

A Journey through Darkness

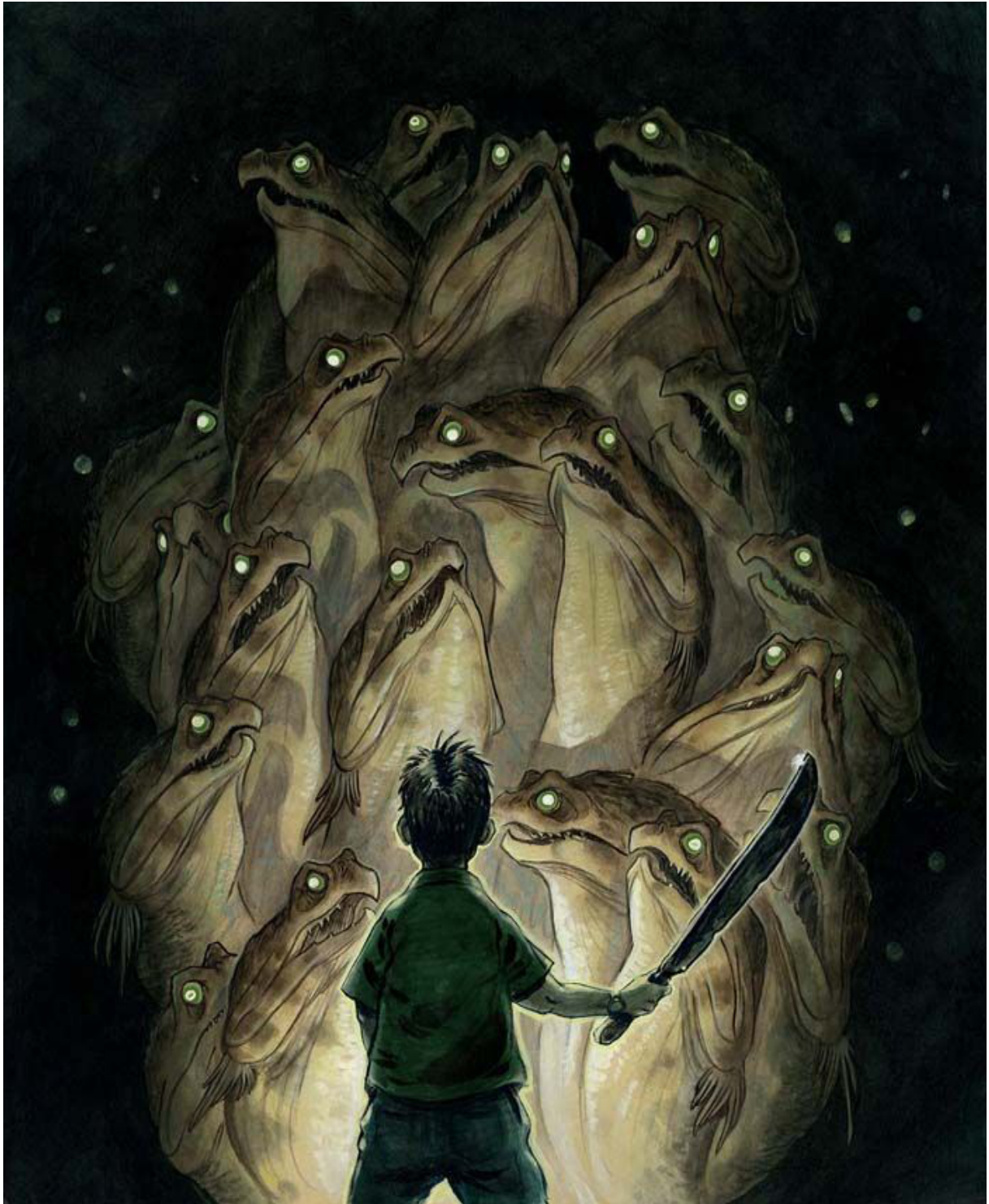


Illustration by Tony DiTerlizzi, book cover of The Wurm King, Beyond the Spiderwick Chronicles (2009)

In a badly-lit room, twenty-four pairs of eyes were watching me. I could hear my name being whispered, “Arthur Sahmat... Arthur Sahmat...” Curious, greedy, calm for now, but, according to what I said, it could change completely. Panic could take hold of me if I let my guard down even for one second. I was shaking as if it was the most important speech of my life, but I needed to say something about that subject, about bullying, and how it could change your life drastically. I shut my eyes for one second due to anxiety, opened them... twelve giant lizards were staring at me, gulp! I shut my eyes again and came back to the real world.

