

*The Essential Edgar Tiswell*  
*Fragments from an Unfinished Comedy*  
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I

MAXINE

Precocia? Precocia! I know she's nearby -- I can feel the "atmosphere" from the novel she's writing filling every room. Don't get me wrong -- I'm glad my eldest daughter has realized her dream of becoming a famous novelist. But why does *her* novel have to take over *our* house, with a chapter in every room? Well, that's all right. Things are a little quiet around here since my other girls moved out. I guess I should be grateful for all the noise Precocia makes.

(Maxine covers her ears as Precocia bounds in, speaking loudly and shrilly.)

PRECOCIA

Were you calling me, Maman?

MAXINE

*I* was calling you. I don't know anyone named "Maman". You know, it was cute, for a while, that you insisted on addressing me by the French word for mother, even though neither you nor I have ever been to France . . . or Belgium, or Quebec . . . . But, as I believe I've mentioned to you before from time to time over the past fifteen years or so, the novelty has worn off.

PRECOCIA

Is *that* what you called me all the way down here to tell me?

MAXINE

No. And don't you whine about coming "all the way down." It's *your* choice to work upstairs. I offered you the extra study down here for your office.

PRECOCIA

I know, but I needed that one for my telecommunications center.

MAXINE

Of course you did. Anyway, I have some good news. I've finally finished drafting my initial presentation on the retractable push pin.

PRECOCIA

Your new invention! I'm so excited, Maman.

MAXINE

Thank you, honey. So I was hoping you might like to tag along to my meeting tomorrow with the marketing consultants in Hartford.

PRECOCIA

*Where?*

MAXINE

Hartford. Hartford, Connecticut. It's only about 2 1/2 hours by car, and I just thought --

PRECOCIA

Why would I want to go to Connecticut? I'm a writer, you know.

MAXINE

Yes . . . but I'm afraid I don't see the relevance.

PRECOCIA

Relevance? Relevance? Being a writer is relevant to *everything* I do. It's what I am . . . it's who I am . . . it's *where I'm at!*

MAXINE

"Where I'm at"? Surely, my dear writer, that's slang.

PRECOCIA

*Not!* According to the latest guidelines published by the Wagglehurst Writing Workshop, "where I'm at" is no longer considered slang.

MAXINE

Nobody tells me anything anymore. So, you don't want to keep me company on the trip tomorrow, huh?

PRECOCIA

Sorry. How about if I keep you company here for a while right now, instead? It will be so much more convenient.

(She sits on the sofa and gestures for Maxine to do the same.)

(Maxine sits. An instant later, Precocia's cellphone rings. Precocia stands up and begins pacing the room as she takes the call. Maxine rests her elbow on the arm of the sofa, leans her head on her fist and sulks.)

PRECOCIA

(On the phone)

Hi, Jeannine. So, how'd the meeting go? Are they going to give me the advance you requested?

MAXINE

Hey! Why don't you take that call in the "telecommunications center"!

PRECOCIA

(Aside to Maxine)

Because I'm keeping you company. Remember?

(Into the phone, without missing a beat)

He said *what*?

(Maxine crosses to the table, where she has left a cup of tea. She sits and begins drinking. As Precocia continues her phone conversation, she crosses to just behind Maxine and talks loudly.)

PRECOCIA

Ha! Absolutely not.

MAXINE

Do you mind! I'm trying to drink my tea.

PRECOCIA

(To Maxine, patronizingly)

And you're doing a good job of it. So relax.

(Into the phone)

No way. You hold firm, or we're going to another publisher. Talk to you later.

(She hangs up, and addresses Maxine.)

Well! In all my years as a best-selling writer, I have never heard of such a thing!

MAXINE

(Rolling her eyes)

*All* your years? Honey, you seem to have forgotten that your first -- and only -- novel was just published eighteen months ago.

PRECOCIA

I'm not talking about *literal* years. I'm talking about *literary* years. Best-selling-writer-years. According to the Wagglehurst Writing Workshop, a best-selling author experiences life so richly that she lives the equivalent of 5 to 10 normal years at a time.

MAXINE

Hmm. At that rate, you'll be even older than I am pretty soon. You'd better warn that boyfriend of yours.

PRECOCIA

Oh, Maman! You can be so exasperating.

MAXINE

Seriously, Precocia. You know how proud and thrilled I was that your first novel became a surprise best-seller . . . .

PRECOCIA

"Surprise"? *Who* was surprised? After Edgar Tiswell, the famous writer, sponsored me for the Wagglehurst Writing Workshop, it was only natural that a big publisher would snap me up, *and* that my semi-autobiographical novel, *Ineffably Indoors*, would become a rollaway best-seller!

