



Source: Geoff Elliott, 'Diplomacy before force: Bush on Iran', *The Australian online*, 12/04/06.

Tags: [desert](#), [intimacy](#), [literature](#), [shape-shifting](#)  
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Cops and robbers, superhero and villains, rock star and roadies. They had played all afternoon in the sunshine. Satisfied, the three boys lay now in the long grass, overheated and sweaty, letting the beginning of an evening breeze cool them down.

Stuart raised one lightly-sunburned arm and pointed upward, toward a bank of clouds floating from the western horizon to the east. 'I think that looks like a caravan in the desert. See the camels and the riders? They're heading for a caravansary at an oasis.'

Mark turned onto his belly, pushing up onto his elbows and glaring at Stuart. 'Caravansary? What the hell is that?'

With all the intellectual superiority his glasses lent him, Stuart looked pityingly upon his friend. 'It's an inn with a courtyard, for caravans to stop in as they travel, of course.'

'You are such a know-it-all,' Mark grumbled, dropping his face down onto his hands.

Laughing at them both, Eddie squinted at the caravansary, his blue eyes crinkling with humour. 'You're so wrong. Your camels look more like mermaids to me.'

'Mermaids?' Stuart's voice revealed his horror. 'Aw, man, you've been watching too many Disney videos with your little sister.'

Eddie kicked out at him, but missed by a comfortable margin. 'Like you don't ever watch Disney movies, you dork.'

'Never. Never did. Never would.' Stuart pretended great affront, but the boys had been friends for enough of their twelve years to have few secrets from one another.

Mark had been ignoring them both, his face dreamy. 'If you could create a cloud, what would it look like?'

The question stopped conversation cold. Stuart's eyebrows rose in startlement. 'That question is way too creative for you,' he said.

Mark's hand was tracing shapes in the air. 'I'd make a cloud that looked like a video game, like Tomb Raider or something. There'd be monsters and hidden treasures and...'

Eddie snickered, breaking in, '...and Angelina Jolie in a skimpy outfit.'

With a lewdly adolescent laugh, Mark admitted, 'Okay, and her too. That's not what I was thinking about, though.'

Stuart was seriously studying the sky. 'I would create a cloud that looked like the white city of Gondor. It'd have hobbits and elves and men, and Gandalf.' His voice trailed off, his lips settling into a happy smile.

'Always with the Lord of the Rings! Those movies are ancient history, man.' Eddie dodged, in case Stuart kicked out at him, but the other boy seemed oblivious to his gibe. 'Me, I want to make a cloud that looks like a rock concert! With pyrotechnics and clouds of smoke and lots

of back-up singers.'

'And an eighteen inch Stonehenge.' Mark jumped to his feet, playing air guitar and shrieking out what was meant to be a song. 'We're Spinal Tap! Smell the glove!' The others struggled to their feet and danced around him like maddened ravers.

The sun sank below the horizon as the boys tired of the dance and threw themselves back onto the ground. For a few minutes, there was a contented silence. The shadows grew darker, and the air began to cool. Idly, Stuart said, 'Maybe I ought to be getting home. Mom will be mad at me if I miss dinner again.' He didn't sound enthusiastic about the idea.

Eddie yawned. 'Yeah, I have to get home too. I'm going to meet up with Katie at 7.00 at the mall. We're going to play games at the video arcade.'

Mark turned onto his side to look at him. 'You have a date?'

'Date? No, man, we're just going to play games. Mom will drive me to the mall and shop a while, and Katie and I will just hang out, maybe have a soda. What do you mean, date?'

With a shrug, Mark said, 'Nothing, I guess. I just thought we'd be getting together to hang out again this evening, just us.'

Stuart sensed a tension in the air he couldn't quite name. 'Hey, I'm not going out with some girl. I'll come over and we can play Tomb Raider or watch movies, okay?'

'Okay, yeah, we'll do that. Eddie can go meet Katie and stuff.' Mark fell silent.

After a few moments, Eddie stood up and casually said, 'See you guys later.' He walked off without a backwards glance, leaving the other two boys looking after him uneasily.

Stuart got to his feet and dusted at his pants with his hands. 'Gotta go. I'll come over after I eat. I'll bring a couple of dvds and some chips. Maybe I can sneak out something R-rated without Mom noticing. See you, Mark.'

'Bye.' Left alone, Mark threw himself back onto the grass, looking up into the darkening sky. The clouds floating across it looked ghostly. A glimmer of moon hung on the eastern horizon. 'And the moon was a ghostly galleon, tossed upon cloudy seas,' he murmured.

Crickets chirped in the grass around him, and fireflies began to wink here and there. He watched them, his finger tracing their flight. 'The highwayman came riding,' he chanted, 'riding, riding, up to the old inn door.' He laughed. His arm pointed upwards again, toward the clouds. 'I'd create a cloud that looked like the highwayman. He'd ride alone, away from the inn, away from girls, away from parents and friends. He'd just ride along the sky from horizon to horizon...'

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Vicki Abshire.