



Fiction © 28 March 2013 by Robert Richter

Bland is the ironic name of a sleepy little Missouri town, 100 miles from St. Louis. A quiet two-lane highway slows down there, rolling over gentle hills. A railroad track runs through, paralleling its only main street, lined with few modest businesses, abandoned storefronts and the post office, devastated a few years back by a wayward tornado. Summer sun bakes the red Missouri clay on hot, humid days. Grasshoppers bound through sparse cornfields. At night, warm winds stir mosquitos, as crickets chirp to each other under star-filled skies. Bland is a town that time and commerce passed. People there are friendly, conservative and value family. Life goes on.

True to its name, Bland never had much mercantile success. A forgotten railway stop in the middle of rocky, hard-clay farm country, it seems to hide low in the hills, shy and modest. A number of local businesses were driven out when Walmart came to Gasconade County. One undertaker serves the needs of the aging, dwindling population. People there don't expect a lot of their lives. Many struggle. Most are content with their quiet routine and families, raising their kids and doing their best.

A small run-down factory sits at the edge of the main street. Over decades, it stumbled through several configurations. The Brown Shoe Company made leather shoes there, until a mix of competition and changing fashion forced its closing. Leather shoes were being replaced by increasingly popular athletic shoes. American workers were being replaced by foreign workers. Most of Bland's were out of work. A few light manufacturers filled-in over the years, trying to make a profit. They failed too. Finally, a lawn furniture assembler took over and made a modest effort, bringing some locals back to work.

Belle, the closest town, is a few miles up the highway. It's a little bigger, but not much different from its neighbor down the road. Bland teenagers bus there for high school. Bland vs. Belle softball teams carry on a fierce rivalry. If things get slow in Bland, a night out might feature a drive to Belle for a its meager menu of entertainment. Young folks with nothing to do cruise to Belle for their excitement.

Gayford Miller and his wife Jessie lived in Bland. They built their own modest frame house on a quiet street three blocks from the railroad tracks. He drove a bus all his life in St. Louis. The night-owl shift. Home at dawn, Jessie would fix his breakfast and he'd settle into bed, as the city woke. They raised four kids and a couple of grandkids. They spent Friday nights in a neighborhood tavern talking, listening to the jukebox and drinking Budweiser with friends and family. Gayford was a quiet man who liked to ask questions. Being a good listener, he learned a lot. Without a formal education, he was a wise man with practical sense. He liked to sit on the front porch on summer

evenings before work. Looking at the stars with his grandchildren, he asked what they thought was out there. His questions rarely had easy answers. Time passed quickly. On Gayford's retirement, he and Jessie moved to Bland, to live out their lives near the graves of their parents.

Jessie's sister Pearl lived in Bland all her life. Her house crouched at the bottom of a hill below the highway. She had a few husbands and numerous suitors. Pearl had a reputation as a flirty girl. In her old age, she had wide bowed legs. It was observed that she would wrap those legs around her rocking chair, rocking vigorously against the gentle rise in the wood seat, masturbating herself. One story goes that one of her husbands got jealous of a rival for her affection. Mysteriously, that man was found dead one morning, run over by a train. Country justice was served. The Gasconade County Prosecutor never charged her husband.

Pearl raised chickens and two boys, Sonny and Todd. Sonny, the oldest, wore thick glasses and tended toward husky. He'd lost the last segment of his right thumb in a farming accident. Despite that stump thumb, Sonny was a star fast-pitcher on Bland's softball team. He married, raised his kids and worked at the town factory. Pearl's other son Todd was a dark-haired, good-looking good-for-nothing. He took to the guitar, took on an Elvis hair-do and took advantage of his mother. He played in bands and ran with fast ladies. Todd and his parade of girlfriends lived with Pearl much of her life. Somehow, Todd got by on his looks, talent and mother.

Jessie's brother Cecil lived with his wife Lucy near the Baptist Church. Prissy, the minister's daughter ran a beauty parlor and did Lucy's hair. It was always smooth sprayed and tight waved, its shining grey tinted slightly blue. A scandal ran through Bland when it was discovered that, for many years, the widowed minister and his daughter were lovers.

Cecil worked at the factory and came home every day for lunch. At noon, Lucy cooked their main meal, often in the company of their daughter Dorothy and grandkids. Dorothy's husband Noah was a farmer, a tall, handsome man with black wavy-hair and sky blue eyes. His kids worshipped him. His oldest boy wanted to learn to shoot a shotgun. One late summer afternoon in lengthening shadows, Noah took his son to a pasture below a hill and was climbing a fence. Carrying the shotgun, his foot caught in one of the rails, tipping his balance. As Noah hit the ground, the shotgun discharged. The exploding shell tore into Noah. His young son watched the light fade from his blue eyes, as life ran out of his father.

The Gasconade County Republican carried the story on its front page. Friends and family came from miles around for the tragic funeral. The undertaker took Noah away, up the hill to the cemetery. Bland, Missouri mourned the death of one of its finest. A choking sorrow spread over the town. And the world kept turning around.

ROBERT RICHTER