

Roadside Picnic - Legend

(Arkady & Boris Strugatsky - Roadside Picnic (1972/2012)
Taken from new translation by Olena Bormashenko)

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-Anomalies:

#Satan's blossom – Type: Chemical? Injures via spitting (acid).
Description (page 23): "And from Satan's blossom and its spit."

#Burnt Fuzz – Type: Thermal/Chemical?
Description (page 25): "Even the burning fuzz doesn't make it over to our side, though you'd think the wind would carry it around all four directions."

#Hell Slime – Type: Thermal? – Note: Last quote implies that the anomaly or its effect/manifestation/piece can be picked up/contained and moved.
Description (page 25/31/32/46): "Now at night when you crawl by, you can see the glow inside, as if alcohol were burning in bluish tongues. That's the hell slime radiating from the basement."
"The dump truck is standing over the pit, just like before—in great shape, without any rust holes or spots—and the stuff on the floor around it also looks the same; that's probably because there isn't much hell slime in the pit, and it hasn't splashed out since my last visit."
"...the hell slime was shooting tongues of flame up from the pit, blue ones, like burning alcohol, and the most frustrating thing was that the damn flames didn't even give off light but only made the garage seem darker."
"So what exactly does he need?" I ask. "Hell slime, if I understood correctly," Dick says, and gives me a strange look. "Ah, so he needs hell slime!" I say. "Maybe he'd like a death lamp as well?" "I asked him about that, too." "Well?" "Believe it or not, he does." "Yeah?" I say. "Then he can go get them himself. It's easy as pie! We have basements full of hell slime, he can take a bucket and dip right in. It's his funeral."

#Bug Trap – Type: Gravitational. Impacts the mass of an object + enforces gravitational fields.
Description (page 29/30): "And what if something gets you at that height? They won't even be able to find the pieces. Or maybe there's a bug trap around here—never mind the pieces, there will be nothing left at all."
"I take the fifth nut and throw it farther and higher. There it is, the bug trap! the nut goes up all right and starts going down fine, but halfway down it looks like someone tugged it off to the side, pulling it so hard that it goes right into the clay and disappears."
"I throw out eight more nuts, until I figure out the shape of the trap. To be honest, I could have managed with seven, but I throw one especially for him, right into the center, so he can properly admire his graviconcentrate. It smashes into the clay as if it were a ten-pound weight instead of a nut, then goes right out of sight, leaving only a hole in the ground."

#Cobweb – Type: Unknown – Note: No feeling or experience on touch, but if exposed enough, it kills some days later seemingly out of the blue, with no precondition symptoms.
Description (page 32/33): "But what about that silver stuff? It looks just like a cobweb. What sort of spider could have left it behind? I've yet to see a single bug in the Zone. "And there really is something sparkling there, silver threads are stretching from the canisters to the floor—looks just like a cobweb. It might in fact be a cobweb, but better to stay away from it." "Kirill steps over the empty, turns around, and his back goes right into the silver stuff. The only thing I can do is close my eyes. I feel weak all over, can't hear a thing—just the sound of the cobweb tearing. With a faint crackle, like a regular cobweb, except louder, of course. I'm crouching there with my eyes closed, can't feel my hands or my feet, then Kirill says, "Well, are we picking it up?"
"You know," he says, "Kirill Panov died." "Kirill!" And the silver cobweb is in front of me, and again I hear it crackle as it tears. And through this terrible sound, I hear Dick's voice as if coming from another room. "A heart attack, they found him in the shower, naked. No one understands a thing. They asked about you, and I said you were perfectly fine." "What's there to understand?" I say. "It's the Zone . . ."
"I see nothing but the silver cobweb. The whole bar is tangled in the cobweb, people are moving around, and the web crackles softly as they touch it. And at the center of it is the Maltese boy, his face childlike and surprised—he doesn't understand a thing."

#Grinder -
Description (page 142/147): "He's the only stalker that's ever been through the grinder and survived. Got lucky. He, strange man, still believes that it was Burbridge who pulled him out of the grinder. As if! There's no pulling someone out of a grinder. Burbridge did drag him out of the Zone, that's true."
"I need to save him for the grinder, he thought coldly and clearly. You can get through everything here but the grinder."

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#Unknown – Type: Chemical or biological effector (stops normal atmospheric reactions or alters time and space)

Description (page 11/12/26/31): “I don’t like those trucks! They’ve been exposed to the elements for thirty years and they’re just like new. There’s a gasoline carrier twenty feet away and it’s completely rusted out, but they look like they’ve just come off the assembly line. That’s the Zone for you!”

“He was right about the trucks -- his brains were functioning. God forbid you should stick your head between two trucks. You have to sidle around them.”

“Yeah, it looks like nothing happened here. that glass kiosk over there doesn’t have a single scratch on it. And look at that stroller near the gates—

even the linen in it looks clean.”

“..the trucks parked on the lot, really just like new; since I’ve last been here, they’ve gotten even newer, while the gasoline tanker, poor thing, is

now completely rusted through and about to fall apart.

#Unknown – Type: Chemical or biological

“The valley was in front of them, and Arthur had already stopped, looking at Redrick in bewilderment. the floor of the valley was covered in a puke-green liquid, glistening greasily in the sun. A light steam was wafting off its surface, becoming thicker between the hills, and they already couldn’t

see a thing thirty feet in front of them. And it reeked. God only knew what was rotting in that medley, but to Redrick it seemed that a hundred thousand smashed rotten eggs, poured over a hundred thousand spoiled fish heads and dead cats, couldn’t have reeked they way it reeked here.”

