Simona Baldelli
The Chamberlain and the Wolf

1. The Chamberlain

Chamberlain.

There was no doubt about it: he was a chamberlain. His father repeated it to him morning and night, on weekdays and holidays: chamberlain!

Most of the time, not with the refinement of Italian, but in the harsh and sharp form of dialect.

"You're a chamberlain!"

A word suitable for all occasions.

"Chamberlain, come here!" when he wanted him to come closer.

"Look what you've done, you useless chamberlain!" when he scolded him because, in his eyes, he had messed up again or seemed lazy.

The chamberlain was someone you couldn't trust, a wanderer, a slacker, someone who would find any excuse to avoid work. The exact opposite of Giorgio, who always completed his assigned tasks, no matter what. Every morning, before the sun was high, the eggs in the henhouse had been collected, the cows in the barn had received the right amount of hay and grain, and the millet had been scattered in the yard, where the hens pecked away happily. But his father was never satisfied with him.

It hadn't always been like this. He used to be a smiling man, always ready with a joke, and when the little boy ran up to him, he would lift him off the ground with one hand and make him spin through the air. Then, he would carry him on his shoulders. "See that green field?" he would say, pointing to a hill. "The stalks are already sprouting, and in a month, it will all be golden."

"It's wheat, right, Dad?"

"Yes, Giorgio, well done. And we'll take it to Badioli's mill, where they'll make sacks and sacks of flour from it."

"For kneading bread and tagliatelle!" The year before, Giorgio had gone with him, sitting in the cart among the jute sacks, so full they looked like they might burst at any moment.

"Oh, what a know-it-all you are!" his father laughed.

And then, with one last spin, he would set him back on the ground. "You know everything!"

That was the way things were: Giorgio had been born a know-it-all, but over time, he had become a chamberlain.

Perhaps, back then, his father praised him because he was only three or four years old and treated him with the gentleness reserved for children. But now, at fourteen, he was almost a man and had to prepare for the harshness of life.

It saddened him that his father had lost his joy and laughter. Ever since he had returned from the war, he hadn't seemed like himself.

He had been gone for over two years, during which Giorgio and his mother had done nothing but wait.

They waited for his return, their hearts full of hope. Or they waited in anguish for the postman to bring the mourning telegram, informing them that the war had swallowed him up and he would never return. It had already happened in many farmhouses around them, where husbands, fathers, and brothers had disappeared through the mail.

In the end, as long as they were waiting, there was hope, his mother said.

2. The Cloud

There was another reason Giorgio had longed for his father's return.

Ever since he had left, Giorgio had lost his courage. Not that he had been an especially reckless child, but without those big hands to protect him and lift him into the sky, he felt defenseless and alone. He was afraid of everything, even his own shadow.

The only thing that kept him company was a little gray cloud.
Sometimes it floated over his head, other times it rested on his shoulder or drifted a few meters ahead. The little cloud didn't care whether the weather was bad or bright and sunny—it was always there.
He couldn't say exactly when it had appeared, maybe the very day his father had left for the front, or maybe later. Back then, he had been too little to notice. He realized it was unusual two years later, during one of his first days at school when the teacher explained how clouds formed and why rain fell.
It was a stormy day, and the whole class had their eyes on the window, watching sheets of rain pour down. The sky was leaden, occasionally lit up by violet flashes of lightning, followed by thunderclaps so loud they rattled the glass panes.
Since the children were too distracted by the storm to follow the lesson, the teacher began explaining the water cycle: vapor rose from the earth and condensed around tiny dust particles, forming clouds. When they became too heavy to hold the water, they released it as rain. And so on.
That was when Giorgio noticed a gray tuft, no bigger than a melon, hovering just above his desk. He passed his hand underneath it; when he pulled it back, it was still dry. "But this one doesn't drip!" he shouted to the teacher.
"What?"
"The cloud on my desk."
His classmates burst out laughing.
At first, the teacher smiled too, but then she seemed to regret it and put on a stern face. "You should behave more seriously in class, Giorgio. Lying is a mortal sin."
"But it's really there!" He looked around.
There were no clouds on the other desks.
He was about to ask the teacher why, but his seatmate had just pulled a lizard out of his school bag and thrown it at the boy sitting in front of him.
The classroom erupted into chaos, louder than the thunder outside, and the teacher shouted at them, threatening to punish everyone.
Giorgio stopped paying attention. He was sure he had created the cloud with his breath, just like how winter cold turned exhaled air into mist. Only this little cloud persisted even indoors. It must have been tougher than the others.
Giorgio was convinced he had many clouds inside his chest, where sometimes he felt the rumbling of a storm. Ever since his father left, the world had turned into a frightening place, full of danger. Every sound carried something ominous, the echo of looming disasters.
The war made an unbearable noise.
When you least expected it—day or night made no difference—the sirens in nearby towns would blare, warning of bombings. Soon after, the monstrous roar of planes filled the air, flying so low the houses trembled, threatening to rip off the roofs. Clusters of bombs fell with ear-splitting crashes, churning the earth, opening up craters.
At such moments, his mother dragged him under the bed, and they huddled together, waiting for the silence to return. A total, solid, stone-like silence, where there was no room even for birdsong or the whisper of wind in the branches. With each bombing, the countryside died.
His mother did everything she could to reassure him. He had never heard her utter a word of despair or fear. She rose before dawn to tend to the house and then went out to the fields. For the heaviest work—like plowing or harvesting—she could rely on the two eldest sons of the Montani family, who lived in the farmhouse next door. Their father was also at the front, while the boys, aged twelve and fourteen, were too young to be drafted but old enough to handle a hoe and plow.
She returned home at sunset, exhausted, but she always found the strength to hold him close with a mix of patience and hope. Perhaps she believed that everything would soon be over, or perhaps she had the same unwavering faith in her husband: he was strong, invincible, and with those big

