The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, tall and intense, is at the controls. He makes adjustments to his dials and gadgets and sends the train hurtling. As Carrie enters the cabin, she and the philosopher exchange a deep look. She joins him, leans her head against his shoulder, and he smiles down at her. He slides a hand across her shoulders and up through her short dark hair then swings his attention back to driving the train. Side-by-side they gaze at the rushing, shiny rails.

Carrie wakes in wonder: Here I am, dreaming about Wittgenstein as if he’s my lover! She knows of Wittgenstein only because of the book she’s reading – one belonging to her ex-neighbour, Kirby Shilling. All Kirby’s books have come to her. Shilling’s bassoon has gone to the oboist from the amateur orchestra; the second violinist – a reportedly beautiful young woman – is the custodian of his CD collection; an obliging bridge partner has taken Kirby’s modest collection of furniture. Most of Kirby’s books are scientific; the only one with strong appeal to Carrie is the biography of the great twentieth-century philosopher. For some time, she has read nothing but memoirs: accounts of drug addiction, paralysis, bi-polar disorder, concentration camps, Russian childhoods. What draws her is the question: how, in the face of suffering, does the individual go on? And now she’s dreaming about Wittgenstein, who enquired about the very same thing.

Five months prior to this dreamy wooing of Wittgenstein, Carrie heard that homestay families were needed during January. A group of teenagers from Seoul would be visiting the Adelaide Hills for a month. At the ‘calling-all-families’ meeting, she discovered that most host families preferred to look after the girls. ‘Korean boys expect you to wait on them hand and foot and they play up if there’s only a woman in the house,’ one warned her. The same homestay mother also said that ‘the boys aren’t used to women running the show’.

Carrie smiled at that. She didn’t expect Korean teenagers to understand where she was at. She knew she was not a woman the average Australian Joe Blow could understand. Did she even comprehend her own life? At the age of thirty-five, at the peak of her career as the public face of Amnesty International, how smart had she been, deciding to have a baby, solo? A handsome Latino guy she met at an international conference had innocently donated his sperm, a guy who still does not know he has a son in Australia. She’d been an ‘I-want-it-all’ sort of a woman but having a demanding career and solo parenting had proved too much. The ‘breakdown’ (or whatever it could be called), had turned her into a recluse; all she’d done this past year was read life stories and work on a gradual recovery. She went ahead and signed up for two homestay boys. ‘They’ll keep my son Jason company,’ she explained to the experienced homestay mother. ‘He’s home from boarding school and still doesn’t know any young people here.’ To herself she said: Three boys in the house will force me to make more effort.

‘Listen to this,’ Jason laughed, reading G’day Homestay! the English version of the booklet the Koreans would receive on arrival: Australians clear their noses into

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tissues and make loud noises while doing so. This is called ‘blowing your nose’ and is perfectly acceptable. It is not good manners to make a loud sniffing noise.

Jason was into The Body. More so, since boarding school. Carrie’s instincts had told her that at twelve he was too young to live away from home but her shrink had suggested boarding school as a coping strategy. She liked the phrase ‘my shrink’, said self-depreciatingly. Boarding school was to be a stopgap measure until the insomnia, the domestic ineptitude, the incessant weeping – all that – subsided. But a year on, at the school Speech Night when she told Jason she was ready for mothering again, he said he didn’t want to return. ‘It’s good here,’ he claimed. Carrie had to talk through this unexpected rejection in two urgent sessions with her shrink and discovered that in fact she was immensely relieved that he would come home only during school holidays. She then sold her house in Adelaide to fund future school fees and moved to the hills where living was simpler and cheaper. In the new place, she lived like a cat, gracefully and indolently moving from one comfortable position to another. A human cat, with mug of herbal tea and the inevitable memoir in hand.

Shortly before the homestay students arrived, Carrie took a second initiative and embarked on a platonic arrangement with the divorced man renting the cottage next door. She’d called on him one day to help with a dead car battery. Their bartering arrangement evolved from here when she discovered that he couldn’t cook: he would come to Sunday dinners with a good red and Carrie could call on him to be her neighbourly fix-it man.

‘Doctor Shilling, let me introduce my homestay boys, Sung-min and Jung-ho. You already met my son Jason when his frisbee landed on your roof, didn’t you?’