(Same Anomaly or a different anomalous effect in the same place):

“The liquid was warm and sticky, like pus. At first they walked upright, wading up to their waists; the ground beneath their feet, fortunately, was rocky and relatively even, but Redrick soon heard the familiar buzzing on both sides. There was nothing visible on the sunlight-drenched left hill, but the shady slope to the right became full of dancing lilac lights. “Bend down!” he ordered through his teeth and bent down himself. “More, dumbass!” he yelled. Arthur bent down, scared, and that very instant thunder split the air. Right over their heads, a forked lightning bolt shimmied in a frenzied dance, barely visible against the backdrop of the sky. Arthur squatted and went in up to his neck. Redrick, sensing that the thunder had blocked his ears, turned his head and saw a quickly fading bright crimson spot in the shade near the rock scree, which was immediately struck by a second lightning bolt.

“Keep going! Keep going!” he bellowed, not hearing himself. Now they walked squatting, one behind the other, only their heads sticking out of the muck, and with each lighting bolt, Redrick saw Arthur’s long hair stand on end and felt a thousand needles pierce the skin of his face. “Keep going!” he repeated in a monotone. “Keep going!” He no longer heard a thing. Once, Arthur turned his profile toward him, and he saw the wide-open, terrified eye looking sideways at him, and the quivering white lips, and the sweaty cheek smeared with green gunk. then the lightning got so low they had to dunk their heads in the muck. The green slime plastered their mouths, and it became hard to breathe..”

#Unknown – Type: ?

Description (page 12/28): “ There’s that ditch where Slimy ended up, just two yards from their road. Knuckles had told Slimy: stay as far away from the ditches as you can, jerk, or there won’t be anything to bury.”

“Over there’s the ditch where the Slug kicked the bucket—you can make out something colorful in there, maybe some clothes of his.”

“And farther away, in the direction of the quarry, to the north of the train, the air above the rails was hazily vibrating and shimmering, and from time to time tiny rainbows would instantly blaze up and go out. Redrick took a look at this shimmering, spat drily, and looked away. “Go on,” he said, and Arthur turned a tense face toward him. “See those rags? You aren’t looking the right way! Over there, to the right . . .”

“Yeah,” said Arthur. “That used to be a certain Smartass. A long time ago. He didn’t listen to his elders and now lies there for the express purpose of showing smart people the way.”

“They passed the pile of gray rags. There was nothing left of Smartass, only a long, rusted-through stick lying in the dry grass some distance away

—a mine detector. At one point, mine detectors were in heavy use; people would buy them from army quartermasters on the sly and trusted in them

as if they were God himself. Then two stalkers in a row died using them in the course of a few days, killed by underground electrical discharges. And

that was it for the detectors ..”

#Unknown – Type: Chemical

Description (page 143): “Arthur, who walked about five steps ahead, lifted his hand and wiped the sweat from his brow. Redrick looked suspiciously at the sun. The sun was still low. And at that moment it struck him that the dry grass beneath their feet was no longer rustling but seemed to squeak, like potato starch, and it was no longer stiff and prickly but felt soft and squishy—it fell apart under their boots, like flakes of soot. Then he saw the clear impressions of Arthur’s footprints and threw himself to the ground, calling out, “Get down!” He fell face-first into the grass, and it burst into dust underneath his cheek, and he gritted his teeth, furious about their luck. He lay there, trying not to move, still hoping that it might pass, although he knew that they were in trouble. The heat intensified, pressed down, enveloped his whole body like a sheet soaked in scalding water, his eyes flooded with sweat, and Redrick belatedly yelled to Arthur, “Don’t move! Wait it out!”— and started waiting it out himself. And he would have waited it out, and everything would have been just fine, they’d have only sweated a bit, but Arthur

lost his head. Either he didn't hear what was being shouted to him, or he got scared out of his wits, or maybe he got even more scalded than Redrick—one way or another, he stopped controlling himself and, letting out some sort of guttural howl, blindly darted, hunching over, back to where they came from, the very place they had to avoid at all costs. Redrick barely had time to sit up and grab Arthur's leg with both hands, and Arthur crashed heavily to the ground, squealed in an unnaturally high voice, kicked Redrick in the face with his free leg, and wriggled and flopped around. But Redrick, also no longer thinking straight from the pain, crawled on top of him, pressing his face into Arthur's leather jacket, and tried to crush him, to grind him into the ground; he held the twitching head by the long hair with both hands, and furiously used his knees and the toes of his shoes to pound Arthur's legs and ass and the ground. He dimly heard the moans and groans coming from underneath him and his own hoarse roar, "Stay down, asshole, stay down, or I'll kill you," while heaps of burning hot coal kept pouring on top of him, and his clothes already blazed, and the skin on his legs and sides, crackling, blistered and burst. And Redrick, burying his forehead in the gray ash, convulsively kneading the head of this damned kid with his chest, couldn't take it anymore and screamed as hard as he could ."

-Artifacts:

#Empty – 14 pounds, 2 disks locked together, 1 disk quarter inch thick, copper looking smooth surface.

Description (page 3): "They're just two copper disks the size of a saucer -about a quarter inch thick, with a space of a foot and a half between. There's nothing else. I mean absolutely nothing, just empty space."

#Full Empty

Description (page 15): "What if you had a full empty, huh?" "A full empty?" he repeats, knitting his brows like I'm speaking Greek. "Yeah," I say. "It's your hydromagnetic trap, what's it called? Object seventy-seven B. Only with some shit inside, blue stuff."

