

An aerial photograph of a rugged, mountainous landscape. The terrain is dark brown and rocky, with a network of winding rivers and streams. The water is a vibrant turquoise color, contrasting sharply with the dark earth. The overall scene is dramatic and scenic, suggesting a remote, natural setting.

Firebird

a novel

Colin Mason

Firebird

a novel

Colin Mason

Dwapara Press Eugene, Oregon

There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood,
leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of their life is
bound in shallows and in miseries.

Julius Caesar
William Shakespeare

Firebird by Colin Mason

Copyright © 2017, by Colin Mason. All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or used in any form, or by any means, without prior written permission from the publisher.

Dwapara Press

30160 Fox Hollow Rd.,

Eugene, Oregon 97405

The publisher may be contacted by email
at: markjjmason@gmail.com

About the Author

Colin Mason foresaw a looming Australian energy shortage when he served for nine years as a senator in the Australian Parliament. After a year's research he now says that doesn't have to happen—it's just that we're neglecting what is our largest reliable source of renewable energy. The findings and ideas in this 'faction' novel, *Firebird*, describe how the potential of the Kimberley's huge tides, harnessed with solar thermal power generators along an 'energy corridor' over the deserts, could provide the whole nation with all the low cost power it could use in perpetuity, without any pollution.

Mason has published fourteen books, four of which have been international bestsellers, selling more than 100,000 copies around the world. However, he says he wrote *Firebird* for his fellow Australians, so many of whom, like him, are fed up with our national drift, our failure of leadership, our apparent inability to do anything. If the bold ideas and vision set out in this book represent a challenge, that's all right with him. What is proposed in *Firebird*, he says, could be and should be done.

The author may be contacted at colinvjmason@gmail.com

The Cover design, by Mark Mason, is based on a Google Earth view of Walcott Inlet and Secure Bay in the Kimberleys, that feature in this book. Image is from Landsat / Copernicus.

Table of Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

The day looked fine, Jake Hazzard thought as he woke up, a day when something good just had to happen. He blinked — why do I feel so sure of that? There seemed nothing unusual around for an early summer day, just the morning sky framed in the window, a very pale blue, and a few rags of cloud on the horizon. A gentle wind drifted in, already warm and dry.

As he rolled out of bed the vague threads of dreams that had been flashing through his brain all night suddenly wove together into a total fabric — for just long enough to see how important it might be. Best he get it down on paper, and soon, before it all vanished, the way dreams mostly do. So he sat down at the keyboard, opened Word and started typing. Just a sentence or two would do. But when he looked up bright sunshine was pouring into the room and maybe three hundred words were down. He read through it, frowning slightly. Yes, this would do, he could see now where it was going. So he saved it, moved through to the kitchen, and sat down to what passed for breakfast. Just minutes later the door opened and Rupe Zalinski came in, clad in just a towel. Rupe was one of the four people who shared this house.

‘Great day,’ he observed as he sat down.

‘One of the best. The beach?’

His friend frowned.

‘Can’t. Got something due in on Monday. Work, work!’

‘Maybe if you actually did the work instead of dreaming your solar energy fantasies...’

‘Don’t talk down the sun, Jakey boy, that’s our future, that great big golden sun. I’ve got my sun, you’ve got your mud-patches.’

Jake laughed with him.

‘So full of go, this early! Funny you mentioned mud. I was thinking about mud, in a dream, you know, then a voice said, think about the tides. Tides, they can be huge, they come and go, they’re like a clock, in fact once people used to tell the time by them.’

‘If you say so... King Canute got his feet wet from them, didn’t he?...and what’ve they got to do with mud?’

‘Dunno, but...’

‘Must’ve been God talking to you, giving you a crook steer, maybe?’

‘You’re a crazy wog, Zalinski!’

‘You mean you don’t believe in God...? Anyway, you pushing trolleys today?’

‘No trolleys, down to the beach for me.’

Jake still felt on top of the world as he ran down the hill, the big curve of the ocean smiling up at him, wondering about that *idea* — such a far-out one really, but it could happen, it should happen. Jake, in his last year of an engineering degree, had to struggle with his assignments because he put in twenty hours a week at the supermarket to get money. Looking at it objectively, Jake’s life *was* a struggle, but he never saw it that way. The old, thinking back wistfully to those bubbles of joy of long ago, would say of course he wouldn’t. It seemed easy to be happy when you were young, boundless energy, lissome bodies, all of life in front of you. So why weren’t they happy, so many of them?

At the beach the sea was quiet, with the wind offshore the surf was hardly there at all. Half a dozen people were out, lazing on their boards, waiting for waves that weren’t going to come. Jake got in and swam well out past the break, where most people didn’t go. They were scared of sharks, and with good reason. There were plenty of them, great whites too,

along this Indian Ocean coast. Jake wasn't any different, but, on his back staring up at the sky, he thought this was the sharks' place, so...

The beach seemed another world seen from out here, the usual family parties, kids playing in the sand, mums sunning on a towel, dads eventually getting into the water. Jake had watched them before as they walked into the water, got wet up to the chest, then came out again, a kind of ritual. Most of them didn't actually swim. He wondered why not, when the water was so beautiful, a pale green blue, so clear you could see every grain of sand on the bottom.

Back on the sand he decided to go for a run, but after a few paces something heavy brushed against his leg. He stumbled and almost fell, then stopped and looked around. It was a dog, quite a large dog, some Alsatian, some Labrador, he thought. It was looking up at him expectantly, so Jake leaned down, rubbed it behind the ears and met the gaze from those intelligent eyes, as he always did, doing his best to get his thoughts through to the animal. Dogs were dogs, you had to think and behave dog to them, he hated the way people dressed them up, cuddled them and called them their babies and little darlings. Many times he'd seen dogs, mostly small dogs, treated that way, they'd turn around and look at you, plainly asking: 'What the hell is she on about?'

'Hi guy,' Jake said quietly. 'You're illegal, here on the beach.' There was a 'No Dogs' sign quite close by.

'Dogs can't read,' she said. So those were the first words she actually said to him, 'Dogs can't read.' He turned and looked at her, until she flushed.

'You're liking what you see?'

