

## See Rock City

by Allen Steele

Junior pulls into the gravel parking lot outside Doc's place and switches off the headlights. He lets the engine run for a few moments, listening to a Nashville country music station as he savors a last toke from the joint he's been smoking since he crossed the De Kalb County line, then he switches off the ignition, stubs out the joint in the ashtray, opens the Camaro's mismatched door, and climbs out.

The night is hot, the air swollen with the kind of midsummer Tennessee humidity that brings out the cicadas and lightning bugs and causes men to drink long past midnight because they can't sleep. Junior pauses to tuck his sweaty white t-shirt down the front of his jeans and shake his legs a little to make the pants cuffs slide back down over the top of his cowboy boots. A silent flash of heat lightning on the horizon draws his eyes past the parking lot, out to the abandoned cornfield behind the farmhouse where the spaceship squats upon its hydraulic landing gear, listing slightly to one side. It's a moonless night and Doc has turned off the floodlights surrounding the vessel, but Junior can see its vague shape against the treeline, like a giant Dairy Queen ice cream cone turned upside-down in the middle of a farm field.

He spits a big hock on the ground, then the soles of his boots crunch softly against the gravel as he saunters to the door. The front porch lights are off, the shades have been drawn, the little Pepsi Cola sign in the window has been turned around so that it now reads "Sorry, We're CLOSED," but Junior didn't drop out of the eighth grade fifteen years ago before he learned not to believe everything he reads. The door is unlocked; a tin cowbell jangles as he shoves it open and walks in.

Two men are seated at a lunch counter on the far end of the room, silhouetted by the dim glow cast by the fluorescent menu board above the kitchen grill. Between the door and the lunch counter are half a dozen tables, piled chest-high with the detritus of Doc's livelihood for the past twenty months, two weeks, and six days: T-shirts, posters, keyrings, cheap ceramic mugs made in Taiwan, plastic replicas of the spaceship custom-manufactured by a company in Athens, postcards of women in bikinis, and at least fifty different items with rebel flags, Elvis, or that stupid spaceship printed on them. This used to be Doc's living room, but things change.

"Hey, Junior. C'mon in."

Doc's dry voice, like the creak of old sunburned leather, comes across the darkened room as the two men twist around on the lunch counter stools. "Have yourself a set, boy. Take a load off."

"Howdy, Doc." Junior walks slowly past mounted dead squirrels holding miniature golf clubs and glass balls which shower fake snow upon tiny replicas of the spaceship when you turn them over until he reaches the lunch counter. "Hot tonight."

“It’s hot, all right.”

“Hotter’n Jesus,” Junior adds, and immediately regrets his choice of words when Doc’s face, a bit of weatherbeaten burlap framed by long white sideburns, turns stolid and cold. Doc’s a good Christian: member of First Calvary Baptist, attends eight o’clock services each and every Sabbath, pays his tithes and all that happy Sunday school horseshit. “Hotter’n the devil,” he quickly adds.

“Amen,” says the other man seated at the counter, then he belches into his hand. “[Scuse me.”

Doc chooses to ignore the blasphemy, as Junior knew he would. “Need a beer?” he asks as he lowers himself from his stool and begins to walk behind the counter. “We got Bud, Bud Light, Busch, Busch Light, Michelob . . .”

“Michelob will do.” Like he’s picky about what he drinks; most of the time, Junior settles for Black Label, which he can pick up for three bucks a six at the Piggly Wiggly in McMinnville. He only buys Michelob when he’s taking a girl out to the drive-in and he’s trying to impress her. Considering that he was invited here because Doc wants him to do a job, though, he might as well splurge. “Tonight’s the night for Michelob,” he adds, reciting something he once heard on TV

“Good idea,” the third man says, then burps again. He teeters slightly on his stool, his eyes unfocused. “Tonight’s the night. I’ll have another, Doc. “

Doc hesitates, his right hand inside the old Coca-Cola cooler behind the counter as he glares at his companion. For the first time, Junior notices the row of Budweiser cans on the counter in front of the drunk. “You know Howell here, of course,” Doc says. “Howell, this is Junior . . .”

