

# Did You Ever Have A Family



BILL CLEGG

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## *About the Book*

This book of dark secrets opens with a blaze. On the morning of her daughter's wedding, June Reid's house goes up in flames, destroying her entire family - her present, her past and her future. Fleeing from the carnage, stricken and alone, June finds herself in a motel room by the ocean, hundreds of miles from her Connecticut home, held captive by memories and the mistakes she has made with her only child, Lolly, and her partner, Luke.

In the turbulence of grief and gossip left in June's wake we slowly make sense of the unimaginable. The novel is a gathering of voices, and each testimony has a new revelation about what led to the catastrophe - Luke's alienated mother Lydia, the watchful motel owners, their cleaner Cissy, the teenage pothead who lives nearby - everyone touched by the tragedy finds themselves caught in the undertow, as their secret histories finally come to light.

Lit by the clarity of understanding that true sadness brings, *Did You Ever Have a Family* is an elegant, unforgettable story that reveals humanity at its worst and best, through loss and love, fracture and forgiveness. At the book's heart is the idea of family - the ones we are born with and the ones we create - and the desire, in the face of everything, to go on living.

## *About the Author*

Bill Clegg is a literary agent in New York and the author of the bestselling memoirs *Portrait of an Addict as a Young Man* and *Ninety Days*. He has written for the *New York Times*, *Esquire*, *New York Times* magazine, the *Guardian*, and *Harper's Bazaar*.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Portrait of an Addict as a Young Man*  
*Ninety Days*

*For Van, and for our families*

DID YOU  
EVER HAVE  
A FAMILY

Bill Clegg



Jonathan Cape  
London



You should have  
    heard him,  
        his voice was  
unforgettable, irresistible, his voice  
was an imaginary garden woven through with fragrance.

*Did you ever have a family?*  
    Their eyes are closed.  
That's how I know  
    we're there  
        inside it,  
it's made of sound and steam  
that weaves between dark  
dining room, bright kitchen.  
We're there because I'm hungry,  
and we'll all be eating soon  
    together, and the hunger's sweet

—Alan Shapiro, "Song and Dance"

## *Silas*

He wakes to the sound of sirens. Many, loud, and very near. Then horns: short, angry grunts like the buzzers signaling time-out in the basketball games he watches but does not play in at school. His cell phone says 6:11 a.m., but the house downstairs is awake and loud and from the particular pitch of his mother's rough morning voice, scratching above his father's and sisters', he knows something is wrong.

Before he kicks off the covers, Silas grabs his yellow knapsack from under the bed. He pulls out the small, red bong his friend Ethan gave him last month for his fifteenth birthday along with a bag of pot he smoked in less than a week, mostly on the job yanking weeds from flower beds and patios for rich New Yorkers. He selects a green bud from the small, gray Tupperware container where he keeps his stash, carefully pinches it in half, and presses the larger piece into the metal bowl. He grabs the half-filled water bottle sitting on his nightstand and pours a few inches into the bong before lighting. As he inhales, he notices the smoke curl toward his mouth, thicken in the red tube, and turn, slowly, like a sheet twisting underwater. Once the bud has mostly turned to ash, he pulls the stem from the bong and releases the smoke to his lungs. The water gurgles at the bong's base, and he is careful to inhale gently to minimize the noise. He opens the window, snaps off the screen, and leans out, exhaling in one full, sloppy breath.

He watches the smoke float before him, catch the wind, vanish. He feels the cool air against his face and neck and waits for the pot to work its magic. The sky is pink and pale

blue, and he traces a long trail of plane exhaust above him until it disappears over the roofline of the garage. The streaks are fluffy and loose, and so he thinks the plane must have flown over hours ago, before daybreak. To where? he wonders, the drug beginning to lozenge his thoughts.