Jake glanced away, muttering 'Sorry.' He had never been that good with girls, they were different, in difficult ways. Then

she smiled, it lit up her face, a small girl, slim too, shortish hair of nondescript colour, face a bit too rounded to be really beautiful, but Jake thought she was from the start.

‘He slipped the lead,’ she said in more friendly tones. ‘Then it was down to the water right away.’

‘That’s the Labrador in him. What’s his name?’

‘Danny.’

‘Hello Danny.’ The dog, who was sitting patiently at his feet, wagged his tail slightly as he heard his name.

‘He’s an old dog, he doesn’t usually take to people that quick,’ she said, feeling mildly jealous. ‘You must be a dog kind of person.’

‘I’d hate it if a dog didn’t like me. They usually do.’

She nodded, presumably approving of these sentiments.

‘I’ve had Danny since I was a little kid... D’you come here often?’

‘Just at weekends. Week days are, well... you know, week days.’

‘Yes. Saturdays are...great. It’s a lovely beach.’

‘The best. But you’re new around here, aren’t you? I haven’t seen you here before.’

She nodded.

‘About three months...we were in Sydney before... I’m Elizabeth Grant. People call me Betty, Beth.’ That was her way, as he would find, to be very direct in everything she said.

‘So I can call you Beth,’ he said carefully.

‘If you want, I like that better.’

A slightly bigger wave rippled in, crept those last inches over the sand to touch their toes.

‘Tide’s coming in,’ he said.

‘Yes, so it is. Goes in and out. The tide, I mean.’ What an inane thing to say, she thought. But he didn’t seem to notice.

‘Of course. Most people never bother to think about why it does that. But it gets to me, I mean, that we have a moon and when it goes round the earth it hurries all that water along and the tides go up and down. It’s a huge force, very big...’ He paused, Beth felt a brief pang of regret as the light went out of his eyes. ‘Sorry, you might not be interested.’

‘Oh, but I am. I just hadn’t really thought about it that much,’ then she bit her lip and the flush that came to her face so easily was there again. They both tensed as that awkward silence came, the one that’s there so often while people are getting to know each other. Will we like each other, won’t we? She looked away from him, up towards the car park.

She’s going. I can’t just let her go.

Then he blurted: ‘Can I see you again, Beth? I’d... I’d like that.’

She hesitated briefly, then said: ‘Maybe. We’ve known each other, what? Five minutes?’

‘That can change. We can change it.’

She gave him a long look.

‘All right. Why not?’ Fossicking in her bag, she got out pencil and paper. ‘That’s the number. But I’d better warn you, I’m a bit old-fashioned...about things. Is that all right with you?’

‘Yes. I am myself... I don’t like girls swearing, always saying...’

‘Fuck? Every sentence, a lot of them. They think it’s cool, but it’s just...just a waste of breath. So I don’t say it, also I don’t do it.’

Jake hesitated a few moments before he replied.

‘I’ve got no problem with that...’ although of course that wasn’t really so...’and I think so many girls swear because all their friends do... You know about 1066?’

‘1066, the date? Of course. Everybody does. Norman Con-

quest. Over there. Britain.'

'Yeah. Lot of Frenchies came over and beat up the Saxons. It wasn't too hard because the locals were scrapping among themselves, anyway. Now up till then all those four letter words were normal, people used them all the time. But once the Normans were the bosses everything Saxon got to be disreputable, including those words.'

She stared at him in wonder.

'That's amazing.' By this she meant that here were facts that gave you a new slant on things, as occasionally happened in ordinary schooling. 'You say interesting things, Jake.'

'Not everyone thinks so. Lots of people when you say something that's not what everyone says, you don't see them as much as before...'

'White bread,' Beth said.

'Come again?'

'Lots of time at school, the kids that had been given brown bread for lunch got a bad time, sometimes they'd just bin their lunch so the other kids didn't see it. The white bread crowd could be really nasty.'

'That's right. So in the end you just shut up and go along with the mob.'

Beth smiled — he was getting more and more interesting.

'So how about tomorrow morning?' he asked. 'About ten o'clock, coffee at the kiosk here, can you do that? It'll have to be just coffee. I don't have much...'

'Yes, I can do tomorrow... Oh, and I'll pay for my own. OK, ten in the morning... But you've forgotten something.'

'Have I?'

'Your name, idiot, you haven't told me your name.'

They both laughed, and this chased away the sense of strain that had been there up till now.

'I should've warned you, at school they called me the absent-minded prof... It's Jake. Jake Hazzard.'

'Hi there, Jake.' She extended her hand and he took it. It was cool and smooth.

'I'll look forward to tomorrow. You know something Beth? You're the good thing that was going to happen to me today, I reckon.'

She seemed to consider this quite carefully, then said: 'Thank you... I'm glad Danny likes you.'

Then she was off up the hill, the dog behind her. Jake watched them, but Beth didn't look back.

Back home, she looked at herself in the mirror. Hips a bit wide, she thought, feet definitely too big. And small, most of me, so small once I used to wonder if people really noticed me at all.

He likes me, I could see he likes me. A boy likes me. And of course he's a bit shy, that would've made it hard for him to say that, *I was the good thing that'd happen to him today*. Not really a dreamboat, of course, but nice-looking, big and strong. And I could be his good thing. What would happen tomorrow, what would he say? Maybe weeks, months away, he might say *I love you*. She was still turning this thought over in her mind when her mother, Julie Grant, knocked at the door.

'It's on the table.'

'I'll be right there.'

'Just the two of us?' she said as they sat down.

'He's working late tonight. A seminar.'

'He works too hard.'

'I don't think so. People like their work, it mostly comes easy to them. How was the beach?'

'Good.'

‘Did you swim?’

‘No. I walked along with Danny, and...’ Beth never lied to her mother, or kept things back from her, they were very good friends as well as being mother and daughter.

‘Yes?’

‘Talked.’

‘And was he nice?’

Beth looked up sharply. Her mother never ceased to surprise her.

‘Bit soon to tell. He talked about the tides.’

‘Tides?’

‘Yes, I liked that, that he was thinking about something like that, and actually said it to me. Most boys talk to you like you were a dumb animal, like you had no brains.’

