

C A R R Y M E



C A R R Y M E

a novel



Peter Behrens



ANANSI

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In dreams begin responsibility.

— W. B. YEATS



THE SWIMMER

Daily Alta California (newspaper). San Francisco 1.8.1884. Lange Family Archive, 12 C-8-1884. Special Collections, McGill Library, McGill University, Montreal.



SHIPPING INTELLIGENCE

ARRIVED: GERMAN BARK *LILITH*, LANGE, 181 DAYS FROM HAMBURG; MDSE TO EPPINGER & CO. MEMORANDA PER *LILITH*—LEFT HAMBURG FEB 1, CROSSED THE EQUATOR IN THE ATLANTIC MARCH 9, ON W $25^{\circ} 30'$, 23 DAYS OUT; FROM S. 45° HAD VERY HEAVY WEATHER; PASSED S. 50° IN THE ATLANTIC MAY 7; WAS 25 DAYS THENCE TO S. 50° IN THE PACIFIC; OFF THE CAPE, HAD STRONG NW GALES WHICH CONTINUED UP TO S. 33° ; CROSSED THE EQUATOR IN THE PACIFIC, W. $109^{\circ} 45'$; CARRIED NE TRADES TO N. 29° ; FROM THENCE TO PORT, MODERATE WEATHER.

THIS WILL BECOME THE STORY OF A YOUNG WOMAN, KARIN WEINBRENNER. Her story is not mine, but sometimes her story feels like the armature my life has wound itself around. I am telling it, so this story is also about me.

I was born 27 May 1909 on the Isle of Wight, in a house, Sanssouci, named after Frederick the Great's summer palace at Potsdam. I was baptized Hermann Lange but for most of my life have been called Billy.

Sanssouci still sits on a cliff overlooking the English Channel, which on a fair day spreads out below like blue butter. The house is now a small, expensive "boutique" hotel and no longer called Sanssouci. The management offers weekend-getaway packages for anxious Londoners who desire sea views, the scent of roses, and shadowy island lanes dripping with fuchsia.

Before the First World War the house belonged to Karin's father, Baron Hermann von Weinbrenner. He was a chemist and colorist and very rich: half the cotton shirts in the world were dyed with aniline colors he'd created. The kaiser had first given Weinbrenner his *von*, then raised him to the lowest rank of nobility after he married Karin's mother, daughter of an Irish peer.

Baron Hermann von Weinbrenner was the second Jewish member of the Royal Yacht Squadron at Cowes, on the Isle of Wight—Lord Rothschild was the first. Weinbrenner kept a pair of very fast gaff-rigged schooners, *Hermione* and *Hermione II*, and my father, Heinrich "Buck" Lange, was his racing skipper and trusted friend. Which is why my parents were living at Sanssouci and why I was born there.

Birthplaces, nationality—such details have consequences in this story.

My grandfather—also Heinrich Lange, but known in the family

as Captain Jack—was a professional sea captain out of Hamburg. The Lange family had been traders and merchants (mostly in the Baltic) for a couple of hundred years before Captain Jack persuaded a syndicate of uncles and cousins to speculate in the California grain trade. Which meant purchasing San Joaquin Valley wheat at Port Costa, on San Francisco Bay, and transporting the cargo to Europe aboard their own three-masted bark, *Lilith*, to sell on the Hamburg exchange.

Risky business.

After some very rough weather on her westward passage round Cape Horn, *Lilith* was one hundred and seventy-one days out of Hamburg and a thousand miles off Acapulco when my grandmother Constance, who was Irish, went into labor. A couple of hours later my father was born in the master's cabin, the delivery assisted by Captain Jack and by Joseph the Negro cook, who cried out, "Oh, the fine fellow! He is a bucko seaman!"

Christened Heinrich after his father and grandfather my father was known ever after as Buck.

Ten days later—six months out from Hamburg—*Lilith* dropped anchor at Yerba Buena Cove, and Heinrich/Buck was rowed ashore and registered as a loyal subject of the German emperor by Dr. Godeffroy, the consul at San Francisco.

The trouble starts there. Our story would have been quite different if, instead of being born on a German ship on the high seas, Buck had waited a few weeks to be born in a comfortable San Francisco hotel room.

Buck Lange an American citizen? How much simpler everything might have been.

But you can't operate on history that way. An American Buck might have joined the American Expeditionary Force in 1917. I can see him answering the call to colors. He'd have been shipped to France and killed in one of the ugly, costly battles the AEF fought in 1918—

I don't want to lose you over tedious genealogy and history that must be very dim to you. This is a story of real people who lived and died, about their times and what went wrong. I shall try to be honest even when it's apparent I am making things up, delivering scenes I couldn't have witnessed.

I know the truth in my bones. And that's what I shall give you.

I'll include documents—newspaper clippings, telegrams, even a film poster—from the Lange family archive, which McGill University has generously agreed to house. Calling it an *archive* is vainglorious. A few boxes on a library shelf are all it amounts to.

