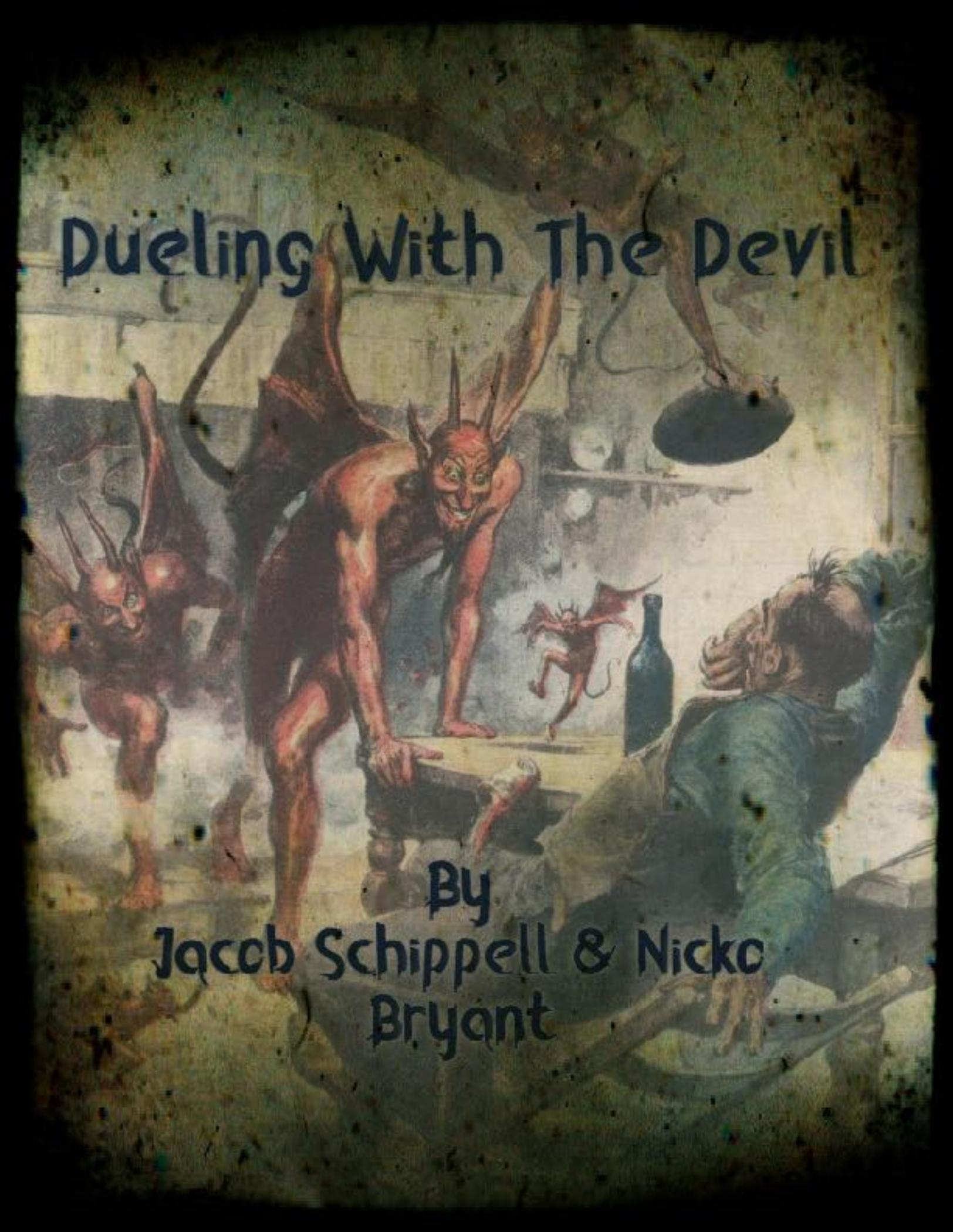


Dueling With The Devil

The illustration is a dark, moody scene. In the foreground, a man with a beard, wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt and brown overalls, is slumped over a wooden table. His head is resting on his hand, and he appears to be in a state of despair or exhaustion. On the table in front of him is a dark bottle and a small plate. Several red, horned devils are present. One large devil with prominent horns and a wide, menacing grin leans over the table, looking directly at the man. To the left, another devil is in a similar pose. In the background, a smaller devil is visible, and a hand holding a dark plate hangs from the top of the frame. The setting appears to be a dimly lit, possibly underground or industrial space, with a stone or concrete wall behind the man.

