



The police carry out a teenager who fell down a shaft. The boy was injured, but alive. All photos of HZB (Hovrino Abandoned Hospital, Moscow Oblast, April-May 2011) © Anna Artemeva/ *Novaya Gazeta*.

HZB*

BY ELENA KOSTYUCHENKO [TRANSLATED BY BELA SHAYEVICH]

Thirteen-year-old Katya is almost six weeks pregnant and her ex-boyfriend Gleb is the father.

“Get an abortion,” Maga tells her.

“Don’t ruin your life; you only have one.”

“My mom told me that if I get an abortion she’ll send me straight to the orphanage. Or bring me here and push me down an elevator shaft. Make it look like an accident. But Grandma said that if I showed up with a baby she’d kick me out on the street.”

Katya lives with her grandmother because her mother drinks. She had Katya when she was 15, and Katya spent the first three years of her life in an orphanage. Their favorite family story is about how, when she was born, Katya’s grandmother made Katya’s mother sign a document giving her up. But then, on the day Katya’s mom turned 18, she forced Katya’s grandma to sign the paperwork to get Katya back, threatening her with a knife.

“Grandma still regrets it,” Katya says, taking a swig of GD.

“Should you really be drinking?” asks Maga. “It’s your first trimester.”

“It’s retarded anyway. I mean, that would be even better—maybe that way they’ll let me give it up. But the best thing would be a miscarriage.”

“If you want a miscarriage, you have to drink vodka,” a tiny girl named Anya pipes up. “Not GD.”

“I know a good clinic. It’s 15 grand to get it done right—it’s expensive; mine was 25! But that came with aftercare.”

Maga, who is 17, had an abortion a year ago. Her boyfriend was going off to the army when they found out Maga was pregnant. “He put the money in front of me and said that if I decided to go for it, I should. I thought about it. Who would have picked me up from the hospital? My mom is very nice, but she told me she wasn’t about to start babysitting for me.”

We’re talking on a balcony on the third floor of the Hovrino Abandoned Hospital, which everyone calls the HZB. Three interconnected buildings slowly sinking into the ground. Behind us, you can hear the laughter

of a crew of about 15 people aged 10 to 30. These are the people who live in the HZB, known as stalkers, diggers, suiciders, guards, and ghosts.†

The construction of this enormous hospital complex, intended to hold 1,300 beds, began in 1980, but by 1985 it had stopped. Some say the funding was cut; others, that the ground waters had come up and the Likhoborka River, which had been diverted through pipes under the building, had spilled into the foundation. By the time construction stopped, the three 10-story buildings, arranged in the shape of a star, had already been built. The windows were in; they had finished all the hospital units and even delivered the beds. All that was left was to install the elevators and railings. The unfinished building was guarded until the early 1990s. After the security was removed, the HZB became a construction supply warehouse for everyone in the neighborhood. They literally took everything. [...]

Today, the HZB is sinking into the ground. The lower levels are already



Top: Slam fooling around with a gas mask, which the kids found in the HZB.

Bottom: Teenagers on the HZB balcony.

flooded, and there is a layer of ice on the bottom that never melts. It's full of stairs without railings, open elevator shafts, and holes in the floor. These floors are covered in ancient layers of dust, broken gravel, and cinder blocks—chunks of cement. Water drips down the support beams. The endless graffiti covering the walls sounds like the real collective subconscious: Patriots are idiots, Ave Satan, Strogino rules, confessions of love, poems, cursing, names. While the government kept passing the building from agency to agency, it filled up with people who have nowhere else to go.

There's a big crew hanging out on the third floor. About 15 people are out on the stone balcony, sitting on railings, dangling their legs. At the center of the balcony, there's a "table" assembled from boards and bricks that's overflowing with bags. Another table, a real one, stands by the wall. There're a few couples sitting on top of it.

Everyone is passing around two 1.5 L bottles of GD, "Grape Day," an alcoholic soda.

Most of the people here aren't even 15. They know the building like the back of their hands, they're skilled at escaping cops down its dark hallways and bringing in tourists for spare cash. In fact, part of the reason the third-floor balcony is where they hang out is that it has an excellent view of the "official entrance," a hole in the barbed-wire fence surrounding the building.