hands, he would sweep away the bombs and catch the airplanes mid-air. As soon as he shot down the last one, he would come home.
Giorgio held onto hope as long as they remained crouched under the bed. But as soon as he stepped out, he saw things as they truly were: terrifying.
Fear had ruined everything.

9. Fear

However, he had to take advantage of the summer.
The nights were warm and dry, the stars in the sky brighter. If he waited any longer, the rain, the cold, and gusts of icy wind would come, knocking him and his bicycle down. Not to mention the snow and ice.
And then Marianna would have her cast removed in mid-August and would go to her grandparents' house in Pesaro for rehabilitation; by then, the bracelet had to be ready. That way, when she looked at her wrist, she would think of him.
The perfect opportunity came on the evening of July 29, 1954. The calendar announced a new moon, meaning it would remain hidden on the other side of the sky, gradually taking the crescent shape, humped to the west, with which it would reappear.
He had to take advantage of the greater darkness.
His father snored with his mouth open on the deck chair under the walnut tree. The rumbling spread across the courtyard and rose up to the bedrooms. His mother had also gone to bed.
Now or never. He went down to the stable. He carried his bicycle on his shoulder to the gate so that the creaking wouldn't wake his parents. He was surprised not to feel terrified, just a slight tension in the middle of his chest.
It only took a few pedal strokes and the "cucumeo cucumeo" of the owl to make his hair stand on end and force him into a retreat home.
That was why he hadn't felt afraid: deep down, he already knew he would abandon the mission before even starting it.
The second night, he made it past the gate and halfway down the path. What sent him back was a breath of air among the oaks, convincing him that a ghost was lurking in the branches. On the third night, he reached Trebbio, the junction of three roads leading to Candelara, Novilara, and Pesaro. Rumor had it that the Scarecrow appeared at that crossroads at night.
The Scarecrow might have seemed like an animal because it was covered in fur and walked hunched over, but in reality, it was a monster. It liked to hide near crossroads, waiting for souls to escape from hell. If no one came by, it settled for scaring those who passed through. Sometimes, it would sneak into houses and jump onto the bellies of sleeping people. The poor souls would wake up in a cold sweat, gasping for air.
Something rustled in a bush and poked its snout out. It looked like a porcupine, but Giorgio didn't give himself time to check. He turned his bicycle around and, in an instant, was back home.
There was a fourth night, and a fifth, and who knew how many more there would have been if the shame of his cowardice hadn't outweighed his fear.
By now, the moon was a quarter full, shining as brightly as an August moon can. All the better—at least he would see where he was placing his wheels.
That evening, the cloud accompanied him. It had settled on the handlebars, giving him a bit of confidence.
Giorgio consoled himself with the thought that the previous nights had not been a complete waste of time but had helped him get comfortable with the bicycle. He barely used it—only on Sundays to go to Mass or on the rare occasions when his mother sent him to the village shops for a meter of elastic, a needle, or thread.
He passed the crossroads, holding his breath: the Scarecrow wasn't there, luckily.

