



# DEAR AMERICA

*The Diary  
of Minnie Bonner*



A CITY TOSSED  
AND BROKEN

JUDY BLUNDELL

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While the events described and some of the characters in this book may be based on actual historical events and real people, Minnie Bonner is a fictional character, created by the author, and her diary and its epilogue are works of fiction.

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1906

MARCH 30, 1906

I want to say at the very start that I am not the type to do this. Write my feelings down, I mean. We are talkers in my family. If I'm sad or happy or confused, I say it. But suddenly I am finding that nobody is saying anything at all.

You would think, diary, that when your family loses everything, you'd want to talk it over. Wouldn't you?

How can your whole life change so quickly, so all-of-a-sudden?

Mama just sits and stares, or says, *Not now, Minnie. I'm trying to think.*

And Papa is just gone.

Now here is a word I would like to have heard from him. *Good-bye.*

Now I will record what happened today.

All I knew was that the grand lady, Mrs. Chester Sump, was coming to call on Mama with her daughter, Lily. This required both of us to be wearing our best dresses and for me to wash the good tea set and bring it downstairs to the tavern.

Mama and I made sandwiches on thin slices of bread – chicken salad, cheese and chutney, and deviled ham. I baked a chocolate cake.

It is so strange to see the tavern closed on a weekday.

Mrs. Sump didn't eat any of the sandwiches. She picked up the chicken, sniffed it, and put it down again. When Lily picked up the ham, Mrs. Sump looked at her and Lily put it down.

Mrs. Sump took a small bite of cake and put down her fork as though it wasn't up to her standards. But then you could see how hard it was for her not to eat it, because I make a delicious cake. In the end she ate two slices. She wouldn't let Mama cut any for Lily.

"Marriageable girls should not eat cake," she said.

Well, that is something I never heard before. All the more reason not to marry, I suppose.

Lily didn't seem to mind. She just looked on, a vacant expression on her face, as though gaslights were lit in an empty room. She had a round face and a sharp nose, but pretty green eyes. She

ignored me, but I was not sitting at the table with them, I was fetching and carrying. I did not realize that I was auditioning for the role of maid until I listened at the kitchen door.

In the time it took for me to wash up, it was settled between them. No money changed hands, but I've been sold just the same.

"That's that, then," Mrs. Sump said to Mama. "I take the girl."

I pushed the swinging door just a crack so I could peer through the gap. The tavern was empty except for the table we'd set in the corner. Mama sat with her hands folded tightly. She had taken off her apron when Mrs. Sump came to the door. She looked so strange without it. Like any other mother in a dark gray dress with jet buttons. I only know her as the owner of a bustling tavern, always in an apron, usually with her hands full carrying a tray or balancing three plates of hot dishes or settling a bill, making change in two seconds flat and always a smile, even at a bad tip.

Mrs. Sump sat at the edge of her chair as if it would contaminate her hindquarters. Her coat

was silk and velvet and her dress frothed beneath in layers of scallops and trimming. Her hat sailed on her head like a ship, ribbons flying like flags. She was someone used to being listened to. I could see she didn't like Mama's hesitation.

"You say she's done washing, and mending, and cleaning," Mrs. Sump said. "I keep a tidy house."

"She's a good girl," Mama said. "She can even cook. She made the cake," she added, and if I wasn't so mad at her, I'd admire the way she said it, so cool, but letting Mrs. Sump know that she'd gobbled up two thick slices and could have gone for a third.

Mrs. Sump's hat shuddered in indignation. "I have a cook, Mrs. Bonner. I also have a housekeeper, a butler, a groom, and a full staff of servants. I'm doing you a favor, taking your girl off your hands. You won't have her keep while she's away, either. If you put that into the pot, you'll see what a favor I'm doing you. She's young — fourteen, you say? — still, she's tall."

"She's a good worker, ma'am," Mama said. She just kept staring down at her hands. She

would squeeze one hand, then the other.

All I've been hearing for the past two weeks is how kind Mr. Sump has been. How he made us a loan of money that we badly needed and so we signed over the tavern and now he is so sorry but he's moving all his businesses to California and has a partner there who is making him sell everything here. And so the tavern is gone, and my parents have no work.

And we have no home, because we live above the tavern.

He gave us as much time as he could to make other arrangements, Mama said last night. Truly? I said. A month is enough time to dismantle a life? It went so quickly! Now we have to be out within the week.

