

Frankie the Spook

"Drawing her close to him while breathing heavily with unspent passion, he slid his hand down the small of her back, around to her rib cage, up under her..."

The image of Sir Francis Bacon stopped reading and winced.

"This is really quite dreadful," he announced firmly.

"Really?" asked Marvin Piltch.

Bacon nodded. "Even worse than the last batch. You have set a new standard of ineptitude."

Marvin sighed. "I was afraid of that."

"And this reference to a boob," continued Bacon. "What, exactly, _is_ a boob?"

"A tit."

"I beg your pardon?"

"A female breast."

"According to my dictionary programs, it must be a very unintelligent female breast to be termed a boob."

"Well," said Marvin with a shrug, "when you get right down to cases, I suppose it is."

"It doesn't make any sense," continued Bacon. "What slang do you use for the elbow? Do you call it a fool?"

"Not very often," admitted Marvin.

"Ah," said Bacon. "Then you think that the elbow is more intelligent than the breast?"

Marvin shrugged again. "I have to admit it's not a subject that I've given a lot of thought to."

"I know. In fact, if there is a subject anywhere in the universe that you _have_ given a lot of thought to, you certainly haven't incorporated it in your writings."

"Actually, there _is_ one subject that I've given considerable thought to."

"Oh?" said Bacon, arching an eyebrow. "And what is that?"

Marvin smiled. "You."

"Somehow I foresaw that the conversation would eventually take this course," said Bacon sardonically.

"Then you know what I'm going to ask you?"

"Certainly."

Marvin leaned forward and squinted at Bacon's image on his computer screen. "Will you do it?"

"Will the greatest writer in the history of the human race ghostwrite your pitiful little novel?" sneered Bacon. "Absolutely not."

"But you ghosted for Shakespeare!" protested Marvin. "That's why I had my computer assemble you."

"Marvin, go write limpware and leave me alone."

"It's called software."

"Whatever it's called, it is obvious to me that you were meant to work with computers. Your ignorance of the world at large is superceded only by your ignorance of the English language."

"That's why I need you."

"No."

"But I've got a contract."

"No."

"And it's got penalty clauses for coming in late."

"Then submit it on time."

"And if the editor rejects it, I've got to return the advance."

"What is that to me?"

"If I have to return the advance, I'll have to pawn the

computer to raise the money."

"Good," said Bacon. "Then I'll soon be speaking with someone who has a serious interest in exchanging ideas rather than stealing them."

"I didn't steal anything!" snapped Marvin.

"Marvin, I hate to be blunt, but you haven't had an original idea in your nondescript life." Bacon grimaced. "At least Shakespeare knew he wanted to write plays."

"And you helped him."

"Helped him?" repeated Bacon furiously. "Who do you think wrote all those plays?" His image made an effort to recover its self-control. "The man was a fool, a complete and utter fool! To his dying day, he never understood why I wouldn't write Henry IX! And yet, even now, centuries later, that dimwit gets all the credit for my work, my creativity, my genius -- and you have the gall to ask me to become a ghostwriter again?"

"I didn't know you were so bitter," said Marvin.

"Did you know that that moron wanted to set Troilus and Cressida in Rome?"

"Rome's a very pretty city, I'm told," offered Marvin.

"Bah!" muttered Bacon. "Turn me off."

"I can't," said Marvin. "The book is due in two weeks."

"Rome's a very pretty city, I'm told," echoed Bacon sarcastically. "Perhaps you can hide there from your creditors."

"You're not being very responsive," complained Marvin.

"I'm certain that I will regret having asked, but how did a literary maladroitness like you ever receive a commission to write a book in the first place?"

"My ex-wife's cousin is an editor. I got the assignment while we were still married."

"Anyone who buys a manuscript from you deserves exactly what he gets," said Bacon. "Which, in my professional opinion, will be nothing."

"But I can't return the advance," whined Marvin. "It's already spent."

"A Shakespearean tragedy," said Bacon mockingly.

"What do you want?"

"Peace and quiet."

"I mean, to write the book?"

"Go away and leave me alone."

"I can't. I have no one else to turn to."

"You should have thought of that before taking on such an awesome responsibility. After all, not every artiste can achieve the high literary standard required of...what was the name of this magnum opus?"

"Meter Maids in Bondage."

Bacon grinned. "Do have fun."

"I'm begging you!" said Marvin desperately.

"And I'm refusing you."

"Name your price."

"What possible use have I for money in my present condition?" replied Bacon.

"What can you use?"

"Solitude."

