

NORMAN SPINRAD

The Age of Invention

Norman Spinrad is a West Coast writer with a pyrotechnic style. He has produced a number of memorable novels and stories, including Bug Jack Barron, The Men in the Jungle, and the controversial The Iron Dream. But Spinrad is even better when working with the short story form, witness his "The Big Flash," "No Direction Home," and the unforgettable "The Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde." This collection begins with one of his best and most ambitious tales, a macrocosmic and hilarious overview of the dawn of business civilization.

One morning, having nothing better to do, I went to visit my cousin Roach. Roach lived in one of those lizard-infested caves on the East Side of the mountain. Roach did not hunt bears. Roach did not grow grain. Roach spent his daylight hours throwing globs of bearfat, bison chips and old rotten plants against the walls of his cave.

Roach said that he was an Artist. He said it with a capital "A." (Even though writing has not yet been invented.)

Unlikely as it may seem, Roach had a woman. She was, however, the ugliest female on the mountain. She spent her daylight hours lying on the dirty floor of Roach's cave and staring at the smears of old bearfat, moldy bison chips and rotten plants on the wall. She used to say that this was Roach's Soul. She would also say that Roach had a very big soul. Very big and very smelly.

As I approached the mouth of Roach's cave, I smelled pungent smoke. In fact, the cave was filled with this smoke. In the middle of the cave sat Roach and his woman. They were burning a big pile of weeds and inhaling the smoke.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Turning on, baby," said Roach. "I've just invented it."

"What does `turning on' mean?"

"Well, you get this weed, dig? You burn it, and then you honk the smoke. "

I scratched my head, inadvertently killing several of my favorite fleas.

"Why do that?" I asked.

"It like gets you high."

"You don't seem any farther off the ground than I am," I observed. "And you're still kinda runty."

Roach snorted in disgust. "Forget it, man," he said. "It's only for Artists, Philosophers and Metaphysicians, anyway. (Even though Philosophy and Metaphysics have not yet been invented.) Dig my latest!"

On the nearest wall of the cave, there was this big blob of bearfat. In the middle of it was this small piece of bison chip. Red and green and brown plant stains surrounded this. It smelled as good as it looked.

"Uh . . . interesting, . . ." I said.

"Like a masterpiece, baby," Roach said proudly. "I call it The Soul of Man."

"Uh . . . The Sole of Man? Er . . . it does sort of look like a foot. "

"No, no, man! Soul, not sole!"

"But, Roach, spelling hasn't been invented yet."

"Sorry. I forgot."

"Anyway," I said, trying to make him feel a little better, "it's very Artistic." (Whatever that meant.)

"Thanks, baby," Roach said sulkily.

"What's the matter, Roach?" I asked. He really looked awful.

"We haven't eaten in a week."

"Why don't you go out and kill a bear or something?" I suggested.

"I don't have the time to waste on hunting," Roach said indignantly. "I must live for Art!"

"It appears that you are dying for Art," I replied. "You can't do very much painting when you are dead."

"Well, anyway," said Roach, in a very tiny voice, "I'm a pretty lousy hunter in the first place. I would probably starve even if I spent the whole day hunting. Or maybe a bear would kill me. This way, I'm at least like starving for a Reason."

I must admit it made a kind of sense. Roach is terribly nearsighted. Also amazingly scrawny. The original ninety-pound weakling.

"Mmmmmmm . . ." I observed.

"Mmmmmmm . . . what?" asked Roach.

"Well, you know old Aardvark? He can't hunt either. So what he does is he makes spearheads and trades them for bears. Maybe you could . . . ?"

"Go into business?" Roach cried. "Become bourgeois? Please! am an Artist. Besides," he added lamely, "I don't know how to make spearheads."

"Mmmmm . . . '

"Mmmmm . . . '

"I know!" I cried. "You could trade your paintings!"

"Cool, baby!" exclaimed Roach. "Er . . . only why would anyone want to trade food for a painting?"

"Why because . . . er . . . ah . . ."

"I guess I'll just have to starve."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Er . . . if I can get someone to trade food for your paintings, will you give me some of the food, say . . . oh, one bear out of every ten?"

"Sure," said Roach. "What've I got to lose?"

"It's a deal then?"

"Deal, baby!"

I had just invented the Ten-Percenter.

So I went to see Peacock. Peacock lived in the weirdest cave on the mountain-all filled up with stuff like mooseskins dyed pink, stuffed armadillos and walls covered with withered morning glories. For some 'reason which I have not yet been able to fathom, the women of the more henpecked men on the mountain give Peacock bears to make the same kind of messes in their caves.

Peacock is pretty weird himself. He was dressed in a skintight sabertooth skin dyed bright violet.

"Hello, sweets," Peacock said, as I entered his perfumed cave.

"Hello, Peacock," I said uneasily. "Heard about Roach?"

