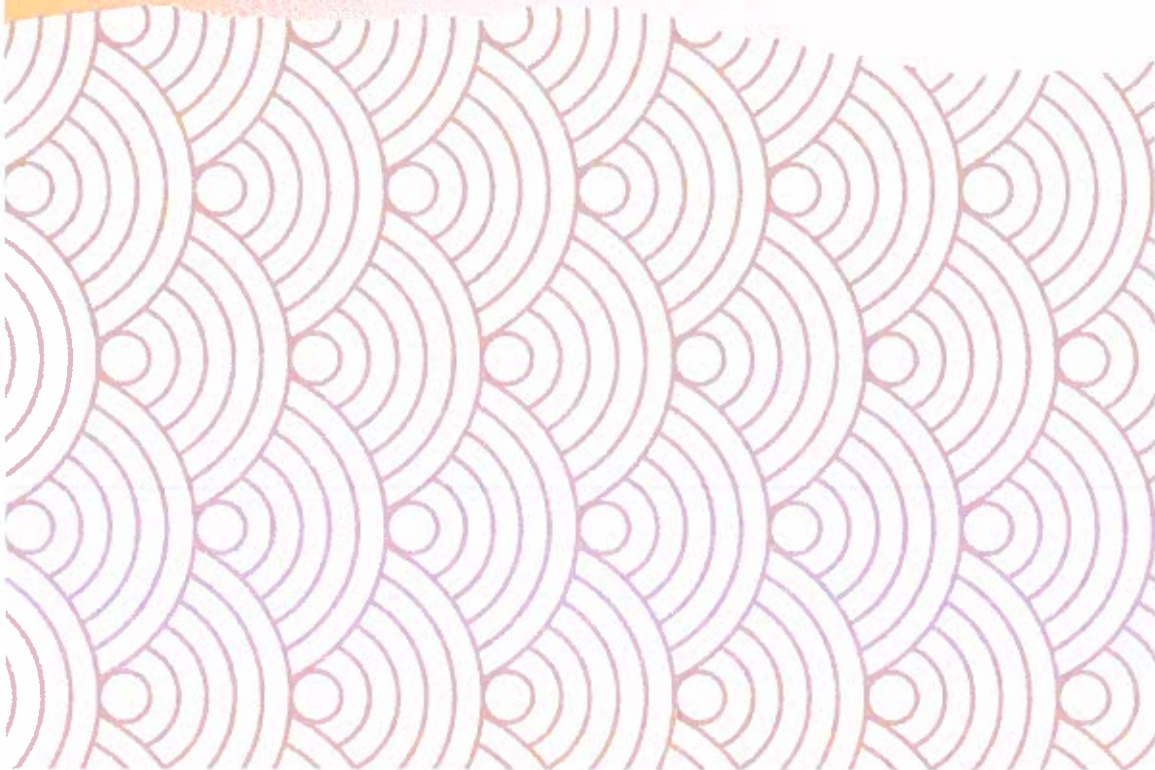




Marcy's Place



Marcy's Place

i

Back in the mid-1980s, a childless widow named Marcy ran a card shop on Main Street in a small northeastern town. It used to be her husband's place before they were married, he fifteen years her senior. But Bill passed on and Marcy just stayed with it. She enjoyed it. It kept her close to Bill's memory.

Marcy kept her affordable wardrobe simple, neat dresses of solid blues or greens to just below the knee, or pleated plaid skirts below white buttoned blouses with rounded collars. Her lightweight sweaters added varieties of complementary colors. She kept one within reach in the store, on the back of her register counter hi-top chair or on a plastic tubular hanger on a hook behind the often-opened office door. Her low-heeled, brown or black shoes were comfortable for standing all day. She'd let her hair grow out to a whitened grey after Bill's funeral and had it cut in town once a month, kept manageably mid-length.