‘Not just boys — a lot of them never grow out of it, men, I mean.’ Julie said ruefully.

‘Daddy’s not like that.’

‘No, he isn’t, we’re lucky, aren’t we?’

‘He asked me to have coffee with him tomorrow morning. Jake did. At the beach kiosk.’

‘Jake. Nice plain name. Are you going?’

Beth reached over for another large slice of the meringue.

‘Yes. Of course.’

Charles Grant’s seminar ran from eight till ten, so he was home late. Beth had already gone to bed, thinking about what she was going to wear tomorrow morning. Julie glanced at her husband as he slumped down in a chair, looking tired, not very happy. His face was pale, there were quite a few wrinkles and more grey up there now. However, he got up, enclosed her in his bear hug and kissed her. ‘More beautiful every day.’

This ritual, even the words, had happened, probably,

thousands of times even, but they always gave her a quick thrill of pleasure, she would be less than happy if he forgot them even once.

‘Food?’ he enquired.

‘In the oven. Shepherd’s pie. But what about a drink first...? No, stay there, I’ll get it.’

As usual it was Scotch, a decent single malt. Charles Grant was not a big drinker, but he liked the best. Julie made it a double, added just the right amount of water, and mixed a light g and t for herself.

‘A good day?’ she asked.

He frowned.

‘I’ve known worse. But tonight got under my skin a lot. Seminars, you know, they’re supposed to be about kicking ideas around, even silly ideas. But tonight I had thirty of what’s supposed to be my best people there.’ His students were always his people. ‘Most’ll graduate next year, supposedly assets to the community. But tonight they just looked at me, waiting for me to say something. And when they did talk, it was routine speak, stuff straight out of the textbooks. New ideas, opinions? No, nothing.’

‘There must be some good ones.’

‘A few. They’re mostly Chinese or Korean.’

Julie nodded.

‘The Chinese are taking the place over, quietly. Downtown, they’re everywhere, it’s like Singapore. Of course they’ll be very pleasant and diplomatic about the takeover, but it’ll happen.’

‘Taking over the country? Yes, eventually, *de facto*,’ Charles said gloomily, ‘and it doesn’t help that academically most young Australians are way behind. How’s it the new generation’s got so screwed up...? Saw Terry Lane in the street at

lunchtime.'

'Terry who?'

'He's our plumber, plumbers do have names, you know... Anyway he told me he'd gone through four young Australian kids trying to organize an apprentice before he actually got one willing to do anything. He reckoned the others thought a job was a place where you turned up and they gave you money. The third one he tried, when Terry asked him to do something the boy looked at him and said... "No, you do it."' "

'It's the way their parents brought them up, giving them everything they asked for,' she said, 'and then they're unhappy when you ask them to do anything that gets them away from their iPads, their computer games.'

Charles sloshed his Scotch around in the glass, scowling at the amber patterns.

'Not just the kids, what about the pollies, they're just as short on ideas. Labour, Coalition, tarred with the same brush, just a political class really, looking after itself. Thing in the paper this morning, saying that soon this country'll have the smallest manufacturing base in the developed world. Behind places like Ghana, for God's sake!'

'So what would you do?'

'Not really my part of the forest, but we've got to do something, not just drift along the way we are.'

Julie got to her feet.

'Another Scotch?'

'No thanks.'

'You're tired. So, off to bed?'

'Right with you.'

The conjugal bed...just another phrase, she thought. But it really did mean something, that item of furniture did acquire meaning, importance, even a kind of authority, over the years.

When they were comfortably tucked in she said: 'By the way, our girl's got herself a boy. Name's Jake. She met him on the beach this morning, she's having coffee with him tomorrow. It might be serious, she's got that look about her.'

'Hells bells, she's still at school.'

'Last year. She is eighteen, after all.'

'Eighteen is very young.'

'Is it? Girls start to notice boys when they're thirteen, sometimes younger. Not so long ago girls were married at fourteen or fifteen. Juliet, how old was she when she was hankering after Romeo? Twelve.'

'This is the 21st century,' he growled.

She laughed.

'You sound like...what? A bull elephant rounding up his females, getting stuck into any rival male that turns up. You might have to get used to being nice to Jake, Charlie. If he's still around in a week or two he can come here for dinner.'

'Is that strictly necessary?'

'Yes, I want to see what he's like.'

When he leaned over to put out the bedside lamps she added: 'I had a thought, just a thought, to wake up the kids, say to them, sit down with your computer games all day, that's OK, but make sure you learn how to say "Yes master" in Mandarin.'

He raised his eyebrows.

'Not bad thinking... ah, bed, bed, bed.'

'A pity you're feeling so tired.'

As intended, she found herself in the bear hug again.

'Not that tired.'

Jake stared at the screen — a photo of a freighter high and dry on the beach at Broome, waiting for the tide to race back in across the sand flats. It could rise and fall as much as twelve metres there, nearly as high as a three storey building, and this happened along a thousand kilometres of the northwest Australian coast — variable, of course, between spring and neap tides, but predictable months, years ahead, a huge amount of energy, all that water rising and falling. Wasted.

As Jake impatiently refined his search he wondered at how little real information there was about this subject. Just scraps here and there...tidal power was used as early as the 11th century to mill grain, so what...? Most of what was around were simple barrage systems, containing the rising tide, then releasing it at low water. Then he found tidal lagoons, and as he came to understand what they were the ideas floating around in his head clicked together into a single concept. King Sound?

He had loaded Google Earth and was just about to zoom in on the sound, far off to the north on the west Kimberley coast, when he glanced at the clock on the wall. Just after half past nine, and he was due to meet Beth at ten. The coastal search would have to wait. But he had read enough to know that King Sound was big, more than a hundred kilometres long and fifty wide — almost a sea in its own right. The tide came in as fast as a man could walk across that vast mudflat.

Walking fast he got to the kiosk ahead of time, and was standing in the sun, his thoughts still hovering about the Kimberley until he had to move as a low slung red car edged into a narrow parking place. It crossed his mind that he hadn't heard it coming. Then Beth stepped out of it.

‘Where’s your bike?’

‘Got a flat. So Mum let me have her car. Hello.’