MAXINE

I think you mean "runaway best-seller". In any case, as I recall it, Professor Tiswell -- a very peculiar man, I might add -- only sponsored you for the Workshop because he desperately needed to produce *someone* as his protege, and you happened to be conveniently on hand when he was visiting our house. He hadn't even read any of your writing!

PRECOCIA

Precisely! I was obviously *so* talented that he didn't even need to read my work to realize it. Why, he even went outside his field to mentor me. He's a poet, you know.

MAXINE

So he kept reminding us.

PRECOCIA

(Reflectively)

Though, judging by his poetry, maybe he would have been better as a novelist. He could hardly have been worse.

(A tabletop fax/phone rings.)

PRECOCIA

Oh! That might be my fax, with the publisher's revised offer.

(Maxine picks up the receiver.)

MAXINE

Hello? Yes?

(She speaks with politely artificial enthusiasm.)

Well, goodness, this is a surprise! And how are you?

PRECOCIA

Psst! Is that my fax?

MAXINE

(Into the phone)

I suppose you're calling to have a little writer's chat with Precocia, yes?

(To Precocia)

It's Professor Tiswell, dear.

(Into the phone)

Oh. Well then what -- I see. Yes, certainly. We'll expect you soon.

(She hangs up.)

Now isn't that funny. Here we were just talking about him --

PRECOCIA

Actually, we weren't precisely *here*, Maman. We were sort of over there.

MAXINE

Well, wherever we were . . . *he*, as it turns out, is visiting our town again and is heading over to pay a social call at this very moment.

PRECOCIA

A social call? Do you think that means he now has some social *skills*?

MAXINE

I don't think so. He just invited himself -- and his graduate assistant -- to lunch.

PRECOCIA

Great! What are we having?

## II

TISWELL

Blake, please pass me my clementine-colored notebook.

BROWNING

(Gingerly, as she extracts the notebook from her bag)

It's Browning, Professor.

TISWELL

Well, I need it anyway. If the paper's getting a little discolored from the sunlight, I'll just have to deal with it.

BROWNING

No, *my name* is Browning.

TISWELL

Your name is getting discolored from the sunlight??

BROWNING

I'm afraid that you keep calling me "Blake". Blake was your previous assistant.

TISWELL

(He looks skeptical. He snatches the notebook from her and refers to it.)

Ah yes, so I see. *Browning*. I'll try to do something about that.

BROWNING

Brilliant, Professor Tiswell!

TISWELL

Now then . . . as I was telling you, this house is a very important landmark in the life of Edgar Tiswell.

(Browning gasps reverentially.)

TISWELL

Once upon a time, I was drawn to this house by the call of a rare and dazzling bird.

BROWNING

When was that?

TISWELL

Oh, a couple of years ago. Probably before you were born.

BROWNING

But I'm 23 years old!

TISWELL

Hmph.

(He continues.)

The residents of this house were, naturally, overawed by my poetic genius and personal charm.

BROWNING

Naturally!

TISWELL

They're likely to be overcome by the shock of having my charisma explode into their lives once again. But as soon as they recover, I'm sure they'll *insist* that I stay with them while I look for a house of my own.

BROWNING

I can't wait till we get a house of our own!

TISWELL

Nonono. How many times do I have to tell you? *I get my own house. You live somewhere else. I may be stuck with you as a tag-along grad student, but we're not married.*

BROWNING

(Giggling)

Oh, Professor. We don't have to be *married* to share a house.

TISWELL

You're right. We don't have to be married. Nor do we have to share a house. *Nor* do we have to do anything together except run my classes and publish my poetry.

BROWNING

But if I don't live in your house, where will we interact?

TISWELL

Interact? Who wants to interact?

BROWNING

Well, we can't teach your brilliant classes and publish your brilliant poetry if we don't *interact*.

TISWELL

Fine. We can "interact" in a conference room at the brilliant university.

BROWNING

"Conference room". Ooh, I like the sound of it.

(She mimes a cell-phone conversation.)

"I'm sorry, I won't be able to make the lecture. I'm still in the conference room with Professor Tiswell."

(She giggles.)

TISWELL

Will you forget the conference room!

BROWNING

(Disappointed)

But you said that's where we would interact.

TISWELL

I've changed my mind. No conference rooms. We can meet in the faculty dining room.

BROWNING

Ooh, a dinner meeting.

TISWELL

No! No dinner! Lunch.

BROWNING

(Cell phone shtick)

"I'm *lunching* with Professor Tiswell today."

TISWELL

Nonono! Forget lunch. Make it breakf -- no, that's worse. Uh . . . a snack. Just a snack. At the vending machine. All right??

BROWNING

(She pouts.)

I suppose.

### III

MAXINE

(Ushering her guests inside)

Welcome back, Professor Tiswell.