The card shop occupied the first floor and extended back rooms of a stand-alone structure situated in the middle of her town's principal business block, with a driveway easement on one side, used for deliveries to the back of hers and of the adjacent stores. Marcy lived upstairs on the second and third storeys of the building, with a single parking spot out back next to the rear stairwell. She owned it outright, no rent or mortgage payment attached, seen to by Bill's life insurance and NYC sanitation department retirement annuity, as he'd planned.

ii

Bright and early on the last business day of each July for the last five years, Marcy had a homemade muffin and a hot cup of coffee, one sugar, two creams, ready for her quarterly visitor. Riley Smith was a bright enterprising regional salesman for the Hallmark company. Over five years he had learned Marcy's "system" and knew how to maximize his orders to her, and her service to her community. This morning, the system would be in full play across Marcy's desk before store hours for the public

"You know Miss Marcy, the people back in Kansas City laugh at me when I tell them we meet on this day as your way of poking fun at Hallmark making up holidays for me to sell you merchandising plans. One manager I never met told me over the phone just last week that he didn't cotton to you joking about our marking the first Sunday in August as National American Family Day and International Friendship Day. He pointed out only one of them was a Hallmark creation and the other was certainly well worth the merit of honoring. 'You just tell that Marcy woman that, you hear?' he says to me. When I didn't answer he comes back across the line saying, 'Well, what do you have to say for yourself?'"

"And what did you tell him?" asked Marcy.

I said to him, "It's probably not a good idea, sir, to tell a young black man from Albany, by way of Harlem, that you don't cotton to something."

"And his reply?" chuckled Marcy.

"He just hung up on me," smiled Riley.

"Have your muffin, Riley," was all Marcy thought it best to say.

After collecting the crumbs on a napkin and his last sip of his favorite customer's coffee, Riley got down to business. "Word is, Miss Marcy, that by next year there's going to be something called a Crown Rewards Program. When your customers buy Hallmark cards or ornaments from you, they will earn points to redeem against their next purchase. Hallmark wants to increase your return traffic for more sales. And store owners will have some extra benefits and programs we still haven't heard about. So, this year in preparation for that we salespeople are being pushed to encourage our store owners to become even more familiar with what their customers are buying. Your index card system for tracking historical orders and sales should really be a help." Riley was good at sharing news and compliments to build rapport.

"What holidays are on your schedule for ordering today, Riley?"

"Well, Miss Marcy, we have October through the end of the year. Unless you need to replenish anything you've ordered already for before then."

Marcy's index cards set out on her desk before her looked like her Tuesday night canasta melds. But they were organized by months or occasions, not sequences or suits. "Let me see here ... for September, then. You know, I think I need a few more cards each for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. My pre-order was equal to last year's sales, but some have already sold out. Give me 2 more each non-religious and 3 more each religious, please.

"Okay, those will arrive separately to be on time." Riley made notes to himself.

"I think I can duplicate last year's order for Halloween and Thanksgiving as a baseline. Then, just add 2 more cards to each theme variation for each holiday. Avoid oversize cards, though; they cost my customers more postage, and I sell fewer."

Marcy made some notes for herself in pencil, then picked up some of the index cards and replaced them into her metal flip-top card holder, behind the proper divider. "Do you have anything else for those two months I should be considering?"

"I realize you know more about your customers and town than some of my stationery store clients whose greeting cards are just a convenience. They rely on me to pull unsold cards for returns and reorganize and stock their display. Hallmark knows that's about 60% of their market. So that's where that Rewards Program comes in." Riley paused to make sure Marcy was patient enough today to hear this pitch.

"Go on. It's okay," she conceded.

"Okay. Good. So, they gave me this printout from a computer they have in Kansas City." He withdrew an oversize piece of paper with pinholes still attached on the sides next to a perforation line. He laid it out in front of him on the side table Marcy always set out for him next to her desk. The sheet had alternating light green and white rows running its full longitudinal width, into which the dotted letters were printed centrally. "This is census data for the region, using zip codes. It says what age, gender, religion, and culture people here now seem to be, and their average income—contrasted to the official 1980 census. It appears in the last five years, for as long as I have been visiting your store, there are more Black families, Jewish families, and single people with increased incomes in more expensive homes than before. This is especially true in the last three buying seasons. This part of the

State is ahead of the growth in other regions, maybe because people are moving here from the larger cities.”

“And ...” Marcy shuffled some of her index cards and waited for the other shoe to drop.”

“And, the numbers suggest a revision of ordering patterns for some of the stationery stores that don’t keep up like you do.” Riley was almost apologetic, but still in a selling mode.

“What does the paper suggest for me?” Marcy was being patient and open. She liked Riley and knew he had a good heart for his customers and a good eye for their business.

