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The Collector

region in a bipolar transistor that absorbs a charge - Webster
by Ray Arthur Monigold II

"Hey - Razin - come on, I'll buy you a Pepsi. It's too cold to work right now anyways."
Jerry always had a way of making things seem better.

It *was* a cold Colorado winter morning and the unheated cement block building we were renting was even colder. At twenty some feet tall it had been built to service one semi truck's tractor - period. We used it as a VW repair shop for mostly Hippie cars and buses. We split the income, then traded paying the rent every other month. And speaking of trading, some of our best work was done in exchange for THINGS instead of money. From chicken fried steaks to chickens, eggs to eggplant meals, good smoke to a HUGE MURAL in the style of Peter Max - it covered the ENTIRE back wall of the shop. The mural was really a billboard print made for 7-Up Soda Pop representing a huge stylized zeppelin, shaped like a 7-Up bottle laying on it's side, with some crazy stuff hanging on to and off of it's psychedelic exterior - all floating over a serene green field topped by a perfect cotton cloud filled blue sky. Somehow, one of our customers, who was a professional sign painter working for a bill board company, somehow he found an EXTRA billboard pressing and installed it on our back wall - damn, it looked good - we called it the lead blimp!

So - it was tall in there. And any heat that might have risen to the ceiling was way too far up to have any influence on the icy concrete slab covering the floor, flanked by even icier walls.
And did I mention there was NO heater?

Looking at my jets of steamy breath pushing against the visible cold that winter morning I knew it, Jerry was right - "OK Jer, if yur buyin' then let's go."

As we headed for the car I suggested "Hey, Jones, let's go collect from that insurance lady since we can't work. It's my month for rent and her half would cover me."

The woman, who managed an insurance agency, owed us for the work we had completed on her bug. She had promised to pay the previous week, but we hadn't seen her since her tail lights faded from our driveway on the night she picked up the old bug, powered by the fresh engine we'd just rebuilt.

"OK man, it's on the way to the store. But the bill is in the shop." Jerry said as we were closing the doors on the Red Wreck, once my ride, now it was our shop's 1964 VW bug (that was red and a real wreck).

"No sweat" I said "I have the amount memorized and she's been sitting on her copy of the bill for two weeks anyways. Let's hit it!"

In some ways the Red Wreck was like Jerry and me, a slow starter, especially in the cold. But there would be no pouring chilled caffeinated sugar water into her in order to coax a faster mood, unlike the two of us. I had never, in my twenty six long years, never once had a cup of coffee. Colas were my caffeine fix. First Coke, now Pepsi. Jerry too, mostly, although I had seen him sip at coffee a few times, but not me - no coffee for me.

The insurance office was just a mile or so down the road, so off we went.

We both had long hair back then, in the beginning months of 1971. Jerry's was half way down his back, while mine totally hid my shirt collar. We were dressed in second hand store Official Hippie Fare and were layered up from long johns out to our forbidden tattered, traditional cowboy style blue jeans. We looked like Hippies. And although our clothes were clean, they were getting thread bare in the usual places. In the early 1970's the social dress code was still firmly enforced. For men, either suits or sport coat with slacks and a tie for an office job, and the same for many retail stores. The rules for women were dresses, or skirts and blouses - NO trousers permitted unless it was a casual setting, but still no blue jeans. Sears or Dickies branded kaki, grey, dark green or dark blue shirts with matching trousers for the service trades. Jeans were discouraged, even forbidden, unless bell bottomed and disguised to resemble slacks. Most places sported the ubiquitous "NO SHIRT, NO SHOES, NO SLACKS - NO SERVICE" placards that were meant to keep the Hippies out. And, if a choice had to be made, above the Mason Dixon Line, between a Hippie or an African American regarding entry or access, the Hippie ALWAYS lost!

Jerry's ensemble was topped by a sleeveless sheep skin lined vest who's leather exterior was hand embroidered with bright colored patterns against the ruff leather skin. Deep sheep pile wool made a natural even trim as it peaked out around the arm holes and defined the bottom and both opening edges. I wore a pair of buck skin moccasin style boots that tied off just under my knees and a belt width leather head band secured with a pair of raw hide shoe laces touting a bead at each end. Neither Jerry nor I wore anything military. Jerry had been out of the Army since 1966 and I had left the Army just 7 or 8 months previous in March of 1970. While I had been drafted, then convinced to "join" in order to avoid Vietnam - where I ended up anyway, Jerry had joined when his post high school wanderings proved futile. Besides, he was desperate to escape his "new family" of several abusive step brothers who's mother was anything but warm and nurturing to the boy she inherited when marrying Jerry's dad after Jerry's mother had passed away.

