

Black Goat Tattoos

By Sylbi Bae

Black goats must be caught early before it gets dark.

Brynn dreamt that a herd of dark cocoa-powdered goats were trampling over her. One minute she was lying in a field of wildflowers and the next goat hooves were pressing her underground. Dirt and dust were burying her alive and seemed to melt the tattoos off her skin. Brynn lay there in complete stillness suppressing the pain in her torso, limbs, and face. Until the alarm clock rang. She was officially late for her first day of work.

Brynn knew the neighborhood. On the streets were littered sidewalks, abandoned stores, and overflowing dumpsters marked with graffiti. Brynn felt connected to them somehow. Here she was, in Virginia, in the middle of winter, pursuing her parents' greatest aspiration: a career in dentistry. The truth was Brynn didn't want to leave her family in Georgia. This was the first time she had been alone with no one taking care of her and no one to take care of. Her parents were traditional and wanted her to become a dentist. Her father was a self-made dental technician who worked in his home lab on the third floor. He was always working, and Brynn only saw him for a few minutes during dinner. Her mother was soft-spoken and mostly tended to house duties. Brynn often argued with her growing up because she thought with her heart instead of her head. Braden, at fourteen, was enough of a menace to keep her parents occupied. During fifth-grade recess, he once took a leak on the girls' side of the playground claiming Ms. Werber refused to let him use the restroom. His reasoning was partly because his bladder was full, and partly in honor of the rebellion. Brynn had met with his vice principal and successfully bailed him out of

detention for the hundredth time. Sweet, five-year-old Bria gave up on questioning Braden's unexplainable actions. When Brynn left for college, she told her, *You're a big girl now, Bria. Will you watch him for me?* Bria was happy to take on the role of the mature child in the household, *I will! Don't forget your coat. It's really cold in Virginia.* It was difficult for Brynn to make friendships as close-knit as her sisterhood with Bria. She was the only person who knew about her tattoos. Bria accidentally walked in on Brynn while she was changing clothes.

Like every family, they had their secrets. Brynn was a responsible sister, loyal friend, and perfectionist student who hid her tattoos from everyone. She caught the bug as soon as she could at eighteen. In three years, most of her back and torso were fully inked up. Brynn had an aptitude for art, but it was a hobby she barely had time for. Brynn's kindergarten teacher, Ms. Shreve, praised her illustrations and showcased them in the class's yearbook. Occasionally, Brynn flipped through her sketchbooks from elementary school. She forgot she had that talent, but that was before she went on the honors track, and there certainly wasn't an honors art class. When she passed by a help-wanted poster at Black Goat Tattoos, she was intrigued by the spirit of self-discovery instilled in every college student and emailed an inquiry to the owner.

It was early Monday morning, and Brynn parked in the fifth row away from the shop. The parking lot was worn from decades of summers and desperately needed new pavement. The asphalt was crumbling, skid marks painted the striping, and trails of rainbow litter filled the cracks. Black Goat Tattoo's storefront was transparent, a strategy that hair salons employ to attract the business of passing pedestrians. Usually, tattoo shops tint the glass to protect their clients' privacy. This felt counterintuitive to Brynn. Tattoos were meant to be seen, a declaration. Not to mention all the natural light they were missing for marketing pictures.

Brynn was expecting to be greeted, but there was no one. The space was a refreshing open-floor layout of work and play. Tattoo chairs and machines were stationed on the right side. Brynn loved the entire process of getting tattoos, an idea turned stencil design turned permanent art in the skin. Even the white noise of the needle felt like a massage, peaceful and sometimes painful. The artists decorated their mirrors with pencil drawings on torn-out sheets and trophy designs on hand for the client that resonated with them. Books of laminated flash tattoos rested on side tables next to a collection of tube paints. Each station's dresser was customized with bumper stickers, storing the artists' preferred equipment. Only one out of seven stations looked like it belonged to a woman. On the left side, the waiting area housed reclining leather sofas surrounding a large-screen TV for clients and their "opinionators". Next to it were long wooden drawing tables and easels where ideas transformed into art. Notes from visitors scribbled around a mural of a black goat painted on the wall. It looked like a black blob from afar, but a closer view revealed embedded ornamental designs adding dimension to its wool. The receptionist's desk was a masterpiece, a thrifty art collage of goats, ranging from all shapes and sizes. Brynn wandered to the back of the shop, past the bathrooms, and into a narrow hallway of storage rooms. There was an office, the door half open, where Ingrid, the owner, was sitting at her desk, flipping through documents. The walls were empty except for one frame, an official tattoo license awarded in 2012. Brynn wondered what it was that Ingrid saw in her.

