

Righteous Son

by Dave White, 1979–

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“Son of righteousness shine upon the west also.”

—Rutgers College motto

„Think you’re a bit out of place, college boy.”

The barkeep put a dirty glass of beer in front of me. The swinging doors of the saloon were unable to keep out the dust, hot air, and smell of horse manure. For the second time today I felt alone, distant. These sensations weren’t evident at home.

„How’d you know I was a college boy?” I asked.

„Y’all got that smug-ass look. You know, like you better than this town.” He ran his hand along the stubble at his chin. „Where you from, anyway?”

„New Jersey.”

I took a sip of the beer. It tasted like gravel.

„No. How smart are you, college boy? What college?”

„Rutgers College.”

„Never heard of it. What are you doing so far from home?”

I finished the beer, surprised I didn't have to chew the last gulp. I was in the middle of nowhere drinking beer that was awful. This wasn't how my life was supposed to go, I wasn't supposed to be in Texas or California or Oklahoma or wherever I was. All I wanted was to get this over with and go back home.

„I'm looking for somebody.”

The barkeep found a dirty rag and wiped at some moisture on the wooden bar. He didn't appear to wipe it down often; the top of the bar was warped and looked like a hilly road. Like the mountains I had to cross to get here.

„Course you are,” he said. „Everyone out here lookin' for someone or somethin'.”

A dark spot seemed to catch his eye, and he rubbed the rag hard into the spot. He didn't ask if I wanted another drink. It didn't bother me much, because I didn't.

„You know John Westing?” I asked.

The rag stopped, but only briefly.

„Yeah. I know him.”

My hands flinched. I tried to cover it by putting them on my belt. All I found was the handle of my father's Civil War pistol.

„Lemme give you some advice, college.” The barkeep gave a crooked grin. „Don't get into any poker games while you're here.”

„Don't plan on staying long enough for games.”

The grin didn't leave his face. „You're talking real tough, college. Why you lookin' for Westing?”

„If you know him, you know he's originally from New Jersey. I have a message for him.”

„He won't be in for a while. He prospects.” The barkeep turned his back to me. „You came all the way out here just to deliver a message?”

Sweat formed where my hat met my head. It wasn't from the heat.

„It's going to be a loud message.”

My mother sat in the dark in our Trenton house. Her face was silhouetted in front of a pulled curtain. I could see only her profile and it was shaded in darkness. The house was quiet except for the snuffle of crying.

„It was a good funeral. They did Father proud,” I said.

„Are you going back to school, Samuel?” she asked.

We were in the sitting room, she sitting on the stool of the piano she used to play when my parents entertained guests. She had pulled the stool away from the piano to the window. I stood in the doorway, watching her.

„In the morning.”

The air was still and musty. I wanted her to open some windows, but she refused. She thought that if she let the air in, it would take what was left of my father out.

„How is your roommate?” she asked, her voice hollow.

„He’s fine.” I thought about the last time we talked. My roommate sitting on the park bench alone, looking at the sky, confused.

„Will he be coming here in the summer again?”

I didn’t say anything.

„He’s a good boy. It’s a shame he has no one. You can’t always watch out for him, however.”

„He’s like a brother to me.”

She shuddered at the words.

„Your father wanted you to have something,” she said, as if she hadn’t heard me. „He told me on his deathbed.”

She got out of her chair and walked to me, her arms outstretched. In her hands was a thick wooden box. One I’d seen only once before in my life. She placed it in my hands. She tried to smile, but her eyes misled her face. There were dark circles beneath them, garnished with tears.

I opened the lid and looked at the metal inside.

„It’s your father’s gun,” my mother said. „From the war.”

I closed the lid. I was very young when the war raged. I can remember bits of my father before he went to fight, a bright man always quick with a smile. I remember more clearly after the war, the light of the smile no longer gracing his face.

The gun returned with me to Rutgers the next day.

The barkeep nodded toward the door as a group of prospectors came in.

„The one with the beard,” he grunted.

I turned on my stool. There were three men with dirt caked on their clothes and their faces. They were loud, swearing and laughing and yelling, until one finally said, „Hey, Red, three whiskeys and six beers!”

The barkeep fished out glasses from behind the bar.

„How’d you do out there, boys?” Red said.