In early 1965 the U.S. launched a "political stabilization operation" in The Dominican Republic. As an Airborne soldier, Jerry was sent in to help the populous change the country's administration for the third time in about the same number of years. The assassinated, former long standing dictator, Rafal Trujillio, had ruled the place with an omni present, but benevolent hand from 1930 until 1961 when he was killed (some say because he helped finance Castro with bridge loans until the USSR could find the funds for Cuba's permanent capitalization). Leaving behind great social and national wealth, the power vacuum his death created was torrential because the citizenry had never experienced anything but his complete control over every facet of life and commerce. Added to this was the fact that the old boy evidently thought he would go on forever as he hadn't groomed a successor. His heirs tried to take over the country by asking Cuba's new boss, Fidel Castro, for reciprocal assistance, but Cuba was feckless to the rest of the world in 1961. So it was, that after two attempts at a democratically elected leader, there was a social revolution that the United States thought might mean another Cuba in the Caribbean. And that's why Jerry and a few thousand of his closest buddies were sent to root out the insurgents and make the country safe for a new, better democracy.

Jerry, it seemed, had spent most of his time mired in the gun battles that moved from roof top to roof top until the U.S. pulled the G.I.s out in late 1965 to get ready for our foray into a country with oil, not just "sugar cane and limp commies" to quote a slogan of the day. Jerry was lucky, though. He had served his minimum time and once again joined the civilian ranks for good. The luck part happened when ANOTHER Jerry Jones started to steal cars and rob people - way before computers and sophisticated surveillance equipment had been implemented. Although this mix up had caused Jerry some grief, it had also kept him from being recalled into the Army for the "Vietnam Conflict."

(To better understand why the wealthy country of The Dominican Republic shares the same island with the now poverty stricken AIDES infected Haiti, look at a map of the area and read a bit of the region's history from 1960 to 1970, to learn how their proximity to Cuba effected their politics.)

Jerry and I had rapidly built a bond in the months since we had met, a closeness that I had never known, nor, I am sure, will ever know again. We had come to finish each other's sentences. But many of our conversations went back to "The War" as Jerry called our combined yet asynchronous run-in with the Army. An organization, Jones was convinced, that insisted we be brought face to face with people who wanted us DEAD! Jerry was still having a tough time with both Delayed Stress Syndrome (unknown in 1970) and the fact that no one was saying anything about "The Dominican Republic WAR". It wasn't about getting a spot light, or even public kudos, it was about admitting that we had been there and that brave U.S. Soldiers had died, along with a pile of D.R. soldiers and civilians. And now, just as the public began serious demonstrations and resistance to the Vietnam war as the number of draftees grew with frightening regularity, now with all that happening, there wasn't a word about The Dominican Republic. Jerry had snapped at least once since being at the commune (where our shop was located). I hadn't seen it, but I had heard about it. His range seemed uncontrollable and his post guilt inconsolable.

We had both decided that the whole problem with Ex-GIs was programming. In eight weeks the Military turned inductees into soldiers (whether draftees or volunteers). A soldier, by that era's definition, was someone who blindly and automatically followed orders - no questions asked - AND was to NEVER think for themselves. Then two to four years later it was PLOP - out on the streets. No re-acclamation, just turn in your gun and go. And there they were, all the Vets, just waiting for someone to give them orders. Some figured it out sooner than later. A few never got it at all. Heck, even prisoners are given classes on how to act when released. Some require half-way houses. But soldiers trained to take or give life without question at the mere bark of an order? They are foisted upon the public to do as they wish until re-acclimated, re-incarcerated or re-incarnated, which ever comes first.

There we were, that cold morning, decked out in our winter version of the Hippie Uniform made of cotton and wool, watching our foggy exhalations frost up the inside of the Red Wreck's windshield. The only 2 windows that roll down in a VW Bug were rolled down and I was busy crawling around scraping the ice off the inside of the other four while Jerry drove the mile or so to the tiny insurance office where our "I.O.U." customer was the manager. Pulling off the road into the four car white dusted gavel parking lot, I spotted the fresh tire tracks leading up to the dark blue '67 Bug. The snow under the rear of the blue bugger had been no match against the heat of the fresh motor. There was bare gravel under the still warm engine.