“Pleased to meet you.” Howell swivels around on his stool to poke his right hand at Junior. Howell looks as if he hasn’t had a sober night in twenty years: big, flabby body, unwashed black hair slicked back with too much Brylcreem, deep creases in the skin at the back of his neck. “I know your daddy, son. What’s he doing these days?”

Junior’s father, Junior Senior, has been dead for almost three years. He passed away in St. Thomas Hospital in Nashville. Junior misses him about as much as he misses his first grade teacher; at least one of them didn’t beat him up for no reason at all. “Nothing much,” Junior says, ignoring Howell’s hand. “Just laying around as usual.”

“Go put something on the jukebox,” Doc says as he opens an ice-cold Michelob and places it in front of Junior. He reaches into a coffee can and plucks out a quarter that has been painted red; he pushes it across the counter to Howell. “Anything but Billy Ray Cyrus . . . I’m so sick of him I could spit up.”

Howell stares at the store-quarter for a moment before he gets the hint. “I’ll

put on some Reba McIntyre,” he says, picking up the coin and hauling himself off the stool. “Maybe some Alan Jackson . . .”

“Play that new song of his,” Junior says. “Play it twice. I kinda like it.” He grins and winks at Doc over the neck of his beer bottle.

Doc only shrugs. “Sit down, boy,” he says softly as Howell wanders away, cursing as he stumbles against a table and causes some t-shirts to fall on the unswept floor. “We’ve got a lot to discuss.”

“About your rocket?” Junior hoists himself atop the stool Howell has just vacated. “When you called me, you said you needed a job done on it.”

Doc nods as he bends over to rest his arms on the cooler. From across the room they can hear Howell sliding the red quarter into the Wurlitzer’s slot and carefully punching a song number into the keypad. “Thank you for making your selection,” the jukebox says in a strange feminine voice. “A video is available. If you wish to view it, please deposit twenty-five cents and enter the code number . . . now.”

“Fuck the video,” Junior says, glancing over his shoulder at Howell. He’s seen it a hundred times already; besides, he knows the holographic screen on the jukebox is busted and Doc is too cheap to get the thing fixed. “Just play the song.” In a few moments the room is filled with slide guitars, drums, and twangy keyboards. Junior’s left knee begins to twitch in time with the music. He closes his eyes and nods his head with the rhythm. Damn, but he loves this tune . . .

“My spaceship . . .” Doc says.

Junior reopens his eyes. Yeah, right. The rocket out in the back forty. “Last time I looked at it,” he says, “it seemed like the paint’s getting a little faded out. Kinda peeling around the top of the nose cone and all.”

When he bothers to work, Junior paints houses and barns. It’s an honest job, after all, and it helps keep him in beer and dope when other work isn’t available. “I can mix a little white and gray, maybe get the shade you need to make it look just right, and when that’s done I’ll shellac with weatherproofing. It’ll last another couple of years before you need it painted again. How’s that?”

Doc continues to peer across the counter at him. “That’s nice of you to offer,” he replies, “but d’ya think I’d really ask to you to come all the way out here just to discuss a paint job?”

No, Junior doesn’t think he would. For the sort of work he does when he isn’t housepainting, people meet him late at night, when the lights are low and the only witnesses are crickets and bullfrogs. Not that secrets can’t be shared at high noon in the middle of the Smithville town square--a whisper is still a whisper, any time of day--but he’s long since accepted the fact that most respectable people don’t want

to be seen with him. Even if Jesus has forgiven his sins, many people who live around here would just as soon see him return to the county workhouse.

Junior is about to answer when Howell waddles back to the counter. "I put the song on, Junior," he brays, as eager to please as a puppy begging for a Milk Bone. "Alan Jackson twice in a row, just like you said."

