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The Unravelling

Written by Thorne Moore

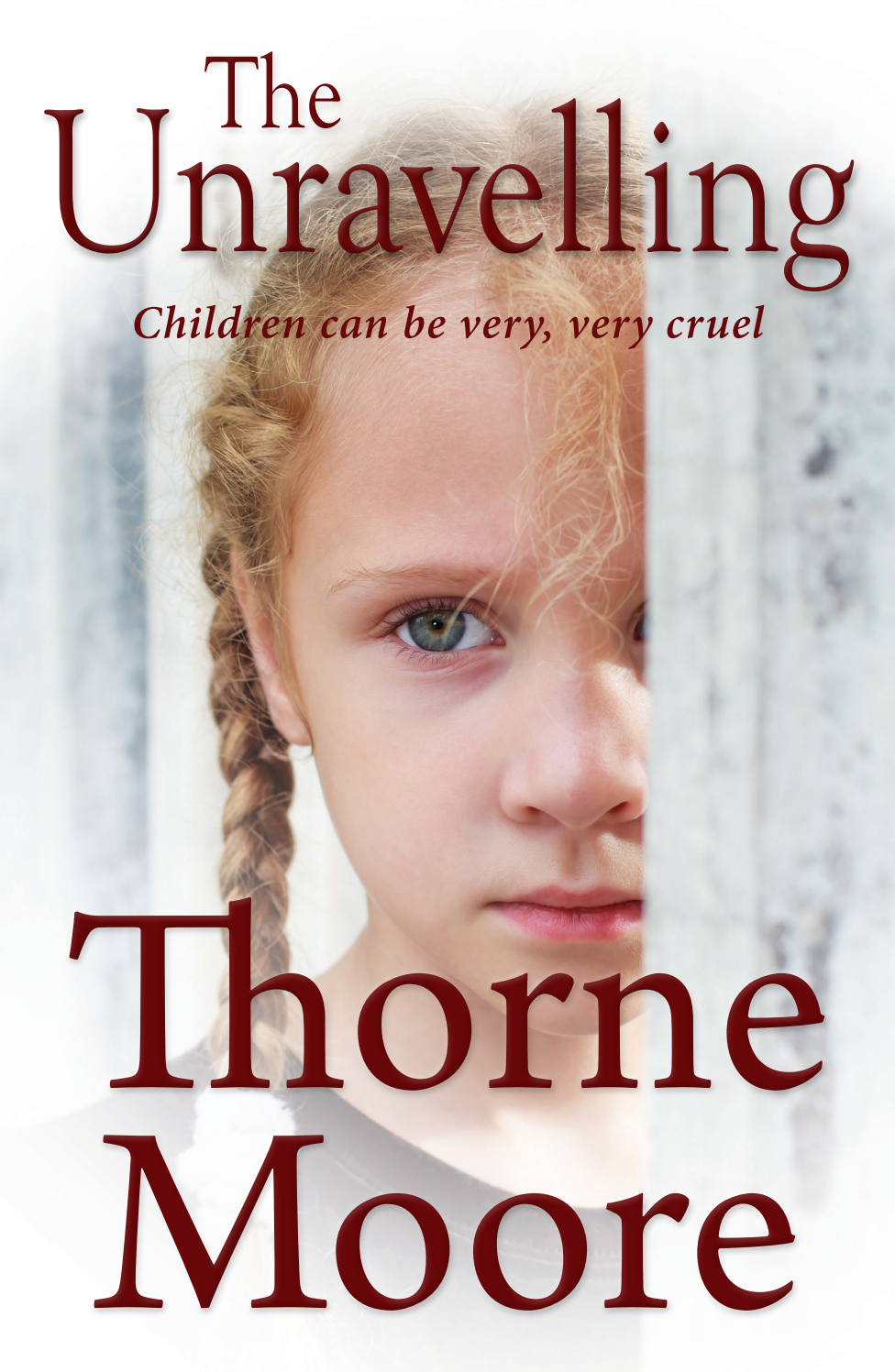
Published by Honno Press

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The Unravelling

Children can be very, very cruel



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First published by Honno Press in 2016.
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South Glamorgan, Wales, CF64 4AH

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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ISBN 978-1-909983-48-9 (paperback)
ISBN 978-1-909983-49-6 (ebook)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Published with the financial support of the Welsh Books Council.

