



Open Category

Second Place: George's New Wars by Chris Fleming

George says we're at war. George is prone to theft and arson and parody but seems serious about this. "Where are the tanks," I say, "the people running through the streets?"

"War isn't like that anymore," he says - "that's old war, movie war. The new wars are ones you can hardly see," he says. "They're microscopic, vaporous, happening at the level of corpuscular transfer." He empties his bag, and a machine gun falls out.

"That's a very traditional weapon," I say.

"Wars are different," he says, "but I'm not."

It has been a bad week, and war is further bother. I cheated on a university assignment using a contract service. Now they're demanding more money, or they say they'll tell the university - and that I might also "face other consequences."

What does that mean? I want to write back and say, "If I couldn't trust you then, why trust you now?" I was going to write exactly that, and then George turned up.

George says kill the lights! He says hit the deck! We must turn everything off and listen for drones, drones which could be the size of mosquitos, which - he says - could look exactly like mosquitos.

If George is wrong about all of this then these vexations are pointless. And if he's right, what chance do we stand, anyway? If our enemy can lay siege with insect drones, then they could just as readily poison us with a gas disguised as air.

I don't have the money the company is demanding; I don't have half. It's unlikely I'd be able to talk them down but, pointlessly, I wonder if they might settle for something of equivalent value. Could I prepare an artwork for them? Something large, modern, but not abnormal.

No. These people would, at the very least, want me to board a Boeing 747 with five kilos of junk in my ass.

It's all very depressing. Part of me hopes George is right. I read somewhere that war relieves ennui. The daily lacerations wrought by small concerns vanish; existential threat supersedes existentialist dread.

"Is the war on the news?" I whisper.

"You think this is 1939, Chris? You're waiting on the broadsheets?"

It's now clear that George isn't lying but rather has broken up with Tina. When Melissa dropped him three years ago, he thought a tsunami was imminent. He went all sandbags, goggles, and higher ground on me. It took some time to figure out what was actually going on. He really believes these disasters are at hand.

His mum died when we were in Year 11, and he became a heroin addict. He got clean but now, whenever emotional disaster strikes, he turns personal suffering into global catastrophe. It's awful, but not permanent.

To throw focus off the war I tell him about my predicament, the cheating, the blackmail. I know George won't judge me.

"That's horrible," he says. He fumes. "They can't do that – they can't."

"Well, they have."

"Gimme a look," he says.

I show him the email. George copies down the address, the URL, my contact's pseudonym, my Unique Customer Reference Number. "Mother of god," he says. He puts on sunglasses, grabs the gun, loads his bag, zips it. "Leave it to me. They've messed with the wrong people," he says – and leaves.

I love George. He's my best friend.

Judge's Comment:

I loved the deeply flawed characters and their actions in this story. An accomplished story that handles both intense content and wrongheaded choices with a light touch and humour. The relationship between the main characters is wryly depicted with excellent word choices building a sense of the world these two have inhabited (and survived) so far.