

Customer Retention With SMS Marketing

by Bryce Parsons-Twesten

In the sea of online distractions and rising ad costs, businesses are constantly grappling with the challenge of engaging customers. Traditional marketing channels like emails and digital ads often fall short, leading to low engagement.

SMS (short message service) marketing can cut through the static, offering a direct and personal way to reach new and existing customers. This article will unpack why SMS marketing is a powerful tool for organizations, especially those with CRM (customer relationship management) systems in place.

The Advantage of SMS Marketing

As cell phones became ubiquitous, SMS marketing established a niche for itself, partially due to its unparalleled engagement rates. It boasts up to 90% engagement, far surpassing email marketing's 20% to 30%. There are a number of reasons behind these numbers.

Immediacy

Text messages are read almost instantly, making them ideal for time-sensitive communications. This is particularly beneficial for fields in which timely customer updates—be they shipping notifications, emergency alerts, or targeted ads—are crucial.

Directness

Unlike emails that can be banished to spam folders, never to be seen again, SMS reaches customers directly.

Cost-Efficiency

Especially important in the face of escalating costs for digital ads, SMS marketing can offer business a budget-friendly way to engage current and potential clients. This makes it easy for companies to find the blend of marketing approaches that fits their audience and their budget.

Personalization

Personalization in advertising is where a CRM shines. With detailed customer information, SMS marketing can use targeted, personalized messages that dramatically increase relevance and response rates. This specialization encourages repeat purchases and builds customer loyalty.

Customer Retention Through SMS

SMS marketing can be used to expand customer bases, but it excels at engaging current clients.

Timely Reminders

Sending appointment reminders and payment alerts in a way your audience has immediate access is effective business and improves customer experience.

Exclusive Offers

Using a CRM, tailored promotions and offers sent via SMS can grow customer loyalty. This also has compounding benefits, as the more a customer engages, the more a business can give that customer what they want.

Feedback

Quick surveys via SMS are one of the simplest ways to engage existing customers. This shows them that their opinions are valued and can fill in the gaps a CRM can't reach.

Abandoned Cart Notifications

For e-commerce businesses, sending a gentle nudge about an abandoned cart can boost sales dramatically—two or three abandoned cart notifications can increase reconversion rates to almost 70%.

Event Updates

Notifying clients about changing dates or details signals your company cares about the customer experience even after a purchase is made.

Challenges and How to Overcome Them

While SMS marketing is powerful, it's not without issues.

Content Creation

Crafting simple, compelling messages requires skill. We live in an age of distraction, so SMS content needs to be clear, concise, and engaging. Over-messaging can also reduce customer engagement, so it's important businesses find the most effective volume for their client base.

Managing Opt-ins and Opt-outs

Respecting customer preferences is crucial to businesses looking to retain patrons. Companies should ensure there is an easy opt-out option to maintain customer trust and respect.

Selecting the Right SMS Marketing Service

When searching for an SMS marketing provider, there are a few important factors for businesses to consider.

Integration with Existing Systems

Complex systems are only beneficial to businesses if they work together. SMS marketing services should seamlessly integrate with established CRM and email systems.

Scalability

The ability to handle high volumes of messages is critical for businesses with large customer bases and those

planning to grow.

Analytics and Reporting

SMS marketing is a powerful tool, but it needs to be fine-tuned to each company's audience and message. Access to detailed reports allows businesses to measure the effectiveness of campaigns and increase their impact over time.

Compliance Assurance

Valuing privacy laws and data security is paramount for any company looking to attract new customers and keep the ones they have. It's important to ensure the SMS marketing service you choose takes these details seriously.

Keeping Clients With SMS

SMS marketing is an important tool for modern-day businesses. Its directness, cost-efficiency, and high engagement rates make it a powerful option for bolstering customer retention. By integrating SMS into their overall marketing strategy, businesses can reach their customers more effectively and build relationships that will last!