Cover image: © altanaka/Shutterstock, Inc
Cover design: Graham Preston
Text design: Graham Preston

Printed by Gomer Press

Late October, 2013

She is here. Somewhere.

Don't look. Not yet. She will be here still, after this.

We approach the chapel through a garden where recent wreaths are on display, a couple of cypress trees strategically positioned to mask the brutal stub of the crematorium chimney. Benches for the bereaved are banked by pale roses, with a few ornamental trees. They may have been planted for their spring blossom, but it's autumn now, and there is no blossom, just hints of anonymous fruit. One drops as I pass, rolls across the grass, over the verge and onto the gravel…

And in an instant, I am back, on an icy January night, watching an apple dropping and beginning to roll. Starting the chapter that demolished my already ruinous world.

An apple rolling into darkness, and the unravelling begins.

— 1 —

Twelve years earlier

Miserable January. The new year was a few days old, but it already felt tired. This was supposed to be a time of ridiculous resolutions, a brand new start, an opening up of the future, but to me, January always seemed an interminable no-man's-land of mud and barbed wire. It wasn't a new anything. Hopeful expectations might begin to reassert themselves with the first glimmers of spring and the lengthening of daylight, but these early days just sank into a post-yuletide quagmire.

The roads and pavements and slate roofs streamed black in a freezing rain, as my windscreen wipers struggled, shrieking and grinding against the deluge. One failed completely as I turned into Hobson Street. The other was juddering on its last legs as I parked up. Switched off.

Silence, apart from the steady hiss of rain. I sat watching it slanting, scalpel-sharp and mesmerising, through the cold glow of the street lights. An occasional glimmer of lamps behind half-drawn curtains intensified the darkness of the night, small defiant declarations of exclusion.

The Slough of Despond – a miserable month, a miserable day, and a miserable, middle-aged woman, sitting in a miserably decrepit car, trying to summon up the energy to do

something, anything.

I swivelled the mirror around and looked at myself. Long face. Sheep's face, my sister used to say. Hollow. Pallid. At least in this weather, the freckles faded. That had to be a bonus. I pulled up a strand of my hair to catch the streetlight. I ought to do something with it, but what? Restyle? Colour? It hadn't changed with time, neither lighter nor darker. Not light enough to be fair, and not quite dark enough to be what my mother desperately called light auburn. Not even decent ginger, just sandy. Poor Mother, she always despaired of me.

No good sitting there, contemplating hair dyes. I needed to get on. Unpack the shopping, phone the garage to get the windscreen wiper sorted out, finally face up to the electricity bill. Or maybe just curl up in my flat, under the duvet, with a good book, and disappear into some golden, flickering world of fire and foe and escapist fantasy that didn't have bills and windscreen wipers. *Come on.*

A mighty heave of will and I emerged into the embrace of the rain. Instantly, it found its spiteful way over my collar and down my neck, while I struggled to pull my shopping from the back seat. Something caught, of course. It always did. The bag tipped and apples escaped. Before I could grab it, one bounced into the gutter and started to roll down the street, hustled by swirling rainwater. I followed, lunging for it, but too late. It slipped from my grasp over the jagged lip of a broken gully cover and plummeted into the gurgling, foetid drain. As I watched, a surge of water enfolded it and pushed it out of my sight into the blackness of the sewers.

Serena Whinn turned, and smiled at me.

My hand was halfway into the gully, groping for the lost

apple. How ridiculous. It was lost, destroyed. There was no point trying to get it back. I pulled back, wiping my fingers in disgust on my wet coat, and concentrated on the other apples – one on the pavement, two in the well of the car – squeezing them back into the carrier. They were bruised, already pulping and inedible, but I had to pick them up. I couldn't just walk away and leave them to rot...

Serena Whinn turned, and smiled at me.

Odd that, remembering a ten-year-old girl I'd known briefly, decades earlier.

I picked up my carriers, locked the car – as if anyone could possibly want to steal it – and headed, hunched against the sharp, icing rain, into the passage that led to the rear of No. 114.

