

**MAGDALENA ŠIPKA:
RED RIDING HOOD, DANNI AND THE THEY-GOBLINS**

Red Riding Hood, Danni and the They-Goblins

Night was descending over the small town. Everything was quiet. There was not even the noise of cars, as the nearby highway remained unfinished. There was only the quiet whisper in the leaves of the Danni forest. Red Riding Hood was in bed, looking up at the glow-in-the-dark plastic stars glued to the ceiling. Then she heard a clang. It sounded quite close, as if something was happening right in front of their house. She got a little spooked and hid her head under the comforter. But in the end, curiosity won over, so she slipped out from under the comforter and ran across the room to the window facing the street.

Her ears did not deceive her! Smack-dab in the middle of their driveway something was leaning over the trash can – a lanky figure, all arms and legs, and dressed in black, slightly raggedy clothes. The figure's hair was long and had a green tint to it. The person pulled out an old jar of jam and some pancakes out of the trash can – leftovers from Red Riding Hood's breakfast – turned around and made for the forest. Red Riding Hood gasped: "So it's true, goblins are real!" This was exactly how she imagined them. "And they eat pancakes." She wasn't at all sure if it was a he-goblin or a she-goblin, so she decided it must have been a they-goblin. In school, she was taught that you're not supposed to talk to goblins and that you should keep your distance from creatures that rummage through trash cans for food. She thought: "I should be afraid!" and quickly went back to bed.

The next morning, she intentionally didn't eat half a pancake and, come evening, she put it on a yellow cardboard plate and placed it on top of their trash can. She crouched behind a window and fixed her eyes on the trash can, but the driveway remained empty. As the corners of the nearby gardens darkened and the street lights became brighter and brighter, Red Riding Hood eventually got tired and fell asleep.

The next morning, she ran out into the street and her they-goblin bait was gone! On her way to school, Red Riding Hood kept thinking about what she could do to get closer to the mysterious visitor. During class, she tried drawing them into her chemistry notebook. As soon as school was over, she headed for the library. She wasn't sure which section she should check first, whether answers could be found in children's literature, novels for girls or geography. It had to be there somewhere! Finally, she stopped in front of a bulletin board that had a giant image of a tree on it with various posters attached to its branches - an announcement for an upcoming concert, an invitation to a performance by the local amateur theatre group and a flier opposing highway construction through the Danni forest. As she pondered whether they-goblins preferred theatre or concerts, the librarian came over to her. "What are you looking for, young lady?" "I'm looking for a they-goblin," said Red Riding Hood. Unsure whether it was reasonable to say such things, she showed the librarian her drawing and added: "It should look something like this." "A they-goblin? There are no such things. There are either he-goblins or she-goblins...didn't they teach you these things in school?" Red Riding Hood rolled her eyes. To be more precise, she only imagined herself rolling her eyes. Actually rolling your eyes when grown-ups don't understand you is dangerous - she learned that back in kindergarten. She didn't let herself get discouraged: "They're hairy, they like pancakes with jam, they wander around and you may have seen them at the dumpsters. Miss, do you really not know anything about them?" "No, and you should avoid such dumpster-diving punks and focus more on chemistry," she gave Red Riding Hood back her notebook and frowned, "but there is one book that could be helpful to you." The librarian walked off and came back with a dark-green book. "Luna's Legacy?" Red Riding Hood read in disbelief, "well, I'd definitely rather borrow this than something about chemistry." "Young lady, the author has a doctor's degree in studying sequoia trees. She spent almost two years living on top of one of them," the librarian noted. Red Riding Hood shoved the book in her school bag and shuffled home.

She got there as the sun was setting. Both her moms were waiting in the kitchen. "We've been worried sick, Red. Where have you

been all day?" "Last night, I found you sleeping next to the radiator by the window. What's up, honey?" "I'm on an adventure, moms and, right now, I'm in the research phase," Red Riding Hood started explaining, "which reminds me - do you know anything about the they-goblin?" She again demonstrated her chemistry notebook drawing. Her moms looked it over. "Sweetie, maybe you shouldn't be interested in such...people," Mom Victoria said. "So, they're a person like we are?" "Yes, but they're a bit weird. The fact that they come here to eat our pancakes confirms that," added Mom Felicia. "It's you who are weird!" Red Riding Hood said angrily. Felicia was horrified, "But Red, we're a completely normal family!" "Did the kids at school say anything to you?" Victoria asked as she stroked Felicia's hair to calm her down. "No, the kids at school don't care about the two of you one bit. And I like you for the weirdos you are," she responded and went to hug Felicia, so that she wouldn't be too sad, because she knew that sadness didn't do her any good. It was especially bad for her skin. She was also glad that she finally had another piece of the puzzle - the they-goblin is human.