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"Runnin with the Devil!..." The sound of Van Halen fills the 1997 silver Toyota Corolla. In the drivers seat sits a man named Teddy. Teddy's in his mid 20's. He's dressed in all black, his hoodie and sweatpants hanging loosely off of his skinny body.

He turns to check on his friend Matt. Matt's the same age as Teddy. He's a short man, but to say he's small would be a lie. Matt's also dressed in all black with a black ski mask sitting on his lap. As they drive along the road he stares at the night time sky in a gloomy silence. This is odd because normally you can't get him to shut up.

"Why so serious?" asks Teddy, purposely quoting Matt's favorite villain in an attempt to cheer him up.

"I'm just tired" he replies in an unusually sunken voice.

"Well you better start waking up, because once we cross that border shit's about to go down. It's gonna be a wild night my man" exclaims Teddy, beaming from ear to ear in anticipation of a long night of partying.

"I'll be fine" replies Matt, sounding anything but fine.

Teddy finally realizes what's got him so down. "C'mon, you're not seriously thinking about that girl still? You gotta leave that shit in the past man, focus on the fut.."

Screeeeeeech!

Just then the car starts making weird noises while more and more smoke rises from the hood.

"No no no no no" pleads Teddy as he tries getting the car to start back up. But his attempts are useless as the car continues to stall.

"Fuck!" he yells, slamming his hands against the steering wheel. He then leans back and runs his hand through his sandy blonde hair trying to think of a solution.

Desperate for answers Teddy gets out and opens the hood. Meanwhile Matt grabs the masks and backpacks and walks over to Teddy.

"It's no use, neither of us know anything about cars." Matt holds out Teddy's bag and mask as he continues flatly. "C'mon, we got a long walk ahead of us."

"UUUUGH! We're so close man. Only a few more miles" comments a dejected Teddy.

"So close, but yet so far" mocks a mysterious voice before breaking out in hysterical laughter. Teddy jumps and starts looking around, searching for the owner of the voice, a voice that sounds eerily familiar.

"HA HA HA, nice try, but I'm not over there." Teddy frantically starts scanning the forest. "Or there. Oh c'mon, you can do better than that" taunts the voice.

"Matt, do you hear that?" asks a confused Teddy.

"Hear what?" replies Matt inquisitively.

"That voice. You don't hear it?"

"I think the forest is playing with your head man. Let's get going. Cops can't be far behind." Matt starts walking to the forrest but Teddy's frozen.

"Well that's disappointing. After what you did I figured you'd never forget me." Teddy's stomach turns as he realizes whose voice is in his head. The image of her lifeless body flashes to the front of his memory.

"C'mon dude, what's the holdup?" Matt's already at the edge of the forest waiting for Teddy. "How far did you say we got to go?"

"We're just a couple mountains away" replies Teddy, regathering himself and joining Matt in the woods.

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The two friends have been walking all night but still haven't reached the border. The sun is out, the birds are chirping, there's a crispy freshness to the morning air.

As Matt and Teddy wearily walk through the mountainside the voice continues to mock Teddy. "... You're nothing but a sick, twisted, blood thirsty psychopath."

Teddy shakes his head as if shaking off the cobwebs and continues moving.

Next to Teddy, Matt's looking depressed. He looks as if he's grappling with something too. "How much further Teddy?" Matt asks solemnly.

"Border's only a couple mountains away" Teddy snaps back.

"Wait." Matt's exhausted. He's got his hands on his knees and he starts to sit down against a tree.

"Wait?!" asks an infuriated Teddy.

Meanwhile Matt's laying down, using his backpack as a pillow and closing his eyes. "I can't go anymore Teddy" Matt continues lazily.

"Are you serious?! You're quitting now?!" Teddy rages. "But we're so close, we only got a mountain or 2 left. At this pace we'll be there before noon."

"You also said we'd be there before sunrise but look at us. I'm done man."

Teddy walks over to Matt and kicks him awake. Matt slowly opens his eyes. "Dude, just rest when we get there."

"Fuck you, you dragged me into this whole mess. I could be at home laying on the couch watching netflix right now." Matt closes his eyes to go back to sleep.

Teddy starts kicking him again. "If we nap the cops get too much time to catch up. There's no way they haven't found the car yet."

"I honestly don't care" Matt counters.

"Please tell me this isn't about that girl" Teddy replies.

"Of course it's about that girl." Matt sits up and rubs his eyes. "You Patrick Bateman or something you no conscience motherfucker? Sorry, but when I take part in murder I feel sick to my stomach."

