



CommWealth

Michael D. Smith

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For my wife Nancy

CHAPTER ONE

I Have Thirty Days Enjoyment of This Object

*Rule One - You are free to enjoy the chosen object for thirty days.
During this period no other person may request it.*

Thursday, December 14

Allan shivered at the reflection of his black overcoat and his striding legs on the wet sidewalk. Up ahead someone with a DreamPiston Electronics bag opened a shiny red Porsche glistening with thousands of water beads.

“Okay,” Allan said, “I’ll take your car here.”

The mustached little twerp looked up. “Ah, crap.”

“C’mon, don’t give me any trouble. Gimme the key.”

“Look, it’s raining. And I just got the top-end GorgonPlus camera and the new Fappy tablet.”

“Not my problem. Fork the damn key over.”

“Look, my umbrella’s in the car. Can I just get my umbrella so my stuff--”

“Forget it. The umbrella’s part of the car as far as I’m concerned. Anything in the car. Besides, I just lost my umbrella a couple blocks back. I’m *soaked*.”

“C’mon, I just got this car the other day.”

“Don’t hand me that. The sticker on the plate says you got it a month and a half ago. You’re overdue, buddy. Now hand me the key.”

“Dammit! Dammit!”

“Got trouble there?” A bright blue City of Linstar police car idled in the rain. “Got a Hoarder there?” a huge officer grinned.

“Uh, no, not at all,” said the twerp. “I just can’t find the key.”

“Yeah, right. You just unlocked the damn car with it,” Allan said, turning to the policeman. “He *is* giving me a lot of crap about it.”

“C’mon, sir, you know better than that.” The officer’s name tag read BARCLAY.

“Dammit!” snarled the twerp. He separated the Porsche key from

his key ring, thrust it at Allan, then spun around and fastened on a man coming down the sidewalk. “Give me that umbrella! Right now!”

“*Goddammit*,” the man grunted, surrendering his umbrella to the twerp, who grabbed it and hoisted it above his DreamPiston bag.

“We really got the Christmas spirit here, don’t we?” Barclay said.

“Really,” Allan said. “Some people ...” He examined the Porsche key in the rain. “Thanks for your help, officer.”

“Oh, I’m sure it wasn’t really necessary. People are basically good, you know. Give ’em time to adjust and all, that’s what I say.”

The twerp leapt into traffic with his new umbrella and his bag, waving his free arm. A little green car skidded to a halt. The twerp ran to the window and pounded on it. “Give me this car! Right now!”

“Whoa!” Allan said. “What a bastard!”

Barclay was out of his patrol car in a second, hand on his holster. “Sir, that’s not the right way to go about it. We need to be *respectful*. That’s the CommWealth way.”

A young woman got out of the car, carefully put up a clear umbrella, and removed the proper key from her own key chain. The guy snatched it out of her hand even as he threw his DreamPiston bag past her into the passenger seat. “Well, there you go,” she said.

“This guy giving you trouble, miss?” said Officer Barclay.

“Uh, no, not really.” She was tall, red-haired, with long slim legs beneath her yellow raincoat. The twerp revved her former car’s cruddy little engine and whipped past Barclay into traffic.

“Listen, you probably need a ride,” Allan said. “I have this Porsche right here.”

Blue eyes wide, she backed away. “Uh, no ... no thanks ...”

“But you’ll get soaked!”

“I--I have my umbrella. I’ll be fine. I can get another car. Don’t worry about me.”

“Where’s the damn Christmas spirit, that’s what I want to know,” Officer Barclay muttered, getting into the patrol car. “Hoarders!”

Allan turned back to the redhead. “Are you sure? We could run by my place. You could dry off, hey, even shower if you want. Look,

I've got an incredible place, I just got it. You won't believe the size of the wet bar."

"Really, no thanks."

"Officer in trouble at Hawkins and Marina--" came the squawk, followed by the roar of Barclay's patrol car accelerating into the rain.

"Well, screw you, then," Allan said. "Give me your umbrella!"

"Well, of ... of course ..." She handed it over, looking at the sky and turning up her raincoat collar.

"Bitch." Allan slipped into the Porsche and tossed the clear umbrella onto the floor next to the mustached twerp's original one. He turned the key and the engine rumbled to life. "*Wow!*" he laughed.

