

# LATE IN THE SEASON

*by*

Felice Picano



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## CHAPTER ONE

**I**t was a perfect day for composing. The morning mist had finally burned off the ocean, unfurling the blue sky like a huge banner of victory. Kites were fluttering at various levels of the warm, balmy air. From down the beach came the sweet-voiced distortions of children's cries in play—the last children of the season—adding extra vibrancy to their sounds, piercing the scrim of post-Labor-Day-weekend silence that had softly dropped a week ago. Already the first dying leaves of an autumn that came early to the seashore and would blaze madly for a mere month of picture-book beauty had flung themselves at the glass doors this morning. They had saddened Jonathan then, perched over his large mug of coffee, feeling the hot sun on his closed eyelids. But now the morning felt so clear and sunny, so absolutely cloudless, he felt he might strike it with the little glass pestle in the dining room bowl, and the day would ring back, echoing crystal, like a gamelan orchestra.

Sixty fresh sheets of newly scored, oversize paper lay on the table in front of him—unstirred on the oceanside deck by any wind. Next to them was a stenographer's open flap spiral notebook, its pages filled with sketches of melodies and modulations, with samples of instrumental combinations he would incorporate into the score—jottings from the entire summer. He'd already written out many solos. Half would go into the score intact; the rest would have to be completed, revised according to the hieroglyphic notes he'd made over the past few months. Orchestral introductions and instrumental transitions would be required. But the most difficult numbers were

done: the laughing quartet for male voices, Fiammetta's lament, the six madrigals the chorus would sing, commenting on the principals' actions, and furthering the flavor of thirteenth-century Florence. Barry would love them. So would Amadea and Saul, producers of *The Lady and the Falcon*, their fourth show together, the first to be written for Broadway.

Above him, to the left, there was a rippling flutter like a stricken bird's panic of feathers. A black, bat-shaped kite with two yellow eyes painted on it was falling from the highest aircraft, spinning forward, bucking, dropping through current after current. Jonathan thought it would plummet endlessly, struggling all the way down like a living thing, until it hit the sea-stained gray board roof of the Locke family's summer house next door. But the kite swept up suddenly, caught a draft, righted itself, then floated serenely on slacker line, its plastic wings unwrinkled.

Jonathan quickly wrote at the top of one score page "Gentile's Prayer," then began to fill in the tenor's vocal line, moving steadily across the page and down half a staff and only stopping at bar sixteen for the break. Last night he'd gotten away from the others in the house long enough to get down to the ocean's edge. There he'd walked, his hands shoved in his pockets, the sweatshirt flapping around his torso; there, too, he'd heard the last cries of migrating birds repeating certain phrases against the solid bass line of surf, phrases that had reminded him of a Landini arietta from seven centuries ago. Their plaintive rise and fall had unconsciously become the tenor line of Gentile's hopeless prayer.

Now he began to write in the bass continuo. That was easy until the break, so he moved up to the alto line: a high oboe that would accompany the singer over low strings. The break should lead to a more agitated central section: music like Dan last night when he came down to the water's edge and asked Jonathan to return to the house, to the others. It was their last night together for a while, Dan had reminded Jonathan almost guiltily. Yes, this central section would be anxious, sad, recalling how guilty Dan felt going away again, and his barely disguised alarm that Jonathan was taking it far too easily. That, and Dan's usual considerate fear that his life, his

concerns, his career, his friends and family were taking up too much of his lover's now valuable creative time. All that Gentile would somehow express to his beloved Fiammetta on the embarkation eve of his quest for the fabled falcon.

Now for the final section—the resigned but hopeful return of the initial theme in a new key. What would that sound like?

Suddenly there was a sound like a loud slap of rubber behind him, loud enough to break his concentration. Jonathan didn't have to turn to know it was Dan, slamming open the sliding doors. No one else did it quite so forcefully.

“Jonathan, do you know where my shaving kit is?”

“Bottom left-hand drawer. You put it there when you came back from L.A. Remember?”

“I looked there.”

“Under the rugby shirts. Haven't you packed them? You'll need them, you know. It'll be cooler in London.”