Ingrid just returned from a weeklong girl's trip to Florida and was slammed with work. She thought all this paperwork was unnecessary, she just wanted to make art. She stretched her neck out and saw the girl wandering around the shop courtesy of the mirror she angled to reflect a view of the floor. A month before, the girl emailed her inquiring about administrative work. The subject line was formatted like a scam, so she left it in the trash. The former teenage

receptionist suddenly stopped showing up, so she invited her to a virtual interview. She thought she could at least gauge the girl's sanity first. If she ended up sucking at the job, she could easily replace her. Brynn was punctual and seemed to hold her own, so she was instantly hired. But here she looked like she just rolled out of bed.

“Brynn, is it? I would show you around, but you've already done that yourself.” Ingrid smiled. “Come, let's get you started.” Ingrid hurried Brynn out of her office and led her to the front desk. The job was simple: clean up for opening and closing, schedule online appointments, handle walk-ins, and stop sketchy people from entering the “church”. There were no new appointment requests, so Brynn decided to pick up the litter outside. She grabbed a garbage bag and her music and started on a pile at the end of the sidewalk. In the middle of the parking lot were two men smoking against their cars. One thick, one skinny.

“1945 style bro, that's it.” Garrett handed Aaron another cigarette.

“Nah, all these kids are like, ‘Oh, you be doing all these crazy black and grey tattoos. Why don't you got that on your body?!’ and I'm like, ‘It's not real tattoos, bruh—*these* are real tattoos!’” Aaron points at his body with both fingers and takes a hit.

“The fact that you say that is good because a lot of those little motherfuckers you tell ‘em that and you blow their mind y'know? They don't understand how the fuck you could even think that way.” Garrett lit another cigarette.

“They're like, ‘Bro, your tattoos are shit!’ and I'm like, ‘I know but I love them!’” Aaron said.

“All I fucking look at now when it comes to tattoo theory is the Russian tattoos.” Garrett said.

“Yeah, I like that style a lot.” Aaron said.

“That’s all that I like now, bro. I like that stuff. So many painfully beautiful stories are told with so much simplicity. And that’s how it needs to be. *Less is more*. Tattooing is storytelling y’know? It’s like an old song like when Slick Rick used to fucking rap you know? It was an entire story from beginning to end.” Garrett said.

“Well, even with my black and grey I always tell people that less is more. People always ask me ‘Oh, you do realism?’ I say, ‘No, I don’t do fucking realism, bro. I do high-contrast black and grey. I just want it to...across the room...’ Aaron pointed to the other side of the lot, ”...pop out! It don’t look *realistic* to me. Y’know what I’m saying?”

Brynn had never heard so much discussion about tattoos before. The men must be tattooists from the shop. It seemed like they dedicated their lives to it, unapologetically so. No one knew Brynn had tattoos, and she didn’t know anyone who had them. She couldn’t show them off or tell their stories. Back home, everyone knew Brynn as the smart one who kept to herself. If only people saw the skin she was hiding, maybe they could see her for everything she was. After all, people are just a collection of stories, but not everyone is willing to hear them.

Ingrid left her office to check on Brynn who was outside hunched over a pile of trash. She saw Garrett and Aaron taking their first smoke break. They always took one before their first appointment. *I hope she didn’t hear whatever dumb shit they said*, she thought. Those two are who she should be worrying about.