Suddenly, one of those pairs of eyes asked me if I had ever been bullied...

From here, I mustered the courage to tell those pupils the story I lived through one year ago, when I was 13 years old. I remember it as if it was yesterday, and I will probably remember it for the rest of my life.

That day, I found myself at school, in the cafeteria with my tray, ready to eat, I was going to sit somewhere I could be alone, again. It was not that no one wanted to talk to me, kind of. But it was more like I did not want to talk to people. In fact I preferred reading books, staying in my bubble and minding my own business. I would describe myself as an introvert or a loner. I had few friends: they were fantasy heroes who took me into a new world, different from mine, who were my role models, a world where I could really be myself. In real life, problems followed me like a dog follows his owner, I did not want innocent people to get hurt because of me. If I had a friend I would probably drag him into my problems, he would get bullied too. Actually, some classmates used to talk to me : they were not friends like you could imagine, they were my bullies. Fear grew into me a little more every time I met them, and anger too, as if someday it could explode in a wave of fury.

I knew a guy, Miller, who was very much into me. Personally, I did not think he was that evil, he was just in bad company... until that day. That guy, Miller, “accidentally” ran into me, and my tray got knocked down. Miller “apologized”, I saw in his eyes that evilness you see only in TV series, and with a little hidden smirk, he told me to meet him behind the gymnasium after the class so that he could pay me back for the meal he spoiled.

It was not the first time something similar had happened to me. I had had quite a lot of problems and my mom did not know anything about them. I didn't want to worry her any more than necessary so I had decided to dodge problems as much as possible. She really mattered a lot to me. She already had to do many things for me so she would be overwhelmed if she knew about the bullying, so I did not tell her. I had never had a father, he headed out of the house the moment I was born, I had always lived with my mom in our apartment. She worked a lot for me to study in a good high-school. She had been suffering from depression since my father went missing. I could not bear to see her sad all day long, I wanted to make her happy so I did everything I could.

But let's get back to our story. So I said I would not go to the appointment, but Miller threatened they would wait for me at the entrance of our apartment if I did not, which meant my mum would see everything. Since I had no choice, I met Miller after the class, but he was not alone, he was with his friends, and not to play cards... In the blink of an eye, I found myself lying on the ground. For the first time in my life I wished someone's death. I felt a rage burst in me. As expected, they hit me and insulted me as hard as their blows.

Then they left me.

"I wish I could put an end to all this," I whispered.

A long moment later, I do not know how long, probably several hours, I began to open my eyes. At the start I saw nothing and I had a very strong headache. Step by step I pulled myself together and my head stopped to turn : I found myself wrapped in a mist along a corridor, yet only a few minutes ago I was behind the gymnasium. I felt oppressed because oxygen was scarce. Suddenly I heard a horrible laugh like a croak, I opened my eyes. I decided to stand up and I looked around me. I concluded that I was in the depths of a large cave : I felt as small as Bilbo in Smaug's cavern. Then my first question was : "Why and how did I end up here ?" Maybe it was another joke from my stalkers. The walls were dripping water, stagnant puddles covered the ground and a regular drop from the ceiling accompanied the voice which

was moving away. I wanted to get out. The atmosphere was cold and hostile. I started to walk, the noise of my steps merged with the rest of the musical atmosphere of the cave. I was scared and impressed by the greatness of the cave which looked like a dark and colorless sky. The air was very wet and smelt like a swamp, that fetid atmosphere oppressed me !