“I think the seasonal religious holidays are numerically appropriate, especially since you already added some specialty cards for Jewish customers or card recipients. Mostly the printout shows you might want to order more Hanukkah cards. But you would know best from your index, for those cards and Christmas cards, how you would enumerate the order ratio of religious vis-à-vis non-religious or more secular cards. Also, we see an uptick in cards for Kwanzaa. I don’t think you had many of them in stock the last two years, so I think you’d be creating a more realistic baseline with this year’s order and sales using the printout suggestion. A baseline, I mean, to maximize next year’s use of that Crown Rewards ordering.”

Marcy passed him a fresh card. “Here’s what I thought to order for this season. How does it shape up to your computer’s suggestions?” It was the first time Marcy gave such a leeway to a salesperson. Only Riley would have been so favored.

Riley checked each list against the other. He penciled in several numbers and handed the card back to Marcy. “I wrote in Kansas City’s numbers next to yours on the index card, when their computer amounts were different.”

Marcy looked at them for a minute or two. “Okay, let’s go with the computer numbers—when they are larger—and we’ll see in January how it worked out.” Marcy paused. “But leave my numbers when they are greater, please, Riley.” She waited for him to make some entries on his paperwork, then asked, “Anything else?”

Riley took out a smaller sheet of loose-leaf paper he brought along. “Just a look at the future, from my sales meeting notes. In the next few years, Hallmark is going to offer a line of cards that are humorous and one that features art and sentiments aligned more with Black American experience. Some of the names they were throwing around to watch for were Shoebox and Mahogany.” Marcy nodded and let him proceed uninterrupted.

“Now, we already have funny cards and African American cards, just not a formalized line. Here’s what I did. I made up an experimental order of specific individual specialized cards from those two categories, for the general occasion cards, and also for the coming holidays of Halloween, Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, and Christmas. I matched them to your orders from last year and the year before and there wasn’t much overlap. If you wanted to add them to your regular order we already wrote up, you could track them and see if you had any sales information to help you decide about taking on the lines when they are introduced. Those lines will have point-of-purchase cardboard floor-stand displays. That will take up selling space, so I’d want to make sure you were more confident about the product sales when I come back in the next two years and ask you about adding those lines.” Riley sat back and only then realized he was so nervous he had moved up onto the edge of his chair and was perched closer to his side of Marcy’s desk.

Marcy signaled the buying was over, as she always did, with an offer of a cup of coffee for the road. But she seemed more formal, though still polite. As usual, this cup had no muffin on the side. After another ten minutes to straighten up files and papers, desk and sales case, Riley was on his way and Marcy got ready to open the store for the day.

It seemed to each of them that this sales call was somehow a little different from those in previous years. Marcy had never let Riley take the lead so much. Neither she nor he quite knew what to make of what took place. They did not speak of it together. Both were unsettled. Riley drove away uncertain whether something had just changed in their relationship. Marcy hesitated when flipping the sign on the door over to the OPEN side.

iii

Later that morning a fellow drove down Main Street in a brand new 1985 Chevrolet Cavalier rented at the airport to the south. He was looking to invest some money in a business and eventually take it over. He had done exactly that in three other towns along the northern stretch of the Interstate in the last two years. His business plan envisioned a string of retail pearls along Main Streets that paralleled, less than a mile away, the six-lane path of progress from the downstate metropolis to the upstate capital.

This mid-summer morning he followed his customary surveillance of a downtown area, parking along the curbside and sliding his quarters into the meter. He sat on public benches on the sidewalks facing out from the town green, moving from one side to the other, in his expensive soft casual clothing, drinking a dark Colombian in a Styrofoam container from one of the Main Street coffee shops and watched the customers come and go from store to store.

He observed for several hours, before and after the lunch break, the traffic patterns of drivers and pedestrian shoppers on all four compass points of the town square. His practiced eye noticed many people going in and out of Marcy's place. He continued his reconnoitering by strolling past her shop several times, from both directions. He took in her window display carefully. He decided to enter the store to get a look for himself. He judged she kept a neat and orderly looking store. Naturally, he was attracted to it. The location was central and expansion was possible without major construction. He did avoid interacting with other customers or with the shopkeeper, whom he presumed was the eponymous Marcy. Eavesdropping a departing buyer's farewell affirmed his supposition. Over the next few hours, he watched from back outside on the green and walking the street or sitting in his car. He saw that Marcy's Place appeared suitably busy for his consideration.

