Aramaic

**A STORY**

[**BY CHERISE WOLAS**](https://www.narrativemagazine.com/authors/cherise-wolas)

**I imagine** my name is Deo or Abel or Icarus or Theo or Zed and that I am chasing a dog named Hercules, trekking Mt. Everest, diving into tropical waters [[](https://www.narrativemagazine.com/node/280)](https://www.narrativemagazine.com/node/280)and photographing schools of fish in bursting color, breeding dogs free of bark and bite but capable of furious meowing, loud as cats in heat, or inventing a new game more famous than basketball, more sacred than baseball. When my father, or mother, or any of my three sisters calls up through the house, “Simon, Simon, Simon,” I hear nothing until their voices splinter the pretend. I do not like living this scrubbed truth, the subject of a medical file that reduces me to:

Patient Name: Simon X  
Age: 15  
Diagnosis: Hemophilia

Nothing in that file is good except for my new last name; Tucker has been replaced with an *X* that makes me feel like the toughest of spies.

When I return from my alternate lives, settle back into my corporeal body, see my bed, my desk, the rug that I pace, my books on their shelves, the windows from which I observe my small universe, I call out in Aramaic, “I am where I always am.”

Aramaic is our familial tongue. Nevertheless, for years my father spoke about the change that was coming: a desperately desired and impractical move to the Iberian Peninsula. We would speak the standard Portuguese and Spanish there but perfect our ability to converse in Catalan, the top shelf of Romance languages according to my father, Harry.

“Just think,” he often said, “if we lived on Gibraltar, or in Andorra, Spain, or Portugal, we could slip in and out of the dark continent of Africa like it was a quick trip to the post office.”

The move was often discussed without our taking a single step, and then, during a Friday-night dinner, my father finally smote the familial Aramaic. I always ate alone at my desk, scribbling notations about the day’s birds that had winged the windows, alighted on the beech branches, but Friday nights were special. My mother flipped a switch in the kitchen, and through a series of tubes my father had laid across the floorboards, up the staircase, down the hall, and into my room, I listened to the warbling of my sisters, the stentorian tones of my father, my mother’s happy chirrups, felt myself swarmed by their butterflied words.

The night Aramaic was banished, this is what I remember: Veronica told us that her boyfriend, Virgil, had, over her objections, increased the piercings that split his lip. Helena recounted her substantial progress toward her literary goal of reading every book in the quaint town library. Margo had said, “I’m decimated. Cohering the town’s under-tens into some balletic structure for the upcoming recital is proving impossible. Please, Dad, pour me more wine.” My mother’s tea party, a charitable raising of orphanage funds, had been a success. She spoke directly into the tube: “You would be so proud of me, Simon. We raised ten thousand dollars today.” My father followed and said, “You would be proud of me too, Simon. I secured a satisfying uptick in the family fortune.”

I pounded my bare feet on the floor, two pounds to let them know I had heard them all, and a single pound to express my approval. We all seemed to be in a good place, but when the round robin wrapped, my father said, “Tonight is the night.”

I heard him and I flung myself onto the floor, put my ear to the tube that poked through the wood like a flower.

“We have an endangered species living right upstairs. No reason to keep speaking a language that’s endangered as well. Plus, we need to be ready for life on the peninsula. We shall speak Aramaic no more. Do you hear me up there, Simon?”

I did hear him. I pounded twice to let him know I had heard, but I did not pound my approval. I placed my mouth close to the flowering tube and tried to speak, but there was nothing left to say. My father’s words had done the trick he wanted done. My cerebral cortex shifted, my Broca’s area sprang a fissure, and I instantly forgot how to speak the three-thousand-year-old language of empire administration, divine worship, and most of the Talmud. I tried mightily, but no longer could I ladle those ancient words into the air.

We could speak Portuguese and Spanish immediately, and Catalan should have been an easy third addition, since it shared linguistic ingredients. But my father sought perfect rendition. He brought vocabulary workbooks home for us each to labor over and instituted good-natured, competitive spelling bees to hammer home the trips and falls, the curlicues of his favored Romance language.

Three times a week I sat like a meditating guru in my striped pajamas on the oriental runner that bisected my bedroom. The stripes, my position, I looked like the undersized prisoner that I was. The rest of my family gathered in the hall, lined up on the herringbone, and limbered to attention. The excitement rippled the miniskirt hems of my sisters, the modest knee fringe of my mother.

My father swept his head around in a final check. The mopped head of me, his only male offspring, his sole sickly heir, I was in my rightful place. I watched him absorb the sculptural angles of his three daughters—a parabola of cheek, a slice of chin, a waning moon of an eye—he had them all in sight. My mother’s cheeks were as round as her name—Pearl—and my father smiled at her, his forever wife lit up at the end of the line. Paterfamilias cricked the joints of his right hand, lifted that arm high to the ceiling, snapped his thick fingers with gusto, and set the spelling bee into motion. He smiled at the magical metamorphosis of the dreary Aramaic words, *tybb, ymp, btkb, lsl*—“house,” “water,” “book,” “sea”—into *casa, aigua, llibre, dim,* words that sang in Catalan.

The Catalan bee scoreboard hung next to my mother’s eight-burner stove, which I had not seen since infancy. Scrupulously maintained by my father, the board reflected points lost over errant mispronunciations and mixed-up conjugations, and gained when the translations danced like water over rocks.

As the youngest, I was quickest to adapt to the demands of our new tongue, but my sisters were right behind me, then my mother. But my father could not reconfigure his mouth, his tongue, the alterations in glottal stops, and his adored Catalan remained for him like a beautiful woman who can never be touched.

Naturally, time passed. My family did not migrate to the Iberian Peninsula; we stayed in our places, at least for a while. My father died and the Catalan scoreboard was buried along with him. My mother kept at her charitable works, had a brief affair with a Catalan smuggler in honor of her husband, our father. Then she died too. Helena moved into the library and kept reading her books. Margo married a piano player.

Eventually I turned old, still small, still dressed in a pair of my striped pajamas, still a prisoner in my room. My meals then were ferried up by Veronica, whose final boyfriend had been Virgil. He had pulled out all his piercings and let the holes close up as she had always wanted him to do, and when his past was smoothed over, he left her. She cried and survived and became a good cook, and often we sat up in my room and talked about the old days when we were just an ancient family speaking an ancient language with dreams of doing simple good in our tiny pocket of the big world. Veronica and I would drink a sherry or two, then she would dance back down the stairs, twirling the dinner tray over her head, and I would sit there, slightly drunk, thinking of those years when I lived the lives of the other boys I had dreamed up and spoke Aramaic like a champ.