

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

---



# Ninety Days

Bill Clegg

## **Contents**

*Cover*

*About the Book*

*About the Author*

*Also by Bill Clegg*

*Dedication*

*Title Page*

*Epigraph*

Borrow Mine

Home

Speck in Streetscape

Re-entry

One Day

The Rooms

The Mother Lode

Use

Goners

Done

Pink Cloud

Shoulder to Shoulder

Close

*Acknowledgments*

*Copyright*

## About the Book

The goal is ninety: just ninety clean and sober days to loosen the hold of the addiction that caused Bill Clegg to lose everything. With seventy-three days in rehab behind him he returns to New York and attends two or three meetings each day. It is in these refuges that he befriends essential allies including the seemingly unshakably sober Asa, and Polly, who struggles daily with her own cycle of recovery and relapse.

At first, the support is not enough: Clegg relapses for the first time with only three days left, turning his calendar back to day one. Written with uncompromised immediacy, *Ninety Days* begins where *Portrait of an Addict as a Young Man* ends - and tells the wrenching story of Bill Clegg's battle to reclaim his life. As any recovering addict knows, hitting rock bottom is just the beginning.

## About the Author

Bill Clegg is a literary agent in New York. He is also the author of *Portrait of an Addict as a Young Man*. He lives in New York.

Also by Bill Clegg

*Portrait of an Addict as a Young Man*

*For Polly, Annie, Jack & Asa and Everyone Counting Days*

# NINETY DAYS

*A Memoir of Recovery*

BILL CLEGG



JONATHAN CAPE  
LONDON

*As snow fills the places  
where you must have walked,  
you start back to where you began,  
that place you again prepare to leave,  
alone and warm, again intact, starting out.*

Daniel Halpern, from 'White Field'

*Forget yourself.*

Henry Miller



## **Borrow Mine**

IT LOOKS LIKE Oz. This is what I think as Manhattan comes into view through the windshield of Dave's jeep. The crowded towers poke the sky with their metal and glass and in the midday haze look faraway, mythic, more idea than place. We're driving in thick traffic that moves swiftly and in unison. A month ago I hadn't noticed the city receding behind us as we drove from Lenox Hill Hospital to the rehab in White Plains. We didn't talk much then and we're not talking much now.

Dave is playing music I don't recognize. A charcoal-voiced girl is crying with as much earnestness as irony alongside an acoustic guitar. He tells me her name and it sounds more like a department store than a person. He compares her to another singer I don't know, and I feel as if I've lost fluency in a language that once was second nature. Between Lenox Hill and rehab I've been in treatment for six weeks, but it seems like years, and I imagine during that time new bands coming and going, movies capturing the attention of the masses and being forgotten, books sparking controversy or indifference, and the roar of it all fading to make way for new entries in the cultural lottery. Dave tells me about a play he and Susie have just seen and I feel myself shrinking in the seat, becoming kid-sized. Up ahead, Oz juts higher above the horizon.

It's early April, a Monday. We're driving to Dave's writing studio on Charles Street in the West Village. He's offered

me the place for a few weeks while I find somewhere to live. I've just finished four weeks in a small drug and alcohol rehab on the grounds of an old mental asylum. Dave drove me there after I was released from the psych ward at Lenox Hill Hospital, where I wound up after a two-month bender that ended in a fistful of sleeping pills, a bottle of vodka, a crack pipe stuffed to bursting, and an ambulance. The small literary agency I co-owned and ran for four years is gone, all my clients have found new agents, our employees have scattered to new jobs or left New York, and whatever money I once had has been wiped out, leaving in its place a rising debt of legal, hospital, and rehab bills. The eight-year relationship with my boyfriend, Noah, is over, and the apartment at One Fifth Avenue his grandmother bought him, where we lived for six years, is no longer my home. I can sleep at Dave's office, but I have to be out between ten and five so he can work.

The song changes—the girl is talking more than singing, the guitar is now a cello—and I wonder what I'll do all day, how I'll fill up the hours, where I'll go.

*Sure you want to do this?* Dave asks cautiously. *Sure you should be coming back here?* He turns the music down and keeps his eyes on the road while he voices my own doubts. I'm not sure of anything. I'm thirty-four years old. Unemployed. Unemployable in a field I worked in for twelve years. I have a mountain of terrifying paper waiting for me: the settlement agreement with my ex-business partner, Kate, dismantling the agency; bills from my lawyers; hospital bills and insurance forms; e-mails and letters—angry, loving, and everything in between—from friends, former colleagues, and family. The balance of the rehab bill is at least forty thousand dollars and likely much more. My sister Kim, who lives in Maine, in the midst of picking up and dropping off her twin boys from school, play

dates, and baseball practice, has taken over the bills, the accounts, the lawyer, and our plan is to go over every last difficult bit of it once I'm settled in at Dave's.

I've arranged to see my sponsor, Jack, at an evening meeting in the West Village—a *beginner's meeting* is how he describes it. I first met Jack on the third or fourth day in the hospital. After a rough, shame-shocked start there when I refused to see or speak to anyone, I eventually agreed to meet him—a friend of a friend, my age, curly haired, boyish, gay—and he offered to be my sponsor, a sort of coach/big brother/guide, in a fellowship for people with alcoholism and drug addiction. I learned later, in rehab, that there are many fellowships—some free, some not, most with organized meetings—where people go for help with addictions like mine. The one Jack belongs to is the one I join.