Below him, four beefy crows land gracelessly on the lawn. He watches them hop and step and tuck their wings into their chest-thick bodies. They are the size of house cats, he thinks as he follows their quick, mechanical movements. After a while and for no apparent reason, they stop and stand perfectly still. He cannot see their eyes, but he senses they are staring up at him. He stares back. They cock their heads from side to side as if making sense of what they see. Wind ruffs their feathers from behind, and after a few hops they take flight. Airborne, they appear even larger, and for the first time he considers whether they might be hawks, or vultures. Then, as if unmuted, birds of all kinds squawk and screech and chirp from every direction. Startled, Silas knocks the back of his head against the top of the window. He rubs the spot and leans farther out. Another siren, different from the others—higher pitched, more upset—screams from far off. He tries to locate the crows that have disappeared into the complicated morning sky. What he finds instead are familiar shapes in the streaks and billows: a mountainous pair of swelling breasts, cat-eyed sunglasses, a fiery bird with vast wings. Then he sees what looks like nothing but what it is: smoke, pitch-black and thick, rising behind the roofline. At first he thinks his house is on fire, but when he leans out and looks back, he can see that the smoke is coming from beyond the trees on the other side of the property. Then he smells it—the oily stench of a fire burning more than just wood. He can taste it, too, and as he inhales, it mingles with the pot smoke still on his tongue and in his throat. The birds get louder. Squawking, yelling

what sound like words. *Go! You! Go!* he thinks he hears, but knows it's impossible. He blinks his eyes open and shut, attempts to process each thing: the smoke, the smell, the birds, the sirens, the magnificent sky. Is he dreaming? Is this a nightmare? Is it the pot? He got it from Tess at the farm stand up the road, and her stuff is usually mellow, not like the trippy buds he and his friends drive an hour and a half south to score in Yonkers. He wishes he were having a nightmare or hallucinating, but he knows he's awake and what he sees is real.

At the tree line on the other side of the house, smoke pumps into the sky like pollution from a cartoon smoke-stack. It puffs and thins, puffs and thins. Then a terrible cloud, larger than the rest, swells from the same unseen source. It is dense, coal black, and faintly silver at the edges. As it rises, it expands into a greenish gray and then dissolves into a long, crooked wisp that points across the sky like the worst finger.

Silas backs away from the window. Still wearing the shorts and T-shirt from the night before, he slips on his old, gray-and-white New Balance running shoes, the ones he wears when he works his landscaping jobs or stacks firewood with his father. He looks in the mirror above his dresser and sees that his eyes are pinkish, bulging slightly, and his pupils are dilated. His unwashed-for-days, dark blond hair is jagged and oily, flat to his head in some places, standing on end in others. He rubs a stick of deodorant on his armpits and puts on his black, corduroy, Mohawk Mountain ski cap. He swigs the remaining water from the bottle by the bed and shoves a few sticks of Big Red gum in his mouth. He grabs the yellow knapsack and packs up his bong, his lighter, and the small Tupperware container. He rubs his eyes with both fists, breathes in deeply, exhales, and steps toward his bedroom door.

His thumb and forefinger graze the knob, and he remembers the night before, where he was and what

happened. He steps back, traces his last movements before falling asleep, runs through it all once and then again to make sure it is not a dream he is remembering. He considers and then dismisses the possibility of taking another bong hit before leaving his room. He stands still, speaks to himself in a whisper. *I'm okay. Everything's okay. Nothing's happened.*

Downstairs, his mother's iPhone rings innocently, like an old-fashioned phone. She answers on the third ring and the house falls silent. The only sounds now are the tireless sirens, the grunting horns, and the distant hum of helicopter blades beating the air. From the kitchen, his father shouts his name. Silas steps away from the door.

## *June*

She will go. Tuck into her Subaru wagon and roll down these twisting, potholed country roads until she finds a highway, points west and away. She will keep going for as long and as far as possible without a passport, since the one she had no longer exists. Her driver's license, along with everything else that had been in the house, is also gone, but she figures she won't need it unless she is pulled over for speeding. She had not planned on leaving this particular morning, but after she wakes and showers and slowly puts on the jeans and blue-and-white-striped, boat-neck, cotton jersey she has been wearing for weeks, she knows it's time.

She washes and dries the chipped coffee mug, ceramic bowl, and old silver spoon she's been using since she came to this borrowed house; feels the weight of each object as she places it carefully back in the cupboard or drawer. There is nothing to pack, nothing to organize or prepare. All she has with her is the clothing on her body and the linen jacket she wore eighteen nights ago when she rushed from the house. As she slowly pushes her arms through the worn sleeves, she tries to remember why she'd put it on in the first place. Had it been cold in the kitchen? Had she pulled it from the overwhelmed coatrack by the porch door before chasing into the field, careful not to wake everyone upstairs? She can't remember; and as she starts reviewing the events of that night and the morning after, examining again each step with forensic attention, she forces herself to stop.