(Maxine shakes Tiswell's hand politely but unenthusiastically. He is indifferent to her indifference. Next she offers her hand to Browning, who shakes it eagerly.)

MAXINE

(To Browning)

I'm Maxine, and this is my eldest daughter Precocia.

(The two members of the younger set greet each other with a casual "hi" wave.)

TISWELL

(Aside to Browning)

This is the young woman I was telling you about -- can't write worth beans, but somehow lucked into a publishing deal.

PRECOCIA

(Aside to Maxine)

Remember, Maman -- don't let on that we think his poetry stinks.

TISWELL

(Continuing his aside)

Mind you, I say that merely as a disinterested reader. And thanks to her tedious style, my level of disinterest has been successfully sustained.

PRECOCIA

(Continuing hers)

The guy drags the most worthless ideas out for page after page, as though something momentous were going to happen, but it never does. All that build-up, and no Brillo pad in sight!

MAXINE

I'll have lunch ready in a few minutes. Let's sit down, in the meantime.

(They sit.)

MAXINE

So, Professor, what brings you back to our town?

TISWELL

Heh-heh . . . what brings a man of my stamp anywhere?

GENE

Free food?

(Precocia shushes him. Tiswell gives him a dirty look.)

TISWELL

What brings me here? Poetry, of course.

MAXINE

Poetry brought you here? You mean like "on the wings of the western wind" and stuff like that?

TISWELL

Well . . . not exactly. Let's just say the weary path of the wandering bard has led me here.

BROWNING

The Professor got a lucrative job offer from your local university.

(All immediately express comprehension.)

BROWNING

They're very lucky that he's accepted, of course. He's a real feather up their cap.

TISWELL

Yes, and their university press has also agreed to publish the second volume of my collected work – the long-awaited sequel to *The Essential Edgar Tiswell*.

GENE

Wow! What's this one going to be called?

TISWELL

I'm thinking of entitling it . . .

(He sees it in big letters in the air.)

*Tiswell: Beyond the Essential.*

BROWNING

We like that better than the publisher's idea.

MAXINE

What was their idea?

BROWNING

(She unintentionally imitates Tiswell's gestures as she reads the title in big letters in the air.)

*Again With the Tiswell Poetry.*

(All react.)

BROWNING

Professor Tiswell is *very* excited about settling down in your town.

(He does not seem particularly excited, and a dreary silence ensues.)

PRECOCIA

(She breaks the silence.)

I'm sure it will be a big adjustment for you.

TISWELL

Oh, yes indeed. I'll need to find a place to live, of course.

MAXINE

I must confess I don't know much about the real estate in the area. What are your requirements?

TISWELL

I just need a place where a person can live the quiet life of a genius.

MAXINE

Hmm . . . I don't know if you'll find any houses for rent that come furnished with *genius*.

TISWELL

Madam! *I* am the genius.

MAXINE

(Without irony)

Oh. Isn't that convenient. I apologize for not noticing.

TISWELL

Hmph.

BROWNING

Professor Tiswell is so brilliant that his old university had to ask him to leave!

TISWELL

They said my presence was discouraging to everyone else.

BROWNING

While the Professor looks for a house, naturally we'll need a place to stay in the meantime.

(Tiswell coughs suggestively. Another silence ensues. Finally, Tiswell speaks.)

TISWELL

You know, just any old place to tide me over while I look for a house.

(Tiswell coughs again, even more suggestively. Browning adds a cough or two. Another pause. Tiswell coughs once more, and Browning tries a sneeze this time.)

MAXINE

Gesundheit.

TISWELL

Do you mean it? Oh, I am awfully grateful, Maxine.

MAXINE

Huh?

TISWELL

As you know, I've always liked your house. It's big but not cavernous, cozy but not cramped, old but not decrepit. The exterior is full of quaint details, and the inside has a sort of indefinable but welcoming personality. It's the kind of place one could write poetry about -- or write poetry in. Or to. In short, there's a sort of unspoken charm about the place.

MAXINE

(She suppresses a yawn.)

It's not unspoken anymore.

TISWELL

Now, I will only be with you for a short time -- just as long as it takes me to scour the area for the absolutely perfect home . . . and negotiate an appealing price.

**IV**

MAXINE

Precocia, it's about time we went through your things, to get rid of whatever you're not using anymore.

PRECOCIA

We already did that, Maman.

MAXINE

(Ignoring her)

With a guest moving in --

(She sighs)

temporarily, I hope -- we don't want the house to be cluttered up with obsolete junk. It's the perfect opportunity to clear things out.

PRECOCIA

(She takes a deep breath.)

