Eugene Frogner liked to collect chess books. Titles like *How to Play Chess, You and Your Opponent*, and *Getting to Know Your Chessboard* were a part of his collection. He owned 4,781 chess books varying in size, color, and condition. On his polished mahogany coffee table lay a blue book about an inch thick that still wore the plastic wrapping. Eugene had carefully cut the cellophane so he could read the book without ruining its cover. The book had cost $29.95. He turned a page, pursing his mouth and pulling on his lower lip. His squinty eyes under his speckled gray eyebrows moved back and forth, absorbing each line. Eugene lowered his book, glancing at the Palisander-Maple chess board beside him. His narrow, transparent hand reached out blindly and moved his knight to g5 as he continued to read. He carefully wrote “Nxg5” on the back of a small postcard.

He closed the book with a sigh and stood up, replacing it on the shelf. Four long steps brought him to the bookcase, which spanned from floor to ceiling and wrapped around the small, yet well-furnished room. He began to search the different shelves. No, not *Taking Out Their King*. His finger skimmed over *The Ideal Diet of a Chessman, Learn to Play Chess by Osmosis*, and *Why You Should Never Cheat at a Tournament*. He stepped back, hands on his hips, and frowned. Now where had he placed it?

A timer went off in the kitchen, and he remembered his meal on the stove. The kitchen was flushed with natural light from the large windows over the kitchen nook. He lifted the lid to the pot and was met by a blast of steam. Inside, vegetables seasoned with herbs bubbled on the surface: brussel sprouts, onions, cabbage. His mouth watered. Eugene opened the drawer,
fingers fumbling through the clutter for a spoon. After lowering the heat to a simmer, he placed the lid back on the pot with a metallic clink.

He was about to leave when a small, white book—a pamphlet really—caught his eye. A smile crept into his lined face. Eugene picked up the book that he had been searching for and turned it over. It read *How to Meet Other Chess Players and Other Dating Tips for the Single Chessman*.

It had been two days since he found the small white book. He had spent most of the afternoon preparing the evening meal and even made a quick trip to the local bakery. The clock struck seven, and Eugene moved back and forth from the kitchen to the dining room, carrying the fine white and blue china and the crystal one piece at a time to avoid any accidents. He carefully placed a white linen napkin next to each setting and, after just barely shifting one of the forks up and to the left, he stood back to observe his work. Satisfied, he turned his attention to the pale, unlit candles on the table. The match hissed as Eugene struck it against the newly opened box. He bent over the round table, careful not to get any sauce on his freshly pressed gray jacket, and lit the tall dinner candles before sitting down. The weak lighting revealed a scene that was more discomfiting than romantic. The Palladian windows reflected only the light of the flickering candles. Eugene reached for the 1931 Chardonnay and poured himself a glass. He filled the glass across from him before taking a sip.

"It's a good year, is it not?" he asked. The empty chair across from him did not respond. With the glass poised in his hand, Eugene carefully turned the page of the small white book to chapter nine, "How to Practice Dining for the First Time," and read from the top: "in case of an uncomfortable silence during the meal, ask your date if she is enjoying the meal."

Eugene cleared his throat. "This dinner . . . I mean, I hope you are enjoying your meal."

He quickly took a bite of the lamb and mint jelly and fingered through a few more pages. "When speaking to your date, address her by name to show your interest." He set down his knife and fork on his plate and touched his lips with the napkin. He leaned forward; his brow was creased and showed signs of perspiration.

"Elaine," he said, and then paused. "Ellen?" He leaned back in his chair. "Mabel. Margaret. Eleanor. Dolly." He smiled, embarrassed yet emboldened with new confidence, and tried again after clearing his throat several times.

