



THE SINGER

Bel Mooney



Bel Mooney has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of these works.

THE SINGER

Three days into their holiday the pattern was established, and George MacGregor felt no worse for the predictability. It gave Miriam the sense of security she craved. The hotel resort complex was not what he would have chosen, with its artificial 'village', purpose-built church, and illuminated paths, but she had read about it in a magazine and thought it seemed safe.

It did not occur to him to ask what danger his wife might have encountered in a less expensive place, although he leaned towards a white room - a modest rental on one of the smaller islands. The smell of grilled meat and lemon

juice from the cheap taverna a walk away, and the friendliness of recognition: *Kalispera* and warmth in brown eyes, even after one night. Red wine as cheap and rough as the gutrot he recalled from student days when he could stay awake all night and make love at dawn, dreaming of revolution. His imagination relished the idea of mosquito bites and no air conditioning and the veil of sensuality of sweat on a July night....

In truth, he would soon have grown testy with the discomfort.

‘When you reach a certain age you want a bit of luxury’, Miriam said.

‘Why not?’, he replied.

And booked the *Minotaur Palace*, to please her, because so often now he recalled his father’s death at 54, and thought, with terror, that therefore he was living on borrowed time - two years off it now - and must not deny his wife of thirty years anything. There was so much to make up for.

Miriam’s habit of going to bed early had begun when they were in their thirties and the expected children had not materialised. George was an architect then, his dreams and energy still intact. If someone had told him that in his mid-fifties he would settle for early retirement and an up-market package holiday in Crete to celebrate, he would have

laughed.

Yet you get used to things, he thought, as he sat with Miriam in the 'taverna' that was part of the complex, and surveyed a menu which showed a bizarre confusion of Greek, French and Italian food, at prices the mainly middle-aged or elderly clientele could easily tolerate. Each evening they ate here and although George was rarely hungry he settled his stomach on his thighs as he looked across at Miriam, knowing she would murmur, 'I wonder what it will be tonight.' Then purse her lips, and study the mysterious combinations of food, before deciding on the prawns in ouzo followed by tagliatelli or veal marsala (never any other variation) leaving him to experiment with all the other dishes, feeling fatter than ever, night after night.

As soon as the meal was finished he would escort Miriam to their over-priced 'Club bungalow room with sea view', and say goodnight, leaving her to take off her makeup and don her nightdress alone. Then he would stroll back through the flowery paths to the taverna, where the singer was about to begin her set. This was the pattern. As he walked he was aware of his heartbeat tip-tapping its presence in time to the increased pace of his feet, as he approached the bar, the *raki*, and the songs. After the first night he spent the days thinking of this moment - although (he thought guiltily) Miriam would never understand.

‘The chief problem with marriage’, he once said to Alex Graham, one of the partners, when they were full of bordeaux at a conference and his habitual reserve fell, ‘...the worst thing about it - is bedtime’. Suddenly it seemed a matter of huge importance to confide in this dapper man who made office blocks his speciality.

Alex made a snorting noise and put his glass down quickly. ‘That would seem to be a sublime statement of the obvious, George’, he smiled.

‘No - I don’t mean *that*’, said George, who needed to be understood, ‘It’s just - well, Miriam - she’s exhausted by ten-fifteen, while I like to... you know, stay up.’

‘Don’t we all!’ laughed Alex Graham.

George was crestfallen. He wanted his colleague to understand the loneliness of the house at midnight, and his need for ... what?

Perhaps it was what he sought when he returned to sit watching the cabaret singer. Each night she slipped out of a side door in the small square open to the stars, her accompanist took his place at the keyboard, and they performed songs in English, French and Italian. No German, not on this island. Eleni, she was called, a heavily-made up

young woman with a tough, beautiful face, who shimmered in the distance - each night in a different dress of clinging silk or jersey, slung about with chains of gold which matched her heavy hair. George guessed her to be twenty four, although she might have been Helen of Troy - born before time to cause trouble. There seemed something ruthless about her which made his heart palpitate.

