

CHAPTER 1: THE BOX

Dear Serenity-

Hello again. I'm sitting underneath our trees as I always do when I write to you. I can't believe I started this journal for you over a year ago. I thought it would help stop the pain, yet I still find myself tripping over paintbrushes and canvases in search of that box hidden in the darkest corner of my apartment. That box holds every emotion I have ever felt. I promise you, I'm trying more and more every day to open myself up to you. I know that you haven't come across my path just yet, but whenever we finally meet, I want you to know about my past and what I want in the future. I want you to know everything. I don't have anybody who really understands me, but you will. When you are finally in my life, I will hand this little book over to you and you will know more about me than anyone ever has. You will understand why I do certain things and hopefully the truth won't cause you to run away. More than anything, I want your acceptance.

I caught myself yesterday, over-analyzing words again. What certain words like, hate, love, happiness, anger all truly mean, not just what society has accepted them as. (Like most people view "love" as an intense emotion where it's possible to get hurt by it but somehow it makes life worth living. I see "love" as an illusion in one's mind, completely controllable and although it would be nice to have, life is not unbearable without it.) I'm usually quite good at this, but I got stuck on that one word like I always do, "crazy." What does "crazy" really mean? I see it as a compliment but society sees it as an insult to one's mind.

The first time I was called "crazy," I was thirteen. I had just chopped my hair and dyed it bright red. I saw it as a personal expression of who I am an extension of my internal feelings. (A little wacky but lots of fun.) I was finally starting to accept who I was and what I was becoming. I was getting out of my mother's clenches and I was doing something I could be proud of, regardless of what anyone else thought. The kids at school thought I had lost my mind. Even my best friend stopped talking to me. My art teacher called me into her office and asked me what was going on. She thought I may have been angry or even suicidal. I laughed at her and casually walked out of her office. Even though that was ten years ago, I can definitely say that was the best day of my life.

Seeing peoples' reactions to what I had just done to just my appearance, really woke me up. All I did was change my hair, not my personality and no one could accept it, but I was ok with that. I was actually more than ok with that. I was happy. I saw that I was truly unique and with that epiphany, I flourished.

Every free second I had, I'd paint, write, sketch or do anything that would expand my horizon in the world of art. That's when I first stopped letting external things influence my work. I stopped watching television, stopped listening to music and stopped reading books that had nothing to do with art. I wanted what I was doing to be truly mine, and if I let outside things influence what I was doing, somehow it didn't feel like it was mine.

It was very hard to adapt to this new way of life at first. My mother didn't understand it at all. She'd throw a fit every time I'd come home from school and lock myself in my room. She thought I was doing drugs, snuffing to be exact. She thought I was

purposefully getting high off of the paint fumes. It didn't take long for us to really part ways. She was never the perfect mother, but when I secluded myself, she almost seemed to welcome it. I think we may have said a total of a hundred words to each other up until the time I moved out at 17.

I have always thought I was complete in myself. I was wrong. Eventually, not having anyone to talk to, no one to care about, really made me quite sad. I wasn't about to change who I was or what I was doing, but I didn't want to be alone either. I still don't want to be alone. All I've wanted is for someone to understand. I realized that was never going to happen and that's when it first started . . . when I acquired the box.

I'm sorry. I'm letting too much out right now. I've gotta get out of here.

You are and forever will be my serenity.

Willow

When I finished writing, I closed the journal a little harder than necessary and shook my head with the realization of what I was about to reveal. The reality of what the box is has always repulsed me despite the comfort it brings. After brushing off the orange and yellow leaves that clung to my jeans, I walked out of the wooded area and proceeded down the main drag in New Jollie, New York. Haskell Street was always busy with tourists walking from one local shop to another. Most of those who visited were in search of some peace and relaxation and the art galleries and small shops that lined the town provided just that. New Jollie had certain features that attracted tourists from around the country. Some of the best blues clubs, the art gallery that featured only local artists, including myself, little shops filled with handmade trinkets. There wasn't a Big Box store for miles which made New Jollie truly a special place.