‘Hi.’ But his attention was plainly on the car — just like a man, she thought. ‘Hey, this is a Volt, I haven’t seen one before, I know what they are, of course.’

‘It goes on electricity. My people are mad on that sort of thing. Dad has a Tesla.’

‘That’s even more money...you must be the fairy princess.’

She scowled.

‘That meant to be funny? My family’s reasonably well off, I suppose. Anyway, does it matter?’

‘Princess and the beggar boy — I’m a super-market trolley boy.’

‘What’s that?’

‘You must have seen us, guys pushing long rows of trolleys up from the car park.’

She stared at him curiously.

‘Jake, just take notice my people are not jumped up, not in any way. But why are you pushing trolleys around?’

‘To get money. But I don’t do it all the time. I’m a student. Engineering. Look, I’m sorry Beth, I’ve been saying stupid, dopey things... I don’t know why the hell... You make me confused.’

‘But there’s nothing confusing about me.’

‘Only that you’re you...you’re so pretty...and —’ This time she was really blushing, and staring down at her toes.

‘Table over there,’ he said, acutely conscious of how odd this conversation still was. ‘You sit down and I’ll... How do you like your coffee?’

‘Latte, thanks, no sugar. And here’s three dollars... No, take it... Most people don’t think I’m pretty.’ She sat down at the table, which had quite a view over the beach to the sea. Jake

felt that last remark deserved an answer, but he couldn't think of anything, just sloped off to get the coffee. I am stuffing this up, he thought despairingly, what will this girl think about me? But when he came back to the table and put the coffee cups down he was thanked with a generous smile.

'You're funny, Jake. You really are funny.'

'I told you, it's you. Most times I make sense when I talk. My mother reckons I have the gift of the gab, tongue hinged in the middle and swings both ways.'

She reached out and took his hand. For the second time he thought her's seemed incredibly cool and smooth. 'You can relax. I'm only a girl, you know. And I'll tell you something. Last night I googled...guess what...? Tides.'

'Tides?'

'Yes. It was a bit unusual, you talking to me about them, most boys don't...and anyway I wanted to know about them. They're complicated, aren't they? I thought it was just the moon did its thing, and they went up and down the same way everywhere. But it's not.'

'No, different places, different tides...practically nothing in the Mediterranean, and they go up and down maybe ten metres over here...places like Derby.'

'Derby, that's somewhere up north, isn't it?'

'Just a little town on a big shallow bay called King Sound. The tides really roar in, up and down a lot of creeks.'

'Oh yes'.

'Energy, Beth, a hell of a lot of power.'

She stared at him intently.

'This is the thing you've got on your mind, isn't it?'

'One of two things, you're the other one.'

She laughed, he noticed how her eyes lit up when she did that.

'You come on rather sudden, don't you? I can't make you out. You seemed so shy, and then...oh never mind.'

He seemed mildly offended.

'I say what I think, some people can't take that.'

She favoured him with another sunny smile.

'I can, Jake, I'm a bit that way myself... And anyway I do like it that you say that...'

'That I like you?'

'Yes. And do you?'

'Of course I do.'

'But you know bugger-all about me.'

He scowled.

'I thought you said you were old fashioned... Don't say that, I don't like you swearing. You know what that word means, don't you?'

'Not really, it's OK to say bugger but not fuck, confusing... I know what the theory is but I can't sort of visualize...what they actually do.'

'You don't have to.'

'No, I don't, do I?' she said pertly, and suddenly both of them burst into torrents of laughter.

'Anyway Jake, what uni are you at.'

'Northern.'

She nodded.

'My father works there. He's a professor.'

'Yes I know about him. Professor Grant. Urban Planning.'

'That's him... What sort of engineering are you doing?'

'Civil. I work on barrages. You know, dams, holding ponds. That sort of thing.'

She wondered what holding ponds were, sounded boring, she thought, searching her mind for something else to say. This was a real problem with boys, what d'you say to them? But

Jake glanced at her and, wonderful, he seemed to understand the difficulty, and was ready to do something about it.

‘But what about you Beth, what d’you do?’

Another problem. She hesitated, looking down.

‘I’m still at school...but it’s my last year. I’m eighteen.’

‘And then what?’

‘I don’t really know. I’d quite like to be a nurse but they... Mum and Dad you know...they want me to be a doctor. But I don’t think I’ve got enough brains for that.’

‘Oh, you would have.’ He seemed quite confident about this, ‘But it really is a tough course. Five years too. You could try medicine, then drop it and go over to nursing, if you wanted.’

Beth looked at him doubtfully. What she really wanted was to be a mother, have three at least, but she could hardly say that to him. Men hated to feel *trapped*, she’d read that in a woman’s mag in the doctor’s waiting room, but you had to have a man for babies. She blushed, quite incomprehensibly to Jake, because she was remembering all that in those sealed sections in those magazines. What would it really be like, she wondered, what would it be like with Jake?

At that point, almost like magic, images of her future children flashed into her mind. Two boys, one girl, or was it just one boy? The picture dwindled, leaving her feeling angry at anyone that might make life less than perfect for *her* children.

‘Too many people want to stuff up the world,’ she said with such venom he was taken aback. ‘That mine. They want to get all their dirty coal, they don’t care about the future. It’s all about money, isn’t it?’

‘I guess so.’ If only she found it as hard to get money as he did. ‘They’re a big Indian mob. Not too good on the environment in their own place, I hear, so why would they care about

mucking up our reef? You were thinking about the Carmichael mine, in the Galilee Basin, I guess...one of the biggest untouched dumps of coal in the world. And that's how it should stay. Untouched.'

'Because of global warming?'

'Yes. Burning coal for electricity's the worst thing we're doing. So you're a greenie Beth?'

'I'm not sure. I hadn't thought much about it before.' Of course quite recently she was just a child, Jake reflected. 'But now I do think about it, it makes me angry. Our children...'

'Our children?'

That blush she could never control warmed her face.

'Don't be stupid... I meant all the children, the future children...to do things...business...that they know damn well's going to make the world a... a ...'

'A furnace, and in the middle of it millions of people starving, the sun striking them dead, that's how it could be. So what are you going to do about it?'

