Bella sits and stares at the expanse of white before her. There is nothing more disheartening than an empty canvas. It is the unforgiving ocean the traveler sees as the ship slides away from the dock, or the snow-blown mountain creating a barrier between him and the warm lights of home. Bella wraps her jacket tighter around her body. Today, she doesn’t feel like climbing mountains.

But she hasn’t spent five month’s rent to come up from the city to go home having done nothing. From the porch of her cabin Bella looks about her, waiting for a scene to strike her fancy. Finally she settles on a simple one, a sloping field with a dark, stone wall and a huge maple tree that will take up half the canvas. In the distance, a slash of smooth lake is just barely visible through the trees.

She starts with the grass, which is still a moist green, even though the trees are blazing with their fall costume. The sun is low in the sky and as it shines through the gaps in and around the maple, it creates golden streaks across the damp ground. The stone wall, however, is in shadow and the bluish black boulders remind Bella of great chunks of ice in some dark sea.

By the time the light fades Bella has painted most of the picture on the canvas. Everything is basic shapes and colors, but she will add the details after everything is in place. She sets down her brush and admires her work. She can never resist painting once she has started. Her father once said that a bomb could go off and she would never notice unless it spilt the paint.

The next morning, Bella wakes up early and steps out on to the porch to watch the sun come up. The early sun’s rays illuminate the leaves of the maple tree making each leaf become a pumpkin colored jewel that sends an orange glow across the blue-green grass. Although the lighting will be all wrong, she retrieves her paint tubes and gets some fresh water and returns to her painting. As she puts her tools down on the little table set up by the easel, she looks at her work and frowns.

Something is wrong.

Right in the middle of the picture is a smear of paint. That wasn’t there last night, she thinks. Was it? She touches the paint and finds that it has dried. She mixes some fresh paint and paints over it. Bella layers thickly, but the mark will not go away.

“Crap,” she says and throws down the brush.

The more Bella looks at the mark, the more it begins to take a form in her mind. It almost looks like a person standing in the sunlight. Fascinated, she takes her smallest brush and gives the mark a head and legs and arms. It really does look like a person now that she thinks about it. A woman standing alone in the field. Bella gives her long brown hair, a red shirt and blue jeans. The part of the smear that should be her hand is too deformed to be a hand alone, so Bella paints a flower in her grasp. The figure is small, so that is all the detail that could really be done. It looks good though, complete somehow.
Around noon, Bella goes into town to eat lunch. It’s a quaint little town, but she soon begins to tire of the hustling of the townspeople and the cheerfulness of the children. They seem so alive, so different from how Bella feels. Except, perhaps, when she paints at the cabin. How strange, she thinks as she eats her salad by the restaurant window, that I had to go so far from home to be happy.

When she gets back to her cabin and sits back down on her stool the first thing she inspects is the painted woman in the field. She somehow seems so content standing there, with the sun on her face. Except that Bella has painted her so loosely that it is hard to see her expression. Surely the woman is big enough for her to paint some facial features. Bella grabs her brush and paints the shadow of a nose and the hint of a mouth and eyes. With a few shadows the flower becomes a rose. Then she sits back. Why hasn’t she done this before? Carefully, she examines the woman. I didn’t paint her that big, did I? thinks Bella. She decides to leave her alone for day and she spends her time painting the sweeping fields and the orange and scarlet trees.

After dinner Bella goes to sit on the porch. She walks past her painting on her way to the chairs, but something makes her stop. She leans down and stares at the woman she’s painted. She is definitely bigger. Not only that, but Bella is sure her head has turned. It is ridiculous, but wasn’t the woman looking into the sun? Now she seems to be looking straight out of the painting, into Bella’s eyes. Bella backs away thinking, don’t be stupid; it’s only a trick of light. What else could it be? All the same, she puts a towel over the canvas for the night.

At midnight, Bella is still awake. She lies, curled in the far corner of her bed surrounded by the smells of the cabin. Unlike her apartment back home, which copious smells of air fresheners and cleaning chemicals, the cabin smells musty, as if the wilderness were creeping back inside during the dark hours. There are sounds, too, that startle Bella from sleep; sounds that make her heart jump wildly until she can identify them as an owl, or raccoon, or other nocturnal creature. Groaning, Bella pulls the covers over her head and waits for dawn.

When the sun rises, Bella walks slowly to look at her painting. The painted woman is larger then ever. Impulsively Bella seizes a rag from the table at her elbow and tries to rub away the painted figure. The woman doesn’t even smear, although Bella thinks she can see a smile appear on her face.

Bella rips the painting from the easel. Holding it by the corner, she carries it around to the back of the house where three tin trash cans stand like gleaming sentinels. She goes to lift the lid of one, but before Bella can do it she becomes aware that her fingers are getting wet. She sets the canvas down and wipes them on a rag from her pocket, but there isn’t any paint on them. She looks back at the painting and sees that where she has touched it, on the distant lake, there isn’t even a fingerprint. Bella lifts the painting and touches the lake again, and for the second time feels her fingers grow wet. She leans closer to the canvas and watches in horror as her fingertips sink into the lake.

“What on earth?” she whispers. She pulls her fingers free and lifts the picture until her ear is almost touching the paint.

Deep within, she hears the faint swish of waves lapping on the shore.

Bella leaves the painting propped against the trashcan. Back inside, she tries to read a book, but can’t concentrate. Instead she sits on the couch and watches TV. She
keeps telling herself that she is being silly, that it is all in her head. *But if it’s all in my head,* she thinks, *am I going mad?*

It isn’t until the next day that Bella goes and picks up her picture. The woman is very big now, nearly as big as the maple tree. She seems to be right at the edge of the painting. Shaking slightly, Bella touches the woman’s face. The last thing Bella feels is the warmth of skin under her fingertips.

The young policeman looks around the deserted cabin and takes a long sip from his foam coffee cup. He and the local sheriff have come to check in on a woman who was supposed to be staying here. Bella something. They have searched everywhere and haven’t found any sign of her.

“Hey,” calls the sheriff through the back door, “come look at this.”

The policeman finds him standing by the trashcans behind the house.

“Look,” he says, and he points to a painting, lying on the ground.

“Can’t see why she’d throw it away,” says the policeman.

“It’s a nice looking painting,” agrees the sheriff.

“Do you think this is her?” asks the policeman, pointing to the figure in the painting.

“I don’t know. It looks like her photograph. Maybe it’s a self portrait.”

The policeman lifts the painting and they both head back inside. Neither notices the rose, smeared with paint, lying, as if dropped, in the grass.