

## Spirit of the North Excerpt

### Foreword

I, Sybil Shelley, certify that I found this manuscript in the home of my grandmother, Sarah Bramble Adams, soon after her death in 2001. I further certify that it was written completely in my grandmother's handwriting. I ask that you read this work with an open mind, beginning with my grandmother's astonishing explanation of how it came to be written. It is a fascinating story, and as I will explain in my afterword, for me it was a revelation that helped to determine the future path of my own life. I believe you will equally find it of incalculable value.

### How This Book Came to Be Written

The other day, my granddaughter came over to help me pack and weed through a half century of accumulated items. I am moving now to Snowberry Heights, the senior citizen high rise in Marquette. I am looking forward to the move, the comradeship it will provide, and the freedom from the care of a house and all its possessions, yet it is hard for an old woman to leave her home; here I first came in 1941 as a young bride, here I raised my daughter, here I lived as a widow when my husband passed away, and then later, here I raised my granddaughter, Sybil, after her parents died in a car crash when she was a young child. Now she is in college, living in the dorms at Northern Michigan University, and I have no need for so much space as my house gives me. In my life, I have acquired so many items, both my own, as well as those I packed away after my husband, my parents, and grandparents died. Since I inherited my house from my grandmother, and raised my own daughter and granddaughter here, the house contains the collected possessions of five generations. I felt too overwhelmed to sort through and toss out everything on my own, so I asked Sybil to help me. I came to write this explanation as a result of what happened that day as we were cleaning and packing.

Sybil was standing on a chair in front of the back bedroom closet. She was pulling down boxes from a high shelf while I sat on the bed, sorting through old wedding invitations and funeral cards for people half of whom I could no longer remember.

"Grandma, what's this?" Sybil asked.

I looked up to see an old notebook in her hand; she had it open to a page filled with handwriting. I knew at once what it was, but to put off giving her an immediate answer, I said, "There should be another one just like it up there."

She dug for a minute before she pulled another notebook out from under a box.

"What are they, Grandma? Did you write them?"

"I guess you could say that." I didn't know what else to say. I had never told anyone about those notebooks. I had always wanted to tell someone, but I had feared no one would understand, except maybe Sybil. Many times I had thought about explaining them to her, but I kept telling myself she was still too young. Finally, I had decided I would just leave them for her to find after I'm gone. I was not prepared to explain them to her that day, perhaps because she would think me crazy, but also because she was always such an odd girl—probably from living with an old lady all these years, and from the blow of her parents' tragic deaths in that car crash—a crash she survived. I cannot imagine what affect that must have had on her. She's always been a moody child, given to odd outbursts of enthusiasm followed by moments of severe melancholy. I'm afraid I was not the best companion for her to grow up with. I worry about what will become of her when I am gone—I hope I live to see her finish college, start a career, and find a husband. I hope college will allow her to find the friends she failed to find in high school because she was always so different from everyone, such a loner as her generation says. I've always felt for some unexplainable reason that it was important she learn what the notebooks contain, but I have just never been sure she was ready for that knowledge—maybe she is more mature than I believe, but the notebooks are strange, and I have not always been sure she would be emotionally stable enough to handle the information.

Yet the story is meant to be known by her—meant to be known by everyone who cares to hear it really. My own fears are what have kept it from the world, fears I have held onto since I wrote the notebooks back during the Second World War. My grandmother insisted the story be told, but I was always afraid to tell it, and somehow I've sensed it is Sybil who is to make the story known; I have just had to wait until the right time to make it known to her. I'm not really sure it was meant for me because while it is quite a curious tale, my life has been basically happy, and the knowledge of that story has made little difference to me. But I trust my grandmother, Barbara Traugott, knew better than me when she had me write it down. My role in the story is probably intended to be minimal, only to act as a link between generations to pass the tale from my grandmother to my granddaughter. Sybil will be the one to decide how and when to bring the tale before the world.

As Sybil held the notebooks in her hand that afternoon, she said, "Grandma, I didn't know you were a writer."

"I'm not," I replied. "That's about the only thing I ever wrote."

"But it looks like a whole book," she said, flipping through the pages of the first notebook.

"Yes, but it's the only book I ever wrote," I replied. "Let me have it."

She was resistant to hand it to me.

"Didn't you think it was any good?" she asked. "The few sentences I've read sounded interesting."

"Don't read any more of it, please. Bring it here."

She looked disappointed, but she obeyed. I took the notebooks and set them behind me on the bed. She frowned.