I never take the time to really look at the beauty of New Jollie anymore. It's getting more difficult to find. I guess when you live somewhere long enough it just seems like the negative aspects are more prevalent. Over the years New Jollie has become an extremely poor community with an abundance of homeless youths running the streets. There were at least five homeless shelters and soup kitchens in this tiny town that I tried to volunteer at whenever I could.

As I got closer to my apartment, my eyes fell upon a girl who was obviously once very beautiful, huddled in the corner of an alleyway. She was undoubtedly another street kid with her greasy hair and torn clothes, yet I was able to see the beauty within her. Both her eyes were blackened and she was shaking. I wondered what could have happened to her. I couldn't help but stare, she was so beautiful but she looked so lost. Her eyes were so blue, I could see them from where I stood, and they seemed to hold all the innocence of a child.

As I walked closer, the girl raised her saddened eyes and took notice of me. Suddenly, she shot up and ran around the corner before I could even call out to her. I tried to run after her but she was gone. It all happened so fast, I almost wondered if I had imagined her. As I pondered that idea for a moment, I heard something from above me. When I looked up I couldn't help but notice the intricate details of the architecture on the building that stood before me.

The arched windows had to be at least eight feet high, the first two floors boarded up because they had been broken. The stone steps that led to the door were all cracked and falling apart from no maintenance after several years of the harsh upstate New York

winters. I knew the building used to be an apartment building for upper class citizens, but that's all I knew. I must've walked past the building a million times since I was a child, but I never really noticed just how beautiful it is until now. I wondered what it might look like inside. I wanted to go in but I knew I shouldn't. There was no way I could go in today, the cops liked to wander this area too much. Maybe sometime when I was down here at night I'd take the chance.

As I continued walking past the building toward my apartment the church bells started ringing. 1, 2, 3 . . . all the way to twelve then the noon whistle blew loudly. That was something you could always count on in New Jollie, the sound of church bells and the noon whistle. Sometimes if the tourists were lucky, just after noon Mrs. Schneider would be playing the church organ at St. Mary's Assumption, and today happened to be one of those days. The notes carried throughout the small town effortlessly. Those who have heard the small, blind woman play have said it's the most beautiful sound they've ever been blessed with hearing, and those who know her story says it's the closest to God they've ever felt.

As I walked toward St. Mary's, I could feel the sense of peace that was always around me when I was near Mrs. Schneider. As I opened the large church doors, I immediately turned to the organ. There she was, a tiny woman that appeared even smaller in front of the massive brass pipes of the organ. Her long, white hair was pulled up in a loose bun at the top of her head. I sat in a pew in the back and watched Mrs. Schneider work her magic on the organ. As the final note of Glory to God resonated throughout the building, I wiped away a single tear from my eye. Mrs. Schneider's playing always brought out the most difficult emotions for me to face.

"Aren't you going to come up here and say hello Willow dear?" Mrs. Schneider called out.

"Yes, of course, I just . . . I didn't want to interrupt. How did you know I was here?" I walked up to the organ's platform and sat down next to Mrs. Schneider on the long wooden bench.

"You have a presence about you Willow. It would be difficult not to know you were in a room. So tell me, what brings you here today?"

"Nothing really I just realized it's been awhile since I've talked to you."

"Or to anyone."

"What?" I asked slightly surprised at her comment.

"I just mean, you lock yourself up in that apartment, keep the world out and you paint."

"I don't just paint," I mumbled, unable to defend myself in any other way.

"I'm sorry Willow. I just don't want life to pass you by. You have such an amazing talent but that's not all there is."

"Mrs. Schneider, that's really nice of you to say, but how do you know I have talent you can't. . . "I stopped speaking when I realized that what I was about to say was probably disrespectful, although honest.

"What? See what you create?"

"I'm sorry Mrs. Schneider, but how could you know if I have any talent if you can't see it for yourself?"