"Well, well - look what the cat dragged in", the lady behind the desk chuckled as Jerry and I entered the small, one room office building. Her voice was deep and gravelly and had that smokey tone that is the defining attribute of so many night club singers. "Did I leave the front door unlocked again?" she continued with a cynical tone. She was twice our age and nearly four times as street smart. Her own hair was covered by a wig made of shiny reddish plastic strands that shimmered as the light winced every time her head swiveled to catch up to the movements of her medium size frame - so it wouldn't wiggle or fall off. No woman back then showed their real hair, except the Hippie chicks. It was ALL wigs - ALL the time!

"Hey, it's like been two weeks man and we haven't seen our money." I said in an almost squeaky voice, knowing that to Hippies everybody was addressed as man. It was about equality man, dig it?

"Money! You boys here for your money? You should a told me. Well, let's see." and with that she pulled her purse up off the floor and sat it on her desk. Opening it she began rummaging around inside. "Money. Let's see. Oh, here's where that went." and she plopped a golden, round compact on the desk. She didn't stop either, standing for a better view, she kept right on rooting and mumbling and pulling out stuff. After a few minutes she looked up, closed her purse with a click and said "Well, that was worth while. Hey, I don't want to seem rude, so either of you want a cigarette?"

She opened a little soft sided fake jewel covered pouch filled with filtered cigarettes that was laying among the dozen or so objects she had produced from her rummaging, now encircling the purse like covered wagons around an old western campfire.

"No thanks" Jerry said "I don't smoke."

"Me either." I said "Just Camels, that is. I only smoke Camels, thanks though."

The lady pulled a long, thin, Virginia Slim from her plastic bejeweled pouch and placed it between her lips, holding it there with one of her glossy red painted fingernail hands. She just stood there, holding the cigarette with two fingers. In her mouth. Saying or doing nothing. Just looking at me. Finally, she removed the cigarette and said "Well..."

I'd forgotten my manners. I fumbled for my Zippo lighter. Pulling it out of my pants pocket, I popped it open with a flick and snapped my fingers across the striker wheel to produce a yellowish smoky flame. She put her cigarette back in her mouth with the one hand, then with her other, pulled the lighter to its required destination by wrapping her hand around mine. She held them, my hand and the lighter, after her cigarette was lit. Turning them both sideways like they were a pair of synchronized swimmers, she glanced at the Vietnam emblem on one side, then pushed the team of fire keepers back and let go. After a long dramatic drag on her cigarette, she tilted her head back slightly and exhaled with great aim and authority. The smoke shot out like a rocket blast then turned to a whitish cloud just inches later, heading for its collision with the ceiling.

She looked right in my awe struck eyes and said "What was it you came for, Boys? Insurance or something?"

I stammered and forced out a squeaky "no, the bill. your car. we fixed your car. you still owe us, remember?" I was starting to get mad.

Laughing out-loud, in that same deep smokey voice, she said "Are you serious? I was about to bring that piece of crap back to have you fix it right this time, but it won't start."

"But we guarantee our work. If it's not right we'll fix it. Just pay up and we'll fix it if it's our mistake." As I said the words I began to get a little warm inside. I could feel my hands starting to make fists.

"Boys, it don't work like that. I've had to put up without a car for two weeks now. So just leave and I'll get someone who knows what they're doing to fix it. OK? Now just leave. And thanks for the light."

"THAT'S NOT HOW IT WORKS LADY! PAY UP. I SAW YOUR CAR ON THE WAY IN AND IT'S BEEN DRIVEN. YOU DROVE IT HERE TODAY." I WAS YELLING. I WAS PISSED - fists tightly clenched, jaw set, eyes focused, stance widened.

"Don't raise your voice to me, Boy. Do you hear? Now Stretch" she said pointing at the over six foot tall Jerry with her two straightened fingers squeezing the cigarette between them "Stretch, get your buddy out of here now - if you know what's good for you."

"THAT'S JERRY JONES, NOT STRETCH! SHOW SOME RESPECT TO A VETERAN." MY LOAD HAD BEEN PRIMED, ALL IT NEEDED WAS IGNITION -

"Veteran? You two Veterans? You're just fucking Hippies. Now leave!"

i i i ssssSS N A P P E D !! !!!!!.

I literally saw a white flash.

