

# Sunlight

**Brian W.** •Aldiss

The sunlight came through the jalousie and spilled itself in bars on the floorboards. Cyril Jones came from the shower, wrapped in a red towel, to stand amid the bars of sun and dry himself. The noises of the café below and of the street reached his ears.

He moved slowly. He was in no hurry. He powdered himself and then dressed, putting on his old white chinos and a clean white shirt. Sitting on the edge of his unmade bed, he assumed socks and sandals.

His room was far from luxurious. It contained, besides the bed, an ottoman covered in striped cloth, with a sausage cushion and a tassel, a brass chest, a mirror hanging tarnished on the wall, and a small circular table, on which stood a radio, with a cane-bottomed chair beside it. In a cupboard in one corner hung a few clothes and a battered linen hat.

When he was dressed, Cyril Jones combed his sparse hair. Unlocking his door, he went onto the landing, turned, relocked the door, and slowly descended the worn wooden stairs. He emerged from the passageway beside the café into bright sunlight, and stood there for a moment, adjusting to the brightness and the crowds in the street.

He ambled slowly to his left, past the shops and market stalls, avoiding contact with the people there, some shouting their wares, some buying them, until he came to the market place. There, a few doors away from the mosque, was a small stationer's shop which sold European papers. From the rack, he selected a copy of the "Daily Telegraph" with the previous Monday's date, and paid the shopkeeper for it.

Retracing his steps, he returned to the café. The café owner had pulled out his awning and set up his tables an hour or more previously. Cyril Jones had heard from his bed the squeal of the awning rolling into place. He seated himself at one of the metal tables - the only one not occupied, the one reserved for him. He exchanged a greeting with the proprietor, his landlord.

In due course, the usual waiter, looking as downtrodden as ever, brought him a cup of coffee, a croissant, a glass of water, and a bowl of plain yoghurt. It was the same breakfast Cyril Jones always ordered.

He ate slowly, while looking idly about him. The other café tables were all occupied by men, men in conversation, most of them smoking, some eking out a cup of coffee. No one showed any inclination to

move. The landlord stood at his doorway, one shoulder resting against the door frame, his arms folded.

Cyril Jones sat back, crossed his legs, and began an idle read of his newspaper. He scanned the columns as if not greatly interested, turning the pages slowly, before going back and reading something on the front page. Then he sat and watched the people passing.

At length, he drew from his shirt pocket a letter which had arrived the previous day. It was, as he knew by the handwriting, from his mother. Taking his yoghurt spoon, he used the handle to slit open the envelope. He smoothed out the single sheet from within on the table top before commencing to read.

His mother's sciatica was troubling her. Otherwise, she was well. It was raining. Emily Watkins was due to call; her daughter had passed her exams. She still could not place exactly where Cyril was, although she knew it was somewhere to the south and left of the Black Sea, she said. Was it in the mountains? She noted that his company was defunct and grieved that he remained where he was, the last man to leave. She hoped he was well. Cyril Jones folded the letter again and stowed it carefully back in its envelope. He returned it to his shirt pocket.

Towards noon, he rose and paid the owner for his breakfast. The man was pleasant and showed his yellow teeth in a smile. The muezzin called his electric cry from the minaret of the nearby mosque.

Walking to his right, past the front of the café, Cyril Jones came after some metres to a flight of stone steps. Beggars were sitting here, sprawling amid their rags in the sunlight. He threw one of them a small coin. Ascending the steps, he entered higher ground where a fountain stood. The fountain was not working; it had not worked for as long as Cyril Jones had been in the city. He sat on a bench, from which he could look down on the curve of a sluggish river. Small boats sailed there. A steamer was moored by a quayside.

When his company was declared bankrupt, the other Europeans had left by that same boat, sailing downstream to the nearest airport.

After contemplating the view for a while, Cyril Jones rose, crossing to a kebab seller, whose wares he could smell from his bench. From this man he bought a skewer of roasted lamb and green peppers. He turned and walked more rapidly than usual back to his seat on the bench, anxious in case someone else took it. There he ate the kebab.

The kebab finished, he rose and walked, newspaper under one arm, back to the café where he lived. Going upstairs to his room, he locked himself in and stretched out on the bed for a siesta.

Some time later, he rose and, going to the mirror, combed his hair. He sat on the bed, yawning, and listened to faint strains of music coming from below. At this hour of day, the owner always put on music. Cyril Jones had never discovered if it came from the radio or from a CD player. Nor did he know why there was no music in the morning.