"Yes, it is true, I cannot see with my eyes, but I can see with my heart. When you lose your eyesight, other senses become much more perceptive to your surroundings.

Sometimes, when you visit, no matter how upbeat you may sound, I know that you are exhausted from working on your most recent project. When I am near you, I can feel the intensity running through your veins. You spend day after day creating, I don't know anyone that dedicates as much time and emotion into anything they do. With those attributes, I do not believe that it's possible to create anything less than beautiful."

I didn't know what to say. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. I hated when I was the topic of conversation. The truth of the matter was that I never knew for sure that anything I created was beautiful. It was either a work in progress or finally complete. There was no denying that I put in a lot of time and emotion into every one of my paintings, poems and sculptures but even so, I never got attached to any of my work. I never had a favorite so I was never upset when it was time to be sold or put away in storage. I wasn't sure that time and emotion was enough to label something as beautiful.

"So tell me Willow, what made you come to me today?"

"I told you. I just heard you playing and well I knew that it's been awhile since we've spent time together."

"It has been awhile. How have you been?"

"I am okay I guess. As good as I've ever been anyway. What about you?"

"I am good, old, but well."

"Would you mind telling me the story of how you came to live here in the church? I know you've told me before, more than once, but I do love that story and I was thinking on the way here that I may be forgetting parts of it."

"Of course I don't mind telling you the story again. Let's see, where do we start? Thirty-five years ago on Valentine's Day, I was fixing my husband his favorite breakfast, pancakes and sausage. It was more than just the greeting card holiday that made me want to do something special for him; it was also our 40th wedding anniversary. When the coffee was finished brewing, I went into our bedroom to wake my husband. I sang our song to try and get him to wake up, but he didn't budge. I felt my heart sink, I knew there was something very wrong. I tried shaking him, but he just laid there. I quickly dialed 911 and when the paramedics arrived, they administered CPR as they loaded him into the ambulance. It was the scariest thing that's happened in all my life. Despite the efforts of the paramedics and doctors on staff that morning, Mr. Schneider passed away. The doctors told me that it was a heart attack and there was nothing they could do.

"He was my only family, so when he passed, I had no idea how to move on. I had never worked outside the home and Mr. Schneider's social security was the only money we had to live on. That check was enough to provide for our bare necessities and my medication for diabetes. When the checks stopped coming, I was evicted from our apartment with no place to go. I told the congregation of this church that I had gone to since I was a child that I was going to California to live with a great-niece. I was too embarrassed to tell the truth about my situation." The tears in Mrs. Schneider's eyes were beginning to spill over but she continued her story.

"I packed a small bag with some clothing and took a bus to the next town over. I knew I first needed to find a place to stay, but I had no money. There was a small, run down building that had been abandoned for years where I set up my blankets.

"There was someone else who was staying in the building also. A young girl who had run away from home because her mother beat her when she found out her daughter was pregnant. She helped me find food and provided the company that I craved. The

young girl taught me the basics of living on the street until she was eventually taken in by her abusive boyfriend. Then, I was left to fend for myself and I did quite well for a while. A little over a year after being alone on the streets and being unable to pay for insulin for my diabetes, I became completely blind.

“One winter evening, I became overwhelmed with depression and I decided to return to New Jollie and come back to this church to ask God for help. With the little cash I had panhandled during the day, I had barely enough money to take the bus ride back to New Jollie. Luckily, the bus driver was sympathetic to my situation and because I was the only passenger on the late night bus, he decided that he would drop me off in front of the church. Shortly after midnight, the bus came to a stop in front of St. Mary's and I said thank you to the driver before stepping off the bus with my bag.

“As I made my way blindly up the steps to the entrance, I couldn't stop the tears from streaming down my face. I sat in the back pew and began praying. I prayed for protection, for help and most of all, for peace. When I was finished, I opened my eyes and could clearly see the organ. The tall brass pipes towered along the wall and seemed to shine as they had when they were once new. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I hadn't been able to clearly see anything in several months, yet the organ was as clear as day, and it seemed to be calling to me. I stood up and walked to the organ slowly, unsure of each step. As I sat on this long oak bench, I felt warmth I hadn't felt since sleeping safely in my husband's arms.