CHAPTER TWO

You May Not Ask Me for Anything for Thirty Days

Rule Two - The requestor is untouchable for thirty days by the person asked. Attempts at retaliation, such as demanding unusually large quantities from the original requestor after the thirty-day period, carry stiff penalties.

Lisa shut the door of her Corvette, amused to note that it matched the color of her dress. It was a lovely morning and the sun was out. How could Linstar have so many strange moods? All the winter rain earlier this morning was gone, and though it was a bit chilly, it seemed like spring to Lisa, perfect for just a turquoise dress. She stepped up the curb to the one-story brick building on Carson and opened the glass door with the sign “The Cup of Fog.”

Sunlight on the black and white checkered tile. The smell of coffee. Two men at the counter. Behind the counter Jill stood in a tight deep blue dress with huge circles of orange and yellow. She looked up with a smile. “Lisa! Long time, no see.”

The men turned.

Allan. And Richard, wearing those tight bicycle shorts again. He was such a lovely man. She took a deep breath. She’d been hoping Richard might be here, but--

“Hello, Allan,” she said, trying to keep her voice light. “Hi, Richard, that must be your bicycle out there.”

“Yep, sure is. Least nobody’s claimed it yet.”

“Well, I guess that’s good, then.” She smiled but, getting no response, turned back to Jill. “So is Steve in? He called me.”

“He’s in the back,” Jill said, “wrestling with a million boxes of boxes of something, as usual.”

“Lisa, what are *you* doing here?” Allan gasped.

“Well, Steve was telling me you had a part for me. A new play.”

“Hell, the thing’s not even finished yet,” Allan muttered. Lisa shifted uncomfortably his gaze. Dammit, she didn’t want it to be like this. When she’d run into him on the street a couple months ago everything had seemed normal. But did she really think they could just be friends again?

“Well, Steve told me you had a part for me.”

Steve stuck his head in from the kitchen door. He was tall and strong in a tight T-shirt, with prematurely receding blond hair. “Hey, Lisa! Are you here to engage in high-level negotiations with our playwright?”

“Well, I thought I was. But he says he hasn’t finished the play yet.”

“C’mon, he’s written the first three acts.” Steve set a carton on the counter and Jill proceeded to lift out packages of napkins.

“Well, it’s really just a draft,” Allan said.

“But you told me you thought Lisa would be perfect for the Bonnie part.”

“Yeah, that was it. The Bonnie part,” Lisa said. “Fork it over, Allan. I need some work here. *Playground* folded last week.”

“But it’s nowhere near finished. It’s really crap,” Allan said.

“What’s it called?”

“*Cabaret*,” Steve said. “I’ve only seen Act One, but--”

“Oh, like the movie, huh?”

“No! Not like the stupid movie!” Allan said. “I didn’t even know there *was* a movie called *Cabaret* when I started it. But I’m not gonna change the damn title.”

“I’m trying to get him to change the title to *Carburet*, since it’s about a car mechanic,” Steve laughed. “Carburetor, get it?”

“Then again, who would?” Richard put in. “When’s the last time you saw a car with a carburetor?”

Steve shrugged. “Well, I’m not a genius playwright. I just own a coffee shop.”

“Look, I know the title sucks,” Allan said. “But I’m not gonna change it.”

“Anyway, I figured we needed to think about casting before too long, and I knew *Playground* was winding down for Lisa, so I gave her a call. C’mon, Allan, don’t be sore. You said she’d be perfect.”

“So how long until you finish it?” Lisa said.

“Years,” Allan muttered. “Probably never.”

“Hell, we need a play, Allan,” Steve said. “Let’s just put the thing on. Finish it up and we could start casting in a couple weeks. Put it on in February.”

“Aaah ...”

“Lisa, would you like some coffee?” Jill asked.

“Sure would.” Lisa took a stool to Allan’s right. She would have preferred to sit to Richard’s left, but that looked a little forward. “You mean I don’t have to formally demand a cup?”

“Not here,” Jill smiled, pouring coffee into an iridescent cup.

“I can’t believe the Cup of Fog still *exists*.”

“Isn’t it an amazing place?” Richard said from the other side of Allan.

“Really. I would have thought July would’ve finished you people right off,” she said, then caught herself.