A few days later, Brynn was studying for her organic chemistry exam behind the receptionist's desk. Ingrid didn't mind Brynn straying from her monotonous tasks as long as things were in order. Brynn had focused discipline built from her love of learning which came to good use when managing the shop. However, the academic subject matter seemed to be draining her. During lectures, she sketched in her little blue book to ignore redundant information she had already taught herself with the given learning materials. She felt more useful at Black Goat Tattoos than she was sitting through classes and skipped more each week as she realized there was nothing to be gained from them. The storefront attracted more walk-in clients after she cleaned up the litter and tweaked unnecessary steps in the scheduling workflow. She wished she could tell someone about her new job, but her parents didn't know about her spotty attendance and if they found out, she knew they wouldn't look at her the same. The other day, she was on the phone with them talking about how she made the best choice going to college in Virginia, how she found the classes interesting, and that she was exploring new things. She told them everything except for her new job. Brynn knew she was an exceptional student, but in the process, she starved the creative left side of her brain. In two weeks, she streamlined her entire workflow and there was more time to work on her sketchbook. She began sketching a young lamb wearing a wolf's coat, an idea she was itching to materialize.

Garrett was lying on Aaron's tattoo chair, beer belly facing up, waiting for Aaron to place the stencil on him. It was a black and grey sea bass above a **W** for his late father's first initial. Garrett didn't have many fond memories of his father, but one of his redeeming qualities was that he liked to go fishing. After his divorce, he spent most of his time at the dock reflecting. Whether he made peace with his mistakes or not, Garrett didn't know. He only wished his father had the time to teach his three grandsons how to fish.

Garrett inspected the stencil. “You’re gonna make a thick ass black line and shade it—”

“In your armpit? It’s gonna hurt.” Aaron scrunched his face.

“I know. But it’s the only real estate I got left, man.” Garrett brought his feet together, butterfly style, and started flapping his wings. Aaron could never be serious around Garrett. It was the new receptionist’s turn to babysit him. “Brynn! Come straddle this man!”

Brynn covered her laugh and went to watch Aaron outline. He made crisp linework look so easy. Aaron set up his ink cups, started the machine, and got into position right next to Garrett’s armpit.

“You probably have the coolest job ever,” Brynn said.

“Yeah, he does,” Basil said.

Basil, Garrett’s apprentice, was standing beside Aaron, observing his technique. One day, he would get the chance to tattoo Garrett too. It was the least he could do after everything Garrett did for him. His life now was nothing like the terrifying weeks in the desert crossing the border to the United States immigration camp. His birth name was Clemente, but Garrett thought Basil suited him better.

“I talk to you later.” Basil held his hand out for Brynn’s and softly kissed her delicate dorsal. He returned to his drawing table to finish his botanical flash tattoo collection. Only two people would get the same flash tattoo, so fate could help them find each other. For only \$50.

Brynn squinted at Basil’s sleeves. He definitely had fine-line tattoos. She could make out geometric patterns, leaves, and mountains flowing cohesively around his toned muscles. They looked romantic on his tan skin. Brynn didn’t realize she was blushing. She didn’t have

predetermined plans for boys, but she appreciated it when they made her feel respected. It made her want them to disrespect her.

“Y’know how you can tell if a tattoo was just done for shits or if there was actually some fucking thought put into it? If it aligns with how their muscles curve and contract and if it looks like it was almost birthed on that part of their body. And your lotus might be the best lotus I’ve seen on those terms.” Aaron said.

“Thanks, I drew it myself.” Brynn lifted the side of her shirt to show the pink lotus flower stretched across her left ribcage.

“Yeah? You got potential, bro.” Aaron said.

The lotus pond was Brynn’s favorite tattoo. Back home, her mother used to take her to see the lotus pond with the red and white koi fish. The water was dark and brown, but it wasn’t the water everyone gawked at, it was the blossoms. Their stems were so tall they looked like heavenly towers from deep underwater up to the sky. The leaves were as green as fresh kale and as big as serving plates. The flowers were pillowy yet strong enough to lift a toddler. Every year they remained the same. Brynn wanted to be like them, to bloom each day even in murky water.