No other store he passed nor wandered into caught his fancy quite so thoroughly. The burger and fries he had at the luncheon counter were not worth the effort to monetize, any more than the mediocre morning coffee he had from the shop on the intersecting street off the square.

That night, while the sequencing neon VACANCY sign patterned the progress of his thoughts, he made his decision as he lay shoeless on his still-made bed in the motel off the Interstate cloverleaf. In the morning, he would just come right out and offer Marcy the chance to sell him her business or the store. The records at the town hall indicated she was the building owner.

The next day, bright and early, he strode into the shop. Marcy's back was turned as she stood over by the register, at the chair with her sweater on its back.

Marcy had just flipped her OPEN sign a few minutes before and was still contemplating yesterday's somehow divergent sales call with Riley. All the night before it kept coming back to her. Had something changed this summer? Was her loosening up a bit of her control a sign of her losing interest, or a way of increasing her horizons? It was bright in the store, another beautiful day outside. Did she notice it for more than encouragement of significant foot traffic along Main Street? She turned to see and was surprised she hadn't heard her first customer of the day enter the store.

He moved with purpose and eyed the displays as he walked toward her at the counter. There was something about his manner that alarmed Marcy. He seemed too direct.

She feigned taking up her sweater off the hi-top chair, giving her a reason to put the counter between her and this tall man. His dress was casual. Smartly polished tan loafers, neatly tapered summer beige straight-legged pants, brown belt, teal buttoned dress shirt open at the neck, and a complimentary brown sports jacket. His oval face was well-shaven and he wore tortoiseshell Wayfarer sunglasses with brown-tint lenses.

The stranger removed the glasses as he stepped forward, forewent an awkward over-the-counter offering of a hand to shake, and spoke.

"Marcy," he said, "Yesterday I was watching people come in and out. Sure is a busy place you have here. Lots of ordering to do. Lots of stock to keep track of. Lots of shelves to keep neat and clean. You know, Marcy, you look to be at a point in your life when you ought to be relaxing, spending time with friends. Not working hard here in this store. What do you say I buy the business from you?"

The first thing this radical idea stoked in Marcy was gratitude that the newcomer did not enter the store yesterday. Riley's sales call and this offer coming on the same day would certainly have been unhinging.

This morning's proffer made Marcy realize that she had come to recognize overnight and this morning that she had grown to think of it as a privilege to have the store. She loved the work. She never took any advantage in the neighborhood because of being a shop owner. Never looked for discounts from the other merchants. Never threw her weight around in the Chamber of Commerce meetings. This possibility of selling the store was truly a new idea. But even more crucial was the prospect it presented of what she would do with herself without the store. Her mind was racing and trying to organize these ideas.

She tossed a potential proposal over in her mind a little bit. Then she looked this fellow square in the eye and said, "No. I enjoy it. It keeps me going. Besides, this shop doesn't earn enough money to keep an eager businessman like you in the kind of money you'd want."

"Well, I certainly would make some changes," he confessed. "Switch some things

around. Bring in a few new and more expensive lines of merchandise. I'd make it pay," he said assuredly.

Marcy could only look at him and say, "I bet you would." Marcy could see right through this fellow's greed clearer than he could. "But no thanks. I'll be just fine, thank you."

v

The prospector was about to press on and continue his pitch to buy the store, when a female customer came in. He slid into the background to watch and wait a while before trying again to persuade Marcy to sell.

"Hello, Marcy," said the woman. "I need a card to send to my Uncle Jim."

"What kind of card, doll?"

The suitor took note. Did Marcy know this woman. Or was her customary greeting so disarmingly affectionate.

The woman hesitated. "Something between a sympathy card and a get-well card, I guess. See, my uncle's been sick on and off. Seems he gets one thing taken care of and then something else pops up. And if it's not him, it's his kids. He just needs to have someone give him an encouraging word. A bright spot to start his day and pick him up when he's down."

"Well, let's take a look," encouraged Marcy. They looked for some time. They saw get-well cards with funny messages that did not suit the occasion. Another group had sayings that were just not right. It seemed to the woman that the messages were all clichés, not a sincere sentiment in the lot.

