

A WALK IN THE GARDEN OF SAND

Prologue

When his mother passed he was barely eleven and he knew himself friendless and scarred forever, all prospects bleak, only heartache and mournful dreams. Outside the cabin was a fierce winter to boot, and his despair held fast until the first good thaw.

Gunther blamed the old man who was guilty of everything, every grief and disaster; and the old bastard would pay, you bet. His brother had a good idea: follow him on this trap line in the next bad storm and do the job, let the snow cover it up. Leo had dropped more than one hint about this, and Gunther with a sore ass from another of the old man's kicks, began to think it needed doing soon; but they waited. Hardly a year after his mother's death he had grown as tall as his big brother, both of them a half-head over the old man though their hides weren't as tough. But they were getting there.

Sometimes he looked back to see himself as a little boy: no wonder he hadn't figured anything out--a baby like that. But pictures from that time stayed in his head, shifting so it was hard to tell what was real. Doc Kostermann rumbling around the little cabin, from time to time ducking outside to his snow-cruled buckboard to refresh himself from the jug under the seat; then to doze on the bench by the stove, while the old man stormed out

often--he had his own stash in the root-cellar. Behind the horse blanket strung across a corner of the cabin's back part where he and Leo had a narrow bunk, Gunther in half-sleep heard the Doc's whiskey voice: "I'd say that's it, Dolph." Fully awake at dawn he wasn't sure that's what he had heard, but it was.

How that came to happen he never found out: something ate at her insides, people said at the grave: her stomach, maybe, women's' trouble; folks murmured at her graveside.

Fetches from Colby, the reverend, a stranger, preached over the wood coffin that Critch's Burials in Zimmerman let the old man have on time. A dozen or so people stood quietly at the rough hole hacked into the frozen earth. Gunther was taken aback to see the Sauerbach girl who would be teaching the winter term. She had arrived early after graduating from the normal school in Bismarck, and he'd seen her once at the Amunsen's where she was boarding and had talked to him pleasantly. Now she actually gave him a quick hug around his sheepskin coat and ragged shawl, and said, "This will be a good year in school, you'll see."

When Leo did leave it was almost a relief to Gunther, for his dire promise was unfulfilled. He left without a word of goodbye to his little brother and certainly not the old man, who late in the afternoon yelled, "Where the hell's that damn kid? He didn't shell that corn and he ain't slopped them hogs either. He ain't done nothing all day." These duties then fell to Gunther who worked into the dark, wondering how his big brother had managed his escape. Did he somehow have money or food or much in the way of clothes? He did have a good horse and good gear. Over the days Gunther saw that

other things had gone off with Leo too: an old rifle, a deer-skin bag, a couple of blankets, a hatchet, some gunny-sacks--probably for the oats--a big ham from the smokehouse.

There were other odds and ends the old man claimed the son of bitch had stolen, and the law was gonna be on his ass pretty damn soon.

With the bunk to himself, Gunther slept on the outside where Leo had before. It was a queer feeling for a time, without his big-brother's elbow and twitching knee and snorts and snores bothering him every night, although he had learned to handle it, hunkering close to the cold wall. But even if he slept better, now he had no one to talk to. Leo had always seemed to listen, for all that he said little in return; and, indeed, for a time after their mother died, nobody said much at all, except Gunther, with his habit of talking to the dogs; or yelling to get the chickens out of the string beans. In time it became his job to snap the beans and dig up the swedes and potatoes. The dogs wagged their tails when he spoke to them, but his best conversations were with Bugs, although he wondered if the pony gave him companionable nudges in the shoulder only because he was now getting the prime cleaned oats that Leo once claimed for his own horse.