#Shrieker

Description (page 50): "I'll show you what a stalker can do. I take a shrieker out of my pocket, a nice new unused one, squeeze it a few times to get it going, open the door to the barroom, and quietly throw it in. Then I open the window and climb out to the street. Of course, I really want to stay and watch the show, but I have to take off. I can't stand shriekers; they give me nosebleeds. As I run away, I hear my shrieker going at full blast. First, every dog in the neighborhood starts barking and howling—they always sense it first. Then an awful scream comes from the bar, loud enough to make my ears ring even at that distance. I can just imagine the people running to and fro—some becoming melancholy, some violent, some scared out of their wits .

A shrieker is a terrible thing."

#Death Lamp

Description (page 46/98): ""And what have you heard about the death lamp?" "Eight years ago," Noonan droned dully, "a stalker by the name of Stephen Norman, nicknamed Four-Eyes, brought out of the Zone a device that, as far as anyone could tell, consisted of a ray-emitting system fatal to Earth organisms. The aforementioned Four-Eyes was attempting to sell this instrument to the Institute. They couldn't agree on the price. Four-Eyes left 他们

for the Zone and never came back. The current whereabouts of the instrument are unknown—the guys at the Institute are still tearing out their

hair about it. Hugh, from the Metropole, who is well known to you, had offered to buy it for any sum that could fit on a check."

"Maybe he'd like a death lamp as well?" "I asked him about that, too." "Well?" "Believe it or not, he does." "Yeah?" I say. "Then he can go get them himself. It's easy as pie! We have basements full of hell slime, he can take a bucket and dip right in. It's his funeral."

#Spacell

Description (page 94/95/102/115): "...dived inside, and, tearing his raincoat off his head, threw it into the backseat. He took a round black spacell out of a side pocket of his jacket, inserted it into a jack on the dashboard, and pushed it in with his thumb until it clicked.

"And it all seems to have started when the stalkers brought the first spacells out of the Zone. The batteries . . . Yes, I think that's really how it started. Especially when it was discovered that spacells multiply."

"He immediately remembered that there was no ignition and there couldn't possibly be and that in his pocket was a spacell. A perpetual battery. And he had to take the damn thing out of his pocket and stick it into the jack, and then he could at least drive away."

"Take, say, the spacells. We've learned to apply them. We've even discovered conditions under which they multiply by division. But we have yet to create

a single spacell, have no idea how they work, and, as far as I can tell, won't figure it out anytime soon."

#Pin

Description (page 68): "and poured the pins out onto the paper. In the electric light the pins looked shot with blue and would on rare occasion burst into pure spectral colors—red, yellow, green. He picked up one pin and, being careful not to prick himself, squeezed it between his finger and thumb. He turned off the light and waited a little, getting used to the dark. But the pin was silent. He put it aside, groped for another one, and also squeezed it between his fingers. Nothing. He squeezed harder, risking a prick, and the pin starting talking: weak reddish sparks ran along it and changed all at once to rarer green ones. For a couple of seconds Redrick admired this strange light show, which, as he learned from the Reports, had to mean something, possibly something very significant, then he put the pin down separately from the first one and picked up a new one. Overall, there were seventy-three pins, out of which twelve talked and the rest were silent. Actually, these would also talk, but fingers weren't enough; you needed a special machine the size of a table. "

#Bracelet/ Ring

Description (page 78): "What the hell is this?" He was sitting with his right index finger extended tensely in front of him. Spinning around his finger was that same white metal bracelet, and Bony was staring at it wild-eyed. "It won't stop!" Bony said loudly, moving his astonished eyes from the bracelet to Raspy and back again. "What do you mean, 'won't stop'?" Raspy said cautiously, and drew back slightly. "I put it on my finger and spun it once, just for fun. And it's now been spinning a whole minute!" Bony bolted up and, holding his extended finger before him, ran through the curtained doorway. The bracelet, shimmering with silver, continued to rotate steadily in front of him, like an airplane propeller."

#Golden Sphere

Description (page 55): ""You're lying. You don't know. Have you heard of the Golden Sphere?" "Yes." "You think it's a fairy tale?" "The Golden Sphere," said Burbridge. "I found it. Lots of stories told about it. Told some myself. That it'll grant any wish. Yeah, right—any wish!

If it granted any wish, I wouldn't be here anymore. I'd be living it up in Europe. Swimming in cash."

"Eternal youth—like hell I got that. Money—hell with that, too. But I have my health. And I got good kids. And I'm alive. You couldn't even dream of the places I've been. And I'm still alive."

#Lobster eyes

Description (page 98/101): " "And what have you heard about lobster eyes?" "About what eyes?" "Lobster eyes. Lobster. You know?" General Lemchen made a snipping motion with his fingers. "With claws." "First time I've heard of them."

"And if that wasn't enough—we've got lobster eyes, bitches' rattles, and rattling napkins, whatever the hell they are! Damn them all!"

#Rattling napkins

Description (page 98/101): " "Well, what do you know about rattling napkins?" Noonan climbed off the desk and faced Lemchen, his hands stuffed into his pockets. "I don't know anything," he said. "How about you?" "Unfortunately, I also don't know anything. Neither about lobster eyes nor about rattling napkins. And yet they exist."

"And if that wasn't enough—we've got lobster eyes, bitches' rattles, and rattling napkins, whatever the hell they are! Damn them all!"

-Unclassified:

#Mentioned, but no description:

(page 101 – singular mention): "Bracelets! Needles! White whirligigs! And if that wasn't enough—we've got lobster eyes, bitches' rattles, and rattling napkins, whatever the hell they are! Damn them all!"

#Battery

#Black Spark

#Sponge

#Carbonated clay

#Needles

#White Whirligig

#Zone morphed grass?

Description (page 25): "The pavement's all cracked, grass has grown through the crevices, but here at least it's still our human grass. On the sidewalk to the left, the black brambles begin, and from this we see how well the Zone sets itself apart: the black thicket along the road looks almost mowed. No, these aliens must have been decent guys. They left a hell of a mess, of course, but at least they put clear bounds on their crap. Even the burning fuzz doesn't make it over to our side, though you'd think the wind would carry it around all four directions.

