

***THE GREATEST OF ALL TIME:***  
***A FABLE***

by JUSTUS THEILING

They called me *Überstunden*, or *Übi* in short. Being the smallest, my mother rejected me after my birth and refused to feed me. She had some disease unknown to me, or simply incomprehensible at that time. The medication changed her sense of smell and rendered me unrecognisable to her as kin. When her sense of smell recovered, she recommenced the care of my siblings, but found me, out of all, repulsive. Her gaze passed over me like water over stone, untouched, indifferent, forgetting. And so, I grew beneath that absence, learning to hunger not just for milk, but for some meaning. So I lay there, a creature half-born and half-abandoned, wrapped in the silence that falls only on the unloved. Even the sun, when it touched me, seemed to do so out of pity, not warmth.

I can still see the arms of giants, reaching for me from above, offering me sustenance; I would see none of them. On my third day after my birth, a pair of warm hands touched me and I felt comfort for the first time. She turned out to be my first caretaker. Reaching beyond the limits of her contract and, apparently, ethical standards, she transported me to her home. I soon became integrated in her daily life and began to complicate all of her errands. My presence was generally met with positive regard, although the feeling never left me that I was in the way, that I was different. Her language never reached my understanding, nor did her manners. As for her odour, it always seemed artificial and sterile. When she picked me up, although I was glad for her warmth, the discrepancy between our materials was jarring.

I remember everything. Once, I was left in the care of strangers - university students, as I later learned - because my caretaker needed to attend a meeting where I was unwelcome. Sleep dominated that afternoon, and the strangers took good care of me. At one point, however, I needed to use the bathroom, but due to our language barrier and the others being engrossed in their tasks, no one noticed. I was forced to relieve myself on their squeaky linoleum floor. Nevertheless, they accepted me for what I was and soon cleaned up my mess, which was more than my mother ever did for me. My condition was so intriguing to them that I became renowned among their ranks. Despite my inability to understand them, their voices always sounded high-pitched when addressing me. That made me feel special.

Thus, during my campus escapades, I was the cause of a conflict between two parties - ideologies even - that seemed to have quarrelled for eternities. The people on my side, dressed in bright and colourful apparel, were concerned with equality and the preservation of nature, which the others, who wore monochromatic, minimalist and frankly drab garments, did not like. Just like those evil grey men in *Momo* known to steal time, they ended up stealing my time as well. As I was left grazing by my caretaker's friends - she herself still occupied - the fight between the two parties continued. However, I was unbothered because the beautiful flowers around me enchanted my senses and kept me engaged. During the fight, the opposing side resorted to an unbelievable manoeuvre: suddenly, a strange woman arrived at the scene. She threatened to take me away from my newfound family with my only crime being the form I take up as a living creature: "he is not yours to have. He should be among those of his own species." Yet before her shadow could swallow me whole, my caretaker stepped forth, fierce as thunder. Her words, soft as petals yet sharp as knives, cleaved the silence: "He was abandoned. We took him in because no one else would. He belongs to us now." The air stilled, as if the world itself held its breath, listening. And in that hush, I felt it. Not fear, not shame, but the first bloom of belonging; I had always believed I belonged to no one, that I never would. But now, for the first time, I belonged.

It was not the sheer community it offered me, but belonging itself, and the tender feelings it carries quiet, like breath shared in sleep; like being seen without being asked to change. In her eyes, I was not a burden, not a misfit, not a mistake. I was simply... me. And that, somehow, was enough. The world had not softened, nor had it grown kind, but in that one gaze, in that one voice that dared to stand, a shelter had formed around my fragile self. And so, I grew, not untouched by sorrow, but tempered by it. The wound of rejection never vanished; it became the hollow in my chest where gentleness echoed, but coldness responded. Even as I wandered into the myths of my own making, through forests thick with time and fields stitched with memory, I carried that silence within me. The one that first held me, unloved, unwanted. It taught me to listen to the unsaid, to cradle the abandoned, to feed the small and voiceless before they gave up asking.

Years passed, and I too became a father. My children were bright-eyed, foolish and brave, they never knew the cold I came from, but felt its shape in my love, in how tightly I held them when they cried in the dark. I taught them what I had learned: that even those left for lost may one day be capable of providing refuge. That the existential givens in life include death, isolation, freedom, and meaning, that it is not enough to have anything, but that one must become something. That it is irrelevant whether one turns to Dionysus's cult or to the cloistered stillness of a monastery, to the wild ecstasy of abandon or the quiet rigour of asceticism, so long as the turning is deliberate, and the self not evaded but encountered. And that I once believed the word that makes the world turn is love, but now I think it is choice. For even love must be chosen, again and again, in the face of freedom.

As my tale comes to an end, I would like to add my children's usual reaction to my attempt at endowing them with wisdom: "Wow. That's... deep, Dad. Anyway, do we have snacks, or is this just a lecture night?"

In these moments, I know they see me as the G.O.A.T.