George stared, mesmerised by her undulating movements as the strong but pretty voice wailed out, 'I Will Always Love You', and ' My Way', complete with phonetic mistakes. Each night he stared fixedly at her, yet rose before her closing number so that he would not have to see the tables cleared, the lights brighten and the singer go home, just like anybody else. Lying awake beside his sleeping wife, he would imagine Eleni's perfect body beneath those dresses, and allow himself his coarsest fantasies.

Miriam was excited tonight, and dressed carefully in beige linen. It was the once-weekly 'greek evening', when the diners would be entertained by six young greek dancers, in pristine folk costumes (changed three times), performing dances whose ancient, stamping rhythms spoke of passion and mortality - old truths, old rituals that lay buried beneath

the foundations of the international hotel, on the tourist island, yet had the power to haunt its wealthy guests like dreams.

But on the Greek night there would be no singer. George felt like a child whose expected gift has not materialised.

They queued at the buffet, piling their plates with dolmades, souvlakia, rice and salad, then ate in silence as the white wine warmed in its bucket, and George craved *raki*. He looked across the table and smiled at his wife, noticing how tired and grey she looked, barely able to remember the dark haired girl she once was.

The thought came unbidden - that some wives let themselves go. Not that it mattered; George MacGregor was one of those men who keep wives and women apart in the imagination. The singer - now there was a woman.....

If only he could see Eleni swaying later, he would not mind Miriam's faded prettiness, or the silence which fell between them like snow. He felt cheated by these lithe boys and girls, clapping and twirling, and the five piece band they called an 'orchestra'.

He wanted to fill in one of the request forms that

were given out to each table, and ask for 'Help Me Make It Through The Night', watching her perfect mouth in the distance and imagining it kissing him, helping him make it through the long night when Miriam breathed beside him - and he lay beside her aching because it had all gone. He would allow his hand to travel down and hold himself, very gently, thinking about Eleni so intently his thoughts had the power to rouse his torpid flesh, even if briefly. Then, deliberately, he would move on to images he would not have shared with anyone - of her bending over him, angry with him, punishing him for his greed, his pervasive disappointment, his fear of death, and for not loving his wife. He deserved to be lacerated with scarlet claws.

The 'Minotaur Palace Beach Orchestra' consisted of two guitarists, a drummer, and a singer who took up a saxophone or flute from time to time. He was in early middle age, yet lean and dark-haired, with a smooth manner, made almost camp by oddly accented English.

'So you see, liddies an' dennelmen, how the yowng dauncers - our balley - perfowm this old dance now spekially for you'.

George disliked him, without knowing why. He suspected that when it was over, behind the scenes, he tore off his blue waistcoat, lit a lethal black cigarette, and cursed the tourists who made him perform with that permanent smile on his face. Yet, he thought, why should I despise him -

or any of them - for being false?. The price of honesty would be too high.

A little to their left, but forward on a table near the band, a young woman sat alone. George noticed her hair at first, because he could not see her face; thick chestnut brown it fell undulating to her waist. Occasionally he saw her raise a hand to touch it, patting it into place - not so much a gesture of neatness and control, as of love. It was astonishing hair, and she knew it. After about twenty minutes, during which Miriam did not take her eyes off the dancers, George was consumed by an irresistible curiosity to see the woman's face. He thought she must be as beautiful as her hair, and yet her pink checked dress seemed oddly girlish and old-fashioned from behind, even to he who understood little of such matters. And she was alone. For George it was inconceivable that a beautiful woman, a woman like Eleni for example, should be alone. He watched the back of her head with the same intensity he normally devoted to the singer, and noticed how the waiters treated this woman with extra courtesy.

At last the final dance whirled and stamped to its close, and the six young people bowed, and smiled, and waved their handkerchiefs as they trooped off.

'Oh, that was lovely!' Miriam said.

'Dancing for the tourists,' George replied.

‘Yes, but what does it matter, dear? The dances are authentic, and so are the costumes, so....Well, I liked it, anyway. Don’t say you were bored?’

Just then he saw that the young woman in pink was busily writing on a piece of paper, shoulders hunched so that the hair fell in waves over the table - as a pupil might hide a test from a neighbour. Then she summoned a waiter, who bent over her for a few minutes, nodding, before taking the note and moving towards the front. George saw him approach the leader of the band, who shook his head for a split second, before giving a slight shrug. The waiter moved back to his place, exchanging a glance with a colleague, and the solitary woman appeared to push her chair back a little, as if in anticipation. Something was about to happen; George could not explain his dread.

