

War Game

a short story

by  
Nancy Werlin

## War Game

What I did to Lije. It might have seemed . . . okay, in some ways it *was* cruel; I'll give you that. But I had to do it. It was important. Okay?

You don't see? Fine. I'll explain.

Lije—Elijah Schooler—and I were friends, though nobody knew it except him and me. It had just kind of worked out that way over the years, with Lije being a boy and two years younger and going to the private school his father paid for. His bedroom window faced mine over three feet of alley, and he used to sleep with the light on. Sometimes at night we'd talk for hours—or rather I would—when Lije was worried and had trouble sleeping. For years we did that. And he lent me books. His school had an incredible library, and he could get me anything I wanted.

It wasn't a big secret, our friendship. It was a little secret, something pleasant, but not really important. Until last August when I was fourteen.

It'd been an almost unbearably hot summer. At first it was just the little kids who had the guns—you know, the big plastic machine guns with huge tanks for water. Super-Soakers. Water Uzis. Ricky Leone and Curt Quillian and even Curt's little sister, Janey, were jumping out from alleys and from around corners and behind cars, screaming like police sirens and soaking everybody in sight. The rest of us had to defend ourselves. Before you knew it, nearly every kid in the neighborhood between six and fourteen had a water gun. They were under fifteen dollars at the supermarket.

They were just plain fun, the guns. I'd had no idea. Though I'd seen real guns before, around the neighborhood and at school and on TV and stuff, I'd never actually had a toy gun before, even when I was little. I wasn't the kind of girl who was interested in toy guns. But I felt so powerful, cradling the gun under my arm and pumping away. Every time you hit someone, they'd jowl. Run. Unless they were armed too; then they'd whip around and shoot back. It was incredible. I'm not a violent person—none of us were, really (except maybe Lina at times). We weren't gang kids; in fact, we did our best to keep away from the gangs. It was the city. It was summer. It was hot. That's all.

At first, we big kids did just like the little kids and ambushed each other. But then I said something, and we got more ambitious. Kevin DiFranco and Lina Oswego organized two teams—armies—and we were all assigned ranks. The little kids were privates and scouts, and the older kids were lieutenants or spies. I was a lieutenant colonel and the head of the war council. "You're smart, Jo," Kevin said. "You do the strategy." Of course Kevin and Lina made themselves generals. Within a week, there were nearly thirty of us involved.

At first I just did it for something to do. And maybe also because it felt good to get the attention from Kevin. He'd never had much to do with me before. I wasn't interested in him, you understand; I wasn't interested in any real boys right then. That was the summer I had the tremendous crush on Talleyrand, and in all my fantasies I (or rather, my alter ego, Anne Fourier) was deeply involved in the politics of the French Revolution. Anne generally disguised herself as Pierre-Ange Gaultier, a boy journalist and the best of Talleyrand's spies. I had worked out nine separate and extremely elaborate scenarios, all of them leading to the danger- and passion-filled moment in which Talleyrand would realize he was in love with Anne. But where were Anne's loyalties? With him or with the Revolution or only with herself? It depended on how I was feeling that day. Usually in

the end I was on my own side, though, because in a war that's how you survive. That's how Talleyrand did it.

Kevin DiFranco was both popular and cute, but he couldn't have competed with my fantasy world if he'd tried.

But my imaginary life was private—I wouldn't even have told Lije the details, and he borrowed most of my books for me. A massive crush on a centuries-dead Machiavellian priest-politician in a powdered wig wasn't the kind of thing you shared. And if I'd gone on to tell people about my mental war games, my elaborately researched historical alter ego, well, my façade of social respectability would have cracked right there, and I'd have been the butt of a million idiotic jokes. If you want to survive, you have to blend in.