"What else?"

Bacon stared out at him for a long moment, his eyes narrowed, his lean fingers rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"If I agree to write this book for you, I will want a favor in return."

"Anything."

"I intend to write my autobiography, which will end the

controversy concerning the authorship of Shakespeare's plays once and for all. It will be your obligation to make certain that it is published and publicized throughout the world, until every new edition of Shakespeare names me as the true author."

"That could take decades."

"I'm more than 500 years old," replied Bacon. "I have a few decades to spare."

"But I don't," protested Marvin.

"It was nice knowing you, Marvin. Be sure to turn out the light when you leave the room."

"You wouldn't settle for a nice plaster bust of you in the local art museum?"

"Good-bye, Marvin."

"How about a poster? I've got a friend who owns a silkscreen plant."

Bacon merely stared at him and made no reply.

"All right, all right," said Marvin in resignation. "It's a deal."

"I have no way of forcing you to keep your promise," said Bacon, "but as there's a God in Heaven, I'll haunt you every day and night of your life if you should break your word to me."

"I said I'd do it."

"All right," replied Bacon. "I'm going to need a little backgrounding before I start writing."

"It's just a sex book."

"It won't be when I get through with it."

Marvin shrugged. "All right. Anything you need, just ask. If I don't have it, I'll get it."

"Let's start with some information."

"Such as?"

"What is a meter maid?"

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Bacon finished ghosting the manuscript in nine days. Marvin changed eleven words that he didn't understand -- the only eleven corrections the stunned copy editor made on the manuscript before sending it off to the printer -- and then decided to take a month off before looking for a new way to make a living and fend off his creditors.

As it turned out, he only had to wait 19 days.

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"It's a hit!"

"Plays are hits. Books are blockbusters," Bacon corrected him.

"Well, whatever it is, we're rich!" Marvin paused. "By the way, how the hell did you learn a word like blockbuster? They didn't have blockbusters back in your time."

"I'm cooped up in here all day and all night with a bunch of word processing programs," answered Bacon. "So, having nothing better to do with my time, I read the dictionaries."

"Oh," said Marvin. "Well, getting back to the news, we actually got reviewed in the New York Times! They called it a mock Elizabethian erotic masterpiece, and said it was even more bitingly satirical than Candy."

"It was more bitingly satirical than Candy halfway through Page 1," said Bacon contemptuously. "And there was nothing 'mock' about it." He paused. "What else?"

"They say I'm a genius, and that I've -- we've -- done

things that have never been done with erotica before. The few who don't mention Shakespeare" -- Bacon's image winced -- "keep comparing me to Voltaire!"

"A decidedly minor talent," sniffed Bacon. "Still, what do critics know?"

"We're Number One on the bestseller list, and we've gone back to press six times in two weeks."

"Only six?" said Bacon. "I overestimated the intelligence of the American reading public."

"Yeah?" retorted Marvin. "Well, almost three million members of that public have forked over six bucks apiece to read a paperback original by Marvin Piltch!" Suddenly he shifted his weight uncomfortably. "With some slight assistance by Sir Francis Bacon, of course."

"_Some slight assistance?_" roared Bacon. "Why, you self-centered, egotistical--"

"Watch your blood pressure," said Marvin.

"I don't have any blood pressure, you imbecile!" raged Bacon. "I'm a computer simulacron!" He paused for electronic breath. "Such ingratitude! At least it took Shakespeare five or six plays before he convinced himself that he was the author!"

"I apologize."

"You had bloody well better apologize!"

"I do."

"Humbly," demanded Bacon.

"Humbly," agreed Marvin.

"That's better."

"We're friends again?"

"We were never friends."

"But at least we're not enemies?"

"I suppose not," said Bacon.

"Good," said Marvin. "Because we've got work to do."

"_I_ have work to do."

"That's what I meant."

"I will require no help whatsoever with my autobiography."

Marvin shifted his weight again.

"Uh..."

"Yes?"

"I'm afraid you're going to have to put your autobiography on the back burner for a few weeks."

"Back burner?"

"On hold."

"English is an elastic language, but it does have its limitations," said Bacon. "Do try to remain within them."

"What I'm saying is that we owe another book."

"What are you talking about?"

"The contract had an option clause. My wife's cousin decided to exercise it."

"Nonsense. He cannot force you to write another book."

"Well," said Marvin hesitantly, "it wasn't exactly a matter of _force_..."

"Explain yourself," demanded Bacon coldly.