There are entries from Karin's journal, her *Kinds of Light* book. When I read them I hear her voice. Even when her entries are merely extracts from her reading, I still feel her mind at work in the process of selection.

You'll find letters here, from Karin, from others. I want you to hear the voices.

Otherwise they are all dead, aren't they? Otherwise, no one remembers.



Fast-forward, please, from San Francisco, 1884, to Germany, 1908, when Buck Lange, my sea-born father, is introduced to Eilín McDermott, my mother, at Walden, the von Weinbrenner estate outside Frankfurt.

Sanssouci was the baron's seaside villa, his dream of sea air, sunlight and Englishness, but Walden was his real home, his grounding. His ground.

Sailing season hadn't begun. Buck was in Germany to inspect plans for a brand-new racing yacht the baron had commissioned from the Townsend & Downey shipyard in New York City.

Eilín was living at Walden as lady secretary to Lady Maire, the baron's Irish wife, who had begun an extraordinary collection of medieval religious art. The baroness was unexpectedly pregnant and, at forty, very self-conscious of her condition.

The Weinbrenners' only child, a son, had died in infancy eleven years before.

My mother and father were almost the same age exactly, birthdays two days apart. Eilín was an Irish Catholic employed by an Irish Protestant aristocrat married to a German Jewish millionaire. After his landfall on the Barbary Coast, Buck's boyhood had been spent in Melbourne, Buenos Aires, and Hamburg. He'd done his military service in a regiment of Prussian cavalry and sailed round the world more than once.

My parents did share an Irish connection: her father and his mother were natives of the county Sligo and lived within a few miles of each other.

And at Walden, besieged by nineteenth-century furniture and stiff Wilhelmine formality, Eilín and Buck recognized a bold, light spirit in each other. They were both twentieth-century persons.

Karin would always envy me my parents, younger and more supple than her own. Eilín and Buck raised me in the life they made together. I lived inside my parents' marriage. The baron and Lady Maire never made room for Karin.

The day after they were introduced, my parents took a walk in the Walden woods. Buck wore tweeds. Eilín had on one of the elaborate hats of the Edwardian era, the size and shape of a small bathtub.

They were both tall. Her hair was honey-brown. She had full breasts, wide shoulders, and narrow hips. He'd lived all over the world, and his English could sound Australian, Irish, British, even American. He was also perfectly fluent in the dialect of a Hamburg Platt, the *Hochdeutsch* of a Hamburg shipowner.

Eilín hadn't lived anywhere but her father's house, the convent outside Dublin where she was educated, and the Weinbrenners' estate. Her accent was middle-class provincial Ireland. Her German was never much good.

After twenty minutes Buck stopped under a giant bare oak and asked Eilín to marry him. If she was willing, he said, he would arrange everything and meet her in London in two weeks. They could be married in London and live at Sanssouci. The Weinbrenners only used the house one month a year, during sailing season. The rest of the year it would be theirs: the baron had said so.

Eilín heard him out, then, without responding, turned and resumed striding along the forest path.

Buck was startled. He'd risked his dignity to make a proposal that had been ignored, even scorned. Dismayed and confused, he started after her, thinking he really ought to return to the house and leave her crashing through the woods like a hunted animal.

She wore a pale-blue dress. Her enormous hat kept getting snagged on leafless branches. It was early spring. Green shoots were just starting from a mat of brown oak leaves on the forest floor. Crusts of snow

lingered in the shadows. Everything smelled of transhumance, rot, change.

Father Pursues Mother Through Hessian Woods, April 1908.

I can picture the scene as if it were captured in one of the (very few) family photographs—sepia toned, frail—that survive. Maybe *pursues* isn't accurate. For a gentleman to pursue a lady who has just turned down a sincere proposal of marriage would be clumsy, luckless, foolish. A gentleman does not chase a lady through a forest, even a small, superbly groomed German forest.

But if he's a man of spirit, he can't retreat to the house, either.

"Listen here," Buck called out. "What's the matter? Have I frightened you? Offended you?"

He was out of breath keeping up with her. Eilín walked purposefully. She was lithe. Even wearing the massive hat she could scamper along forest paths as quick and nimble as a deer.

"Won't you speak?"

He didn't want to admit to himself that she was fleeing from him.

And, in fact, she wasn't.

She stopped so abruptly he nearly crashed into her. "Oh no, I'm not frightened." She turned to face him.

"What is it then?" He was out of breath, and his dignity had been scrambled.

"I need to think. I think more clearly if I'm walking."

He continued to stare at her. She was rude, or perhaps just odd, and certainly beautiful.

"This hat! Not quite the thing, is it?"

Unpinning the magnificent hat, she removed it. Her hair was beautiful and thick, golden in certain lights, auburn in others. It was never cut, and always worn up, except when she went to bed.

"Well, I can't live at Sligo," she said. "I don't get on with my father."

"Who said anything about Sligo? We'll live at Sanssouci. I'll live with you anywhere."