Jason flung an off-handed g’day the man’s way but the Asian boys bowed, casting their eyes down while extending their right hands and mumbling pleased-to-meet-you, Doctor Shilling. Kirby responded with energetic hand shaking and how-do-you-dos. Carrie was pleased by the Koreans’ formality. She wanted Kirby to think well of her. She wanted him to think her sophisticated and literary because Kirby was a learned man, a Doctor of Physics at the University of Adelaide. ‘Doctor Shilling lives over there,’ she told the Koreans and pointed. ‘Neighbour. Over there. Doctor Shilling.’

‘They’re not retards, Mum,’ whispered Jason. ‘They get the picture.’

It was only the second time that Kirby had come to dine and she felt under pressure. Despite their promising start, the Koreans slurped loudly, oblivious to G’day Homestay advice: Australians find noisy eating off-putting. Jason, finding himself unassailable, slurped too, letting spaghetti strands thrash around his face before sucking them wildly into his grinning mouth.

‘Delicious,’ the homestay boys declared perfunctorily, and all three boys bolted to the living-room PlayStation. There they crouched over the controls and shouted exclamations Korean-style. ‘Uuuuh!’ and ‘Uhhhhh!’ fractured every sentence that Kirby and Carrie attempted. ‘It’s been like this every night since they arrived,’ Carrie apologised. ‘They all make guttural noises then trade insults.’ From the living room, a dispute about the ownership of a world-famous manufacturing company erupted. ‘Hear that? Ssibangsaes. Means idiot, I think.’

‘American!’ Jason insisted.

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‘Korean!’ countered Sung-min and Jung-ho. ‘Tea?’ But after checking that no hammering was needed this week, Kirby drained his glass, thanked her profusely for the spaghetti bolognaise and excused himself, pleading the need to practise.

Kirby was an upper-atmosphere physicist but to relax his scientific mind he played bassoon. He’d explained: Monday was community orchestra, Tuesday wind quartet, Wednesday ensemble. On Thursdays he worked late and on Fridays he played bridge. He devoted Saturdays and Sundays to bassoon practice. As Carrie cleared away their pasta bowls, the pah pah pah pah pah pah pah pah of scales came reverberating through the warm night air. Later came Baroque melodies and Mozart. His standard was not impressive, Carrie could tell that, and he could not blame it on the twisted limbs of the old apple trees that separated their places. The bassoon, she surmised, was a new interest, to fill in life without his wife.

The boys bonded in a nightly drama of slurping, saying ‘delicious’ and bolting to the PlayStation. They played chess too. Even though he was youngest, Jason whipped the Koreans and they called out cheonjae (genius). Ssibangsa! he gloated in return, prompting rancorous wrestling matches. Carrie wondered if ssibangsa really did mean idiot or something stronger (like fuckhead). On Thursday, Kirby’s pah pah pah indicated that he wasn’t working late after all and she slipped over to beg a few moments of respite.

Kirby was not a man to waste precious practice time so, after a moment of surprise, he filled up his only saucepan with water to make her tea and apologetically resumed. Not minding too much, Carrie sat on the cottage steps and lazily sipped. Bassoon versus cicadas was far pleasanter than the PlayStation duel that awaited her. She furtively noted Kirby’s lovely strong fingers on the keys, their tips like spatulas, and the way his lips disappeared to embrace the reed. ‘At twenty I could have chosen to be a musician,’ Shilling said when he paused before beginning the Mozart pieces, ‘but instead I sacrificed art to science. I lost this expressive aspect of my life. Lost it completely,’ he repeated. ‘It’s been nearly thirty years. The collapse of my marriage has made me come back to it.’ When Kirby’s lips could take no more, he slid the bassoon under the divan in his living room and they talked idly while the moon rose.

On the following evening Kirby surprised Carrie by calling in to say that bridge was cancelled and would she like saucepan tea again? This time he joined her at the steps and when she put her mug down, he kissed her. ‘I’ve got something to tell you,’ he said. ‘I’m going to Antarctica for the next nine months. I’m needed in the team again; another chap was going but that’s off and it’s up to me. I’m moving out in a couple of weeks and heading to the Australian Antarctic Division in Hobart, then to Davis, our base. But if you want – that is, if you would be so gracious and generous – and he reached into her hair and gathered a handful of it and gently tugged it and drew her to him shyly again, ‘we could have a fling before I leave.’