"My dear," he began, quickly glancing down at the page. "You have come to mean as much to me as . . . ." His breathing and the ticking of each second from the grandfather clock in the library seemed unusually loud. He glanced around wildly. His hands, which had been resting easily on the edge of the table, lost their color as they held on for dear life. "As chess," he finally spit out. He smiled again.
As the evening progressed, he drifted into a relaxed mood with each passing glass of wine. He enjoyed this dead monologue with the empty chair. In his head he called her M, perhaps for Mabel, Molly, Margaret? He did not know. Did he need to know more than that? He could hear M’s delightful murmurs; he was sure his date found his sense of humor delightful.

“And then, there was this one time . . .” The candles burned low. Eugene found himself slapping his knee and winking across the table from time to time. The plate across from him had not been touched, but Eugene seemed not to notice. Along with the lamb, there were potatoes, fresh greens, soup with fresh small pearl onions—all excellently regarded by his date—and blackberry pie.

Eugene suggested that they move into the library. The lamp helped create a comfortable setting. Eugene sat down on the small sofa, which cozily accommodated two. He sat rigidly next to his date. He turned his head in her direction only to find that this caused a cramp in his neck. He shifted his body towards her instead.

“I wonder if my knees just bumped hers?” he said aloud. He stood quickly, taking a step backwards. “Perhaps I should sit . . . here.” He chose the small, delicate chair beside him with the intricate embroidery. While he still found himself facing away from his date, he felt free to turn and even crossed his legs. Then he crossed them the other way. Ah, this is more like it, he thought.

“Coffee?” he asked.

“I didn’t always date, you know,” Eugene said. “No, no, I really didn’t. Women always mystified me. Didn’t have any sisters. And my mother, well she passed away before I was seven.”

“What about you?” He waited allowing a long enough pause for her to answer. He glanced several times at the clock before realizing that it was rude of him to keep checking the time.

“Why, that’s fascinating,” he finally said. He helped himself to another cup of coffee and, as an afterthought, dropped a lump of sugar in the other cup.

“People are always asking me where I got all my books.” Eugene looked up nervously over his cup but, deciding she hadn’t thought anything of this, he went on.

“I found most of them here, right in some of our own bookstores. But others took some effort. London.” He took a sip.

“Ever been to London? Oh, I agree. Gloomy eleven months out of the year, but there are some fascinating things to see over there. Yes, many of my books came from London.” He looked over his shoulder at the books.

“India. I have one from India. Never been there myself.” He felt his date looked unimpressed.

“India,” he tried again. “I have one from India. Ever been there?” he asked timidly. “Oh, of course. Lived there for six months with my brother and his wife. Much too hot. Should have come back on the next boat.”
“I can’t remember where they all came from, of course, just too many. What about you? Ever come across any intriguing books yourself?” He nodded politely as each title was named. “No, no, never read Chess at Teatime or Winning Isn’t Everything. But are you sure that’s the case?” He laughed, but he stopped when he noticed her expression.

“Yes, yes, of course. Winning. So trivial compared to the actual game itself.” He glanced down at the chessboard on the coffee table where he had left it. He looked up. “You’ve noticed my chessboard. Quite a nice set. I recently had it sent all the way from Boston. The man who sold it to me was a fine gentleman. Hardly spoke a word of English. Dutch, I think he was. Yes, quite a nice set.” He leaned over and picked up a pawn and then put it back.

“Moving a piece out of turn wouldn’t do, now would it?” Noticing her inquisitive expression he continued. “Why, yes, I am playing with a gentleman through correspondence.” He picked up the postcard that was still lying next to the board. He had forgotten to mail it. He looked back up. “Where was I? Oh, yes. Quite a fine player, though I was surprised to learn he wasn’t familiar with en passant. Of course, you understand.”

“You w-wouldn’t like to play, would you? I have a different set in the next room.” He waited while she decided.

“No? Quite all right, quite all right. Another time perhaps.” For some time he allowed her voice to take over the conversation, nodding occasionally while giving his coffee a stir. He listened to the silence. Eugene glanced around for the white book and then remembered he had left it on the dining table.

