the bottle...

ETHAN

Wait, before you go any further, or else it'll look - well, you might suspect me. It was Baker that brought the whiskey, wasn't it?

DANNY

Yes

ETHAN

He wanted you to sign something

DANNY

(chuckling to himself)

Yes, but I passed out

He lifts the bottle to his lips but in the candlelight we (and Ethan) can see just the smallest of bubbles - he only drank a small drop.

ETHAN

That's one of the things I wanted to tell you, Danny. He was after the old place, wasn't he?

DANNY

Yes

ETHAN

How is it that you haven't you sold it?

DANNY

I thought I told you. It makes me a gentleman...lacking only the conduct of a gentleman.

ETHAN

Don't sell it Danny. Hold onto it

DANNY

What's it to you? Why not?

ETHAN

For your pride

DANNY

I don't have any pride left. Only position.

ETHAN

Yes, you do. When you asked me for money that day on the street, you were ashamed. That means pride.

DANNY

No, that was a trick. I've been trying to tell you - drunks are clever. I embarrassed you, and you gave me that money because you thought I was ashamed. I wasn't ashamed. I just wanted a drink.

ETHAN

Don't sell it Danny. It's valuable. Baker knows it. He doesn't buy anything without value.

DANNY

What's valuable about it?

ETHAN

It's the only place nearby level enough for an airfield.

DANNY

I see

ETHAN

If you hold out, it can be a whole new start for you, Danny. Hold onto it. You could go to rehab and when you come out you'll have a nest egg.

DANNY

But no nest - Maybe I'd rather sell it and drink it up and (he sings shrilly) 'when the bough breaks the cradle will fall, and down will come baby, cradle and all. (He laughs). You want the place, Eth? Is that why you came here?

ETHAN

I want you to be well

DANNY

I am well

ETHAN

Danny, if you were just a bum that would be one thing. You could do whatever you wanted. But you're not. Your family came from money and you have something that a group of... 'forward looking people', want and need.

DANNY

Taylor Meadow. And I'm going to hold onto it. I'm forward looking too.

Danny glances affectionately at his whisky bottle

ETHAN

Danny, I told you, it's the only place for an airport. It's a key place. They have to have it - either that or level the hills, and they can't afford that.

DANNY

Then I have them by the balls and I'm gonna twist.

ETHAN

I don't think you understand. These are powerful people, Danny. I've already heard them say that "the kindest thing would be to put you in an 'institution' where you could get the 'care' you need."

DANNY

They wouldn't dare

ETHAN

Oh, yes they would - and feel virtuous about it. You know the process. The judge, you know him, would rule you incompetent to handle your affairs. He would appoint a guardian, and I can guess which one. And all this would be expensive, so of course your property would have to be sold to pay the costs, and guess who would be there to buy it.

Danny's shiny eyes were listening intently. Now they look away.

DANNY

You're trying to scare me, Eth. You picked the wrong time. Catch me in the morning when I'm cold and the world is green vomit. Right now I'm as strong as ten men because of this here bottle.

He waves the bottle like a sword. His eyes go to slits gleaming in the candlelight.

DANNY

Did I tell you, Eth? I think I did - a drunk has a special evil kind of intelligence.

ETHAN

But I just told you what'll happen

DANNY

I agree with you. I know it's true. You've made your point. But instead of scaring me, you roused my imp. Whoever thinks a drunk is helpless is crazy. A drunk is a very special vehicle with special abilities. I can fight back, and right now I seem to want to.

ETHAN

THAT'S what I want to hear!

Danny looks at Ethan over the neck of the whiskey bottle as though it were the bead on the end of a rifle.

DANNY

You'd loan me Sara's money?

ETHAN

Yes

DANNY

Without security?

ETHAN

Yes

DANNY

Knowing the chances of getting it back are a thousand to one?

ETHAN

Yes

DANNY

I don't believe you.

He licks his dry lips

DANNY

Would you put the money in my hands?

ETHAN

Whenever you say

DANNY

I just told you not to

ETHAN

I will anyway

Danny takes a big, long swig now. When he stops his eyes are even shinier but more cold and impersonal. Like a snake's eyes.

DANNY

Can you get the money this week?

ETHAN

Yes

DANNY

Wednesday?

ETHAN

Yes

DANNY

Have you got a couple bucks now?

ETHAN

I don't have much on me...

Ethan fishes a couple of dollar bills and some change out of his pocket and puts it into Danny's hand.

Danny finishes the bottle and drops it on the floor.

DANNY

Somehow I never took you for clever, Eth....You know, even a basic rehab would cost about five grand.

ETHAN

All right

DANNY

This is fun, Eth. This isn't chess, it's poker. I used to be pretty good at poker - too good. You're betting I'll put up my meadow as collateral. And you're betting that five grand worth of booze will kill me, and there you'll be with an airport in your lap.

Ethan is shocked at Danny's perceptiveness, but he hides it well.

ETHAN

That's a nasty thing to say, Danny

DANNY

I warned you I was nasty

ETHAN

Couldn't you think I meant it the way I said it?

DANNY

No. But I've got a way to - *keep* it the way you said it. You remember me in the old days, Eth. You think I don't remember you? You're the kid with the built-in judge.

Ethan knows it's true but he tries not to let it faze him.

DANNY

Okay. I'm getting dry. The Bottle's empty. I'm going out. My price is five thousand dollars.

ETHAN

All right

DANNY

In cash on Wednesday

ETHAN

I'll bring it

DANNY

And don't think you remember me from the old days, Ethan. My friend here's changed all that.

(MORE)

DANNY (cont'd)

I have no loyalty, no fairness.
What you'll get is nothing but
howling laughter.

ETHAN

I only ask that you promise to try

DANNY

Sure, I'll promise but I hope I've
convinced you what a drunk's
promise is worth. Just bring the
cash

He eases himself out of the Army cot and flings the comforter
behind it.

DANNY

Stay as long as you like. My house
is your house. I'm going out. See
you Wednesday

Danny walks out with a rolling gait, his pants unzipped.
Ethan watches him leave and then settles his gaze on the
candle. Then, from a distance, we can hear Danny singing

DANNY (O.S.)

*Well, show me the way to the next
whiskey bar Oh, don't ask why Oh,
don't ask why...I tell, I tell you,
we must we must die...*

FADE OUT.