That she has her cash card and car keys with her is luck—they had been in the jacket pockets—but she does not think of herself as lucky. No one does. Still, these stowaways from her old life allow her now to leave town, which is all she wants. It isn't restlessness, or a desire to be somewhere else, but a blunt recognition that her time in this place has expired. *Okay*, she exhales, as if ceding a long, winless argument. She looks out the kitchen window at the orange and red daylilies blooming behind this house that is not hers. She presses her hands against the rim of the sink, and in the basement the dryer she'd filled over an hour ago with wet sheets signals its duty done with one long, harsh bleat. The porcelain feels cool under her palms. The house without sound is now loud with nothing, no one. A molten ache returns, turns in her chest, scrapes slowly. Outside, the daylilies flail in the morning wind.

She has not cried. Not that day, not at the funerals, not after. She has said little, has had few words when she needs them, so she finds herself only able to nod, shake her head, and wave the concerned and curious away as she would marauding gnats. The fire chief and police officer answered questions more than asked them—the old stove, gas leaking through the night and filling, like liquid, the first floor of the house, a spark most likely from an electric switch or a lighter, though none had been found, the explosion, the instant and all-consuming fire. They did not ask her why she was the only one outside the house at five forty-five in the morning. But when the officer asked if her boyfriend, Luke, had any reason to want to harm her or her family, she stood and walked out of the church hall, where a makeshift crisis center had been created. This is the church where her daughter, Lolly, would have been married that day; across the road and a short walk from the house. Guests had shown up before one o'clock expecting a wedding and found instead a parking lot filled with police sedans, ambulances, fire trucks, and news vans. She

remembers walking out of the church toward her friend Liz, who was waiting in her car. She remembers how talk stopped and people shuffled and half stepped out of her way. She heard her name called out—timidly, unsure—but she did not stop or turn around to respond. She was, she sensed sharply as she reached the far side of the parking lot, an untouchable. Not from scorn or fear, but from the obscenity of the loss. It was inconsolable, and the daunting completeness of it—everyone, gone—silenced even those most used to calamity. She could feel all eyes on her as she opened the car door to get in. She remembers seeing in her peripheral vision a woman coming toward her, holding up her hand. Seated, she could see clearly through the car window Luke's mother, Lydia—busty, bright-bloused, long brown hair piled loosely on her head. This was the second time she'd seen her that day, and as before, despite a powerful urge to go to her, there was no way she could face the woman. *Go* was all she could say to Liz, who sat in the driver's seat spellbound and mute like everyone else in the parking lot.

The police never questioned her again about what happened that night and the following morning. Friends stopped asking her the same safe questions—was she okay, did she need anything—when she didn't respond. A thin smile, a blank stare, and turning her head away discouraged even the most persistent. A morning news anchor was especially pushy. *People want to know how you're surviving*, this woman, who had been on television since the seventies but had not one crease or line on her face, said to her in front of the funeral home. *No one survived*, she said in response, and then, quietly, *Stop*, which the woman did. Eventually, everyone who had been in town for Lolly's wedding left, the questions ended, and she was, at the age of fifty-two and for the first time in her life, alone. Through that first week and after, she refused to wail or fall apart or in any way begin a process that would



bring her closer to rejoining the new and now empty world, or, as someone urged in a well-meaning but unsigned note that accompanied one of the hundreds of funeral arrangements, to *begin again*.

She buttons her jacket and starts to close and lock the windows of the small cottage loaned to her by a painter she once represented. *For as long as you need*, Maxine said that day over Liz's cell phone, *the place is yours*. Maxine was in Minneapolis, where she'd been when everything happened. How she found out so fast and knew what was needed, June still did not know. Some people, she decided, magically surface in these horrible moments knowing exactly what to do, which spaces to fill. The cottage was on the other side of Wells, the same small town in Litchfield County, Connecticut, where her house had been, where she'd come on weekends for nineteen years and had been living full-time for the last three. Maxine's dusty, little place is far away and unfamiliar enough for these weeks to be bearable. That anything could be bearable was a shameful minute-to-minute revelation. How am I here? Why? She allows these questions, but she keeps others from herself. It is safer to ask the ones she doesn't have the answers to.

