

Stopover at Wattleplains

by

Judith Deane-Freeman

When the birds return to Lake Garcello in outback NSW, I pack my camera, some clothes and laptop, and head west. After years of drought, the migratory birds are back, and for a freelance journalist and bird photographer, it's too good an opportunity to miss. My love of birds goes right back. Maybe it's because of my name. Jacinta Wren. And would you believe it? My mother's maiden name was Finch. As a little girl I was determined to marry a Hawk one day. Now that I know I can change my name to whatever I choose, I have become quite attached to Wren.

I break my long journey west in a town I've never heard of, called Wattleplains, because firstly, I am tired and I'd just passed one of those signs exhorting drivers to rest and revive every two hours, and secondly, I am hungry and need a hot pie instead of the tired sandwich I'd prepared hours earlier. Also, my attention is captured by a painted silo, spotted as I slow to the speed limit. I've heard about the silo trail, and sited right by the train line running parallel to the main highway, it is my first opportunity to take a look at an example.

I get out of my car and dodging the traffic cross the highway before looking up at a vividly painted scene depicting farm life. I follow parrots swooping in a blue sky above a tractor ploughing chocolate furrows, and around the curve of the silo walls, as a timeline is revealed. The colours fade as time winds back and I find myself looking at scenes in sepia from what my sister and I used to call the olden days. Returning to the other side, I admire the vivid depiction of colourful birds appearing to dive and soar in an airy defiance of the harsh concrete silo walls on which they are painted. I take some photos with my phone and then walk the circumference once more, looking for the artist's name. I consider fetching my real camera from the car, but hunger intervenes.

I cross the highway again, following the heavenly aroma of freshly baked bread to find a pie, a coffee and an opportunity to make some inquiries. The bakery staff direct me to the council for information about the silo art, and as I make my way through a big, airy entrance to the building shared with the library and history room, someone calls from behind.

'Bethany? Where have you been hiding all this time?'

I am the only person in sight so I turn around to face a young man who must have come in off the street behind me.

‘You’re not Bethany?’ he says. ‘Or are you?’

‘Nope, not Bethany, sorry.’

The young man looks embarrassed and puzzled all at once.

‘Right, then you must be her cousin. You look so alike. Do you know where she is? Stu’s got a bone to pick with her big time.’

I was beginning to feel like Alice falling down the rabbit hole.

‘I have absolutely no idea who Bethany is. I’m looking for the council chambers.’

‘What’s your name, then?’ The young guy is really quite persistent, and I felt a prickle of unease. He looks harmless enough; good-looking if a country vibe is your thing, but I’m a city girl and schooled not to give my name out to just anyone. One of the library staff wanders by with an armful of books which is how I deduce her role. Also, she has an ID badge. **Rhiannon/Library assistant.**

‘Bethany! You’re back!’

‘She says she’s not Bethany.’

‘Oops. Sorry. My bad. My glasses are back at reception.’ She hitches the armful of books and peers at me over the top. ‘I’ll just dump these books. Don’t let her get away, Daz. I want to hear about Bethany.’ And she disappears through the self-opening doors. Reassured that Rhiannon knows Daz and will be back any minute, I decide to set the record straight.

‘Look, Daz. I don’t know anyone called Bethany. I’ve never been here before in my life. For what it’s worth my name is Jacinta Wren.’

The young guy Daz, who I should probably stop thinking of in those terms because he is every bit my age, I must acknowledge, is very cool. More R.M. Williams than Country Target, if you know what I mean. Think grazier rather than farmhand. Daz looks at me and grins, his blue eyes twinkling in a lean, suntanned face.

‘Well, there ya go, I knew it. Wrens have lived here forever. You must be related to Bethany. What’s your father’s name?’

My Alice in Wonderland feeling returns as Rhiannon arrives with an older woman who studies me with interest. Her name tag read **Michelle/Librarian.**

‘You do look like our Bethany, love. Not just your face, it’s the way you move. I saw you crossing the street earlier. Here’s trouble, I thought. Bethany’s back.’

‘But she’s not Bethany! She’s Jacinta Wren and she’s never been in Wattleplains before.’

‘Is that right? We’ve got a bit of a mystery on our hands here then, haven’t we?’ Michelle crosses her arms across a substantial bosom and looks me up and down. ‘Let me take you along to the Family History Room. You’re in luck, Jeff’s in today.’

Rhiannon peers at me from behind Michelle as if I am a rare and exotic specimen. She looks both fascinated and suspicious, making me wonder if much happens in the town of Wattleplains since I appear to be the focus of so much curiosity. Then, I realise that it is the elusive Bethany provoking all the interest, and not me at all. Time to be firm.

‘You might have a problem, but I don’t,’ I tell them. ‘I’m passing through town and wanted to find out about the silo art. Maybe pick up a brochure about the art trail and the artists. So, if you could just point me in the direction of the council inquiry desk, I’d be grateful.’ Rhiannon steps out from behind Michelle and stands between her and Daz looking as determined as the others look disappointed.

‘Seriously, Jacinta? You don’t want to know your connection to the Wattleplains Wrens? Because you’re connected, believe me. My mum was a Wren and, no kidding, that family is bat shit crazy.’

‘That’s hardly encouraging, Rhiannon, dear. The Wrens were pioneers and are well respected members of our town.’ Michelle sounds reproofing.

‘Crazy though,’ agrees Daz. ‘They’re Brethren. Don’t believe in dancing, singing or any modern world shit.’

‘All prayers and judgment,’ explains Rhiannon. ‘If you’re a Wren from around here, your old man probably cleared out because of the Brethren. My mum left that mob, but she stayed around.’

‘That’s the older generation of Wrens,’ says Michelle. ‘The young ones have moved on from those narrow-minded views.’

‘Yeah, like Bethany. She’s a wild child, that one.’

‘But my father is not from here,’ I say, uncertainty creeping in. Where was he from when it came down to it? Sydney is all he’d ever tell us. Parents dead. It has always been a no-go area. I guess I should check it out.

In the History Room, Jeff does a double take as I am pushed in front of him by Michelle, with Daz and Rhiannon on her heels.

‘Yeah, No, Jeff. She’s not Bethany, she’s Jacinta Wren.’

‘Well, I can see that she’s a Wren. You must be Marg and Ed’s granddaughter, right? Neil’s daughter. A bad business that.’

And who knew? I learn that my grandparents had died in a car accident a few K's out of town. Their young son Neil, my father, was sent away to a Brethren boarding school, never to return. As soon as he was able to escape, he turned his back on a town that he believed had let him down. I gave him a call and he, reluctantly at first, confirmed it all. His grandparents hadn't wanted him, no one else had put their hands up and he'd resented it for many years. Put it behind him, made a new and happy life with Wendy Finch. But time has passed, his grandparents are long dead, and he is okay for me to check out the remaining Wrens; his cousins, our cousins.

Bethany comes back to town, mighty relieved that my unexpected arrival has shifted the focus from her. She's my second cousin but we are so alike, we could be twins. And not only in appearance. Like me, Bethany is a party animal and like me, she is prone to bad choices in her personal life.

We bond over beers at the local.

She makes it up with Stu.

Daz, Stu, Bethany and Rhiannon introduce me far and wide, and it's like I've come home.

And believe it or not, it turns out Daz's real name is Daniel Falcon.

So, as you will have guessed, I miss documenting the birds return to Lake Garcello for this year.

The End. ©