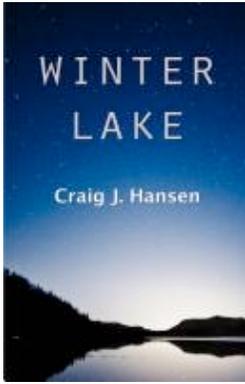
A night landscape featuring a calm lake in the foreground, reflecting the sky. The sky is a deep blue, filled with numerous stars. In the background, dark silhouettes of forested hills or mountains are visible against the lighter horizon. The overall mood is serene and quiet.

WINTER LAKE

Craig J. Hansen



Winter Lake continues the story of Jason Audley, introduced in the novel *The Skeleton Train*. It is now seven years later and we find Jason wandering northern Wisconsin as the drummer in the woeful Chess Chalmers Band. His journey eventually takes him to Winter Lake and adventure, where his aimlessness doesn't work, where others grow to depend on him, and where he finds that he must confront his past to reveal his future.

Winter Lake

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Winter Lake

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Chapter 1

“Your Uncle Karl says you play drums,” Chess Chalmers says.

“Yup,” I say.

“You any good? How long have you played?”

“I’ve been playing for seven, eight years,” I say.

“Here’s what I mean by are you any good. Them drummers that got their diddles and daddles and fills that go in circles until the band’s lost in the woods, that ain’t good. You know, those guys with twenty toms and bongos and whatnot, sit back there like the grand pasha?”

I nod.

“But a drummer who can keep a beat.” Chess pounds a funereal rhythm on the table. “That’s a drummer. That’s what I’m talking about. Can you do that, or are you a diddle-daddler?”

“I can do that,” I say.

“This ain’t no picnic. We play for some demanding folks. They’ve come to expect a lot from Chess Chalmers. I’m kind of a celebrity on this circuit, kind of well-known. Respected. Had some hits, you know. Regional. Never made the charts. But these folks, they know me. They know my standards. And we play a whole lot of different stuff. A show band. You follow?”

“I do. You’re talking about quality,” I offer.

“You bet I am, young man.” Chess leans back, pushes his half eaten sandwich away. He waves to the waitress.

“This here’s on me,” he says when he gets the bill. “I tell you what. I’m going to take a chance here. Your Uncle Karl, he’s a stand-up guy. You don’t exactly look like a drummer

Craig J. Hansen

to me. I'll be honest. You're kind of—tall, big. But I'm going to say, let's go for it. I'm going to say welcome from Chess Chalmers."

He offers his hand. It's a firm, brief shake.

"Great," I say. "Mr. Chalmers..."

"Chess," he says, "goddam it son, call me Chess."

"I thought you planted trees," I say.

"Well, yeah, I got a tree farm. But once I get 'em in the ground, I hire out the rest of it to the Mexicans and I tour."

"That's cool," I say. "Where exactly do you tour?"

"Didn't your Uncle Karl tell you anything? It's a big deal, Chess Chalmers and his band. We tour all throughout northern Wisconsin. All summer. Through all them resorts, clubs, casinos, biker bars, you name it."

"So I'm not planting trees?" I say. "You serious about drumming?"

"Hell, yes, son. Those trees are in the ground. That's done. Now it's up to the Mexicans."

Chess gets up, hitches up his jeans. He's a thin man, but he's got a little belly, like he swallowed a grapefruit. Chess looks at me, right in the eyes. "You finish up. I gotta run. What you say your name was?"

"Jason," I say.

"Okay, Jason. We'll meet you here, 6 AM tomorrow. Bring your drums. You got drums, right? Cases?"

"Nope," I say.

Chess nods. "Yeah, well, I got some drums for you to use then. They'll be in the truck. You just show up here, with your personal gear then."

"Tomorrow?" I say.

Chess nods. "I wanted to go this afternoon, but I got some things to take care of."

Winter Lake

“Don’t you rehearse or something first?”

“Hell, no,” Chess smiles. “The boys know the tunes. You’ll pick it up.” He leans over and taps out the dirge again.

I nod.

Chess winks. “You gonna meet some ladies, ladies who like Chess Chalmers and his band.”

“Great,” I say.

Chess walks away, stopping to talk to everyone in the diner. They all know him. I guess that’s because he’s a celebrity.

I go back to Uncle Karl’s.

“You get the job?” he asks.

“It was to be a drummer. To go on tour,” I say.

“No shit,” Uncle Karl says, and laughs. “Well, maybe we can find you something else tomorrow.”

“I took it,” I say. “I’m going on tour.”

Next morning. I’m there, with a duffel. Rained last night and there’s a mist close to the ground. Chess introduces me.

“This here’s Jake,” he says, pointing to me. “New drummer.”

“Jason,” I say.

“Rusty,” says an Asian man about my age. He’s smoking, palms his cigarette in his left hand, and shakes with his right. His hand is cold.