She has refused to be admitted to the town hospital or to take any of the sedatives or mood stabilizers the few people around her have urged her to let them have a doctor prescribe. There is nothing to stabilize, she thinks. Nothing to be stable for. In the cottage she has slept past noon each day and after waking moved from bed to chair to kitchen table to couch and eventually back to bed again. She has occupied space, tolerated each minute until the next one arrived, and then the next.

She switches off the kitchen light, locks the front door, and places the key under the geranium pot plopped haphazardly toward the edge of the stoop. She walks from the house to her car reluctantly, recognizing that these steps are likely the last she will take in what remains of her

life here. She listens for birds and, as she does, wonders what she expects to hear. Farewells? Curses? The birds see everything, she thinks, and for now they are silent. Under the high canopy of black-locust trees that stretch between the cottage and the driveway where her car is parked, there is little sound save for the faint buzz of fading cicadas, who had weeks ago emerged from their seventeen-year slumber to mate, fill the world with their electric hum, and die. Their sudden appearance had seemed like a beautiful omen the week before Lolly's wedding when the slow early-summer news cycle seemed to talk about little else. Their last gasp now seems as fitting as their arrival was then.

June rushes the last steps and yanks the driver's-side door open before slamming it shut behind her. She fiddles with the keys, unable at first to find the right one. She eyes the four on the ring as if each has betrayed her: one for the Subaru, one for the front door of her house, one for Luke's truck, and an old one she still had from her last rental in the city. She wrestles all but the Subaru key off the ring and drops them in the cup holder next to her seat. She turns the key in the ignition, and as the machine rumbles to life beneath and around her, she recognizes again that she is awake and in the world, not stumbling through some outlandish nightmare. *This is the world*, she says to herself with grim wonder, touching the steering wheel dully with her fingers.

She backs the black Subaru out of the driveway, shifts from reverse to drive, and inches slowly along the narrow dirt road until she pulls onto Route 4. She fills the gas tank at a full-service station in Cornwall and drives until merging south onto Route 7, with its swoops and curves and steep, grassy banks. On an empty stretch of road she fishes the three keys from the cup holder, opens the passenger-seat window, and in one swift motion tosses them from the car. She closes the window, presses her foot

harder on the gas pedal, and speeds past two spotted fawns, stumbling several yards from their mother. For as long as she's been driving between Connecticut and Manhattan, dozens of deer have grazed alongside this stretch of road, oblivious to the speeding cars a few feet away. How many times had one darted into traffic, she thinks, imagining all the close calls—the ones she's had and the countless others everyone who's driven this road has survived, thanking God and exhaling as they sped safely away. She thinks of the unlucky souls who didn't speed away and the staggering catastrophes these stupid and beautiful creatures must have caused. She accelerates, pushing past the speed limit ... 52, 58, 66 ... and as the wagon shudders, she considers how many people have actually died here, their bodies dragged from twisted metal, charred into objects no longer resembling human beings. Her palms get damp against the steering wheel, and she wipes each one on her jeans. Her light jacket feels tight and constricting, but she does not want to stop the car to take it off. She passes another grouping of deer—a doe and a young buck with their spindle-legged fawn—and as she does, she imagines the wreckage: shattered glass, smoking tires, survivors identifying bodies. Her breathing is quick and shallow and she broils inside her clothes. South of Kent village she comes upon an open stretch of road, fields of summer corn fanning out in tight rows from either side. The wagon approaches 70 and the windows rattle in their wells. She imagines, with more detail than she wishes she were capable of, a sea of yellow crime scene tape, police-car and fire-engine lights, the spark and smoke of road flares, ambulances lined up with EMTs standing by, useless.

She pictures the dazed survivors, aimlessly stumbling. She circles each one, agitating with questions. Who had been driving? Who looked away at exactly the wrong instant? Who fiddled with the radio instead of paying

attention? Who leaned over to find a mint in a purse, or a lighter, and by doing so lost everyone that mattered? How many, she wonders, stepped from the wreckage without a bruise or scrape? And of these lucky and living, who had been in the middle of a quarrel just before the moment of impact? Who had been fighting with someone they loved? Going at it long enough to unleash the irretrievable words they knew to say only because they had been trusted to know what would hurt the most. Words that cut quick and deep, inflicting damage that only time could repair, but now there was none. *These people*, she mutters, somewhere between curse and consolation. She can see them crouching along the roadside, doubled over and alone.