'I don't know. Something.'

'It's hard, you know. A mob of us went up there last month. A bomb of a car, really clapped out, but it kept going. We stopped at all the towns and places, talked about what that mine would do. People listened to us, we were amazed, and they chucked in money so we could buy petrol. Anyway we got there and there was a lot of earthmoving equipment, pipe, metal sheeting, lying about.' He shrugged. 'But we couldn't afford good chain, thick stuff, too expensive. We just had little chains when we chained ourselves to the bulldozers. After a while the cops came. They were quite decent really. One of them said he felt the same way we did, but he had to do his job, we'd better go home. They had bolt-cutters that cut the chain real easy. We hung around for a day or two, but nothing

else happened. There wasn't even anyone around.

'So we high-tailed off south again but two days on our transport blew up. Head gasket. We had to ditch it and hitch after that.'

Beth hadn't the faintest idea what a head gasket was, but that didn't matter.

'You actually went there and did all that!'

'For what it's worth, but demos like that don't get you very far.'

'So what else can you do?'

'I don't know,' he said after some thought. 'Some more coffee?'

'No thanks... But Jake, why don't we go for a drive in the Volt?'

'That'd be great.'

'All right, off we go. But being my mother's car, I don't think you can drive it. Just come for a ride with me.'

It was his turn to look crestfallen.

'I couldn't anyway. I can't drive, that is, I can drive but I haven't got my license yet. I don't even have a car.'

'I've only had my Ps two months. And you have to be really careful with this car. It's so fast, but...'

'Yes, that's the electric motor...constant torque right from the jump.'

How could a car talk? she wondered vaguely.

'I don't know whether she'll be home for lunch,' Julie Grant said nervously. 'Should I keep something for her?'

'If I were you, I'd stop worrying,' her husband said.

'You say that because you're not a woman. Mothers understand how important their daughter's first love is, even if it doesn't last.'

'And it probably won't. A bit soon to talk about love anyway, isn't it?'

'Maybe. But she had that look about her. Shiny eyes.'

'I'd better have a talk to her. Young guys like that, they're only interested in their belly and what hangs from it.'

'You will not! Let her have her joy, her amazement, her *illusions*, if you like, without any sordid talk from you.'

'All right. I guess you've talked to her, anyway, haven't you?'

'Of course I have.'

'Birds and bees?'

She glared at him.

'And you can shut up!'

At that moment Beth came in the door. Her mother glanced at her anxiously. Yes, she thought with a trace of envy, she still had those eyes. Charles glanced at his watch.

'Hi big girl...see you later. I have to get back.'

'See you, dad.'

'You want some lunch?' Julie asked, 'Or did you...?'

'No. We just had coffee. Jake hasn't got a lot of money. He's a student, engineering. But you know, down at Coles, you see these guys pushing a long line of trolleys around? He does that twenty hours a week to get money.'

'Mostly they seem to be Indian, Asian of some kind anyway. Is he?' She felt vaguely guilty as she asked this, did it really matter if he were black, brown or brindle?

'No, he's white, mother.' Being called 'mother' meant she was being chastened in some way.

'Nothing wrong with Indians, of course,' she muttered vaguely.

'No, but you wouldn't like to see me shack up with one of them, would you?'

'You seem very taken with Jake, dear.'

'I think he's nice. We're going to see more of each other. Maybe a lot more.'

'Not too much, I hope.'

'You mean I'm not to let him knock me up?'

'Beth!'

'That's what you meant, wasn't it? No, nothing like that's going to happen until I decide it's going to happen.'

Julie considered herself modern but now, she reflected, there really is a generation gap.

She was still agitated when Charles came home.

'I asked her, I sort of asked her, you know, to be careful with Jake... and she said, she said did that mean he wasn't to knock her up... I've never used that sort of language in my life.'

'But that was what you meant, wasn't it?'

'I suppose so. That's what she said.'

'If she said a four letter word —'

'She didn't actually, but I got the meaning. There is such a thing as being too broadminded,' she said, quite sharply. 'Anyway, I'm worried about this Jake thing, and so you should be too.'

'No, I'm not going to worry about it, but I am interested. And you can be assured I have our daughter's interests at heart.'

'Then there's the Kimberley thing. She's got her mind on that.'

'Kimberley?'

'Yes. Where exactly is it anyway?'

'You're still talking like a New South Welshman... It's in WA, but about as far away as you can get and still be in Australia, a wild place, one of the wildest on the planet. Have you ever heard her mention it before?'

‘No, never. It’s Jake again, of course. I said we might take a holiday there and she said, don’t bother, I expect I’ll be going there with Jake.’

Charles raised his eyebrows.

‘So Jake’s interested in the Kimberley. He’s doing engineering, and he’s also interested in tides. I draw certain inferences from that... Beth might have snared someone with some brains, good, one of my great horrors’s been a brainless hunk for a son in law. And having to dandle some little cretin grand-kids on my knee.’

‘You actually think about that?’

‘Well, why not? Once a guy gets to be family, you’re stuck with him, aren’t you?’

This conversation was still at the back of his mind the next morning, when he dropped into the common room for coffee. Charles had not got especially close to Tom Wilson, who ranked as a professor in the engineering department, but they were acquainted. Wilson was sitting at a table alone, staring down at some papers when Charles approached him.

‘Now would I be interrupting something important?’

Wilson looked up and grinned.

‘Hullo, Charles, isn’t it...? You settling in OK...? No, not a bit, this is just some of the endless marking.’

‘I’ll get my brew and come back.’

When he sat down again Charles asked: ‘How do you find all that...the general standard of the student effort.’

‘Pretty bloody poor. Most can’t write, a fair few can’t spell either... I’d lose interest completely if it weren’t for the handful that are showing promise.’

‘My experience too. My wife blames it all on computer games.’

‘Something in that, but they’ve all had iPads, smart phones

since they were kids. It's cumulative, a whole new way of learning. You don't actually have to learn anything, you just Google it. You have thoughts on all this? What we do about it?'

'I'm trying to have them, but I haven't got very far.'

'Ditto...anyway Charles you didn't sit down here just to pass the time of day...what's on your mind?'