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Should I Paint Cabinet Hinges or Replace Them?

by Bryce Parsons-Twesten

Cabinet hinges are one of the unsung heroes of home design. They often go unnoticed, but they play a surprisingly influential role in the aesthetics of your home.

When it comes time to give your cabinets a makeover, you might wonder if you should paint the hinges or replace them entirely. This post will help you decide which approach is right for you, and how to tackle whichever one you choose.

Budget Meets Aesthetics

When it comes to remodeling, costs add up quickly and every penny counts. Thankfully, you don't have to know how to strip kitchen cabinet doors in order to transform your home. Painting your cabinets or their hinges can be a cost-effective way to revamp your kitchen without breaking the bank. It also offers a chance to showcase your style in small but meaningful ways.

Time Versus Value

If you flip houses, you can lose sight of the details when you're turning a property for a profit. Replacing hinges can be an example of a low-cost, high-impact investment. It can improve the design and functionality, and buyers love attention to detail. New hinges can be just the kind of thing that puts a property over the edge.

Quality and Durability

For professional builders, it's all about quality and longevity. While painting hinges can be a quick fix, replacing them might be the better long-term solution, especially in high-use areas like kitchens. Plus, new hinges can signal to clients an elevated standard.

Painting Hinges: A Step-by-Step Guide

If you're thinking of painting your cabinet hinges, here's some advice on how to do it right:

Remove the Hinges

Carefully remove the hinges from your cabinets. It might not feel important now, but you'll be grateful later that you stay organized, so be sure to make a note of where each hinge belongs.

Clean Them Up

Old paint, grease, and grime are your enemies here. Give each hinge a good cleaning with soapy water or a degreaser.

Sand Them Down

A light sanding can help paint adhere to metal. Use fine sandpaper and be gentle so you don't damage the hinges.

Prime Time

A metal primer can help paint adhere to the hinges and prevent corrosion. This is especially important on hinges found in kitchens and bathrooms.

Paint Away

Achieve the best finish by using a spray paint designed for metal. Lay your hinges on newspapers or unwanted cardboard, ideally in a garage or outside. Be patient and apply multiple light coats.

Reattach with Care

Once they're dry, reattach the hinges and enjoy the new look.

Replacing Hinges: What You Need to Know

Leaning towards replacing your hinges, instead? Here's the lowdown:

Choose the Right Hinges

There are many styles and types of hinges available. When deciding which path to take, consider the type of cabinet, other hardware in the room, and the aesthetic you want to create.

Consider the Features

Hinges can come in many varieties with many features, including soft-close, self-closing, and concealed. Each serves a different purpose and may be better suited to different rooms or cabinets.

Installation

This can be straightforward if you're using the same type and size of hinge as the one you removed, but if you're switching styles, you might need to drill new holes or make adjustments to the door.

Aesthetics

New hinges can give your cabinets a whole new look. In order to keep things consistent, contemplate adding a new finish to the wood or changing hardware like knobs or pulls to match.

The Best Path for You

Small decision can have a big impact on a home's look and functionality. For the budget-conscious DIYer, replacing hinges offers an affordable makeover, while house flippers and professionals can translate the aesthetic shift of this small investment into big returns. Whether you choose to paint or replace your cabinet hinges, it's one of the easiest ways to change your home for the better.

How Long Does a Car Accident Stay on Your Record?

by Bryce Parsons-Twesten

For many, understanding how long a car accident stays on their record is more than—it's a crucial aspect of their lives. Most car accidents will stay on your record for three to five years, but this article will delve deeper into the topic and provide some insights for those who need to know more.

The Quick History

The concept of a driving record emerged not long after automobiles became the common mode of transportation, and these records were pivotal in tracking driver behavior.

Of course, where there are laws, there are lawyers, and it wasn't long until it became beneficial for drivers to hire legal counsel when they were in an accident. Even today, hiring a car accident lawyer in can be a key part of after-accident actions a driver should take.

The Duration of Accidents on Driving Records

The length of time an accident remains on a driver's record can vary, and it's influenced by several factors.