#Wispy Hair

Description (page 26): "Only the TV antennas give the place away—they're overgrown with wispy hairs. Our eggheads have long been hankering after these antennas: they'd like to know, you see, what this hair is—we don't have it anywhere else, only in the Plague Quarter and only on the antennas. But most important, it's right here, beneath our very own windows. Last year, they got an idea, lowered an anchor from a helicopter, and hooked a clump of hair. They gave it a pull—suddenly, a pssst! We looked down and saw that the antenna was smoking, the anchor was smoking, even the cable itself was smoking, and not just smoking but hissing poisonously, like a rattlesnake. Well, the pilot, never mind that he was a lieutenant, quickly figured out what's what, dumped the cable, and high-tailed it out of there. There it is, their cable, hanging down almost to the ground and covered with hair."

#Light prism – Something effecting how light behaves.

Description (page 31): "I don't like the look of that tire. There's something wrong with its shadow. The sun is at our backs, but the shadow is stretching toward us. Why is that tire's shadow like that? The Vulture Burbridge was telling us something about the shadows, which sounded strange but harmless . . . The shadows do funny things around here."

#The Shambler – A teleporting phantom/ anomalous undead

Description (page 53): "To his right, not very far but not close, he heard a noise—there was someone else in the cemetery. Over there, the leaves were rustling, soil was trickling down, and then something hard and heavy hit the ground with a soft thud. Redrick froze, following it with his eyes; he thought that on a grave between the crosses he saw a motionless man in black. The man sat there without concealing himself, leaning against the marble obelisk, turning a white face with sunken black eyes toward Redrick."

"The searchlights had stopped darting through the bushes; they had frozen, converging on that same marble obelisk, and in the bright blue fog Redrick distinctly saw a hunched figure wandering between the crosses. The figure seemed to be moving blindly, heading right toward the searchlights. Redrick saw it crash into a huge cross, stagger back, bump into the cross again, and only then go around it and keep going, stretching long arms with fingers spread wide in front of it. Then it suddenly disappeared, as if falling through the ground, and in a few seconds appeared again, farther and to the right, walking with an absurd, inhuman persistence, like a windup toy."

"It was now dark and he couldn't see a thing, but that one was out there somewhere—marching like a windup toy, stumbling, falling, crashing into crosses, getting tangled in bushes."

"...started telling Redrick how a corpse from the cemetery showed up this morning on his street. "He came to his old house, except this house, it's been boarded up for years, everyone has left—the old lady, his widow, and his daughter with her husband, and his grandkids. He passed away, the neighbors say, about thirty years ago, before the Visit, and now here you go—hello!—he's turned up. He walked around and around the house, rattled the door, then sat down by the fence and just stayed there. A crowd gathered—the whole neighborhood had come to gawk—but, of course, no one had the guts to go near. Eventually, someone figured it out: broke down the door to his house, gave him a way in. And what do you know, he stood up and walked in and closed the door behind him. I had to get to work, don't know how it turned out, all I know is that they were planning to call the Institute, so they'd take him the hell away from us. You know what they say? They say the military has been drafting an order, that these corpses, if their relatives have moved out, should be sent to them at their new place of residence. Won't the family be delighted! And the stench of him . . . Well, he's not a corpse for nothing."

-Events:

#The Plague – Plague Quarters section of the Zone. (specific area where people who lived there got the plague.)

Description (page 25): "During the initial panic, he ran in nothing but underwear all the way to the bridge, like his neighbors—ran for four miles nonstop. After that he got a bad case of the plague, which peeled his skin and nails right off. Almost everyone who lived here got the plague. A few died, but mostly old folks, and not all of them either."

#The Blindness – Mass blinding event occurring in the initial stages of the Zone's appearance.

Description (page 25): "Now in those three neighborhoods over there, people went blind. That's what people call them nowadays: the First Blind Quarter, the Second Blind Quarter . They didn't go completely blind but rather got something resembling night blindness. Strangely, they say they weren't blinded by a flash of light, though it's said there were some bright flashes, but by an awful noise. It thundered so loudly, they say, that they instantly went blind."

Doctors tell them: that's impossible, you can't be remembering right! No, they insist, there was loud thunder, from which they went blind. And by the way, no one else heard any thunder at all . "

-Equipment:

#Spec-suit – A hazardous environment suit specifically designed for use within the anomalous zone. Sealed hazard suit with a helmet to match and a large visor at the front.

Description (page 23): "Sergeant gives each of us a specsuit. Now these really are handy. Dye a specsuit any color other than the original red, and any stalker would put down five hundred for it without batting an eyelash. I've long since vowed to figure out a way to swipe one from the Institute. At first glance, it's nothing special, looks like a diving suit, with a helmet to match and a large visor at the front. Maybe it's not quite like a diving suit, actually, more like a space suit. It's light, comfortable, not too tight, and you don't sweat in it from the heat. You can go right through a re in this thing, and no gas will penetrate it. It's even bulletproof, they say. Of course, re, toxic gas, and bullets—these are only Earth perils. The Zone doesn't have those; in the Zone you have other worries. Anyhow, truth be told, even in their specsuits people drop like flies. On the other hand, without them it'd probably be even worse. These suits are completely safe from the burning fuzz, for example. And from Satan's blossom and its spit."

#Boot – A transportation hovercraft for exploration of the Zone.

#Detectors - Mine detectors

Description (page 143): "Mine detectors were in heavy use; people would buy them from army quartermasters on the sly and trusted in them as if they were God himself. Then two stalkers in a row died using them in the course of a few days, killed by underground electrical discharges. And that was it for the detectors."