"You can read them when I'm gone," I told her. "In fact, I'll make sure you get them, but not until then. Now, pull down that stack of records. There's no sense in my keeping them. I haven't had a record player for years."

When she turned her back, I slid the notebooks under a box—to leave them visible might only entice her to further questions.

Later, after Sybil had gone home, I pulled out the notebooks and reread them. I had not thought about them for many years, and often when I did think about them, it was dismissively, as if they were the result of some delirious fantasy of my mind, but as I read them again that night, I was struck by just how remarkable they were, and how utterly impossible it seemed that, even at my most imaginative, I could have written them. They contained information about life in early Marquette: names of pioneer families—the Ridges, Whitmans, Hennings; families whom I had no knowledge of—and terms from the nineteenth century I had never heard. I know it would have been impossible for me to have written this book, even though it was in my own handwriting.

I'm probably confusing the reader now, the first of whom I imagine is Sybil. Be patient, dear, and you'll understand it all shortly. The story of how those notebooks came to be written goes back to a day similar to the one when you found them. On that day, I had gone over to my grandmother's house, the very same house I inherited and the one you grew up in.

I was a young woman then, and I had just finished my courses at the Northern State Teachers College and was still looking for a position. My grandmother knew I had little money, so she asked me to come over and help her clean in exchange for a few dollars.

My grandmother was an ornery old woman, but God rest her soul, she tried always to rise above her nature. She would go the extra mile for those she loved, but in return, she demanded strict obedience to whatever she asked. Even in her eighties, her eyesight remained impeccable enough to notice every speck I missed when I dusted her hutch cabinet.

On this particular day, I was cleaning in her bedroom. As I lifted the edge of her dresser scarf to dust beneath it, a young man in an old tintype photograph stared up at me. He was very handsome, and not more than eighteen, I would say. Although the picture was quite old, his face was still clear. He looked as if he would have been blond, and tall, and strong, what the young girls today would call "a hunk" I suppose. I had never seen a photograph of my grandfather, so I naturally assumed it was him, but when I looked at the back of the photograph, it was signed, "To Adele. Love, Ben." And below that was written some sort of poem, although the paper had rubbed away in so many places that I could not fully make out the lines.

I knew Adele had been my grandmother's sister—dead long before I was born. But I had no idea who Ben was—perhaps some secret lover—but certainly not Aunt Adele's husband, for she had never married.

While I pondered the handsome man's face, my grandmother came into the room. Despite her age, she could still manage to sneak up on people; she was not yet feeble enough to warn others of her approach by clumping down the hall with a cane.

"Haven't you finished in here yet?" she snapped.

"I'm almost done," I replied.

"What's that you've got there?"

"I don't know," I lied. "It just fell out from under the dresser scarf when I was dusting."

She came up to me and put out her hand. When I gave it to her, her face started to go pale. Lifting the edge of the dresser scarf, she stuffed the photograph back where I had found it.

"Well, come on. I've made us dinner."

I followed her to the dining room where she had set sandwiches for us on the table. I waited until we were both seated, then boldly asked, "Grandma, who was in that photo? The back said it was to Aunt Adele from Ben, but Aunt Adele never—"

"Best to leave the past alone," she said. "They've both been dead so long now it doesn't matter."

"Was Ben her boyfriend?"

"You are too nosy," she replied. She took a sip of her coffee and then looked me straight in the eye. "You must get that nosiness from your father's side of the family; you sure didn't get it from mine. In my day, a person only had to be told once that something was none of her business."

"But Grandma," I said, "if they're both dead, what would it hurt to tell me about them?" If there were nothing to tell, she would have said so, but her resistance to talk revealed that there had to be a story behind that picture, and my curiosity made me persistent.

"There really isn't much to tell," she grumbled. She sat down, then picked up her sandwich and inspected the meat in it. "I can't believe I let that butcher sell me this ham. I don't know how I'll ever chew it. I could barely slice it. Seems as if there's chopped up little bits of bone in it."

"Grandma," I scolded. "You're changing the subject."

"There isn't much to tell," she repeated. "He was just a boy my sister knew when we first moved here to Marquette—just a friend. We didn't know him long. That wasn't long before my sister went to—"

Before she finished the sentence, my mother knocked on the door and entered. My mother was always such a talker that others could scarcely get a word in. She and grandmother could gossip with the best of them, but if the conversation turned personal, Grandma would instantly clam up; she feared if people knew her business as she made a point of knowing theirs, she would never have any rest from others' tongues. Apparently, the mysterious Ben was too personal for her to talk about because when I tried to mention the photograph to my mother, Grandma purposely changed the subject by asking me about my future plans now that I had finished my schooling. I forgot about the photograph for the time being.