Sweat soaks her clothes and her hands tremble on the wheel. An oncoming car flashes its headlights, and she remembers that a speeding ticket will end her flight. She has no identification, no Social Security card or birth certificate, which would be the least she'd need to secure a new driver's license. She slows the wagon to 55 and lets a green pickup truck pass. Had the driver seen the flashing headlights? Judging by how fast he was going, she doubts he had. We never pay attention to the right things, she thinks, as she watches the truck vanish beyond the bend ahead, until it's too late.

She opens her side window and air blows through the car, chilling her damp skin and tossing the shoulder-length blond and silver hair she's worn in a short ponytail and not washed for weeks. To her right, the Housatonic River snakes closely alongside the unruly road, midday sun sparking off its lazy currents. She relaxes, less from the coolness in the air and more from its turbulence. She opens the passenger-seat window and, feeling the added chaos, opens the remaining two behind her. Wind explodes through the car. She remembers Lolly's long-ago Etch A Sketch and how upset she became once when a friend shook it and the mysterious sandy insides wiped clean

whatever careful scribble she had made there. She remembers Lolly's screaming—piercing, wild, indignant—and how she refused to be consoled or touched. It would be over a year before Lolly would allow that friend back for a playdate. Even young, her daughter held grudges.

June closes her eyes and imagines the wind-blasted car as an Etch A Sketch hurtling forward, the rough air wiping her clean. She hears that particular sound of shaken sand against plastic and metal, and momentarily the trick works. Her mind empties. The imagined roadside calamities and their self-pitying culprits vanish. Even Lolly—tear-streaked and furious—disappears.

June settles deeper into her seat and slows the car just below the speed limit. She passes a farm stand, a newish CVS where a video store once stood, miles of crumbling stone walls, and a dusty white house with the same pink-painted sign in front that has been there for as long as she can remember, CRYSTALS stenciled in pale blue underneath black letters that spell ROCK SHOP. For years, these were the things she saw on this drive—each marking the distance between the two lives that had for so long passed as one. She tries again to summon the Etch A Sketch—this time to erase the memory of all the giddy Friday-afternoon flights from the city and the too-soon Sunday-evening returns with Lolly in the backseat, Adam in front, driving too fast, as always, and June pivoting between them, talking about teachers and coaches at school, which movie to see that night, what to eat. Those car rides flew by and were the least complicated part of their lives. The memory of them steals her breath, surprises her with an ache for a time she almost never remembers fondly. If it could only have been as simple as that: the three of them in a car, heading home.

The river disappears from view and she slows the car to 20 as she approaches the half-mile stretch that everyone who travels this road regularly knows is a speed trap. She crosses from Kent into New Milford and passes the

McDonald's she has long considered the unofficial border between country and suburb. In the parking lot, children climb from the open doors of a dark green van like clowns out of a circus car and stand restlessly before a row of elaborate motorcycles parked in front. A young man jogs beyond them, a sturdy chocolate Lab keeping perfect pace by his side. They cross in front of an old gas station, boarded up and empty, the pumps removed. June remembers stopping there twice, maybe three times, in the years she's been driving this road but cannot remember its going out of business. Weeds have sprung up in the cracked pavement of its parking lot, and she notices the Lab circle a scruffy bunch of dandelions and grass, on which he lifts his leg and pees. His master jogs patiently in place a few yards away.

The light ahead blinks red and she slows to a halt behind another Subaru wagon, this one dark green, newer, and filled with what appear to be teenagers. She avoids looking at them and instead focuses on the blue Connecticut license plate and the Nantucket-ferry stickers peeling on the back window. A siren signaling noon sounds from a nearby fire station. It starts low and soft, like a French horn, and builds gradually to a high, wide wail so loud and overwhelming she covers her ears with the thin linen sleeves of her coat. The light finally turns green, and as it does, she closes all the windows. The bus driver behind her taps his horn—once, politely—and she eases her foot from the brake until the car begins to roll forward.

The siren dies. The air inside the car is still again. She passes restaurants and clothing stores and supermarkets she's driven past for decades but never entered. OPEN signs hang from windows, garlands of tiny, multicolored flags snap in the wind above a Cadillac dealership. Through the rearview mirror she watches it all get smaller.