Suddenly, I noted there were two tunnels. I was looking for the exit. On my right side the odour was terrible and unbearable whereas on my left side, it smelled good, fresher. My curiosity took over and I hoped the exit was there: I started walking down the tunnel on the left side. Far away, in the tunnel I could glimpse some little lights looking like fireflies but I couldn't see clearly what they were. I moved forward and I noted green fluorescent mosses ... That was very strange ! The fireflies were everywhere: that deep cave looked like a night sky full of shooting stars! I could discern mosses of different colours, blue, red, pink, purple and insects of all forms I did not recognize. I knew that cave was not normal because it had a very different architecture which I had never seen before: the walls were made out of liquid rock ! I felt very disturbed and afraid ! Far away behind me I could see movements and I thought they came from my stalkers. As I walked on, I saw less and less fireflies and I soon found myself in a dead-end. There was nothing around me, only a heavy silence which was very distressing. Suddenly, I noted something shiny at the foot of the walls. I approached and I realized it was a rock broken into two halves with some diamonds inside. I decided to pick it up and searched if there were others around me. If I could get rich after this adventure, why not ? But a noise made me tense up me and I stopped moving. I had heard my name ! A little voice that I couldn't recognize was saying my name ! Arthur... Arthur... Slowly, I began to look everywhere around me. But nothing. Nobody. I heard my name again but still nobody in sight. My hands shivered more and more, I felt a breeze, caressing my hair, like a breath, my head started to spin and as I looked up, I saw eyes looking at me, bulging eyes. How many ? Around twenty probably... I did not know, I did not want to know. A firefly had the misfortune to fly close to those yellowish spheres. At lightning speed the warm light disappeared. Unfortunately, I had had time to see the awful monsters... My description will be an understatement, but they looked like giant

lizards or swatted toads which were still alive, only they had long and sharp teeth. Their greenish skin was sweating with a smell more unpleasant than the smell of a rotting corpse. I could not correctly describe them, it is not humanly possible. Their bodies, or I have to say their deformities which served as body, were not the most frightening. It was their deadly aura. I could nearly touch it. It was so oppressive. I did not need to speak their language to know they wanted to kill me. Miller was a kitten next to them. Why did I think about him ? Now I was sure it was not one of their jokes, I was in a real nightmare. I felt paralyzed in front of these creatures. I wanted to run but my legs refused to move. I did not want to die. To force my body to flee I hit my thigh to help me get a grip on myself. The pain woke up my survival instinct and I put on my best sprint, away from those hellish creatures. I was not brave and strong enough to fight them...

I ran away as fast as I could, I never stopped. I paid no attention to anything, I went back to the crossroads and took the right tunnel, everything was invisible to me. The only thing that I saw was a light far, far away but while I was advancing in its direction the monsters' noises were not decreasing so I ran for minutes, for hours, I don't know but I ran for my life.

Suddenly there was no noise behind me, the monsters just had given up and let me go. I looked back above my shoulder to check and when I faced the tunnel again, I saw the light was just in front of me, as if it had teleported after the monsters disappeared. The brightness was burning my eyes but after a few minutes they got used to it. I saw that the light was a lantern in front of a black boat, the kind of boat you can imagine when Death comes for you as Charon in the mythology. Unlike the legend I was alone: nobody was in. At my feet the river was invisible and inaudible: it could only be magical and with supernatural living things in such a darkness. Although it was weird and frightening, getting on the boat was the only way to flee the monsters if they would come back. Resolutely, I jumped into the boat. After some rockings it stabilised and as it was starting to move on the river, I sat down not to fall overboard. The crossing was strangely calming, I could now hear the water being ripped through by the boat. That atmosphere did me good after running like I did.

Breathing out, I put my head on the edge of my ship and dropped my arm outside brushing the surface of the water with the tip of my fingers. I didn't see anything, the river had been cloudy since I was on the boat. Daydreaming, I was thinking out loud and I said, « This place is very damp, no wonder there are creatures which look like ugly toads! » As I was considering what I had said, an idea came to me which made me sit up quickly. Toads live in water ! That thought terrified me. I waited patiently for the end of the travel with my hands laying wisely on my lap.

