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## 47 Tallies

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# 07

## 47 tallies lucy gardner

In the summers, the garage my father calls his shop envelops me in its concrete refuge. An old pickup truck rests inside that has his tool box and ladders strapped to it, and the tailgate has a soft dip in the place I always sit. Today my feet dangle from the tailgate, and Aerosmith screeches "Rag Doll" through the radio.

"What you always doin' in here, girl?" sneers Tattoo Man as he hobbles through the doorway toting a ladder and caulk gun. I'm always girl to Tattoo Man; my brother, always Liam. "Nothin'," I say.

He grins and I look away. Disfigured and stained from years of smoking and biting bottle caps off, his teeth trigger my gag reflex. Every year, I notice there are one or two more missing.

He starts stacking bathroom tiles in a box for his next job with my father. And he makes a point to drop a "goddamn," "shit," or "fuck" every time he fumbles and cracks one. Which is a lot. My mom would say, "He's lit." But my father says Tattoo Man has hands of gold. "Those hands craft tilework as perfect as the Lord crafted you," he says.

He glances over to find me watching him. I hold his stare this time. He grins. I thank God for my toothbrush. "Wanna see my new tattoo, girl?" He packs the last tile in then saunters over to me.

"It's my 47th," he says as he lifts his sweaty shirt to reveal 47 tally marks down the side of his rib cage, the one on the end still inflamed from the trauma of a dragged needle. I say nothing.

When I asked him about the 40th a few years back, he laughed and said maybe he'd tell me when I was a woman.

"Forty-seven," he repeats. I sit stiffly as he admires them, stroking each black line with his thumb. After a minute, he looks at me and says, "You're a weird girl, you know that?" He glances at me without turning his head. "Kind of like my own girl." I still say nothing. My father shouts for Tattoo Man from outside the shop, interrupting our staredown.

"Yeah, comin'," he grunts back. He strides out and I notice the radio lost signal. Just me and the static now. That night I brood over the Tattoo Man and his 47 tallies. He'd given me a window to ask this time. And I hadn't taken it.

I think about why people get tattoos. I think about what could be tallied 47 times. And I think about what could be tallied 47 times by him. Maybe years lived. Beers guzzled in a day. Wins at poker, at scratch offs, or at dive-bar pinball. Records collected. Children conceived. Children snatched from sidewalks. Cars driven. Prayers answered. Deer shot, fish caught, balls hit, targets bullseyed. Men beaten. Promises made. Tools stolen. Days sober. Days pretended to be sober. States wanted in. Pounds lost. Lies told. Women loved, used, hit on, just hit, or worse. Or maybe it's how many times he's wished I was a woman.