“I laid my fingers on the keys and I could feel that everything was going to be ok, though I had no idea how. I had never played the instrument before, but the notes flowed with ease. I played throughout the night until Father Salmon arrived for morning services. He approached me and asked me to play for the morning services. I respectfully declined saying that I had nothing to wear. Father Salmon neglected to see my torn clothes and disheveled look. He said that there was a bathroom downstairs where I could take a hot shower and he could give me some clothing that's be donated to the church. When I turned to thank him, it was then that he recognized me.

“I reluctantly told Father Salmon that I never went to California and that I had been living on the streets for well over a year. I told him that I had only returned to New Jollie to pray for help in the church that I cherished. I had no intentions of staying, or being seen. Accepting Father Salmon's offer of a hot shower, I played for morning services that day. With my back to the congregation, no one realized that it was me playing the organ. With my permission, Father Salmon told the congregation my pathetic story and the people listening closely to his words began to cry.

“St. Mary's managed to raise enough money to transform a section of the basement in this church into a small apartment for me. The only rent I had to pay was the promise to play the organ for services on Sunday. I've been here ever since.” Mrs. Schneider ended her story wiping her tears away.

“Do you realize how much the kids look up to you around here? It's not just the talent, or gift you have, that has made you a legend here,” I said. “The adults see you as an icon of femininity and morality, and when teenagers can't talk to their parents, they turn to you and you always know just what to say to make everything ok,” I added to the end of her story

“Oh I don't know about all that,” she said embarrassed. “I guess it is true that kids open up to me for some reason even I don't completely understand. I don't know if that

would make me a legend dear.”

“I would...after all, that was how I met you. When my art teacher noticed that I was becoming more withdrawn from my friends, she suggested that I visit you here at the church. I never would have come, but I became truly desperate to save my own life. That fight with my mother when she said, 'You are nothing and you will always be nothing,' that's what made me break down and come here.” Repeating the words my mother said to make me truly hate her sent a chill through my body. “I went to you Mrs. Schneider at a time in my life when I was contemplating suicide for the first time. You helped me believe that it didn't matter what anyone thought about what I was doing, even if it was my mother.”

Mrs. Schneider must have sensed how my mood had changed talking about that time in my life. She changed the subject asking me about my day so I told her about the girl I saw. I couldn't stop thinking about how scared the girl looked. I wished that I could just talk to her. I talked about the building that took my attention away from the girl and said I thought about going inside.

"So she ran around the corner and she was just gone? Do you think she went inside the building?" Mrs. Schneider asked.

"I don't know. I didn't even think about that. The beauty of that old building caught me off guard and that was what my attention focused on. Why didn't I just go in? I could have helped her."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I don't know, but I wish I had the chance to at least try. She was all bruised and she was crying. She just looked so scared. Yet, she was so beautiful," I said trailing off into my own thoughts.

I realized that I let the word "beautiful" slip from my mouth. It was quite obvious that it wasn't used in the same context as if I were to say that Mrs. Schneider was beautiful. However, even I wasn't exactly sure how I meant it. I remember when I was a teenager and all the girls were having boyfriends and crushes, I just didn't have any desire to do any of that. No guys appealed to me in the slightest way and I felt like there was something wrong with me. After I chopped my hair off, there was a rumor that I was a lesbian. When I was seventeen and I still hadn't had any interest in dating, I started thinking the rumors were true. However, I had never had a crush on a girl either. I guess I had seen my mother in and out of so many relationships, that I didn't want any part of it.

“She's beautiful? How do you mean?” Mrs. Schneider asked interrupting my thoughts.

“Well, she has these eyes that I could see from twenty feet away they were so blue. She just looked so innocent, and even though she was all beaten, I could somehow see the happiness hidden inside.”