“I'll go look again,” Dan said, but his tone of voice said he'd never find the shaving kit.

“Want me to?”

“No. You're busy. I'm sorry to bother you while you're working.”

Jonathan got up, weighted the score with an ashtray, and went to where Dan had just stepped inside the doorway. Dan was dressed in an open-necked shirt, casual slacks, and sports jacket. He'd be flying directly to the airport, where he'd board a jet.

“I'll look,” Jonathan said. “It's no trouble.” He went past Dan into the house. “When's your plane?”

“Not till one.”

“It's almost noon now. Are you packed?”

“All but the shaving kit.”

In their large bedroom two suitcases were open on the bed. They appeared to be neatly, fully packed, but Dan was so distracted lately, it would be just like him to forget something essential—socks, or underwear. They ought to be checked.

Jonathan rummaged through the wide bottom drawer, pushing aside various shirts, some of them wrapped in thin paper from the

laundry, others still encased in plastic from their purchase. Why didn't Dan wear these shirts when they looked so good on him? Jonathan always thought his own body too stocky for them. On the bottom, shoved between two of them but bulkily apparent, was the shaving kit. Surely Dan had seen it?

"You were right," Dan said, receiving the kit, "as usual!" He stood looking at the shiny cracked leather kit in Jonathan's palms, until Jonathan thought he was going to say something: admit he'd known where it was all along and merely wanted Jonathan's company. Then Dan made a typical wry smile and hugged him, crushing the kit between them.

"Who's going to find my shaving kit for me in London?" he asked, low, against the nape of Jonathan's neck. Dan smelled of cologne today; for the trip, Jonathan supposed. Last night, after their guests had gone home, they'd put the dishes in the washer and slowly, expertly made love for hours as only couples who've been together years knew how to do. Last night Dan had smelled of almond cold cream soap, chocolate, Brie, and lust.

"You'll be all right in London."

"I always feel as though I'm missing an arm or leg or something when I'm away from you too long."

"It's only a month."

"I don't want to go," Dan said. He still held him, continued to nuzzle against his neck. The kit began to fall and Jonathan let it drop.

"You'll feel better about it when you're on the plane. You know how excited you get once you're flying."

Dan pulled back, still holding Jonathan, staring at his face. His own face was so familiar Jonathan wondered if he could ever forget it. Dan was tanned, of course—honey tan—they both were. His left eyebrow had two long bright orange hairs sticking out of the surrounding chestnut like little signal flags. Dan's long nose and forehead were slightly freckled, even through his tan; his forelock and mustache tinged with vague touches of gray that almost seemed blond. All the rest was the same face that Jonathan had looked at for

almost a decade: the country boy urbanized, sophisticated, grown up.

“What are you thinking?” Dan asked.

“How good-looking you are.”

“Still am, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think we’ll always look twenty-seven years old to each other?” Dan asked.

Jonathan wanted to say no, that Dan no longer looked twenty-seven, that he looked his age: thirty-five. Dan had grown older and Jonathan liked that. Dan’s self-assured smirk had mellowed into a wry mature grin; his bright arrogant look was only occasionally present, replaced by a trusting, comfortable gaze.

“I suppose,” Jonathan said. “Go pack the shaving kit before you forget.”

“Aren’t we going to have a big parting scene?”

“Here? I thought we’d save that for the seaplane dock.”

“You’re coming? I thought you’d be busy composing.”

“I’ll come.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I’ll come,” Jonathan said. “I’ll weep and wave a tearstained handkerchief as the seaplane flies off into the sunset. It will be very touching, terribly domestic.”

Dan stared, then laughed.

“You’re nuts.” A quick hug, then he picked up the shaving kit and went to the bathroom to fill it with toiletries.

So, he had known where it was all the while. He’d thought that Jonathan would let him go away without saying a private good-bye.

Jonathan checked through the packed bags anyway, hearing Dan happily whistling in the bathroom.

“Don’t forget the allergy pills,” Jonathan called out. The bags were well packed: there was even a pocket-size chessboard. Evidently Dan wasn’t taking chances on boring flight companions. Jonathan zipped the bags, brought them outside, plumped them into

the little red-and-white Radio Flyer wagon, then went around to the front deck, gathered up all his papers, and carried them inside.

