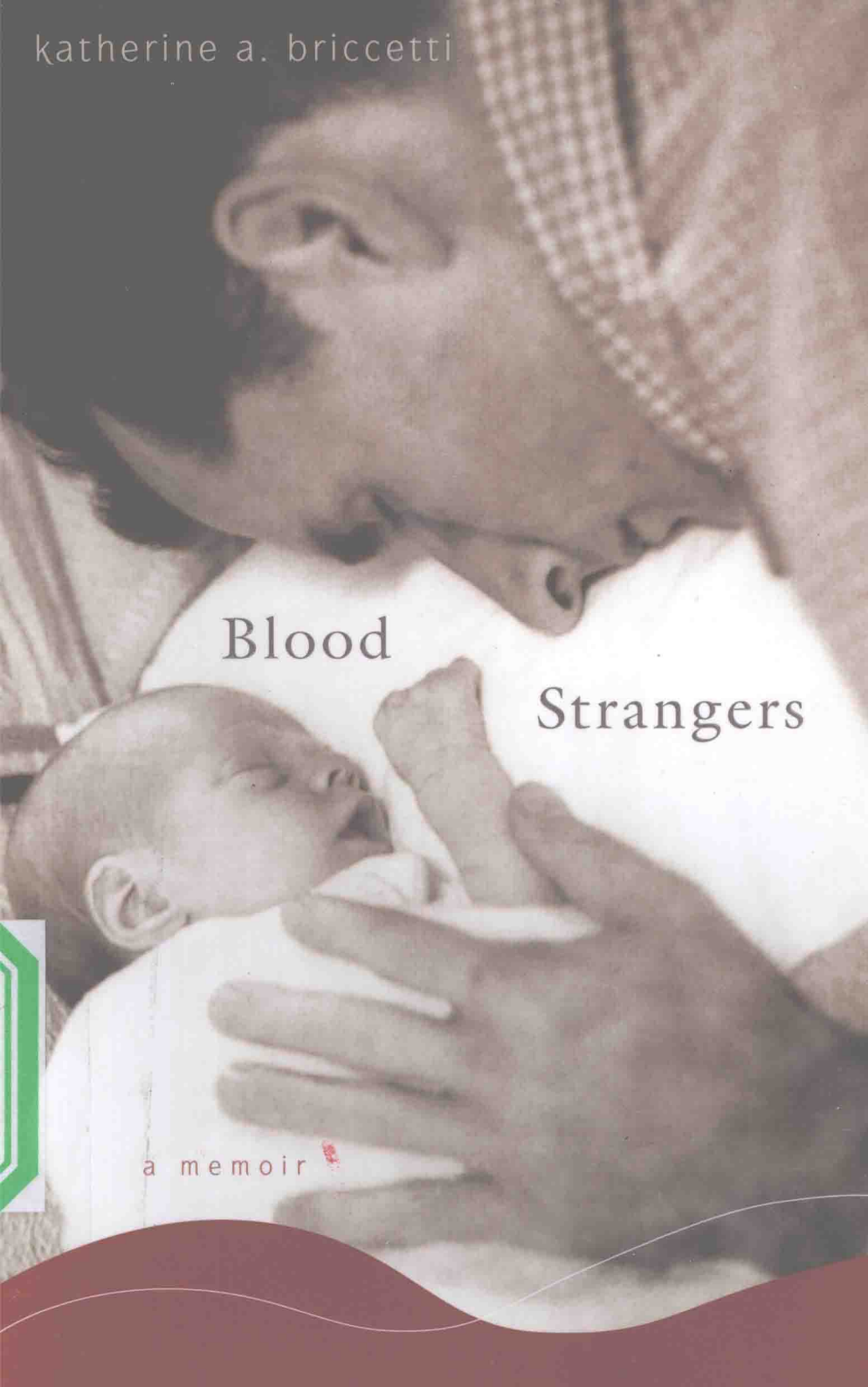
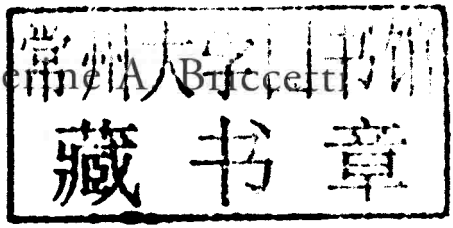

katherine a. briccetti
Blood Strangers
a memoir

Blood Strangers

A Memoir



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In memory of my four grandmothers

Martha Rose Terborgh "Conway"
Hazel "Cyrus Manfred"
Joan Filardi Briccetti
Mavis Foster Shaver

And with love to both of my fathers

For my mother

Note to Readers: To protect the privacy of some of the people who appear in this book, I have changed their names and invented some locations. I have altered the identifying characteristics of the sperm donor. For flow and dramatic effect, I have also turned a phone call and two letters into face-to-face conversations and merged two trips into one without changing the content of events. I took notes during my travels and after conversations in order to remember details and essence. In any given situation, we know that people remember events differently, and although I'm sure my family will have somewhat varying versions of this story, I'm confident they will appreciate the veracity of my experience.