Ludwig Wittgenstein fell in love several times. He described it as hardly bearable. The yearning, the suffering: it nearly broke him. As he struggled with the agony of longing he wrote: There is something I have not yet realised. Some standpoint from which to see the truth more clearly. A few days later, he broke through to claim: Being in love affects everybody in the same way. Love means thinking about what the

other person suffers. For he suffers too, and is also a poor devil.

Kirby had pouchy, sad-set eyes, a great black beard riven with silver, and rosy lips. He said besotted things about Carrie’s beautiful curves, the deliciousness of her breath, the very joy of her. He kissed her on the lips and buried his head between her thighs. Carrie could not get enough of his kisses.

‘You bliss me out,’ she said.

Now every evening Kirby returned from his commitments, raced inside his cottage to shove his bassoon away, and came tapping on Carrie’s window. She sat up in bed, delighted with him, letting Angela’s Ashes drop to the floor, holding out her arms and giggling as he climbed over the windowsill. They whispered and kissed and told each other stories (of amour, Amnesty and Antarctica) until dawn while the three boys under her roof played games then slept. Some nights she went to him and it was often midnight when she resumed the role of homestay host and closed her door dizzily against the hot starry sky.

‘Where’ve you been Mum? ’ asked Jason vaguely one night, the only games zombie to lift his head.

‘Having tea with Doctor Shilling,’ she answered, neutral as anything.

But on another night when she waltzed in blustering about how she’d stayed too long drinking tea, Jason cut in to complain that the others had bent his arms back and forced him to say out loud three times: LG Corporation is a South Korean company. LG is not American. ‘And I called out for help,’ he yowled, his handsome face on the verge of tears, ‘and you didn’t hear me.’ On yet another midnight return, all three teenagers stared at her in silence and in the morning she felt compelled to invent an explanation: Doctor Shilling is a very clever man who has to speak at symposiums about green laser probes (and aerosols and things), and last night he had needed someone to practise his talk on, and because she too had been all over Australia and indeed to Paris and Rio de Janeiro delivering papers on such topics as Third World development and political repression she understood something about the challenges involved and understandably he’d called upon her … blah blah blah …

Jason translated tersely this information to Sung-min and Jung-ho as, ‘Doctor Shilling is a cheonjae.’ The boys from Seoul exclaimed, ‘Uuuuh! Doctor Shilling cheonjae? Uhhhh!’ To his mother Jason complained, ‘Have you noticed how hairy that dude’s ears are?’ and he made his arms into gross tendrils, waving them from his ears and then from his nose.

Wittgenstein hated science. He blamed the Second World War on its worship. The savagery, the bombing of the great cities of Europe, the Holocaust – the darkness of those times – all the fault of science. Scientists lacked the ability to focus on more than one thing at a time, he complained. Not understanding connectedness was their immense, tragic failure.

Shilling packed his belongings, vacated the cottage and flew to Hobart to take the ice-ship before summer’s end. The Koreans were wrapping up their Australian experience and Jason began itching for boarding school. An email came from Hobart. Kirby reported that he felt elation. Antarctica is the ultimate place for scientific exchange. And friendships that last a lifetime. I’ll meet the much-younger second wife of a close
friend tomorrow. He’s a cosmic ray man; she’s a Doctor of Zoology, a lichenologist, wintering for the first time. He’s staying home to look after their twins so asked me to keep a protective eye on her. Then Kirby warned: I’m not a phoner. When you’re in the most beautiful, desolate place on earth, you can’t beat silence.

Carrie was stunned by his mute vision-splendid. Why hadn’t they talked more about this stuff before he left? What she missed most was the sight of Kirby’s buttoned-up shirts on coat hangers swinging from the clothesline by the apple trees, but she couldn’t have explained why. She replied cautiously: I miss our cups of tea. Sung-min’s gone Anglo and changed his name to Russell. Jung-ho has dyed his hair blonde. All the guys wear sunglasses constantly. The Koreans leave tomorrow and Jason the day after. But you know, it’s been strangely wonderful. We all kinda love each other. Then she waited. No reply came.