“It’s getting late,” he called, then went out again. The day was beginning to cool. It seemed slightly gray in the west, where he could sometimes see weather approaching them a week in advance.

“How about a drink for the road?” Dan asked. He had his flight bag slung over his shoulder and held a bottle of vodka.

“Don’t you take Valiums for the plane?”

“Oh, all right.” Dan came out onto the deck without the bottle. He threw his free arm around Jonathan’s shoulder. “When I come back you’ll have the whole score done, won’t you?”

“I hope.”

“I do too. I was thinking last night how this would be a good thing, my going off like this alone for a month. I’ll be busy. You’ll be busy. You know how much I hate to see the summer end. I’ll come back to glorious autumn. You’ll be done. We can be together again, and I won’t have to apologize all the time.”

Dan kept talking as they pulled the wagon along the wooden plank boardwalks that encircled and formed the only paths in their autoless community. Jonathan kept his free arm around Dan’s waist, his fingers hooked into Dan’s belt loop, as they descended the incline, leveled off, passed houses he saw every day, telephone poles, trees he’d remembered blooming wildly earlier in the summer.

Everything Dan said made sense. He understood that Jonathan now needed privacy and solitude to do his work; that when he returned the pressure would be off, and they would be able to deal with each other again completely, without the score between them all the time. Look at me, Jonathan wanted to say to the few people they passed, look at me and my handsome, mature lover, who understands me better than I do myself at times.

The seaplane was already at the dock. Someone took the bags off the wagon and placed them in the rear compartment of the big metal and fiberglass craft. Dan dropped his bag onto the seat, then stood on the pier. Two passengers were already belted in. The pilot was talking to a local woman. The dock was otherwise empty.

“Now if I don’t come back,” Dan began, “you know where the

will is. I keep the safety deposit box keys at the bottom of the safe. All my papers are in order. My family won't give you any trouble. They're provided for."

"And I'll have you cremated and scatter your ashes on Forty-second Street."

"I could *die*, you know," Dan said, suddenly offended.

"And I could get married and sire three bouncing babies."

"In a month?"

"Well, I could make a start."

"Would you name a boy for me?"

"Sure. Dan Two. Or better, Dead Dan the Second."

"I once dreamed you died," Dan said. "Remember when you were in the hospital? I dreamed they gave you the wrong stuff, instead of anesthetic, and when I came to visit you the next morning they had a sheet over you. I felt so awful. Sort of like being in a really bad Lana Turner movie, where she mopes and wears lots of black chiffon. Then I tried to picture my life without you. And you know what? I couldn't. I'd open a kitchen cabinet looking for paper towels, and you'd be there, winking at me. I'd open a closet for a pair of pants, and you'd be standing there, shaking your head at my choice."

"Stop," Jonathan said.

"Even in the dream I couldn't begin to think of what I'd do without you."

"Stop! You're not going to die in a plane crash, and I'm not going to die either. At least not for a while. Go to London."

He kissed Dan.

"Go to London. Get rich and famous."

The pilot got in, then Dan. Jonathan unhooked the dock line and the seaplane turned with the tide and floated parallel to the dock, out into the mainstream of the bay, very slowly. Dan looked out his window, but didn't wave, as the pilot revved up the motor. The plane began to slide forward, its pontoons skimming the sun-shattered water. Then it began to lift slightly, tilting from side to side a bit, and finally it rose, leveled off, swerved slightly, and flew over the bay.

Jonathan remained on the dock until the seaplane was a speck against the darkening sky. Then he walked back to his house. Turning into his yard, he noticed the neighbors' deckchairs were out. He'd thought the Lockes were gone for the season. Hadn't they closed up the house last week? Maybe not.

It was too hot to work on the deck, so he made himself a vodka tonic, and sipped it slowly, listening to some medieval music on the cassette deck. Then it began to cloud over, and he felt exhausted. The bedroom seemed suddenly abandoned without Dan's carelessly thrown clothing everywhere. Jonathan felt very at sea for a minute.

"I'm a lucky man to have a lover like Dan," he said to himself. Then he fell asleep.