Lindsay Simpson is the author of six works of non-fiction. She spent twelve years as an investigative journalist with *The Sydney Morning Herald* and in 1999 was the founding member of the Journalism and Media Studies program at the University of Tasmania. She lectures in journalism and writing at James Cook University and lives on Magnetic Island with her husband, Grant Lewis. They have five children. *The Curer of Souls* is her first novel.

Also by Lindsay Simpson

Brothers in Arms (co-authored with Sandra Harvey)
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More Than One: twins and multiples, and how to survive them
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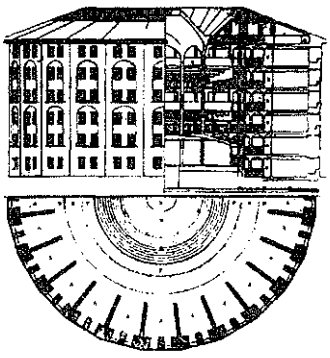
THE CURER *of* SOULS



Lindsay Simpson

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'History . . . is certainly the most erudite, the most aware, the most conscious, and possibly the most cluttered area of our memory; but it is equally the depths from which all beings emerge into their precarious, glittering existence.'

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*

'I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain to be immeasurably worse than torture of the body, because its ghastly signs and tokens are not so palpable to the eye and sense of touch as scars upon the flesh, because its wounds are not upon the surface, and it exhorts few cries that human ears can hear.'

American Notes, for General Circulation by Charles Dickens, 1842, quoted on a plaque at the Female Factory Historical Site, Hobart

To Grant, my
soulmate on a
sea of possibilities

CHAPTER ONE

London
March 1865

Lydia imagined her parents in heaven, twin figureheads, their carved expressions gazing confidently seaward. She had dressed her stepmother's body in her hand-crocheted wedding dress. The fine cloth hung around Jane's wasted flesh. Her face was sallow and sunken, the skin stretched across prominent cheekbones; her mouth loose, not how she would have liked. The white cotton bonnet around her head made her features look uncharacteristically witch-like. Her eyelids had the translucency of the leaves that rustled outside Lydia's bedroom window. Lydia could feel no connection between the body lying in the coffin and the woman with whom she had spent most of her life.

Jane had always cared about her appearance and Lydia felt her wedding dress was appropriate apparel to wear to her final resting place. The bonnet jarred with the dress but, now it was

in place, it seemed too much effort to remove it. Besides, Jane had always told her it was where the soul went after death that was important.

Now both Lydia's parents were dead. Jane had chosen to be buried in a country grave in a churchyard in Wiltshire, next to her forebears rather than next to the empty coffin of her husband. At the funeral each scrape of the shovel resonated, as though ending a chapter. Clods of earth fell on the coffin, a muffled sound pierced by the cries of gulls under a leaden sky. There was only a handful of people. Charles Darwin, the grey-haired evolutionary, came in a wheelchair, along with other elderly gentlemen Lydia recognised – lords of some sort – and a few family members. They stayed for the requisite time and then escaped in small clutches. The clipped hooves of their horses and the rumble of wooden wheels echoed off the low stone walls that surrounded the country cemetery as they disappeared out of Lydia's life forever. At forty-one years of age, she was alone.

One morning after the funeral Lydia awoke to sunshine in the family's London house in Bedford Place, Russell Square. She had been half listening to the familiar noises that denoted the beginning of the day – the grate being dragged away from the fireplace as the maid prepared to lay the coal, doors banged, the heavy curtains opened, the great clock in the hallway striking the hour – and waiting for the tinkle of the bell to summon her for service; Jane's voice commanding her to read, to adjust her pillows, to have a game of draughts, to administer her medicine, or to simply sit in a chair and listen to her talk.

Lydia felt separate from the cloistered world below. No one disturbed her. She did not go down to breakfast, nor did she ring to explain her absence. Instead, as the ordinary morning street sounds clattered outside, she sat in the study and wrote letters to her stepmother's relatives.

Each day since the funeral she had been delaying the inevitable. Jane's death had not been unexpected, but now it had finally happened she felt paralysed by indecision. She was unaccustomed to taking control. Besides, her future was decided. She imagined her relatives' sympathy clinging unspoken between them as they discussed her letter. How would she cope without Jane? They had been erstwhile companions, inseparable until death. Lydia was a spinster, alone with no direction and no real purpose in life.