The hole pulls in goths, impressionable school kids, stalkers, coeds, paintball players. It costs 150 a head to enter and the price of admission includes a "tour," where the children take groups through the building while spreading the local legends. They introduce themselves as the "deputy guards." The head guard is

currently Maga, but she doesn't go out of her way to personally deal with the tourists. "It used to be cool running around, sounding out the building, trying to hear whether there's anyone else there. Now people just bring me the money." Deputy guards have to hand over whatever money they get off the tourists. "We're buying booze for everyone anyway." A few more guards are supposed to come by later: Ratcatcher, Alex Criminal Investigation, and Zheka, a young hulk. [...]

In order to stay out of trouble, the residents share their profits with some of the boys from the Hovrino precinct. Periodically, cops will pick up the school kids who also hang out here. The residents don't chase them away, but reluctantly share their alcohol and cigarettes and sometimes allow them to do their own tours. But if the cops raid the building, it's every man for himself. Around here, it's always every man for himself. [...]

"I worked at Rostix since I was twelve," adds Slam.

"Well, aren't you special, Miner?"

Slam got the nickname Miner because of his giant plugs—2.5 and 3 centimeters in diameter—that are like tunnels through his earlobes. But he likes his warrior name, Slam, a lot more.

Slam's brother is a champion boxer and fought in Chechnya. He really looks up to him.

"When I was in first grade, I came home with an F and he told me to do push-ups. At first, it was 10, then it'd be 100. If I got tired of push-ups, he said do squats. When I got tired of squats, it was back to push-ups. He fed me condensed milk so my muscles would grow. Everyone beat the shit out of me until fifth grade, but

after that, I was the one beating the shit out of everyone else."

Slam never did get around to becoming a better student, but he did become an expert kickboxer. Then he injured his shoulder—he's been out of commission for two years already—and now he's at the HZB.

His story sounds like many others. Everyone here's damaged goods.

Slam still talks to his brother, but not his mom. "She yells at me, I hate it."

"I'm a legend here!" Slam screams.

"Right, Jumper?"

"He's a legend," Jumper says very seriously.

"Who will stand up for Slam? Jumper?"

"Everyone at the HZB."

"That's riiiiiiight! You heard that? Did you? Because I'm a legend! A legend! I can take anyone!" [...]

Shaman is over 30. He has a bloated red face, greasy hair, and a black leather jacket. He's the father of three, and there's a fourth "in the oven." He drinks a lot. He'd fought in Chechnya, and now he runs around the building with delirium tremens, brandishing an invisible machine gun. He also "realigns energy fields" by moving his hands in front of people's faces, and that's why they call him Shaman.

The guards don't like him much—he takes cuts of their profits. But there's always a group of boys hanging around him learning how to become tour guides. The right to give tours is also something that has to be earned.

Meanwhile, a solemn group of stalkers has shown up downstairs—four young men in camo, one of them with a gas mask under his arm. Shaman goes down, trailed by his posse of 12-year-olds and Maga. The conversation is what you'd

"When I was in first grade, I came home with an F and he told me to do push-ups. At first, it was 10, then it'd be 100. If I got tired of push-ups, he said do squats."

expect. "Who are you?" "This area is restricted and under guard." "Should I call the guards?" "Do you really want to get taken down to the station?" The stalkers readily accept the fact that they'll have to pay 150 rubles each to get in. They hand over the cash and ask to be taken to Nemostor, a room on the ground floor, the site of one of the many legends about HZB. [...]

The Nemostor is not much different from any of the other rooms. It's filled with dust, broken gravel, and sunlight streaming in where the windows used to be. The walls are covered in pentagrams and odes to Satan in Old Slavonic and English, both with horrendous grammatical errors. This is where the people who live in the HZB usually celebrate New Year's.

"The last time a Satanist came here was 2007," Maga quietly tells me. "Our guys caught him in the basement with a knife. Jesus Christ! His face was covered in some kind of flour, dark circles under his eyes. Everyone was laughing their asses off and taking pictures. We're like, 'What's your name, freak?' And he goes, 'Zinzan.' Zheka punched him a few times and right away he's all, 'Sergey! I'm Sergey!' Later on, he had the whole police station howling." [...]



From left: A girl bikes past the HZB; the title of Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is scrawled on a wall in the HZB, complete with spelling mistakes; teenagers kissing on the HZB balcony.