Thank God there weren’t any customers here. Only friends. Forensic Squad. Maybe she’d been homesick for these people for a long time. But she’d had to stay away. Maybe it had been good for her.

“No, no finish-off,” Steve said. “We’re stable.” He knocked on the counter. “You know, we did have one guy demand the place last October.”

“Really? God, I’ve been so out of touch. So what happened?”

“Well, for businesses you have to register with CommWealth and it takes a day or two for all the paperwork to go through. Like you have to prove you won’t be a polluter and you’re responsible and all that. But it was weird. We open the paper the next day and *this guy* was the one arrested for abusing all those kids at that day care center.”

“That guy? The Albert Carter guy? Oh my God! That was everywhere!”

Steve nodded. “Isn’t that disgusting? The guy apparently--”

“Look, let’s not talk about all that,” Jill cut in. “It’s yucky. Not worth talking about.”

“Yeah. But, dammit, we came *that* close.”

“Now, c’mon, Steve,” Allan said, “let’s not be too much of a Hoarder here. Why, I could ask you and Jill for the Cup of Fog right now!”

Steve swatted at Allan with a counter towel. “Hell, you’d never be able to run the place. And I’m sure you’d be a major polluter.”

“Besides,” Jill said, “Allan is the soul of propriety about the Cup

of Fog. He gives us two dollars for every cup of coffee. He even pays for his refills.”

“Course it’s all just play money now,” Steve grinned. “I still can’t figure out why we lock it up in the safe every night.”

Jill shrugged. “Anyway, we don’t know how Allan stays sane. He drinks eight cups every morning.”

“Well, then I hafta go write,” Allan said. “Need to tank up and all. Collect some morning experiences and all.” He turned to Lisa. “See, I’ve really started writing every day. Every afternoon. A lot of times all night.”

“Well, that’s good. I always thought ... you needed to do that,” Lisa replied, avoiding his eyes.

“Like just earlier this morning I got this incredible Porsche.”

“Oh, the red one out there. I wondered who had it. But I thought that would be more Steve’s style.”

“Not me. I’m too shy to ask people for stuff like that,” Steve said.

Lisa laughed. “You? Shy? All you have to do is ask, and they *have* to give it. Like I just *asked* for that Corvette last night.”

Steve peered through the window. “Nice. How much did it set you back?”

She laughed again. “I can afford it!”

“Anyway,” Allan said, “I need experiences to write about. Like for the play. Since it’s about a German car mechanic. I got that Porsche and the first thing I did was take it up to a hundred fifty on the Central Speedway. Man, it’s smooth!”

Lisa shook her head. No, Allan hadn’t changed a bit. Why had she come back here? “So have you guys been putting on a lot of plays? I saw the ad for *Total Approximation* in September.”

“That and *Crumpled Mirrors* have been the only ones since you left,” Steve replied. “A lot of people just haven’t been up to it. Like Xander, for instance. He’s flitted in and out of here but basically we had to write him out of *Total Approximation*. We haven’t seen him or Plater or Darco since then.”

“Well, they’re all sleazeballs,” Jill said. “They weren’t right for Forensic Squad.”

“But we’ve had a couple new people. Like Richard here. And

Erica.”

Lisa smiled at Richard. “I hear that was your first time in a play.”

“No, actually my first time was when I got to stand in the background in *Crumpled Mirrors* and wave a plastic gun. *Total Approximation* was my first speaking part, but it was pretty minor. Just keep me in the background. But Erica wants to keep going.”

Lisa kept forgetting about Richard’s gorgeous model girlfriend. No wonder he didn’t flirt back. “Well, when she applied at the Middle Theater I thought she’d be good, but Hardin wasn’t ready for a new actress just yet, so ...”

“Well, we’re all minor roles here,” Steve said. “Except for our genius actors like Allan, of course.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re devoting your energies to your real work, Allan.”

“Yeah, well ...” Allan sipped his coffee. “For what that’s worth.”

Lisa looked beyond the infantile Allan to Richard’s magnificent profile. And that long dark hair and those piercing dark eyes. And that blue bicycle shirt over his lean hard torso. Well, she wasn’t really shopping for a man, was she? Sure, Richard was damn intriguing, but the Rupert disaster was over and she really didn’t need anyone now. And the only good thing about Rupert was that he’d blown her clear out of the Allan catastrophe.