“Best goddam lead player north of Kenosha,” Chess says. “And over here, these sorry looking sons of bitches, they’re the Tierney boys, Bob and Miles. Bass and piano.”

They are a few years older than me. “Jake,” one says, “welcome, man.”

“And here we got Lark,” Chess says. “My niece.”

Craig J. Hansen

Lark is small, skinny. She wears a sleeveless tee shirt. I'm chilly in a jean jacket. Her dark hair is short, kind of a Julius Caesar haircut. She's got a tattoo on one arm, but I can't see what it is.

"She plays trumpet and a little bit of sax," Chess says. "Helps out on the vocals. She brings the zing to the Chess Chalmers band."

Lark frowns at me.

"Me and Lark, we'll drive the truck." A white panel van, rusted, says Chess Chalmers Review in curly, red letters. "You boys, you follow in the Chess-mobile."

It's like an old airport van, with flat gray anti-rust paint. Inside is a split captain's chair for the driver and three tight rows of school bus seats. We toss our gear in the back. Bob drives. He fires it up and exhaust swirls into the cabin. Bob yells something back at us, but we can't hear him over the engine.

Bob turns, yells again. "Try not to breathe deep," he says.

Astrid died three years ago. She's my mother. Was. This is how it should have gone:

Astrid is out running. Tall, bony. Her hair just started to turn gray, and it's tied back. It's long, like a pioneer woman. It swings when she runs. Suddenly, she sees a kid. A blind kid, riding a bicycle. Nothing good can come of this, she thinks. And sure enough, he rides out into the street, right in front of a bus. Astrid reacts instantly, dashes out, snatches the boy off the bicycle just as the bus crushes it. The bus driver, horrified, jerks the wheel and crashes into a tank truck carrying something really volatile. The tank truck flies off the street and lands on a man mowing the grass. Volatile liquid spills, and the spark plug ignites it.

Winter Lake

There's a thudding explosion and a ball of superheated plasma engulfs everything. The truck. The bus. The man and the lawnmower. The little blind boy. And Astrid, though she never knows what happened. It's too fast. She's aware only of a flash of light and then a sensation of falling. Falling apart, first in big pieces, then in small pieces, then in molecules, atoms, quarks, muons, gluons, and strings. She feels no pain, no fear, no surprise, no regret. She embraces dissolution unlike anything else in her life.

But it didn't happen that way. She got uterine cancer and despite the cuttings, the poisonings, the positive attitudes, it spread through her like kudzu until she was dead. I don't understand cancer's motives, its *raison d'être*. It exists to grow, to take over, to win. But what it conquers it kills, thereby killing itself. Is it stupid? Or does it have a tragic sense of destiny? Or is it martyrdom? Or does it feel cheated? Striving, growing, living, it all leads to oblivion.

The funny thing, the really funny thing, is that about one year after Astrid died, I got cancer. Miller Construction wanted to take me on full-time, instead of paying me under the table. I had to get a physical.

"Have you been sick?" the doc asks me.

"No," I say.

"Your glands are swollen," he says.

And so I find out, a bit down the line, that I have lymphoma. Hodgkin's disease. One of the most common cancers in young adults, and a good one to get, because, five years after treatment, 80% have not had a reoccurrence.

I had no symptoms, other than swollen lymph nodes. Never felt sick, or lethargic. No pain. Nothing. I felt fine. I felt fine until I went through the treatments. I lost a year to

Craig J. Hansen

chemo, radiation, and more chemo. Lost my muscles and my hair. Lost contact with my life. What I gained was debt. I had no insurance. The Millers helped me out. Anna Bella helped me out. Lydia, my sister, helped me out. But I am 25 and I can't see that I will ever be able to pay this off. In two years, I've not dented it.

And two years after the treatment, more swollen glands. That's what I have now. No symptoms. Just swollen glands. I can't tell anyone about this. It's embarrassing. I want to be a winner, not a relapser. I can't lose another year. Not just yet. I decide, after sober reflection, to wait and see.

Most of the time, I live in Anna Bella's basement. Anna Bella Woolcott, Astrid's girlfriend. She cried like a baby when Astrid died, and didn't write poetry for six months. During this time, I emptied the dehumidifier, cut the grass, cooked, went to work, took some classes, and got drunk with Anna Bella.

Outside of the van, rain falls and we close the windows. Rusty chain-smokes and I feel queasy. I'm riding in the back, which jolts and bounces crazily, in three dimensions, maybe more. Bob strains to see through the foggy windshield. No A/C, so no real defrost. We lose Chess when one of our wipers flies off. We pull over. Rusty finds it in the ditch, his black hair plastered to his head, a soggy cigarette in his hand.

"Aha!" he says. Bob tries to reattach it, but something's missing, and it flies off again as soon as he turns it on, catapulting back into the ditch. Rusty and Bob think this is hilarious. They do it again, and once more, watch the wiper flip away. It just kills them. Then there's a simultaneous

Winter Lake

flash of lightning and gut-thumping thunder and we get back in the van.

