*Ethan Smestad*

Learning To Play

Hey! Did you hear that? *Yeah, it sounded like a Thunderbird.* Thunderbirds don’t sound like that! *Well, then what does THAT sound like?*

A screaming eagle—possibly a phoenix! *That’s exactly what I meant, dummy! Thunderbird’s come from Indian stories—*I know.

Blue sky set the scene for the white cloud’s midday puppet show. A girl and a boy lay under an apple tree in a wide green field, on the other side of a playground.

Do you see that? *Hmm…You tell me!* A dragon with three horns, and…four arms, and one of them is holding a poor peasant girl—probably a princess in disguise—*But what’s that coming near them?* Oh, a big ugly troll who’s in love with the peasant girl, and he’s got this weird fish tail too, but it’s got spikes on the end, and he’ll fight the dragon with it. *He’s not really in love with the princess; he’s actually smarter than you’d think. He’s just pretending he’s gonna save her so he can eat her himself later.* Ha! Too bad the peasant girl is actually a princess in disguise, who’s been fooling both the monsters all along! *Booring.*

Well, what’s that over there, then? *The one with the thing flipping up? A Whale God. Not any species of whale known to man, but a Whale God from another world, who can take the form of clouds and float through the air and observe humans and judge their actions.* So, it’s just watching us right now? *Maybe, there’s no way to really know…* That’s a terrible story.

The clouds drifted apart, as if pulled by many different hands. Sunlight glowed on the grass, and shadows scattered across the field.

Sometimes, don’t you just feel like a flea? *What does a flea feel like?* Small, dummy! You haven’t even noticed that we’re strapped for our lives to the back of a cheetah!

The wind rippled over the grass with an over-friendly greeting. The girl’s and boy’s hair whipped around, up in the air, in front of their faces, and down again.

*When you put it that way, I guess I know exactly how a flea feels. I just wish I could jump like a flea.*

You know, I really don’t think the troll would’ve eaten the princess. I think he would’ve kept her safe. *Trolls don’t do that though—otherwise they wouldn’t be trolls*. I don’t believe that! Trolls can love something, because everybody loves something! *Trolls love meat and bones and food, that’s all*.

Red autumn leaves flew all around the girl and the boy, and fell on their faces.

So, how about that? *What?* That! Up there! What do you see?

*Rubies—Garnets—Crimsons—*What do you mean? You don’t see all of the Amber Fairies? *Oh, I wasn’t looking at those; I was looking up the tree.* What do you think is up there? *The Amber Fairy Treasure, I suppose.* Exactly!

The boy climbed into the palm of the apple tree’s hand and crawled up the old, gnarled fingertips. He breathed in deep through his nose.

What does it look like, the treasure? *It’s not a gem. It’s a magic potion in the air—It makes the whole world visible to you, far and wide, all over the planet—It makes everything shrink!* Can you bring some of it down for me?

*As you wish, Milady*. *But you must climb up to look down.* No, you can just bring it to me, in a bottle or something—Actually! I have a magic sniffing box that sucks up the air and all it smells and bottles it. Here, take it! *Milady, it will not work unless you climb up here yourself; there is no other way to give you the Amber Fairy’s Treasure*.

The girl sat under the tree with her arms crossed, staring into the field.

*I’m sorry, but it really won’t work otherwise, you just have to believe me.* Why do I have to though? Why can’t we just do something else? Why can’t we just be anyone else?

*Well of course we can—you know that, dummy, but we have to believe each other in order for us to be together… Just remember that I’m less stubborn then you are.* What? You always think things have to be a certain way! *Well, then you do just as much.* Maybe. But yes, we have to forget that so we can do something together.

*Don’t you ever just get bored? You know a lot of times, it’s not even fun, and I’m just being something I don’t wanna be, in someone else’s world. I want to be me; I want to be real.*

But what we’re doing is real! I think it’s more real than whatever you think is real. *I don’t think you’re real, sometimes. Maybe I made you up—we never play with anyone else, after all.*

The boy no longer said anything, and neither did the girl, as he looked at the wide-open field and watched the sky change for a while.

The boy looked back to the playground on the other side of the fence, and there was the girl, on the monkey bars with all the other boys and girls. He didn’t leave the tree, but stayed and breathed deeply of the Amber Fairy Treasure.

**Meet the Monkey Squad! That’s Chip, Pimmy, Cheese, and I’m Kongo**—Can I be Chezmerelda? --**That’s too long!** --What about Chez? --**Too much like Cheese! We’ll call you…Peep!** --Alright… So, what does the Monkey Squad do? --**We hang, stupid!**

The monkeys hollered and hooted, swung from bar to bar, hopped from slide to swing, and then returned again to the bars, hanging like before. Peep shook Kongo:

Hey squad, I thought I saw some hunters chasing us—**No way, what are you talking about?** –Or it might’ve been something else…I just thought, you know, maybe something was chasing us—**Stop making things up Peep, you’re ruining the game!** *Over here, you stupid monkeys!*

There the hunter stood beneath the hanging monkeys, with a whip at his side, a net in one hand, a rifle in the other, and the wickedest smile the monkeys had ever seen.

**Who’s this kid? What do you want, kid?** *You heard your friend—I’ve been chasing you all around this jungle, so I can sell your skins on the black market*. **Is this one of your friends? We can’t have anyone else in the Monkey Squad—***Are you listening? I’m not here to join you; I’m here to skin you alive!* **He’s crazy! Get away from them!**

The monkeys swung away to the other part of the jungle gym, and the boy and the girl fell over laughing.

*I’m sorry I scared away your new friends.* They weren’t real friends, that’s for sure. *Am I a real friend?* You’re a real…

The sunlight disappeared and the clouds became the sky, dark and ready to fall. It started with a single droplet on the boy’s nose, then one on the girl’s cheek, then it all fell, as if it was shouted from above. They did not move, but only looked at each other and giggled as they were soaked to the marrow.

Hey! Do you see that? *You mean the thunderbird?*

The sky cracked, and roared with the boy and the girl.

I thought it was the Whale God, punishing us for scaring the monkeys. *It was both of them, fighting over us, because they both want to take us with them into the sky.* They’re not really fighting—they’re fighting just for fun. *Fighting for real is fighting for fun, in some strange way—so yeah, of course!*

Do you see that? On the other side of the fence? *What do you see?* I see…two pigs who’ve just discovered the Magic Mudland.