

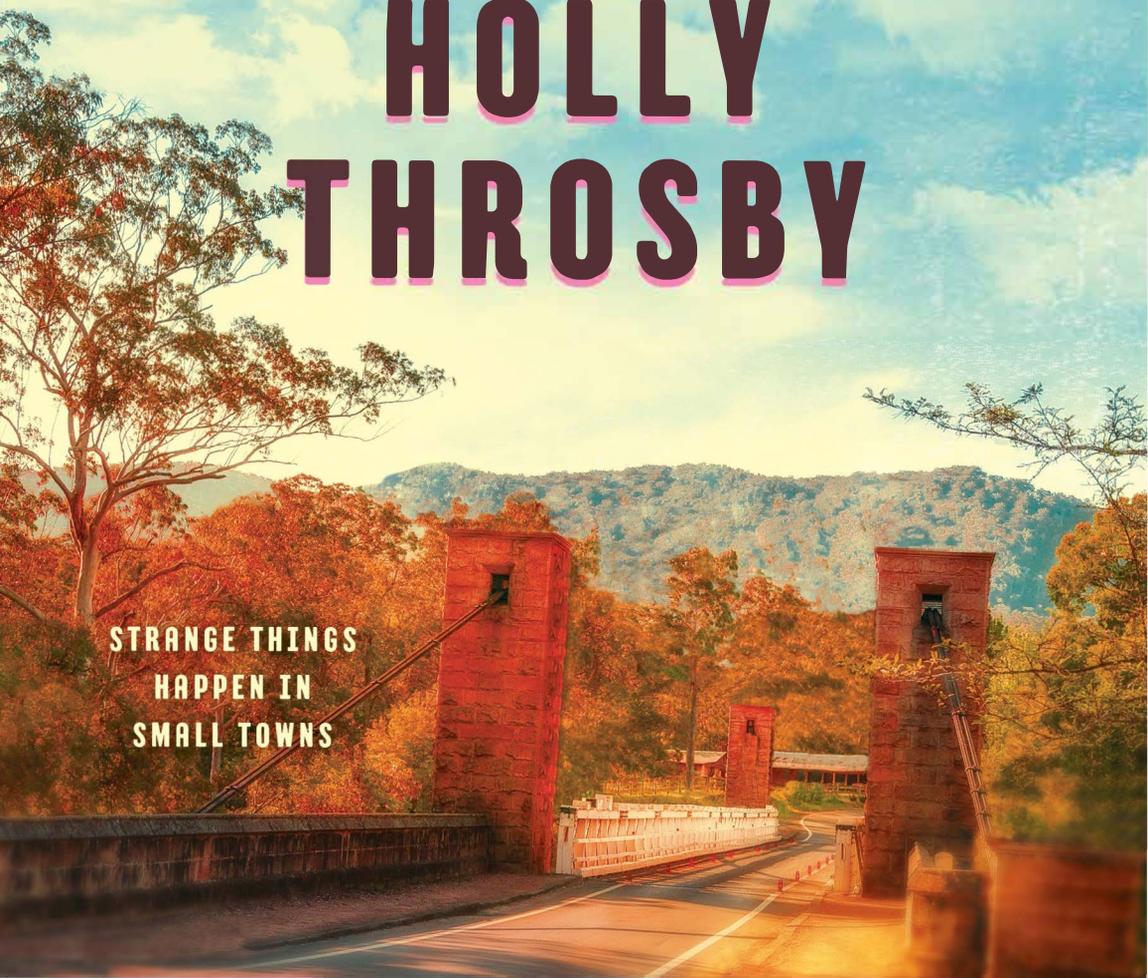
'This is a masterful novel. There's a fragility at the core of her characters and an intimacy that adds depth to their quirks and peccadillos; there is such heart in her storytelling.'

Deborah Crabtree, *Books + Publishing*

# CEDAR VALLEY

## HOLLY THROSBY

STRANGE THINGS  
HAPPEN IN  
SMALL TOWNS



First published in 2018

Copyright © Holly Throsby 2018

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher. The Australian *Copyright Act 1968* (the Act) allows a maximum of one chapter or 10 per cent of this book, whichever is the greater, to be photocopied by any educational institution for its educational purposes provided that the educational institution (or body that administers it) has given a remuneration notice to the Copyright Agency (Australia) under the Act.

