The afternoon Sonny Brewer moved into the street Archie Kemp was resting his tired body on the front verandah in a beaten wicker chair he’d retrieved from the side of the road. When he wasn’t driving trucks for a living Archie parked himself in the chair and kept company with a book. Distracted from his dog-eared paperback, he lifted his eyes and saw Sonny dribbling a tin can along the footpath. Archie’s look of contempt was met in equal measure by the boy’s. While he couldn’t have been more than thirteen years old at the time, Sonny wore a *fuck you* attitude and liked to show it off.

Archie was unhappy to see the boy go into the house next door. He stood up, dropped the book on the chair, walked into his own house and announced *trouble’s moving in next to us*. Loretta Renwick, his wife in every way but marriage, was standing with her back to him at the kitchen sink. She went on peeling potatoes as if she hadn’t heard him. Experience had taught her there wasn’t a lot that came out of Archie’s
mouth in need of her attention. While she barely tolerated his occasional outbursts, Loretta did love Archie. They’d met in hospital, eight years earlier, when Archie was laid up with a badly broken leg after a truck accident. Loretta worked in the hospital kitchen on the meals trolley and came to enjoy Archie’s bedside cheekiness.

Loretta was a hardheaded woman who fell for his rare qualities. Archie never drank or raised a hand in anger, and he was a hard worker. If there was more she would have hoped from a man, she never let it be known. Loretta had a twelve-year-old son, Charlie, who went by the name of Ren outside the house. His natural father, a man he’d never met, had got Loretta pregnant in the darkness of the back stalls of the local picture theatre and hadn’t been seen since.

When Archie ambled into the kitchen that afternoon Ren was sitting at the table, with pencil in hand, drawing a picture of a blackbird he’d seen preening itself on the back roof that morning. Ren had been sketching from the day he could hold a pencil. The mantel above the open fireplace in his bedroom was lined with exercise books full of his drawings, mostly of birds. He looked up from his book to Archie, with no idea who his stepfather was complaining about. Nor did he know that the boy Archie was referring to would soon become his closest friend, and that the two boys would discover more trouble and adventure than even Ren’s vivid imagination could wish for.

As it turned out, Archie wasn’t far off the mark on his prediction about Sonny. It took only a week for the boy to announce his arrival on the street. He was exploring the railyards that cut off the rundown neighbourhood from the city’s growing urban centre of prosperous high-rise buildings
and expensive shops. The railyards housed the suburban trains that returned late each night, along with freight trains, diesel engines and row after row of broken-down carriages left to rot and provide shelter for bands of stray cats and the occasional runaway teenager.

Sonny picked up a sleeper spike he found laying between the tracks and stuck it in his back pocket. He was later seen hurling the missile through the milk bar window at the end of the street and running away to the sound of breaking glass. The police knocked on his door the same night. When he refused to let them into the house they asked after his parents. Sonny had no mother, and at the time his father was asleep on the couch after a solid day on the drink. While the police thought it a good idea for the boy to take a ride with them in the divisional van, he declined the offer. Street-smart beyond his years, he knew better than to give up the safety of the front doorstep. The police could have dragged him into the street and thrown him into the back of the van, and they would have, except the neighbours, after noticing a flashing blue light in the night, had gathered on the footpath outside the house. As notorious as local police were, they knew it was a poor look, hauling a kid from his own home. Such a scene could turn a crowd and earn a copper a house brick in the back of the head.

During the doorstep interview the officers asked Sonny for his explanation about the broken window. He told them he’d been aiming for a bird perched in the branch of a tree out front of the shop.

‘I weren’t meaning to kill it or nothing. Just wing it. Maybe frighten it.’
‘You’re full of shit, son,’ one of the officers said. ‘We just come from the milk bar and there’s not a blade of grass on that street, let alone a fucken tree.’

Sonny was ordered to present himself at the police station the next morning, along with his father. He was interviewed, fingerprinted, photographed and charged with vandalism. The conviction, handed down six weeks later, earned him a criminal bond. Worse was the belting he received at the hands of his father, who was found liable for the expensive bill for the broken plate-glass window. Having come to their attention, the police kept an eye on Sonny from that day on, sweating on him to step out of line.

As Sonny walked out of the police station into the sunlight that afternoon, one of the detectives on duty, Sergeant Foy, turned to the desk officer and said, ‘You see that kid who just walked out, Ollie? He’s got fucken bad blood pumping through his veins.’