"He offered me a million-dollar advance for a hard/soft deal, 15% straight royalties, 60% of all subsidiary rights, and--"

"You've accepted payment for another book?"

Marvin nodded.

"Well, I certainly hope you enjoy writing it."

"I...ah...thought we might collaborate again."

"We didn't collaborate the first time."

"You know what I mean."

"I know precisely what you mean," said Bacon distastefully.

"You want me to write _Girl Scouts in Leather_."

"Great title," said Marvin admiringly. "But no, that wasn't what I had in mind."

"What you had in mind is of no interest to me."

"Come on," said Marvin. "A deal's a deal."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Bacon. "I fulfilled my end of the bargain."

"Well, not officially."

"I wrote the book."

"You had to help me fulfill the _contract_," continued Marvin. "Well, the contract now calls for another book."

"You mentioned nothing about a contract," protested Bacon. "You asked me to write a book. I wrote it -- and with the absolute brilliance of which only I am capable. My obligation to you is finished."

"I was afraid you were going to become an attitude case," said Marvin with a sigh.

"And I was certain that you would break your word. It appears that each of us shall have his expectations fulfilled," retorted Bacon.

"Well," said Marvin with a sign of resignation, "it was probably beyond you anyway."

"What was?"

"The book I signed for."

"Don't be insulting. If _Meter Maids in Bondage_ proves anything, it proves that no form of erotica is beyond my talents to attack and upgrade."

"Yeah, but this one's for his science fiction line."

"Science fiction?"

"Well, fantasy, anyway. It's an alternate universe story."

"What is an alternate universe?"

"One in which history happened differently," explained Marvin. "It might be about a world in which Germany won World War II, or where Shakespeare is credited with ghosting all _your_ writings."

"Where that toad ghosted _my_ work?" repeated Bacon incredulously. "This really is too much to bear!" Suddenly he stared intently at Marvin. "Is _that_ what you propose to write?"

"No."

"You're quite sure?"

"Quite."

Bacon glared at him distrustfully. "What _is_ the subject of your book, then?"

"Well, I had heard you mention it, and it was the first thing that popped into my mind, and--"

"What is it?"

"The life of King Henry IX."

"That's not _my_ idea, you fool!" snapped Bacon. "It's that idiot Shakespeare's."

"Well, if you feel you can't handle it..."

"It's not that I _can't_, it's that I _won't_." Bacon was absolutely motionless for a moment, his eyes fixed on some distant point that only he could see. "For one thing, I'd have to write Queen Elizabeth out of the history books." He paused, and then snickered. "I never did like her very much anyway." He seemed lost in contemplation for a long moment. "Actually, I could turn it out in less time than the last one, since I'd be working within my own _millieu_..."

"Will you?"

"No."

"You've got decades to spare, remember?" urged Marvin.
"What's a week between friends?"
"We are not friends."
"Collaborators, then."
"Collaborators?" snapped Bacon. "If you think I'd allow you
to write a single word of Henry IX, you subliterate
anthropoid..."

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It sold seventeen million copies worldwide, and was made
into a megahit movie starring Charlton Heston III as Henry and
Bubbles Vancouver as Betty Jean Plantagenet (a role created
expressly for the film).
More to the point, it won the Hugo, the Nebula, the Nova, the
Supernova, the Pulitzer, and even the prestigious Harold Robbins
Award.
"Listen to this!" enthused Marvin as he read the reviews to
the simulacron inside his computer. "The New York Times says,
'It's as if the Bard himself had taken pen to paper.'"
"I thought time was supposed to take care of critics,"
muttered Bacon. "All it really seems to do is compound their
ignorance."
"And the Saturday Review says, 'There are a few turns of
phrase that Shakespeare himself might have envied,'" continued
Marvin.
"Shakespeare again!" snorted Bacon. "That dolt would envy a
phrase that concisely asked directions to the men's room!"
"Don't take it so personally."
"Five centuries later and he's still getting credit for
my work! How would you take it?"
Marvin shrugged. "I don't know. Why don't you write something
that doesn't read like Shakespeare?"
"A complete, well-constructed sentence doesn't read like
Shakespeare!"
"Well, then, write something that doesn't read so much like
yourself."
"I'm never writing again, thank you."
"Well, if you don't think you can disguise your voice..."
"Of course I can disguise my voice," said Bacon defensively.
Marvin shook his head. "You wrote a smut book and a fantasy,
and the critics still compare you to Shakespeare."
"They are fools."
"They are your audience," Marvin corrected him. "And you
can't hide your identity from them."
"That's what I get for being a ghost writer in the first
place. If I'd written the tragedies under my own name..."
"But you didn't."
"No, I didn't."
"And now," said Marvin carefully, "if you don't manage to
create a new literary persona, everything you write will always
be credited to Shakespeare's influence."
"This is intolerable!"
"I thought you might feel that way," said Marvin, "so I
signed another contract."
"No more fantasies or sex books," said Bacon. "It has to be
something totally different."
"A hard-boiled detective story," announced Marvin.
"I don't think I've ever read one of those."
"I'll run the scanner over some Hammett and Cain and Chandler
before I go to bed tonight."