He took the downhill road leading to Pesaro. The beauty of the countryside bathed in moonlight, the warm wind wrapping around him like an embrace, and the majesty of the oaks lining the road made him forget his pounding heart.
The spell was broken by a small glimmer among the leaves. He convinced himself they were the yellow eyes of a bird of prey.
Of course, birds of prey scared him too.
(...)
Focused on the birds of prey, he didn't notice a ditch.
He ended up in it with his front wheel. Fortunately, it was almost dry, and the bicycle didn't get stuck. A stone jolted him to the other side, where there was an overgrown field with holm oaks and birches. He tried to zigzag between the trunks but failed to avoid a large bramble bush.
The thorns hooked his arm and dragged him down from the bicycle. He fell next to a large oak tree with a hollow trunk. In the end, he had taken quite a tumble.
He sat up, sore all over. The undergrowth was denser in that spot, and the interwoven branches blocked the moonlight.
The cloud was gone.
He had never been in such a frightening, dark place before. Alone and far from home, surrounded by eerie shadows, chilling hisses, indistinguishable whispers, and the cries of wild animals. The ground beneath him was a disgusting, damp carpet that crept under his nails and into his pants, making his underwear stick to his skin.
He looked around for a better place to recover from the fall.
He spotted the cloud in front of the large oak with the split trunk. It seemed unsure whether to go inside. Then, it slipped in.
He followed inside, he would be safe from any potential predators. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.
His knee and shoulder hurt from the fall, but nothing was broken. He could continue toward the sea.
The moon had moved along its arc in the sky. A few rays filtered through the branches of a nearby tree, illuminating the dirt before his feet and the cavity where he stood, about two meters wide.
He was about to get up when a faint breath of warm air brushed the nape of his neck. He heard a sort of rasping sound. He turned.
Two reddish glimmers, like embers under the ashes, shone from the other side of the trunk.
He squinted. The glowing points vanished.
He must have imagined it, or perhaps he had hit his head in the fall and was now seeing things.
He felt the warm breath again. The lights reappeared just above the ground, stayed still for a moment, then lifted a few centimeters, disappeared again, and then reappeared lower, where he had seen them the first time.
It took him a while to realize they were eyes, set in the head of a large dog with a triangular skull, an elongated muzzle, and pointed ears. Its fur was mottled gray and brown, darker along the back. It was crouched against the trunk, panting. It seemed to be in pain.
Dogs, along with cats, were the only animals he wasn't afraid of—on the contrary. Whenever he saw mistreated ones, chained with short, heavy links, so thin their ribs showed, with rough, patchy fur, he felt a strong urge to free them and take them away. There was nothing more senseless than a chained dog. What was the point? None. Not even for guarding, because, unable to move, it couldn't attack or chase thieves. It couldn't even defend itself.
The cloud liked dogs too, as it had settled just a span from its muzzle.
Instinctively, Giorgio reached out his hand to pet it.
The animal perked up its ears and bared its teeth—long, white fangs that would sink into flesh like butter. It gave a brief warning growl: *Move your hand away, or I'll bite you*.
The boy obeyed. "Alright, I won't touch you."
The dog let out a low whimper and curled up even tighter, in the same position Giorgio took on stormy or foggy nights, when the wind slammed doors, and the lighthouse howled.

“Are you hurt?”
As if it understood the question, the beast pulled out one of its front legs, which it had been keeping curled under its chest, and stretched it forward.
The small cloud drifted down to the ground for a better look.
A chunk of flesh was missing down to the bone, and the fur around the wound was matted with blood.
Meanwhile, the moon had sunk lower, casting a silver glow inside the hollow. Beneath its scruffy coat, the dog’s thin frame was evident.
Poor thing.
Giorgio crawled closer to examine the wound.
It would be best to cover it with a bandage. He was about to take off his shirt to wrap the leg when the beast changed.
It arched its back and bared its fangs with a kind of roar. It pulled its head back as if to gather strength and tried to rise on its front legs. Suddenly, it froze. With a howl of pain, it collapsed to the ground. Its wounded leg had failed to hold it up. It licked the wound for a while before tucking it back under its body with a long sigh.
At the first movement, Giorgio had retreated to the opposite side of the trunk, staying still while the beast cleaned its wound with its tongue.
Then they stared at each other, each in their half of the hollow tree.
The boy felt like he was dying. He couldn’t describe the sensation in any other way—the overwhelming weakness, the melting of his flesh into the wood and earth. It felt like he had roots growing from his fingers, anchoring him to the ground, and more from his back, binding him inseparably to the tree. He couldn’t escape, couldn’t move, couldn’t defend himself if the beast decided to attack.
It was a wolf. A wolf, not a dog.
How had he not realized immediately? It looked nothing like the German Shepherds—mixed or purebred—he had seen behind gates or in farmyards. Its body wasn’t as massive but was lean from hunger and a wildlife, its snout sharp for digging into burrows to catch moles, squirrels, hares. Its legs were thin and long, built for trekking over hills and through forests for days. Its eyes pierced the darkness.
And now?
The wolf seemed to be assessing the situation, too.
Giorgio was skinny, but once the little meat was gone, he’d still have plenty of bones to gnaw on until his leg healed and he could hunt again.
If such thoughts crossed the wolf’s mind, it didn’t attack. It stayed curled up, eyes half-open, wary, as if it feared Giorgio’s presence as much as Giorgio feared his.
Giorgio was hypnotized by those reddish eyes, filled with suspicion, pain, anger, and—deep down—a plea for help. Where had he seen that look before?
When he started breathing again—or became aware he had catched his breath—he looked around for the small cloud.
It hovered behind the wolf’s back, pulsating, glowing, as if trying to warm or protect it. A hot-water bottle in the shape of a puff of smoke.
The cloud’s calmness reassured him a little.
After all, he had just seen proof that the wolf couldn’t attack. Not with that injured leg, at least.
“I’ll be going now,” he said.
The wolf closed and opened its eyes.
Giorgio took it as permission.
He slipped out backward, crawling on his hands and toes, never looking away.
Once he recovered his bicycle, he noticed a pedal was missing. His heart skipped a beat—he couldn’t bring it home like that.
He found it nearby, missing the screw that held it in place. He combed through the dirt with his hands, glancing occasionally at the split trunk. The wolf was out of sight.