The bride jumped off the roof of the HZB, following in the footsteps of her lover, and now she “goes around singing and killing people.”

The standard tour includes the Nemostor; the memorial to Edge, a boy who'd fallen down an elevator shaft; the “filmmaker's corridor,” which the kids have covered in construction foam and painted so that it looks like the set from a horror film (“These are your brains, these are your intestines, these are your heads”); the roof; and the flooded basement, where “the Satanists' bodies are still floating around in the water.”

The absolute majority of the legends come from the guards themselves—more often than not, unintentionally—like the time Maga

singing in a white dress was described online by a person who happened to see her as “the ghost of a dead bride.” The bride jumped off the roof of the HZB, following in the footsteps of her lover, and now she “goes around singing and killing people.” Sometimes, Maga remembers she used to act in school plays. When she does, tourists are given insane performances featuring an old fisherman, a little girl with a ball, a housewife with a rolling pin, a serial killer, and death itself, wearing a mantle. “The hardest part is not laughing,” says Maga. “And also making sure that your sneakers don't stick out from under the mantle.” Or you can just make some noise with a piece of metal in a nearby corridor, moan, and come out from the darkness with your weapon and question, “You want to die, don't you?” which doesn't even count as a prank. [...]

Maga wound up at the HZB when she was 15. Her boyfriend had died and she spent a month in a mental

hospital. “How'd he die? They killed him. They drained the brake fluid out of his car. He was driving with his friend. When he realized that he couldn't brake, he drove into a pole on the driver's side. His friend survived. He didn't die right away, either, but when he was in the hospital; the nurse went out to smoke; it's a shady story. He was actually headed to see me at our dacha.”

Now she's 17, but most of the other people at the HZB think that she's actually much older. She has a walkie-talkie hanging from her waist, camouflage, long hair, a watchful gaze, and a calm smile. She's all grit. A year ago, when “40 Dagestanis with knives” showed up to the building to fight the residents, Maga fended them off herself until “reinforcements” arrived.

Maga has even managed to do a year at a medical school. But then she dropped out.

“I realized that I don't actually give a shit about other people. I don't care



about saving them. But a doctor's supposed to take an oath. I'm not the kind of person who takes oaths anyway. If I do, I'll be just like all those other indifferent bitches in the clinics," says Maga.

In the summer, Maga is going to apply to become a civil servant. She just has to wait until August, when she turns 18. "I don't want to get my mother involved." [...]

The other kids are sympathetically silent. None of them want their parents involved in their career counseling. Or in any other part of their lives. As one of the girls put it, "It's enough that they're on my birth certificate."

"My mother has already decided that I'm going to be a cop. She screams, 'We're not even discussing it,' drunk bitch. I want to be an archaeologist," Liza says. "This summer, I'm going to the Voroninsky caves."

"She hasn't beaten you in six months! Maybe it'll work out," says Anya. "You used to always come to school covered in bruises."

"I did the math," Liza suddenly says. "And if you count all of her miscarriages and abortions, I would have had nine brothers and sisters." [...]

In 2009, some guys into skating organized an ice rink in the HZB basement. "They were good guys, they came and talked to us first," Maga says. "We told them the breakdown—that we'd have to split everything 50/50—and they were cool with it. They cleaned everything up, these graffiti girls did the walls, they wrote the menu up right on the concrete, there was a bar, lights, music, skate rentals. Six hundred rubles a head. One hundred fifty people would come on a Friday night. We'd make 10–12 thousand net profit. And then the visitors would pay another 150 rubles each for a tour. One night, Zheka and I made 14 grand in two hours just from doing tours."

The neighborhood patrol cops backed the ice-skating rink. They'd take three grand a night, and everybody was happy. But then cops from a

unit higher up found out about their colleagues' supplemental income, and the organizers didn't manage to make a deal with them—they asked for too much. So on one of those winter nights, the police raided the HZB.

"It was crazy, everybody was screaming, people were falling on the ice. The first thing we did was we got everyone who knew us as the organizers out. A bunch of people ran away. The cops hung out for a little while, you know; there was music and booze, then they got around to rounding everyone up—Who organized this? No one knows. Who'd you pay to get in here? No one! They never did manage to shut us down." [...]