The next day at school, Red Riding Hood drew a picture of the they-goblin in all her notebooks. Fortunately, that afternoon they had art class, so she could draw without the fear of getting in trouble. On her way home, she kept thinking about what material she could use to make a little statuette of the they-goblin. How to express that incomprehensibility and terror? Lost in thought, she almost bumped into someone on the driveway. "Hello," said Red Riding Hood. "Hello," said the They-Goblin, "I'm the They-Goblin." "I know," she muttered, "Red Riding Hood." "Glad to meet you," they said, "I wanted to see if there would be a pancake on a yellow plate, though I already have carrots and cucumbers and some messed-up croissants from the bakery," they pointed to the things in their bag. "You like croissants, too?" "Kind of. Especially the butter ones." "I see. I didn't know that. You have nice hair, it's almost like seaweed or something." "Thanks." "Where do you live, anyway?" "In the forest." "Oh, can I see? I'm conducting a sort of research." "You can, but come quickly, so you can get home soon," the They-Goblin shrugged and continued

walking down the street with Red Riding Hood. "What research?" They asked. Red Riding Hood almost said, "About you, silly," but she paused halfway through the sentence and decided to be a little mysterious: "About...the forest." "Makes sense, Danni is really great. In that case, you should definitely check it out," the They-Goblin encouraged Red Riding Hood as the road slowly turned from pavement to a forest path. Along the way, they passed a piece of barren land. "They-Goblin, why doesn't anything grow there?" "There's supposed to be a highway."

After a few minutes of walking through the forest, Red Riding Hood saw some lights glowing through the pine needles. For a split second, she thought they were the headlights of an oncoming car, but then she realised she couldn't hear any sound other than the gentle rustle of the forest. The air was suspiciously fresh, too. It was slowly getting dark, making the lights easier to see. As they got closer, Red Riding Hood noticed that the lights were arranged in lines criss-crossing the treetops. "That's our treetop village," the They-Goblin said proudly, as if it were an elven royal court.

The next day after math class, Red Riding Hood couldn't stand it anymore and headed straight to the mayor's office. She snuck around the gates and waltzed straight towards his office. Not even the secretary could stop her. The mayor was just putting down the phone as she slammed the door open. "Oh, Red Riding Hood, what brings you here? Shouldn't you be in school?" "I should, but I need to clear something up first. Why is there going to be a highway instead of a forest?" "You see, Red Riding Hood, that's a complicated question. We need a connection to the outside world. This will allow cars to get to places faster." "And what about the trees, Mayor? They also have needs! And what about the moss? Mayor, have you seen the little spruce saplings? Those also need space. I don't understand why there should be road signs instead." "Riding Hood, it may not seem that way to you, but the forest is full of all sorts of vermin. Lately, there have been wandering goblins, banshees, even some witches from Berlin and Copenhagen. Judging by how outraged you are, I assume that you've

met some of them. A curious little girl such as you would do better to play elsewhere. Spruces can be planted in lanes or parks.”

“Don’t change the subject on me, Mayor. This is important. All the spirits have gathered there to defend the forest. Do you know how old it is?” “I do, Riding Hood – it’s older than our town hall. But there’s nothing I can do to stop the development. The highway has already been planned out. Not even the houses of witches could stop it now.” “But you could stop it, Mayor!” “Not right now, Riding Hood, I need to get back to work – and you should head back to school.” He took her hand and pushed her towards the secretary who had regained his senses and came into the office. “Say hi to your moms, Red,” the mayor told her as she left, “and please tell me if you were being discriminated against in any way.” “But I’m not, the spruces they’re …” she managed to let out. “So long, Riding Hood, it was nice seeing you.” “But you’re also mayor to the spruces and spirits, even if they can’t vote,” Red Riding Hood yelled at the closed office doors. She shook off the secretary who was holding onto her coat and left. At school, she diligently focused on physics, hoping that it would help her construct a house in the tree branches.

One day, as she climbed up into the They-Goblin’s tree house, she caught a whiff of something odd in the air. Many black-and-blue figures were gathering in the distance and the They-Goblin seemed uncharacteristically nervous. “You shouldn’t stay here, Red Riding Hood. It’ll get dark soon and it won’t be safe here tonight.” “But I just came over to have tea. Besides, I brought you pancakes,” Red Riding Hood argued. “You should leave soon. We’re almost surrounded. Haven’t you seen them on your way here?” “I saw a bunch of them, but it’s not like the forest belongs to them and I’m free to go wherever I please.” But as she and the They-Goblin ate their pancakes and drank their tea, the little black-and-blue figures were getting closer and closer. Just as they were talking about swamps and buttercups, their discussion was interrupted by a voice from below: “Spirits, leave your tree houses! These trees are scheduled to be felled!” The They-Goblin shivered and turned to Red Riding Hood, “Seriously, you should go now.” “Not a chance! I’m a regular person and a regular spirit, and I don’t understand