A narrow alley. For the first time, since moving in, I saw its sinister potential, a darkening lane, full of shadows, where anything might be lurking. I brushed away the cold fingers that were beginning to stroke the back of my neck.

Serena Whinn turned, and smiled at me.

Serena. A lovely girl. Everyone had wanted to be her friend. I used to be her friend once.

I fumbled with my keys, couldn't find the keyhole, it was so dark. Everything was dark. The fingers were back on my neck. Found it! I threw the door open and lurched inside, stepping by instinct round the piles of books, dark ramparts in the gloom. I dumped my bags in the cramped kitchenette and wriggled out of my coat. My hair was dripping rats' tails, soaking my already damp blouse.

One shoe squelched. I pulled it off – the sole was split. My cold foot prickled with pain – a stone must have worked

through. I turned my foot up and in the dimmest of light saw the darkness of saturation, the pink bloom of blood spreading around a hole in my sock.

My stomach lurched.

Serena Whinn turned and smiled at me.

That was the moment, looking at a hole in my sock, when I stopped the instinctive fight to keep her out and let Serena in. I knew it was going to be one of those bad times, everything splitting, a double helix coming apart, and I knew what I was meant to do, how I was supposed to cope, but I didn't care. Serena was smiling at me and suddenly, nothing else mattered in the whole world.

*

Serena has seen me. Me! She's coming. She doesn't just wave, she comes to join me, smiling, skipping down the road.

'Are you going home?' asks Serena. 'Can I come with you?'

My heart swells, with nerves and joy. She wants to come with me! 'Oh yes!'

*

I abandoned my shopping, curled up on the sofa and pulled the paisley throw over me, so all the lingering light of today's world – the crimson pinpoint on the phone, the green digital numbers on the clock radio, the glimmer from houses beyond the fence – all were expunged in the darkness of a world that had vanished thirty-five years before. It was too late to turn away, to blink Serena out of existence. I wanted to look at her, nothing but her. I wanted to let her possess me.

*

I am trying not to shuffle. We've been told not to shuffle, because we might push Colin onto the stage too soon. But it's difficult not to shuffle if you're wrapped in a sheet, with cardboard wings slipping down your back and a tinsel halo that makes your scalp itch. Me and Jacqueline Winstanley. We're attendant angels. We get to chant 'Glory to God in the highest' when Colin's finished, and that's it.

Colin Chivers is Gabriel, who is sort of angel house captain. He does all the talking. He's really loud. That's why Miss Hargreaves picked him, only now she keeps having to say 'Don't shout, Colin. You're not broadcasting the good news to Scotland.'

I'm an angel, which is loads better than having to wear socks on my hands and a woolly hat and pretending to be a sheep, but I'd really, really wanted to play one of the big parts where they have real lines to learn. Kings or shepherds or Gabriel. It's not like you have to be a boy. Angela Bryant's a king, with an orange wool beard that keeps tickling her nose and making her giggle. I could have done that. The innkeeper would have been great, but Michael Wiley got that because he's good at making people laugh, and the innkeeper's supposed to be funny. Michael's really small and Barbara Fulbright, who plays his wife, is really big and that's supposed to be funny too.

Trouble is there were too many of us squabbling over the good parts, so I didn't have a chance. I never do. Others got chosen and I got to be in the crowd, snivelling over the unfairness of the world and being handed tinsel and white socks.

We never squabbled and snivelled over Mary, though. It

went without saying, there's only one girl in the whole world who could play her. Serena Whinn. None of us even sighed with disappointment when Miss Hargreaves beckoned her forward and said 'We'll have you as Mary, shall we, Serena? I'm sure you'll play her beautifully.' Of course she will. Serena was, is, and ever shall be, Mary, Mother of God.

Now I'm standing in the wings, trying not to scratch, with Colin blocking my view and roaring his lines.

'Fear not! Behold! I bring you great tidings of good joy!'

Miss Hargreaves is hissing, 'Good tidings, great joy!' but Colin is roaring on. If I peer round him, I can see one of the shepherds, Shirley Wright, finger in her nose, kneeling up to peer into the audience. She's not interested in what the angel has to say, or in Miss, who's flapping her hand to make her sit down. She just wants to see if her parents are watching.