‘An’ now, liddies and dennelmen, we have a leedle surprise - becawse one of our guests is going to dance for us, liddies and dennelmen - a spekial greek dance that is her favvrite. So plis welcome - Maria Fanouki!’

The woman rose, and turned to move around her table, as a smattering of surprised applause clattered from the corners of the room. Then George saw with embarrassment, that the young woman was not attractive, as he had expected, but very plain. Her small face was thin and pale, dominated not just by the mass of hair that

suddenly seemed inappropriate, but also by the slightly pointed, old-fashioned glasses she pushed back with a decisive gesture. The next shock came when she moved towards the empty dance floor. For there was something wrong with one of her legs, so that she lurched rather than walked, dragging one foot behind her.

‘My God, she’s crippled’, whispered Miriam, leaning forward, ‘What’s she going to do?’

‘I think she’s going to - *dance*, for God’s sake,’ he hissed.

Miriam’s face creased. ‘Oh dear’.

The leader took up his flute and the band began to play a Greek tune, and the woman Maria started her dance, staring into the space in front of her with concentration as she moved her feet in traditional steps, her body swaying - not with easy, natural rhythm like the singer - but with the awkward clumsiness of her disability. The magnificent hair swung out behind her as she moved - her sole claim to beauty and grace. The piping notes of the flute mocked the ungainly movements of the woman who needed to perform. George knew that each instrumentalist in the ‘orchestra’, and indeed each person in the open air room, watching as they all were with patronising intentness, was willing the performance to be over, overwhelmed by a collective pity that was almost unendurable.

Then it was, indeed, finished - and relief rippled in

applause. The woman turned to the bandleader and said something, but he shook his head.

‘I think she wants to do another one!’, whispered Miriam.

‘Now, liddies and dennelman, wasn’t that something? Wasn’t that something, liddies and dennelmen? Tankyou, tankyou, Maria.....An’ now, we gif you some music - some seexties music to dance, liddies and dennelman’.

Maria dragged herself back to her table, looking faintly annoyed, as if cheated of something she had the right to expect. George closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them as the band began to play a medley and couple by couple, the diners took to the floor.

‘I think it’s time for bed, darling’, said Miriam, ‘Do you want to stay?’

‘No, I’ve had enough. I think I’ll turn in too’, said George.

‘Oh good’, she said.

Miriam tucked her arm in his as they walked along the flowery paths, lit by concealed lights by which moths jagged helplessly up and down. The air was warm, with a scent of jasmine.

‘What on earth do you think that woman was doing?’, he asked.

‘Dancing, of course’, said Miriam.

‘Yes, but...God, it was embarrassing, wasn’t it?’

‘In a way. But you know - why shouldn’t she?’

‘You were horrified, Miriam!’

‘I know, but thinking about it now I suppose I admire her. Why should it only be beautiful people who get up to show off? She wanted to do it enough, and she did...’

‘Oh come on - how can you approve of such a spectacle?’ he asked sharply.

Miriam withdrew her arm. ‘The trouble with you, George’, she said, with unaccustomed tartness, ‘Is that you have this fixed idea about women. If they’re beautiful they can do anything they want, while the rest of us have to rub along in the shadows, don’t we?’

‘I haven’t the faintest idea what you mean’, he said. They walked the rest of the way in silence.

The next day they went shopping in the village, and bought honey, a small tin of olive oil, an earthenware dish patterned with olives and green leaves, and a misty blue glass ashtray - all of which, George pointed out, they could buy at home. The old ladies in black beckoned them to buy tablecloths, woven cushion covers, mats patterned with dolphins and plates bearing stick-like greek warriors. Miriam was tempted but he told her they mustn’t weigh their baggage with pointless souvenirs.

‘But...being on holiday...Isn’t shopping for things a part of it?’, she complained.

‘Why?’

‘Just doing things you don’t normally do. Away. You must know’.

Her face took on that pained expression he knew too well. It told him she was disappointed, that this was not as she hoped it would be, and that it never would be.