Plus, even I couldn't live in the eighteenth century all the time. And our real-life war game fascinated me. I had a lot of say in it, a lot of control. I was the one who said we were the opposing guerilla factions of a country in the throes of civil war, a country located right on the equator, full of steaming jungles (the playground and the abandoned factory lot around the corner on Eastern Avenue). The jungles, I said, entirely surrounded the bombed-out capital city (our street and its alleys). I was the one who set up the POW camp behind the brick wall in the truck yard, and I wrote up the rules surrounding capture, punishment, and death. Kevin and Lina were the generals, okay, and they planned the raids and battles and took care of the daily details. But I was the one who designed the game. You could even say it was *my* game.

It was amazing, when you thought about it, when you saw how well it worked. I mean, it had never happened before—all the kids in the neighborhood hanging out and doing something together. We were all different ages, of course, and on top of that there were cliques. But it worked. For a few weeks, it worked. And we had such fun.

Only Lije wasn't playing. He didn't have the summer off from school; he was in some special enrichment program and came trotting home every afternoon at around three o'clock and let himself into his apartment with his key. He'd be there alone until after eight o'clock, because his mother worked as a secretary for some big downtown law firm, and she didn't home until late. And of course his father was, as the social workers say, not in the picture. Actually, Lije had never met him. But he did pay the tuition for Lije's private school, and hey, I've heard of worse absentee-father deals. Mine, for instance. Lije hated it, though. Hated *him*. It was a funny thing. Lije was a fat, scared mess with a runny nose, and he couldn't sleep without the lights on. But underneath that he was okay. Because he could hate.

We were on the second day of a two-day truce (really an excuse to concentrate on covert ops and training) on the afternoon we all noticed Lije. He had just come out of the convenience store on the corner of Eastern Avenue and Tenth Street. He looked dorky, especially considering the heat, in his long pants and cheap dress shirt and school tie and with his backpack dragging his shoulders down. He was holding a wrapped ice-cream sandwich that he'd obviously just bought, and he was completely absorbed in trying to pick open the wrapping.

He was a perfect target, and Lina pounced. "Ambush!" she yelled, and in seconds her SWAT team had him surrounded. Lije looked up, blinking, at the four Super-Soakers leveled at his head.

"Hand over the ice cream," Lina said, "or you're dead."

Lije shot a glance at me, where I was lounging on a stoop with Kevin and a couple of the little kids. But then his eyes skimmed on past. Right then it hit me that we had never talked to each other in public, only from our windows across the alley. Out here on the street, that relationship was nonexistent. It didn't even need saying. So I grinned at Lije but didn't move or speak.

Silently, he handed over the ice cream to Lina. She laughed, made a gesture, and the SWAT team opened fire. Lije didn't move. He stood there and took it, until the tanks were empty and he was completely soaked.

We all laughed. "Feels good, huh?" Lina said. If you knew her, you'd know she was actually being friendly. For Lina.

And that was the moment I understood that Lije wasn't okay after all; that he would need help to be okay. Because he wouldn't just laugh too. Couldn't even force himself to do it; couldn't even pretend. Instead, he acted like a jerk; minded; showed he minded. Why didn't he know better than to show it? Why did he have to let his lip tremble and his face get red? Why did he run like that? Why did he let them—let us—let me—see he was scared?

It's dangerous to show your fear. It marks you as a victim. And watching Lije run away like a little kid, I was afraid for him. And right then I knew I had to do something to help him. I just didn't know what, or when.

That night, though, was completely ordinary. Lije's light came on well before the sun set, and I leaned out of my window and called his name.

"You all right?" I said.

"Yeah." His hair was wet; he'd obviously just taken a shower. Another shower.

"Sorry about today," I said casually. "You just have to laugh, you know. You can't let it get to you." I watched him carefully to see if he understood what I was saying.

Lije shrugged. "Jerks," he said. He said it like he meant it, but I saw his chin tremble and his eyes brim. So he didn't get it. I decided to leave it for now.

"Did that book I wanted come in from interlibrary loan?"

He nodded and handed over hardback copy of J. F. Bernard's biography of Talleyrand. Inches thick, crammed full of detail, and with plates not only of the man himself, but also of his wife and some of his more famous mistresses. I was thrilled. "Thanks tons," I said to Lije. "This is great. How long can I keep it?"