Why did Allan have to be here today? Lisa just wanted to see her buddies, maybe do something with Forensic Squad for old time’s sake, but who was she kidding? Everyone knew Forensic Squad wasn’t doing well. *Mirrors* and *Approximation* had gotten terrible reviews. Yeah, those three sleazeballs had quit, but they’d been decent actors when they could stay off the coke. Then Peter and Diane had left, and they were geniuses. So who did they have now? Jill and Steve and Allan? And bicycle mechanic Richard and his stunning model Erica who couldn’t act? That was no acting troupe.

She loved Jill and Steve, though. And she’d missed the Cup and the camaraderie. Was there some way she could just drift back in and help the group grow again, ignoring Allan until he finally got it through his head that she was just a person? He just sat there moping, looking as if he were about to throw up. And all the time staring at her breasts. She scrunched down on her stool.

If Richard wanted to stare at her, that would be another thing. Now there was a man who looked like he knew how to conduct himself in bed.

CHAPTER THREE

I Can Only Ask You Once

Rule Three - Once you ask somebody for something, you can never ask him or her for anything else again.

Richard put his hands around the hot cup. He loved the black walls and ceiling of the Cup of Fog, the crimson counter, the overexposed light glowing from the window to his left. He gazed into the steam rising from his coffee. Across from him in her deep blue dress Jill organized supplies.

“So I hear you have your own business, too,” Lisa Arlington said from across Allan. “Bicycles, is that it?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Richard said. “Bought it in June, before anybody knew the Change was coming. But apparently nobody wants to ask for a bicycle business, so I’m stuck with it.” Lisa was cute, in her tight turquoise dress, with all her makeup and jewelry. But definitely not his type. He’d met her at Erica’s audition at the Middle Theater last July and hadn’t seen her since.

“It must be weird, trying to run a business under these conditions,” Lisa said, glancing over her shoulder the way everyone did these days when discussing CommWealth, even though there was no one else in here today.

“Well, it’s not really a business anymore. Mainly it’s just the building itself on Emily Street. That’s all anybody could really ask for. The only people who want bicycle repair are the kind who’re really attached to their bikes. Otherwise, they’d just go out and ask somebody for a brand-new bike. Sometimes people will even offer to barter something for my services, but usually they just demand I fix the thing. They don’t see that I really enjoy doing it.”

“It’s like Allan here,” Jill said, “when he pays for his coffee. I guess people are still pretty nostalgic for the old days.” Richard noted the same glance behind her.

“Hell, I like the idea of value for value transaction,” Allan blurted. “Never said I didn’t.” He relapsed into the odd silence he’d kept to ever since Lisa came in. Richard knew the whole story. Everyone did.

It was hard to believe Lisa would just walk in like this. Then again, Steve had predicted she'd return to Forensic Squad someday, just that there had to be a way of getting her back without freaking Allan. Richard shrugged. Too late for that.

"And you and Steve," Lisa said to Jill, "you just wind up having to hand out free coffee all day? How do you go on?"

Jill shrugged, switching on a fresh pot of coffee. "Like everybody else. We just go to the coffee wholesaler and demand coffee. Then we go to the napkin wholesaler and demand napkins. Then we go--"

"Then we go to the little plastic stirrer wholesaler and demand little plastic stirrers," Steve cut in, leaning over with car keys in hand to kiss his wife's cheek. "It's really quite a simple life."

"It wouldn't be if 'I Can Only Ask You Once' applied to businesses as well as individuals," Richard said. "But you can ask the same business again and again until there's nothing left of it."

"But where's it to end?" Lisa said. "I mean, it's really quite confusing."

"Yeah, it makes you wonder who *makes* anything anymore," Allan muttered.

Steve shrugged. "Well, when it all comes crashing down, we'll have CommWealth to blame!"

"Shhh!" Jill said.

"Come on, we're all friends here," Steve said.

"Well, all the same ..." Jill rearranged something under the counter. "Where're you off to?"

"I'm gonna hit Jackson Lumber and see what kind of wood they have left. For those shelves we were talking about in the back."

"Oh, right. But you can't fit all that in the Volvo."

"Well, either I'll cram it all out the window, or I'll come back with a semi-truck. Don't worry."

"Pick me up a semi while you're at it," Richard said. "You can never tell when you need one."

