

The makeup artist talks too much, breath thick and hot, but I can't get away. Eyes closed, I trace the dappled path lined with Nooksack river rock and a bronze goddess posed like a reluctant warrior against aging hemlock. Some hoping woman has placed her in this forest. I'm reclined in a beauty chair while she scrapes small wounds into the skin of my brow bone. Camphor slices the humidity. Odd to think these tiny hairs for catching sweat, weather, and debris can disappear too. *Keep still as a corpse*, she says. There's her daughter's high school crush, her son's fear of fire, and Aunt Judy, who will be dead in eight months. The path leads to a box canyon where the sun leans way back past Vancouver Island's distant ridges like frisky fins on the Salish Sea. Bald eagles wing into the salt shine. The lidocaine takes hold and all I feel is her floral smock brushing my neck as she darkens my faint ridges. Whiff of stale smoke, voice a rusty saw blade. Aunt Judy refused it all, oxy, morphine, even ibuprofen, even as the tumor devoured her liver. *People who've had near-death experiences, they don't want to come back*, she says. Sword ferns limp in the clammy air, blueberries heavy on the branch, and deadwood tangle in the creek bottom. I open my eyes and say, *I know*.