Alone in her house for the first time in two months, she fell into an icy crevasse – the kind that Kirby had once described as so monstrous it could swallow up a team of dogs. And people. Mostly people.

One night she dreamt of two scientists: Physics Man and Lichen Woman. Dressed in a king’s ransom of furs they stood in the snow, pressed together. They began to pull at each other’s furry trousers. They moaned into the icy air, fogging it with urgent clouds of warm breath. Kirby cried out aaah! She knew that aaah! and the dramatic slump like a sack of potatoes tumbling off a shelf that followed – and now came Lichen Woman’s contralto, ringing out across the plateaus, the glaciers, the immense white: Shilling. Shil ... 1 ... ing!

Carrie woke in panic. She wept, I can’t get up.

She hated Kirby for leaving her. This sense of abandonment then transmogrified into a horrible image of his body, lying in the snow, frozen-dead, like the men of the doomed Scott Expedition.

She phoned her shrink, the man with the reputation of hip and cool. Who said, ‘No, can’t squeeze you in for an appointment until next week and we were expecting this weren’t we? Don’t fight it but repeat: Just depression. Just a relapse. I have plenty of strategies for dealing with this. But in bed in the crevasse Carrie resented the shrink’s funky mantras. Her mind shrieked with theories to explain Kirby’s silence.

Lichen Woman is Theory 1. Theory 2 is that Kirby is ill. So ill he can’t tell the Personnel staff at the Antarctic Division about Carrie’s significance and only his ex-wife is informed. Theory 3 also involves his ex-wife: she wants him back and they are reuniting in Hobart right now before he winters. They’d been perennially unfaithful to each other, Kirby had confided one night as he absently ran his fingers along her arms. She saw his struggle to hide his pain. ‘It’s not an unusual Antarctic arrangement. In our case, the dalliance with her manager – she’s a jazz singer – got out of hand. She told me: Darling, you’ve lost your bright plumage.’ Carrie had mused in return, ‘Like Molly Bloom and Blazes Boylan,’ but Kirby hadn’t read Ulysses. Carrie had straddled him tenderly and for the first time that night, they reached orgasm together. Theory 3 comes into Carrie’s crevasse-bed with a ghastly no-holds-barred fantasy starring his jazz singer ex-wife in a sequined gown rediscovering Kirby’s bright feathers.

To relieve (or to prolong?) this mental torture, Carrie threw on a shawl and went to where Kirby’s books were stacked in cardboard boxes in her living room, and unpacked them. Of course I’ll store them for you, she’d said. There were a few that

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held mild interest: *Catastrophe Theory, The Tao of Physics, The Dancing Wu Li Masters* but in the end she’d chosen *Ludwig Wittgenstein*.

Wittgenstein said theories were useless. Freud’s theory of the interpretation of dreams, for instance. Waste of time. Understanding arose from making connections. *Don’t think. Look!* he taught. After reading about Wittgenstein, Carrie realised that Kirby’s focus could be called singular. When he played bassoon, he played bassoon; when he kissed, there was nothing but the kiss. When he’d packed to go to Antarctica, there was only the packing. Now he was in Antarctica, there seemed to be nothing in his heart but Antarctica.

It wasn’t until the South Australian days turned seriously autumnal that an email from Kirby arrived. Weirdly, only the heading got through and the message itself was blank. She replied poignantly but it happened again with his next reply. Then again. The messages had titles like *Re: Testing; Re: I Have Sent You Four Emails*. In response to *Re: I Have Sent You Four Emails* she wrote: *It must be a sign not to try anymore*, which was Womanspeak for try harder you jerk: telephone, use carrier pigeon, commission a robotic penguin to waddle across the icy wastes, check the deep sea cable is okay, but Do Something (*Ssibangsae*).

I’m being dropped by a fucking Antarctic explorer with hairy ears, she realised. A man with an embouchure to die for.