The building always provides the opportunity to die in it. On either side of the corridors, there's almost always a half-meter drop, stairways with crumbling stairs, sharpened armature swinging from the ceiling, holes in the walls. Underfoot, broken bricks and twisted metal rods will readily trip



A teenage girl cries and drinks at the HZB.

you. But the most important feature is the pass-through elevator shafts. They have no walls, they're just holes in the ground that will suddenly open up in the middle of a hallway lit only by intermittent stripes of light coming from rooms that have windows. The lights create a false sense of being able to see ahead of you.

HZB residents will gladly recite all the names of the people who've fallen to their deaths, broken their bones, and disappeared. It seems like the proximity to death, the ready possibility of leaving this life, of an escape that can open up right at your feet, is something the residents like. Everyone's slit their wrists at least once. They don't like to show off their scars. Scars are a sign of failure. [...]

Anton is 22, tall, and chubby; and he's bugging the girls. "I'm a systems engineer," he introduces himself. "I've been in front of a computer since I was five, and have minus-five eyesight." [...]

Meanwhile, people on the balcony have started talking politics.

Vera was the one who started it. She's 15 and in eighth grade, and refers to everyone in the formal "you."

"Everyone in our class is on the right except for four people," Vera says. "But the school principal is Arakelian. An Armenian. This *churka* goes and fires Russian teachers who've worked there for 20 or 30 years! They come over here from their Chechnya and act like they're at home," she continues, as though she is reading from a script. "They go around with our women. From Chechnya, another country!"

"Actually, it's part of Russia," Anton objects.

There's a brief discussion of the territories in the south. Vera learns that Dagestan and Ingushetia are a part of Russia, and Armenia and Azerbaijan are not. "So what?" asks Jumper. "A *churka* is always a *churka*."

"One time, Liza and I were running across the street on a red light and there's a *khach* sitting there in his Volvo," Vera continues. "He sticks his head out of the window and yells, 'Whores!' I mean, he yells it in his language, but you can tell from the way he says it. And I go, 'Sig off!' and Sieg Heil him. We ran away after that! They're animals, you know."

"There's a *churka* girl in our class. Her name is actually Aishat," says Anya. "Me and her dad have the same birthday, March 28. It's messed up!"

"Migrant worker, you are through! We are getting rid of you!" Dimas shouts.

"I mean, I get it, the *khaches* are better than us," Vera suddenly says. "Everyone knows it deep down. That's why people fuck them up. They don't drink, they're all united. Look at us: All the men drink ... they treat their children different, their families, I see it myself. They have faith. Their God is with them. War is supposed to be

cultural, like, we're fighting with what we're made of. One time, I came drunk to a Russian test on a Saturday and I got a D. I was so ashamed of myself! Because it's our language, Russian, I know it well enough to get an A!"

"In Italy you get a fine just for throwing a wrapper on the ground!" Liza says.

"I'm not saying that there aren't any good *churkas*. Let them sweep the courtyards, fine. The problem is when they try to walk on their hind legs and put themselves above us ..."

Two men are spotted from the balcony. They keep walking past the hole in the fence instead of coming in, inspecting the perimeter. "Are they cops?"

Maga and Dimas go down to check it out. We descend through the passages, periodically stopping to listen. Maga jumps and falls, biting down on her lip, yelping. "I dislocated my kneecap," she hisses. "I have torn tendons."

Maga says that she used to be a soccer player but then, two years ago—and, sadly, it was not even at a game, just practice ... They were giving her over-the-counter painkillers and she'd drink all the alcohol in the house. "The bone has been loose ever since. Doctors say it's a habitual dislocation."

Maga doesn't want to go to the ER. "Let's just wait for Ratcatcher; he's fixed it before." She calls him, crying into the phone.

Ratcatcher shows up, a strong, bearded redheaded guy in a biker jacket. He's the most important one in the building, and everyone goes up to him to say hello, one by one. Little is known about Ratcatcher—he's into role-playing games, he's really smart, he's the one who does the negotiating with the police. In his free time, when

he's not "working on the building," he's a security guard at a florist by the train station. He looks at Maga's leg: "You have to go to the ER." [...]