"What about the building? Do you think you're going to go in?"

"Maybe. I mean, I think I want to. I'm curious to see what's inside. I love old architecture. I know that it's not going to be in the same condition as it was when it was first built, I just want to see the way the rooms are laid out. Do you think I should go in?"

"I think that if you feel that drawn to it, I think you have no choice but to go in. Just be careful. You may not be ready to see what's inside."

"I know. Street kids have probably taken it over but I think I'd be alright. It's nothing I haven't seen before."

By the expression on Mrs. Schneider's face, it was obvious that I didn't fully grasp what she was saying. I could tell that she was considering elaborating but for some reason decided not to.

"In those few minutes you saw a building that was falling apart and a girl that was beaten and afraid, yet both were still beautiful in your eyes. Willow, I think in those few minutes, you saw yourself."

I thought about those words on the walk home. In a way I had seen myself, only reversed. I mean, the building was falling apart on the outside, I was falling apart from within. No one could see through the confidence wall that I displayed to others. No one that is, except for Mrs. Schneider. I had always put on a happy face in front of people. I put my best foot forward and never let anyone see the scary truth.

As I turned down my road, I watched some children playing hopscotch on the sidewalk. Seeing how happy they were at that moment made me feel so content inside. They were only about five or six years old and they had yet to discover the harsh reality of life. They had not seen the injustice of humanity or the cruelty of their peers. They were the billboards of innocence. People should really look more at children as an icon of society. They were the true heroes. They are fearless, ready to take on any obstacle that stands in their way. They are curious, always asking questions trying to understand things beyond their realm. They are imaginative, always telling stories in such an exciting tone. Best of all, they don't know hate. It doesn't matter if you're black, white, gay or straight, as long as you're willing to play in their world, you are accepted.

As I approached the door to my apartment building, I turned to look at the children one more time. Without realizing it, I was smiling, thinking about how lucky these children truly were at this moment in their life. I stepped into my building, the heavy door slamming behind me. I laid my journal on the kitchen counter and saw the red light of my answering machine flashing. Because of the gallery and food delivery places, the telephone was the one piece of technology I hadn't banned from my life. I stared at the blinking light debating whether or not to push the button. It couldn't possibly be the gallery, they called before I left for the woods. That only left one possibility. I closed my eyes and pushed.

"Willow! Are you there Willow? Geez, you'd think you could find ten minutes to call your mother. Damn it Willow, put down that stupid paintbrush and answer your phone." Then there was a few seconds of silence and barely over a whisper, "Stupid bitch, she'll always be nothing." Then a click as my mother hung up the phone.

I hoped that my ears were playing tricks on me. I played the message three more times before accepting the fact that my ears had not deceived me. My mother had actually called me 'stupid, bitch and nothing' in less than five seconds. I could feel the rage overwhelm my body. I picked up the answering machine and screamed furiously as I threw it and watched as it smashed against the wall and fall to the floor. I could feel my face become scarlet red with anger as my blood pressure rose.

I walked through the living room, past the bathroom, to the back closet. I grabbed the box and went out into the living room where I sat on my brown suede couch and set the box on my lap. The anger still burning inside of me, I opened the wooden box and looked inside. Sitting on top of years of tangible memories, was my knife. I removed it from its sheath and looked at the blade through blurry, tear filled eyes.

Without a second thought, I pressed the blade into my forearm and took a deep

breath in. I cut a line about four inches long and waited to feel something. I didn't cut deep enough, I couldn't feel it. I cut along the same line, this time pressing harder as I gouged deeper into my flesh. Finally I could feel it, the pain that let me know that I was alive and I did exist. I watched as the anger, pain and the sadness released itself in the form of warm red liquid. Finally, relaxed and at ease, I let go of the knife and as it fell on the floor, I smiled. No more pain, no more anger, just numb. I fell asleep as I thought about how lucky I was that an inanimate object could bring such peace into my life, even if it was only for a moment.