State-Specific Regulations

Each state in the US has its own set of rules regarding driving records. While some states might keep minor accidents on record for three years, others may retain more serious accidents for five years or more. Because the nuances of state laws can affect how long an accident stays on your record and because these laws are subject to change, it's important to know the laws where you live.

Nature of the Accident

The severity of the accident plays a critical role in how long it remains on a driving record. Minor fender benders aren't likely to linger as long as accidents involving significant property damage or injury.

Involvement of Violations

Accidents associated with serious traffic violations, such as DUIs, tend to stay on a driver's record for extended periods.

Insurance Company Criteria

Different insurers have varying policies on how much time must have passed for them to stop factoring in an accident when calculating premiums.

Planning for the Worst

There are a few things to keep in mind as you navigate the aftermath of an automobile accident.

Insurance and Driving Privileges

Having an accident on your record can affect your insurance rates and influence your driving privileges. People who have been deemed high-risk drivers by insurers often incur higher premiums.

Repeated accidents can even lead to the suspension or revocation of a driver's license. Jobs that require a clean driving record might be also unavailable to those with an accident on their record.

Navigating Settlements and Police Reports

If you're in an accident, it's important to understand the financial and legal aspects, including the average settlement for a minor car accident. Equally important is knowing how to file a police report for a car accident, as that report will form the legal basis of the insurance claim processes.

Steps to Mitigate Record Impact

Seek Legal Counsel

Navigating the details of laws can be difficult for the average person, and legal experts can offer insights into possible damage to your record and ways to move forward. A skilled lawyer might be able to offer strategies for reducing the length of time an accident stays on your record or help you explore paths to expunging the accident or reducing the its impact.

Enroll in Safe Driving Courses

Courses in safe driving can sometimes help reduce the impact of an accident on your record.

Monitor Your Record

Regularly checking your record can help you spot and rectify any inaccuracies.

Moving On

The length of time a car accident stays on your record is influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including local laws, the nature of the accident, and the details of the drivers. By understanding these factors and taking proactive steps, you can navigate the aftermath of an accident effectively and not be held down by the past.

Breath

by Parsons Twesten

Score — *Susan's Gone* by Dirk Powell

It always holds the head upright and the mouth open, and is the only animal which receives nourishment neither by meat nor drink, nor anything else, but from the air alone.

— Pliny the Elder, *Historia Naturalis*

Who knows where these things begin? You can say that kind of thing in an essay. Pliny wrote *Historia Naturalis* late in his life, in 77 AD, and the idea of a creature that eats air must have been older than that, because Pliny is simply sharing with his reader facts he's collected. Picture him in a smoky bar, scribbling notes while someone who's just returned from Africa tells Pliny what a wild fucking place it is. A place wild enough to have given birth to the chameleon.

Regardless of where it began, it's easy to see why it's persisted—up to Hamlet comparing himself to the breath-fed animal in 1603 and beyond—the logic is sound. Chameleons change color—that detail about the magical beast is true—and it's deeply reasonable that in order to be so flexible in your being that you are, yourself, mistaken for a part of the world, you must consume the very air around you. To eat food—to drink, to fill your gut—makes you solid. It makes you real. It makes you, undeniably, you. If you want to disappear into the world, some substance must be sacrificed.

In 1804, in the name of science, a London journal reported a man put five chameleons in a cage until they starved to death one by one. On the 116th day, the last chameleon was set free. Pliny, a man repeating what he's been told, 1,700 years earlier, explained how the reader can cook a chameleon in such a way as to make its possessor invisible. What does the world want from those who are free? To understand, surely, but also something more. Clearly, they can't simply be allowed to roam, living off the air of the world and returning home mistaken for the places they've been. They must be unpieced, and, if you can manage it, taken advantage of. It's an old desire, to consume to become. Pliny elsewhere describes a philosopher who discovered a way to shape a magical serpent from the blood of birds—a serpent that, if eaten, grants the devourer the power of King Solomon—Mantiq al-tayr, the language of birds.