‘How do you know? He’s just a kid. No different to any other young troublemaker around here. He’s no gunnie, Roger. He only smashed a window.’

Foy’s seniority rarely brought him into contact with petty vandals. Most of his work was spent dealing with gunnies and career criminals. With the slow demise in local bookies and the opening of TABs near of ten years earlier, armed robbery was the growth industry of the 1960s. As the crims got more dangerous, so did the police. And Foy was one of the most dangerous of all. ‘Nah. There’s something more in this kid. He’ll take some beating down soon enough.’

*
Sonny Brewer was an oddly built boy. He stood long and pale with dark ragged hair and a bird-shaped chest. From a distance he resembled a scarecrow standing in a field. Up close there was something of a scraggly pigeon about him. He kept his left eye to himself, the lid lazily resting on his cheek, and fixed his sight with his right eye, a marble that appeared to have exploded and shattered to pieces. He liked to claim the eye possessed powers and brought him luck, which could only make sense if he was referring to bad luck, of which he’d had much experience. When Ren first ran with Sonny, the eye spooked him so badly he was unable to look at it for more than a second or two before turning away.

Given the choice of the right or wrong way to do something, Sonny mostly steered the wrong way. After the night of the broken shop window, any time the police grabbed him in the street or came knocking at his door, Sonny wasn’t surprised to see them. And when his drunken father bowled into his room of a night, drunk and swinging his trouser belt, Sonny wouldn’t bother asking what it was he’d done wrong. He’d simply drop his pants, eager to get the whipping over and done with. He never felt sorry for himself, and took every knock like he deserved nothing better.

While it wasn’t unexpected that the police would hold local boys in poor regard, they fared little better with their own schoolteachers. Only weeks before Sonny’s arrival, the headmaster, Dogger Dean, told Ren, after giving him the strap when he was caught spitting on the ground, that your kind live at the arse-end of the world. Ren wasn’t offended by the comment, seeing as he didn’t have much respect for the headmaster either. Dogger wore the same wine-stained jacket to work each day
and smelled little different from a drunk on the street, but was held in less regard, as he had money in his pocket and a home address that wasn’t automatically looked down on.

Ren lived on a row of terraces opposite the towering red-brick wall of the old cotton mill. At one time the mill had employed hundreds of workers from across the suburb, until the day the gates were shut and it was abandoned. At the bottom of a steep bank below the mill a wide river ran from the hills in the distance and wound its way through the suburbs and inner city, to its mouth at the bay. The water was the colour of strong black tea and didn’t smell all that different, except on hot summer days when a stink rose from its surface.

Its banks were often used by people ridding themselves of possessions they no longer wanted – old machinery, cars and broken furniture. Even dead animals. On one of his many walks along the riverbank Ren had once come across a maggoty draught horse laying on its side. No one could work out how the horse got there. The bloated corpse was left out in the sun for days and picked over by birds and rats until a council worker eventually turned up, scooped the animal into a front-end loader and drove it to an offal yard, where it was sliced apart with a bandsaw and boiled down for glue.

The river had long accepted human refuse as well. It was the favoured dumping ground for dead bodies whenever a gang war kicked off, which occurred like clockwork every decade or so. Those disposed of were rarely weighted down to ensure their bodies would not be found. Instead, the dead were put on display, their beaten corpses floating downstream with shotgun blasts to the face, slashed throats or missing fingers and toes. And then there were the jumpers, suicides who leaped
from the river’s highest bridge, the Phoenix, some filling their pockets with stones before leaving the bridge behind. Many of the jumpers were female, handsome and well-dressed women, who for reasons unknown left the comfort of their homes on the high side of the river for the murky water below, where, with good fortune, they found peace and salvation.

Although Sonny was a year older than Ren, when he enrolled at the local school he found himself in the same class. His looks, particularly the demented eye, didn’t invite friendship. A loner at school, he could never focus on study and spent most of his time fashioning darts out of matchsticks, string, cardboard and the dress pins he stole from the art room. Like everything he produced with his own hands the darts were beautifully constructed and flew like miniature space rockets. If the work had been graded, Sonny would have picked up an A-plus. He launched the darts into the back of the heads of boys he didn’t like, which accounted for most kids in the classroom.