That fall, I got my first teaching position in another town too far away for me to live in Marquette. While I was gone, Grandma passed away. That same week, a teaching position in Marquette opened for me. And although Grandma had three sons and a daughter (my mother) for her children and plenty of other grandchildren, she had left the house to me. As her only granddaughter, I had always suspected I was secretly her favorite. At that time, my fiancé, Earl, lived in Marquette, but we had put off getting married until we could afford it, and my living in another town had only complicated the situation. Now everything seemed to have come together for us. We married that summer and moved into grandmother's house. Everything would have been perfect except that the United States had entered World War II, so Earl soon found himself enlisted. A month after he entered the service, I learned I was expecting a child.

Earl and I had no time to clean out Grandma's belongings before we moved into the house, but now I decided to turn Grandma's bedroom into the nursery. While cleaning her room, I again found the photograph of Ben. I don't know why, other than that I fancied Ben's looks, but I hung onto the picture, hiding it in my own dresser. I was even a little afraid Earl would find it when he returned. I admit I peeked at it fairly often. I knew there had to be something terribly romantic behind that picture—Ben looked like such a naturally heroic young man with that great blond curl waving over his forehead. No harm existed in looking at his handsome face; Grandma had told me Ben was dead anyway, and even if he were alive, he would have been about ninety by then, and I was a married woman. But I never did show the picture to my husband. I placed Earl's picture on my dresser where I could see it each morning as I woke, but I confess I looked at Ben's picture almost as much. Perhaps it was only a misdirected longing for my husband, but I started to feel a serious infatuation with Ben; I started imagining some remarkable stories about whom he had been and what his relationship may have been with Great-Aunt Adele. I convinced myself that she had been in love with him.

It is silly now, even embarrassing, to admit how infatuated I was with that photograph. I rather fancied Ben looked as if he wanted to talk to me, as if he were trapped in that flat black and white world and yearning to escape. He looked so alive, so vibrant, though seventy years had passed since the photo had been taken. It seemed a shame that a young man with all that energy should not be alive now. I bet he could have taken a dozen Japs with his bare hands. What an asset he would have been to the war effort. How did Aunt Adele ever let him slip through her fingers? Grandma had said Ben and

Aunt Adele were just friends, but I found it difficult to believe any woman could settle for just being friends with such a good-looking man.

Sometimes I daydreamed so much about Ben that I felt guilty, and then I would try to make it up to Earl by writing him an extra sweet letter, and saying my rosary to pray for his safety. And now comes the hardest part to explain—far harder than to explain my infatuation with Ben.

I was sitting at the kitchen table one evening, trying to write to Earl, but I had nothing to say to him other than the usual about how much I missed him. When he had first gone away, I had written to him everyday, but after the first couple of months, it felt like a chore to write more than once or twice a week. I wished I'd had the baby before he had gone—then I could have written to him about its first tooth, its first word, its first attempt to walk. But until the baby was born, what was there to say? My life was dull compared to the dangers Earl was experiencing in the Pacific. All I could talk about were the school papers I had to grade, and how once or twice a week I went to my parents' house for supper because my mother worried I was lonely. I was lonely, but I didn't want to express that to Earl—he would only worry about me, and that might distract him from paying attention to whatever battle he was facing, and then he might not come home to me. And then I would wonder whether that was how Aunt Adele had felt—that Ben had not come home to her—I didn't know what had happened to Ben, but he hadn't married Aunt Adele; I was certain there had to be some great heartbreak there, yet I could not believe any man so outwardly attractive could be anything less than inherently good, so I remained curious why they had not married.

One evening, I decided to write to Earl before I made supper, but instead I found myself just sitting at the table, long after dark came, without turning on the light, letting my mind wander until I dozed off. I dreamt I was writing something, not a letter to Earl but some sort of beautiful story, even though in my sleepy state the words did not quite make sense. Finally, I woke to find myself sitting in the dark. When I turned on the light, I found I still had the pen in my hand. I had scribbled all over a sheet of paper, scribbled, not written any words. I crumpled up the sheet, threw it in the wastebasket, and then made myself supper. By the time I finished the dishes, I realized I did not feel well. Fearing that if I became sick, the baby would be in danger, I decided to go to bed early.