After a few moments I heard the water flowing louder and thought that was the sound of the boat but after some minutes the sound increased and increased more and more... until I understood it did not come from the boat but from a waterfall. I tried to escape from my floating prison but there was only water around, no ground. The waterfall was getting closer and closer to me and I knew I was going to die. I thought the boat would fall but suddenly as I was closing my eyes because I was afraid of the drop, I did not feel the boat going down as expected... So after a moment I opened my eyes and saw the boat was flying. It was a beautiful experience to fly on a boat, I felt like a bird. While I was flying, I could see an island far away. When the boat landed on it, I was alone on an island that I decided to name "Santorin" . Since I was lost in a cave, I thought that it would not be bad if I started to name things to take my landmarks.

I jumped onto dry land. To be precise it was sand. I stood up and tried to know where I was. Again, the cave ceiling was luminous and bright like a starry sky. It illuminated everything in the room and I could see the island looked like a tropical forest, the kind you can see in Pirates of the Caribbean, but there were no locusts, no birds nor bees to make any sound. The island looked empty of life except for trees and plants. After walking around the shore for a few minutes, I decided to explore the inside of the isle and to avoid going too close to the water because of the monsters I had met in the first tunnel. THE only sound I could hear except from the screeching of the sand under my feet was a clunking noise coming from the center of the island. I walked to the place where the sound came from and what I found was a skeleton in chains. I got closer and I began to hear someone laughing above me so I looked up and saw a perfect doppelganger of the skeleton but that one was flying

above me. So I screamed and tried to run away but the skeleton caught up with me and stopped laughing :

“I have the impression to see myself... you look like me a long time ago,” he cried.

I was interested by what he said so I stopped screaming and paid attention to his words.

“ Why do you say that ?” I asked.

“I used to have the same lousy haircut!” he laughed loudly.

“Are you kidding me ?” I said, offended.

“Ah ah ah ! It was a skeleton’s joke, son! I was like you... a human being,” he said, more seriously. “I loved my life, my son, my wife and my little dog called Poppy... One day, we had a tragic car accident which killed all of them. I fell in a depression until I heard a rumor about an extraordinary and magical cave that could fulfill wishes and which could get me a new lease on life. Convinced to find my family, my old life back I spent twenty years searching for that cave. When I finally arrived to this place, I had to make a choice : saving my family and being imprisoned in this world or staying alive in the “normal” world but without a reason to live... Wanna guess what choice I made ?”

“The first one ?”

“Good answer! You’re very smart, captain obvious ! Ah ah! Now I’m here ! And you ? Why are you on MY island ?”

I heatedly told him my story. He listened with attention and seriousness. After several minutes of silence, he just said :

“Son, we all have to find our own way in life. But before I go I just want to give you something: there’s a sword close to here, go find it. I was supposed to guard it until someone deserves to pull it out of the rock. I know you are more capable than anyone to do it. Good luck!”

In a flash, he disappeared. I was alone again with more questions than before... What should I do now ?

I decided to release his chains and bury his remains. As I looked behind the rock where he was chained, I found a bright sword stuck in it and engraved with a name:

Hiro. I tried to pick up the sword. I thought that the weapon was stuck in the rock but when I tried to take it out it came out very easily. At that moment a strong light dazzled me and the ground below my feet started to move: stairs appeared which went down even lower. So I went down deeper and deeper and the more I went down, the more the air became breathable . I started to hear some noises from the bottom of the stairs but I could see nothing because of the darkness. The first thing that caught my eye was once again a light at the bottom of the stairs.

As I was approaching the light, I could see it came from a beautiful lush garden and at the center I saw a slimy creature on a rock. It was here, like a bald monk on a mountain. It looked as if it was meditating.



After a few moments I saw a lot of slimes appearing below the rock and gathering around it as if it was their king. I approached and the creature woke up and said :

“So you're the new one who ended up here, right?”

I was too shocked to say a single word. The slime added :

“Can you talk ? I'm Limule, the king of this place and as you can see I'm a slime.”

“Of course I can talk,” I responded, but I was astonished to see a talking slime!