After a day of tours, the guards have 2,500 rubles, and Slam and Anton are sent out to the store to buy a loaf of bread, mayonnaise, a pack of Winstons, 2 GDs, 2 Strikes, and vodka. As they come out of the store, they are stopped by three guys in gangster uniform: track pants with pointy leather dress shoes and gold chains. They take them aside "to talk."

"Good Friday to you, gentlemen. Though for some it is good, and for others a day of passions," begins the thug at the center. "Take us to the hospital for a tour."

Anton tries to get out of it.

"We need to go now. You say you're a guard there, so take us."

"I'm not a guard," Anton says slowly.

"We're here on business. There's a little shit running around in there, Lev. We need to punish him. By Friday. Will you get him for us?"

"Sure ... alright, if I see him," Anton grows pale.

Slam steps away and comes back with Ratcatcher and Zheka, who's appeared out of nowhere, a giant, tattooed mountain of muscles. The men stand facing each other.

"Is there a problem?" Ratcatcher asks with a smile.

"We're from Zelenogradskaya Street," the thug begins. "The other day, this guy here," he points at Anton, "was acting like was he was in charge and trying to get 500 rubles off each of us."

"I wasn't," Anton begins.

"Shut up," Ratcatcher tells him.

"And there were these little kids

with him, fucked up on glue, like deer in the headlights. Your fucking guards! We came on business. There's a little shit running around in there named Lev ..."

"Which one of you's in charge?" Ratcatcher asks. "Let's have a chat."

They set the time for Thursday. On Thursday, Ratcatcher is supposed to hand Lev over to the thugs.

They leave, wishing everyone a good evening. The guards leave after them.

We climb up to the roof. Seven stories of stairs without railings, my legs are burning. It's really warm on the roof and only now do we understand how cold it was in the building. We lie down on the sun-warmed moss. Sasha, Ratcatcher's girlfriend, with a Band-Aid on her cheek, tells us the first time she came to HZB, she was seven.

"Everything was different back then. There was a pond over there with little wooden huts all around it. It was awesome watching the sunset here. Now, we're surrounded by high-rises. The HZB is practically the shortest building in the neighborhood."

An announcement blows in from the direction of the station; trains are coming. A white dove is circling over the helipad.

"There's actually a superstition that if a dove flies all the way around you, you can make a wish," says Liza. "Although none of that shit ever comes true. I've tried it."

"What did you wish for?"

"Five grand for my birthday."

Vera comes out from behind the helipad, takes out her phone, and takes a long time to dial a number. She screams into the phone, "What are you freaking out for? Like you've never been wasted!"

“What the fuck are they doing here, huh? Fucking 11-year-olds. I’d shoot them all if I could.”

“I wanted to find a cure for cancer. That’s been my dream since I was 12,” Sasha suddenly says.

We go down to the fourth floor. Yen and some other people are running toward us. “The cops! The cops!” We race through the corridors. Yen hides in a hole in the wall; all the children bound out in different directions.

Only Gosha stays in front of us. He has a wide gait, his nylon wind-breaker blows open at his sides, he grabs at the air with his hands.

After a turn, we run into total darkness. We slow down and proceed quietly. We can hear Gosha running ahead of us. Suddenly, the footfalls stop. There’s a rustling of nylon. We turn our phones on for light. We’re one step away from a square hole, fenced off by a 10-centimeter-tall curb. It’s a pass-through elevator shaft.

Gosha lies four stories beneath us, his face buried in bricks. His long hair completely covers his head. He is not moving.

We can hear shouting going up the floors, “Hovrino police! Don’t move, motherfucker!”

They bend down and turn him over, then ask us to call an ambulance since it will take longer if they radio for it. Two officers lead us to the stairs. Anton is there, writhing in drunken hysterics.

“Let me go! That’s my friend! My friend, do you understand?” They hold him back.



The HZB at dusk.

“I’ve seen a lot in my day,” one of the cops says. “They’re taking care of him. Stay out of it.”

“His mother didn’t give a fuck about him!” Anton continues yelling. “I took him to my house so he could at least learn some stuff!”

“What the fuck are they doing here, huh? Why do they keep fucking getting in here?” Another one says, “Fucking 11-year-olds. I’d shoot them all if I could.”