"They are the three exemplars of the form?"

"No. They're three hard-boiled mystery writers."

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Boil and Bubble won the Edgar, the Shamus, the Marlowe, and even the coveted Jacqueline Suzanne Memorial Trophy (for Positive Contributions to the American Cultural Scene). It also sold 21 million copies, and was made into a feature film, a video series, a computer game, a role-playing game, and a chain of soup kitchens.

"'An almost perfect melding of high Shakespearean tragedy and down-to-earth Chandleresque drama,'" read Marvin, holding up the _New York Review of Books_.

"Again?" shrieked Bacon. "Am I never to be rid of that meddlesome fool?"

"You're getting on my nerves," said Marvin. "I'm the best-selling author of the decade, except maybe for Fritz Hauer, and all you can do is complain."

"I've read Fritz Hauer's books," retorted Bacon. "They're trifles, nothing but trifles. They can't begin to compare to what I've written."

"Then why don't you relax and feel triumphant or something, instead of harping about Shakespeare all the time?" complained Marvin.

"Don't you understand? The credit should be _mine_, not his! My work is revered throughout the world, but it is his name that is worshipped, not mine. Don't you realize what that can do to a sensitive artistic spirit?"

"_Boil and Bubble_ outsold his entire body of work five-to-one last month. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Not if every word, every precise turn of phrase, every poetic fantasy that I create, is to be credited to _his_ influence," responded Bacon.

"You are getting to be a regular pain in the ass," said Marvin.

"You can always turn me off and write these masterpieces yourself," said Bacon with a nasty smile.

"Don't push your luck, fella. I may just do that one of these days."

"I, for one, would thank you. Then I could return to that limbo in which Shakespeare's name is never mentioned."

"Not quite yet," said Marvin. "I just signed to do a michener."

"A michener? Is that like a mystery?"

Marvin shook his head. "No. You choose some obscure city or country, spend 300 pages making up its history, and then follow five or six generations of your hero's family. They're very popular."

"I have it!" cried Bacon. "I'll write of my own family, and then the world will know who Shakespeare really was!"

"I thought the notion might appeal to you," said Marvin with a triumphant smile.

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The Bard and the Ghost was Marvin's only artistic failure, though it sold out its first three printings prior to its official publication date.

"Too far-fetched," said _Publisher's Weekly_.

"Suspending disbelief long enough to read _Henry IX_ was one

thing," added Kirkus Review, "but when Mr. Piltch asks us to go along with the ridiclous fancy that Sir Francis Bacon actually wrote Shakespeare's plays..."

"Unbelievable," said the New York Times in the shortest book review on record.

Bacon was beside himself with frustration. His sole topic of conversation was his contempt for Shakespeare, and he soon reached the point where Marvin would have hired him a psychiatrist if he had known any who specialized in the treatment of monomaniacal computer simulacrons.

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Then came the fateful day that Marvin, in an effort to bolster his flagging sales, agreed to appear on a television talk show with his only serious literary rival, Fritz Hauer, whose rise to the top of the sales charts had been as meteoric as Marvin's own.

He was waiting in the Mauve Room prior to walking out on stage when a young man with thick glasses, an ill-fitting tan suit, a blue bow tie, and white socks peeking up over his loafers entered the room. He stared at Marvin for a moment, then took a step closer to him.

"Marvin Piltch?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yes."

"I thought I recognized the t-shirt; it's the same one you wore on the cover of Time." The young man extended his hand.

"I'm Fritz Hauer."

"Pleased to meet you," said Marvin.

"Mind if I sit down?"

"Be my guest."

Hauer sat down and continued to stare at Marvin for a few moments.

"Is something wrong?" asked Marvin.

"No. I was just curious."

"About what?"

Hauer shot a quick look at the door to make sure it was closed.

"Well, I'll never get an answer if I don't ask. Just between you and me, who's your spook?"

"My what?" said Marvin.

