

THE ONES WE BECOME

a NOVEL

Nadine Macaluso

For anyone who has ever felt they couldn't,
shouldn't, wouldn't.

You will find your way.

In the end, it will all just **become**.

And for my friends and muses:

You are the only reason I have ever been able to
succeed.

Thank you for letting me talk endlessly about a
story that I never thought would make it.

I suppose, at one time in my life, I might have had
any number of stories, but now there is no other.
This is the only story I will ever be able to tell.

— DONNA TARTT,

The Secret History

Tell me, Atlas. What is heavier:

The world or its people's hearts?

— DARSHANA SURESH,

Howling at the Moon

Juvenility

FROM THE DAY OF MY BIRTH, the period between my childhood and adolescence had never existed.

When I was an infant, there was nothing I could have known—I was simply a newly made being of flesh and bone. The years following were built on naivety, something that seems to last an entire lifetime before it is stripped from you.

My youth began to fall away when I turned eleven. So suddenly, it was—one day I was a child, and the next, a man.

My family owned a bakery back then—it was a compact building with two narrow floors, the space dilapidated, the roof sloped and the windows stained with watermarks—and from the day my parents taught me to bake, the thought that I would one day run it for myself was placed in my mind.

The week after my eleventh birthday my parents threw me into it. A tradition that had been passed down for generations. It happened to my father. And his father. And it began with his father's father. I was born into that

bakery, that business that had been passed down through so many families and marriages, and since I was small, there was no way to escape the fate that upheld me. The cycle would go on until the end of the world.

And so it happened as I knew it should've: I observed at first, watching my parents in the kitchen. Eventually, my sister taught me how to serve, take orders, and deliver them back to my father.

She worked in the kitchen for all the years she had been taught. She was sixteen and turbulent, as adolescents are towards their parents. She wanted so desperately to run away; she often spoke of this to me. My mother always told me I was the embodiment of her spirit.

I picked up the art of baking and serving quite fast. My sister had worked at the bakery for nearly five years longer than I had. She teased me the first few months when I made a mistake, but as I caught on, it faded away. Women did not often work, but without my

mother and sister, our business would never have been able to run thoroughly.

Those first two years, I served the food my mother and sister baked. My father took orders and went out for ingredients often. While he was away, my sister stood at the counter, her chin held high in conceit. When I helped my mother bake, it simply meant pouring ingredients and whisking batter. Then I would wash her dishes.

But then a year was behind me, and I was thirteen, and my father was letting me take orders, and he would serve. My mother was truly teaching me to bake, and I would knead the dough for the bread. I would put it in the oven and watch as it rose, then I would take it out and set it in the display cases. Then she would wash the trays; a swap of places between us. My sister envied the attention—it was evident in the way she watched me—but she said nothing.

I had been in the business for nearly two years when my mother first fell ill. Our staff was knocked

down to three. In addition, the man that was courting my sister proposed to her when she turned eighteen. She stopped working after that, leaving only my father and me.

This was the only way out of that bakery—getting married, moving far away, and starting a family. But I was young and I had no one to marry, and my mother was sick, and I couldn't leave, as much as I wanted to. My father would pass away before I grew old enough to start a family, as would my mother. And the bakery would be placed in my hands—only mine, now that my sister was away—and I was stuck to it.

My father and I had no other choice but to run the business ourselves. Two were not nearly enough people, as I was not entirely accustomed to everything yet, but there was no one else who could help us.

We worked alone for two dreadful weeks. I had never gone to school. I had never had any friends. I had only ever known that bakery with its two floors and the

smell of coffee and bread lingering at each time of the day.

I thought it would stay that way forever. I thought, *how could this ever possibly change?* My mother fell deeper into sickness with the passing day. My sister and her fiancé went to France for a month. And I thought it would stay that way forever. I thought I was glued to my fate.

And that was when a girl came into the bakery with hair a chocolate shade of brown. Piercing blue eyes. And then she came to the counter, and she told me her name was Carina, and that she came for a job interview with my father. And then everything began to change again.

— — —

MY FATHER GAVE HER THE JOB—of course, he did, we desperately needed the extra hands. Her father was close to my family, though I had never known either of them. He was a man who owned a watch shop a few blocks from the bakery. And her mother was dead.

She started that day, the moment after the 'interview'. (It wasn't quite an interview, as she still was a child, and my father already knew he would hire her.) She already had baking experience, and she was an excellent cleaner. She washed dishes as I kneaded the bread. And so it all came into play.

The first days with her in the bakery were the most unfamiliar days I had ever experienced. A girl who was not related to me in any way possible was now cleaning and working in *my* family's bakery. Each time she entered the bakery, even if only for a moment, I forgot who she was.