Doc winces; Junior grins at his discomfiture. "Go out back and check the dumpster, willya? I don't want the raccoons to go rooting through the trash again . . ."

"I looked at it this evening. It's secured nice and . . ."

"Then look at it again," Doc says. "And take a leak while you're at it . . . something, I don't care. Just leave us alone a few minutes, okay?"

Howell looks wounded; the puppy has been kicked. He starts to argue with Doc--he's the co-owner of this operation, he sold his pig farm and sank his life's savings into that damn rocket, doesn't that give him a say in this matter?--but one look from Junior shuts him up. He wanders away from the counter; a few moments later Junior hears the back screen door creak open and slam shut.

"Kinda slow, ain't he?" he murmurs.

Doc shakes his head as he glances over his shoulder to make sure that Howell has indeed stepped outside. "No, but he might as well be, considering how much he drinks." His eyes are hard when his gaze returns to Junior. "And don't you be calling Howell slow. He and I have known each other since we were children . . . we've gone through some tough times together before and he's always stuck with me. He's a good man."

Junior says nothing as he polishes off the rest of his Michelob. He has known some good men, too, but most of them are either dead or in jail. Being a good man doesn't mean two shits in this old world; being quick is all that matters, and that's why Junior is still drinking beer and getting laid on Saturday night when many good men are lying on their butts in a cold prison cell, waiting for tomorrow morning when they get to return to some godforsaken interstate median and pick up trash for the state of Tennessee.

And if Doc and Howell are such good Christians, then why did they invite him out to their little piss-ant tourist trap out on Route 52?

"Talk to me about your rocket, Doc," he says as he pushes his empty bottle across the counter.

The fact of the matter is that there's not much Doc can tell Junior that he doesn't already know. Most of the story is public knowledge already; almost two years ago, it was on the front page of every newspaper in the world, from Taiwan to Athens, plus most of the TV stations.

The rocket parked out in Doc's cornfield is a Delta Clipper, a single-stage-to-orbit spacecraft designed and built by the McDonnell Douglas Space Systems Company of Huntington Beach, California: no wings, no throwaway boosters, nonmetallic epoxy-graphite fiber hull, low launch and recovery turnaround-time, minimal maintenance schedule, and all that other good shit. About a hundred and thirty feet tall and weighing about twenty thousand pounds, the Delta Clipper is almost the same height (but half the tonnage) as an old DC-8 jetliner and nearly as versatile: it goes up, achieves orbit, delivers its payload, re-enters the atmosphere nose-first, then flops over and lands on its tail where it started, right on the dime with nine cents change.

That's theory, at any rate. But this particular Delta Clipper had a turn of bad luck.

The ship is christened the U.S.S. Grissom--which is kinda ironic, considering it was named after some astronaut who was killed trying to go to the Moon, way back before Junior Senior porked the wrong girl and bequeathed Junior upon this lucky world--and it had the distinction of being the sole man-rated ship in the SSTO fleet. Instead of being a pilotless cargo vessel, it was flown by two pilots; its midsection contained a pressurized passenger module. Two years ago last August, the Grissom had rendezvoused in orbit with Freedom Station. It had been a routine crew-relief mission--besides the pilot and co-pilot on the flight deck, there were three other astronauts aboard, taking a ride back to Merritt Island from the space station--until something had gone seriously wrong during re-entry,

Exactly what, nobody really knew at the time. Just as the Grissom was commencing its aerobraking maneuver over the Atlantic coast, flight controllers at the Johnson Space Center in Texas heard a sharp bang over the comlink, then the pilot shouted something about loss of cabin pressure. Before anyone at JSC could react, the Delta Clipper entered Earth's upper atmosphere, after which there was the loss of signal which occurs when a spacecraft is passing through the ionization layer.