Bob starts the motor and yells to Rusty, conferring about where to go. Rusty pulls out his cell phone. "Oops," he says. "Battery's dead." In this short time, Miles has fallen asleep. They wake him up because he also has a cell phone, but it's dead, too. He hasn't paid the bill in six months, he says, but he still likes to carry it around.

"Where are we going?" I shout to Rusty.

Rusty turns, grins. "Wherever Bob takes us, man," he says.

We find Chess and the panel truck at a gas station and follow it into Esquato. We aren't far from Green Bay. We pull into the gravel lot of a VFW hall.

"Wedding," Chess tells me. "Perfect place for your first gig. No one gives a shit at a wedding."

We unload equipment into a large, stale room. Card tables have white paper taped over them. Looks like it would seat about 100. There's a small riser for the band back in a dark corner. It's 3 o'clock. We have until 5 to set up. I can haul things, but I'm no help in plugging things in. So I set up the drums, which seem to be missing some important pieces. Like wing nuts to hold the cymbals on, stuff like that. The drum heads are loose and I can't find a drum key to tune them up. I borrow a vise grips from the bartender. Then I stand and watch the boys run cables.

Lark watches for a while, from the opposite side of the stage, and then goes outside. I follow.

"Hey," I say to her.

Craig J. Hansen

"I don't want to talk," Lark says. She's staring out at the highway, arms folded loosely. I can see that the tattoo on her arm is Thumper the rabbit.

"Nice tat," I say.

"Look," she says. "I don't want to talk. I don't want to answer questions. I don't want to know anything about you."

"Okay" I say. "Why?"

"Because you are a loser."

"I'm not a loser," I say, by reflex,

She looks at me. "How much are you getting paid for this?"

"For this particular gig, or the whole summer?" I ask.

"You don't know, do you," she says.

I guess I never asked Chess about that. "I play for art," I say.

She raises an eyebrow. "You're an artist," she says. "That's just another name for loser."

"So, it's trumpet you play?" I say. The obvious retort is to say she's a loser, too, if she's in the same band. But that seems like a conversational dead end.

Lark ignores me, looks at the highway. I do, too. It's mostly pickup trucks. After a while, I go inside.

"How much do I get paid?" I ask Chess.

"You better get your mind on the music, Jack," he says.

"No, really." I'm sitting at the drums. We are ready to play. I put my drumsticks down.

"Christ. Alright," Chess says. He's dressed in a white shirt and black jeans, as is the rest of the band. Except Lark. She wears black jeans and a black sleeveless top. Except

Winter Lake

me. I'm wearing jeans and a Lynwood Lions tee shirt. That's where I went to high school until I got kicked out.

"I told you what clothes to bring," Chess said.

"No you didn't," I say.

"We'll get some for you, though it's coming out of your pay."

"So, what do I get paid?" I say.

"It's complicated. Percentages and such. You know, bonuses, deductions. We'll talk about this later. Get your head into the music now."

"Song list?" I ask.

"Whatever I say we are going to play," Chess says. He turns to the mike, says hi to everyone. Hopes they are having a good time. Congratulates the bride and groom by name. Makes some lame wedding jokes. Miles, the bass player, sidles over. "Just let us start," he says. "Then join in, but make it sound like it's on purpose. You know, come in with--conviction."

"Got it," I say.

Chess introduces us as Chess Chalmers and the Mellowmen, then starts strumming his guitar and singing a sappy old song from the 60's. "Last night at the dance I met Laura..."

I start tapping along. "Isn't this song about a girl who dies and becomes a ghost?" I say to Miles.

He nods. "Makes me want to puke," he says.

Lark adds a little trumpet. Her cheeks puff out and her neck goes red. She looks way too small and skinny to play a horn. It's kind of hard to watch. Chess wiggles his butt as he sings. That's even worse. I search for somewhere safe to aim my eyes. Then a cymbal stand collapses in a ringing crash. Chess jumps a foot in the air.

Craig J. Hansen

“Jesus Christ!” he says in the middle of the song.

I learn to stare past Chess and his wiggling butt and watch the crowd. It’s interesting watching the wedding party. The bride is chubby, drunk, beautiful. The groom has bushy sideburns and loves his new wife. I can tell. She dances with lots of people and he watches, grinning, happy. He goes under her skirt to get the garter belt and stays there for a while. People start to laugh. We on the riser start to laugh. The bride slaps at her skirt and tells him to get the hell out of there. He does, then throws the garter. A groomsman catches it, the boyfriend, I think, of the girl who caught the bouquet. Everyone’s happy. Chess narrates from the microphone, announcing the throws, the dollar dance, the girls-ask-the-boys dance.

A little boy stands near me. He’s somber, dressed in a shirt and tie like a little accountant. At the first break, he says, “How long have you been playing drums?”

“45 minutes,” I say. I think that’s kind of funny.