Grant stared at the ceiling momentarily.

'You might see this as out of court...but I have an interest in a student in your faculty. You're a big department, he might not've come to your attention. The name's Jake Hazzard.'

'We have him down as James Hazzard. Yes, I know him quite well...you don't mind telling me why you're interested?'

'Not a bit. My daughter's picked him up. Her first boy, and all the indications are it's pretty intense.'

'How old's your daughter?'

'Eighteen. My wife wants to ask him for dinner.'

Wilson smiled.

'Understood... Well, Hazzard is a bright boy, and like many such he's got problems... Nothing serious, nothing really to worry about.'

'So why do you mention them?'

'The boy's a maverick, he has ideas right outside the box. People like that invariably have a chaotic life...'

'...because the orthodox want to tear them down? But to get back to his ideas, would tidal power be one of them?'

Wilson gave him a hard glance.

'Plainly, you've talked with young Hazzard.'

'I've never met him... He's talked to Betty — that's my daughter — about the Kimberley, the big tides there. She's full of it.'

'Because she perceives he's interested... Ah yes, King Sound, that idea's been around for years, the potential for

huge amounts of power. Trouble is, what do you do with it? We're the nearest big city, couple of thousand kilometres away. Building transmission lines that far, no way at all that could work. But getting back to young Hazzard, he seems a decent kid. Keeps his hair and fingernails short, a bit withdrawn rather than aggressive. Your girl ought to be OK with him.'

'That's the sort of thing I wanted to know, thank you, Tom'.

The Grant house was large and rambling, set well back in a pleasant but slightly dishevelled garden — just what you'd expect a successful academic to live in, Jake thought, as he eyed it apprehensively. He was worried about his clothes, especially his shoes, but they were the best he had. When he knocked at the front door it opened promptly to reveal a smallish, fair woman with a marked resemblance to Beth. And yes, her eyes dropped momentarily to his shoes, then she said: 'You must be Jake. So glad you were able to... Come on in then.'

'Thanks Mrs Grant,' he muttered as he went inside. This hardly seemed adequate, and he was still striving to think what more he could say to her when she said: 'You just sit over there next to Professor Grant.'

But Charles protested at once. 'Don't like being called professor in my own home. Charles it is... Sit down Jake.' Beth was opposite him, looking at him gravely. He grinned at her and she smiled back.

'You're from the country, Jake?' Julie asked.

'My people are farmers, down south, just in from Mandulah.'

'Drought's still bad there?' Charles asked.

'Rotten. This is the third year. The banks are at his heels.'

'Bastards.'

'I guess they want their money, they'd sell us up if they could, but the way things are there are no buyers.'

Australia was a country of droughts, Charles reflected, but this one was of unusual proportions, just as they were now in so many parts of the world, a manifestation of the changing climate.

‘Beth tells us you’re almost through your course.’

‘Yes, I’ll finish this year, then...’

‘You’ll go on, post grad, if you get a good pass?’

‘I’m not too sure...people who’ve got doctorates are driving taxis. And geologists now, a few years ago it looked like they’d be made for life, but since the mining boom fizzled out, you’ve got a degree, useless, there aren’t any jobs.’

Charles nodded, frowning slightly.

‘Think laterally...find a niche not too many other people are occupying.’

‘I’m turning that over in my mind, but meanwhile I’m getting a bit tired of all work and no money.’

Yes, no help from home for this one, while the drought held, Charles reflected.

‘What sort of engineering are you into?’ he asked.

‘Oh, civil. Dams, barrages.’

‘Barrages?’

‘He has a thing about tides,’ Beth put in.

‘Tides, yes, interesting,’ Jake said slowly. All that water going up and down twice a day, ten, twelve metres, just like a million waterfalls... We don’t use it, but think, it’s our biggest reliable source of clean energy.’

‘I guess that’s right,’ Charles said. ‘I hadn’t really thought of it that way before. But you know as well as I do why we don’t use it.’

‘I know the general view, you generate power up in the Kimberley, what do you do with it— the nearest decent market is down here in Perth, too far away, much too far...anyway, the technology’s too undeveloped. End of story. That’s the line we always get, but I’ve been thinking about it. There is another way.’

‘Really? I can’t think what that’d be.’

‘Just plain logic— if you can’t take the power to a city, you have to take a city to the power. Then the Kimberley comes alive.’

Charles’ brow creased.

‘What was that? I thought you said...?’

‘I did. A city, industries, people up there in the Kimberley, it’d have it made, coal, iron, bauxite, uranium, you name it, they’re all there. Plenty of water in the Fitzroy, cheap land, toss in unlimited power for almost nothing, huge markets close by in Asia. Your industry there’d be post-modern, heavily automated.’

‘Untouched by human hand,’ Charles said thoughtfully. ‘Here, have some more of this casserole. Big boy like you, you need your dinner... You think big too, don’t you? And what would this new city of your’s make?’

‘Solar thermal power stations, for a start, for this country and for export. We have all the raw materials over here, plenty of iron, sand to make glass for mirrors. Give us an industry again.’

‘And what are solar thermal power stations?’ Julie asked.

‘Very big machines to generate electricity, a parabolic mirror, it could be a hundred metres long, concentrating sunlight to boil water. The steam drives a turbine, turbine spins a generator. You can make them any size you want.’

‘And why would you want to?’

‘Keep the lights on, industry turning over, your air conditioner working, with no pollution, no pollution means we can come to grips with climate change.’

‘Something I’ve never thought much about,’ Julie said, ‘but I know a lot of people do. So the sun, the tides, would do all the work?’

‘Yes, they’d work well together, instead of coal. Remember

I said people thought tidal technology was too undeveloped? That was true, but not anymore. There's a new concept being heavily researched called tidal lagoons that's efficient and practical. Basically you build a U-shaped seawall out from the coast so you end up with an enclosed lagoon. That seawall is studded with turbine generators. The rising and falling tide can only get in and out by passing through those turbines.'

'And they're generating power?' Charles put in.

'Yes, fourteen hours a day...but there's no evidence planners here even know about them, much less consider them.'

'Should they be?'