Six months ago, when I bought some new office equipment for my study, you said it was the “perfect opportunity to clear things out.” And we did. But there wasn't much to clear out, because the previous clearing-out session was only three months before that, around the time that Fuschia and Darla moved away -- when you also said it was the perfect opportunity. We also cleared things out when I graduated from college; when I first entered college; when I graduated from high school three months *prior* to entering college; when I graduated from little league; and on my third birthday. You will notice that this list has been presented in reverse chronological order -- but it is also available as an alphabetized list, a graph, a pie chart, a PowerPoint presentation, or a video game.

MAXINE

Are you ready to get started?

PRECOCIA

(She is resigned to it.)

I suppose.

(Tiswell enters.)

MAXINE

And what have you been up to, Professor?

TISWELL

I've been out looking at houses.

GENE

Did any of them look back?

TISWELL

I haven't had any luck so far. Nothing seems quite right. Ah well, I guess I have to be a little patient. I assure you that I won't be underfoot for long.

V

(Three months later.)

TISWELL

Just a reminder, Maxine, that the Regional Poets Association is meeting here tonight.

MAXINE

(Sarcastically)

Swell.

TISWELL

Now, Maxine, you don't mind a few of my colleagues meeting in your living room for a couple of hours, do you?

MAXINE

No. What I mind is *their* colleague staying in my house for three months, and giving no sign of even looking for a residence of his own.

(The doorbell rings.)

MAXINE

Gene, would you get that, please?

(To Tiswell)

Look, Professor. We have got to talk. You have a nice little meeting. I'll be stepping out till it's over.

TISWELL

You're *leaving*?

MAXINE

Yes, I'm *leaving*. It's something I wish *more* people would do.

(Tiswell and Browning share an incredulous look.)

BROWNING

But some of the area's most illustrious poets are going to be in this house tonight.

MAXINE

That's okay. I've had my fill of illustrious poets.

TISWELL

But they'll be reading their work!

MAXINE

Better than me.

PRECOCIA

Why don't you stay, Maman.

MAXINE

Because I don't like poetry, that's why.

PRECOCIA

You like that Robert Frost anthology I gave you.

BROWNING

Frieda Gromphkin is a nature poet, too, and she'll be here tonight. I think you'll really like her work.

MAXINE

Well, maybe you're right. Why should I leave my own house. Do you think it will really be like Robert Frost?

VI

(Later that evening)

GROMPHKIN

(Reading with feeling)

It is February,  
and the mucus runs from my nostrils  
like twin Alpine streams

(Maxine rushes from the room, gagging.)

VII

(Still later)

PRECOCIA

Why don't you give those poets another chance.

BROWNING

Oh, yes, Hector Fnitz is really classy. A true literary lion.

MAXINE

(She is dubious.)

Do literary lions write about (ahem) mucus and stuff?

BROWNING

Nothing like that. Fnitz writes of lofty things.

MAXINE

Well . . . all right.

VIII

FNITZ

(Reading)

*Con molto neretto . . .*

MAXINE

(Whispering)

What's that?

PRECOCIA

Italian, I think.

MAXINE  
Is the whole poem in Italian?

BROWNING  
No, don't worry.

FNITZ  
. . . I awoke to the *Tauschhandel* of a *moulin-à-vent Schraubenzieher* . . .

MAXINE  
Huh?

PRECOCIA  
French and German.

BROWNING  
Beautiful, isn't it.

FNITZ  
*Ubi laguncula ramosa est?* I sang, in harmony.

MAXINE  
Is *any* of it in English?

BROWNING  
Of course! Why, Fnitz is one of the greatest living poets of the English language.

FNITZ  
And I quoted her the hundred-line Sanskrit proverb, saying . . . .

(Maxine leaves.)

## IX

PRECOCIA  
Look! That advice columnist published your letter in the paper today!

MAXINE  
Really! What does it say?

PRECOCIA  
Let's see . . . first here's yours, you know "Dear Dr. Barneezles, how do I politely get rid of a houseguest who has overstayed his welcome?"  
(She laughs.)  
Oh! You signed it "Ginger Rogers"?

MAXINE

(She shrugs.)

It was the first name that came to mind. So read the answer already.

PRECOCIA

(She reads.)

“Dear Ms. Manx: I understand completely the problem you’re having with Professor Tiswell.

(She shrugs at Maxine, then continues reading.)

“The thing I always try to remember in situations like this is that, after all, you have two choices. That is to say, if you get to that fork in the road, provided it *is* a fork in the road and not, say, a spoon, then you can’t go wrong trusting your instincts. A lot of people don’t trust their instincts, and so they rely on other people’s instincts, and then those other people don’t have their instincts on hand when they need them, because the neighbors have borrowed them again. So save your instincts for a rainy day, when it’s too wet to mow the lawn. Hope this helps, Dr. Barneezles.”

(She stops reading and gives Maxine a skeptical look.)

Does it help?

MAXINE

It doesn’t help me. Maybe it helped him.