He nods. “Thought so,” he says.

We sit at a table near the stage. Miles and Bob pound down beers. Rusty smokes and sips a rum and coke and watches the party. Chess is milling around in the crowd. Lark is somewhere else. I sit and rotate my plastic glass of beer in its little puddle of sweat. It’s stuffy in the VFW.

Guests take turns at the mike. They are pretty drunk. Bridesmaids toast the bride and groom and wipe away tears.

A couple of groomsmen tell stories and end by praising Jesus.

“I didn’t see that coming,” I tell Rusty.

Winter Lake

“What?”

“The Jesus part.”

“Oh, beer and Jesus, you know. Kind of goes together up here.”

“So you don’t have a beer,” I say.

“I’m a foreigner,” he says. He leans over. “Asian,” he says.

“Ah,” I say.

The father of the bride is wasted. I think he’s looked kind of down all night. Maybe it’s money. Maybe it’s the loss of his daughter. Maybe it’s the gaining of a son. He wobbles to the mike, says a few things and ends by raising his glass and saying, “I just hope these kids are as happy as his mother and I have been.” A moment of silence and then laughter. “What?” he says. “What did I say?”

By the third set, it’s pretty empty. The bride’s father comes over, says we can pack up, pays Chess, then walks to each member of the band, shaking hands and saying how goddam good we were.

“Let’s tear down,” Chess says. He looks tired and his shirt sticks to him.

Rusty says, “Catch you later boys. I’m going for bridesmaid.”

They are standing at the back of the room, 4 of the 6 of them, dressed in tight lime green dresses.

“You are not, goddam it, Rusty,” Chess says. “You gotta help us pack up first.”

I peel duct tape of my cymbal stands. The screws are stripped and the stands slowly collapsed as I played. By the end of a set, my cymbals were knee high. When we are packed and loaded, we stand around the panel truck.

Craig J. Hansen

“Get some food, boys,” Chess says, and gives us each \$10. “I got us some rooms over at the Super 8. Don’t stay out late. We got another gig tomorrow afternoon.”

“Wedding?” Miles asks.

“Nope. Festival. Gooseberry Days,” Chess says.

“Over at BERF?” Miles says. “Cool.”

“Berf?” I say.

“Yes,” Chess says. “Where else would it be?”

Chapter 2

We walk over to a little bar next to the VFW, me, Rusty, and the brothers. Lark goes with Chess.

It's dark inside, almost as dark as the parking lot. Smoky. Country music playing quietly. A TV on in a corner over the bar with no sound. Half a dozen guys turn in their barstools when we walk to a table, then they turn back.

Bob goes to the bar, orders a couple of pitchers, gets Rusty a rum and coke.

"You a beer drinker?" Bob asks me.

I nod. Bob pours. Miles starts talking to him and they sort of turn away, talking brother talk I guess. I find they do this a lot.

Rusty is looking at me.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"Feeling my lymph nodes," I say. "Bad habit."

"It's creepy," Rusty says. Then we sit for a while.

"So," he says. "What do you think?"

"It's great," I say.

Rusty laughs, stubs his cigarette and slowly lights another. "We suck," he says.

"What's this with the Mellowmen?"

Rusty laughs again. "You'll see."

"You've done this before?"

"Yeah," Rusty says. "Last year. So, you got family?"

"Yeah," I say.

"You gotta Mom?" he asks.

"Dead," I say.

"Dad?"

Craig J. Hansen

"Dead."

"Brothers? Sisters?"

"All dead."

"Dog?" Rusty says.

"Ran off," I say.

"That's fucking bullshit, man," Rusty says, smiles a little.

"Well, my Mom's dead," I say.

"Don't be killing off your family," he says. "Christ, if I had some, last thing I'd do is say they're dead. Bad luck."

"Sorry," I say.

Rusty takes a long pull on his rum and coke. "I'm adopted," he says.

"Oh," I say. I pour myself another beer. Miles points his empty glass at me without even looking at me. I fill his and top off Bob's.

"What happened to your mother?" Rusty asks.

"Saved a kid from a truck and got blown up."

"Jesus."

"Blown to atoms," I say. "Or subatomic particles. No one knows for sure."

Rusty snorts.

"So I live with my Mom's girlfriend. A black poet named Anna Bella. She has a dog that used to belong to the guy my uncle shot," I say.

"You are so full of shit," Rusty says. "You have a mental condition or something?"

"I'd be the last to know," I say.

I pour another round of beers.

"So, who adopted you?" I ask Rusty.

"Some rich folks in Evanston. That's by Chicago. Jewish couple, nicer than crap," Rusty says. "You play pool?"

Winter Lake

We play pool. Rusty is good. So am I. It's a competitive game and some people stand by the table and watch. Then Miles and Bob come over, say it's time to go.

A young woman works by herself at the motel counter. She looks at us a little nervously.

"We got some rooms," Bob says. "Probably under Chalmers."