#Misc info and relevant quotes:

Alien source direction: Deneb is the alpha star in Cygnus. α Cygni, called Deneb, is the brightest star in Cygnus. It is a white supergiant star of spectral type A2Iae that varies between magnitudes 1.21 and 1.29, one of the largest and most luminous A-class stars known. It is located about 2600 light-years away.

"Still, I hope you go to hell, he told the aliens. You couldn't have had your picnic somewhere else. On the moon, say. Or on Mars. You are just callous assholes like the rest of them, even if you have learned to curl up space. Had to have a picnic here, you see. A picnic."

"I take off my watch and look at it—my Lord, we were in the Zone for more than five hours! Five hours. I shudder. Yes, my friends, there's no such thing as time in the Zone."

"Especially when you remember the stories about the children of stalkers—how they turn out."

##Arguably the most important section of the book -

Conversation between Noonan and Valentine (full account):

Noonan approached. "May I join you?" he asked.

Valentine raised his dark glasses at him. "Ah," he said. "Feel free."

"One second, let me wash my hands," said Noonan, remembering the sore.

He was well known here. When he came back and sat down across from Valentine, there was already a small grill with sizzling barbecue and a tall stein of beer on the table—neither warm nor cold, just the way he liked it. Valentine put the magazine down and took a sip of coffee.

"Listen, Valentine," said Noonan, cutting a piece of meat and dipping it in the sauce. "How do you think it's all going to end?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The Visit. Zones, stalkers, military-industrial complexes—the whole stinking mess. How could it all end?"

For a long time, Valentine stared at him through his opaque black lenses. Then he lit up a cigarette and said, "For whom? Be more specific."

"Well, say, for humanity as a whole."

"That depends on our luck," said Valentine. "We now know that for humanity as a whole, the Visit has largely passed without a trace. For humanity everything passes without a trace. Of course, it's possible that by randomly pulling chestnuts out of this tree, we'll eventually stumble on something that will make life on Earth completely unbearable. That would be bad luck. But you have to admit, that's a danger humanity has always faced." He waved away the cigarette smoke and smiled wryly. "You see, I've long since become unused to discussing humanity as a whole. Humanity as a whole is too stable a system, nothing upsets it."

"You think so?" said Noonan with disappointment. "Well, that may be . . ."

"Tell me the truth, Richard," said Valentine, obviously amusing himself.

"What changed for you, a businessman, after the Visit? So you've learned that the universe contains at least one intelligent species other than man. So what?"

"How can I put it?" mumbled Richard. He was already sorry that he started the subject. There was nothing to say here. "What changed for me? For example, for many years now I've been feeling a bit uneasy, apprehensive. All right, so they came and left immediately. And what if they come back and decide to stay? For me, a businessman, these aren't idle questions, you know: who they are, how they live, what they need. In the most primitive case, I'm forced to consider how to modify my product. I have to be ready. And what if I turn out to be completely superfluous in their society?" He became more animated. "What if we're all superfluous? Listen, Valentine, since we're on the subject, are there answers to these questions? Who they are, what they wanted, if they'll come back . . ."

"There are answers," said Valentine with an ironic smile. "Lots of them, pick any you like."

"And what do you think?"

"To be honest, I've never let myself seriously consider it. For me, the Visit is first and foremost a unique event that could potentially allow us to skip a few rungs in the ladder of progress. Like a trip into the future of technology. Say, like Isaac Newton finding a modern microwave emitter in his laboratory."

"Newton wouldn't have understood a thing."

"You'd be surprised! Newton was a very smart man."

"Oh yeah? Anyway, never mind Newton. What do you actually think about the Visit? Even if not seriously."

"Fine, I'll tell you. But I have to warn you, Richard, that your question falls under the umbrella of a pseudoscience called xenology. Xenology is an unnatural mixture of science fiction and formal logic. At its core is a flawed assumption—that an alien race would be psychologically human."

"Why flawed?" asked Noonan.

"Because biologists have already been burned attempting to apply human psychology to animals. Earth animals, I note."

"Just a second," said Noonan. "That's totally different. We're talking about the psychology of intelligent beings."

"True. And that would be just fine, if we knew what intelligence was."

"And we don't?" asked Noonan in surprise.

"Believe it or not, we don't. We usually proceed from a trivial definition: intelligence is the attribute of man that separates his activity from that of the animals. It's a kind of attempt to distinguish the master from his dog, who seems to understand everything but can't speak. However, this trivial definition does lead to wittier ones. They are based on depressing observations of the aforementioned human activity. For example: intelligence is the ability of a living creature to perform pointless or unnatural acts."

"Yes, that's us," agreed Noonan.

"Unfortunately. Or here's a definition-hypothesis. Intelligence is a complex instinct which hasn't yet fully matured. The idea is that instinctive activity is always natural and useful. A million years will pass, the instinct will mature, and we will cease making the mistakes which are probably an integral part of intelligence. And then, if anything in the universe changes, we will happily become extinct—again, precisely because we've lost the art of making mistakes, that is, trying various things not prescribed by a rigid code."

"Somehow this all sounds so . . . demeaning."

"All right, then here's another definition—a very lofty and noble one. Intelligence is the ability to harness the powers of the surrounding world without destroying the said world."

Noonan grimaced and shook his head. "No," he said. "That's a bit much . . . That's not us. Well, how about the idea that humans, unlike animals, have an overpowering need for knowledge? I've read that somewhere."