Allen & Unwin  
83 Alexander Street  
Crows Nest NSW 2065  
Australia  
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100  
Email: [info@allenandunwin.com](mailto:info@allenandunwin.com)  
Web: [www.allenandunwin.com](http://www.allenandunwin.com)



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 978 1 76063 056 0

Set in 13.9/19 pt Perpetua Std by Bookhouse, Sydney  
Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



The paper in this book is FSC® certified. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

# 1

**B**enny Miller was not the only person to arrive as a stranger in Cedar Valley on the first day of summer in 1993.

A man arrived, too—a calm-faced man in a brown wool suit and a wide-striped tie, clothing too warm for the weather. He strolled down Valley Road, past the hairdresser and a small cafe. A warm wind stirred, carrying with it the faint smell of pies and horses, and the man paused for just a moment before he sat down. Benny Miller would have driven right past him in her station wagon on that bright and brimming day.

Here she was, this young woman Benny Miller, all of twenty-one. She pulled off Valley Road, concentrating on the directions she had committed to mind. A curved street lay before her and Benny eased along it, veering left at the end, two hands steady on the wheel. Wiyanga Crescent, when she reached it, was narrow and short, a cul-de-sac surrounded by bush. She stopped at a weatherboard cottage, double-checking

## HOLLY THROSBY

the number on the letterbox, and pulled her car into a bricked driveway covered in leaves.

Benny Miller got out and stood straight as a pole. She stretched her long arms and took a moment to look around. Low-slung houses were set apart widely and neat grassy footpaths were lined with flowering trees. Boats and camper trailers sat in faded carports. Cicadas sang in the damp air. Full of apprehension, Benny blinked at the street and then turned to stare at the modest green cottage: her new home.



On that same day—the first of December—the man in the suit arrived too. He made his way along Valley Road, arousing little attention, and he sat down directly on the footpath in front of Cedar Valley Curios & Old Wares.

Curios, as it was known to locals, was a big old shop, as cavernous as a barn. It had a large glass frontage with gold-leaf signage and antiques arranged in the window. Cora Franks, the proprietor, saw the well-dressed man as he sat down and leaned his back against the glass. And if she hadn't been deep in conversation with Therese Johnson (about the extramarital affairs of Ed Johnson), then Cora would have got up straight away and said, 'Excuse me, sir, but that isn't the best place to sit—there's a bench for that purpose just along in front of the Coiffure.' But Therese was so upset, on the verge of tears, and Cora didn't think it a good time to interrupt.

## CEDAR VALLEY

Eventually, Therese left and an out-of-town-looking lady came in and asked to see some of the watches that Cora kept in the display cabinet. Then Mary Anne arrived and Cora got to chatting. Later, she organised the books on the back shelves, and she tried on some new blouses that had come in as part of a deceased estate, and by that time it was almost five and she had forgotten about the man on the footpath altogether.



Just a few streets away, Benny Miller had gone to the metal letterbox outside the cottage, opened the lid and fetched the key from inside, just as she'd been instructed. She walked along the path through the long grass at the front of the house and went up the steps to the verandah. The whole look of the place was nicer than she had imagined—the weatherboards, the stained-glass windows, the steep slant of the roof—although she hadn't really known what to expect on the drive.

Benny had never been to Cedar Valley before, nor to many other places either. She'd been born and raised in Sydney and was yet to travel—except for a primary school excursion to Canberra and a high school excursion to Jindabyne, both of which had been cold. Her childhood home was a terrace house in Rozelle, with a view of the power station. Her most recent home, up till this morning, was a terrace house in Glebe, a few doors along from the cinema. She'd shared it

## HOLLY THROSBY

with three friends she met at university. They were good friends, good people. But Benny had always been wary of friends in some deep-down way and, despite their goodness, she had maintained a careful distance, perceptible only to herself. She was so grateful—almost guiltily so—when they had helped her load her car for the drive to Cedar Valley, waving and yelling their goodbyes as she pulled out of the carport and honked her horn, laughing.

But of course the laughing hadn't lasted. By the time the outer suburbs of Sydney had become unfamiliar, a spring of sadness had welled in Benny's chest, along with an ordinary old fear of the unknown that she did her stoic best to ignore.