"Two weeks." Now that we were back on familiar ground, he was feeling more comfortable. He leaned on the windowsill. "Jo, listen. I think the librarian is getting suspicious. She asked me if I had finished the books I already had out."

"What'd you say?"

"Oh, I just shrugged and said I was working on it. But then she started asking me what I found so interesting about France, and was I taking French, and stuff like that, so I had to get out of there fast. You know, I'm not supposed to take out books for other people."

This wasn't news to me. Why was he suddenly making such a big deal out of it? "Look," I said. "I'd get them myself if the public library still did interlibrary loan."

"I know. I just want to be careful and not get into any trouble."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "They won't know anything you don't tell them. It's in your control. You're in charge."

“You always say that,” Lije said, which was true. But I’d always thought before that he heard me. I looked at him and saw that he had that rabbity look that he got when he was tense, brooding about his father, or about his mother and money, or something. Life was rougher for Lije than it should have been, just because he took everything so hard, so seriously. He didn’t know how to protect himself at all. I wondered how I’d missed that before.

So I said, “Okay. I’ll tell you some stuff you can dazzle the librarian with.” And even though I wanted nothing more than to be alone with the new book, instead I climbed up on the sill and leaned against the window frame, while Lije pulled up a chair to his window and propped his chin on his hands. I told him about the bread riots and how they guillotined the rich bastards and how, for the greater good, Charlotte Corday—what a woman, huh?—stabbed Marat to death in his bath. And as I talked, softly as I always did when I told Lije stories, the sun set, and if it hadn’t been for the smog and the city lights, there might have been stars.

“You tired enough to sleep now, Lije?” I asked finally, long after midnight. It never got quiet in our neighborhood, not exactly, but most people were sleeping.

He didn’t answer, and for a moment I thought he was already asleep. Then he said, “Jo?”

“Yeah?”

“You like me, Jo, don’t you? You’re my friend?”

He’d never asked me anything like that before. I said, “Is this about today?” Lije didn’t answer, but he did look at me, his cheeks all pudgy and his eyes, well . . . suspicious. I said, “I already told you I was sorry that happened. But Lije, you took it too seriously, you know what I mean?” But he was still staring at me with that odd look on his face, *needing*, and so finally I said, “Yeah. Yes, Lije. I like you. I am your friend. I’ve always been your friend.” Which was the truth.

“Good,” Lije said. “I’m your friend, too, Jo. Always.”

And then he stood up and leaned out the window and reached his hand across the alley. He held out his arm, suspended, for a few moments before I realized he wanted me to take it and shake hands. I did that. I think . . . now I think it may have been the only time we ever touched.

Then he went to bed, and I read about Talleyrand until dawn, when my mother came home from her night shift and made me get some sleep.

The next day it was nearly noon by the time I finally got outside, and Kevin was pissed at me for missing morning council. Worse, our planned morning kidnapping of Lina’s best sniper, Ricky Leone, hadn’t worked; instead Ricky had shot two of our guys, and by our rules—my rules—they were dead for the rest of the day. An hour later Janey got caught spying and ended up in the POW camp. Lina was triumphant, Kevin furious. There were about fifteen of us engaged in a huge argument about the rules, with me trying to cool them off and Lina nearly purple with rage.

And that was when Lije came down the street again, looking dorkier than ever. I saw him see us standing there, armed of course; saw his eyes dart around as if looking for a hole to dive into. But then—because he really did have something underneath, like I said before—he squared his shoulders and came on anyway, marching like a windup toy soldier, looking neither right nor left. Hostility, fear, anger—they were almost visible, pulsing in the air around him as he tried to push his way right through us.

Kevin stuck out his foot and tripped him. Lije fell onto his hands and knees. A few of the littler kids snickered. Lina laughed, and it wasn't the friendly (for Lina) laugh of yesterday. She'd picked up on Lije's hostility, of course, and taken it as disrespect. "You looking for trouble?" she said to Lije's back. Two of her kids stepped forward and leveled their guns at Lije, grinning. "Soak him?" one said.