'Yes, King Sound in the Kimberley is ideally suited to them, and it's big enough for, probably, producing as much power as our total national output is now.'

Charles pursed his lips.

'Then that's big, very big, it should put tidal power very much back on the map.'

'Even bigger, I can see an energy corridor across the deserts from the Kimberley to Adelaide — enough high voltage direct current power lines to carry huge amounts of tidal and solar power to the national grid. A road — a highway — would run parallel to those power lines. And all the way along, sitting in the perpetual sunshine, solar thermal power collectors. That corridor could provide the entire nation with all the power it could use, perpetual energy security.'

'The whole of Australia? That's a big call.'

'It could do it easily', Jake said. 'There are also two big bays with narrow entrances not far north of Derby, Walcott Inlet and Secure Bay. These will probably be the best early prospects. Dams housing modern bi-directional turbine generators across those entrances and both would be natural tidal lagoons.'

Charles sighed deeply.

‘How great to be young...anything’s possible. Still, I grant you those are interesting ideas, and ones I’ve not heard of before. A pity it’ll never happen.’

‘It will happen. It has to happen.’ Jake said stubbornly. ‘There could be a huge industry there. We’ve got half the world’s population sitting next to us. They’ve got two really big needs to get themselves together — energy and decent housing. There are millions living in flimsy shacks that are being knocked down already by cyclones, earthquakes, flooding. It’s not good enough.’

Charles nodded.

‘Yes, and that’s going to get worse, much worse. Soon.’

‘Just like you say.’

‘So what’s the answer to that?’

‘Steel frames, floor, walls, roof trusses, metal roofing, all in a flat pack. Design a standard village house, mass produced, made so you could put it up with simple tools, something that bolted together, hand spanner comes with it. It’d be strong enough to stand up to the worst winds, and fireproof. Tank inside, getting clean water off the roofs. Save a lot of lives.’

Charles picked up a chicken leg and began to chew it.

‘And that would be made in your new industrial centre too?’

‘There could be any kind of steel fabrication there. We don’t have to go on shipping iron ore, much better to make steel beams, plate, cladding, whatever. Value added.’

‘Damnably plausible, when you think about it...’ Charles muttered. ‘Yes, once you start to consider your proposition, all sorts of possibilities suggest themselves... You know, these are hefty new ideas. Revolutionary even.’

‘I hadn’t thought about it that way.’

‘Then don’t sound apologetic. Some people have to have the new ideas, and God knows there are few enough of them.’

‘Are we ready now for fruit salad?’ Julie asked. ‘Ice cream with your’s, Jake?’

‘Yes thanks, Mrs Grant.’

‘So let’s get off men’s business, Beth and I are ready for pudding. And seeing we might be seeing more of each other, Jake, I come to Julie, so how about you call me Julie?’

He returned her smile.

‘OK then Julie... Beth took me for a drive in your car the other day. It’s terrific. So quiet, smooth, fast.’

‘Yes, it can really take off,’ Beth said enthusiastically. ‘Leaves everything else dead at the lights.’

‘Hey, get that look off your face,’ her mother said. ‘You’re not to break my car, see?’

There was general laughter at this. The rest of the meal passed pleasantly enough in small talk and family prattle. Like most people who work hard and live a Spartan existence Jake quite enjoyed this.

When the big clock on the wall chimed two, Julie said: ‘What’re you two going to do next? Tennis? There’s a court out the back.’

‘I’ve never learned to play tennis,’ Jake said. ‘Never had time.’

‘Then you can start now, we’ll have a hit around.’ Beth glanced at him. ‘Yes, your shoes’ll do.’

‘Shoes?’ He looked down at them.

‘Yes, dummy, your crappy shoes. Maybe I should buy you new ones.’

‘And maybe you could pull your head in, small change. Check?’

‘Birdies in their little nests agree.’ Julie’s inane statement

was greeted by hoots of laughter from Beth and Jake.

'I have to keep him in order,' Beth said.

'Ditto to you too.'

But once on the court he felt at a distinct disadvantage.

'Can't hit the bloody thing!'

'Oh, you will. I'll just keep knocking them over to you...no, not in front of you, hold it out to the side. Right side, you are right-handed?'

'Yes.'

'That's better. Try and hit it harder.'

'You're getting good,' she said twenty minutes later. 'That's enough for now, backhand and serving another day. You think you might like tennis?'

'Yes. Could be, some time when I'm not quite so busy with things.'

'Poor tired old thing... Got enough energy for a walk on the beach?'

'You're on.'

After a while just walking in companionable silence she said: 'Dad was interested in what you were saying, Jake, I could see that. So am I, I think it's...it's exciting.'

'Didn't think it'd interest a girl much.'

'There you go, you're as bad as the rest of them... I reckon most of us, the great unwashed, you know, even the female unwashed, worry that things are altogether too quiet here.'

'What, in Perth?'

'No, the whole country. We don't seem to be doing anything, just running on the spot.'

'Sliding backwards, more like — maybe we've had it easy for too long.'

'But you've had an idea, Jake, a good idea. Dad's always complaining that none of his students have any ideas at all.'

‘That’s getting to be a habit — not having ideas, I mean, even if you have some, you shut up about them, wouldn’t do to seem different from everyone else.’

‘Oh, I know, girls especially, girls aren’t supposed to have ideas. The word is boys don’t like them to have ideas...and Jake, would you do something for me?’

‘What is it? Don’t ask me to rob a bank.’

‘Idiot! No, could you please not call me small change? I can see you think that’s funny, but so many people have called me that, I could scream! I’ve always wanted to be bigger. When I was little I dreamed about stretching myself, in this old book I saw a picture of people being tortured on the rack and I thought, well... Anyway, if you’re big, you get along, look at elephants, tigers. Small, people just don’t see you.’

He was observant enough to see she was at least mildly distressed, and put an arm round her shoulder. She didn’t seem to mind, so he went on: ‘I won’t say those words again, I promise, I’ll just say, beautiful. Beth is beautiful.’

‘Oh.’

‘Beth I like you a lot, a whole lot. Just the way you are.’

‘And Jake, I feel like that too...about you...but I’m so new to all this. There hasn’t been anyone else, you know. From what you hear around the place I shouldn’t have my heart on my sleeve, I should be playing hard to get.’