She looks at us, looks down and flips through a book.

"Yup," she says. "I got it."

"How many?" Bob asks.

"One," she says quietly.

"Shit," Miles says. "He's doing it again."

"What?" I say.

"Nothing," Bob says. He fills in paperwork and grabs the key. "Bed dibs," he says.

The four of us crowd into the single room. The windows won't open and the A/C smells fungal. Bob and Miles say they'll share the only bed. We find a couple of extra pillows and blankets in the closet and Rusty and I sleep on the floor. The carpet smells like ashtray and dog pee.

"Lark," Chess says the next morning, "you ride with the boys. Jack, you ride with me."

"Jason," I mutter.

I get in the panel truck, sit on the bright red plastic seat.

Chess starts it up and slowly pulls away from the motel. He's a slow driver.

"BERF ain't too far," he says. "But we got to be ready to play by one o'clock."

"What is BERF," I ask.

Craig J. Hansen

“Black Eagle River Falls,” Chess says. “But I didn’t invite you in here to talk geography. No, we got some other things to talk about.”

“Okay,” I say.

“First, not bad on the drumming. A little diddle daddley, but not bad. Let’s try not to knock over the gear, though. Scared the living crap out of me. I was in Nam you know and them loud noises, you just don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“I didn’t knock the cymbal over. The screws are stripped...”

“And another thing,” Chess says. He pauses, then turns to look at me. “Lark says you been chatting her up.”

“Chatting her up? No, I...”

“Listen to me, Jack. That girl has had a world of hurt and she don’t need any more trouble. She’s a cutie, I know, and real fun to be around. But that’s just hiding the pain. You hear what I’m saying. She’s a good girl and she don’t need any trouble.”

“Got it,” I say.

“I’m her uncle and if there’s trouble, well, you just don’t know what I might do.”

“Got it.”

“Good man,” Chess says. “Now let’s talk about more pleasant subjects. Number one, you got to grow your hair. Crew cut just doesn’t say musician. Number two, we got to get you some stage clothes. It’s all about image, about marketing.”

“I’ll start working on the hair,” I say.

“Good man. Marketing. That’s half the battle. You win the marketing, and they’ll hear whatever you want them to.

Winter Lake

See what I mean. If they expect The Beatles, they hear The Beatles.”

I nod.

“Do you think my name is really Chess?”

I look at him, waiting.

He waits for me though and says, “Well, do you?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“Well, it’s not. Name is Chuck. Picked out Chess because of Chubby Checkers,” he says.

I must look blank.

“You know, Chubby Checkers, ‘Do the Twist’ and such?” Chess says.

“So I play on people’s minds. That’s marketing. I’m Chess, and inside their heads, people are making this connection to Checkers and thinking, I know that name. This guy is famous.”

“Makes sense,” I say. “Though I thought your real name was Chess.”

“That’s the beauty of it. Don’t matter. Still works. Whether you think it’s my name de plume or my real name, you’re still going to be thinking, I know this guy.”

“So maybe I should change my name,” I say.

“No, wouldn’t work,” Chess says emphatically. “First, you need a plan. Got to think this through. Second, you aren’t a headliner.”

“Got it,” I say. “I’ll stick with plain old Jack.”

“Good man,” Chess says. “To be a headliner, you got to have talent. You got to be an entertainer. You got to have some hits.”

“Wish I had some hits,” I say.

“Well, you don’t. Not yet, anyways. Who knows? Maybe you’ll come up with something. Me, I got several.”

Craig J. Hansen

“We didn’t play any last night, did we?” I ask.

“Nope, but we will today. But that’s enough chatter. I got to focus on driving, start to get my head into the music. We’re just going to listen to the radio now. And you think about all I said. All of it.”

BERF is a pretty town. Big trees, nice old houses. A banner across the street says “Gooseberry Days.” It’s only 10 AM, but Chess frets about getting set up. But we can’t set up. The band shell sits in a nice little park, the center of Gooseberry Days festivities. And there’s a school band just getting started. They kick off with “On Wisconsin” and the crowd claps along. Chess is not happy, but he tells us to get some food and stay close, because when it’s time for us to move, we’ll be moving hard and fast.

I sit under a tree and listen to the concert. The kids in the band look really young. Might even be a junior high band. I buy some fried cheese curds and a lemonade from the Lion’s Club food trailer. The old guys are friendly. The wind begins to pick up and some paper bags blow across the grass. Sun’s out, but it’s still cool. Early June in Wisconsin, I guess. I think of going to find a sweatshirt, but I don’t know where the van is parked. So I sit in the sun, listen to the band play a Disney theme. Next to me is a playground. Faded timbers, ladders, and a yellow plastic slide—crawling with kids. In one area, kids swing from hand to hand, from ring to ring, graceful primates. Kids charge up the slide, playing tag. Parents watch, some absently, some like life and death. I hear a snuffy sound and turn to see a dog eat my cheese curds.