Who is Pliny speaking to when he shares these cruel recipes? Who are the barbarians with plans to devour something free, hoping to become it? It's easy to picture them, men asking women to be pure, to be supernaturally light—light in body and need, living on nothing so there's no responsibility, in the world but not of it—and the same men unable to bear this, decrying purity and needlessness. It's easy to picture them, a readership living off destruction through contradiction, and, like Pliny explaining how to roast the foot of a creature so you can take its powers, it's easy to see who benefits.

Of course—you can do that in an essay, shame your readers. Don't worry, I know you've never heard this part before. I won't tell anyone when I overhear you at a cocktail party later, repeating this detail and saying, “Of course...” yourself. Of course, there is also a myth that the chameleon was made by the devil out of spare parts. No one is asking to be the daughter of the devil, only to have her gifts. They would say that to be empty, to be fed by the untouchable parts of the world, to be a walking menagerie, is a curse.

Who would want to be made any other way? Lord, cut us from the scraps of the world. Make us from the places we cherish and the one's we've never walked. Shape us from the family we love and don't understand, and from the strangers we haven't met and know top to bottom. Let us live not on air, but on choice itself, uncaged.

Echo

by Parsons Twesten

Score — *The Daemons Lament/Sugar Baver* by Tatiana Hargreaves

2nd-level illusion

Casting Time: 1 action

Range: Self

Duration: 1 minute

Sing about pain. Sing about the heartbreak and lonesome nights when you want to die, but do it while you stomp your foot in time, hammering your instrument like the piston of a train driving for the horizon. There's no reason to be doleful about it, it's only life. These things happen. You walk through it and you come out the other side dotted in dew, grasshoppers jumping into the air as you step over the bent stalks, the fine hairs of your arms dressed in jewels.

Three illusory duplicates of yourself appear in your space. Until the spell ends, the duplicates move with you and mimic your actions, shifting position so it's impossible to track which image is real. You can use your action to dismiss the illusory duplicates.

Bluegrass is a bastard. Italy invented the violin; the banjo started in Africa; Britain and Ireland brought ballads and reels, long winding narratives and wordless dance music. The land had enough sadness for everyone.

Each time a creature targets you with an attack during the spell's duration, role a d20 to determine whether the attack instead targets one of your duplicates.

There's a reason there's harmony, there's a reason we play in a circle in church basements and parking lots, men and women yelling in chorus—we are not alone. These things happen. No matter what troubles you have, how low life gets you, how hard death wrecks you when it claws away your mother, someone is there, singing with you, voices married and fit to yours are behind you, echoing your lamentation and changing it. This is how mourning becomes music.

If you have three duplicates, you must roll a 6 or higher to change the attack's target to a duplicate. With two duplicates, you must roll an 8 or higher. With one duplicate, you must roll an 11 or higher.

It isn't insignificant, the way we play sitting around the fire, taking turns playing loud, the woman on your right nodding to you as she fades into the choir and it's your turn, hammering soft or hard until you finish and return to the whole with a nod to the man across from you who looks you in the eye and nods back. It isn't insignificant that this style of handed-over-handed-over-handed-over center is called a breakdown.

A duplicate's Armor Class equals 10 + your Dexterity modifier. If an attack hits a duplicate, the duplicate is destroyed. A duplicate can be destroyed only by an attack that hits it. It ignores all other damage and effects. The spell ends when all three duplicates are destroyed. A creature is unaffected by this spell if it can't see, if it relies on senses other than sight, such as blindsight, or if it can perceive illusions as false, as with truesight.