The one with the long gray beard said, „Same as always. A little bit, but nothing major. It’ll come.” He glanced at me. „Big crowd in here today, Red. Who’s the new blood?”

„This is—” Red looked at me.

„Samuel Donne,” I said, rising from my bar stool.

„Your accent, it sounds like mine.” A grin appeared beneath his dusty gray beard. „New Jersey?”

„Yes, sir.”

„John Westing,” he said and we shook hands. „What’s a New Jersey boy doing way out west? Too hot to be out here for laughs. You’re too young to be here prospecting. We got all the gold anyway.”

His cracked, dry face shuddered as he chuckled.

„Looking for you, sir,” I said, not joining his laughter.

He took his hat off and placed it on the table his friends were sitting at. Dusted off the shoulder of his jacket.

„Me? Where are you coming from? And why would you come out all this way to see me?”

„I’m coming from New Brunswick, sir.”

I let it sink in. Let the realization rise through his body until I saw it in his eyes.

„Bartholomew lives in New Brunswick. Goes to the college there.“

I nodded.

„I'm Bartholomew's roommate.“

„My son's roommate.“ He appeared to be thinking it over. „Well, why don't you join us for a drink and a game of cards?“

The box rested on my desk. I sat on my bed, polishing my shoes. Across from me, Bartholomew Westing sorted through some envelopes. He'd just taken in the mail.

„What are you doing this evening?“ he asked.

These moments were always difficult. Bartholomew rarely had plans and he usually counted on me to make up for that.

„I can't tell you,“ I said.

Our room was bare, the walls a soft white color, the floor uncovered. We kept the room simple, temporary. A reminder to us that college leads us to a larger goal, it was not a place for us to stay.

„You can't tell me?“ Bartholomew smiled. He shifted his frail body toward me to hear me. He looked like he'd just woken up and hadn't eaten in a week. Since I'd been away, it was possible both were true.

I got up, looked into the hallway, then closed the door to our room.

„I saw Harriet near Kirkpatrick Chapel this morning.“

„Damn you.“

„What?“

„You are lucky and you don't even know it. Every woman you meet falls for you. You have it so easy. I meet a woman and she wants me to help her study.“

I shrugged.

Bartholomew's tired eyes were still scanning the addresses on the envelopes. „So you will be with her, then? I was hoping we could go to the pub.“

„Not tonight.“

„Why not? You're always with Harriet.“

„Let me see her tonight. We can go to the pub anytime.“

„No. We can't! You have no idea what the world has been dealing me lately. We need to talk. We need to drink. It's time to have fun like the old days. Harriet will still be around for you.“

The frustration in his voice prickled my skin. I didn't answer.

„We used to be like brothers, Samuel.“

He held an envelope under the light of a candle.

„We still are,“ I said.

„A woman is dividing us. I'm alone, and you don't care. Soon, I'll lose you as well,“ he said. „My own brother.“

Again, I didn't answer, this time because I noticed the color drain from his face. His shoulders slumped as well.

„Are you going to be all right? This is about more than you and me, it seems,“ I said.

„Go be with Harriet. I've just received a letter from my father,“ he said. „I'd prefer to read it alone.“

Four of us sat around the table, beers in one hand, cards in the other. As John Westing got more and more drunk, the more he talked, the more he rambled. He seemed to consider me his best friend.

I never played cards before and Red was right, I shouldn't have. The little money I had was draining away before me.

„My son the college graduate,” Westing was saying. „It never fit him, it will never fit him. It's not in his blood.”

I folded my hand, and took a sip of beer to keep from breaking the man's neck.

„You see, Sam, the thing my son never realized is you can't get away from who you are. Violence is in our family, and it's passed down from generation to generation. He thought by going to school he could become his own man.”

He drank an entire glass of beer in one gulp. After the third beer, I had to admit, the taste improved.

Red brought us all another round. Though it had been dark now for hours, I could still feel the heat of the still air on my skin. The temperature didn't seem to cool out here, only settle.

I tried to watch the others play cards, but Westing kept talking, „I've killed men, Sam. I didn't like it, but I've done it. My father killed men. It runs in the blood. I came out here, hoping to get rich, but I knew at some point I would have to kill again. I wrote my son a letter telling him just that. I told him there would come a point where he'd have to kill, too.