“Hey,” I say. “How’s life in BERF?”

Winter Lake

Miles and Bob sit down by me. "We found the beer tent," Miles says.

"Where's the van?" I ask.

"Already lots of people in there. You buy tickets and then a beer is 2 tickets."

"I want to get my sweatshirt," I say.

"Here," Bob says, tosses me the keys. "Right behind the bandstand."

I walk past BERFians on blankets, benches, strollers, walkers, skateboards, bikes. As I move closer to the bandstand, the music is louder and I hear all the wrong notes. Rusty is standing next to the van, talking on a cell phone. He moves away as I approach. It's warm in the van and I take my time locating my sweatshirt.

I have an urge to get in and drive away. That's my nature, I suppose. Tom Audley, my father, isn't like that at all. He sticks things out until he fails totally. No half way for Tom. Find a crazy idea and then plumb it to the very depths of potential for disaster. Since he's been hanging with Cherry, though, she chooses the paths and they march toward doom together. That's how I see it anyway. I'm getting morose in the hot van, morose and tired. Maybe I should find the beer tent.

Rusty pulls a door open. "Jesus," he says. "Why don't you just run a hose in here and get it over with? You trying to bake yourself?"

"I got kind of cold," I say.

"Time to unload. You won't be cold for long," Rusty says.

No one is paying much attention to us as we set up and no one pays much attention to us when Chess steps up the mike.

Craig J. Hansen

“Testing, testing,” he says. “Ho, anyone out there?”

Then a guy walks up, asks to use the mike.

He speaks in a booming voice. “Hey, everyone having fun at Gooseberry Days?” A couple of people clap.

“Well, we got the Miss Gooseberry coronation coming right up after these guys here play you some polka. Here’s Chess Chalmers and the Heidelberg Boys.”

“We’re going to start with you know what!” Chess says, taking back the mike. “The song that made Chess famous.”

The guys start playing and start tapping out the ridiculous polka beat—thump, tap, thump, tap. Chess begins to sing.

The Beer Fartin’ Polka
By Chess Chalmers

Spend the day with my mother-in-law
Take her out for a drive
I drank way too much beer last night
And now I need somewhere to hide.

The old bat, she sees what’s wrong
Why I’m looking tormented and meek.
She makes a face, rolls the window down
Says “I think that I smell rotten meat.”

Well, I’m doing the beer fartin’ polka
Too much brew did I sip
I’m squirming and dancing to keep it inside
Guess I’ll just let her rip.

Winter Lake

It can happen at Walmart, happen at church
Happen wherever it's rude
Your wife will avoid you, your dog run away
'Cause inside your guts have been brewed.

Well, I'm doing the beer fartin' polka
Too much brew did I sip
I'm squirming and dancing to keep it inside
Guess I'll just let her rip.

When the song's over, the crowd claps, whistles, and hoots, especially the women. I can't believe they liked it. Chess turns to me, "See kid? That's star power."

Chapter 3

When I was younger, I read all I could about the Romans. I don't like Romans like I used to. The past seems so distant. Yes, you can learn from history, and yes, part of being educated is knowing the past, especially of your own culture. Those are good reasons, except that a) I am not educated, nor am I likely to be and b) the Romans were very un-Audley-ish. They were perhaps western history's greatest overachievers. The Audleys are not historically significant, never will be, and achievement is unknown. You might say I am comparing apples and oranges, an entire classical civilization to a weak-minded branch of an obscure Welsh family. But who says equations have to balance? Why can't Audleys = civilization? I brought this up in a philosophy class, the arbitrary nature of logic, the capriciousness of syllogism. This was an introductory philosophy class at Middle Illinois Community College, taught by a moonlighting choir director. He didn't even know Latin. What kind of educated person doesn't know Latin? I may be distancing myself from Romans, it's true. Latin is another thing—a timeless language, a living language until the Renaissance killed it.

If not Romans, then what? Perhaps I should move further up in time, something more contemporary, like the Middle Ages. They had it all—whole wheat bread, mysticism, strong beer, an overwhelming fear of almost everything. Very Audley. We spent almost two weeks on the Middle Ages in the history class I took at MICC. It was a survey class, and medieval history was a particular passion of Ms. Natalie Boxer, M.A. The Reformation and

Winter Lake

Renaissance shared a week. We skipped the Enlightenment altogether.

This is what I'm thinking as I lie in the van, listening to the snores of the Heidelberg Boys.

"Tough luck," Chess says when he finds us in the beer tent. We've been there since the conclusion of our all-polka performance, and I, for one, am drinking it away.

"Something got screwed up at the motel. Just a room for Lark and me. Sorry guys," Chess says. "I grabbed some blankets and such and they're in the van. One night sleeping in the van won't kill you." He laughs heartily. "See you all tomorrow."