Why is it the old ones get so repetitive? Why is it the chorus comes back a hundred times and the verses end in a repeated line, a repeated line? Because we're coming back for you. Like church when you haven't been in ten years, walking through a city you've just moved to, as lonely as a bird in an airport, and you step into any

church across from any bar and someone stands in front of you and speaks, and you already know the words. That speaking proves what was hard to believe when you walked through streets where no one knows you—that you are not alone, that you are real. The call and response proves your voice is part of the storm, and the repetition proves that there are always people speaking somewhere, waiting to be made real by your reply. We're coming back for you because if you're out there hearing us say we've got no sugar baby now, yelling it in harmony as we pound our heels on the earth, maybe you've got no sugar baby now either. Sing with us. Stomp the ground and prove this is life, echo us and prove we're both real, dotted in dew. We're coming back for you. Now.

True Love

by Parsons Twesten

The first time I met Tigerlily, she was running out of a gas station with Buck yelling after her. She had her hands wrapped around her gray sweater, which was bulging awkwardly. I was halfway through the door when she came flying out and she stopped in front of me. She had a stick of deer jerky between her teeth. I stepped back to let her through, and she winked at me and took off. Buck was still yelling at her, alternating between heys and obscenities. I watched her go, then I walked in and put some cash on the counter and Buck started yelling at me and cursing my fat ass. Because that's what I'm looking for on a Sunday, I said, tackling some feral girl and busting up my hands. I held out my hands like the kids on drugs you see in movies. These are my moneymakers, Buck, I said, I can't put my moneymakers in danger. He called me a name and took my money. Out at my truck, I sucked on my teeth when some gasoline splashed on me—a blister had popped on the inside of my thumb and it burned like crazy. I watched the numbers run and bit one of my nails. I looked in the direction I'd seen the woman run. When the tank was full, I went in and bought some jerky.

After that first time, it was a month until I saw her again. I was in the middle of the Kerry job then, busting my ass weekends to get it done before August. It was hot early that summer, the kind of hot that made you blink a hundred times while you were looking down at the cuts you made, sweat building up on the tip of your nose and leaving stains on the boards. I brought a fresh shirt in my cooler to change into at lunch every day. Some of the younger guys on my crew worked shirtless, and I'm not somebody to tell a man what he can and can't do, but it always seemed indecent to me. I spent most of June that way, and the whole town sighed when there was a break in the heat the weekend of the fireman's picnic. That was the first time she talked to me.

It was the same as every year—church's cakewalk, booths for the school and Al's hardware and the Dairy Dream and the daycare, little games for folks to raise some cash and big games for the carnies to take your money, though sometimes you'd win a stuffed animal or an inflatable hammer and the kids would give 'em to their girls or hit their friends in the head when they weren't looking. No Whirler after the accident last year, but the Ferris Wheel and the Gravitron and the potato sack slide. The fireman's picnic was like Christmas—even when it changed it was the same.

I was sitting with Nelda at the beer booth. She took folks' money and they'd gossip while she got them their bottles. I was in the same place I sat in her bar, the real bar, the right corner by the mirror that said Schlitz in gold. Nelda had hung up a big plywood wheel you could pay to spin and see if you'd win a free beer or have to drink the mystery shot. I'd built the thing for her, put finishing nails around the edge and cut the dial on the band saw and painted it red. It was a decent job, if I say so myself.

Pete Decker walked away laughing after landing on Pay Double, and I was working on my second one of the evening, enjoying the breeze and the sounds of kids screaming and Mike on the PA at the pavilion calling out the line dance. Tigerlily stepped up and asked for two beers. I looked over and saw she was looking right at me. Well, well, she said, my accomplice.

Nelda set the beers on the bar and Tigerlily said, And two spins, for me and my partner, nodding towards me. She came around and stood by me, reaching out and pulling down on the spinner. Spin one was a free beer. Spin two was a mystery shot.

Nelda got both and said, Well someone's lucky. Tigerlily picked up the shot. She winked at me, just like that day at the gas station, and my heart did a flip. Someone is, she said, emphasizing the is, like she was saying Nelda was

right. She tipped back the shot, left five dollars extra on the bar with the free beer, and walked away.