“Every person I meet has the same reaction, it's normal for a human but you have to respect me, I'm a king as you know.”

“Sorry, your majesty.”

“I was joking! Just call me Limule for the moment! But I can see that you have a great sword, isn't it Hiro's sword ?”

“Yes it is, but how do you know Hiro?”

“He was at the same place as you years and years ago, he passed the tests and his wish was granted.”

“Tests ?”

“Yes, tests and if you want to continue you'll have to pass them.”

“This sounds like school! But all right, I want to go home and see my mum.”

“Let's get started!”

Limule accompanied me to a door on the other side of the garden and gave me a torch. After going behind the door with my sword, I heard the monsters I had seen at the entrance of the cave again. Those creepy frogs. I lowered my head and I saw the sword shining in the night. With that sword in my hand, I felt stronger than usual. I decided to face those monsters, because I had to, even if I was scared of those creatures. I decided to wait and not strike first. I knew that they would come at me automatically. So when they came, I raised my blade like a real Witcher. The first one approached and I gave a large sword strike which killed him instantly in a bloodshed. I felt power flow in me even if I was covered with that creature's blood. After that a second came and I tried to do the same thing but this one was difficult to bring down. I did the same strike which had killed the first one but it was not enough and I jumped back when he tried to bite me. I fell in a sort of mud that smelled very bad: it was not mud but their excrement! The monster jumped on me again but I placed my sword so that it impaled himself. I killed three other monsters in the same way but it was more and more difficult to move because of the excrement that had dried up and the smell that still stank so bad. The last one was the most difficult to kill, I jumped countless times until I gave him the last strike which killed it. After that Limule came and told me to stop. I returned to the slimes' kingdom and Limule

walked me to a lake where I could clean myself and change my clothes. I was thinking of what I had done on the other side of the door: I had killed something and I did not feel guilty . Of course those monsters wanted me dead but I had killed them and I was happy, I felt good about it. Limule walked me through the garden to another door and said that it would be the second test.

I crossed the threshold and the door closed instantly behind me.

The room was beautiful: there were luminescent plants who were lighting the walls decorated with reflecting stones which looked like a lot of little stars. I was amazed with that show, but in fact, not only were the stones reflecting the light from the plants, but also my own image. A different version of myself in every reflection. An older Arthur, a bearded one, a muscular one etc. As I was staring at those, I started to have a strange feeling, as if I was observed. I looked at each corner of that place but nothing. A voice resonated in my head, I heard nothing but this : « You have thirty minutes to get out of here, otherwise you will get locked up in here for the next week », the time for me to die from a lack of oxygen! I panicked, like any human would do, I started to hallucinate and to shiver, my eyes almost popped out of their orbits. It took me several minutes to recover my mind, I looked for an exit. As predicted, there was none.

I was braver than I could have imagined, I wouldn't let the life I had fought for since my birth go like this. I wondered why the reflections were all different. In a few seconds, I understood. Those were all different futures from different timelines I could follow according to the choices I would make. The reason I got there was the test. My eyes got all wet, I thought that I had to thank Limule for making me grow up. I had not seen it clearly, but while I was panicking, the lights had been switched off one by one. At that moment, I was confident and sure of what I wanted to be and, in a flash, the stones shone brightly again. I suddenly saw only one reflection on the stones, the boy I was at that moment.

The exit was here, everything was fine, I just needed to walk through it so I could return to the normal world... A flash, a second and I was back in my room, back to my routine, back to my everyday world. That is what I thought at first, but in fact, I

was all wrong. When I opened my eyes, I found myself in a hospital room. I looked up and felt my mom's tears falling onto my cheek. They were as warm and comforting as one of her hugs. My heart was warmed and breaking at the same, it was really a strange feeling. I couldn't stand to see her like this. I had promised myself not to worry her, I was really a rascal... I thought that I had become a man through all that, but in fact I was still a weakling.

The doctors told her to let me rest. My mom left the room, wiping her tears with her arm. "It's useless mom, you know they won't stop falling...", I whispered.

Forty hours later, I woke up again. She was still there, she was really worried about me. Since I was in better shape, I engaged her in conversation :

"Mom, you were worried for me ?"