Along with the snoring I hear the sound of an air compressor and nail guns. I sit up and see that they are reflooring the bandstand. Why do this after Gooseberry Days, I can't imagine. What if the school band had crashed through the old, presumably rotten floor, tubas, tympani, kids, tumbling, mixing like salad. Gooseberry Days would forever conjure dark memories in BERF.

So I'm sitting on the last seat, after a long night of sticky plastic, smelly feet, and mosquitoes. The compressor reminds me of Lark, of how she looks when she's playing the trumpet.

I crawl out through the van's back door and stand stiffly in the morning sunlight. I warm myself like a lizard, preparing to move.

My other deep thought of the night is that, so far, I have made minus \$40 on the Chess Chalmers Tour.

Lark walks up to me.

"You are supposed to wake up and get ready to go," she says.

"How do you feel about the Romans?" I ask.

Craig J. Hansen

"We are playing at a church thing this afternoon. It's like four hours away. So you guys have to get moving," Lark says.

"Are we the Heidelberg Boys again?" I ask.

"Probably," she says.

"Then I'm going to fall on my drumsticks," I say.

"Last year, Rusty tried to plug himself into the amp. That was after three nights of polka," she says.

"Well, we should at least be the Heidelberg People, to be gender neutral," I say.

"The Romans suck," she says and leaves.

We're in the van. Rusty is hung over. He hit on a couple of BERF women in the beer tent. The BERF men didn't like it, though all they did was tell him knock it off. Still, Rusty took it hard and drank a lot of beer, then smoked a lot of dope with the women-defending BERFians.

I take a turn behind the wheel of the van. You have to steer like crazy to go straight. You have to press the brake pedal with both feet to get any stopping power.

Miles watches me. "It's not a real nice vehicle," he says.

"No, it's not," I say. My heart is pounding from trying to steer the van through a gentle curve. It's like a bad dream where you try to hold a curve, but your car just keeps sliding away under you. I take the next curve at 14 MPH and a hay truck passes me.

"I'd like to introduce," the minister says, "Chess Chalmers and the Bible Boys."

Chess strums his guitar and starts singing "We are climbing Jacob's Ladder..."

Winter Lake

I look desperately at Miles, but he won't look at me. I feel my face turn red. I'm not sure of the reason for this, but suddenly I need air. Christians are closing in all around me.

Chess turns and mouths "Drums," and nods his head. Woodenly I begin to tap along.

I'd like to think I'm suffering from an acute awareness of public hypocrisy, on my part. I'm not Christian. I'm not anything. Let them pray, bless, praise, sing, obey, forgive, serve, celebrate, tithe, hope, hearken, and hold hands. Let them love one another, comfort the afflicted, aid the poor, spread the word, welcome the sinner, and climb Jacob's ladder higher and higher. It's all great. It's just not where I am, something I explained to my friend Davey's parents in my experimental youth, when I went with them to church. And even after Davey disappeared, they welcomed me, forgave me, hired me, for god's sake. They're good people, the Millers.

Or maybe it's because I'm backed up against a brick wall, at the edge of the church parking lot, I'm crowded in on all sides, sweating through my white shirt and black jeans we got at Walmart. It's gotten hotter than hell today. Bricks and blacktop radiate heat. I drop a drumstick. Slips right out of my hand. Grab the spare from beside me and the people crowded around me, they applaud. I smile weakly, tasting sweat. If Hieronymus Bosch grew up in northern Wisconsin, he would have painted a scene of torment like this. Here sits the sinner, surrounded by the faithful, roasting and tapping, up against the wall, for eternity.

We take a break. A teenaged girl, with red hair and a sun dress, brings me an ice cream cup.

"You look so hot," she says, ambiguously.

Craig J. Hansen

“Thanks,” I say, taking the cup. “Do you have a spoon?”

“No,” she says. “You’re really good.”

“Drumming?” I say. “Naw.”

“Oh, yes you are. I’ll get you a spoon.”

She brings me a spoon and napkin. “What’s your name?” she asks.

“Lars,” I say.

“I’m Martha,” she says.

I hold up my ice cream cup. “This was very nice of you, Martha,” I say.

She smiles, blushes.

“Well, better get back to work,” I say.

“Okay,” she says and watches me.

We’re actually not in Wisconsin. We are in the UP, the upper peninsula of Michigan, which I have never thought much about. I don’t know if anyone thinks about it. How did a state get a satellite state. It should be West Michigan, like West Virginia, or maybe part of Canada. I bet I am seeing fifty per cent of the population.

The church faces Lake Michigan, and I’d guess we are about 3 hours north of Green Bay. I’ve asked Chess where we are going, an overview.

“Well, that’s hard to say,” Chess says, frowning. “We’ll kind of go east to west, but it don’t always work that way. I try to get these bookings in winter, but by the time we actually get out here, well, some places have closed and others opened, and people call me up with gigs. Yup, we’ll do ziggling and zagging. But July, August—those are the real peaches. Good gigs. Lots of tourists at the resorts, looking to party.”