I kept my eyes on Nelda, who was making eyes at me. When she put the money in the bucket behind the bar, she found a piece of paper under the bills that said Tigerlily, with a phone number under it. Later on, walking back to my truck in the outfield parking lot, I saw her talking with the guy running the Gravitron, holding his hand and looking at the tattoo on his arm before she climbed into the darkness like something in a science fiction story.

That night in bed, I started off looking at some pictures, but by the time I came, I was thinking about driving my truck with the windows down and Tigerlily leaning her head against me, her bare feet out the window.

A few days later, I was in the grocery store ticking through my list, plus extra for a barbeque my uncle was having. I'd promised to make egg salad—my secret is horseradish—and there she was in the garden corner, pushing a cart stacked with four big bags of sand. She walked right up to me and I wished I could have disappeared.

You never called me, she said. I apologized and said I wasn't sure if she'd wanted me to. I could tell I was stammering like an idiot and I tried to stop. She looked me over. Well I did, she said. Okay, I said. She didn't move. So... Tigerlily, I said. She said, Yeah, and just looked at me until I told her my name. We still hadn't touched each other. I nodded to the bags in her cart and asked if she was doing some construction. She said, Something like that, and I said, Well, if you need all that, you ought to buy it somewhere else. She looked back at the bags and nodded. She put the bags back, helped me get the rest of my list, and walked me out to my truck. We didn't talk much. It turned out she didn't have a car. I have no idea how she was planning to get those bags of sand home, but I didn't ask. Before I could tell her it was a 20-minute drive, she was sitting in the passenger seat. I sat as far away from her as I could and drove us to Elgin quarry.

When we got there, I drove us down into the pit. We went into the little one room office in the middle, nice and cool away from the dust and heat. I talked to Pam and asked about the kids and whatnot and Tigerlily explained how much she wanted and I backed over to the pile of sand and they loaded us up, easy as pie.

As we were driving out, she asked me to stop at the top of the hill, where there's a little pullout. I did and we both looked down at trucks coming and going getting loaded down with gravel and asphalt and limestone.

We had been watching for a minute or two when I asked if Tigerlily was her real name. She said the name her parents had given her was boring, there were thousands of them, and every time she met one she wanted to scream. I reminded her my name was John and asked her if she was gonna scream. She smiled at that and said, Well, we'll have to get you a new name too.

After that, I drove her home. While she pointed out turns along the way, she told me she was living at her mom's old house. She'd died last year and Tigerlily had been all over the country, visiting when she could, but when it had gotten bad, she'd come back home to be with her. She didn't know if she was going to keep the place or not, because she loved cities so much, but it was nice being home and she said she figured there wasn't any sense in not fixing it up while she was back. She said she was at least going to stay as long as her mom kept coming round to visit.

When I was a boy, after my aunt died, a week after the funeral I saw her in the backyard. She was pulling apart acorns and putting the tops on her fingers, like she used to do when we played together. The only thing I thought when Tigerlily said that about her mom was I wished my mom had come around after she'd died.

Eventually, we pulled up next to a little house by a pond. The house was beat up and there were some dead patches

in the yard, but one of the window frames was new and the grass had been mowed, and there was a little tree covered in pretty white flowers next to the water. I said it was beautiful and she saw where I was looking and said, Dogwood.

She pointed where to park and we got out. The sun was halfway to setting and the heat had backed off some. She got a flat backed shovel and started in on the sand. I tried to get her to let me do it, but she ignored me, saying she owed me and that she only had the one shovel anyway. She unloaded the sand into a pit in the ground. Around it was a circle of rocks that looked like they'd come from a river, sort of smooth. I went and walked around the house.

When she was done and I was sitting in my truck, she came and stood by the door with her hand on the frame. I could see the dark hair under her armpit and I made myself look away. I pointed to a corner of the roof where the shingles had been bent up and said, Let me know if you need someone to look at that. She looked me over and nodded.

See you around, Dogwood, she said, and I drove home.

We saw each other almost every day after that. The next day, she called me while I was on site and asked if Dogwood was there and if he had time to look at a poor woman's roof. I said I believed he did. It was maybe a week later we started the assignments.