After a long search, he found the screw lodged in the earth beneath the bramble that had snared him.
He looked up at the sky. The eastern horizon, toward Pesaro, was starting to brighten. Much of the night had passed. He cast another glance at the oak. The wolf had stayed inside. Perhaps it had fallen asleep, exhausted from the pain.
He crossed the ditch and walked home, pushing the bicycle, the pedal and screw in his pocket. He felt unsettled, but he passed the Trebbio without thinking about the Scarecrow or the shadows, or the wind's whispering in the branches.
What had just happened was beyond any monstrous fantasy.
He looked for the reassuring presence of the cloud, but it was gone.
Maybe it had stayed with the wolf.
He couldn't get it out of his mind, especially those eyes that had left a deep impression on him—eyes in which a tangled mix of despair, fear, hostility, and need was evident.
He reached the gate at the first crow of the rooster. His father was no longer under the walnut tree; at some point during the night, he must have gone up to his room.
In the small shed beside the farmyard, which they used as a storage space for tools, seeds, and animal feed, he found a screwdriver. He fixed the pedal and put the bicycle back in its place. His father wouldn't notice a thing, luckily.

10. Doing the Right Thing

The next evening, Giorgio waited for his father to fall asleep with more restlessness than usual. He had spent the entire day thinking about the wolf. Why hadn't it attacked him? The injured paw that had cut short its momentum wasn't a sufficient excuse. Its snout had come within inches of his face—one bite would have been enough to tear off half of it. And yet, it hadn't done so.
He didn't understand why the cloud had stayed with him.
Was it trying to tell him something by making that choice? Or did it just want to make sure Giorgio went back into the tree trunk?
What a shame he didn't speak the language of clouds. Italian, dialect, and even the influence of French were of no use to him with her. Just the thought of returning to the oak terrified him, but the idea hammered in his head all day, along with the wolf's gaze—so full of pain and fear. A cry for help.
With its paw in that condition, it couldn't move and risked dying of thirst and hunger. How could he ignore the fact that the animal's life depended on him?
On his way back from the fields, Giorgio stopped to pick a melon. At home, he cut it in half and carefully scooped out the flesh with a spoon. He ate it with pleasure, but that wasn't why he had taken it. The half rind would make a perfect bowl. He set it out in the sun to dry on the stable roof.
At dinner, he hid a flatbread under his shirt. His mother had brought them to the table sizzling hot, and he burned his stomach. He had to bite down on his napkin to keep from crying out.
That night, he didn't care that his parents kept their heads down over their plates as if he weren't even sitting at the same table. In fact, their distraction allowed him to snatch a few strips of pork rind that his mother had set aside to cook with yellow beans, along with the cheese rind they had used to stuff the flatbread with wild herbs.
It probably wouldn't be enough to fill the wolf's belly, but it was better than nothing.
His father fell asleep around ten.
Half an hour later, Giorgio was in the stable, stuffing the now-dried melon rind, a flask of water, and the food he had stolen at dinner into a burlap sack. He tied it with a rope, slung it over his shoulder, and pedaled without hesitation to Trebbio, where he took the downhill road leading to Pesaro.

