

The Craftsman

The store was a landmark from Penny's earliest memories. It lay on the main road from Bay Bridge to the Delaware beaches: a 1920's gas station, white-painted, green-shingled; hip roof extending out on two pillars above a gravel sward. It sat alone at a rural crossroads far from any town, amid flat, bright green fields in serried rows, against a distant background of trees.

In those days the Bridge was a single two-lane affair, and at the summer season's height it ran one-way, alternating direction by the half-hour. State troopers, with Dudley Do-right hats and imperious gestures, directed each end; and cars would back up for miles in the shimmering summer heat, east through Stevensville, and westward from the tollgates towards Annapolis. Each summer for a fortnight the Frowards took a cottage at Rehoboth, and homebound always seemed to get caught in the jams, at the crossroads where the store lay.

Penny and her siblings never minded. They'd build a nest with pillows, back among the luggage and the bags of sweet corn their mother bought at roadside stands, laughing and bouncing and singing old songs in loud happy dischord: "*On top of old SMO – key!*" and "*Shall we gather at the RIII – ver!!*" Out the open windows Penny would see and wonder about the store. Why was it never open? The gravel was always overgrown, the paint fading, blank windows shrouded in dust and cobwebs.

Penny grew up, and became a lawyer. She obtained a junior place, at first, in a small Rockville firm. One March a case required her attendance in Dover, Delaware; so she drove east on U.S. 50 across the Bridge (now paralleled by a newer span). The day was gray and the roads wet with rain, but the Eastern Shore fields were showing their first green. Rounding a bend, she saw once again her little store. Memories of lost summers came back, making her smile. She saw with pleasure, as she flashed past, that it had been restored as a shop. It was clean and trimly painted, with planters where the gas pumps had been, and a sign at the driveway. She checked her odometer, and made a mental note.

The next day, her legal researches complete, she stopped in on the way home. "Kagan Furniture", the sign read.