LOS usually ends after nine minutes, but this time twelve minutes elapsed before the JSC controllers reacquired telemetry with the Grissom, only to be met with stark silence from the other end of the radio channel. By then they had come to the cold realization that the Grissom, albeit still intact, had somehow been knocked dangerously off course; NORAD radar showed that the vessel was somewhere over the southeastern United States, with a new trajectory that would bring it down somewhere in the South.

Although the JSC controllers could raise neither the crew nor the passengers, they still had an uplink with the Grissom's navigational computers, and even if the Grissom could not be destroyed by radio signal--as a man-rated spacecraft, it was not equipped with an auto-destruct mechanism--they were capable of overriding the ship's manual control and remote-piloting the vessel to an emergency landing, preferably in a remotely populated area.

And so they did. And that's how, early one morning in mid-August, a spaceship crash-landed in the middle of Doc's cornfield.

None of this had meant jack shit to Junior, who had been serving time in the workhouse, but it had been a godsend to Doc, whose corn crop had been scorched by two straight years of drought and who was looking for any-damn-way of paying off his debts that didn't mean waiting for Willie Nelson to throw a benefit concert on his personal behalf. Even before government officials showed up at his farm, Doc had set up sawhorses in front of the gate leading to the back forty and was charging people five bucks a head to take a close peek at the spaceship that incinerated ten acres of cornfield.

When the suits from NASA and FAA and DOD and all the rest had arrived, Doc graciously allowed them to come into his field for free. After the bodies of the two pilots were removed from the flight deck and the three passengers, unconscious but still alive, were rushed away in ambulances, Doc put his foot down. His property, his rocket: no one, but no one--not TV camera crews, not local reporters, not his Baptist minister, not local residents nor their children nor their dogs--got through the gate without putting five dollars in the kitty.

Even as Doc was bickering with two NASA men and a U.S. federal marshal in his living room, a slick lawyer from Dallas who specialized in space law--there actually is such a thing--called on the phone to offer his services. Once the lawyer was cut in on a percentage of any money Doc might make, he informed Doc of his rights. On one hand, under the U.N. Agreement on the Rescue of Astronauts, the Return of Astronauts, and the Return of Objects Launched into Outer Space, Doc was legally impelled to surrender the Grissom and its crew to the authorities. However, under Article II of the Convention on International Liability for Damage Caused by Space Object, the United States government had to compensate him for the loss of his cornfield.

What all this meant, the Texas attorney told him, was that Doc had already cooperated with the government by allowing them to enter the spacecraft and take away the dead and injured astronauts. Until NASA found a way to haul away the Grissom and the government ponied up the money, though, the spacecraft rightfully belonged to him.

Not that the Grissom was going to fly away any time real soon; its fuel tanks had been depleted by the emergency landing and its aft landing gear leg had fractured during touchdown. Only luck had kept the spacecraft from going up in smoke itself during the cornfield fire; the flame retardant which coated its hull had been seriously eroded during its prolonged re-entry. Not only that, but when NASA inspectors combed the spacecraft, they found three small holes in the flight deck, caused by micrometeors which had struck the Grissom when the spacecraft accidentally encountered a Perseid meteor shower. This was what had caused the explosive decompression which had killed the pilots and knocked the vessel off course; the passengers had survived because their module was isolated from the flight deck and

had its own independent oxygen supply. It was no small miracle that the Grissom had survived re-entry and had landed safely, but it would never fly again on its own power, nor could a spacecraft the size of the Grissom be easily hauled away by either truck or helicopter. For the time being, it was permanently grounded in the middle of Doc's cornfield.

The government didn't want to handle a messy civil lawsuit; the circumstances of the crash were embarrassing enough already. Nor did NASA want to foot the bill for salvaging a useless, unflyable spaceship from somewhere in Tennessee. And nobody wanted to pay for Doc's ruined farmland. After a few weeks, therefore, Justice Department attorneys reached an out-of-court compromise with the farmer: if Doc agreed not to sue NASA for the loss of his fields and if he continued to cooperate with the crash investigation, then Doc could keep what was left of the Grissom after NASA was done with it.