Her gift, too, had failed to materialise, so that the crowded streets, the tinkle of brass wind-chimes, the tourists buying trinkets, only served as a frame for the terrible lack. The sun punished them both.. Miriam’s head was lowered in shadow now, beneath unravelling straw.

‘Yes. I’m sorry, love’, he said faintly, as sweat ran down his side and soaked into his shirt.

That night, and the next two, they returned to their pattern. Miriam went to bed, and he returned to the taverna to hear the singer. ‘Je ne regrette rien’, she sang, and ‘La Vie en Rose’ , requested by a table of French guests, who talked as she performed. Eleni wore black with a plunging neckline, and the next night a scarlet jump suit under which, George decided, she wore nothing, because no lines of underwear could be discerned, although he squinted and tried. He knew each movement her body would make, and the exquisite arabesques her arms traced as she gesticulated

elation and despair, according to the song. 'Volare' was jaunty, 'Stormy Weather', heavily tragic.... It was all false, he knew that, as artificial as the dancers in their pristine costumes, and the 'village', and the bonhomie of the orchestra leader. Yet he was addicted now, and the singer was his shot:: parroting ersatz emotions in foreign languages - yet delivering to him the instant high of all his fantasies.

On their last night Miriam was sad. Smelling slightly of anti-mosquito lotion, she clung to his arm as they walked to the taverna and complained that she did not want to return to 'reality'.

'Nor me,' said George.

He ordered a bottle of champagne in honour of the occasion, and they clinked glasses. 'Here's to...er... getting away from it all!', he said.

'And the next visit!' she beamed, then reached a hand across the table with a smile that pierced him, 'Darling George....thank you for a lovely time.'

'There, there', he said, patting her hand.

The greek 'champagne' was light and verging on sweetness, but he emptied his glass at one toss while Miriam sipped demurely. He poured another glass, and again drank greedily. The knowledge that he would soon watch the singer for the last time made him suddenly desperate. As the alcohol took hold he felt dizzy for a moment, and turned

impatiently to summon the waiter. It wasn't that he was hungry, simply that he wanted the meal to be over so that he could take Miriam 'home', and return to watch Eleni. Tonight he would request, 'I Will Always Love You', again, and pretend that she was singing only to him.

Miriam talked of her childhood, memories flooding as the champagne made her light-headed. His responses were brief and barely needed; her nostalgia was self-sufficient and as isolating as his dreams. Then she progressed to when they met, and giggled as she reminded him of their first night together - when he tried to be gallant and leave, and she insisted he stay.

'Wasn't I naughty?', she whispered flirtatiously.

George closed his eyes for a moment, on the pretext of leaning back in his chair to loosen the belt which dug into his rolls of flesh, and tried hard to remember. Was it really like that? Were they as hungry for each other then as now they were for shopping or food? Trying to summon remembered images of affection he saw, in the red darkness behind his own eyes, nothing but vacancy. The effort of trying to fill it made his heart beat faster in panic. Had it really been like that?

He signed the bill at last, and pushed back his chair as usual. Miriam half rose too, then sat down decisively. 'No,' she said, 'I don't know why I've got into this habit of going

to bed early. I'm not really tired. It's our last night too...so for once I'm going to stay up and have a nightcap with you!

George felt his mouth slacken. 'But we're travelling tomorrow, dear, and we have to get up quite early...', he began feebly. Her mouth was set into a little stubborn line which belied her habitually meek expression.

'It doesn't matter', she said, 'For once I'm going to put you first. Now - why don't you order your usual drink, and I'll have a...a cocktail.....and we'll listen to the music together?'

There was nothing to be done. George gestured to the waiter and gave the order. The drinks came, and still they had not spoken. The accompanist strolled in front of the tables to sit at his keyboard and George stared fixedly at the door through which - any minute now - Eleni would come.

She was wearing another all-in-one cat suit, this one a disturbing flesh-like beige with a high neck slashed to her bosom. The silky jersey fabric clung to her breasts and hips, and once again George was convinced she was wearing no underwear. At the thought, a fine dew beaded his forehead, and he closed his eyes for a moment, feeling the room lean as if they were at sea. The faint roaring in his ears was the wind over unspeakable salty depths.