I was asleep by eight o'clock, and slept until after midnight; then I woke up sweating and lay awake in a miserable state for hours, too tired to get up, yet unable to fall back asleep until the early morning. Then I slept fitfully, dreams flitting through my head. I know I had many dreams that night, yet when I woke, the only one I remembered was of lying on my stomach, trying to write a story on my pillowcase with an imaginary pen.

I got up with the first glimmering of daybreak and made myself some tea since I doubted my stomach could take anything more substantial. I thought I should finish writing my letter to Earl before the mailman came—if I became more ill, I did not know when I would be able to write again. But I got no farther than, "Dear Earl" when I felt so tired and groggy that I thought I should go back to bed. My mother had feared that having Earl away during my pregnancy would be too much of a strain for me. I began to think she was right—I suddenly felt overwhelmed by my entire life—the responsibility of teaching so many students, being alone and pregnant, worrying about my husband overseas—it all seemed so unreal, so nonsensical, so absurd to believe it was my life.

I stared out the window until the sun rose—its rays breaking pink over the lightly snow-covered ground. The snow looked so smooth in the early morning light—smooth like Ben's boyish cheeks. Earl, by comparison, had a very rough face, even after he shaved. I wondered what it would be like to touch a smooth face on a man. For a second, I sort of reached out my arm, as if Ben were before me so I could stroke his cheek.

A sudden jolt shot through my arm, from my shoulder to my wrist, and then my left hand began to tingle. My hand picked up the pen, gripping it tightly, and in a fury, it began to pour out words onto the blank paper. I was terrified—I had lost control of my arm, but I was too astonished to try stopping it. It felt numb, as if separated from my body, yet it was functioning perfectly. I stared as I scribbled words onto the paper. I felt as if I were leaning over someone else's shoulder, watching her write. I wondered whether I was possessed by a demon; should I grab the phone? But who would I call? St. Luke's Hospital? A priest to come do an exorcism? I could not move from the chair; my arm would not stop writing, and my body could not move without my arm.

Then I started to read the words my hand was writing. My fear turned to amazement and curiosity. I had no way of knowing what power or intelligence was forming the words, but I saw names on the paper, sentences written about people whose names I did not know except those of my grandmother and Great-Aunt Adele. Then after a few paragraphs, I recognized the tone as my grandmother's voice. Curiosity overcame my fear as I read further. My grandmother's spirit—I don't know how else to describe it—was somehow flowing through me, forcing me to write for her a tale from her own life. And while my hand continued to jot down words, in my head, I heard my grandmother speaking. "Every morning before you go to school, you must wake up early to write until the story is finished." I still could not believe this possession was my grandmother, but as the writing continued, I realized it could not be otherwise. Later, although I never told my mother about the experience, I asked her questions about my grandmother's life; my mother confirmed knowing some of the people mentioned in this manuscript in her early childhood, and she confirmed those people's positions in the community so that I cannot doubt my grandmother herself wrote this story through me, although I find it unexplainable. There is nothing in the writing that makes me believe I was possessed by an evil spirit, even if some of the story's message does

not perfectly coincide with the Church's teachings. The way the sentences are turned, the words put together, all sound so much like my grandmother's way of speaking that the only explanation is that her spirit was using me to perform some type of automatic writing, so she could tell me her story now because she had been afraid to speak it during her lifetime.

I don't want to say much more. Every morning after that for several weeks, I woke up in time to spend a quiet hour or two allowing my grandmother to use me to perform her writing. I think it best I say no more about the manuscript's contents but that I leave it to speak for itself. Perhaps because I am old now, people might dismiss this story as the ravings of a madwoman trying to put one over on the public. I do not know what people will say about it—that is why I have always been afraid to show it to anyone, so I leave it for Sybil to decide how to use it. I only know it was an experience I can never explain. I know during those hours of writing, my arm moved at an alarming pace I never could have maintained by sheer human stamina. I don't know what made me susceptible to the spirit world's influence—although I have an idea it had something to do with my family background, and perhaps because I felt such an attachment to Ben's photograph, an attachment that in itself felt almost otherworldly.

I verify that this story is written in my grandmother's own words—she never spoke a word to me about anything it contains during her actual life. Neither did I change a word of it from how it was channeled through me. I don't believe there is any way I could have known this information, or provided the historical details the work contains. Never could I have imagined with such clarity what my grandmother's life would have been like when she first came to Upper Michigan, seventy years before I wrote this manuscript.

I leave it to the reader to decide what to believe of this strange story. Perhaps the people of the twenty-first century will be less skeptical than those of my own largely atheistic twentieth century.

Sarah Bramble Adams  
Marquette, Michigan  
August 27, 1997