She said she'd heard about them somewhere, but she never told me where. She said I was lucky I'd met her when I did. She was still early on in the list, she said, and I could catch up, because soon she wouldn't be able to come back for me. Some of them were strange, I know, but I don't care how crazy it sounds, they were fun too. Little challenges. We never did anything really dangerous, and after every one I was glad I'd done it. We'd be about to do one and she'd wink at me and I'd think, Lord, I don't want to live any other way.

This isn't the whole list, not by a long shot, but here's a few. I keep trying to remember the rest, trying to get them all down right. Later, I tried to write them all down in the back of an old crop journal I found in the barn, but no matter how much I beat my head against the wall, I know I'm missing some. I know I'm forgetting.

Steal something. This was part of me catching up. I took a pack of gum from the gas station. I wanted to leave a dollar on "accident" but Tigerlily said I couldn't.

Tell a rock a secret. I felt like a fool doing this one. She said she'd done this one already, and she stood on her porch with her back turned while I picked up a rock and whispered real close to it. I double-checked she wasn't watching. I thought she was messing with me, just seeing if I would do it.

Run circles in a rainstorm with your mouth open, drinking the rainwater. By the time we stopped, my skin felt electric. She kissed me and I just about exploded.

Help someone without them knowing it was you. We did this one separately. Ms. Perkins had complained her garden hose had cracked in the winter, so I bought a new one and snuck up to her house at night and switched it out. I felt like a kid breaking the law.

Take a shot of spoiled milk. Oh lord, I hated that one. We looked at each other and pinched our noses and counted to three. Made my insides curdle. But when it was over, Tigerlily was sitting across her table from me gritting her teeth and she looked at me with the biggest smile on her face and I couldn't even remember the how it tasted.

Go into the woods and talk nonsense. Tigerlily said she knew the words, but they didn't sound like words to me. She'd ramble out some sounds, some I knew and some I didn't, and I'd repeat 'em. I felt like a fool doing this one too until she said to pretend it was church, and then I felt a little less stupid.

Write a letter to someone dead. I wrote to my mom. I hadn't been that close to crying since I was a boy. We burned the letters and buried the ashes in the fire pit.

There were others, like I said, some I remember and some I don't. I'd come over and do a little work on the house, replace some of the gutter or plane a cabinet that was sticking, and she'd come up from weeding by the pond and have one in mind. Sometimes I think she just made them up, just whatever amused her at that moment. I'd come over to pick her up and we'd go out to get dinner or sit with Nelda on a slow night—we had to stop drinking for the assignments to work, Tigerlily said, and lord knew I could stand to lose a few pounds so I didn't mind. We'd make our way home and she'd get that look in her eye and I'd tell her to tell me, and I'd drive us where we needed to go. I slept at her place most nights. It was nice, having someone to lie down next too, even with it being hot as it was. I tried to get her to come over to mine once, but she said she still didn't feel right leaving the house alone all night.

It was the last week of July I started worrying about her. Even now I feel bad saying it out loud, but it's true.

She wasn't sleeping well. August was right around the corner and I was busting my can to hit my deadline, but we still saw each other almost every day. She seemed anxious even when we were just sitting in the truck at the drive-in. One day we were having lunch at her place and I was complaining about an electrician who was jerking me around on a price, and she was looking more and more agitated and all of a sudden she says the assignments were getting more important now, that we were almost at the end and we had to focus. This was serious. No room for messing up. I squeezed her hand. I remember thinking, She's going to be okay. This would be hard on anybody, I thought—your mom dying and coming back alone, fixing up her place by yourself. Once we get it in good shape, I thought, we'll take a trip somewhere, a nice place with a beach.