'Are you all right, dear?' Miriam whispered.

He opened his eyes to her puzzled expression.

‘Just a bit hot’, he said, unable to repress a slight shudder, as a faint breeze lifted Miriam’s salt-and pepper curls.

Eleni was clicking her fingers and wiggling as she launched into ‘Fever’, and Miriam settled back in her chair, beating on the tablecloth in time.

‘Ev’rybaaaady’s gotter fevah...Daht ees suhmtun we-ee all know.....’

Yes, thought George, the fever did start long ago - the slow burn that is blackening the edges of my vision and singing my hair only now, when it is too late. I caught it even before I met Miriam, and carried it in my blood for thirty years, infecting my life wherever I went and whatever I did. Miriam’s memories of passion are not mine. This is all there is.

The singer sang song after song with such gusto a stranger would never know she performed the same favourites night after night. George listened in a trance. Then a party of four rose from a table in the middle of the room, and through the space they vacated, George noticed a familiar figure, sitting alone, her hair cascading over a white dress. He saw the tension in her shoulders, and waited for the hand to reach up and touch her own hair. It did. There was something excruciatingly painful to him in that gesture that he did not understand. Yet needed to. As the singer

worked through her repertoire he ceased to listen, but closed his eyes again - as if in appreciation - while he concentrated. What was it? Why did the bizarre confidence that had driven that woman to her feet to dance bother him so?

He noticed Miriam filling in a request form. The glance she gave him was almost flirtatious. 'I'm asking for a song just for you, George!'

'Oh - don't' he said.

'Why not, dear?'

'Because.....' He heaved air into his lungs and collected himself. '.....Oh....nothing.... I just didn't think you liked this music very much.'

'Of course I like it! It's quite romantic really...'

The waiter came and took the slip of paper away, dropping it on the keyboard as the singer came to the end of the Piaf standard requested each night by middle-aged people of all nationalities whose lives were full of regret, despite the veneer of bravado gained from money and alcohol. Eleni sent her smile around the room, as she picked up Miriam's note - and this curiously intimate communication between his grey wife and the golden creature who had glittered in his distance all the week filled George with nameless dread.

The singer cupped the microphone with both hands as

if it were a lover. She announced, 'Now, we sing for you a speshial song, asked for by.... (she frowned to make out the name)...Meeriam, for her housband George. Pleeese - where eess George?'

He shrank down. Miriam put up a hand, laughing, then swooped her finger through the air to point at him. People turned round and smiled. He saw the young woman with long hair - Maria, he remembered her name now - swivel in her chair and fix steely eyes on him through her spectacles, as one hand rose automatically to her head. George met her gaze, and there was something in its bleakness told him the truth: she touched her own hair because she knew it was beautiful and yet knew too that she was the only person who would ever handle it in love. George sank his chin on his chest, staring down in despair at the fat that strained against his shirt buttons, then glanced up once more and saw the woman's eyes still fixed on him from across the taverna. Then she swung back, and fixed her stare on the singer once again, waiting.

We're both so hideous, he thought - and so utterly alone.

'George!' Miriam was saying happily, 'Stop looking so shy! I've chosen a Beatles song for you. You remember? We loved

the Beatles...”

‘When I find myself in times of trouble....’ the singer began, phrasing with delicate precision, so that George felt his eyes moisten at the old anthem of acceptance, ‘Let it Be’. There was no choice, he thought, but to let it be, let it be, as the singer went on with merciless repetition, like a knell calling him home.

‘...in my hour of darkness she is standing right in front of me.....’

The room appeared to be filling with smoke, billowing from the corners like dry ice. He felt Miriam take his hand and hold it, hot and sticky as it was, as the song went on.

‘...speaking words of wisdom., let it be ...’

Then there was applause, which he joined in, and it seemed he heard the sound of his own palms slapping together from a great distance.

‘Wasn’t that lovely?’ Miriam sighed.

There was a pause, until a cake was carried in by a posse of waiters, candles flaming. On cue Eleni sang ‘Happy Birthday’, as the table full of English people clapped, and the recipient affected surprise, and kissed the wife who clung to him as the remaining diners joined in the song.