My parents are out there too, but I don't want to look for them. I just want to rest my eyes on the pool of light at the far side of the stage – at the kneeling vision in blue, Serena Whinn, still and quiet at the heart of a world that spins around her, hands pressed together in prayer as she gazes down with angelic blessing on the plastic doll, wrapped in a nappy, that is our Lord and Saviour. My heart is bursting with love.

*

I was awash with that remembered love. This was how it had been. All-consuming. Of all the world, when I was ten, before all thoughts of sex and hormonal turmoil, I had eyes only for Serena Whinn, a girl I worshipped with a love so pure I knew I had to find it again. If I could only recover that, surely I could

get the world back into balance once more. Until then it would split and keep splitting and splitting, till nothing was left.

I pushed back the throw, before I suffocated under it, and drew a deep breath. What was weird was not that I had suddenly remembered Serena Whinn, but that I had ever forgotten her.

Thirty-five years. That was what had passed since I'd last seen her. At the age of ten I'd been living in Lyford, attending Marsh Green Junior School and Serena had been my idol, my lodestar, my all. Then, on the whim of an adult world, my life had turned a page. I was in a new town, new school, new home, in a life that didn't contain Serena Whinn, and it was as if she'd ceased to be. Until this moment, thirty-five years later, I hadn't given her another thought.

I was appalled at my own disloyalty. How could I have wiped her out?

Serena turned and smiled at me, a smile of disappointment – oh the pain – but her dark eyes melting with forgiveness.

I scrabbled for the table lamp, for the paper and pencils under the sofa, and began to pour out my memories, scribbling, furiously scribbling. Serena's face, Serena's smile, Serena's hands. I was going to bring her back. That way, I would deserve her forgiveness.

Scribble, scribble. Another sheet. Scribble. I only had to shut my eyes to see her there in front of me, beckoning me into her circle of light.

How do you draw a circle of light? There was one around her, I'd swear, and everyone had longed to be in it. The teachers and the sour-faced caretaker, the school swots, the giggling girls, the sporty bouncers. Even the hard bully boys. We'd all worshipped from afar and hopelessly dreamed of edging

closer, of being chosen as one of Serena's bosom friends. I knew the exquisite pain of that dream, because I'd shared in its hopelessness. But I had also known the numbing bliss of its fulfilment.

*

The playing field is chill, the wind is brisk. The rest of the class are stamping, or jumping up and down, eager to be on with the game and running around to get warm.

I don't stamp or jump, because I know nothing will warm me. Life is cold and miserable and full of despair, as the crowd of fellow pupils around me dwindles, summoned one by one into the growing teams. Their names are shouted and off they bound. The loud and athletic went first. Now it's the earnest and eager, and I'm left standing there, me and… well, everyone else. The ragbag useless ones that never get called. The tightness and the little misery grows within me.

Then Serena's voice, clear as a bell, comes to me on the chill wind. 'Karen Rothwell!'

She's looking at me. At me! In my joy I rush forward, stumble, trip and fall flat on my face. I feel the fire in my ankle, my knee, my nose, but any physical pain is swamped by the excruciating humiliation. All ten thousand of my cruel schoolmates hoot and roar with laughter as I struggle up and my tears begins to flow. But there is Serena, smiling down on me, her hand reaching out to pull me to my feet, and suddenly nothing else matters.

*

It was as if she were pulling me up out of reverie into wakefulness.

Loud, rude wakefulness. A crash of bins. The distant grind

of a refuse lorry. Where was I? All through the evening, I had dimly heard the sound of children, TVs, clicking heels, dogs barking, a cat prowling, until the night noises had petered out into silence. Now, out of that silence, the clatter of the bin men burst like a shrieking klaxon into my consciousness and I flung off the throw, the cushions and the papers that had wrapped themselves round me like swaddling clothes.

An avalanche of sketches and a forest of blunted pencils slid chaotically to the floor. I peered down at them. That was all the movement I could manage for the moment. Every joint had stiffened, every inch of me was aching. I had to roll off the sofa onto my knees before struggling to my feet, my clothes still damp, clinging to me like mermaid hands, dragging me down.