I WAS a veteran. I was a veteran who had seen the shit hit the fan and now, like Jerry before me, I wanted it all to end. To me THAT was what being a Hippie was - PEACE not war. You can't beat up someone and then expect them to be friends just because you stop beating them. What's to say you won't start beating them again? If you are at odds with a country's leaders, and attack them or provoke them to attack, or they attack you no matter the cause, when the fighting begins between nations, the majority of the death, destruction and uprooting - the life changing, neglect, and plain old inconveniences will ALWAYS fall upon the GOVERNED. And, as if to add insult to all that injury, the spoils of military conflicts ALWAYS go to the GOVERNING, never the governed.

I lunged as the wave pushed up from deep inside. Without conscious thought or planning, the instinct of military training put her neck in my two hands.

I found myself applying pressure. Her wig began to shake.

But at that moment, in my head, in my whole being, it was not her that I was holding.

I was holding the Boy Scout leader, whom, after trusting everything that was me, to him - as a pseudo father because mine was always away, he betrayed me! Then he had threatened me, and followed through on his pledge to not submit my application for Eagle Scout, just to make sure I kept my "... smart mouth shut." WHY? I never said ANYTHING! I never told ANYONE! And now he was dead, nearly a year ago, but still I hated what he stole from me - my innocence and my hard earned Eagle Scout rank. I wanted to kill him MYSELF. Not some damned heart attack. ME !

I squeezed a bit more and began to sweat.

I was holding my mother who had used me as a source of income so many times from my tenth birthday on. The woman who had stood by while my father made his deal for me. Something I had refused to believe until, as I was being discharged from the Army, I read, in my own files - the waivers I had signed at his behest - it was four years late, but finally I read the whole story and I was REALLY PISSED !!!

I was holding my father who had sold me (so to speak) to the military in exchange for his reinstatement of all his retirement pay and privileges (which he had lost because of his womanizing) - I felt CRUSHED !!

I was holding the people responsible for taking the rest of my innocence, then raping me again, only this time with the horrors of war I had no way of knowing about until it was way too late. For killing the people I had to carry off the fields in bits and pieces. For foisting upon me all the little children I had held in my arms as they threw up or died there - always scared - always alone. mad. Mad. MAD.

I was holding the hippies that greeted me with chants and rants of baby killer when I got off the plane in California after a harrowing trip back from Vietnam where I was plucked out of the jungle, yanked away from my beloved Big Daddy 312 airplane that had been my home and life for nearly a year, without even saying good bye. The nearly week long flight to the states that cost us three emergency landings and a stay in Guam waiting for a replacement engine. Hurt with the worst pain - pain that can't be changed - a wound to the soul.

I was holding the Generals who had pinned ribbons on me for the role I played in America's efforts to free a foreign people. For the trip I had been given to visit the Oval Office in Washington D.C. - even though the President was away that day. dumb de dumb dumb, dumb de dumb dumb, DUMB - OUCH !

I was holding the people who put me in charge of ALL the Army aircraft assigned to NORAD - YIKES

I was holding the people who had placed me in the nut house because I had refused to go back to Vietnam. OH ! now THAT hurt!

I was holding myself for being so foolish, so naive, so unaware of my actions and their effects on so many others, until THAT very moment. What had I been thinking? How could I have not seen all this before now? None of this would be going away any time soon, of that I was PAINFULLY aware.

I then watched, through moist, blurry eyes, as if from a far, I watched the lady struggle and grind her cigarette into the cloth that covered my arm. I smelled the burn, a smell that I had come to know from before. But I did not feel the pain. I had taught myself to not ignore pain, but convert it to energy and then use that energy to survive the ordeals that I had come to know as "sessions". "Sessions" that were intended for my own good, to help me decide that I had not made a wise choice in refusing to return to Vietnam. And even though I had won my little battle against staying in the Army, against returning to Vietnam - I had traded away all my rights as a citizen.

Then I felt something so different. A feeling I had never before known. It was a shot of serenity surging through me from it's point of origin - from my shoulder. It was Jerry. He was simply laying his hand on my shoulder. Not squeezing, or pressing, just laying his hand on me.

I let go of my grip. I turned as the tears began to flow from every pour in my body.

The lady gagged as she sat - ker plunk - in her chair, gravity having had it's way with her completely. She was choking. With her wig at a decided angle, she was cursing me with as much volume as she could muster, ordering us to "GET THE HELL OUT".

And then he spoke, with the sincerity of a saint -

"Hey - Razin - come on, I'll buy you a Pepsi. It's too cold to work right now anyways."