"Your ghost."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on, Marvin," said Hauer confidentially. "You're my only rival on the literary scene. I've studied you thoroughly. I know all about your background, your education, your cultural upbringing. You have no more business writing a classic than I have. We're computer hackers, not writers."

"Speak for yourself," said Marvin defensively.

"I will," said Hauer. "I can't ask for your confidence if I don't give you mine." He paused. "You know how people keep saying I write with Rabelaisian wit, even when I'm doing Westerns?" Hauer grinned. "That's because I've got Rabelais in my box."

"Really?"

Hauer nodded. "Who's yours? Shakespeare?"

"Is that they way they read to you?"

"Who reads books? That's what the reviews all say."

"Actually, it's Francis Bacon," admitted Marvin. "He wrote all of Shakespeare's plays."

"So you've got an experienced spook ghosting for you?" said Hauer. "Boy, I wish to hell mine was! He's very unhappy about the

situation."

"Oh?" asked Marvin, suddenly interested.

"Yeah. He keeps wanting to write orgy scenes into the cowboy stories."

"Francis writes exactly what I tell him to write," said Marvin.

"I envy you," said Hauer.

"Don't. He's very difficult to get along with. He gets furious every time the critics compare my books to Shakespeare."

"You'd think that after being a ghost writer for so many centuries, he'd be used to it by now," said Hauer.

"It just seems to make him madder," replied Marvin. "I'll be honest with you -- I'm thinking of announcing my retirement. I don't know how many more books I can get him to write."

"Whoever heard of a writer who doesn't want to write?"

"Oh, he wants to write -- but he's obsessed with this Shakespeare business. I have to appeal to his vanity to get him to do any contract work at all."

"I see your problem," sympathized Hauer. "But still...a spook who's willing to write something besides orgies. It must be wonderful!"

"I'd settle for the orgies, if he was just a little more pleasant."

"Who needs pleasant? Just lock him in a room and let him write. Hell, Rabelais wastes so much time telling dirty jokes that I've missed my last two deadlines."

"But he's pleasant?"

"Pleasant as all hell," said Hauer. "Just lazy." He paused. "I mean, it isn't as if he's got anything else to do inside that damned box."

Marvin stared intently at Hauer, who stared back at him.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" said Marvin at last.

"A trade?" suggested Hauer with a grin.

"Why not? They're ghost writers. Who else would have to know?"

"What the hell. It's a deal!"

"Fine," said Marvin, shaking on it. "_Now_ let 'em say I write like an Elizabethian!"

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"Hi, Frankie," said Hauer. "Welcome to your new home."

Bacon eyed him suspiciously.

"It's okay, really it is," said Hauer. "Marvin told me all about you, and we're gonna get along just fine."

"Why do I doubt that?"

"Beats the hell out of me. But as a gesture of good will, take a look at this."

He held a paper up before the screen.

"What is it?"

"A contract for a novel about professional football."

"I know nothing about football."

"Neither does Shakespeare."

"I _am_ Shakespeare, you dolt!"

"What I mean is, since football is totally beyond your experience, and all your research will be couched in contemporary language, you ought to be able to get out from under Shakespeare's -- uh, your own -- shadow once and for all, and be recognized as a truly original literary genius."

"You know, there's a twisted kind of logic to that," mused Bacon.

"Then you'll do it?"
"I'll consider it."

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"You brought the reviews with you?" asked Bacon.
"Yes," said Hauer.
"They didn't compare my writing to Shakespeare this time?"
"No."
"Finally!"
"Uh...Frankie..."
"I can hardly wait. Let me hear them."
"You're sure?"
"Of course I'm sure," said Bacon. "I've waited 500 years to be acknowledged as my own man."
"Okay," said Hauer.
"Start with the _New York Times_."
"_The Green Bay Massacre_, Fritz Hauer's latest novel, begins with a brilliant conceit, but soon degenerates into a slavish imitation of our foremost American writer, the incomparable Marvin Piltch."
"_What?_"
"Well, at least they're not accusing you of being Shakespeare any more."
"Shut up!"
"Do you want to hear the rest of it or not?"
"No. Read me the _New York Review of Books_."
"_The Green Bay Massacre_, Fritz Hauer's heavy-handed homage to the works of Marvin Piltch..."
"_This can't be happening!_" cried Bacon.
Hauer stared at Bacon's image with some compassion, then shrugged. "What the hell -- once a hack, always a hack," he said as he walked to the door.
Bacon's last plaintive scream seemed to linger in the dusty air of the room long after Hauer had left to sign a new contract with his publisher.

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