"Why should I feel bad? It wasn't even our fault man. She always travels with them, if she didn't stay behind she'd still be alive" explains Teddy.

"You're unbelievable" Matt shakes his head then lays back down, eyes open staring up at the branch covered sky.

"And you're weak" Teddy fires back.

"What?" Matt asks, unsure about where his friend is going with this.

"Honestly I blame myself for this. I should've known you wouldn't have the stomach for this business." Matt takes a couple steps back and pulls out his pistol, pointing it at his best friend.

Matt looks back at Teddy in horror. This is the last thing he ever expected to happen. "C'mon man, we've been best friends since Ms. DiMaggio's class. This is how you want to end things?"

Teddy shrugs, "Eh, I mean you're a good guy Matt, but god are you a terrible criminal. I won't get locked up because of you."

BAM BAM BAM

3 to the chest.

Teddy's shots ring throughout the forest. He stares coldly at his best friend's lifeless body then puts his gun away before making his way over. He kneels down next to him for a moment and closes his eyes, giving his friend a moment of silence before picking up Matt's backpack and standing up to walk away. "HA HA HA" cackles the voice. "I love when they prove me right."

"Oh please, he brought this on himself" responds Teddy, insulted at the insinuation that he would ever want to shoot his best friend.

"Keep telling yourself that, maybe 1 day it'll be true" chimes a new voice.

Teddy stumbles backwards recognizing the voice, "No."

"Just be honest with your self Teddy. You didn't have to kill me.."

"Th-That's not true" Teddy interjects.

"Oh c'mon Ted, don't lie to yourself, you liked the taste. That rush of power and feeling of control. You wanted to kill me" snears Matt's voice.

Teddy turns around eyes closed, tapping his head as if trying to get the last bit of ketchup out the bottle. As he turns his foot catches a root sticking out of the ground and he goes falling down the mountain side.

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Teddy opens his eyes. Laying on his back, he sees the pinkish hue of the dusk sky. He can smell something reminiscent of a rotting corpse but he can't figure out where it's coming from. His whole body is in pain at this point. He lifts his arms to start checking out the damage. Somehow his arms only came away with nothing more than scrapes and bruises. But as he tries to sit up he feels a piercing pain in his stomach. "AAAAAAH!" He knows that he's injured real bad.

He sits against a tree and inspects his legs. His left knee is swollen to the size of a balloon and his ankle isn't doing much better. Based on the way his foot is pointing it's guaranteed to be dislocated, maybe worse.

He turns his attention to his right leg and gags, just barely holding in the vomit. His right shin bone is poking out and the skin around the wound is slowly rotting, turning black with scattered puss. He now realizes that the smell of death is coming from his leg.

Just then he hears a group of dogs barking the distance.

"Well ain't Karma a bitch." The voice of Matt has returned to continue the torment.

Teddy closes his eyes and lazily taps the back of his head against the tree trunk and lets it rest there. "You won't beat me" he replies defiantly and takes a deep breath.

The other voice jumps in cackling. "HA HA HA, well that really isn't your choice now is it?"

Teddy opens his eyes to try and will himself to continue. When he does he notices a line of trees with slashes in them about 100 feet away from him.

BARK BARK BARK

The dogs are closer now, they can't be further than the other side of the mountain.

"Tic toc, tic toc" taunts the female voice.

Meanwhile Matt just laughs. "HA HA HA, it's ironic isn't it. You killed me to avoid this very situation."

"Just ignore them, nothing can stop me. Just a bit further, C'mon." Teddy grinds his teeth and starts army crawling towards the Canadian border. "C'mon you piece of shit, don't give up now."

As Teddy slowly makes the painful crawl along the valley he can hear the dogs' barks growing louder by the second. Meanwhile Matt and the girl popcorn the words "Tic toc, tic toc" endlessly.

He's halfway there at this point. But he can hear the dogs and their owners at the top of the mountain. He can faintly hear one of them yelling "We found a body! One of them was shot in the chest!"

Teddy slowly crawls over to the nearest tree and leans against it. He takes out his pistol and puts the barrel in his mouth. He can hear the dogs coming down the mountain side. It's only a matter of time before they catch up to him.

"You always were a quitter" sneers Matt. "Don't worry, it's not like there's anybody left to mourn your death."

Teddy takes 2 rushed, deep breaths then pulls the trigger.

Click Click Click

Breathing heavily, Teddy slowly opens his eyes and takes out the mag. A feeling of dread comes over him as he realizes what's happening.

He's empty.