Prelude

My left foot bowed in when I was born, its toes reaching for their mates on the other side. A month later, when the foot hadn't turned back naturally, the pediatrician fitted me with a baby-sized leather and metal brace that attached around my waist like a belt, holstered my leg, and over the next six or seven months guided my foot into its proper place. I wore the brace twenty-four hours a day, scraping it across the floor as I learned to crawl. It wasn't a burden. My mother says I seemed to accept that it was just part of life.

That year, 1957, my parents lived in the converted army barracks that constituted the married student housing at Indiana University. Mom had finished her coursework for her master's in music the year she was pregnant with me, and after I was born, she began practicing six hours a day for her violin recital the following spring. During my waking hours—when my father was in the practice hall with his cello and not pushing me around campus in my stroller while humming pieces of music—my mother slipped me into a bouncy seat hanging from the doorframe so she could practice. There I jumped, she tells me, up and down and around in circles, my metal sole clunking on the linoleum like a faulty metronome.

For most of my life, I have danced to a discordant beat as I searched for the rhythm of my family and my place in it.

PART I

"If we cannot name our own we are cut off at the root,
our hold on our lives as fragile as seed in a wind."

Dorothy Allison

ONE

Blueprints

I am drawn to fathers and sons because my two boys were conceived with the sperm of a stranger. When people refer to Benjamin and Daniel's "father," I correct them. "The donor," I say, not meaning to be rude, but needing to make the distinction. "No dad in this family."

In the summer of 2005, my younger son Daniel and I waited in the San Francisco airport to board a plane to Kentucky to visit my own father, a man I hardly knew, a man whom I had lost and then found again. Now we visited every few years, trying to make up for lost time, trying to settle into our adult relationship, a relationship that defied easy definition.

Standing at the gate with my ten-year-old, I found myself staring at a teenage boy and a man ahead of us, the boy hunched over an electronic game, the father resting his arm across his son's shoulder, fingers grazing his neck. Not taking my eyes off the teenager, I smoothed my boy's silky hair, watching the future my sons would not have. The future I once believed I had stolen from them.

When the boy looked up from the game, his father turned the caress into a playful squeeze, a jostle almost, as if remembering how men are supposed to show their affection for one another.

Sometimes when my sons brush away my embraces, when they think they're too big for them, like a halfback I charge them and grab them in a quick, rough hug, pretending it's nothing more than a tackle. Absurd as it may sound, I even find myself grunting when I accost them, my voice deepening in my imitation of a male-bonding ritual.

Waiting in line to board the plane, I remembered a conversation I'd had with Daniel on a walk home from kindergarten years before.

"Hey," I'd said, as we turned the corner on our block in Berkeley. "How do you feel about not having a dad?" I wanted to keep it light, not project my anxiety onto him, make it sound like, "Did you feed the dog this morning?"

"Um…" Daniel paused. "Sometimes good and sometimes bad."

Uh-oh. Here we go. In preschool, having two moms had made Daniel an object of envy, but maybe by kindergarten two moms were no longer enough to make up for the absence of a father.

"Okay," I said, preparing myself. "What's the bad thing about not having a dad?"

"The bad is because you can climb up on a dad and he can lift you really high."

I stifled a laugh. "You mean like Uncle Mike does?"

"Yeah. I can touch the ceiling when he lifts me."

"All right." I prepared for the rest. "What else?"

"That's all."

That was all? The only bad thing about not having a dad was not having someone to climb on? I wanted to believe him, desperately wanted this to be true, but I feared he was old enough to know what might hurt my feelings. He might have been holding back, protecting me.

"What about the good?" I asked as we neared our house. Instead of looking over at him, I stared at the jacaranda I'd planted next to the sidewalk the year before, noted its growth. "What's good about not having a dad?"

"It's good because they're meaner. Jack told me his dad is meaner than his mom."

All right. Score another for two moms.

"You're like the dad."