Winter Lake

I survive two more sets. It starts to cool off. We throw in a couple of polkas and couples fly around the pavement.

"Folks, we are going to be winding up here," Chess says. "We're gonna finish up with a Chess Chalmers original, one you probably heard on the radio."

I cringe, but he doesn't kick off The Beer Fartin' Polka. He strums and sings softly.

Prayer
By Chess Chalmers

Lord, keep me tranquil
When the winds blowing mean
And keep my eyes skywards
Like a praying machine.

Lord, keep me well- rested
And when I'm troubled of heart
Keep me invested
To the love that thou art.

Lord, keep me devoted
To my loving wife
And these eight little children
That they'll keep quiet at night

And Lord, keep me faithful
And honest because
I'm proud to be humble
When I'm living your laws.

Craig J. Hansen

And bless this old guitar
For when I meet my end
I can play it in heaven
With other heavenly men.
Amen.

Martha walks up as we are tearing down equipment. Rusty nudges me and gives a sort of pirate laugh.

"Hi, Lars," Martha says. "Can I help?"

"Sure," Rusty says.

"No," I say. "Don't worry about it." I put down the cable I'm coiling. I am certified to coil cable now, after lessons from Bob. He was really serious about it. "Let each cable find its own coil. Loose wrist. Just go with it."

"Martha," I say. "Is there like an internet café here, or something like that?"

Martha frowns. "You need to use a computer?" she says.

"Yeah."

"Well, you can come to my house. My Mom wants to know if you've eaten dinner."

I glance at my watch. It's a little after 4 PM.

"Nope," I say.

Martha's father says grace. It takes a long time. He's the church president, he explains, and it's a pleasure to bring a Christian musician into this home.

Martha's mother says, "So, do you tour around, playing at churches?"

"Yes," I say.

"No other—gigs?" Martha's father says.

"Well, we do a few weddings."

Winter Lake

"Lars is a really good drummer," Martha says. Her parents smile at her. She has two younger brothers who eat in silence.

"So," Martha's mother says, "are you earning money for college?"

"Yes, ma'am," I say. "My parents died. And my sister. So I'm kind of alone in the world. Just playing music to pay tuition."

Martha's eyes mist. Martha's Mom does not look so convinced. "All dead? How sad," she says.

Martha's father says, "What are you studying?"

"The law."

"That's great," Martha's father says. "What school?"

We're eating chicken in some kind of casserole with tater tots and mushrooms. It's good. I chew slowly, considering my options. What did I say, law?

"University of Illinois," I say finally.

"Excellent school," Martha's father says. "Martha is going to the University of Wisconsin this fall, in Marinette."

I nod at Martha. "Great choice," I say.

"Well, all the boys in your band got to eat with parishioners tonight, but Lars, I'm glad we got a chance to meet you," Martha's father says.

I want to send an email to Anna Bella, tell her to save me. Drive up, bring me home. When we go to the den, where I can use the computer, the whole family stands and watches me.

"Well, I could of told you the weather forecast," Martha's father says. "More of this hot streak, then a whole lot cooler and rainy by Wednesday."

"Thanks," I say, pushing back from the little computer desk.

Craig J. Hansen

"Want to watch a movie?" Martha asks.

"Sure," I say. I sink onto a couch. Martha sits next to me, not touching, but close enough. Martha's mother says, "I'll find you a movie. Maybe we have one about lawyers." She picks up a plastic folder.

"Dad alphabetizes all the movie titles," Martha explains.

The doorbell rings.

"It's for the guy," one of the little brothers says.

I go to the door. Miles and Rusty.

Miles speaks softly. "We got to rescue Bob. He's with this holy roller family."

"And then we'll get drunk," Rusty adds. "C'mon."

I make my excuses. The family walks me to the door.

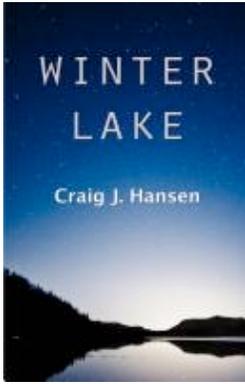
"Goodbye, Lars," they say. "Stop again any time."

I turn to leave and Martha touches my arm. She hands me a slip of paper. "My email address," she says. She smiles and I feel myself turning red.

"Lars?" Miles says when we get to the street.

"Cute girl. Good work," Rusty says. "Nice little bod."

But I'm quiet. I've got a glowing little knot inside. It doesn't feel good and it doesn't feel bad. I'm not sure what it is. Maybe regret. Maybe longing.



Winter Lake continues the story of Jason Audley, introduced in the novel *The Skeleton Train*. It is now seven years later and we find Jason wandering northern Wisconsin as the drummer in the woeful Chess Chalmers Band. His journey eventually takes him to Winter Lake and adventure, where his aimlessness doesn't work, where others grow to depend on him, and where he finds that he must confront his past to reveal his future.

Winter Lake

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