“Pardon me. I’ll be right back.” With a rather foolish look on his face, he left the room. The book was right where he remembered. He picked it up and began scanning through the chapter. Dinner, yes. Conversation with eye contact, yes. Coffee and conversation about chess (It’s What Brought You Together!), yes. Then his finger stopped. He read:

As the date draws to an end, the time comes to bid your date farewell. This is where it is necessary to evaluate the evening so that you are able to decide the best course of action. With ten being the highest score and one the lowest, pick the following grouping that your date falls into.

(1–3) You and your date had little to talk about. In fact, you find each other completely unattractive and you were tempted more than once during the evening to throw her or him out. (This also includes verbal insults such as “ninny,” “you old horse,” and other words we won’t mention.)

(4–6) The evening proceeded smoothly and you realize you have discovered your new best friend. Quickly schedule a time for chess before she slips away forever.

(7–9) The candles must have paid off for you to be in this grouping! More than once you found yourself winking at and being winked at by your date. Dinner was excellent, the conversation was superb, and the future is looking promising.

(10) You’ve just popped the magic question and she has said yes.
Congratulations you two!

He skimmed the rest of the page and quickly turned it. “Ah there it is,” he said. “How to proceed in grouping seven through nine.”

(7–9) For those who fall into this category, be excited for what’s to come! You’ve had a wonderful evening of sharing, honesty, and romance.

“But I’ve never been to India,” Eugene moaned.

Now as the evening draws to a close, the hour of bidding your date goodnight has arrived. Proceed with care as the right word just may get you a kiss from your sweetheart, whereas the wrong word could get you the slap of your life. Good luck!

Eugene turned the page. It read: “Chapter 10: Shopping for that perfect outfit.” He quickly turned the page back. Surely a page was missing! Still holding the book open, he looked anxiously towards the library. He held his breath and peeked around the corner. Finally realizing the absurdity of the situation, he closed the book with a loud clap. No woman, real or otherwise, was going to intimidate Eugene Frogner. He strode into the room, prepared to give the speech of his life, holding nothing back, throwing all caution to the wind, even if it killed him.

But he did not get that chance. Before he could even open his mouth, the doorbell rang. He was glad at that moment he had not spoken at full volume as he was planning on doing.

He hurried over to the entrance adjacent to the library, glancing at his watch. It was a quarter past eight. He opened the door with the force of one who had intended to make a speech and had not been allowed to do so.

He found himself face to face with a woman. A rather attractive woman.

“I’m so sorry to bother you. You must think it improper on my part to knock on your door at this time of evening,” she said.

When he did not respond, she continued. “I just never seem to remember to bring this,” she produced a book, “over during the day. I thought it was mine, from my son Geoffrey. That’s why it’s opened.” She looked very apologetic as she held out the opened package. Her blue eyes which were framed with dark lashes were opened wide and had a childlike quality to them. She has very nice eyes, Eugene thought. “It’s a chess book, isn’t it?” she said. “I don’t know much about the game except there’s a king and there are bishops and horses . . .”

“Knights,” he said.

“Yes, knights. The children always liked to play with their father before the war. But then, well—” There was an awkward pause. He quickly tried to think of something, silently chastising himself for having skipped the chapter on introductions.
"I'm Margaret Townsend by the way," she finally said. She handed him the package. After he took it from her, he looked down at her still-outstretched hand. For a moment he wondered if she wanted the book back. With a start he realized what she wanted; he shook her outstretched hand. He was surprised at how soft it was.

"Eugene Frogner," he finally said. He nodded slightly. He continued to hold her hand as she smiled up at him. He finally let it go. "Thank you for my book," he said.

She smiled again and bid him good night. He watched her from his doorway as she turned and went down the narrow walk that led to the street.

He went inside and closed the door. He gathered up the tea cups and carried them into the kitchen. The candles were still burning. He snuffed each one out and then returned to the library. He sat down and glanced at the horse—no, the knight—that he had moved earlier that day. He picked it up and studied it for a long time. He placed it beside the board and picked up the postcard. Kxg5. He wondered if he had made the right move.