"Oh, that reminds me, we need a new laptop," Jill said. "It screwed up again."

"Is it the hard disk? Again?" Steve said. "I thought defragging would fix that. Do we have backups?"

“Sure, but I’m sick of fooling with it.”

“Let me take a look at it again before I leave.” Steve disappeared into the back room.

“Did you hear about his grandfather a few weeks ago?” Allan said.

“Uh, no,” Lisa said. “Did he die?”

“Damn right he died. Cops blew him away in a gun battle up at his farm in Freestone County. The old coot holed up there with all sorts of semi-automatics and kept ’em at bay for three days. But Steve won’t let me write a play about it.”

“Allan, *please*,” Jill said.

“Son of a bitch!” came from the back room.

“In a *gun battle*?” Lisa gasped. “My God! What was he doing?”

Allan shrugged. “Cops said he was running drugs out of there, can you believe it? An old codger like that? The guy was nuts. Don’t you read the papers? I want to play the part when I write it. It’ll be called *Standoff in Freestone County*.”

“Huh. But maybe Steve wouldn’t like that.”

“Haven’t you always wanted to do this?” Steve said, emerging from the back and pitching a laptop computer into the air. It smashed to the tile and split open.

“*Steve!*” Jill yelled.

“Whoa!” Richard cried, laughing. “Steve, you’re nuts!”

“No, don’t worry, it doesn’t run in the family, Lisa,” Steve said, kicking the wrecked computer across the tile. “I’m not like my grandpa.”

“Don’t break the screen! I’m not gonna clean up that glass!” Jill said.

Steve maneuvered the laptop out the door with his feet. Then they heard it thump into the dumpster outside.

“Look what it did to the tile!” Jill complained.

“Well, that floor’s probably needed replacing for years,” Allan commented. “Why don’t you go to some tile store and make ’em replace it?”

Jill frowned. “All right, I will. Steve hates it when I do that. He’s always *fixing* things.”

Richard was astonished by her tight angry lips. “Hey, I never

would have met him--or you all--if he hadn't brought his bike over to get fixed," he pointed out. Jill met his eyes and shrugged.

"Listen, is anyone cold in here?" she said. "I have a little heater in the back."

"Well, I guess I am getting a little chilly," Lisa said. "It really hasn't warmed up outside yet. I thought it was like spring, but ..."

"I've been *freezing*," Allan said.

"Okay, let me get it. I'll be right back." Jill headed for the back.

"Need some help?" Richard said, getting up.

"That would be nice. I think it's on the top shelf."

Richard followed her into the back room. It was fifteen by twenty feet and fifteen high. One entire wall was shelves crammed with supplies.

Why did Steve and Jill need so much? Were they just stocking up for the day when everybody ran out of everything? Of course, that would make them Hoarders. Not that Richard would ever say anything. It was hard to believe that Steve needed to build even more shelves back here.

Jill dragged a stool over and climbed up. Her blue dress was like an exercise leotard, hugging her full breasts and her hips, then loosening and flowing below her thighs. She had brick-red hair and wore large dangling silver triangles from her ears. Her eyes were the strangest gray he'd ever seen.

"Here, I'm taller, let me do that," he offered.

"No, I know where it is. Back on this top shelf somewhere. You just steady me in case I fall."

Richard gently placed both hands on her hips. She pulled items this way and that, her thighs straining beneath his fingers. "Steady, there."

"Don't worry, you've got me. Where *is* that thing?"

Those breasts jiggled pleasantly as she worked something free. His fingers were just an inch from her firm round ass. He felt that he was holding a magnificent jungle cat. Jill turned with the heater and started to come down. Richard took the heater and set it down. Then he guided her off the stool and into his arms.

Gray eyes. And she was kissing him, long and fiercely. He held the magnificent jungle cat and kissed her with all his soul.

CHAPTER FOUR

You Can Never Get it Back

Rule Four - You can never ask for the same thing back from the person who got it from you, not even after his or her thirty days of enjoyment.

Allan cleared his throat. “Well, the, uh, play still needs some work, but if you’re interested in the Bonnie part, well, it’s there. It’s sorta interesting, I think.”

He was alone with Lisa. This couldn’t be real. It had to be fate that Jill and Richard and Steve had all gone away. And Lisa was actually being nice to him. Was that a hint of passion in her eyes? Was the passion still there? Buried and horrible, but there?

