An excerpt from "Cambridge" by Susanna Kaysen

It was probably because I was so often taken away from Cambridge when I was young that I loved it as much as I did. I fell in love with the city, the way you fall in love with a person, and suffered during the many separations I endured.

In the summer before our October departure for England, the screen door to the backyard broke and had to be replaced. The new door had a hydraulic canister that hissed when it opened or closed instead of smacking, thump, thump, the way the old door had. I didn't like this. Neither did my cat, Pinch. Cats and children are conservative. Pinch would use the new door to go out of the house, but she refused to come in through it, and she'd sit by the front door waiting for someone to notice that she'd decided it was time to come home. After three weeks in England, I felt the same way: Okay, let's go home now. It's time to go home. But my parents, looking out their new, hydraulic door to England, didn't notice me, and like Pinch I had to sit there hoping and hoping.

For my father it was a kind of homecoming. He'd spent the war in London analyzing aerial reconnaissance photographs of German cities to pick targets for the Air Force. Midnights, he and his comrades stood on the roof of the townhouse where they were billeted and watched the bombs fall, heedless, twenty-two and abroad for the first time. The damask and mahogany hotels, the parks and the Embankment, the Rosetta Stone back from where it had been hiding from the Luftwaffe—now he could show all this, his former kingdom, to my mother.

My mother was preoccupied with the oven. She'd been forewarned that there wasn't any heat; nobody had mentioned the oven. The burners worked, but the oven was in a coma. She enshrouded a whole chicken in aluminum foil (aluminium in England) and roasted it over the

coals in the living room fireplace in an attempt to make a nice dinner—a nice dinner being something other than a greasy chop or noodles (this was the era before noodles became pasta). It was a failure. It was a poached chicken, pallid, wet, raw in places. The oven, the oven. When was my father going to get somebody to explain or fix the oven?

My father had gone to France for the day to get us a car. It was a tiny English car named a Hillman. How or why it had emigrated to France was unknown. He went with a friend who was a French count, who had found us the car. Why my parents had a friend who was a French count and how they had finagled him into finding them an English car in France were not questions I asked at the age of seven. The car, my father, and the count all appeared at our London doorstep just as my mother was unveiling the disastrous chicken she'd made as a thank-you dinner for the count.

But they were young and full of life and they went out for dinner instead, leaving me with the somber Swedish nanny who made noodles on the stovetop.

Nanny is a misnomer. Frederika was my mother's aide-de-camp. She came from an aristocratic Swedish family. Her father had dropped the von in solidarity with Socialist ideals. She had little experience of stovetop noodles, either eating or cooking them. It turned out when she came to live with us in Cambridge that she was a marvelous cook, but she needed six fresh herring or a whole side of salmon or a handful of cardamom and a long twisty ginger root to do her Swedish magic. Barely ten years after the war, England didn't supply this sort of thing. Noodles and candy, with the occasional tough hunk of mutton, was what was on offer.

She was only eighteen. I thought of her as a grownup, but she was a kid away from home for the first time, just like me. Our family must have been a puzzle to her. Moody. We were all liable to black moods, which we tried to cover up with not much success. My father was best at it

because he was always busy. If he wasn't going to France to get hold of a car, he was dashing around London revisiting war glories and teaching at the London School of Economics and on weekends packing my mother into the tiny car to go on expeditions while Frederika and I stayed home with the baby and squabbled about the toilet.

The English toilet was a nightmare. Every day the toilet convinced me—though I needed no more convincing—that we absolutely had to go home.

At home, in Cambridge, we lived in a three-story wooden Victorian house with a square backyard where an old willow hung its whips for me to catch and tear off. The grass grew an inch a day in June and in January the wind blew around the frames of the double-hung windows with a cheerful rattle. My bathroom had a magnificent claw-foot bathtub fifteen inches longer than I was and my parents' had a blue-tiled shower, and gallons of hot American water gushed out of both of them. We even had a third, extra toilet tucked under the front stairs beside the coat closet, in a tiny room my mother had painted dark red "to emphasize the coziness."

In England we lived in a skinny four-story brick coffin set upright on one short end with a skinny, long, coffin-shaped cobblestoned yard in back that contained some scratchy yews and a million spiders, though once I saw a ball of excitement that might have been a hedgehog. Each floor had two rooms: one that faced the street and one that faced the yard. Some rooms had a fireplace equipped with what looked like the inside of a toaster: the gas fire. The kitchen was in the basement, an arrangement that made no sense unless you had servants. Also in the basement, down a dark hall that felt longer than the house (I knew that was impossible, but still), the sole toilet squatted in porcelain malevolence. Near my parents' bedroom was a tub in what was literally a bathroom, where you couldn't pee, though I'm sure my father used the sink.

The terrible toilet was big and was mounted on a wooden plinth. I could barely get onto it, and once on it, I worried I'd fall into it because the seat was so wide. The room was a twelve-foot-high sliver only inches broader than the toilet. Its clammy walls pressed in on anyone who sat there. Up above, mounted like a moon on the ceiling, was the flushing mechanism: a box of water with a chain and pull that wasn't reliable. Sometimes when I pulled it, having made the little hop I needed to reach it, it didn't move. Maybe it was on strike against Americans, like the useless oven. The room smelled of old pee and old plaster and old damp.

Constipation. Psychoanalysis unnecessary.

Frederika got mad at me for using the chamberpot to pee in at night.

"Are you going to clean that?" she asked.

"It's just pee," I said.

"I haff to clean that," she pointed out.

I loved Frederika almost enough to use the terrible toilet.

It was a long trek in the middle of the night, down past my parents' bedroom and the living room to the dank corridor and the prison cell of the toilet room. Some nights I made the whole trip in good faith and then, faced with the plinth and the rank odor, trudged back upstairs to use the pink-flowered chamberpot that lived under my bed. Then Frederika would get mad again. It might take her a couple of days to find it, though.