Besides the cumbersome movements I made when around her, and the silence I would obtain, she was remarkably open with me. In a brief time, you could almost say we had become friends.

Every day I would work beside her in the kitchen, both doing our tasks in each other's silence. The first week I did not speak unless spoken to by her, which was often. She wanted to know how old I was, and how

long I had been working at the bakery. She reminded me of myself when I first began to bake—I wanted to know every secret of every recipe and the secret to every food that ever existed. But there were never enough answers to satisfy me.

And then the weeks after she had known everything I could tell her, I started to speak leisurely with her as I baked and as she washed my dishes. She served and watched and she was the same person I had been—except she was mature and spoke like a woman, while I was still a boy. She knew more than me, and she taught me things about the world outside of the bakery, and I returned it by teaching her what she wanted to know about baking and serving. Each was passed down from my parents.

After so many weeks of only speaking of only me, she began to open up and tell me about herself. Information such as how old she was (fourteen, a year older than me) and about her father's shop. Faster than I imagined, she unfolded, and the topic of her mother's

death came into conversation like it was meant to be there.

'Do you ever miss your mother when you mention her?' I asked curiously one day while we were in the kitchen.

'Of course, I miss her,' she said, her voice smooth and quite dignified. 'But I have gotten used to it. I don't even remember her face.'

Her words felt like a world I could never know. I loved my mother more than anything, and the thought of losing her—of forgetting the shape of her face or the creases of her smile—seemed an impossibility.

'That seems like a nightmare.'

'It was. It *is*. But I've gotten used to it. It's just the way it must be.'

'It doesn't *have* to be.'

'But it is.'

I looked behind me at the door of the kitchen. The rust on the handle, the wood on the frame. I would

be there forever. In that kitchen, in that bakery, for the rest of my life. There was no escaping what would come.

Yet Carina taught me to accept my fate. For that moment, I didn't feel so trapped. So glued to what I was born into.

She looked at me and smiled reassuringly. 'We can't change our fate, Emiliano.'

And I believed her.

— — —

IN A MONTH OR SO, WE had become close companions. Carina and I seemed to be twin flames; whatever she said, I wasn't far behind. We could talk and talk for hours at a time, and sometimes my father would have to remind us we had to work.

Often, she would stay as late as to close the restaurant with us, and then she would walk home beside me and we would wait outside for a few minutes before her father's shop closed, and then she would walk home to greet him. Occasionally, I would walk with her. Those conversations in the darkness—nothing but our

words to surround us, scarcely able to see our hands in front of our faces—were the most profound conversations I have ever had with another person, even after all these years.

One night, almost a month after I had met her, I walked her home as it began to flurry. Winter had set into everyone's bones weeks back, but even then we still shook with the earnest chill of it. It rarely ever snowed in Genoa.

'If you could go anywhere in the entire world,' she began to say, 'where would you go?'

I shook my head, a laugh escaping my lips. 'You know I can't answer that question.'

'Try to. I ask you all the time, and you never do. So try now.'

'Where do I start?' I stopped to consider. 'France?'

'What about America?'

'America? That's a thousand miles away.'

She nudged my shoulder. 'Come on. You have to think big.'

'England?'

'*Big*.'

'Fine, America.'

She spun, her arms outstretched, and giggled. 'Oh, *America*. The name even sounds wonderful, don't you agree? I would give anything to step foot in New York and become an actress. To leap on the stage—that is my greatest life's desire.'

She came close to me again and pressed up against my shoulder. 'What is *your* greatest life's desire, Emil?'

I turned to her, though I couldn't make out her features in the dark. 'My *life's desire*? Those are just dreams. Your life cannot have *desires*.'

'Oh, but it can!'

'How do you know?'

'I've read a book about two lovers whose life's desire was to be together. And since it was meant to be,

through all their hardship, it came into play.'

'Fiction, I suppose.'

'Yes, but fiction has many grand lessons—'

'No, it does not.'

'Come *on*, Emil.' She nudged me again, and I knew she had a secure smile on her face. 'Brighten up. Is the snow making you grumpy?'

I rolled my eyes, knowing I could not be mad at her. 'Yes, actually, I suppose it is.'

She leaned into me as we neared her home.

'Thank you, Emil. For being my friend.'

'Of course, Carina.'

'Fate has brought us together, I just know it has.'

As she waved goodbye to me, I felt my face go warm, despite the cold. She made me do that when she was close to me, the warmth of her breath on the side of my face. I truly did love being so close to her, feeling her next to me. It almost felt like it had been that way every day of my life; like it was meant to be that way forever.