

The New Yorker | June 2009

Inside the world of a killer high-school assassination game.

Killer, the last-man-standing game of water-pistol ambush, has become a key end-of-the-year ritual in several New York City high schools. At St. Ann’s, a private school in Brooklyn Heights, the game lasts two and a half weeks and is especially ferocious. Over the years, students there have developed a seventeen-point rule book, a map of the safe zones around the school, an entry fee (currently twenty dollars per team; it goes into the winners’ pot), and a nonplaying senior-class “judge,” to arbitrate disputed kills and rule violations. The judge also makes a pie chart of death—the order of killing assignments, which he or she then distributes to squads shortly before opening day.

“I’m looking for some good massacres early,” this year’s judge said as the competition began, the second week in May. (Summoning what his classmates referred to as his “inner lawyer,” he asked that his name not be used.) “I’ve arranged at least one boyfriend-girlfriend kill that could be interesting.”

Initially, each team of up to four students is given only the identities of its immediate prey. All other players are anonymous, so that in the days leading up to the game the school becomes a souk of intelligence-gathering and disinformation. In 2007, Jake Protell, a freshman, distinguished himself by ferreting out the itinerary of a field trip that two targets were taking to Tel Aviv. Protell took a car to Newark Airport, found the victims before they passed through security, and dispatched them using two bathtub “squirt fish.” “I had to get special permission from the judge for the squirt fish, because I didn’t want to take my gun anywhere near an El Al counter,” Protell, now a junior, recalled, as he paced Pierrepont Street, three water guns shoved inside the pocket of a hoodie.

Eighteen squads of assassins signed up for Killer 2009, a total of seventy players, creating a pot of three hundred and sixty dollars. The first week kicked off with the upperclassmen’s swift massacre of the less disciplined freshman teams. There were a couple of tenacious ninth-grade holdouts, though. Willis Cohen, age fifteen, just five feet six and a hundred and thirty pounds, was gumming up the works for a team of seniors assigned to kill him. Since the start of the game, the twelfth graders had been sleeping on futons in a couple of vans borrowed from their parents, the better to pull off a stoop-side ambush and avoid being ambushed themselves. They had to take Cohen out before they could move on to their next victims.

At 10:30 P.M. on a Wednesday, three of the four seniors, armed with Walgreens-issue water pistols, staked out Cohen’s house in a blue Toyota minivan. The idea was to use a cell phone to call the Cohens’ landline, posing as Cohen’s teammate Dominic, using Dominic’s caller I.D. The call had been engineered from a remote computer by a squad member with prodigious hacking skills.

“We want to get Cohen out on the stoop, or learn whether he’s sleeping at home,” Tuck Gaisford, the seniors’ driver said.

The call went through. But Cohen's mom—who had earlier driven her son and a teammate to a kill in SoHo—had been tipped off. The brownstone remained dark, and the seniors spent the night on a cul-de-sac in the Heights.

Meanwhile, Jake Protell and his squad—Paulie Lowther, Charlotte Istel, and Mark Croitoroo—mowed through entire teams, racking up thirteen kills in four days. In five hours on Memorial Day, Lowther, a member of the winning teams from 2007 and 2008, shot a boy sitting on his stoop in Boerum Hill, a second as he ventured from his country house to Cobble Hill, and a third whom he duped into coming to a party in the village.

Willis Cohen was finally killed through no fault of his own. He woke up and, as usual, hopped a neighbor's fence and exited through a neighbor's house. He caught a livery cab on Amity Street and headed north to the Heights. He knew he was in trouble when his driver refused to raise the windows. A member of the Gaisford team shot him in the chest through the cab's passenger side window as he pulled up to the school.

"I told the driver to pull over on the other side of the street, but he wouldn't do it," Cohen said, the wet splotch drying in the center of his T-shirt. In the end, the Protell-Lowther team won, with twenty-one kills. They celebrated with a spaghetti dinner.

In the late innings of Killer season, some kids occasionally sleep in the deeper recesses of St. Ann's itself. The game's valedictory message is built into its architecture: school is the safe ground. And, keen as the graduating seniors may be to leave, the game tells them that the world outside is not.