Wittgenstein strove to know how human life could be made more bearable: faith and love, he concluded. *What good does my talent do me*, he lamented to his journal, *if, at heart, I am unhappy? What help is it to solve philosophical problems, if I cannot settle the chief, most important thing?*

By winter, when the freezing southerly winds blasted the Adelaide Hills, not only had *Shilling@icynews* fallen silent but so had Carrie’s correspondents at *hotmail.com* and *ozemail*. Documents ceased to exist, and weird squiggly symbols popped up on the edges of things. Before collecting Jason for his mid-year break, Carrie lugged the computer to a technician. The virus removal cost her sixty dollars. You dumbo, you dumbo, she berated herself as she drove home. When she reconnected the cords and logged on, over a hundred messages downloaded. Many were from Shilling. The first said this:

*Have Arrived at Davis*
*My last email must have seemed callous. Forgive me, I didn’t want to exert pressure on you – of course I want to hear from you again. But how could I dare to ask you to wait for me? You say you miss my shirts. I miss your Amnesty stories; well, not only them, everything about you. How starved I am for a woman who cares deeply about the world. My ex-wife was seriously selfish – even our friends say that – but I wasn’t any better. I let science suffocate my soul. You mustn’t idealise me and imagine that I cared deeply about climate change. At the university, I was ambitious – nothing more. Whereas you have cared too much about the world’s problems and have sacrificed yourself for the sake of all of us, and now you must find peace. Am I*
right? With you and music in my life, I feel I am becoming a better man. Carrie my love, there is a wonderful display of the aurora tonight – it is beauty, endlessly manifesting. If all the dreams that lovers dream originate from some place on earth, it is here. It is now.

Re: Testing
Nothing since Hobart? No problem this end. Time to get your computer checked out, I’d say. I’ve reached the Prince Charles out-base, high up on a plateau. There are five of us, an all-male team of physicists and glaciologists. The journey here was exquisite. A butterscotch moon sank through a pink sky to set over the steely-blue frozen sea. Now, stars. Piercingly bright. Lichen Woman (as you dub her) is back at Davis. Turns out to be one of those careerists who barely lifts her head from her microscope. So much for looking out for her – she’s never gives anything, other microbes, a glance. Write again, try again, my love.

Re: Testing Again
No good?

Re: I Have Sent You Four Emails
I’ve seen it so often – the stress of keeping love alive with a man in Antarctica. It’s easier for us here – with the cold our libidos plummet, although as soon as we’re back to the warmth, they resurface with a vengeance. When I’m back, don’t expect me to squeeze through your window – assuming that you would want me to – because as the libido drops, the appetite for food soars. Carrie, dearest, your dropping out of communication is a sound survival strategy. But please listen to ‘Song to the Moon’ one evening. Yes! we heard it together – the night that Jason and the Koreans spied on us from one of the apple trees. The devils. I often wonder: does Jason like me at all? I’ll be in luck if he sees me as anything other than a mad old git into classical music. I rather hoped that giving him my elephant seal incisor would win him over, but it didn’t, did it? As for ‘Song to the Moon’, it’s from one of Dvorak’s operas. Listen to it. What more can I say?

Wittgenstein, aging, dying, wrote philosophy until his consciousness departed. Despite his angst and over-thinking, on his deathbed he surprised his friends with: I’ve had a wonderful life. After the recovery of Kirby’s lost emails, Carrie stays up late and finishes Wittgenstein’s biography. As she wakes, she dreams of resting her head against the philosopher’s shoulder, of watching him tenderly while he drives the train fast along the tracks. Along the shining, rushing rails which hurtle them into the future.

Half-awake now and laughing at Wittgenstein’s debut as her dream lover – especially amusing given the philosopher’s homosexuality – Carrie stretches forth an arm and retrieves Ludwig Wittgenstein from the stack. Below it pile up Angela’s Ashes, My Life by the Dalai Lama, stories of living with cancer, wrongful imprisonment, surviving incest. She presses her face against its hard cover and sobs.

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aloud, ‘Kirby darling, you’re coming back to me. You’re coming back. In a few months you will be here. Here.’ When she calms down, she lets the biography drop to her chest, and clasps it, and rocks herself a little. ‘I’m utterly pathetic and – God knows – as crazy as a cut snake but Kirby seems to love me.’

When the emotion recedes, Carrie searches for the dying words of Wittgenstein (1889-1951). Here they are: *I’ve had a wonderful life.* She takes up a pink felt pen and underlines the sentence. Boldly she does it, smug as a cat with a prize of a parrot. Bright pink – colour of the Antarctic sky.

The literal meaning of the Korean word cheonjae is ‘a person of heavenly gifts.’

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