"So have I," said Valentine. "But the issue is that man, at least the average man, can easily overcome this need. In my opinion, the need doesn't exist at all. There's a need to understand, but that doesn't require knowledge. The God hypothesis, for example, allows you to have an unparalleled understanding of absolutely everything while knowing absolutely nothing . . . Give a man a highly simplified model of the world and interpret every event on the basis of this simple model. This approach requires no knowledge. A few rote formulas, plus some so-called intuition, some so-called practical acumen, and some so-called common sense."

"Wait," said Noonan. He finished his beer and banged the empty stein down on the table. "Don't get off track. Let's put it this way. A man meets an alien. How does each figure out that the other is intelligent?"

"No idea," Valentine said merrily. "All I've read on the subject reduces to a vicious circle. If they are capable of contact, then they are intelligent. And conversely, if they are intelligent, then they are capable of contact. And in general: if an alien creature has the honor of being psychologically human, then it's intelligent. That's how it is, Richard. Read Vonnegut?"

"Damn it," said Noonan. "And here I thought you'd sorted everything out."

"Even a monkey can sort things," observed Valentine.

"No, wait," said Noonan. For some reason, he felt cheated. "But if you don't even know such simple things . . . All right, never mind intelligence. Looks like there's no making heads or tails of it. But about the Visit? What do you think about the Visit?"

"Certainly," said Valentine.

"Imagine a picnic—"

Noonan jumped. **"What did you say?"**

"A picnic. Imagine: a forest, a country road, a meadow. A car pulls off the road into the meadow and unloads young men, bottles, picnic baskets, girls, transistor radios, cameras . . . A fire is lit, tents are pitched, music is played. And in the morning they leave. The animals, birds, and insects that were watching the whole night in horror crawl out of their shelters. And what do they see? An oil spill, a gasoline puddle, old spark plugs and oil filters strewn about . . . Scattered rags, burntout bulbs, someone has dropped a monkey wrench. The wheels have tracked mud from some godforsaken swamp . . . and, of course, there are the remains of the campfire, apple cores, candy wrappers, tins, bottles, someone's handkerchief, someone's penknife, old ragged newspapers, coins, wilted flowers from another meadow . . ."

"I get it," said Noonan. "A roadside picnic."

"Exactly. A picnic by the side of some space road. And you ask me whether they'll come back . . ."

"Let me have a smoke," said Noonan. "Damn your pseudoscience! Somehow this isn't at all how I envisioned it."

"That's your right," observed Valentine.

"What, you mean they never even noticed us?"

"Why?"

"Or at least they paid no attention."

"I wouldn't get too disappointed if I were you," advised Valentine.

Noonan took a drag, coughed, and threw the cigarette down. "All the same," he said stubbornly. "It couldn't be . . . Damn you scientists! Where do you get this disdain for man? Why do you constantly need to put him down?"

"Wait," said Valentine. "Listen. 'You ask: what makes man great?'" he quoted. "'Is it that he re-created nature? □ at he harnessed forces of almost-cosmic proportions? □ at in a brief time he has conquered the planet and opened a window onto the universe? No! It is that despite all this, he has survived, and intends to continue doing so.'"

□ ere was silence. Noonan was thinking. "Maybe," he said uncertainly.

"Of course, from that point of view . . ."

"Don't get so upset," Valentine said kindly. "The picnic is only my hypothesis. And not even a hypothesis, really, but an impression. So-called

serious xenologists try to justify interpretations that are much more respectable and flattering to human vanity. For example, that the Visit hasn't happened yet, that the real Visit is yet to come. Some higher intelligence came to Earth and left us containers with samples of their material culture. They expect us to study these samples and make a technological leap, enabling us to send back a signal indicating we're truly ready for contact. How's that?"

"That's much better," said Noonan. "I see that even among the scientists there are decent men."

"Or here's another one. The Visit did take place, but it is by no means over. We're actually in contact as we speak, we just don't know it. The aliens are holed up in the Zones and are carefully studying us, simultaneously preparing us for the 'time of cruel miracles.'"

"Now that I understand!" said Noonan. "At least it explains the mysterious bustle in the ruins of the factory. By the way, your picnic doesn't account for that."

"Why not?" disagreed Valentine. "Some little girl might have dropped her favorite windup doll."

"Now cut that out," said Noonan emphatically. "Some doll—the ground is shaking. Then again, of course, it could be a doll . . . Want some beer? Rosalie! Come here, old lady! Two beers for the xenologists! It really is a pleasure to talk to you," he told Valentine. "A real brain cleansing—like someone poured Epsom salts under my skull. Otherwise, you work and work, but you never think about why or what for, grapple with what might happen, try to lighten your load . . ."

They brought the beer. Noonan took a sip and, looking over the foam, saw Valentine with an expression of fastidious skepticism, examining his stein.

"What, you don't like it?" he asked, licking his lips.

"To be honest, I don't drink," said Valentine with hesitation.

"Oh yeah?" said Noonan in astonishment.

"Damn it!" said Valentine. "There has to be one nondrinker in the world." He decisively pushed the stein away. "Order me a cognac, then," he said.

"Rosalie!" Noonan shouted immediately, now completely mellow.

When they brought the cognac, Noonan said, "Still, it's not right. I won't even mention your picnic—that's a complete disgrace—but even accepting the hypothesis that this is, say, a prelude to contact, it's still no good. Bracelets, empties—those I could understand. But why the slime? Or the bug traps or that disgusting fuzz?"

"Excuse me," said Valentine, choosing a slice of lemon. "I don't exactly understand your terminology. What traps?"

Noonan laughed. "That's folklore," he explained. "Stalkers' jargon. Bug traps—those are the areas of increased gravity."

"Oh, the graviconcentrates . . . Directed gravity. Now that's something I would enjoy discussing, but you wouldn't understand a thing."

"Why not? I'm an engineer, after all."

