

START

You never stopped being a stalker. Without realizing it, you recorded somewhere in your nervous system the essential information: that on the left, at a safe distance, there was a jolly ghost over a pile of old planks--it was quiet, exhausted, and so the hell with it; on the right there was a slight breeze, and a few steps later he saw a mirror-smooth mosquito mange, with many arms, like a starfish--far away, no danger--and right in its center, a flattened bird, a rare sight, since birds did not often fly over the Zone; and right by the path there were two abandoned empties--apparently Buzzard had dropped them on the way back, fear is stronger than greed. You saw all of this and took it into account. <...> The broken rocks at the edge of the quarry were getting closer, and you could see the fanciful designs made by rust on the cabin's red roof.

FINAL

The fog was disappearing before their eyes. It was completely gone from the embankment and in the distance it was thinning, melting away and showing the rounded bristly peaks of the hills. Here and there between the hills could be seen the mottled surface of the stagnant swamps, covered with sparse thickets of willows, and the horizon, beyond the hills, was filled with bright yellow explosions of mountain peaks, and the sky above them was clear and blue. <...> You did not remember when it all ended. You understood only that you could breathe again, that the air was air again, and not steam that burned your throat, and you realized that you had to hurry and get out from under the devilish heat before it came crashing down on you again. <...> You had stopped trying to think. You just repeated your litany over and over: "<...> Look into my heart. I know that everything you need is in there. It has to be. I never sold my soul to anyone! It's mine, it's human! You take from me what it is I want... it just can't be that I would want something bad! <...> I can't think of anything, except those words of his ...'HAPPINESS FOR EVERYBODY, FREE, AND NO ONE WILL GO AWAY UNSATISFIED!'"

Excerpts from Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's story "Roadside Picnic" (adopted for the tool)