For hours, Garrett, Aaron, and Brynn talked about their favorite and least favorite tattoos. It was the first time Brynn freely talked about tattoos or art. She couldn’t believe Garrett and Aaron were the same men she saw smoking in the parking lot. Brynn felt like she had known them for years even though they had only been around each other a few days. She had learned the stories of all their tattoos, and they had learned hers. It was well past the end of her shift, so she hurriedly packed her things and left for the day.

Ingrid was on her way out when she saw a little blue book poking out of the drawer. On each page, she discovered an intriguing interpretation. The most recent sketch, Lamb in Wolf's Clothing, triggered an emotion she hadn't felt in a while: shame. Although there was nothing shameful about it—it was a beautiful depiction of purity and self-realization—it reminded her that her defenses made it impossible for her fiancé to feel secure in forever with her.

Ingrid had an appointment with one of her few lucky clients. Brynn had never seen her tattoo and was looking forward to it all day. The design was arranged into four separate stencils perfectly laid in one try. The appointment would be a long one, but Brynn didn't mind. Watching Ingrid was different than watching Garrett, Aaron, or any other artist. She worked with a sharp eye and had a light hand.

After a few hours, Brynn went to check on the client.

“Brynn, have you ever thought of tattooing?” Ingrid asked.

“No, I was too busy following my ten-year plan to be a dentist,” Brynn replied.

“A dentist? If you're here, I doubt that's truly for you.” Ingrid said.

“How did you get into tattoos?” Brynn asked.

“I used to paint murals around the city and got accepted into fine art school. But they believe making art for the sake of beauty is shallow, that it's absurd if it doesn't represent some kind of pain or societal trauma. With tattoos, you can get something just because you think it's pretty. There's a reason why you gravitated to it.”

Brynn was a visual person. Nearly all her tattoos were inspired by something she saw online. Securing a tattoo appointment with the right artist could take months, and sometimes she had to decide to get the tattoo before she could defend why she wanted it ingrained forever. She tried waiting a few months to make sure she wouldn't regret it, but the waiting only revealed a hole that the tattoo should've filled. It was like trying to predict a baby's life before it's even born. Brynn realized that living with the body art assigned meaning to it.

For the first time in a long time, Brynn went to class. It was the day of her organic chemistry exam, so she shut off her phone. When she was done, she saw three voicemails from her mother and listened to them on the drive to the tattoo shop.

The first: "Brynn! You haven't called in three weeks! Have you forgotten about your family already? Bria's teacher had her draw a picture of all of us and I hear she's quite the artist. It reminded me of your kindergarten yearbook illustrations. Call me when you get this!"

The second: "What did Bria draw on your body? It looks like bruises or something. Is that why you were always wearing long sleeves?"

The third: "Bria just explained her drawing of you. What is this about art that never goes away? Since when did you get tattoos? How many do you have?? Brynn, you can't ruin yourself with those ugly things, it doesn't suit you! How are people supposed to take you seriously?"

Brynn wasn't upset with Bria. This scenario had played out many times in her head already. She was upset at herself for keeping this secret and sorry for making Bria keep her secret

all this time. Brynn's parents had always praised her for making responsible decisions but what did they know about responsibility? Brynn had to raise herself and her siblings while her parents were caught up in their regretful lives. They couldn't have been content slaving away at their traditional gender roles. Did they not aspire for themselves? What kind of role models were they? Brynn had never thought about this because she never had role models. Not in her parents, teachers, or TV characters, she had no older relatives. College was a chance for her to realize her full potential and become her own example. But what was she doing working at the tattoo shop? She could've worked at a lab or helped with her department's research. She wasn't sure what she was doing or what she truly wanted out of it. And no one was there to help her.

Brynn tried to fight back her tears to see the road. But it only made her vision blurry, and it was no use holding them back. She closed her eyes for a split second and saw the same vision of herself lying on the field of wildflowers getting trampled by a herd of black goats. It was a pitch-black night this time and all her tattoos were gone. She couldn't even recognize herself.

Brynn heard a sustained car honk. The car turning at the intersection was going full speed and headed straight toward the side of her car. It was too late to brake.