„But he wouldn't listen, he's never listened to that. He tries to run from his past. He attends one of the first colleges created in this fine nation. If we go to war, he will not go. But there will come a time where he has to make a choice, and he'll have to kill someone.”

The next hand was dealt, and I got three queens, a deuce, and an eight. I bet. The rest immediately folded.

We played a few more hands and soon I was out of money. Red laughed at me, reminded me how he warned me to stay away from cards. I didn't speak to him.

John Westing had his arm around me now, was talking into my ear, spittle flying from his lips.

„So, you've come all this way,” he said. „It must have taken you weeks by wagon. Why are you here?”

This was the moment. My hands shook, my throat closed, but I got the words out.

„I'm here to kill you.” The words came from my mouth, but they felt as if someone else had spoken them.

Westing laughed. The other cardplayers laughed, too.

Finally composing himself, he sucked down his beer, and said, „Why would you want to do that?”

I put my hand around the grip of my gun and said, „Your son is dead. And it's your fault.”

On most occasions, I didn't like taking Harriet to my room. But after we'd had a few drinks at dinner, it didn't seem to matter. We climbed the steps arm in arm, she stopping to giggle, me stopping to nuzzle her neck.

Outside my door, I pressed her against the wall, kissing her deeply. Her scent surrounded me, the smell of powder on her skin. Her hands ran through my hair, and she groaned softly.

I opened the door and Harriet pulled away from me, stepping over the threshold. She turned into the room, froze, and screamed. I came in behind her only to see my roommate, noose around his neck, hanging from the ceiling.

John Westing drank another beer, confident that I wasn't going to shoot him. He even asked his drinking buddies to leave. They listened. The dirt on his face was now hardened and some of it rolled off as he spoke.

„My son committed suicide? I always knew he was weak.”

„Sir, with all due respect,” I said, “your son was stronger than you'll ever be.”

He balled his fists and ground them into the tabletop. „You have no idea what it means to be a Westing. Bartholomew was an embarrassment to me. His mother, God rest her soul, thought the same thing.”

His eyes were glazed over from the alcohol. He couldn't sit in his chair without having to catch his balance on the table. Now was my chance. I reached to my belt and began to pull out the revolver.

„Why don't you just put that on the table, okay, Sam? Where we both can see it.”

For some reason, the strength in his voice stopped me. His demeanor hadn't changed, but there was darkness in his voice. Something I couldn't put my finger on, but it scared me.

I put the gun on the table.

„Let me tell you a story, so you know where I come from. Then you can tell me what kind of Westing my son was.” John Westing leaned across the table and did his best to point a finger at me.

„When I was twenty-five years old, I killed a man in Boston. Drowned him in the harbor. Held his head under water until he stopped kicking and screaming. That's how I met my wife. The man was trying to rob her, you see? And I did what was necessary.”

Red had finished cleaning the bar and was now going around and blowing out candles. Shadows crossed our faces.

„Thirteen years later, when Bartholomew was just starting at the local school in Philadelphia, I shot a man. He tried to walk out on a bill in my friend's bar. Again, this was necessary.”

Red came and took the last of the empty glasses and whispered to me it was last call. He paused, looking at the gun on the table. He repeated the words.

Westing acted like he hadn't heard. „Get us another beer, will you, Red? Me and Sam here are talkin'.”

Red looked at me and I shook my head.

„One day, probably three years ago,” Westing continued, „before he left for school, Bartholomew came home with a bloodied nose. One of the boys he was with punched him. I asked Bartholomew what he did in response. Bartholomew said nothing.

„Nothing. Can you believe that? Someone punches you and you don't respond. He wasn't my son. That was not what I brought him up to be. And what he did, he

soiled our family's name. I had to find the boy who punched Bartholomew. I went out, found him and his father together." A smile crossed Westing's face. „They won't bother anyone anymore. They won't hurt my family. Or my son."

„You left town after that, didn't you?" I asked.

Westing nodded.

„But you kept in touch. With your son, with your wife. You wrote them letters."

Westing nodded. „I wrote Evelyn a letter every day until she passed. I wrote Bartholomew a letter when I thought he needed one. Maybe, he'd read one and wake up."