I felt as if I might stumble on the sidewalk. "I'm like the dad?"

"Yeah, you're meaner than Mama."

I smiled, but something stung inside my chest. I knew he meant "stricter" when he said "meaner," and he had me pegged. I am the heavy, the alpha female in our pack. I holler more, and louder, than Pam does. Too often I overrule her, and then she and I argue over how to share authority.

"But you know I love you, right?" I asked Daniel. It was lame, but I was desperate. I wanted to be known as the mom who let him wrap his arms and legs around her like a koala cub and who kissed the warm spot in the soft hollow of his neck. The mom who played basketball in the driveway and pitched baseballs at the park. I needed to be acknowledged as a Good Mom. Did he appreciate any of this?

"Yeah, I know, Mommy," he said, glancing up and grinning. "You love me."

I was saved.

"But you're still meaner."

I sometimes wonder whether my family's legacy, what feels like an invisible blueprint, has influenced my choices, however unconsciously, and led me to create two children who will not grow up with the man whose genes they share. Their relationship with their biological father—if they ever meet him—will mirror my relationship with mine: lost opportunity for anything deeper than simple acquaintance.

My children are the third generation in our family to be adopted in some fashion and the third generation to grow up without their father. These repetitions fascinate me. I'm attracted by the pattern: the thirty-year spread between each of these events—from

the nineteen thirties to the sixties to the nineties—the numbers suggesting a type of balance, or symmetry, like a repeating design in a quilt. Granted, the three adoptions were of different types—traditional, step-parent, and second-parent—but the threads of father absence woven throughout bind us together.

It wasn't until the man in the airport smiled at his son that I could see their resemblance. The father was balding, and his eyes were rounder than his son's, but when they smiled at each other, there was no questioning their kinship. Their lips and the creases in their chins were identical. I'd have been embarrassed if they'd turned and found me intruding on this intimate moment, but I was riveted.

Around that time, whenever I caught my reflection in store windows, I saw my mother. Although she was dark-haired and I was blonde, I had her plank-like body and eyes that disappeared when I smiled, and at forty-seven, my face was becoming hers. Our lips—reedy lines when we concentrated—were the same. More and more often now, usually when I'm being silly with my boys, I catch myself saying something in exactly the tone my mother would use. Even though she's still enjoying her earthly incarnation, I feel as if I'm channeling her spirit. If women turn into their mothers at a certain stage, do men turn into their fathers? My sons share many of my family's physical characteristics, but they must also resemble the donor, whose photograph we've never seen. Both boys inherited my fair skin and blonde hair, and Daniel got my mother's wide, round eyes, but I don't recognize my eldest's steeply vaulted Mr. Spock eyebrows. These may have come from his biological father. The need for my sons to compare themselves to this man, the need to see themselves reflected in him, might become important when they reach adolescence—when they try to figure out who they are, where they belong, which man they came from.

I'm beginning to understand how repeating ruptures across generations have affected me and my children as well as to recognize the ways we've broken free of the blueprint. And I'm realizing something else: how losing, in different ways, both my

father and my stepfather has shaped me, perhaps made me tougher, more resilient, dogged in my pursuits. I better understand now my continuing drive toward reunions—beginning with a Greyhound bus trip at sixteen to meet my father again. It's the mélange of my genetic make-up and early experiences that propelled me toward years of detective work, drove the decade-long search for my father's birth mother, and impelled me to travel from my Berkeley home to Texas and Missouri to meet missing kin. During those journeys, I would uncover the secret my mystery grandfather took to his grave, and I would finally find the grandmother I never knew.

A woman behind the teenage boy in line shifted her weight. The boy's father spoke to her, and she handed him a boarding pass. It took me a moment to realize that she was the mother; she had been invisible to me, standing in line behind them. I realized that this could be me in a few years: redundant, unnecessary when the need for Mommy is less passionate, when I'm no longer the center of my sons' universe, when my sons might turn their attention to the missing man. Perhaps there will be one more search that will take place in this family; perhaps my sons will set off on their own quests to find their father.

Once, running errands on Solano Avenue in Berkeley when Benjamin was about five, we passed the donor on the sidewalk—or a man who could have been the donor. According to the file from the sperm bank, he was the right height and body type, and something about his eyes made me inhale sharply. I don't remember if it was the hue of blue, matching Ben's perfectly, or if it was their almond shape and particular slope, but I felt for a second as if I was looking into my son's eyes. The man's glance at Benjamin lingered a beat too long, and I tightened my grip on my boy's hand. I didn't want to meet the donor—for I was convinced in that instant that it was him—yet. I turned my back on the man, hurried Benjamin to the car, and nudged him into his car seat.