Was he scared? Yes, very. But in his heart, there was a stronger feeling pushing him forward. As if he were going to an unmissable appointment. As if the hollow oak held the answer to a forgotten question.
Where did that self-control come from? Probably from knowing he could change his mind at any moment, turn the handlebars, and go home to safety. He had the freedom to choose.
A little owl's call echoed in the night—cucumeo, cucumeo. Was it a bad omen, a sign of danger?
He shrugged. It was crying that brought bad luck; that was just a call.
A little further ahead, he recognized the spot where he had veered off the road. Terror seized him.
He spun the bike around and started pedaling home at breakneck speed.
Suddenly, the little cloud appeared in front of him.
He slammed on the brakes. "Let me pass, I don't have the courage."
She didn't move. She was black as ink and trembling.
"Think about it," he told her. "What if it bites me? What if it goes for my throat?"
He pictured the suffering animal, the struggle it had made to lift itself onto its front paws. If it had wanted to attack him, it could have done so as soon as he entered the tree or while he sat there with his back turned. Instead, it had only reacted when he had approached and tried to touch it.
Why should it trust Giorgio? Humans had always been the wolves' enemies—they destroyed their dens, hunted them, set traps to catch them. It didn't want to attack; it wanted to defend itself.
Never before had Giorgio longed to confide in someone. But who? He felt the painful absence of his father's support, of the boundless trust he had once had in his judgment. For a moment, he considered going home and asking for advice, but after years of silence, the words died in his throat. Speaking to his mother was out of the question—it would only give her another worry.
No, he had to make the right decision on his own. Because he was growing up, and making decisions was something grown-ups did. Making decisions and caring for the small and the weak.
Meanwhile, inside the oak, a living being needed help.
The choice before him would define him as a person. It would reveal whether selfishness or generosity prevailed in him.
The little cloud stood still, waiting for his decision.
He chose to trust her. After all, she had always been a good friend. She had comforted him in moments of loneliness, taken a place on his pillow on nights of crying, drying his tears.
"All right, let's go to him."
He turned back, hoisted the bike onto his shoulder, and crossed the ditch. The large oak shone under the moonlight.
Kneeling before the hollow, his heart pounded in his ears.
"Hello, wolf. It's me, Giorgio," he whispered.
The reddish eyes glowed in the dimness.
The wolf had probably spent the day dozing to conserve as much energy as possible since it couldn't hunt for food.
Giorgio slid the sack from his shoulder and let it drop to the ground. Maybe the movement was a little too abrupt because the wolf flattened its ears and bared its teeth.
Giorgio froze, fighting the instinct to run.
They stared at each other. The animal's eyes were full of pain, suspicion, and anger.
He remembered that beasts could smell fear. Was the wolf sensing his?
It kept its snout pointed like a dagger, nostrils flaring, twitching. Then it let out a low growl, more defensive than aggressive.
"Easy, easy. I brought you food."
Slowly, he untied the knot of the sack. He poured water into the half-melon and carefully pushed it closer. "Here's some water," he whispered. Then he took out the food. "And here's something to eat."
The wolf pricked its ears and curled its muzzle. White fangs glistened in the darkness.
The little cloud moved between them.
Somewhat reassured, Giorgio tossed a strip of pork rind toward the wolf.

It sniffed the air. Its eyes flickered between the food and the boy. Its nostrils flared and contracted, testing the unfamiliar scent. It must have liked it because it lowered its head and picked up the rind with its teeth.
It chewed slowly, as if still unsure, then licked its snout. Then, it fixed its gaze on him again.
Giorgio picked up a cheese rind and rolled it toward the animal.
Again, the wolf stretched its neck; again, it flared its nostrils; again, it liked the smell. This time, it swallowed the rind whole.
They continued like that for a few minutes—pieces of flatbread, pork rind, cheese scraps.
The whole time, the wolf remained pressed against the trunk, its paws tucked under its chest. Perhaps for protection, or because it was in too much pain to move.
Giorgio nudged the bowl closer.
The wolf emptied it in a few laps.
He poured more water. This time, it only lapped at it lightly.
“I’m sorry, I don’t have any more. But I’ll bring you more tomorrow.”
The wolf closed its eyes and let out a soft whimper. Its breathing had become more regular.
They stayed there for a while—the beast dozing, Giorgio gazing at the moon through the branches, the little cloud glowing faintly between them.
At some point, the damp air chilled his spine. There was nothing more he could do for that night.
“See you tomorrow,” he told the wolf before stepping away.
It opened its eyes. The small embers gleamed for an instant, then faded. It must have been exhausted.
“Are you staying here?” he asked the cloud.
In response, she curled up beside the beast.
Part of him was sad to do without her company, but another part was glad she would stay with the wolf.
He pushed his bicycle back to the road and pedaled home. The countryside had never looked so beautiful.