“So ... what’s Bonnie like?” Lisa asked, fidgeting on her stool.

Fidgeting. Good sign. Yes, it was obvious she still wanted him.

“Well, Bonnie’s the wife of Carl, this race car driver. One day she decides she’s going to race cars too. At first Carl is a real sexist pig about the whole thing, but finally he sees that she needs a real life of her own and he says okay. It ends up really energizing their sex life.”

“Oh ... I see ...”

“See, I play Carl.”

“Oh ...”

“But there’s also this cabaret they all play in during their off hours. It’s sorta like a satire on Forensic Squad.”

“Right ...” Lisa looked toward the back room. “I don’t suppose there are any other plays you all have in the pipeline? I’m really looking for some steady work. Hardin says the Middle Theater won’t do another production until June.”

Allan shrugged. Who cared about steady work? Everyone was fixed for life with CommWealth. And Lisa was rich in the first place. The damn Arlingtons had practically founded Linstar.

God, she was beautiful. He remembered her climbing on top, boobs dangling. What he’d give to strip that tight turquoise dress off her this second. It was all in *Cabaret*. How much he loved her. The fantastic sex. When she read it, she’d finally know how Allan had felt

all this time. “Well, I know what you mean about needing steady work,” he said. “People want to stay occupied with ... with meaningful stuff.”

Lisa nodded. And he met her golden eyes. How often he’d stared into them as they’d made it, both of them laughing with delight. He couldn’t believe he was actually alone with her again.

“I think that’s it,” Lisa said. “People need steady work.”

“Well, the theater is *my* steady work. I should write more plays, I guess.”

“Well, I’m glad you’ve got this outlet. Just keep practicing with it and all, you know. I think you’d be perfect for the Middle Theater when we get it running again.”

“Really? You think I could handle the Middle Theater?” God, now she was *flattering* him. Didn’t that mean she definitely wanted him in her bed?

“Well, sure. I don’t know why things fell apart there the last couple months.”

“But, the Middle Theater’s so *professional*.”

She shrugged. “You’re probably ready for it, Allan.”

She used his first name. She wanted him. They could get married. Be like Steve and Jill. They were so damn stable. They loved each other and had this wonderful business that was mystically protected from anyone ever barging in and stealing it.

But it wasn’t stealing, was it? It was CommWealth. It was the way they lived now. They’d made this new life out of nothing. They couldn’t go back. If Jill and Steve lost the Cup of Fog, they just lost it. But if someone ever took this place from them, all Allan had to do was wait thirty days and ask for it back. Forensic Squad could just take turns always asking for it back. Yes, they could keep it in the family.

“Well, I really *like* Forensic Squad, you know,” he said. “There are some great people here. And I’ve been talking with Peter. You know, trying to get him and Diane back, and if you came back, wow, there’d be like eight of us.”

“Well, you certainly seem to be getting some interesting new people. Like Richard. I mean, you can tell from looking at him that he’d have presence on stage.”

“Huh? I don’t know. He’s okay. Real wooden, though.”

“Of course it’ll take time for him to develop.”

“And Erica. I don’t know about her. She seems so shallow.”

Lisa shrugged. “She had a decent tryout at the Middle Theater. There just wasn’t a part in *Playground* open. But she’s so gorgeous.”

Allan swallowed. “Not ... not as gorgeous as you, of course.”

Lisa looked away. “Jill certainly still makes the same fantastic cup of coffee.”

“So are you going to be Bonnie?”

“Well, I’d have to see the play first.”

Allan reeled. *She wanted to read his play*. The play that would lay his soul bare to her. After all these agonizing months of separation, Lisa Arlington would finally understand him. Would finally soothe his deepest suffering.

About the Author

Michael D. Smith was raised in the Northeast and the Chicago area, then moved to Texas to attend Rice University, where he began developing as a writer and visual artist. The first six novels in his Jack Commer science fiction series have been published by Double Dragon Publishing. In addition, Sortmind Press has published his literary novels Sortmind, The Soul Institute, CommWealth, Akard Drearstone, and Jump Grenade. All titles are available from Amazon.

Smith's web site, <https://sortmind.com>, contains further examples of his novels and visual art, and he muses about writing and art processes at <https://blog.sortmind.com/>.

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