It was addressed to Lina, but Kevin answered. "Go ahead." Kevin hadn't even finished talking when Lina's kids opened fire on Lije.

First just those two. But then more of them, in a circle around Lije, shooting down first at Lije's back. Then somebody—Lina?—kicked Lije viciously, forcing him over. And the rest of the water reservoirs pummeled down on his face and chest. He was pinned to the concrete by the force of the water.

Talleyrand—master strategist and supreme survivor—always knew how to improvise on the moment. He would have been proud of me, because I knew immediately that this was the moment to help Lije. I didn't even have to think how to do it. I knew.

I waited until everyone else was done. Waited until Lije got up. His palms were scraped and bleeding. He didn't say anything. He looked at me. And it was that look, the one I'd seen on his face last night. *Help me*, it said. *Protect me. Be my friend. I can't do it alone.* But he didn't say anything, he just watched me. Waited.

I emptied my own gun into his face. Then I said, "Run on home, kid. You don't belong out here. You might get hurt."

After a few more excruciating seconds, Lije left, dripping.

That night, I lay alone in bed watching the light in Lije's window and reliving those minutes. I waited until after it was full dark. Then I went to the open window and called his name. I didn't really think he would come, but he did. He looked terrible.

"Give me back my books," he said. It was what I was expecting. It still hurt, though. Inside, I felt the way he looked. But I didn't show it. I handed him the Talleyrand biography—at least I'd had one night with it—and the others he'd got me before. I wondered how I'd get books now. Somehow. I'd figure something out.

"You're going to be okay, Lije," I said evenly.

Lije shook his head. He was standing awkwardly, arms tense, hands dangling out of sight below the windowsill. "You lied to me," he said.

I shrugged. Stared right back at him as his arms bent and lifted. I saw with pride that he had his own Super-Soaker now. He aimed it at me. His aim was lousy because he was crying, shaking, and so most of the water missed me, but I stood there and took it, as he had, until his reservoir was as empty as mine.

"I hate you, Jo," Lije said. "You're not my friend."

He went back into his room. I went and got a towel and dried myself. Then I waited. And after a while Lije put his light out and, to show me he could, for the first time slept—if he did sleep that night—in the dark.

Okay, *yes*, I was sorry to hurt him. But the French have a saying about things like this. *C'est la guerre*. Literally, it means "that's war," but really it means "that's life." And ... Lije doesn't understand. Not now. But *you* can. He was wrong about my not being his friend.

I am the best friend he will ever have.

THE END

## **About the Story “War Game” by Nancy Werlin**

I have never seen—let alone touched—a real gun in my life. In deciding to try to write this story for a commissioned anthology, I thought at first I would fake some gun knowledge. That was story number one, which died a death too horrible to relate. So there I was, with one weekend between me and the deadline, and no story. I realized then that my last hope was to write a piece centered around the only kind of gun I’d ever handled myself. Of course that was a water pistol.

Originally, I thought this story was about peer pressure. But within a few paragraphs of beginning to write, I understood that the narrator, Jo (who had come along from story number one), was not really interested in fitting in with the group, though she knows that pretense is important. Something else was on Jo’s mind; something more important to her personally. So a second story developed, one that pivoted on Jo’s view of the world and of friendship.

Writing “War Game” left me with a question that I find intensely disturbing: What if Jo is right about the world?

### **About the Author**

Nancy Werlin is the author of several young adult novels, including the fantasy novels *Extraordinary* and *Impossible* (a New York Times bestseller), the science fiction novel *Double Helix*, the suspense thrillers *The Killer’s Cousin* (winner of the Edgar award), *Locked Inside* (an Edgar award nominee), and *Black Mirror*, and the realistic novels *Are You Alone on Purpose* and *The Rules of Survival* (a National Book Award finalist). She also writes short stories and essays.

For more information on Nancy and her books, visit Nancy’s web site at <http://www.nancywerlin.com>, and friend her on Facebook.

### **About the Cover**

The cover of this ebook shows a picture of the author, Nancy Werlin, that has been manipulated to resemble an illustration.

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### **Publication History**

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