Nobody wanted the house in Russell Square. It was expected that it would be sold, having been emptied of the furniture of generations of Griffins, Jane's family. Then Lydia would begin her new life by moving to the family's small country cottage in Wiltshire, near Jane's grave.

Twenty-one Bedford Place had been Lydia's home since they returned from Van Diemen's Land in 1843. It was a five-storey Georgian house in Russell Square within walking distance of the British Museum and Covent Garden, where the gaslights still bore the name of the Duke of Bedford from whose estate the suburb had been born. As a child, Jane told her there were so many windows on each floor she used them to help her to learn how to count.

Before Lydia moved she had to dispense with the staff – at one guinea per servant she could not afford any of them: the maid, the footman, the hall porter or the steward's room boy. In the past few years of Jane's illness they had rarely entertained.

The servants had been an unnecessary luxury. The cost of their livery alone amounted to a princely sum and they expected new suits once a year, not to mention their board. After summoning the footman to take the letter, Lydia moved into the morning room and sat staring at the large green ledger on the desk.

She had already decided she would sell the silver and put her stepmother's exotica up for auction. The house was also full of memorabilia from her father's two trips to the Arctic. Jane had wanted her husband's study left the way it was when he had sailed for the last time all those years ago. In it there were the reindeer tongues he had given Jane on their wedding day and three pairs of shoes from the snow people, which he had brought back for Lydia. Then there were his dusty paintings, large Arctic horizons with the sun a watery smudge and the Eskimos' faces yellowed, harsh and uncompromising. When she was a young child the large canvases had given her nightmares: the ghost of a ship trapped in the ice, its mast like a dead branch from a tree rising from whiteness, the ship a foreign object in the natural surroundings. Later, they reminded her of her father's death. She imagined him in a soundless land carpeted with snow.

Eleanor, Lydia's mother, had only been dead for three years when her father married Jane. Jane had been Eleanor's friend. Jane had known her mother whereas Lydia could not remember her. Her father had one portrait of Eleanor: the girl in the painting was in her teens, her hands clasped in front of her lavender dress – not like a mother at all. Lydia came to think of her as an older playmate who never aged, her eyes solemn and almond-shaped, spaced far apart, her hair dark like Lydia's.

Her father had first brought Jane home from a trip to the Continent when Lydia was about four years old. Her new

stepmother had brought her two porcelain dolls that were cool to touch and had fixed glassy smiles. She remembered waking to their shadowy stares and her stepmother's irritation when she perceived her gift had been rejected. Her father, hovering, had tried to bind them together – the two girls he loved.

It was Jane who had told Lydia that Eleanor had died when her father was on one of his trips to the Arctic. Eleanor had told him to go, Jane said, even though she had been sick and was left with their baby daughter. Lydia did not want to ask her father whether this story was true. Her father did not like to speak of Eleanor and Lydia shirked from the idea of asking Jane more. It was not Jane's place to be revealing things her father had chosen not to tell her. Nor did she want Jane reminding her that as a toddler she too had lost her mother. That did not make them the same. Nothing made them the same.

By then, Sir John Frankland was already knighted, a hero after two trips, including one successfully charting much of the mythical North-West Passage. His book about his adventures in the Arctic had been a bestseller. Jane listened to the same stories Lydia had listened to: the blistering winters he had endured; eating a man's leather boots to survive; the stabbing pain of frostbite. Watching her stepmother, it appeared to Lydia she was a consummate manipulator, supporting her husband only for her own ends. To Lydia, Jane seemed to be incapable of real affection for anyone. Nevertheless, she knew he was happy so she tolerated Jane. Lydia never had the sort of conversations with Jane that she imagined having with her real mother. Her transition to womanhood was a solitary journey.

When they had bidden Sir John farewell at Southampton on the voyage that was to be his last, Lydia was twenty-one. Jane

had grasped her hand in a rare show of affection, which united them in their love for this man, and as they were alone Lydia knew this was not for anyone's benefit. The gesture touched her because of this. A dove had settled on the mast of the ship. It was a sign, Jane had said. He would return to them soon.

But he never had. They had delayed his funeral for so many years and they still did not know the truth. Jane had been wrong, but Lydia had believed her. She tried to gain comfort by imagining that her father was preserved under so much ice, frozen for posterity, but instead, she would see his corpse frostbitten, his mouth hollow from lack of food and love. Jane never gave up hope, until she finally conceded in her dying moments that his coffin would never be filled and she would be apart from him in death as she had been in life.

