



# *Who's afraid of the DARK?*

**Tijana Lukovic** doesn't shy away from *NIGHTMARES* and that is exactly why kids love her. Here's the **Serbian** artist's magical take on everything *DARK AND COZY*... *Text Pia Dewit*

**D**ark forests, stormy skies and mysterious creatures. Drawings that seem to magically come alive at the very moment you're staring at them. Leaves dancing in a gust of wind, a gnome, a squirrel or a hidden star popping up out of nowhere: Tijana Lukovic is your general daydreaming expert. The Ghent-based Serbian-born artist creates enchanting paintings that transport you to a parallel universe. In fact, scrolling down her Instagram feed feels like flipping through the pages of a poetry book -not in the least because of the beautiful collection of big and little thoughts, poems and excerpts she quotes in her copies. No wonder literature is her greatest source of inspiration. Russian and Celtic folklore, pagan rites, Haruki Murakami, Sylvia Plath, Carl Jung,... they all whisper their own kind of magic to her. "I like fairy tales and mythology, exploring the relationship to our roots, how to reconnect with our heritage and the olden ways. It all started with my personal challenges, as I have struggled with anxiety in the past. The famous psychologist Carl Jung used to praise the magic of nature to understand and overcome one's own darkness, and I kind of took his word on that. In fairy tales, the forest is used as a metaphor for the mystery of the human psyche and our subconscious mind: it's where wisdom, knowledge and limitless possibilities can be found, a place of magic and wildness. The hero -whether it's a princess, a bunny or even an enchanted mushroom- is



just to going to school. I think showing magic and endless opportunities, including a layer of fear and darkness, can help. It shows children it's okay to feel the way they feel: acknowledge that those emotions are also valid and part of us, that we're not just unicorns and Barbie dolls. It is also okay to feel scared and sad sometimes, we can talk about it and find a place for it.

Again, I love the role rewilding can play here. I feel like both parents and children are so disconnected from the world around as well as the world that lies within each of us, trapped in an infernal rat race. It helps to reconnect with the animal world, the plants, the seemingly insignificant details that hint of seasons. Even though we live in the city, my daughter and I have these little rituals - grounding moments if you will. After school, we sometimes stop by the tree in front of our house, we lie down and breathe, look up at the sky, take in the leaves and just notice what happens. We also collect nature finds together and display them around my workplace: a feather she found on her way to school, a pebble, a branch. She's always super proud when she brings one of them home, claiming it's for 'our' work!"

I imagine it must be rather inspiring to have a fairy-tale-creating artist for a mother, but it seems to be the other way around. "Everything I do is always stirred by my daughter, because she made me a mother. Without her I would never have found these worlds I draw. I remember my world before she came into my life: I was quite lost -both as a person and as an artist. I was successful as a conceptual artist, exhibiting around the world, but it didn't fulfil me. I didn't find meaning in that kind of expression but had no clue how to do things differently. And then I had Petra. I started reading beautifully illustrated stories to her, which sparked my own imagination and reminded me of what I liked as a child. I grew up in a mountainous area in West-Serbia. Our home was located at the edge of a small town, and I would spend every day playing out in the woods and fields. Those memories created the world I imagine and draw today. Without my daughter I don't believe I would have ever found this world I call my own."

sent on a journey to the woods and gets confronted with his darkness and fears. By way of happy ending, the hero comes out transformed - Jung and his friends would have said he shapeshifted into his true self. That is the very essence of rewilding. It's also why the Wheel of the Year tradition fascinates me: I like following the seasons and finding a cyclical nature in everything that surrounds us -the sun, the moon, even our own bodies and minds. It means structuring our lives according to ancient nature, rather than the artificial structures that tend to dictate our every move these days."

So much for deep layers... In fact: consider each painting a mille-feuille of unspoken feelings. And quite surprisingly, kids seem to be fond of this particular kind of pastry. Furthermore, it tastes even better just before bedtime. Although Tijana paints from her own adult perspective, her illustrations are unintentionally coveted for children's books. "My drawings contain magic and innocence, of course they are drawn to that, but I think it has something to do with the darkness in them too. Children need darkness in their lives! So-called child-friendly imagery is always about unicorns, cute bunnies and butterflies. That's all just pleasant stuff lacking every layer underneath. Children have just as many feelings and emotions as adults do -and they're not all pretty either. To give you an example, my daughter is only just four years old, yet she encountered anxiety when she had to ad-