Once NASA inspectors completed their investigation, an engineering team from McDonnell Douglas stripped the vessel of any reusable components; when they were through with the Grissom, the SSTO was not much more than an empty hull. But that was okay with Doc, who by now had gone into the tourist trade; attracted by screaming headlines and breathless TV news reports, people were driving from all over the country to his farm, willing to pay their five bucks for a chance to gawk and take snapshots of the spaceship in De Kalb County, Tennessee.

"I can't rightly complain," Doc says as he opens another Michelob and pushes it across the counter to Junior. "Business was pretty good for awhile. Howell came in as a partner and helped me run things. I moved everything upstairs and turned this part of the house into a shop. We put in the lunch counter, ordered up a bunch of T-shirts and ashtrays and stuff . . . no, sir, I can't complain."

Junior is only half-interested; three beers and he's got a pretty good buzz going, yet he's getting a bit impatient. He knows what the Doc wants, but the old man is rambling, working up his nerve to ask.

"Well, y'know, everything's gotta come to an end sometime." Doc pulls a paper napkin out of a dispenser and absently whisks it across the marbled formica, wiping up the round stains left by the beer bottles. "I guess everyone who really wants to see that thing has come and gone already. I'm in my second summer of running this place, and there's been too many days lately when Howell has sat out by the gate and hasn't collected a dime."

"Yeah, uh-huh . . ."

"Meanwhile, I still owe the bank money and the bills ain't getting any smaller. Plus the percentage of the take I gotta send that lawyer. And the insurance . . . that's the worst. Premiums just keep getting higher and higher, and I'm not getting anything for it."

Junior knows about insurance. That's part of his line of work. "It's a bitch, all

right,” he says. “Damn insurance companies . . . just keep getting richer all the time.”

“Sometimes I wish that rocket never landed here.” Doc sighs and looks around the store. “Never believed in the damn space program anyway . . . waste of time and money, if you ask me. Now I got a houseful of space stuff I can’t sell and a spaceship out back that no one wants to see.”

“Yeah, uh-huh . . . kind of wish something would happen to it, don’t ya?”

Doc doesn’t reply. Lost in his thoughts, he toys with the damp napkin, absently tearing off thin, narrow pieces and crumpling them into little spitwads. “You ever been to Rock City, son?” he asks after a little while.

Junior shrugs. Maybe he has, maybe he hasn’t; when he goes somewhere for fun, he’s usually stoned on something and doesn’t remember it very well afterwards. “That’s up on Lookout Mountain outside Chattanooga, ain’t it? Big ol’ place.”

“Big ol’ place, that’s right.” Doc continues to strip the paper napkin as he speaks. “You probably don’t remember, being a young man and all, but there was a time when half the barns in Tennessee had black roofs with |See Rock City’ painted in big red letters across them. See, the company which owned and operated Rock City would go to farmers whose barns were facing the highways and make ‘em a deal . . . the company would repaint their barns for ‘em and put up their advertisements where no one could miss seeing it from the road, and in return the farmers would get their barns painted for free.”

“I guess.” Junior begins to wonder if that’s what Doc has in mind: hiring him to paint “See Doc’s Rocket” on barn roofs all over the state. Junior hopes that isn’t the case; he really hates painting barns. “I ain’t seen many like that lately”

Doc raises his eyes from the napkin to look straight at him again. “Why do you think that is? Rock City’s still there. You can visit it anytime . . . see four states, check out Mother Goose Village, buy yourself a birdhouse and a pecan pie. Rock City is still in business, but you just don’t see too many of those black and red barns anymore. So why do you think that is, son?”

Junior hates it when someone calls him son; it reminds him of his drunk old man. The night isn’t getting any younger; he could be home in his trailer now, watching an old Star Trek rerun on TV and getting wasted. “I don’t know why, dad,” he says with scornful impudence. “Maybe no one wants to see Rock City anymore.”