Marcy saw the distress the woman was going through and turned to her and said, "You know what, dear? I don't think a card is what you want to send. Why not go down the street to Buddy's and have him make up a nice plant with colorful blooms for you. You know, something that will bring your Uncle Jim the joy of the sun and the happiness of the morning and stay with him all through the day."

After Marcy saw her to the door, the businessman came over and said, "That's no way to run a business. There must have been a card that was close enough to sell. You're here to sell cards. You're not here to . . ."

Marcy interrupted. "I know what I'm here for. I'm here to give people what they need. Lots of times that means they buy something here. And sometimes, it means they don't. But when they don't, they know the next time I'm not going to lead them wrong. These people trust me. And they trusted my husband long before that. No, mister. I know what I'm here for. But. Do you?" Marcy paused after her staccato question. It was not answered. Then she said, "I'm not so sure you could make a go of it here after all, mister."

"Oh, but there's where you're wrong, Marcy." She saw he wasn't going to give up easily. As she did yesterday with Riley, the "new" Marcy—as she was beginning to fancy herself—decided to see where this was going. Strangely enough it had some "Riley echoes."

"I've done my homework on this town, Marcy. Just as I have on other towns in this corridor of the Interstate. The last decade has seen changes many store owners aren't watching for or acknowledging. They're not keeping up."

Marcy was getting hot, but not warming up to her visitor. She decided to take off her sweater, place it on the back of her chair, and sit down on her hi-top. She again wanted that counter between her and this would-be business heir. She wanted physically to assert her ownership. She wanted to remind him he was in Marcy's Place.

vi

Not to be outdone, he slipped off his jacket and draped it over the counter, like a matching ante in a poker pot. He spread his arms to encompass the store and began. "The census data for this county tells any business owner that there are more Blacks and Spanish speakers here now than eight years ago. But I don't see most owners taking advantage of this trend to increase sales and profits."

"And you would do that how?" Marcy said evenly, suppressing her rising feelings.

"First of all, you should have added Lottery ticket sales long ago. The state allows that. Each of these demographics would buy tickets every day of the week. Even without a bonus for selling a winning ticket, between the commissions and increased traffic, it would've paid you well."

Marcy remained quiet. She was certain he did not care about the difference between taking advantage of a business opportunity and taking advantage of people. She ignored his gestures to show where she should have made counter space for the lottery sales, with the ticket machine and scratch off reels compartmentalized into their numbered pigeonholes.

"Second, a card store needs to catch up with the times, and communications in the middle of the computer age." He walked over to the far corner wall where Marcy had a fashioned an alcove for sitting on a wooden straight chair and a small shelf for writing out cards and addressing the envelopes. "You don't need this set up here. They bought the card already. This does nothing to generate any more cash."

He spun for dramatic effect and faced her. "Over here there should be a photocopy machine and a fax machine—making ways that people can't afford to have at home still be available to send urgent messages and get important tasks done. They'd depend on your store for rapid replies and communication to businesses they ordered from over the phone and needed to send return requests or file written complaints. Kids will use them for school reports. At tax time you'd have two or three customers at a time waiting to use them.

You can charge a penny less a copy than the public library does and save your customers the half mile trip away from this shopping district. No other store around the green is doing this. You'd be the first. It's a natural. At a dime a sheet for fax transmissions you'd make 50% profit over your costs. And you could charge twice that per sheet for faxes people arranged to have sent here for them to pick up. Many will buy more merchandise when they come in to collect their faxes."

Marcy said nothing. The interloper decided to prod her with a hot poker. "It's no different than your husband's decision to sell postage stamps when he had the store."

And that did it. Marcy came out from around the counter. "And how did you come by that little tidbit about my Bill? Your source didn't quite get that right, by the way." She handed him his jacket after lifting it off her counter. "You should take this; I may need the counter space for my next customer." She neither smiled nor scowled—by face nor tone.

Taken down a couple of notches, shirtsleeves was about to reply. But indeed, behind him and unseen at first, another customer ambled in the store. An older gentleman leaning on a cane.

vii

"Hello, Josh," hailed Marcy. "How are you today?"