"Because I don't understand a thing myself. I have a system of equations, but I haven't a notion about how to interpret it. And the slime—that's probably the colloidal gas?"

"The very same. You heard about the catastrophe in the Carrigan Labs?"

"I've heard something," Valentine replied reluctantly.

"Those idiots placed a porcelain container with the slime into a special, maximally insulated chamber. That is, they thought that it was maximally insulated, but when they opened the container with the mechanical arm, the slime went through the metal and plastic like water through a sieve, escaped, and turned everything it touched into the same slime. The tally: thirty-five dead, more than a hundred injured, and the entire laboratory is completely unusable. Have you ever been there? It's a gorgeous building! And now slime has seeped into the basement and lower floors . . . That's a prelude to contact for you."

Valentine made a face. "Yes, I know all that," he said. "But you have to admit, Richard, that the aliens had nothing to do with this. How could they have known about the existence of military-industrial complexes?"

"Well, they should have known!" said Noonan didactically.

"And here's what they'd say in reply: You should have long since gotten rid of military-industrial complexes."

"That's fair," agreed Noonan. "Maybe that's what they should have worked on, if they are so powerful."

"So you're suggesting interference with the internal affairs of mankind?"

"Hmm," said Noonan. "That, of course, could lead us all sorts of places. Forget about it. Let's return to the beginning of the conversation. How is it all going to end? Say, take you scientists. Are you hoping to acquire something fundamental from the Zone, something that could really revolutionize our science, technology, way of life?"

Valentine finished his drink and shrugged his shoulders. "You're talking to the wrong man, Richard. I don't like empty fantasies. When it comes to such a serious subject, I prefer cautious skepticism. Judging from what we've already acquired, there is a whole spectrum of possibilities, and nothing definite can be said."

"Rosalie, more cognac!" yelled Noonan. "Well, all right, let's try another tack. What, in your opinion, have we already acquired?"

"Amusingly enough, relatively little. We've found many marvels. In a number of cases, we've even learned how to adapt these marvels to our needs. We've even gotten used to them. A lab monkey presses a red button and gets a banana, presses a white button and gets an orange, but has no idea how to obtain bananas or oranges without buttons. Nor does it understand the relationship between buttons and oranges and bananas. Take, say, the spacells. We've learned to apply them. We've even discovered conditions under which they multiply by division. But we have yet to create a single spacell, have no idea how they work, and, as far as I can tell, won't figure it out anytime soon. Here's what I'd say. There are a number of objects for which we have found applications. We use them, although almost certainly not in the ways that the aliens intended. I'm absolutely convinced that in the vast majority of cases we're using sledgehammers to crack nuts. Nevertheless, some things we do apply: spacells, bracelets that stimulate vital processes . . . all sorts of quasibiological masses, which caused such a revolution in medicine . . . We've gained new tranquilizers, new mineral fertilizers, we've revolutionized astronomy. In any case, why am I listing them? You know it all better than I do—I see you wear a bracelet yourself. Let us call this group of objects useful. You could say that, to a certain extent, these objects have benefited humanity, although we can never forget that in our Euclidean world every stick has two ends . . ."

"Undesirable applications?" inserted Noonan.

"Exactly. For example, applications of spacells in the defense industry . . . Let's not get off track. The behavior of each useful object has been more or less studied and more or less explained. Right now we're held back by technology, but in fifty years or so we will learn how to manufacture these sledgehammers ourselves, and then we'll crack nuts with them to our hearts' content. The story's more complicated with another group of objects—more complicated precisely because we can't find any application for them, and yet their properties, given our current theories, are completely inexplicable. For example, take the magnetic traps of various types. We know they are magnetic traps, Panov gave a very witty proof of that. But we don't know where the generator of such a strong magnetic field could be nor understand the reason for its amazing stability; we don't understand a thing. We can only make up fantastic conjectures about properties of space which we've never even suspected before. Or the K-twenty-three . . . What do you call those pretty black beads that are used for jewelry?"

"Black sparks," said Noonan.

"Right, right, black sparks. Good name. Well, you know their properties. If you shine a light at such a bead, the light will be emitted after a pause, and the length of the pause depends on the weight of the ball, its size, and a number of other parameters, while the frequency of the emitted light is always less than its original frequency. What does this mean? Why? There's an insane idea that these black sparks are actually vast expanses of space—space with different properties from our own, which curled up into this form under the influence of our space . . ." Valentine took out a cigarette and lit it. "In short, the objects in this group are currently completely useless for human purposes, yet from a purely scientific point of view they have fundamental significance. These are miraculously received answers to questions we don't yet know how to pose. The aforementioned Sir Isaac mightn't have made sense of the microwave emitter, but he would have at any rate realized that such a thing was possible, and that would have had a very strong effect on his scientific worldview. I won't get into details, but the existence of such objects as the magnetic traps, the K-twenty-three, and the white ring instantly disproved a number of recently thriving theories and gave rise to some entirely new ideas. And then there's also a third group . . ."

"Yes," said Noonan. "Hell slime and other shit."

"No, no. All those belong either to the first or the second group. I meant objects about which we either know nothing or have only hearsay information, objects which we've never held in our hands. Ones that were carried off by stalkers from under our noses—sold to God knows who, hidden. The ones they don't talk about. The legends and semilegends: the wish machine, Dick the Tramp, happy ghosts . . ."

"Wait, wait," said Noonan. "What's all this? I understand the wish machine."

Valentine laughed. "You see, we also have our work jargon. Dick the Tramp—that's the same hypothetical windup doll which is causing havoc in the ruins of the factory. And happy ghosts are a kind of dangerous turbulence that can happen in certain regions of the Zone."

"First time I've heard of them," said Noonan.