Why had Benny Miller come to Cedar Valley? Well that was simple enough. Benny had come on account of Odette Fisher, her mother's old friend. Odette owned this pale green cottage and had said that Benny could stay there as long as she wanted. The offer had drawn Benny like a magnet. She had quit her job at the pub, handed in her final assignments and sat her exams. Then she had sat in her room in Glebe, listening to Harry Nilsson, packing her clothes into an open suitcase, and imagining her new life in a small town with its lonely sophistication.

The fact that Benny had never actually *met* Odette did not deter her. She had thought about her a great deal. And she knew her face so well from the photographs. Odette and Benny's mother were the closest of friends. Benny had

## CEDAR VALLEY

keenly collected pictures of them together and kept them in a cardboard box, along with her other treasures. Not a month went by when she didn't look at them, these pictures of her mother, and of her mother with Odette, in various poses: sitting at a bar, standing in front of an old car, leaning against a long wooden fence, their faces fresh and free.

And then Odette's letter had arrived to sit on Frank Miller's kitchen table like a prize.

'It's from Odette Fisher,' said Frank, Benny's father. 'Her name's written on the back.'

He let out a nervous laugh and kept his eyes on the tin of cedar polish he was applying to a dining chair.

'Your, ah . . . your mum's friend, Odette Fisher,' he said to the chair.

The letter was addressed formally to Benita Miller, and Benny took it eagerly to read it in the car.

'Dear Benny,' it said. 'I am Odette Fisher, an old friend of your mother. I write to say how very sorry I am, Benny, to hear the news. I haven't seen Vivian in some years but of course I'm heartbroken. Please, if you need anything would you let me know? I'm sure Vivian would want me to check in on you, and I feel awful that we have never met. Perhaps you would consider visiting me where I live in Cedar Valley, approximately two and a half hours from Sydney. It would be so nice to get to know you a little. If you would ever like to talk, do call me on this number anytime.'

## HOLLY THROSBY

A telephone number was written below in black pen.

Benny sat in the driver's seat and held the letter, and then she read it again. Afterwards, she drove back to her house in Glebe, fetched her box of photographs down from the top shelf of her cupboard and sifted through them to find the photos she knew were of Odette.

Then she sat on the bed and lay the pictures in a neat row on the quilt.

There was Odette Fisher.

And next to her, there was Benny's mother.

A cold feeling came over Benny, like stepping into snow, and then the old familiar stirrings of yearning and shame. But on that day, something new followed. Perhaps it was something close to excitement—a bustling in her chest. *It would be so nice to get to know you a little.* Benny shut her eyes and balanced, as if on a rope, between strange divergent feelings. Then she lay back on the bed, stared at the ceiling, and decided that she would call Odette Fisher, just as soon as she'd worked out what she wanted to say. And when she did call, it was in that brief and oddly comfortable conversation that Odette had made the offer: of her accommodation; her company. Benny could feel the warmth in the older woman's voice coming down the phone line. How easy it was to talk with this woman, Odette Fisher.

'That house has been sitting there empty all year, Benny. I'd be happy to have someone in it. And you could come visit

## CEDAR VALLEY

me as much as you like. I'm just a ten-minute drive out of town up the mountain. I'd so love to have you around.'

So here she was—Benny Miller in Cedar Valley—standing in her high-waisted jeans and T-shirt on the unfamiliar verandah with a key in her hand, while the well-dressed man on Valley Road was sitting on the footpath.



In one report, he was seen to extend his arm out and then above his head, elegantly, 'like a dancer'; in another he rested his chin against his chest, and then turned his head slowly from side to side, as if stretching the muscles in his neck. There was nothing unsavoury about the look of him. No indication of drunkenness or insanity. He was handsome enough, with kindly eyes, and in 'perfectly good condition', according to Janet Avery, who nursed at Valley Road Family Medical and was quoted later in the newspaper. Everyone who walked past the seated man that afternoon reported his healthy appearance as much as his calm and contented expression.

He just stretched and sat, and stared a little, and sat some more, and at some point—after a good while sitting on the footpath up against the big glass window under the gold leaf letters—he died.

## 2

**A** person could come at Cedar Valley from several directions. From the north or south, it was just a few moments off the coastal highway, via a charming stretch of road where cows looked on from a large paddock and horses mingled under a clump of trees near a fence. Towards the east, small roads beat a meandering path that eventually found the ocean. Sparkling beaches lined the coast with sand as white as teeth.

