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Long Bright
River

THE GOD
OF THE
WOODS

A Novel

LIZ MOORE

ALSO BY LIZ MOORE

Long Bright River

The Unseen World

Heft

The Words of Every Song



**The God
of the
Woods**

Liz Moore

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For my sister, Rebecca, who also knows these woods

Contents

I

Barbara

II

Bear

III

When Lost

IV

Visitors

V

Found

VI

Survival

VII

Self-Reliance

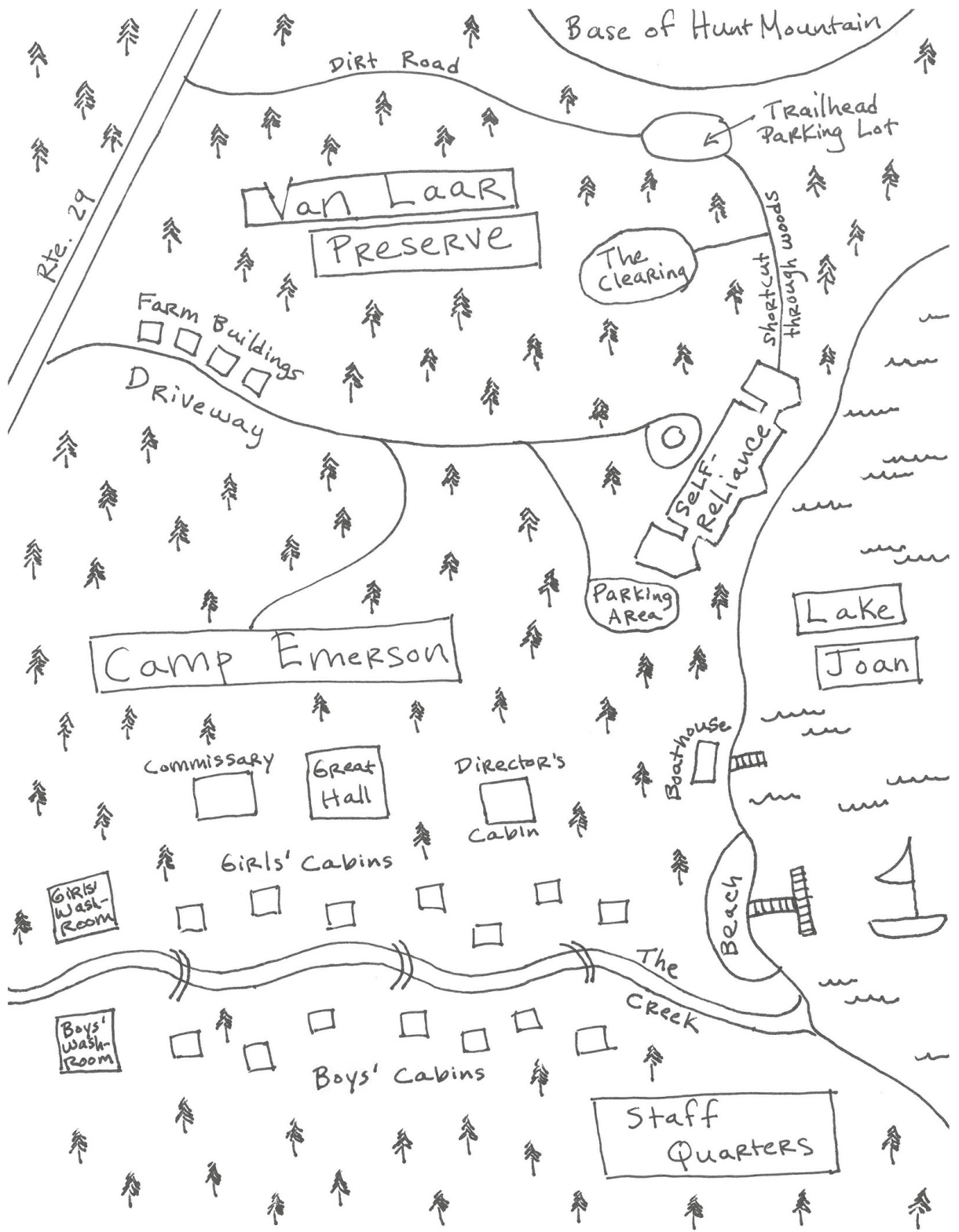
Acknowledgments

Many a pedestrian on reaching these woods is incredulous of the danger which he is told will menace him if he ventures out alone to indulge in his favorite pastime. But let him rest assured that there is no question as to the reality of this danger—the danger of losing himself in the forest. That is the only thing to be dreaded in the Adirondack woods!

