

Shelley W. Moore

The First Woman Marine

When I meet her she greets me with a smile
Her eyes and skin are the color of a sunflower
Little does she know she will wilt before my eyes
Neither do I
She tells me of better days when she was healthy
She paints with oil—people, nature scenes, animals
From pictures, she says, not from real life
I ask her if she will paint me someday when she is well
She smiles and says, of course
She never returns home to her palettes and oils

At first her yellow skin and eyes are the only symptoms
But the disease progresses and her body fails
Pneumonia attacks
When I ask her how she is feeling
She tries to turn the conversation around
In between coughs and gasps for air
She says she is not in pain
I know better

Soon she is too weak to breathe on her own
I tell her she needs a tube down her throat
and a machine to help her breathe
We will do everything we can to make you better
But you may not survive this
She understands and agrees to press on

She dies in front of my eyes
One organ at a time
Liver
Lungs
Heart
Kidneys
Still, the machine pumps her lungs and the medicine runs through her veins
Keeping her alive
Until her son comes to rescue her

He arrives and kisses her good-bye
Modern medicine turns off
She leaves, finally in peace
Tears in his eyes, he says with pride
First woman in the marine corps

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