"You see, Richard," said Valentine, "we've been digging through the Zone for two decades, but we don't even know a thousandth part of what it contains. And if you count the Zone's effect on man . . . By the way, we're going to have to add another, fourth group to our classification. Not of objects, but of effects. This group has been outrageously badly studied, even though, in my opinion, we've gathered more than enough data. And you know, Richard, I'm a physicist and therefore a skeptic. But sometimes even I get goose bumps when I think about this data."

"Living corpses . . ." muttered Noonan.

"What? Oh . . . No, that's mysterious, but nothing more. How can I put it? It's conceivable, maybe. But when, for no reason at all, a person becomes surrounded by extraphysical, extrabiological phenomena—"

"Oh, you mean the emigrants?"

"Exactly. You know, statistics is a very precise science, despite the fact that it deals with random variables. And furthermore, it's a very eloquent science, very visual . . ."

Valentine had apparently become tipsy. He was speaking louder, his cheeks had turned rosy, and the eyebrows above the dark glasses had risen high in his forehead, wrinkling his brow. "Rosalie!" he barked. "More cognac! A large shot!"

"I like nondrinkers," said Noonan with respect.

"Don't get distracted!" said Valentine strictly. "Listen to what I'm telling you. It's very strange." He picked up his glass, drank off half in one gulp, and continued, "We don't know what happened to the poor people of Harmont at the very moment of the Visit. But now one of them has decided to emigrate. Some ordinary resident. A barber. The son of a barber and the grandson of a barber. He moves to, say, Detroit. Opens a barbershop, and all hell breaks loose. More than ninety percent of his clients die in the course of a year; they die in car accidents, fall out of windows, are cut down by gangsters and hooligans, drown in shallow places, and so on and so forth. Furthermore. The number of municipal disasters in Detroit increases sharply. The number of gas pump explosions jumps by a factor of two. The number of fires caused by faulty wiring jumps by a factor of three and a half. The number of car accidents jumps by a factor of three. The number of deaths from flu epidemics jumps by a factor of two. Furthermore. The number of natural disasters in Detroit and its environs also increases. Tornadoes and typhoons, the likes of which haven't been seen in the area since the 1700s, make an appearance. The heavens open, and Lake Ontario or Michigan, or wherever Detroit is, bursts its banks. Well, and more to that effect. And the same cataclysms happen in any town, any region, where an emigrant from the neighborhood of a Zone settles down, and the number of cataclysms is directly proportional to the number of emigrants that settle in that particular place. And note that this effect is only observed with emigrants who lived through the Visit. Those who were born after the Visit have no impact on the accident statistics. You've lived in Harmont for ten years, but you moved here after the Visit, and you could safely move to the Vatican itself. How do we explain this? What do we have to give up—statistics? Or common sense?" Valentine grabbed the shot glass and drained it in one gulp.

Richard Noonan scratched behind his ear. "Hmm," he said. "I've actually heard a lot about these things, but frankly, I've always assumed this was all, to put it mildly, a bit exaggerated. Someone just needed a pretext for banning emigration."

Valentine smiled bitterly. "That's quite the pretext! Who would believe this lunacy? No, they'd make up an epidemic, a danger of spreading subversive rumors, anything but this!" He put his elbows on the table and

looked unhappy, burying his face in his hands.

"I do sympathize," said Noonan. "You're right, from the point of view of our mighty positivist science—"

"Or, say, the mutations caused by the Zone," interrupted Valentine. He took off his glasses and stared at Noonan with nearsighted dark eyes. "All people in contact with the Zone for a sufficiently long time undergo changes—both in phenotype and in genotype. You know what stalkers' children are like, you know what happens with stalkers themselves. Why? What causes the mutations? There's no radiation in the Zone. The chemical structure of the air and soil in the Zone, though peculiar, poses no mutation risk. What am I supposed to do under these circumstances—start to believe in witchcraft? In the evil eye? Listen, Richard, let's order another round. I've really gotten a taste for it, damn it . . ."

Richard Noonan, smirking, ordered another shot of cognac for the laureate and another beer for himself. Then he said, "All right. I am, of course, sympathetic to your turmoil. But to be honest, I personally find the reanimated corpses much more disturbing than your statistical data. Especially since I've never seen the data, but the corpses I've seen, and smelled them, too."

Valentine gave a careless wave. "Oh, you and your corpses . . ." he said.

"Listen, Richard, aren't you ashamed of yourself? After all, you're an educated man. Do you really not see that from the perspective of fundamental principles, these corpses of yours are neither more nor less astonishing than the perpetual batteries? It's just that the spacells violate the first principle of thermodynamics, and the corpses, the second; that's the only difference. In some sense, we're all cavemen—we can't imagine anything more frightening than a ghost or a vampire. But the violation of the principle of causality—that's actually much scarier than a whole herd of ghosts . . . or Rubinstein's monsters . . . or is that Wallenstein?"

"Frankenstein."

"Yes, of course. Mrs. Shelley. The poet's wife. Or daughter." He suddenly laughed. "These corpses of yours do have one curious property—autonomous viability. For example, you can cut off their leg, and the leg will keep walking. Well, not actually walking but, in any case, living. Separately. Without any physiological salt solutions. Anyway, the Institute recently had a delivery of one of these . . . unclaimed ones. So they prepared him. Boyd's lab assistant told me about it. They cut off his right hand for some experiments, came in the next morning, and saw—it's giving them the finger!" Valentine laughed uproariously. "Hmm? And it's still at it! It just keeps making a fist, then flipping them off. What do you figure it's trying to say?"

"I'd say the gesture is pretty transparent. Isn't it time for us go home, Valentine?" said Noonan, looking at his watch. "I have another important errand to run."