Now Lydia was left to journey on alone. She tried to enjoy the unfolding of each new, uneventful day until one morning she arose early, having decided she could procrastinate no longer. She pulled back the heavy maroon curtains in Jane's study that adjoined her bedroom to let in some of the foggy city sunshine. Jane had spent her last two years bedridden. The room had the feeling of being unoccupied for some time. Dust had settled, in spite of the parlour maid's efforts.

Lydia surveyed the scene in front of her, unsure where to begin. Her stepmother had charged her with cataloguing her belongings. On a table in the corner of the room she noticed some large bulky shapes under a heavy canvas. Her curiosity aroused, she picked up the canvas and, struggling with the

weight of the cloth, pulled it along the table. Particles of dust floated in the sunshine, a shower of diamonds. She peered into the blackness. As her eyes adjusted, she saw the yawning mouth of a Tasmanian devil. The taxidermist's handiwork had survived for nearly thirty years. Teeth yellowing with age, the creature snarled at her as though protesting at being awoken so suddenly. It looked ferocious and real. Lydia closed her eyes. She was smelling the whale oil at the wharves on an island at the end of the Earth; the fresh chilled breeze as it came off the Derwent River; the soft blowing sound of whales at night off Battery Point; the musty smell of the shops that sold kangaroo and possum skins. The devil was a relic from Van Diemen's Land. Lydia had almost forgotten about her stepmother's collection from that wild colonial outpost where she had spent much of her childhood. During the winters in Van Diemen's Land the clouds would circle Mount Wellington threatening a storm and only its jagged dolerite peaks would be visible. She would bury her head in her father's greatcoat as they strolled through the Government House gardens and he told her more of his Arctic adventures.

'Come and see the Tasmanian emu,' he would say. 'My little Lydia, what a place we live in. Giant birds and convicts – we are in an island jail and I am the jailer.' And he would laugh his loud, comfortable laugh.

She saw his black frock coat buttoned to his neck, a white bob rising above the crown of his black beaver hat, a belt and a sword in a glittering scabbard around his ample waist, a red seam down the outside of his trousers. More than half of the population were convicts when her father arrived to govern the colony. Her fondest memories of that time were walking in the garden with her father where the lawns ran down to

the river. After his marriage to Jane, her stepmother took up the space she had once inhabited, but during those early morning or evening walks, she had the opportunity to speak with him alone. He would take her hand in his and watch her lips sounding the words. There was much that he missed in conversation due to his deafness. He had told her it was the legacy of an old battle wound from Trafalgar, when he had stood too close to a cannon firing. He wanted to know if he spoke too loudly and he was always happier away from a crowd.

When they first arrived in the colony and trumpeters blazoned a welcome, the crowds had lined the streets, waving their hats. Sir John's cheeks, usually pink, had shone even more than usual that first night at dinner in Government House with the glory of it all. She had imagined him in the hubbub on the deck of the ship in full battle. Her father, the Arctic hero who ate men's boots, who had defended the old country at sea, who had charted the coast of Australia, would now show he was capable of leading a colony, of deciding the fate of criminals, of succeeding as a leader of men. She watched Jane bask in the reflected glory. As he settled into the role of governor, Lydia suppressed her need to see him as more and more often his position took him on journeys around the colony. She and Jane were left to their own devices and Jane had taken up collecting as a hobby.

No doubt the Royal Society would be interested in the Tasmanian devil. With some excitement now, Lydia lifted the canvas off the other boxes, coughing into the dust. Finally, the creatures stood on the table, imprisoned in their glass cages, a silent zoo awaiting her direction. Her favourite was the platypus, a creature that laid eggs, had furred skin like

an otter and a beak like a duck. On impulse, she pushed her fingers against the glass lid of the cage, a child again, tempted by the forbidden. Her stepmother had always been protective of her boudoir of stuffed animals. Was the platypus's fur coarse or soft? It looked so sleek.