"How could I not ? You disappeared overnight and went missing for two months !" she cried.

"Did I really ?"

"You don't remember ?" she was shocked.

"I didn't even know that I disappeared for two months..." I couldn't look at her in the eyes.

"So you REALLY do not remember...", she seemed sad for me. "You know I'll always believe in what you say, I'm your mother after all, I'll always be by your side even if the entire world goes against you."

"Thank you, that warms my heart..."

I could not keep that secret any longer, I could not bear it alone any more: I told her about the bullying at last.

"You look like you've grown a little bit, no ?"

"You think ?" I blushed and smiled.

"My love, you look like you went through a lot, I am so sorry I didn't realize what was happening to you! I'll be there for you from now on." she cried.

I couldn't stop the tears from falling either. She understood everything, even what I had not told her.

"Even if you've grown, you can cry, every man does, once in a while."

I burst in tears and did not know why, but I did not care, I needed it.

“Come here,” she hugged me tight.

“You don’t have to do that much...” I said, wiping my tears.

“I’ll let you rest, I’m going. Stay here, okay ? Don’t go anywhere because you’re not fully recovered !”

“I won’t, be sure of that,” I said, smiling.

“Don’t forget that I’ll always be there for you too !”

I did not want to have regrets, not anymore, I wanted to try whatever I could to make her happy...

A few days after that talk, I went back to school. Surprisingly I felt nostalgic of my student life. But the fear I had of the bullies was still not wiped off. I started to shiver because I remembered my last day in that school. However, I mustered the courage to enter the cafeteria and kept walking towards a table. Suddenly I heard a loud voice that I recognized. The voice came from a group of person and I could see a familiar silhouette. It was Miller. Miller’s eyes and mine met once and he decided to walk towards me, him and his group both shouting my name, laughing at me. “It’s been a while since we met ! Why won’t you come have lunch with us ?” he said while sketching a vicious smile.

I lowered my eyes and saw a glow coming from my pocket. I took out what was shining. They were blue pebbles with little diamonds inside. I was like Harry Potter finding the Philosopher’s stone in his pocket.... Suddenly I felt dizzy and a lot of images passed in front of my eyes. I remembered why I grew up, why I felt so strong and why I went missing for two months. I had travelled throughout a cave, a magical cave in which I had to fight strange creatures...

“How could I forget this ? Ah ah !” I laughed.

“Can I know what you find so funny ?” Miller seemed angry.

I did not answer, I could not afford to cause other problems. Miller pushed me against one of the tables. It was too late, it had already started. That time I would not fall for his cheap tricks. I was stronger now ! But I was still shivering. He did this to make sure that I fell in front of everyone and that the whole high school could make

fun of me. He tried to hit me, it was close but I dodged. Suddenly, in a rage, I grabbed the chair next to me and raised it above my head. I wasn't controlling my body. I was about to throw the chair at him, but I thought that if I did this I would become like him, and that was not what I wanted, so I put the chair down. I really felt like it was a victory since I had been smarter than him. Miller realized I was not the same guy as before and I was ready to stand up to him. My reaction must have scared Miller because he walked away. He understood he had better stop bullying me. I was no longer a prey.

“Except for that adventure, I have never lived other extraordinary things. It is something that I am proud of and I will always be. It's a part of me now. More than once I could have despaired, but I made the right choices. Guys, never forget what you want to be, there is always a way. Don't regret what you have done, you should be proud of what you are now and not what the other persons want you to be. Be yourself. Be strong.”

That was the end of the story !