Mrs. Sump has a proposition for us, Mama told me this morning. Now it turns out it's for me to be a lady's maid for her daughter, Lily, out in San Francisco, where they are moving in less than two weeks.

"She'll have her duties as a parlormaid, too," Mrs. Sump said. "Of course, my housekeeper

usually does the hiring, but I'm making an exception in this case so that you know your daughter will be going to a good house. I wanted to have a look at the girl. She seems suitable. I will take her on. Our life in San Francisco will be very different. We'll be moving in the best society. Not that we aren't now," she added quickly.

"I'm sure you're very kind." Mother pressed her index finger to the inner corner of her eye.

Papa said many people have a "tell." This means a gesture they make but they don't even realize they're doing it, especially when they're trying to hide something. Mama puts a finger there when she's trying not to cry.

"And she won't be grubbing around in a tavern," Mrs. Sump proclaimed. "I'd say this is a rather better life for her."

She said it like this — *rah-thuh bett-uh*.

Mama didn't answer this. I wanted to pound on the other side of the door. Our tavern had been in the Moore family for over a hundred years. Benjamin Franklin had hoisted an ale at our table. We weren't a fine restaurant, we were just

the Blue Spruce Tavern on Spruce Street, and that was good enough for the neighborhood. Everyone got a welcome who came through the door.

“Mrs. Bonner,” Mrs. Sump said impatiently. “Are you in agreement? Done?”

“Done,” Mama said.

She should have said *Sold!* Because that’s what she did.

I leave for San Francisco in ten days.

## APRIL 1, 1906

I did not wake up this morning and find all this to be a great practical joke for April Fool. My father did not walk in the door, laughing and teasing and saying, “Of course you’re not going to San Francisco, you silly thing!”

No. Instead I am mending what needs to be mended and Mama is packing her things.

Well, what is there to say. Everything we know is gone and soon I will be. I’m to “train” as a maid (train like a horse?) before we leave for San Francisco. Mama has found lodging in a rooming house by the river.

Mama says,  
*I can't help what is.*  
*You're almost fifteen, you're practically  
grown now.*

*Just be a good girl and do what you're told.*

*I have no choice, Min!*

It's hard not to talk to someone you live with. Even when—especially when!—you're so filled up with angry words. Silence doesn't come natural to our house. Usually I fall asleep to the sounds of laughing and talk from the tavern downstairs. And in our own rooms above we are always telling each other what needs to be done or what was done or what will be done tomorrow. And when Papa was here there was singing and jokes. Now there is nothing but silence.

Papa has always taken off from time to time, but this time he's gone for good, Mama says.

How does she know he's gone for good?

She won't say.

I'm to go to Mrs. Sump's house to learn how to be a maid and then I'll travel on the train with Mrs. Sump and Lily. Mr. Sump is already in San

Francisco, has been for the past year on and off. Except for when he was here, dining at the tavern. When he first came in we were excited, because he's very rich and we hoped he'd bring his friends. Well, he did, and something happened and then he had to loan Papa money and then called in the loan, but I'm supposed to be grateful and think he was kind.

I don't understand any of it.

Mr. Sump built some kind of a palace out there, on Nob Hill. So Mrs. Sump told Mama. The Sump Mansion, she called it. Phew.

I want to ask Mama what Papa will do, how he'll find her once she moves and I'm gone, but I don't. I know what she'll say: *Your father is not coming back.*

*What about school?* I asked her, and she said, *You're fourteen, you can leave school to go to work. Just keep up with your reading,* she said. *San Francisco has a library just like Philadelphia — it's a very grand city, you know. I want you to join the library as soon as you get there. That's the first place I want you to find.*

*Shall I replace you with books, then?* I wanted to say.

There are too many words inside, like a pot of water at a rolling boil.

That's why I'm writing this. When the tavern closed, Cook left behind the book he wrote his recipes in. I saw it there on the counter and picked it up, grease stains on the red leather cover and faded gilt letters: RECIPES. It was only a quarter full of recipes, the rest of the pages were blank. He had wound a string around it to keep it together and stuck a pencil right inside the twine.

You are my secret, diary. Here is where I can finally talk.

I am starting out on a life where I can't say anything anymore, anything of what I feel or think. I'm to be a maid, alone in a city thousands of miles away. Who will I say things to now, like,

*Should I make us some tea?*

*What a funny hat that lady has on.*

*I miss Papa.*

Writing things down will get them out and on a page and over with.