"Roach?" shrilled Peacock. "That dirty, dirty man? That beatnik with the positively unspeakable cave?"

"That's him," I said. "Roach the Artist. Very good Artist, you know. After all, he invented it."

"Well, what about that dreadful, dreadful creature?"

"Well, you know your friend Cockatoo-?"

"Please, sweets!" shrieked Peacock. "Do not mention that thing Cockatoo in my presence again! Cockatoo and I are on the outs. I don't know what I ever saw in him. He's gotten so unspeakably butch."

Cockatoo was this . . . uh . . . friend of Peacock's . . . or was. They . . . uh . . . invented something together. Nobody is quite sure what it was, but we've organized a Vice Squad, just in case.

"Yeah," I muttered. "Well anyway, Cockatoo is paying Roach twenty bears to do a painting in his cave. He says that having an Original Roach in his cave will make your cave look like . . . er . . . 'A positive sloth's den, hubby,' I think his words were."

"Ooooooh!" shrieked Peacock. "Ooooooh!" He began to jump around the cave, pounding his little fists against the walls. "That monster! That veritable beast! Oooh, it's horrid, that's what it is! What am I going to do, sweets, whatever am I going to do?"

"Well," I suggested, "Roach is my cousin, you know, and I do have some pull with him. I suppose I could convince him to do a painting in your cave instead of Cockatoo's. Especially if you paid thirty bears instead of twenty"

"Oh, would you, sweets? Would you really?"

"Well, I don't know. I do kind of like you, Peacock, but on the other hand"

"Pretty, pretty, pretty please?"

I sighed heavily. "Okay, Peacock," I said. "You've talked me into it. "

So Peacock got his Original Roach for thirty bears. Next week, I went to see Cockatoo, and I told him the story. I got him to pay forty bears. Forty and thirty is seventy. Which gave me seven. Not bad for a couple hours' work. I better watch out, or someone'll invent income tax.

I saw Roach last week, the ingrate. He has moved to a bigger cave on the West Side of the mountain. He has a fine new leopard skin and three new women. He has even invented the Havana cigar, so he can have something expensive to smoke.

Unfortunately, he has discovered that he no longer needs me to make deals for him. His going price is eighty bears a painting. I, like a dope, neglected to invent the renewable exclusive agency contract. Can't invent 'em all, I suppose. Roach has become truly insufferable, though. He now talks of "art" with a small "a" and "Bears" with a capital "B." He is the first Philistine.

He is going to get his.

How do you like my fine new leopard skin? Would you like one of my Havana cigars? Have you met this new woman yet? Have you seen my new cave?

I can buy and sell Roach now. I am the first tycoon. How did I do it? Well . . . Hog was the mountain bum. He never trimmed his beard. He didn't have a woman, not even an ugly one. He laid

around his filthy cave all day, doing nothing but belching occasionally. A real slob. But even a jerk like Hog can throw bearfat and bison chips against a cave wall. I made an Artist out of Hog. I did this by telling him he could make fifty bears a day just by throwing bearfat and bison chips against the walls of other people's caves. This appealed to Hog.

This time I did not neglect to invent the renewable exclusive agency contract. It was another ten percent deal.

Hog gets ten percent.

Then I went to Peacock's cave. I stared in dismay at Roach's painting. "What is that?" I sneered.

"That, sweets, is an Original Roach," Peacock crooned complacently. "Isn't it divine? Such sensitivity, such style, such grace, such--"

"Roach?" I snorted. "You can't be serious. Why that Neopseudoclassicalmodern stuff went out with the Brontosaurus. You're miles behind the times, Peacock," I said, thereby inventing the Art Critic. "The Artist today is of course the Great Hog."

"Hog?" whined Peacock. "Hog is beastly, beastly. A rude, stupid, smelly thing, a positive slob. Why his whole cave is a wretched mass of slop!"

"Exactly," I answered. "That's the source of his greatness. Hog is the mountain's foremost Slop Artist."

"Ooooooh How much do the Great Hog's paintings cost?"

"One hundred bears apiece," I said smugly. "Cockatoo is already contracting to--"

"I told you never to mention that creature to me again!" Peacock shrieked. "He must not steal an Original Hog from me, do you hear? I simply couldn't bear it! But all this is getting so expensive"

I gave Peacock my best understanding smile. "Peacock, old man," I said, "I have a little business proposition for you"

Well, that's all there was to it. You guessed it, now when Peacock makes one of his messes in some henpecked caveman's cave, it always includes at least one Original Hog, or maybe a couple Original Treesloths-Treesloth being another jerk Artist I have under contract. I sell the painting to Peacock for a hundred bears, and he charges his sucker, client, two hundred bears for the same mess of bearfat and bison chips. Peacock calls this Interior Decorating.

I call it "Civilization." Maybe it'll last for a couple of months, if I'm lucky.