She pulled across a small footstool from underneath the piano and stepped gingerly onto it. It seemed to bear her weight. Now she could reach inside the cage. The fur felt smooth and dry. The animal's webbed feet seemed incongruous with its furred body and she hesitated before touching the feet, wondering if they would crumble with the stress of time. Wedged between the wooden stand on which the creature was mounted was what looked like a crease of butter. Forgetting her original intention, Lydia began to prise at the object with her fingernails. It was a document of some sort. She searched the study and found an old ivory letter opener, but it was not strong enough. Impatiently, she pulled at the folded pages with the nails of her thumb and forefinger. She heard a rip and drew breath, but the pages were intact, yellowed with age. How long had they been there? She moved through into Jane's boudoir to her walnut writing desk where the light was better and opened them.

The letter was addressed, 'My dearest Louis', and the handwriting belonged to her stepmother. Blinking, she thought the light was playing a trick. Louis? An early suitor perhaps? She hesitated, confronted by the thought that she was prying. There had been so many men in Jane's life: geologists from Poland with unpronounceable names, botanists who specialised in grasses from the Falkland Islands, amateur natural historians with an insatiable appetite for the new and unclassified.

Then she remembered. Louis – a keen natural historian from Port Arthur, an amateur painter. Jane had introduced him during one of her Tasmanian Society dinners. Lydia recalled he had his own museum at the penal settlement, but she could remember little else about him. Jane had kept some of his paintings, she thought.

Marlborough
March, 1842

My dearest Louis,

I leave this arid township to venture into a wild land with quartz peaks and streams of ice.

You are already spoken for, as am I, yet from the day you showed me the southern boobook and spoke of Cuvier, of Lyell, and I saw your passion and curiosity for life, you seemed at once familiar and shocking to me. Love is the domain of Coleridge and Keats. I have studied their verse yet I have never understood it. Everything I read now speaks the same as my heart.

I may never return from this journey and never speak of what is between us. The deputy surveyor-general, Calder, has prepared the first fifty miles of our route. He tells me it is frightening terrain, like that of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, with horizontal trees that grow outward and fallen branches, which will hamper our path. All around there are craggy mountains clothed in mist. Beyond is Transylvania, where few white men have been and to my knowledge no woman.

Of course, my mind runs away with me. The trip has been meticulously planned and Calder seems an able man. But even as a seasoned traveller, I confess to being alarmed.

The canvas flaps so strongly in the gale outside. I wonder if I

will have the courage to send this to you? Committing it to paper is so dangerous.

Oh, my love. There. I have written it. I imagine your hair falling across your brow, reading those words. What will your expression be?

It is time to write of secrets so long kept, the heresy we have talked of. I have battled with myself for thinking these things, but I am writing to you to say that as each day passes I know there is truth in Mr Darwin's hypotheses, though he may feel as though he's confessing to a murder. In his last letter he told me that his young wife, Emma Wedgwood, has been counselling him not to shut out the truth of religion. Why, she asked him, did he want to constantly prove things?

Mr Darwin challenges all of us – and not without proof – to accept his theory that species are not immutable. Louis, we have been placed in this savage outpost at the end of the earth, where we have examples of strange creatures adapting to their habitat: the platypus – part bird, part mammal – the Tasmanian tiger with a body and jaws like a hyena. Is it heresy to believe they adapt to where they live? I want to take this opportunity in case I have no other to tell you that I believe it is not heresy.

Darwin writes that he was in the Regent's Park Zoo when he came across a baby orangutan that had the same expressions he had seen in human babes. 'Man from monkeys?' he asks. I cannot yet make that leap, yet I am entranced by his logic.

Are you still recording the tides on the Isle de Mort? I think of your quill scratching across the page as you sit in the storeroom writing your meteorological register. The Royal Society will accept your records – they must. Your curiosity matches mine. You will have a place among scientists as a hydrographer of world renown. You deserve this, no matter what happens.

I must ask. What happened to the boy? I still dream of him and ponder his fate. I know of your compassion for him. I attempted to intervene with Sir John as you asked me to. Alas, an exception cannot be made for a boy who has already been transported across the seas, particularly as his crime is murder and one so brutal. I realise you may not agree. You, a curer of souls. Do we have a right, I hear you ask, to take a young man's soul?

Perhaps had I not been on this journey I may never have had the courage to tell you any of this. God be willing we shall meet when I return to Hobart Town. If you feel moved to finish my portrait, I can only acquiesce to your request. Do not reply to me at Government House, I beg of you, for it is not safe.

Yours,
Jane