But if you came in via the big motorway, which was off to the west, it was a treacherous descent down the bushy mountain on a mosquito-coil of a road. It wound in and out in the speckled shade and moss grew along the edges of the bitumen. Occasional white posts were the only thing to stop a car from skidding through the thick ferns and off over the edge of the mountain.

This was the way Benny had come in that morning, her ears popping with the altitude, and her old car rattling at an angle around the tight curves. Benny sat stiffly, gripping

## CEDAR VALLEY

the wheel, and she had taken the advice of every road sign, especially the ones that called for a speed limit of twenty-five kilometres per hour. At one point she realised she was barely breathing, such was the intensity of her concentration. It was the steepest road she had ever encountered, and the bends were the sharpest. By the time she had reached the bottom, a small rim of sweat sat along the back of her neck.

In Benny's station wagon, along with Benny, were most of her worldly belongings. She'd purchased two suitcases from the Vinnies on Glebe Point Road and filled them full of clothes. Tapes and books were stuffed into old beer cartons and plastic bags. In the footwells were some small furnishings (a reading lamp, a bedside table). She had stored her larger items in Frank Miller's garage, while he chewed his fingernails and admitted nothing of his true feelings.

Benny's most important possession—her box of photographs and personal treasures—sat on the passenger seat beside her.

At the bottom of the mountain, greatly relieved, Benny let herself look about at the tall gum trees that grew thickly all around. Their trunks were cream, or brown, or grey and gradually they gave way to open space. Paddocks lined with wire fences. Some sheep on a tufty hill. Farmhouses with machinery beside them and old tin sheds. She saw a boat in a driveway, under a tarpaulin, and short white birds with long bent necks.

## HOLLY THROSBY

Soon enough Benny came upon a bridge that stood like a sentry before the town of Cedar Valley. It was old and grand, with tall sandstone towers that caught the light in a particular way and seemed to glow. In a moment, Benny was driving over it, and she saw how high it was over the brown water. She slowed the car to a crawl, rolling the window down and hearing, for the first time, the sound of a rushing river.

All of this would have happened just moments before the well-dressed man sat down on Valley Road. And it infuriated Benny ever after that she couldn't remember seeing him as she came in, but of course she didn't, she was too busy looking around at the main road of the town. She drove past a post office, a pizzeria, a hardware store, a bookstore, and she felt good about the general feel of the place and the look of the people. A man in a brimmed hat and a flannel shirt was reading a newspaper in a neat park. Benny saw how wide the main street was—it was immensely wide—and she took in the handsome brick shopfronts with verandahs above them. There was a crowd of people outside a shop called Fran's World Famous Pies, and a big pub sat on a broad corner, painted pink and yellow and green. A truck rattled past, filling her car with an unfamiliar aroma that Benny would soon recognise as horses.

But Benny didn't see a man in a well-made suit, and she didn't notice the gold leaf letters that spelt out CEDAR VALLEY CURIOS & OLD WARES either. Small street trees were planted

## CEDAR VALLEY

along that section of Valley Road, and there was a particularly low awning that obscured easy vision from passing cars.

Benny merely drove by, turned left at the grocery store, past the weedy vacant lot, and soon found the pale green house, the key in the letterbox.

She unlocked the door and stood for a moment in the living room that smelled of dust and closed windows. There was a slow-combustion fireplace in the corner and a pile of logs and newspapers in a basket beside it. Odette had told her the house was furnished, and it surely was: long couches with large cushions, a coffee table, an armchair, everything tasteful and old. There was a wooden sideboard with a record player on it, and paintings in antique frames on the walls.

Benny went along the hallway to the kitchen, put her bag on the table and read a note Odette had left on the bench. It said she'd been over yesterday to turn the fridge on and that she'd left some milk and cheese in it. Benny saw fresh bread on the counter, some peaches, and dirt-smudged eggs in a bowl.

*Possum may still be living in the shed, he sleeps in the washbasin on the shelf. Python lives in the roof—don't worry, he can't get into the house.*

Benny read this and glanced up at the ceiling worriedly. Then she unlatched the double doors that opened out onto a little deck, and she sat down on the slats and ate a peach.

The garden was overgrown with trees and weeds and vines, and the shed at the back was an old slanted thing with

## HOLLY THROSBY

a corrugated-iron roof and a door hanging off one hinge. Behind it was bush, dense high gum trees with cicadas singing in them and bird calls she didn't recognise.