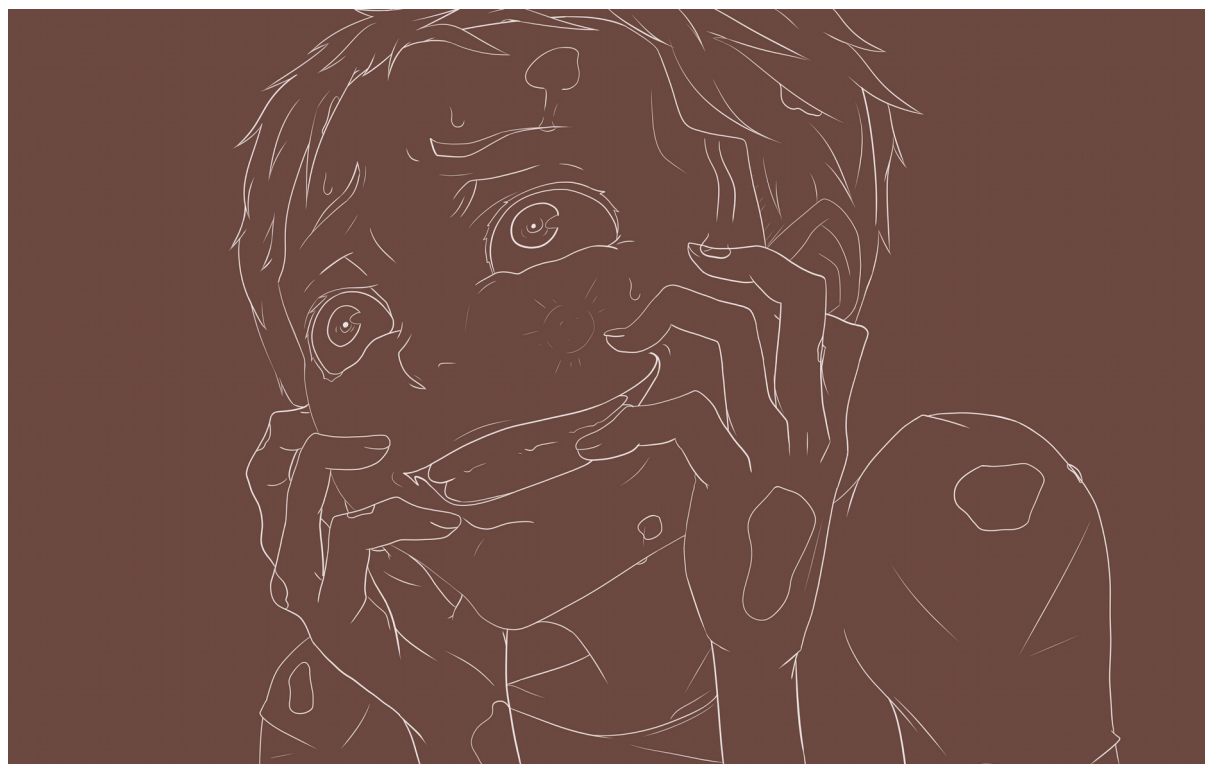
That was the end I told the pupils...

It was part of the prevention plan against bullying and depression, a happy-ending moralistic story I had to tell as part of my community service and punishment, so that they would adopt a good behavior and be happy in their future life and they would obviously remain civilized citizens.

But now that we are alone, I must reveal the truth to you...

To be honest the story took another turn : after I came back, Miller and the others tried to annoy me again but when he tried to punch me I blocked his attack and I broke his arm with all the strength I had. I fought my bullies like an evil Beowulf slaying the dragon ! I had no control over my body and my mind. Miller cried and screamed and told his friends to go at me. Four of them jumped on me but I used Miller as a shield, took a table and hit them with it. One of them fell unconscious so fast that I was not satisfied, so I threw him a good punch in the stomach to wake him

up. The others stood up to hit me again but I decided to charge them. I punched the first one's face, I kicked the second's and I broke the last one's leg with my foot. I came back to Miller who begged me to spare him and told me he was sorry for all the times he bullied me. Before he finished talking I punched him in the face again and again until he was not able to talk. He was so sorry ! It sounded like a joke to me ! How could you use the word "sorry" when you hit and insulted someone everyday, all day long, telling them they were a piece of trash ! Maybe he was sorry but I was very satisfied with what I had done, I was so happy that I wanted to hit him again. So I did. I could feel his teeth shatter. I was not feeling guilty at all. In fact I had never felt so good. How could I ignore the happiness it provided to literally destroy someone's mind and body, what a pleasure!



I guess I will not stop here...