If, when they turn eighteen, my sons decide to locate the man

who helped us make two marvelous boys, if they feel they lack a piece of their identity, or if they just want to know what he looks like, the sperm bank will release his name, and they can go looking for him. I have mixed feelings about this possibility. I don't want to find him if he's an out-of-work, four-times-divorced, drug-addicted deadbeat dad who'll show up at our house every Friday night wanting to hang out for the weekend. I don't want to be disappointed by him, and I don't want my boys to wish they'd never looked for him.

On the other hand, because we can tell from the notes in his file that more than likely he's a decent guy, I hope they do find our donor, so we can get a look at him, so we can study photos of him as a boy, which I'd like to place side by side with those of my sons at parallel ages. And I want to find him so that I can wrap my arms around him, the man who gave us the gift of our children, and ask him just one question: How can I ever thank you?

Since each donor is allowed ten offspring, my sons could have eight half-siblings scattered around the country, girls and boys sharing half of their genes. Someday I'd love to see what these kids look like, what characteristics they share, as well as how each is unique. Sometimes I imagine an odd gathering in a park in the hills east of San Francisco: tofu hotdogs grilling on a barbeque, badminton players' shouts ricocheting off eucalyptus trees, and all the kids and adults in red T-shirts with the inscription *Family Reunion of Donor 042-75.*

At the airport, a voice through the speaker called our row. I lifted my carry-on bag and slung it over my shoulder. Daniel picked up his backpack, slipped his hand in mine, and together we boarded the plane.

TWO

Leaving

When I was three and a half years old, my mother tossed suitcases and a cardboard box of toys into the trunk of her Chevy Corvair and slammed it shut. With care, she placed her violin case on the floor of the back seat and then called to my brother and me. The magnolia in the front yard of our Kentucky home still clenched its flame-shaped buds, new leaves glowing like green embers, and, in its shade, my father bent his stalky frame to embrace me. When his smooth cheek brushed mine, I filled up on his Daddy smell—spicy mouthwash and the musty velvet and rosin scent he carried from his cello case. He patted my back, lingering a second before unfolding and standing again. I grabbed his legs, and with my cheek felt his knees jutting against the soft fabric of his slacks.

"Come on, honey," he said, peeling back my fingers from around his shins. "Be a good girl and get in the car." He spoke as if my little brother, my mother, and I were heading to the park for the day, but something in his voice was off. I climbed into the front while Michael, not quite two years old, settled onto the back seat, the car's lap belts dangling like abandoned playground swings. Perched on my knees, I pressed my forehead to the side window as my mother backed the car down our driveway.

"I'll let you know when we get a place," she called out her open window, her stone jaw contradicting the flowery lilt of her voice. Eyes hard, she was already a hundred miles away. I swiveled to catch a last glimpse of my father through the back window, a cloudy oval framing the moment. His hands in his pockets, he stood fixed at the end of the drive, swaying slightly. His face vanished into the shadows cast by the magnolia, and as the car headed down Oakdale Street toward the expressway, my father slowly shrank, then disappeared.

This is how it might have happened. But somewhere along the way, I had forgotten this scene, this leaving, and the vanished memory melded into a child's confabulation: the belief, the never-doubted knowledge, that *he* had left *us*. Perhaps I forgot this parting because it was too painful to hold on to, or I simply forgot it just like I forgot the other events of my first three or four years. I do remember the apartment in New Jersey we moved to, and can still conjure up images from that time—a neighbor girl teaching me how to tie my shoes on the steps of our brick apartment building and the mail carrier bringing me a snow cone maker, the prize for winning a coloring contest. However, the scene of our leaving escaped me entirely, happy memories trumping sad ones.

It would be nearly forty years before I learned what happened that day, when I finally rectified the mistaken belief that had in many ways set the course of my life, when I finally understood the circumstances of the parting. Even though it might be equally painful to a child, to be left is not the same as leaving, and although I know the truth now, the ghost of that old, distorted belief refuses to vanish.

In our apartment in New Jersey near my grandparents' home, I knelt on a phone book on a kitchen chair coloring a picture of Cinderella's rag dress. My mother, her back to me, snipped the ends off green beans with a pair of red-handled kitchen scissors, the pointy bean ends disappearing into the sink, the neatly clipped sections landing in a colander. A bacon-draped meatloaf sizzled in the oven. I colored