„Your son is dead."

Westing didn't smile. But he didn't appear sad, either. „You said that earlier. Why don't you tell me what happened?"

The doctor came first. He needed help getting Bartholomew down, and Harriet needed to be pried from my arms so I could help. He was shorter than me, but as we pulled him down, he seemed the size of a child.

We cut the noose and laid Bartholomew on his bed. His face was blue, his eyes bulged in their sockets. His mouth was twisted in what could only be described as horror. I tried shutting my eyes to block out the image, but it wasn't possible. I could already sense Bartholomew Westing's face creeping into the recesses of my brain, planning to haunt my dreams.

As the doctor looked over the body, I let Harriet weep against my shoulder. After a while I told the doctor I was going to walk her home. He agreed and said he and the police would be here when I got back. Before I left, I took the wooden box from my desk and the open letter that rested on Bartholomew's desk.

Harriet and I walked across the city, our silhouettes cast in gaslight. We didn't speak. The drinks we'd had earlier had worn off, as had the mood. Around us people laughed and enjoyed the evening.

After I dropped her off, I found the closest streetlamp and leaned against it. I unfolded the letter.

Dear Bartholomew,

I am writing you again to plead for you to realize what you've done to your family. You have broken us apart.

Your mother is dead. She died shamed. You cannot defend your family name. And now you've done what? You pay too close attention to girls you cannot expect to know intimately. You say you go to school to learn, to be a man.

You are not a man. This is the last correspondence you will receive from me.

As of today, you are no longer my son.

Signed,

John Westing

The letter also contained a return address on it. I folded the letter and placed it in my jacket pocket. I took my father's gun from the box and secured it in my belt.

I thought about what my mother said a day earlier. That I couldn't always be there. I should have been. If I had stayed home that night, I would have stopped him. I couldn't always look out for him. But there I could make it up to him.

I set off for Westing's town the next morning.

We left the saloon, Westing stumbling ahead of me. After I told him the story, he showed no remorse, no sadness. His anger scared me, but I had traveled a long way. I would not be deterred.

A few horses tied to posts muttered at us as we passed. I noted the stars glittering in the sky, stars I'd gotten to know well during my journey to this forsaken town. Being in the open, things that were familiar to me on my trip were familiar now. The sky, the smell of the air, the heft of the gun returned to my hip. The image of Bartholomew Westing's twisted face.

I stopped walking in the middle of the road. I stood next to a closed hardware store. The sign in the window advertised to prospectors. All their gold-digging needs could be found in that store.

It wasn't like this back home. Even at night restaurants bustled, people were in the streets, living. The gaslights glittered off expensive buildings. Candles flickered in the windows of houses where families enjoyed their time together.

For six weeks, I'd abandoned that comfort. I rode a horse in darkness. Now I stood among rickety buildings on weak foundations. Nothing moved, no one laughed. This town was dark and silent.

Dead.

Westing must have noticed his feet were the only ones crunching gravel. He stopped and slowly turned toward me.

I took out my gun.

John Westing eyed me, his hands at his sides. He stood a good twenty feet from me.

„I don't know what you've read about how things occur out here, but you're wrong. There are no draws, no duels. I'm not going to do that. And even if I were, you know I'd win. I should shoot you right now." He laughed and spat on the ground. „But I won't."

„Why not?"

„I've killed people, but everyone deserved it. You don't. You're trying to avenge a friend. I can understand that."

„You really think I'd come out all this way and not kill you?" I didn't want to say those words. There was too much of a chance they were true.

„Do you even know how to fire a gun? You're a college boy, probably like your father before you. You're following your path. My son didn't follow mine. He deserved what he got. He deserved it for what he did to my name. Where did you get that gun?"

I pulled the hammer back.

„It was my father's," I said. „From the war."

Westing paused, and his eyes widened. He knew then I would pull the trigger.

So did I.

„Don't," he muttered, but there was no conviction behind it.

I imagined my father, the smile on his face as he lifted me out of my cradle. I pictured my father returning from the war, his hair gray, his eyes sad. I wondered what he did in those years, what he'd seen.

I wondered what lay ahead for me. And what path I was setting for my children. Then I remembered Bartholomew Westing would have no children. And would never set a path for them.

I squeezed the trigger.