Still pitch dark outside but it was morning, the world was waking, and I had been scribbling and thinking all night, giving form to shards of memory that kept emerging like shattered pots from an archaeological dig. Shards that I couldn't quite fit together, but I knew that at the centre of all of them was Serena Whinn. The meaning of it all.

I dragged myself to the window, supporting myself on the books piled high on the sill, and stared out into muffled darkness. Icy rain had given way to icy fog, seeping into the joints of the world. At the end of the yard, on the narrow alley separating the houses of Hobson Road from those of Leopold Street, luminous jackets were yellow blurs, dragging wheelie bins.

I rubbed my eyes, thinking of the bin men back in Marsh Green. The way they used to hoist the bins on their shoulders, crashing the metal lids, loping along at the double like strange

bowed beasts. Like the coal men, bowling along with their sacks on their backs. Sacks of coal and coke. Their memory overlapped with an image – some medieval depiction of the Last Judgement – of humped devils dragging souls down into the jaws of hell. Demons come to drag us down. Too many of them…

Clatter. Grind.

I tugged at my tangled hair, till it hurt, and forced demons out of my mind. They weren't demons in the alley. They were poor sods, out there in the freezing fog, breaking their backs to empty our garbage. Except, not mine. I'd forgotten to take it out again. Too late, now.

High up through the greying blanket, where I knew a bathroom at the rear of a house on Leopold Road to be, a halo of light appeared. The sound of a distant radio came at me through cotton wool. There was a fog inside my head, mirroring the frozen grey outside, swirling confusion as present reality tried to force itself back into focus. Why did it have to? Who needed reality? Who wanted the tedium of another day? Just like the last, and the one before and the one before. Block it out.

I drew in the condensation on the clammy window pane.

A sun. Around it, encompassing it, a five-pointed star. Five sharp points.

Very sharp. The golden girls. Barbara Fulbright, Denise Griggs, Angela Bryant, Ruth Jefferson and Teresa Scott.

There. A surge of satisfaction. I even remembered their names. They were the seraphim surrounding Serena, armed to the teeth and ready to turn their spears on any trespasser who came too close. Not on her command, let it be understood.

Serena smiled on everyone. She would have poured her sunshine out on the whole world. It was her court favourites who were determined to keep the rest of us out. They were jealous, terrified of being usurped. Barbara, Denise, Angela, Ruth and Teresa.

I dropped on my knees and searched through the night's scribbling. Yes, I'd captured each of them in the night, burly Barbara, petite Ruth with her purse on a strap, gangly Angela and her tartan hair ribbons, rotund Denise, serious Teresa with the glasses. I couldn't draw Serena and not draw them. They were welded into one. Except that in my last year at Marsh Green Junior, Teresa Scott had left and the ring was snapped. It needed emergency repair and I, Karen Rothwell, the unworthy and yet the most blessed, had been chosen to take her place.

I could remember the joy.

Karen, come and play with us.

Yes!

And? Nothing more. Just that moment of joy.

The bin men were finished. More lights were on, and louder radios. Doors slammed. Engines started. Daylight was beginning to seep into the fog. How could they do this? How could people just get on with life as if the second coming of Serena Whinn hadn't happened?

I couldn't. There was a riddle here. It had arrived on my doorstep and eaten me whole. At ten years old, I had achieved my dream. I had stepped into Serena's circle of light, and then – what? Something incredible must have followed. Did I acquire mystical enlightenment? Or superhuman powers? Did I conquer the world? Did I achieve greatness or have it thrust upon me? If I did, I couldn't recall any of it.

All I could remember was that first glorious joy of acceptance. Nothing else, except a lurking sense that wasn't akin to joy at all. I could feel it, fingers on my neck, thudding in my heart, thundering in my ears, threading its way into my veins to reclaim me.

Fear.

There was my riddle. How was it that this episode, which had begun with a blazing memory of bliss, left me haunted by a sensation of overwhelming dread? Serena Whinn would have the answer. No one else. Just her. I had to have the answer, had to find her.

The problem was, I didn't have the first idea how.