*I hate her.*

*I hate Mrs. Sump.*

*I hate her fat husband.*

*I hate San Francisco.*

*I hate my father for leaving.*

APRIL 2, 1906

Mama came in last evening as I was stirring the soup I was making us for our dinner. She put a suitcase on the chair. It was a present. It was scuffed, the brass cloudy and scratched, though you could see she had tried to rub it shiny.

I'd never had such a thing before. I'd never had need of it. Presents were books and oranges or a new shirtwaist on a birthday or Christmas.

"If I had another way, I would take it, Min," she said. And then she gripped the chair back and I could see her throat working, like she was swallowing an extra-big piece of roast. "I'll save every penny and get back on my feet. Then I'll send for you. I *will*, Min. It's just the two of us now, and we have to save ourselves."

I said, "What if Papa comes back?" And she laughed without any laugh inside the laughter. And then just like that she was crying.

I was so mad at her for crying I just kept stirring the soup. After a minute she walked away.

## LATER

Today I go to the Sumps'. It feels so bad inside me, I am scared and mad and helpless all at once. I am going away from everything I know.

Grandad Moore ran the Blue Spruce for forty years until he died three years ago when I was eleven. I still miss him. After school I'd come to the tavern, where they'd be setting up for the dinner hour. My first job was placing the spoons and forks while Grandad polished the glasses. Mama was usually writing out the menu. It changed every day. We were known for our roasts and our fish stew, and she was up and at the Reading Market every morning before sunrise.

Grandad never trusted my father, and he lived long enough to know he was right, I suppose.

"I don't trust that foreigner," he said, even though my father had lived in America most of his life. He came over from France with his parents, and he still spoke with an accent. I never knew

my grandparents – they died before I was born. My father has been looking after himself since he was sixteen.

Before he married Mama he went door-to-door selling pots and pans – like a tinker, Grandad said. Looking for an easy life, he said, and Mama would snort and say, “So he came to a tavern? Didn’t know I was leading the high life, old man.”

My earliest memory is of my father, standing by the front door, welcoming people. Tall and black-haired like me. His name is Jacques Bonner – *Zhack Bon-ay*, it’s pronounced in French, but everyone calls him Jock.

My name in French is so pretty, *Meen-ette Bon-ay*, but in American I’m just plain old Minnie Bonner.

What bothered Grandad is that the tavern wasn’t good enough for my father. He was always wanting to try new dishes, to go for a fancier clientele. He had dreams, it seems to me, and what’s wrong with that? But Grandad never liked how he got to act like the host. He moved around the dining room, seating people, slapping

backs, raising a glass, and not hardly wiping a table or polishing a candlestick.

After Grandad died, Papa suggested that Mama take the back dining room and turn it into a room for private dinners. He convinced her that all the best restaurants did that. He started to teach the cook how to make French sauces. That's when Mr. Sump started arriving with his friends from the banks and fancy houses around Rittenhouse Square.

Papa has always been restless. The first time he disappeared for three days Mama called the police. The second time she didn't. And then it just became part of our lives, how he'd not be there one morning when I got up, and I learned not to ask. Mama made up stories for a while and then she stopped. Jock had gone for a long walk, people joked. And the men would laugh a bit, and the women would feel sorry for us, I guess, but nobody said a mean word to our faces because everybody liked Papa too much.

Here is a funny thing I just realized, diary – when I said at the beginning that my

family talked about things, I never realized that we can talk and talk and talk, and yet not say one word about the most important thing.

When he'd come in the door at last, after a week or two, Mama wouldn't say a word, just put his plate and cup down on the table. And sometimes I was relieved and sometimes I was mad, and I guess I was both at the same time. He'd pick up his cup and wink at me. And I couldn't help smiling at him, because he was my papa and he made me happy. In a few hours or a few days Mama would be smiling, too. He would be calling her "*ma belle*" and bringing her onto his knee. He says her name like this: *ah-zhel*, and it sounds as soft as feathers. Much better than Hazel, isn't it? Mama has big hazel (*ah-zhel!*) eyes with long black eyelashes, but she's not named for her pretty eyes, because Grandad said they were blue like mine when she was born. She has long auburn hair to her waist and is the loveliest woman in the world except for right now when I am not speaking to her.