Doc slowly nods his head. “Or maybe all those old barns burned down,” he says very softly.

Junior smiles.

Doc nods again as he looks down at the paper napkin. “These things happen sometimes,” he murmurs as he makes another spitball. “Accidents, weird freak



things, stuff like that ... lots of stuff can happen on a farm, nobody ever knows when.”

“Sure does.” Junior takes a long, slow sip from his beer. “Someone down in Lebanon, his barn went up one night just like that.” He snaps his fingers. “Boom, just like a bomb. Burned to the ground in a couple of minutes. Total loss.” He shakes his head. “Crying shame.”

“I know,” Doc says. “That barn belonged to a friend of mine . . . Earl Walker. I believe you know him.”

“Never met the man,” Junior replies, but he can’t keep the grin off his face. “Did the insurance company settle with him okay?”

“Earl did well with his insurance company. They thought it peculiar that someone would want to torch his barn for no apparent reason, but . . .” Doc shrugs. “Well, Earl got his money and he’s using it to move him and his wife down to Florida next month.”

“I’d say he got off lucky.”

“I’d reckon he did.” Doc pauses. “He told me to say hello to you, next time I saw you . . . but I guess that’s kind of stupid, since you say you never met the man.”

“I suppose so.” Junior is still grinning. “Like I said, I ain’t been in Lebanon in months.”

“Guess not. And you haven’t been out here for awhile, have you?”

“Naw, I ain’t been here.” Junior drains the rest of his beer and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “Fact is, I was in Nashville tonight . . . went in to catch that new Arnold Schwarzenegger movie, Ain’t that right?”

Doc doesn’t reply. He picks up the three Michelob bottles and carries them out to the back door. Junior hears the screen door swing open and slam shut; while he waits for Doc to return, he pulls another paper napkin out of the dispenser, dabs one end in a small puddle of water Doc missed a few minutes ago, and uses it to wipe down every inch of the counter where he has been sitting. The napkin goes in his back pocket; after that, he is careful not to touch anything in the store.

There’s some things they just don’t teach a kid in the eighth grade.

When Doc comes back, he’s got Howell with him. Howell has a thick roll of money in his pocket: five hundred dollars, split into twenties and fifties. Junior makes him count it out on the formica, and when he’s finished counting Junior picks up the cash and shoves it into a front pocket of his jeans.

“Well, good night, then,” he says as he stands up from the stool. “I think it’s

way past y'all's bedtime, don't you think?"

Neither man answers. Both are staring at the floor, each looking as stupid as only a couple of dumbass hick farmers can look. Ex-farmers, rather; Howell is as thick as the pigs he used to slop, and Doc was never that good at harvesting corn. They should have learned a real money-making skill, like Junior did.

Junior shoulders open the front door and walks to his car. He drives out of the parking lot and spends the next couple of hours cruising the back roads where the county sheriff never goes. He finishes the joint that was left in the ashtray and listens to country music on the radio, savoring the warm summer breeze and the feel of money in his pocket, and when the night is at its darkest and a cool mist is beginning to rise above the tall grass, he swings back toward Doc's place, where all the lights have now been extinguished and nothing is moving.

Driving another quarter-mile down the road past the rocket farm, Junior finds an old tractor-path off the highway where he can stash his car without it being spotted from the road. The path is nice and dry, so there's no real danger of leaving tire tracks in the dirt, and everything he needs is stashed in the trunk: a pair of old rubber rain boots, some latex dishwashing gloves, and two five-gallon gasoline cans. He switches his cowboy boots for the galoshes and pulls on the gloves, then picks up the gas cans.

Way off across the abandoned field, the U.S.S. Grissom rises above the withered remains of corn stalks. The stars are out tonight; constellations Junior can't name shimmer in the moist midnight heat. Humming his favorite country music hit, Junior begins to wade through the tall wild grass, the gas cans gently bouncing against his knees.

If he gets through with this job soon, maybe he'll get home in time to catch the end of Star Trek.