Then: "I saw vot you did."

"But, Frederika," I was inspired to say once, "Why are the chamberpots there if we're not supposed to use them?"

"From olden times," she said. "Now, you must use the toilet."

"Okay," I said. I meant it but I didn't always do it.

Things improved when I was sent to school.

My parents had found a coeducational day school, wildly progressive for England. By American standards—that is, by my standards—it was out of *Oliver Twist,* a book my father had given me when we arrived in England. It did have pretty good toilets, which halved my visits to the bad toilet at home. The Oliver Twist parts were uniforms (pleated plaid skirts for girls, gray flannel shorts for boys, gray flannel jackets for both), lining up for everything (they called this a crocodile), including going to the toilet, speaking only when spoken to, and reciting in unison a litany named the Times Table.

Every morning the same ritual.

"Two times one is two.

"Two times two is four.

"Two times three is six."

And on up to ten times ten. When twenty-five seven-year-olds chanted this all at once it made no sense. It took me a week to figure out that it was English, I mean, that the words were in the language we shared, or pretended to share or, in fact, didn't share.

I asked my father what it was all about.

"Daddy," I said, "what does <u>times</u> mean?"

"Times?" He looked at me. "Times?"

"They say it. Two times two is six."

"Two times two is four," he said.

"Okay. But what does it mean?"

"It's like addition. You can do that. Two plus two is four, right?"

"I guess." I'd never been very interested in addition.

“It’s just another way of saying that. Two PLUS two is the same as two TIMES two.”

“What does it mean, though?” I asked.

“It means, Take two two times, and you get four.”

“So two times three is like two plus three?”

“No,” said my father. “It’s two and two and two. Two times three. So it’s six.”

“But when are these times?” I asked.

“Why don’t you talk to the teacher,” my father said. “Ask her. She will be better at explaining it for you.”

“You’re not supposed to talk,” I said.

“Look, it’s just a different way of talking about addition. It’s a shortcut.”

“You said that. The different way. So why not just do addition?”

“It’s quicker,” said my father.

“It isn’t quicker if I can’t do it,” I said.

“When you’re learning it, it doesn’t seem quicker. But once you get the hang of it, multiplication is faster.”

“What’s multiplication?” I asked.

“Times,” my father said. “Times is multiplication.” He sighed.

“I’m going to stick with addition,” I said.

I decided to stick with addition mostly from petulance. Addition was Cambridge. Times, multiplication, whatever it was, was England, and I knew which side of the Atlantic was mine.

Arithmetic and language affected me in different ways. Arithmetic had a stately rhythmic progression that I could appreciate. But something about the static truth of numbers hurt my brain. Numbers felt sharp. Words felt elastic and springy. Language had an unpredictable

quicksilver quality, saying one thing but meaning something else, varying from place to place but maintaining (against all evidence) that it was the same language. Thinking about words was ticklish and amusing. It was also easy, as if they fit into slots and patterns prepared for them in my mind. Numbers, on the other hand, bounced right out of my mind. The longer we stayed in England, the more words I accumulated for my internal dictionary of synonyms: lorry and truck, queue and line, lavatory and toilet—and the last two even had second synonyms on the English side of the column, crocodile and loo. A sweet was a candy. Jumper meant sweater. Ra-ther meant Yeah! Within a few months I'd acquired an English accent and vocabulary. I never acquired the multiplication tables. Ten was obvious; I could do that one. And something about five was memorable as well. The rest of it left no trace.

The accent was camouflage. I was shamed into it by Miss Gravel, the second-grade teacher.

I was a dunce at calculation, but I was far ahead of the others in reading. Embarrassingly ahead, I guess, if you were Miss Gravel representing the British Empire's side of the Who Can Read Best in Second Grade competition. The class was still at the sounding-out-words stage. Some of them would hesitate and fumble over things as simple as another or because. I was reading The Wind in the Willows and Oliver Twist in bed when I should have been asleep.

"Reading aloud," Miss Gravel announced daily.

Eventually, sometime in the second week, she arrived at me for reading aloud.

"Our American friend," she said. Nasty, smirking—even a child could tell.

I read aloud. I read the page she indicated. I read the next page. I was prepared to read until sunset to prove that I knew how.

"That will do," she said, cutting me off. "Thank you."

There was a pause, during which I waited for my praise.

"That, class, is a perfect example—" I held my breath, excited by what was coming "—of how *not* to pronounce your words."

So we were at war.

I won with the method that's proved effective over the course of my life, though it's shut off what are now known as options: I refused to participate.

Each year had a theme. First grade: animals of the British Isles. Second grade: early man. Third grade: Romans. This is a common ploy in schools that pride themselves on being progressive. It doesn't fool the children. They still have to learn how to read and write and to add and subtract (and, someday, to multiply), whether they're adding wooly mammoths or abstractions. We were studying cavemen. We spent hours a day learning about bows, flints, pelts. I couldn't stand it. I had absolutely no interest in cavemen.

Soon after Miss Gravel had disparaged my accent, on a day devoted to how to chip flint to make a spear point, I went up to her desk at the front of the room and announced: "Early man is boring. I am going to read."

She looked at me. I looked back.

"What are you reading?" she asked.

"Puck of Pook's Hill," I answered.

"Very good," she said.

This could mean two things. One was a compliment (I doubted that); the other was the English version of Okay.

I decided it meant Okay.

Miss Gravel and I had arrived at an *entente*, more or less cordial. I could read instead of listening to flint-talk, I could sit mute during the times table, and in return she would never, ever call on me for anything, especially not for reading aloud. I spent second grade with Kipling and Enid Blyton and Schwab's Gods and Heroes. There are worse educations.