Benny contemplated the wild garden and thought of sending a letter to Jules to tell him where she was and what she was doing, but as soon as the thought occurred to her, she knew she most probably wouldn't.

Instead, she went back inside and decided on the front bedroom, which was smaller than the middle one, but she liked the picture window facing the street. She made a few trips to the car, bringing in her suitcases and boxes, and she unpacked her sheets and made the bed. A quilt was folded on the seat of the picture window so she spread it out on top and thought the bed looked nice. She opened her box of treasures, setting her collection of interesting rocks and stones in a neat line along the bedhead. Then she pulled out her favourite photo of her mother and put the silver frame on the bedside table.

Benny Miller sat still in the quiet room and stared at the picture.

'Hi, Mum,' she said. 'I miss you.'

The walls were cream and the room was quiet. Benny's mum—whose name was Vivian Alice Moon—smiled back from the photo.

'I miss you too, Benny,' said Benny aloud to herself, as if it were her mother talking, and she lay back on the coloured quilt.

## CEDAR VALLEY

Benny was not much of a crier.

She was more given to quiet rumination, or spells of busied distraction, buoying herself with some activity or another, finding relief in her capabilities, keeping herself afloat with a valiant kind of independence.

But being so far from home—perhaps that's what it was—the newness of it snuck up on her. She pulled her knees up to her chest, squeezed her eyes closed and, though she did everything she could to hold it in, out it came, the hot tears and sound. Benny lay on her side and made a cocoon of her body there on the bed, curling herself up as small as she could as if trying to disappear. She wept softly at first. Then she creaked open, like the door of an old shed, and she sobbed with all the elemental sadness that a person can only feel when their mother has newly died.

### 3

Cora Franks generally shut Curios at four-thirty, but on that day it was a while after. She'd got stuck into the book organising and decided to make new signs for her sections: *Romance*, *Crime/Horror*, *Action*, *Fiction*, *Cooking* and *Misc*. The signs were good, she thought, since she'd used a ruler under the letters to make the bottom edges straight, and she'd made them out of fluoro cardboard, so they stood out from the front of the shop if you were looking back towards the bookcases.

What stood out when you looked at the front of the shop, though, now that Cora was on her way towards the door, was the silhouette of the man in the suit, who had sat down there—how long ago now? A long time. What on earth was he still doing there? Begging? Cora Franks shook her head in annoyance and stepped out the front door, closing it behind her, and while she was in the process of locking it she began speaking, very sternly, to the suited gentleman on the ground.

'Excuse me, *sir*. That is not the best place to sit.'

## CEDAR VALLEY

The man stared calmly forward. His eyes were fixed on the chemist across the road. They were blue—his eyes—or they were grey; it was hard to tell in the five o'clock light.

'Sir?' said Cora, looking across at him now.

She finished locking up and shuffled on her brief legs the three or so metres to where he was sitting.

He was leaning back so his head was propped against the glass. His legs were straight out in front of him and his feet, in polished shoes, splayed out to either side. Looking at him front on, the gold lettering of *Old Wares* appeared to go right through him like a stake, impaling him sideways. His body covered most of the W. He looked so peaceful it seemed almost a shame to disturb him—and he had such a likeable face. Cora was already feeling bad for thinking ill of him. He was the kind of man who made you feel safe just to look at, like a gentlemanly hero from an old movie. He would know the way out of a difficult situation, a man like that. And what a nice suit it was, a properly authentic vintage suit.

'Sir?' she said again, more gently.

'Not one for conversation, is he?' said Lil Chapman, who had wandered out from the quilting shop next door to have a cigarette. 'I've seen you sitting there most of the afternoon, doing your stretches. You like to stretch, do you? Are you from out of town?' This last part was said slowly in a loud voice, as if he were either a moron or lacking basic knowledge of the English language. Lil Chapman, her hair faded and her

## HOLLY THROSBY

cheeks creased with age, looked up to the sky and blew out a line of smoke.

Cora just stared downwards. Perhaps she went a little pale.

‘Sir? *Please!*’ she said, urgently this time, and waved her hand in front of his face.

The man did not blink. His chest, under a wide-striped tie that looked moderately expensive, was perfectly still.

‘Lil,’ said Cora, ‘I think we’d better call someone.’