He walked round the room and adjusted the jalousie. A fly was buzzing about. He chased it with the rolled-up newspaper. Driving it into the bathroom, he shut the door on it. At length, he decided to go out for a stroll, now the heat of the day had lessened.

This time he took himself across town, to the area where a few municipal buildings stood. They were of a grander sort than elsewhere in town. Here stood the offices which included the post office, to which Cyril Jones's letters were addressed, and from which they were sent. He knew a cashier there who spoke fairly fluent English.

Behind this cluster of buildings stood a tennis court. The court was reasonably well maintained. Beside it was a stretch of green grass, a sure sign that it belonged to some authority, since it was watered by hose every morning.

Cyril Jones went through a gate and walked on the green grass. It pleased him to do this. Today, a woman was strolling on the grass, a tennis racket in her hand. She wore a grey recreation suit, tied with cord at her waist, and white trainers. Her hair was dark and curly. Freckles were sprinkled like pepper

on her cheeks.

When she and Cyril Jones came level, she asked him if he played tennis. She spoke in English. He said he used to play. She said she used to drink lemonade. A long silence ensued while he thought about her remark. Finally, he offered to buy her lemonade ; it seemed only polite.

They walked together to a nearby café she knew. He had not visited this café before. It was smart by local standards, rejoicing in a once-smart decor. They sat at a table on the pavement. The table was covered by a moderately clean cloth. She talked, with an accent that lent charm to her words. When she asked him what he was doing, he said he was planning to visit the cinema that evening.

At that, she fell silent. Eventually, she said she was living in a hotel. He asked her which hotel it was. She gestured vaguely to her right. She brought out a cigarette packet and offered him one. He took it. She produced a lighter; they lit up and smoked in silence. The silence was comfortable.

Eventually, he paid for the drinks and they parted.

He looked back once, but she had already turned a corner and disappeared. There was only sunlight on the stained pavements.

That evening, he visited the nearby cinema. A silly gangster film was showing. He tried to follow the dialogue, in order to improve his knowledge of the local language.

He slept poorly that night. Next morning, he showered, releasing the troublesome fly into his room, and went downstairs. After buying a newspaper, he sat at his table and made his usual leisurely breakfast. He took his mother's letter from his shirt pocket and read it over again. He must answer it today or tomorrow. He could not remember the name of Emily Watkins's daughter.

As he was sitting gazing at the street, the woman he had met on the previous day strolled up. She greeted him and took a chair at his table facing him. The men at the neighbouring tables stared at her.

This morning, she was wearing a pale blue blouse with a pair of grey trousers and sandals. She had no adornments, no earrings, no necklace. She produced a packet of cigarettes from her handbag and offered one to Cyril Jones. Accepting, he called over the proprietor and ordered the woman a coffee. The proprietor passed the order to the waiter and returned to prop up his doorway.

They drank and smoked. He told the woman of a news item he had seen in the paper. It was about a town in Surrey which was flooded in a storm. He had been born near there. She said she was from Denmark. When he remarked that her English was good, she replied that it was grammatical - in fact, she added, more grammatical than the English spoken by many Englishmen. She had not visited Surrey.

"I could move in with you, if you liked," she said.

He thought, before replying that he had only one bed in his room.

She said that that was okay.

Cyril Jones said there was also an ottoman.

She said that that was okay too.

So it was arranged.

Instead of taking his morning stroll, he escorted her upstairs to inspect the room. She appeared to like it. The sunlight lay in bars across the floor. He attacked the fly, which made the mistake of settling on a bare wall. He swatted it with his newspaper. She clapped her hands in applause, saying it was useless to be sentimental.

She went away, to return an hour or so later, carrying a small suitcase. She moved in. She had nothing complimentary to say about his arrangements; on the other hand, she had no complaints.

They lived together without quarrelling. The ottoman was not used. The owner tried to charge Cyril Jones a little more rent.

Every day, they went for walks together. One day, they walked all the way down to where the

steamer moored, and had lunch there, in a restaurant overlooking the river. They ordered fish, which proved to be tasteless. She mentioned that she had to get back to Denmark; someone was waiting for her in Copenhagen. But there was no hurry.

It was two days later that he went into the street and hailed a taxi for her. She kissed him goodbye and climbed into the vehicle with her case and her tennis racket. He gave her a wave, and then she was gone, her car swallowed up in dust and sunlight.

After his siesta, he fished in the brass chest and brought out a sheet of paper and an envelope. Taking them downstairs, he sat at a table and ordered a small raki. He began to write a note to his mother.

"All is well here," he wrote.