"Is it nice there? Is it bright? Should I like it?"

"Well, yes, it is, rather. I expect you will. Beautiful gardens. The sea."

"I suppose I shall like it. When shall we do the thing, then?"

"Are you certain? Are you saying that you agree to marry me?"

“I knew the moment you came in the library yesterday. It’s the details and effects one has to work through mentally.”

She looked at him, her expression concerned and serious. She did have a wry sense of humor, my mother, but most of the time she was unnervingly straightforward. “I think we’ll be very happy. As happy as married people are generally.”

They were solitary people, and for the rest of their lives would rely on each other emotionally without much need of friends, except the Weinbrenners. The marriage never had trouble except when they were apart. Separations were a torment and destabilizing. Neither did well mentally without the other.

They were wed in London and went to live, as Buck had promised, at Sanssouci. Eleven months later I was born in the bedroom where Karin had been born the summer before. Ever since her son’s death, Lady Maire had distrusted German doctors, which was why her daughter was born in England.

My parents asked the Weinbrenners to stand as my godparents, and they agreed and came over to London. I was baptized Hermann, after the baron. This was also the name of Karin’s brother, buried at Walden.

Her parents did not bring Karin to London for my christening, but she was on the Isle of Wight the following summer. The Weinbrenners came out from Germany for August and settled into Sanssouci, and my parents and I shifted into a set of stuffy, eighteenth-century rooms above the bar at the Crab Inn, in Shanklin village.

While the Weinbrenners were in residence, my mother spent most afternoons up at the house, writing letters for the baroness, and I was looked after by a village girl, Miss Anne Hamilton. Hamilton usually had Karin in her charge as well and would push us into the village in a single pram. Once during that first summer Karin crept into the nursery while I was napping and poked at my eyes to test if I was real. I began wailing: real enough. Was she punished? Probably. A little girl born so late in their lives had been a shock and something of an embarrassment to her parents. They ought to have been grateful for another chance at parenthood, ought to have cherished Karin more than they did. But the baron had his aniline colors, his polo ponies, yachts, and great wealth; and Lady Maire had horses and hunting and medieval art. They mostly ignored their daughter.

Possibly my only real memory of Karin at Sanssouci—at the same time so sharp and so ungrounded, so full of sea noise and sea light that it seems a dream and not an entirely authentic memory—is the afternoon she tried to swim to America.

It was my third or fourth summer. Our nurse had brought us to the beach below the cliffs on a blazing blue afternoon. I was napping under a little shelter Hamilton had constructed out of napkins, sticks, and beach towels, and she must have dozed off, too. It was a shingle beach, with the lulling clatter of waves. I wasn't old enough to sea bathe—Hamilton would sometimes hold me and dabble me in up to my knees. But Karin had already learned to swim and must have seen her chance while our young nurse was dozing. Wading in against the small sharp waves, Karin plunged and started swimming offshore.

It's unusual enough that a child four or five years old would know how to swim. It's an extraordinary impulse in one that age to confront something as enormous and active as the sea without feeling the least intimidated. Karin was determined to enter that wild world and leave behind the calm and safety of shore.

Hamilton awoke after a few minutes, feeling dozy and heavy. She sat up and looked about. On a clear day in midsummer there was always a stun of yellow heat on the beach. I recall an unwholesome odor of potted-meat sandwiches and custard, wrapped in wax paper inside a wicker hamper.

No Karin in sight.

We always had that beach to ourselves. It was at the head of a small, tight cusp of a cove, seabirds whickering overhead. But the cove was open to the Channel. Hamilton scrambled to her feet and scanned the water. Leaving me under my little tent, she hurried along the shore to the foot of the cliff path, steps cut in rock, searching upward for a little girl in a white sundress, seeing only wheeling gulls.

Hamilton climbed a boulder, scanned seaward again, and made out a speck of white flotsam beyond the first break—Karin, in her bleached muslin sundress. By then she'd swallowed enough seawater to feel sick and was allowing tide and wave action to sway her back to the shore. Our nurse gave a yelp and dashed down to the water's edge. Not bothering about her boots and white stockings or the hem of her skirt, splashing through yellow surf, she grabbed Karin off the top of a wave,

shook her, slapped her, and dragged her ashore where they collapsed in wet sand, both sobbing.

Wary of punishment herself, at first Hamilton didn't mention what had happened to any of the adults. I certainly wasn't old enough to inform anyone. But after the Weinbrenners went back to Germany, never to return—for this would have been the summer of 1913, and racing was canceled in '14 because of the European crisis—Anne Hamilton did tell my mother of the little German girl's wicked waywardness. What a fright it had given her, and the child had boldly insisted that she'd been swimming for America. Only the bitter-tasting sea hadn't wanted her and kept pushing her back.

“I told her it wasn't America it was only bloody old France that way! And if she turned up in France in a sopping wet frock with seaweed for hair, they'd call her a mermaid, the French would, and burn her at the stake.”