‘Oh, *that’s* nice’, said Miriam wistfully, and George looked at her as if seeing her for the first time - looking from him to where the three sets of parents, late thirties, sat with

their children, and where the candles were blown out in one breath as soft laughter rose to the enormous sky.

The singer sang three more songs, or four, or five but George barely noticed; he viewed her through a long tunnel: a vision of light at the end, through the darkness. And she would surely turn and walk towards him, he thought, the world falling away into the abyss, and when they came together, and he could enter her, he would know at last what it meant to be savaged, to be consumed in flames until there was nothing left.

'Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away....'

Normally he would have left by now, but Miriam was there and everything different.

'...Now I need a place to hide away...'

There were only a few people remaining; the rest had slipped to their bungalows or hotel rooms before Eleni announced her last number, *'The Power of Love'*. She sang for George, and George alone, telling him that she was his lady and he was her man, and that whenever he reached for her she would do all that she.....

He gave a small, involuntary groan, but Miriam did not hear. *'Sometimes I am frightened but I'm ready to learn - the power of love..'* George sat transfixed, even as the singer bowed to the last applause, and slipped away through her door.

'I need another *raki*' he said hoarsely, motioning to the waiter.

'George, don't you think....'

Oh for God's sake, can't you see I need a drink?', he almost shouted, making Miriam cringe.

It was then that the solitary woman with long hair rose and shuffled over towards Eleni's accompanist, who sat at the keyboard tidying his sheets of music.

She bent to speak to him, as the waiter plonked George's drink down with an air of faint disapproval, and George watched, fear heavy within his ribcage.

'Don't say she's going to dance again!', said Miriam, glad of the diversion, 'Mind you, if she is, you have to hand it to her in the courage stakes!'

The musician looked surprised for a moment, then nodded and smiled. He rose, unhooked the microphone from the stand and handed it to her, pulling up a chair and placing it just in front of his keyboard.

'That peculiar girl's going to sing', hissed Miriam.

'Dear God - no!', muttered George, desperately.

'Well, she *might* have a wonderful voice...'

At that moment the lights around the edge of the dining area were turned up so that the waiters could see to clear - and Eleni came back out through the door, drawing on a cigarette. George stared at the singer. In the light he could

see she was much, much older than he had guessed, sharp lines etched each side of her nose giving her face a hawk-like, almost cruel quality. How fierce she was, forbidding even - someone who had been around, thought George, exulting in the confirmation of his private fantasy.

The music began, plangent and slow: the unmistakable strains of a Greek folk song, and the woman Maria began to sing in her chair, her hands like claws around the microphone. Her voice was reedy and tuneless, and yet she increased its volume after the first few bars, and even moved her hips slightly on her chair, as if aping the singer who stood still and watched.

‘Oh dear’, whispered Miriam.

Embarrassment crackled about the room; diners and waiters alike stared fixedly ahead, as if to catch another’s eye might release the mockery.

‘This is so awful - I can’t believe she doesn’t realise she can’t sing’, whispered Miriam, leaning across the table.

‘Shhh’, he said, as the iron band tightened around his chest.

It was intolerable, this sound; George felt hatred rise like bile - loathing the terrible, oblivious ego, the damaged selfhood, that was driving away the memory of his singer’s sweet sounds.

Eleni finished her cigarette, and ground it underfoot, never taking her eyes from the disabled woman. Then she

smiled, and began to sing too, unamplified but strong and clear, leading the thin tuneless voice back to the right notes. She stood and nodded her head to the traditional rhythm as she sang, as you might encourage a child, and yet there was nothing patronising about her help, nor did the woman Maria appear to resent it. They were like two friends, singing along, and it made the audience relax.

The song ended, Eleni led the applause, then took a few paces towards the amateur, kissing her tenderly on her cheek. Gently, she raised her to her feet and led her back to her original table, sitting down herself and bending her head in quiet conversation. Her laugh was low and tender..

Then George McGregor was dazzled by light which flared from an explosion deep within his chest. In that last moment he saw that the truth was there at last. And it could not be borne - that his singer was *kind*.

Eleni was kind.

And it is kindness which can break the heart.



© Bel Mooney