One night we were at her place and she shook me awake. She said we had to go outside. I said I didn't want to, that I had to get up early, but her voice got real high and when I looked at her, she looked like she was about to bite her jaw in half, so I said okay. We stepped outside and the yard was blue from the moon. I started to put my boots on but she told me not to. The assignments always had little rules like that. She walked over and sat on the ground in front of the fire pit. She looked up at me and I sat down across from her. She took my hands and put them in the sand. She used my hands to push together little mounds and then knock them over, covering my fingers and wiping them off, using my fingers to write letters and then smoothing them over, again and again and again, until her hands were moving on their own and I was doing the same things, exactly the same things. I can't explain it now. All I can think to say is that I've never been able to dance, and when I was a kid I loved watching Mom dance with Aunt Carrie. I knew they made it up as they went, my Mom told me that, but it always looked like it was all planned out, like they'd memorized every step to every dance. I don't think I ever saw them make a mistake. After awhile, even though we still hadn't said a word, at about the exact same time, we stopped. When I looked at what we'd made out of the sand in the pit, I don't even know how to describe it. I didn't remember making it.

We went back inside and laid on our sides and she clung to my back, running her hand up and down my arm saying, We're close now, we're so close, we're almost done.

It was August 1st when she called me and said it was time for the last assignment. I was at the Kerry house on my knees, vacuuming up sawdust and screws. I told her I couldn't, the owner was coming by in an hour, I couldn't. I hated hearing that sound in her voice, panicked, like she couldn't calm down. I tried to make my voice low and

steady. I told her it was going to be okay, that I would come over as soon as I was done, I would come straight over, it was going to be okay. She kept saying I had to come right now, she was sorry, but it was time, if I loved her I would come right now, and she hung up. It was torture finishing out that day—cleaning up, waiting, walking through the house while the owner poked around. I must have checked my watch a hundred times.

When I got to her house, she was sitting at the kitchen table. She had her hands folded in front of her. The table was empty except for her butcher knife. There was blood everywhere.

I kept wanting to look at her hand, but she was staring at me so hard, I couldn't look away from her eyes. You can still do it, she said. She looked at the knife, then back at me. I couldn't move. I stared at her. There's still time, she said. We can be forever. I thought I might cry or throw up. I took a step back.

I thought it was you and me, she said. I don't want to be forever alone. I want it to be you.

I tried to get her in the truck, but she wouldn't go, so I called an ambulance. When they walked her out of her house, her hand all wrapped in gauze, I stared at my boots

She disappeared not long after that. I went to the house after she was out of the hospital and found a note saying she was going to kill herself and a phone number that ended up being her brother. I didn't even know he existed. He came in from out of state and organized a funeral, and I dug my suit out of the closet and went, even though I didn't believe it. I met him afterwards and he said that Alice was sick. I said I was sorry about his mother, and he said thank you—her health was too bad to travel right now, but it would've been too sad for her to be at the funeral anyway. He said she was staying near him in an old folks' home somewhere in the southwest. Alice was supposed to help out but when things got bad she had skipped out on them, but he didn't blame her, he said, Alice was sick. He didn't blame her. When I said goodbye, he asked what my name was. I told him it was Dogwood.

That was almost 35 years ago now. I sold the business a few years back. It had a good run, got a couple big jobs I traveled for in the cities and a smart kid who worked for me the last five years wanted to take it over. I was slowing down anyway, then I hurt my leg and decided to call it quits. I'm still proud I got out because I was old, not because the work dried up.

Last night I was sitting at the fireman's picnic at my usual place at the bar. Nelda died a while ago now. Everything is different. The kids are different, the beer is different. All the games and rides are there, but they're new and covered in a different kind of lights. Somehow, the everything is louder.

I sat there and out of the corner of my eye, I saw her playing the water pistol game. I stood up and walked towards her, but she wasn't there. I'd seen it clear as day, though, her face in the lights of the game, not a day older than when I last saw her, her hand on the plastic gun and the stub where her thumb used to be.

I went back to my seat. I've tried a hundred times to remember everything, to get them right, but I know I'm missing some. I know I'm remembering them wrong. I sat down and felt the spot where my thumb used to be, just once, and asked the stranger behind the bar for another beer.