

War Games

by Cileme Aroha Venkateswar
winner of the
Elsie Locke Writing Prize 2009



I am from India, and Zaffar is from Pakistan. India and Pakistan are at war. But that doesn't matter to us. We play in the zone between the two borders. No soldiers ever come here. This is no-man's-land. No one's, just ours.

Game time. His foot is facing right; he'll make a right kick. He'll take the ball ... ah, but his eyes are drifting to left wing. He'll shoot left. Perfect for my attack! Zaffar dribbles to halfway. He tosses the football up. Our eyes follow it. I jump in to steal the ball, but he has a game plan worked out. He knew I was watching, so he's given me a false trail to follow. He runs up to the centre, then shoots ... right.

"You win again," I grumble. We both speak a little Urdu. It means we can communicate in a language other than football. We meet every day; Zaffar's my best friend. Sometimes we fight, but that's nothing compared with what happens around us every day.

One day, Zaffar suggests we play a two-hour game. I thought he would never ask! I sort out a structure in my head. OK. I'll take the ball straight to midfield. He'll expect me to go for the shot. If I move to left wing after I fake a forward run, I can have a clear space to shoot ... and score! Amazed at my brilliance, I dance in delight like a mad maharaja.

Zaffar yells that we'd better start. I regain control and go over my game plan. Ready.

I dribble to midfield. Zaffar runs up. I fake and dodge out of the way. He falls flat on his face as I run to left wing. Then I toss the ball up. My foot smashes into it, and the ball soars straight into the goal. Zaffar looks stunned! I crow, "Kya baat hai! I'm the greatest!"

By half-time, we are neck and neck. While we are getting our breath back, Zaffar suddenly shrieks and points upwards with a trembling finger. I hear a distant humming that turns into a roar. Bombs! An Indian bomber plane! I freeze in shock. Then, in unison, Zaffar and I scream and run. I leap under the barbed wire at the border as a deafening BOOM blasts me back onto the razored edges. I wonder whether Zaffar has made it back.





I don't return for days. I can't bear to think of what I might find. Then I remember my grandfather's last words to me before he went missing. "Always face up to what you can't bear to know." I have to go back! So I do, but what a different place! The posts we had used for the goal are charred cinders. There is a smoking crater in the middle. But we can still play football – only this would be a more extreme game! If I still have anyone to play with.

I scan the tumbledown field, alert to the slightest trace that he has survived. "Hey! Kuch dhoond rahe ho – you looking for something?" calls a familiar voice. Zaffar is alive!



During the next few weeks, we clear the debris and rebuild our field. We leave some rubble because we both like the idea of a more extreme football field. One day, Zaffar asks me: "Zindagi kis cheez se banti hai? What are lives made of? I mean, are they made of war, of belonging to a country?" I think about it. "No," I say, smiling at him. "I am Anand. Mere liye zindagi dosti se banti hai. My life is made of friendship. Friendship and football!"