There was silence again for twenty paces or so while he thought about this, then he said: ‘No Beth, I like it that you’re so straight about things, not trying to play games.’

‘Let’s leave it at that for now. Race you to the end of the beach.’

After that hundred metres or so, both flushed, breathing hard, they stopped and faced each other. Then Jake kissed her, a modest, tentative kiss at first, but later...

'That wasn't leaving it...'

'...at that. No. You didn't like it?'

'I... I won't say that.'

'I'm glad. I've never kissed a girl that way before.'

'Well, you got it right.' She glanced around. 'Not a soul around up here, why don't we do it again?'

'I think I know Betty well enough to be sure she'll keep him at arm's length,' Julie said. She and Charles were talking about Jake.

'For a while,' Charles muttered. 'Raging hormones, like they say.'

'Oh come on, don't be awful.'

'I'm not, just being realistic. Anyway, I know you're aching to be a grandma.'

'I am not either. Give her time, she's just a child still.'

'Like you said, not so long ago they believed in marrying them off young to keep them out of trouble.'

When she glanced at him she was not smiling.

'Well, he seemed a nice boy to me.'

'Yes, and also interesting,' Charles muttered.

'Is he? All that about the tides and whatever.'

Charles gave a sigh of exasperation.

'Why is it women seem so set against men having ideas? Maybe they think men should just be taking them out, buying them presents, plenty of endurance in bed.'

Julie rolled her eyes.

'Sounds great to me.'

The Kimberley, which occupies the north-west corner of the Australian continent, is indeed one of the most remote and least settled places in the world. Three times the size of

England, it has barely 40,000 people, about half of whom are the aborigines who first came here 45,000 thousand years ago. It might have been them, it might have been someone else. We'll never know. But somebody did, and whoever they were they were pretty smart, they made the hundreds of rock paintings scattered through the Kimberley, some of them such competent, sophisticated pictures they might have been modern art.

A huge complex of cave systems, waterfalls, spectacular gorges, lush rainforest and the fertile plains of the lower Ord River, the region has an arresting almost alien look to it, from the beehive shaped stripy crags of the Bungle Bungles to the golden beaches on the Indian Ocean coast. And it is red, red, red. Red soil, red cliffs facing the seas. But much of this red landscape is forbidding trackless desert, with nothing much but clumps of prickly spinifex grass, low scrub struggling to survive and sometimes fat boab trees. You don't go far from the coast before you're into that other sea, an eternity of waves and troughs, but the waves are dunes of deep orange sand, trillions of grains of sands that get on the move when the wind blows, blinding sandstorms that can last for hours. The Great Sandy, the Gibson, these are truly huge, harsh deadly deserts that make up the red heart of Australia. The native people of this land can survive there, but few others even venture into these sun-baked wildernesses, or have any reason to do so. There the sun can be deadly. As it rises mirages form, shimmering and bobbing, so this improbable landscape becomes all the more unreal. Most living creatures there are small, like ants, evolved to survive on the barest minimum of food and water.

All ours, and what do we do with it? the Australian Prime Minister, David Hammond, thought as he stared down at the map that covered most of his desk. Hardy and well-heeled

types in four wheel drives struggled over its few roads during the cooler dry season, but few ventured there during the extraordinary fury of the wet, when rivers like the Ord and the Fitzroy turn from a series of disconnected water holes into raging torrents.

Hammond thought there must be something — but of course we had already tried, directing the flooded Ord into Lake Argyle, one of the world's biggest manmade bodies of water. It was hoped the irrigated land around the lake would develop into a huge food bowl, but weird things happened, mass plagues of insects, even of birds, that destroyed the crops. So now the major crop was Indian sandalwood, food crops like melons, chick peas, bananas had given place to the biggest commercial production of Indian sandalwood in the world.

Sandalwood?

'Big money in it,' his chief of staff, Chuck Wilshire said when the prime minister raised the issue. 'The oil and wood are both very valuable, there's a huge demand in India and China.'

'And I thought it was stuff Aladdin raised next to the cave.'

'Maybe he did,' Wilshire, who had no sense of humour, responded. 'A mob called TFS has the largest plantation of sandalwood anywhere, around ten and a half thousand hectares.'

'I'm thoroughly confused. Doesn't sandalwood grow here wild, all over the place?'

'Yes it does, it's an Australian native, our forestry people manage it, the general idea is to encourage planting but avoid over-exploitation.'

'So why do we grow the Indian one?'

‘I’m not totally up to speed on that, maybe it’s better suited to the tropics, but I think the main reason is that other things just haven’t worked.’

Hammond nodded.

‘Like cotton — that was a flop, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes, the growers struggled with huge numbers of insect pests for eleven years, the crops had to be sprayed every few days. That couldn’t last.’

‘Then all those birds. Bizarre.’

‘Magpie geese — yes, they turned up in thousands just as the rice crop was ripening. Ate the lot. Then they took over the airport, it got to be unmanageable.’

‘There must be something.’ Hammond intervened.

‘Oh yes, vegetables, fruit, bananas, mangoes. But food crops go off very quickly and the place is just too far from markets.’

‘More than a billion dollars we’ve spent there,’ the prime minister mused. ‘We were promised a food bowl that’d feed the world, but...’

Wilshire nodded sympathetically.

‘Happens with a lot of tropical agriculture schemes, they just haven’t worked out. And now, with things hotting up...’

Hammond began to tap his desktop with his little finger — those who knew him well recognized this as an expression of extreme impatience.

‘In spite of all that they’re at it again, expanding the Ord irrigation area, and I’m told we’re to throw in another couple of hundred million. Something to do with cockatoos.’

‘That’d be Cockatoo Sands, not far from Kununurra. Free-draining red loam, quite a good prospect.’

‘For more sandalwood trees, I suppose.’

‘I hope not.’

Lights flashed on the intercom on Hammond's desk.

'Yes, Esme?'

'Mr Cleary's been waiting for seven minutes, sir.'

'All right, send him in.'

What, he mused, was it the director of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation wanted of him this time.

To buy the full novel *Firebird*, please visit
www.colinjason.com