why they decided to cut down these trees!" "In that case, hold on tight in case they try to shake us off," said the They-Goblin. Just as they said it, maybe ten of the little figures gathered around their tree and started shaking it. Red Riding Hood and the They-Goblin gripped onto the tree trunk as hard as they could, but parts of the house slowly started falling off. The roof, her thermos and the leftover pancakes. Red Riding Hood finally realised what all the helmets and shields were for. They were meant to protect the little figures from falling pancakes. Thanks to the protective gear, they may have had jam smeared all over their jackets, but at least it didn't get in their hair. On the tenth time the figures shook the tree, the line with the lights tore off and the house went dark. In all this mess, Red Riding Hood could only feel the bark of the tree and the hand of the They-Goblin, to which she was trying to hold on tight. The bark was rough, and each tremor of the tree sounded like rolling thunder, but the hand she held was soft and warm and, in that moment, it was the only thing that made any sense at all. The figures left to take a break. They sat down on the nearest stumps and started hatching new plans. Only at that point did Red Riding Hood realise how late it was - the sun had fully set, and she was worried what her moms would say.

In the dark, they couldn't even see the nearest stump, so they couldn't tell what the little figures were up to. They could only hear stomping all around them. Red Riding Hood thought to send her moms a text message that she'll be late for dinner etc., but as she went to type it, she realised she didn't have her phone. It probably fell out of her pocket when they were shaking the tree and it's now down by the roots. The they-goblin began repairing the damaged roof and didn't speak to Red Riding Hood for a little bit. Their silence felt oppressive and Red Riding Hood was greatly relieved when they finally sat down next to her. "Are you as cold as I am?" They shook their head. "I'm used to it." "I'm definitely not. I'm still useless as a spirit." "No, you're not. Do you want a hug?" "Sure, that could help." "Sorry that I won't be able to take you home. I need to stay in the tree, because otherwise they'll cut it down." "I get that."

She couldn't see the figures, so she had no idea what they were up to. She didn't want to ask the They-Goblin, since she thought

she'd come off as scared. "What else are the little figures capable of doing, considering they had no issues with shaking the trees? Would they simply chop down the tree with them in it?" Then she saw a light. At first it was just gently swinging from side to side, but then it started getting bigger. "What do you think it is?" She asked the They-Goblin. "No idea, but the little figures don't have lights like that, so it must be something good," the They-Goblin concluded. The light wobbled over to the roots of the tree and Red Riding Hood could make out the silhouettes of her mothers through the leaves. "Come down, Red, there won't be any more felling tonight."

Red Riding Hood went home that night and slept for what felt like a whole week. She caught a bit of a cold from being up in the tree, not to mention all the fear that came with it. She stayed in bed and waited for her moms to let her go out, although she felt that they wouldn't let her go into the forest anyways. They went up to her to tell her about how they baked a pie for the mayor and convinced him to stop the cutting for at least a day. They did so because they were so worried after Red Riding Hood didn't come home that night. "I guess we were all worried, then. Even the little black-and-blue figures," Red Riding Hood concluded about her experience as a forest defender.

After a week of recuperation, she went downstairs for breakfast with her schoolbag. She had to get back to school so she wouldn't fall too far behind. During breaks, her classmates talked about how all the tree houses had been torn down and the forest might get cut down entirely. Red Riding Hood desperately wanted to tell them that it wasn't true, but she wasn't sure herself. Right after lunch, she headed for the forest to check if everything was fine. The little black-and-blue figures were no longer on the forest paths and, even from a distance, she could see some broken branches and noticed that the whole forest had gotten smaller. When she finally got to the trees where the houses used to be, she began to feel hopeless. Only broken planks, a few ropes, and the remains of rooves hung from the branches. A different part of the forest had already been cut down. It looked like a sea of stumps. There

was a lot of light coming in, but it was a white and cold light - different from the golden yellow light flickering through leaves. The place was lifeless.

Luckily, Red Riding Hood remembered a cave that the They-Goblin had mentioned earlier. As she was running through from the old treetop village towards the cave, she wondered if it had all been for nothing. Should she have stayed in the treetops for so long? Won't the black-and-blue little men cut down all the trees? In the end, won't the springs be replaced by roads and trees by streetlamps? But as she ran, jumping over branches and stepping on moss, she told herself that she had to do at least one more thing. The forest was still here. And surely, the spirits must be hiding somewhere...unless they were gone.

And then she saw the cave, and as she got closer and closer, she noticed that something was moving inside. "Spirits!" she let out a sigh of relief. And so, she saw a glimmer of hope in all the fear and sadness. She passed a couple of banshees who were guarding the entrance. Fortunately, they knew Red Riding Hood, so they didn't start screaming in alarm. The middle of the cave was occupied by a small fire pit around which witches were gathered. Their eyes were glowing from afar. Red Riding Hood was slowly approaching the fire pit when she bumped into the They-Goblin. "Was anybody hurt?"

"The houses got destroyed, but all the spirits are safe."

"What's going on here?" "We're coming up with a plan to take the forest back."