His unlikely friendship with Ren began when the younger boy was taking a pounding in the schoolyard one lunchtime from a mound of a kid, Milton the Monster. The overweight Milton was being teased from the far side of the school handball court. Mistaking Ren for the offender, Milton took off after him, knocking over other boys in the process and spreading them like bowling pins. Ren, who was built like a whippet and just as fast, should have been too quick for the bigger boy. Unfortunately, he took a wrong turn around a game of marbles and was soon cornered, wrapped in a bear-hug by Milton and thrown to the ground and sat on.
‘Say my proper name!’ Milton screamed at Ren, his hands at his throat.

In that moment Ren would have been happy to call Milton by whatever name he wanted, but it wasn’t possible. Every kid in the school had been calling Milton by that name for so long Ren couldn’t remember his true name. Other boys, sensing a murder, circled the writhing bodies, chanting Kill! Kill! Kill! Until Sonny appeared from nowhere, bulldogging through the crowd, and tore Milton off Ren. Although Sonny stood no taller than Milton and was at best half his fighting weight, he gave Milton a brutal lesson that day.

Sonny stood by the gate after the school bell rang, keeping his good eye focused, in case Milton decided to come after Ren a second time. They walked home together, not saying a great deal, except for Ren’s mumbling attempt at a conversation he couldn’t stitch together.

‘You live next door to me,’ was the best he could offer.

‘Yeah, I know,’ Sonny answered.

They stopped outside Ren’s front gate.

‘That Milton, he would have crushed me to death if you hadn’t saved me. Why’d you jump in?’ Ren asked. ‘I suppose it’s because we’re neighbours.’

‘Nah. Weren’t that.’

‘Was it because he’s a ton heavier than me and it was no fair fight?’

Sonny shrugged, indicating he hadn’t entertained the concept of fairness.

‘Couldn’t care less how big he is. Could have punched a hole straight through you for all I care.’

‘Really? Why’d you do it then?’
‘I was after a fight and he stuck his head up. No reason more than that.’

Ren looked disappointed. He’d walked home with Sonny feeling he’d found a friend, one who’d look out for him on the street. Sonny spotted the look of disappointment on Ren’s face. He grinned so wide he showed off his tonsils. And he laughed. ‘I’m just playing you. Milton’s a bully and he got what he should’ve.’

‘He gets a hard time at school because he’s so fat.’

‘Don’t matter. You’re smaller than him. He should have gone after someone closer to his own size. There was enough of them standing there. He picked you out because you’re the smallest. What time you leave for school in the morning?’

‘When I get out of bed.’

‘Me too.’

‘You ever late doing that?’

‘Not always.’

Sonny scraped the toe of his shoe across the ground. ‘Milton could come hunting you before school. Tomorrow, if I’m out of the house first I’ll wait here for you. You do the same, if you’re out first.’

‘Okay.’

Ren offered Sonny his hand. ‘Thanks for saving my life. I reckon he would have killed me if you didn’t come along.’

Sonny shook his hand, shrugged and turned his back on Ren. He opened his front door and went inside.

That’s the way it would be between the friends. Whenever Ren needed him Sonny would be there, standing by the front gate, looking like the loneliest kid in the world without realising it. Except for Ren, other kids steered clear of Sonny.
He had only his father for company, if you could call it that. Once he came to trust Ren, Sonny told him a story about his mother running away with his baby brother, Lucas, and leaving him behind with his father. He hadn’t seen her or heard a word since the day she left.

‘I knew soon as I walked in the house from school she was gone, without my old man saying a word.’

‘How’d you know?’

‘Not sure. But I could feel it. The house was empty of her and it made me feel empty inside.’

Ren decided he should share something of his own story with Sonny.

‘I don’t have a dad. I mean I’ve got Archie, and he’s okay most of the time. But no real dad.’

‘Your mum and dad split? I bet you miss him.’

‘Nah. They never got together in the first place. I don’t miss him at all. More like he never was. Or a ghost.’

Differences between the boys could have set them apart, but their shared loss drew them together. Sonny and Ren were also the only kids around the neighbourhood without brothers or sisters living under the same roof, which was unusual. Most families had three or four kids at least, and often more. The Portelli family, two doors along from Sonny, had eight kids, and Mick O’Reagan around the corner had eleven. Mick was a lucky man. He had a job as a milkman and got his cream, butter and milk for free, which helped him to keep his tribe fattened over the cold months of winter. Before Sonny came along, Ren had been friends with a couple of Mick’s boys, but from the day he’d been rescued in the schoolyard it became the two of them, for better and worse.