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Ours is a family of dreamers, beginning with *nonno* Lorenzo, who had a vision underground.

While my grandfather dug a subway tunnel in downtown Manhattan, his pickaxe shattered into brilliant light, revealing the shadow of a lost, three-masted ship. A vision revealed by the grace of God — or so he thought — a sign of blessing that flowered in Elena, his fortunate daughter; that grew in Eddie, his skeptical, educated son. Now in memory, I, his grandchild, peer into darkness, pause and hold my breath, witness my family born inside that flash of light, our shadows burned into the city's deepest stone.

2

Let's walk along the river, Adrian. Let's go back to our families' beginnings, to the spark that destroyed your ancestor's ship and filled my *nonno* with unaccountable wonder. His last surviving daughter has written us — my Aunt Elena, coming home to be with her kin. She's gracious enough to think of us as family; old enough to realize that she hasn't much longer to make what peace she can.

The Hudson River was once named *Muhhaakantuck*, the river that runs in two directions;

that's my own family, toward and away from whatever blessing — real or imagined — might heal it. Here in New York City, we're strolling along a shoreline which was once under water. That was in 1614, when the Dutch vessel *Tijger*, weighted down with beaver pelts, sat at anchor at the mouth of the river, west of the island known in the Munsee language as *Manahatou*.

Adrian, you know everything about this ship. Tell me the story once again, because when you speak, or even when you think of it, I can feel the wind of a chill day, and see its long shadow falling out of time, into that narrow passage where my *nonno*'s pickaxe is about to strike.

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*Dear Joy, I'll tell you the story as my father told it to me, in the Netherlands and then in Ontario, the tale handed down through generations. It's the gold coin that I brought with me from Canada, my slight bit of wealth, one that roots me in this foreign island to which my ancestor came. Watch the story come to life as I speak it — the *Tijger* resting at anchor, not a large boat but a sturdy, hard-working one, a three-masted square-rigger, broad in the bow, built to withstand the ocean swells, armed with cannons to protect her cargo from piracy. Her seamen know that she is a source of coveted objects for the Lenape of *Manahatou*, a band of farmers, hunters and fishers; lately, traders with the Dutch who crossed the ocean after Henry Hudson's voyage up this great river on the *Halve Maen*. Gliding down that river from their day to ours, loaded down with bric-a-brac, the *Tijger* sails for the *Van Tweenhuysen Company* of Amsterdam, traders in pearls, wine and textiles. Now its ships have come to the New World to barter for its wealth of beaver, otter, mink and muskrat pelts, the abundant catch of the river valley.*

So we walk along this river of many names (North River, to the Dutch), where I imagine the Lenape hunters, bearing their pelts, making their way from the southern end of the island of Manahatou to the Dutch ship Tijger. A striking procession, long lines of tall men in robes pinned and draped at the shoulder like Roman senators of old, their deerskin leggings a protection from the chill air of autumn, their breechcloths adorned with beadwork. Others paddle canoes, great conveyances hollowed out of tree trunks, now laden with pelts, a small armada approaching the ship. For weeks the Lenape have been coming to the Dutch captain to trade for their catch. Before them he stands — a dark-eyed man, his pointed, well-trimmed beard accentuating a stern and wary look. With a captain's bearing, he's attired in a fitted doublet, a ruff at the neck, full breeches, a hat with a small plume. His name is Captain Adriaen Block, the man for whom I was named. I'd like to call out to him across the years, I know what's about to happen, how the story ends. Yet he can't hear me. I'm not yet born, and besides he's a practical man with a deadline to meet. Autumn is sifting through the mesh of time and he has a ship to load by the onset of winter. He's meticulous, examining each pelt with care, paying each hunter from the ship's store of glass beads and buttons, hatchet-blades and jack-knives, bolts of cotton cloth, ribbons, mirrors and pewter-ware. To this careful rhythm of barter and trade, the hold of the ship fills up with pelts.

His deadline met, the captain must be pleased. As both an explorer and a businessman, he must expect to profit from this venture. Guilders, he'll have a chest full of them upon his return to Holland. Snow is gathering in the clouds overhead, January clouds. The ship is weighted down with cargo and at this point, he may be thinking of his wife, of their house on Oude Waal Street in Amsterdam, of the gift he will make her of a warm fur; of his five children, the sons who will one day be seamen. Now it's time for the ship to weigh anchor, to begin the

journey home.

They're about to depart when on the deck, the captain looks up to see a dark curl of smoke. He has no idea of its origin. He knows that on a wooden ship, fire could start in the hull, the keel, the rigging-masts, could end in a sudden conflagration, only he has no time to ponder these facts. Fire's hissing, flicking its tongue; flames lick and snap at the bow, crackling as they torch the foremast, setting the mid- and mizzen-masts aflame, collapsing the sails, shooting up through the great height of the poop deck while the captain runs aft, commanding his men to the dinghies from which the entire crew escapes to safety before the ship burns down to the water-line and vanishes into the sea.

The captain's load of pelts is gone. He is stranded in the New World.

If he wants to go home, he will have to build another ship.

No such thing has ever been done. Not by a white man on the island of Manahatou.

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There's a kind of enchantment in your story, Adrian, in the spell it casts, and yet it's a rather mundane incident, made exceptional only by the stories that weave our families together. No one knows how the fire started. It was an accident and there was no loss of life. History has nothing more to say about the incident. History tells us that Captain Block carried on, that he and his crewmen built another boat with the help of the Lenape, that he discovered and mapped Long Island Sound. Off the coast of *Roode Eylant*, (which he named for the ruddy colour of its soil), tiny Block Island bears his name.

A fire set by longing, is what you tell me, Adrian. I have never understood what this

meant. Absent official reports, we may believe whatever we like about this fire.

In truth, this part of New York City has burned down more than once.

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