Dave pulls up in front of an old ivy-covered apartment building on Charles Street between Bleecker and West 4th. I step onto the sidewalk and wait while he makes a phone call from the front seat. It's quiet. The air is humid and the streets are speckled with afternoon light. A young, high-cheekboned couple walk by, speaking what sounds like Russian into their cell phones. A fire engine wails. A trim young man with a Great Dane on a leash bends with a plastic bag in hand to scoop up a pile of the elegant dog's poop. *New York*, I think. *I'm back in New York*. I see a middle-aged man walking alone with an earpiece connected to a wire that disappears into his tan windbreaker. He looks at me a beat too long and a little too seriously and an old familiar panic flashes in my chest. Dave comes around to the side of the jeep and grabs two bags from the back and barks, *C'mon, I have to meet Susie*. I rush to help, and when I turn to look for the tan-jacketed man, he's gone.

I follow Dave up three flights of exceedingly creaky stairs as he tells me how the old woman on the second floor, just below his studio, is highly sensitive, extremely cranky, and will call him day or night if she feels anything is awry. I wonder if this is his way of discouraging any funny business. A little barricade against what he and everyone else in my life fear will happen now that I've returned to New York: relapse.

The apartment is a bright studio with a fireplace, high ceilings, and a small, dangling crystal chandelier. It looks like the study in a much larger, very nice old house. Dave's books line the mantel and shelves, and there are old rugs scattered about. The small brown couch unfolds into a bed that I'll sleep on for the next few weeks. Dave rat-a-tat-tats a tour of the basics—towels, locks, a pile of blankets, tricky windows, cutlery, cups, coffee machine, keys—and then he's gone. I had imagined having coffee with him at a nearby café and a brotherly speech about how it's all going to work out—that I have to be brave, that I can count on him, et cetera—but what he offers instead is help with the bags, another warning about the downstairs neighbor, a worried look, and a hurried good-bye.

The apartment looks onto a garden behind a town house. It's a minimalist oasis: boxwood, teak, reflecting pool. The town house has large clear panes of glass that frame exquisite mid-century modern furniture on the second floor, and a clean geometry of stainless steel, marble, and what looks like suede in the kitchen below. Order and wealth hum from the place and I can barely look. I close my eyes and only then do I hear the bright racket of songbirds. They sound exactly like the birds that covered the trees near the field where I walked on the grounds in rehab. I imagine a flock flying just above Dave's jeep the whole way down

from White Plains, descending now upon the branches outside to chirp and coo their encouragement.

*Hi guys*, I say and am startled by the sound of my voice. *Thanks for the welcome home party*, I whisper, and though I'm embarrassed by the fantasy of the birds escorting me back to New York, I'm still glad for any kindness—made up, even—coming from the greenery outside. I lie down on the couch and listen.

The birds carry on. Voices drift in from outside. The refrigerator hums in the little kitchen. And all at once it hits me: I'm alone. No one besides Dave knows exactly where I am. I could be doing anything. I've been in-patient for weeks, under the thumb of nurses and doctors and counselors the entire time. No more morning gatherings, group meals, and in-bed-by-ten room checks. I'm alone and unaccountable. And then, like a dead ember blown to life, I think about my old dealers, Rico and Happy. I remember how I owe each of them a thousand dollars and wonder—despite all that's been lost, everyone hurt, despite everything—how I'm going to get two grand to pay these guys off so I can buy more. I start to puzzle through credit cards and PIN codes for cash advances. Suddenly a few thousand dollars seems within reach and I can feel that old burn, that hibernating want, come awake. I imagine the relief that first hit will deliver and I'm suddenly up off the couch and pacing. *No no no*, I chant. *No fucking way*. That craving, once it begins, is almost impossible to reverse. What my addict mind imagines, my addict body chases. It's like Bruce Banner as he's turning into the Incredible Hulk. Once his muscles begin to strain against his clothes and his skin goes green, he has no choice but to let the monster spring from him and unleash its inevitable damage.

I step on a creaky floorboard and remember the old lady below. I think of Dave and how he's spent most of his day driving to White Plains and back; how he's trusting me with his place, and how worried he looked when he left. I look at my watch. It's 3:50 and I remember Jack had suggested I go to a four o'clock meeting around the corner if I returned to the city in time. *I can make it*, I think desperately, meaning both the meeting and in general. I grab the set of keys from the mantel and, as gently as I can, descend the three flights of noisy stairs and hurry out to the street.

By the time I get to the meeting it's packed and I have to wedge myself through the crowd to grab what looks like the last seat. I sit down against a wall painted robin's egg blue and as I do, I see Jack. He's sitting in the seat directly across from mine with a big glad-you-could-make-it smile. We're not supposed to meet until later, but he's surprised me by showing up at my first meeting back in the city. *Welcome home*, he whispers seriously as the lights go down and the meeting begins.

I have met Jack only three times—twice at Lenox Hill and once during the last week at rehab when we went for a long walk and sat in a white gazebo and listened to the head counselor say he believed I was someone who would make it, someone he didn't see relapsing. Jack is a music critic and lives in the city with his boyfriend. He wasn't a crack addict, but his history with drugs and alcohol reminds me of my own, and every time I think I've told him something too embarrassing or too shameful, he's quick with a story that reminds me we've sunk to the same depths. I keep needing to remind myself that Jack is a drug addict. He's so put together, so clear-eyed and wholesome. It surprises me when he describes doing things when he was high that I'm convinced no one else but me has done. Like hitting on taxicab drivers. He tells me this the first