

Insult and Injury

by Brent Bowen

Hitting rock, the shovel gave a soft clink when it broke dirt. "Mr. Andrews, we in?" Cassandra asked.

His shovel lifted for another strike, the squat man turned his head and simply grumbled, "Yes."

The metal blade sliced into the ground again. Though this time, the blade scraped the rock and shrieked against the night's quiet. Sitting in her lawn chair, Cassandra surveyed the cemetery. She half expected a groundskeeper armed with a police-grade flashlight to jump out from behind one of the huge oak trees. Or, perhaps from one of the hundreds of headstones. Some of them were large enough to shield a whole unit of the Colonial Defense Forces. But in the end, they were alone amongst the night's crickets and the dew that formed along the ground.

On and on Mr. Andrews worked. And Cassandra brought nothing to occupy her time. She didn't need to. She had her anger. The belief she had been wronged--lied to by the

people she trusted most--occupied her mind and kept her company while he worked. Five years had past since her husband's death and she still refused to accept it. She clenched the plastic armrests of her chair for hours at a time, relaxing only when Mr. Andrews, her paid muscle, stopped.

At the last release of tension, Cassandra's blue knuckles throbbed with arthritis. This only fueled her anger when she realized he hadn't finished, but was just catching his breath. "I hired you because you were sturdy, Mr. Andrews. I need steady activity," she said, wiping the spittle from her chin. She broke open her lip's senescent skin but continued after the man. "You only stop when you've found something for me."

From within the ditch, the man's shoulders buckled with a sigh. "Yes, mam. We're nearly there."

An hour later, pink and azure invaded the sky. Mr. Andrews was completely concealed within the ditch and Cassandra kept tally of every fresh soil pile flung. At last, a deafening clank shot through the graveyard. The dirt stopped.

"Miss, I'm finished," he yelled from the ditch.

"Hold on," she said, struggling to press herself over the aluminum lip of the lawn chair's seat.

She dragged the chair behind her. And when she reached the ditch, she nearly toppled over the ledge, much like her husband's car had over Miller's Point five years earlier. The "authorities" recovered a body from the river several week's later. It looked a lot like Henry, but she never was convinced.

She settled in the chair again and pointed to the casket. "Go ahead. Open it."

Mr. Andrews dropped his shovel and lifted the casket's top lid. Nothing but tufted satin. He slid down the casket and lifted the other lid. Nothing.

Cassandra narrowed her eyes. "What's that at the foot of the casket."

"It's a piece of paper, Miss," he said, collecting it.

Cassandra took the folded paper from his outstretched arms and opened it. It read C.D.F. Or, Colonial Defense Forces.

"That fucker left me!" Blood and spittle sprayed the paper. "That son of a bitch faked his death to run off and join the military."

She had a moment's notion to join up, as well. To find the fucker. "He got a young's man shell in place of that worn-out carcass sure, but he likely got himself killed already."

A 25-year-old body, though. It would be nice, she thought. She leaned forward in her chair, flipped the paper over and focused on the note. "And Cassandra, if you're reading this, I'm gonna replace those saggy titties of yours. Will find a young gal with a nice firm set," she said, reading aloud.

She noticed Mr. Andrews choking back laughter. "What's so fucking funny," she snapped.

Disbelief coursed through her. It finally connected in her chest, clenched and twisted, like talons shredding its prey. Black spots marred her vision and she tumbled from the chair into the ditch. Her limbs trembled and the last thing she felt was a stream of clammy soil smattering her face.

Mr. Andrews steady voice trickled away from her as she lay there dying. "Insult and Injury."