An incredibly calm Ratcatcher descends onto the scene. “Cool it,” he says to Anton, who shuts up immediately. He offers to help, he has medical training in “intensive care.” The cops decline.

“Which one of the chiefs is coming?” Ratcatcher asks.

Turns out it’s someone named Tolya, and “you can talk things over with him.”

Ratcatcher takes one of the cops aside. They speak quietly, they laugh.

Anton isn’t yelling anymore, he’s back on his favorite subject: guns. [...]

The ambulance and emergency services drive up. They walk toward the shafts, assessing the situation. The woman doctor goes out to smoke with the police. “He’s breathing; they’re

going to transfer him now.” Gosha soon regains consciousness. He says his name, his date of birth. When they ask him, “What hurts?” he breaks down.

Gosha is loaded onto a cloth stretcher. There’s blood coming out of his head, soiling the fabric. They carry him through the darkness of the corridors to the exit, staying close to the wall to avoid the holes in the floor, lifting him over the rubble.

“How did I fall? How did I fall?” Gosha begins to cry. “I know the building, I couldn’t have. I know the building!”

Tema, who has been sobbing, climbs out of the darkness. “Gosha, Gosha! That’s my friend! Get out of here; I’ll carry him myself!” One of the cops pulls him away, punches him in the face, and Tema chokes down a scream.

“You gonna keep meowing?”

“No.”

“You got it?”

“Yes.” [...]

They put us in a car with Tema, who is acting proud and smiling defiantly. “I’m gonna tell my dad, and he’s going to make your life hell.” The warrant officer behind the wheel is furious.

He stops outside of the station, pulls Tema out of the car, and

punches him in the chest. The boy's knees buckle. "I can't breathe."

Tema is dragged into the station and thrown onto a bunk. He tries to stand up, but he's surrounded by mothers who grab his arms. "Calm down, calm down." The boy is breathing through his mouth and tears are spraying out of his eyes.

"You'll all be sorry!"

The warrant officer bends over him, smiling, and suddenly grabs him by the collar, pressing his forehead against Tema's crying face.

"When you threaten someone, look them in the eyes, you fuckhead. Look me in the eyes."

"My dad will come ..." the boy begins, choking.

The women put their hands over his mouth.

"You're a man. Be quiet, be patient ..."

The warrant officer notices my attentive gaze and drags me out to smoke.

"My name is Zhenya Ananiev, and I'm a warrant officer of the police. Go ahead, file a complaint against me. I have a little fuck just like him at home. There's nothing I can do

about him, unfortunately. Say one thing to him, be gentle with him, he'll look at you like you're shit. At least this way it'll have some impact on him."

"Like a hundred a year," a detective says lazily. "In summer, we're out there every day. They keep falling ..."

"When you have kids of your own and you beat them, you'll understand," Zhenya tells me. "Are you gonna file a complaint against me? I'll get ready for civilian life, now that I've been with the force for 15 years. You drag a little fuck like him out and he's not breathing."

Everyone's hanging out at the train station. Maga is headed to the ER, and they're seeing her off. Drinking, laughing, the kids are glad that they've once again gotten away from the cops.

"He's alive? Well, thank fucking God!" Katya shouts. "The second one down a shaft in a week! Who's next?"

Yen, Gosha's girlfriend, is calm. "I don't love anyone. But I wish it'd been Slam. He was like, 'Don't do

tours, there'll be one less little cunt hanging around in the building.' It'd be better if he'd fallen off the roof, right on his head."

"Or if the cops had taken him instead," Katya adds.

"Exactly."

"When it was the private security company, when it was the cops, and now with us, kids have always fallen down the shafts," says Maga. "There's nothing you can do about it." She is also completely calm.

"Shaman, come at noon tomorrow," Ratcatcher tells him. "We'll come by a little later, and you can get the money off the tourists."

"Okay." Slam is running around in circles, yelling, "I'm injured, but it'll heal in a year. Just another year, girls, and that's it. I'll get out of here. Back to the sensei making me run barefoot through snow."

Nine days later, Slam dies, falling down an elevator shaft from the ninth floor. ■

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Slam's wake; the kids light candles flanking his portrait in the HZB.



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† Stalkers, named after Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*, are people who seek out abandoned places. Diggers take part in an urban exploration subculture called digging. Suicides are people who are willing to die, like kamikazes.