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## Poison

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*Tawny Wagner*

## Poison

The first time I heard “Poison” by Alice Cooper, I was standing in the woods staring into the eyes of my best friend’s naked grandma. I don’t know why I didn’t press pause on my iPod. Maybe a part of me liked the mood set by the ballad. Maureen had a cigarette dangling from her mouth. She didn’t notice me right away, but when she did, she looked anything but startled. Nonplussed. Even a little content.

“Scott, hand me that toilet paper,” she said around the cigarette, and it bounced precariously on her bottom lip. I stared down at the dry nettles at her feet. She was wearing studded black Harley Davidson boots, rusty brown from years of wear. Surely she received them from a smitten biker man the same year I was born. Still staring at the ground, I grasped blindly for a small roll of toilet paper which was hanging on a tree branch close to me, then kind of tossed it in her direction. As I started to shuffle off, Maureen said tersely, “Hold on a minute, son.”

*Son.* My father never called me son, but Jason’s naked grandma thinks she can call me son. I caught a glimpse of her bare, dimpled breasts knocking together as I raised my eyes to hers, and pulled out my ear buds. “Yes, Jason’s Grandma?”

“You ever see a naked woman before?” asked Maureen, beaming.

“Yeah,” I lied.

“Probably in your dad’s books, I’m sure.” That wasn’t true. Only my brother kept pornography in his pillow case on the passenger side of his bed. He showed me once, and my face was so hot, I could only look for half a second. I turned away as Maureen unapologetically bent her legs and started wiping her rear.

“Look, it was nice talking to you, but Igottago,” I muttered hurriedly. I don’t know how it happened, but my legs brought me back to the campsite, and I trekked over to Jason. He was sitting in a foldable camping chair in front of the smoking, ashen logs, staring at his phone and jamming the pad of his thumb onto the keys. He glanced up at me and back down at his phone.

“Hey, you seen my grandma around? We need ice.”

“No, I don’t know. I’m sure we have enough.”

My mom didn’t like Jason. She said he was on a bad track. He was the first fourteen-year-old I met that smoked. Dad loved him, and I’d heard him tell mom he was a good thing for me. Probably because he had friends and played sports, two things I kept absent from my life. Jason had downloaded Alice Cooper’s most popular album to my iPod, which my own grandma had gotten me for Christmas. My grandma would never be naked in a forest wiping shit off her butt in front of a teenager. She would probably have a stroke if anyone saw her without socks on.

Jason said that even though it is 2005, Alice Cooper is still the god of cinematic rock music. You haven’t lived until you’ve seen one of his shows, he would say. Maureen must have gotten him into Alice because it had been her idea to come see him. She was too cheap, or more likely, too broke to buy a hotel room with a toilet in it; thus, we would be sleeping in the middle of a forest I really doubted was legal to camp in.

A snap of twigs caught my attention, but I reflexively averted my eyes once I saw Maureen walking up to us. Now she was wearing a denim skirt, a stained white t-shirt that showed off the faded tattoos up and down her arms, and a leather hat. It was so easy to believe I hadn’t seen too much of her mere minutes ago.

She walked up to the pit where a fire should be and poured another cup of water over it. Earlier she had informed us that it would be in all of our best interests to keep the fire and smoke minimal. I knew this was because she didn’t want to call attention to us, and I wondered vaguely if she had been in trouble with the cops before. I thought about telling her, if you’re so afraid of calling attention to us, maybe you shouldn’t smoke in the forest during the dry season. That’s when I noticed a cloud coming out of the trees behind Maureen. I squinted my eyes and stared for a moment at the dust billowing over the trees and when I realized it wasn’t from our pit of dirt, I jumped out of my seat and yanked my earbuds out again.

“MAUREEN!” She flinched and looked over at me incredulously. Was this the first time I called her by name? She looked where I was pointing and exclaimed “Shit!” about thirty times as she ran to the cooler and grabbed some bottles of water.

“Son of a b-” I pounded three important numbers into my phone, and Jason interrupted me, snatching it out of my hands. “Don’t,” he hissed.

“Maureen will take care of it.” She was running incredibly fast for sixty-seven. I paused for a heartbeat. The right thing to do would be to call the firefighters. That’s what my grandma would have wanted. Jason was just staring at me even though I could now see the smoke becoming blacker, heavier. A bright tendril of hell flame encapsulated the roots of the tree Maureen had shit on. I ran to our tent and grabbed a gallon of water and my sleeping bag, drenched the sleeping bag and yelled hoarsely for Jason to do the same. He did, and we ran to Maureen, who was stomping at the ground like there were ants. We threw our sleeping bags on the fire and doused the flames, creating more smoke. I glowered at Maureen as she collapsed onto the sleeping bags and cackled, breathing in the natural smoke like it was part of her.