"Well, not so good, Marcy. No so good. My Sarah's still not over being sick last week. She's staying at home, exhausted. All she seems able to do is just rest on the couch. And you know tonight's that card party down at the church she was so looking forward to going to. She'll just have to miss it now."

"Oh tonight, is it?" mused Marcy. She went on as an idea took form in her mind. She would take care of both the men in her domain at the same decisive moment. "You know, I could never figure out how to play that game."

"Oh, bridge isn't that complicated, Marcy." Josh's spirits seemed to be picking up. "You could learn it in a night."

Marcy knew she had at least one of them now. The one she really cared about, and his wife. "Oh, yeah. What about tonight?"

Josh came right back, with a gleam in his eye. "I don't know. They play a pretty quick game down the church. I don't think they'd be anyone there'd be wanting to teach you how to play tonight."

Marcy said purposefully, "Well, then, why don't I scare up a friend for a 'fourth' and bring some potluck. We'll have something to eat together and then you and Sarah can teach us how to play. Tell Sarah to take a nap this afternoon. Promise we won't keep you up late."

Josh smiled brightly. "By God, that would be swell of you, Marcy. I know Sarah's awfully lonely up there."

Marcy waved as he was heading for the door. "We'll see you about five-thirty, then. I'll go upstairs at lunch time and get something started in the slow cooker and then close up a little early and get things finished to carry over."

She ignored her persistent buyer for the moment and called her friend to set up the night's assembly at Josh's and Sarah's."

viii

Marcy didn't need anyone to tell her that this upstart businessman just wouldn't believe it. He walked over to Marcy, shaking his head. "Why would you close up shop early for someone who didn't even buy something! I don't know Marcy. I just can't believe this is any way to do business. I've been here for almost an hour. Two people have come in and neither bought anything. One you sent away and for the other you're going to close the store early. Maybe this isn't such a good location after all. Perhaps people don't expect to shop here. I must have mistaken what all the foot traffic I saw yesterday would create in sales. Maybe I ought to be moving on."

Marcy couldn't have agreed more. And she decided to let him know it. "Yes, that's the first thing I find myself agreeing with you on this morning, sir. That, and my pleasure at your decision not to tell me your name, in case I recognized it as what my friend Riley would call a 'geographically-challenged carpetbagger.' Maybe you'd had best be moving along. I think you're right."

He paused just long enough for Marcy to realize he had not yet given up. She decided to unsimmer her anger about his apparent activity around town the day before. She'd recalled Bill telling her about union halls and city politicians modeling voting on such gossip-mongering. Ed Muskie's and Richard Nixon's campaigns called it "opposition research" back in the day.

"And about Bill. You were terribly misinformed about what kind of stamp he left on this community. See" ... she paused just one last time before deciding to finish. "My husband once told me I had a lot of rights as a store owner. I can almost hear his voice right now, telling me: *'You got a lot of rights as a store owner, Marcy. You can tell people they can't linger. You can tell people anything you do for them is going to cost them some money. You can go down to the Chamber of Commerce and make a fuss when things aren't as you'd like them to be on Main Street. But here's a warning. Don't do it, Marcy. No, dear, don't do it. Just be here when they need you. They'll take care of you. There's enough business here in this town. They'll take care of you. Let them count on you, dear. Yes, let them come to count on you. And everything will be just fine. Everything will be just fine.'*"

Marcy stirred from speaking her recall aloud and looked at the astonished entrepreneur. "So that's how I run my business, sir. Five years now since my husband's gone. And I've yet to see his advice go sour. So maybe you should move on."

So, he left. Not to return. To buy her business or any others on that town green.

That afternoon a slow cooker turned out a fantastic stew for four. Marcy did close the card store early. She and her friend met at Sarah and Josh's to learn how to play bridge.

ix

Back on the third floor of her store and home, as Marcy was getting into bed and saying her night prayers, she began musing to herself. She was talking to her husband, the way she had been doing nightly for five years now. She laughed as she told him that she really didn't learn how to play bridge that night.

Somewhere in the depths of her prayers, she heard Bill's voice. "Well, Marcy, maybe today you were meant more to be the teacher than the learner."

With a smile on her face and that voice in her heart, Marcy drifted off to a sound, and as she discovered the next morning, a very satisfying night's sleep.