—From “Lost in the Adirondacks: Warning to Visitors to the North Woods; What Not to Do When You Lose Your Way and How Not to Lose It,” *The New York Times*,
March 16, 1890

How quickly, I reflected, peril could be followed by beauty in the wilderness, each forming a part of the other.

—From *Woodswoman* by Anne LaBastille



I

Barbara

Louise

August 1975

The bed is empty.

Louise, the counselor—twenty-three, short-limbed, rasp-voiced, jolly—stands barefoot on the warm rough planks of the cabin called Balsam and processes the absence of a body in the lower bunk by the door. Later on, the ten seconds that pass between sight and inference will serve to her as evidence that time is a human construct, that it can slow or accelerate in the presence of emotion, of chemicals in the blood.

The bed is empty.

The cabin's single flashlight—the absence of which is used, even in daylight, to indicate that campers have gone to the latrines—is in its home on a shelf by the door.

Louise turns slowly in a circle, naming the girls she can see.

Melissa. Melissa. Jennifer. Michelle. Amy. Caroline. Tracy. Kim.

Eight campers. Nine beds. She counts and counts again.

At last, when she can no longer defer it, she lets one name bob to the surface of her mind: *Barbara*.

The empty bed is Barbara's.

She closes her eyes. She imagines herself returning, for the rest of her life, to this place and this moment: a lonely time traveler, a

ghost, haunting the cabin called Balsam, willing a body to appear where there is none. Willing the girl herself, Barbara, to walk through the door. To say she has been in the washroom, to say she forgot the rule about taking the flashlight, to apologize disarmingly, as she has done before.

But Louise knows that Barbara won't do any of these things. She senses, for reasons she can't quite articulate, that Barbara is gone.

Of all the campers, Louise thinks. Of all the campers to go missing.

• • •

At 6:25 a.m., Louise walks back through a curtain into the space she shares with Annabel, the counselor-in-training. She's seventeen, a ballet dancer from Chevy Chase, Maryland. Annabel Southworth is closer in age to the campers than she is to Louise, but she stands upright and infuses her words with irony and in general works to ensure that everyone recognizes the firm line between thirteen and seventeen—a line made manifest by the plywood partition that separates the main part of the cabin from the counselors' corner.

Now, Louise shakes her awake. Now, Annabel squints. Crooks an elbow over her eyes dramatically. Sinks back into sleep.

Louise is becoming aware of something: the smell of metabolized beer. She had assumed it was coming from her own body—from her own skin and mouth. She certainly drank enough last night to feel the effects this morning. But standing over Annabel, she wonders whether the smell, in fact, has been coming from Annabel's side of the room.

Which concerns her.

"*Annabel,*" Louise whispers. In her tone, she suddenly recognizes the sound of her own mother. And in some ways she feels like her mother—her bad mother, her irresponsible mother—in relation to this girl.

Annabel opens her eyes. She sits up and winces immediately. She meets Louise's gaze and her eyes widen, her face becomes pale.

"I'm gonna be sick," she says—too loudly. Louise shushes her, grabs at the first vessel she can reach—an empty bag of potato chips on the floor.

Annabel lunges for the bag. Retches. Then raises her head, panting, groaning lowly.

"Annabel," Louise says. "Are you hungover?"

Annabel shakes her head. Scared.

"I think I," she says—and again Louise shushes her, sitting down on the girl's bed this time, counting to five in her mind, the way she has done since she was a small child. Training herself not to react.

Annabel's chin is trembling. "I think I ate something bad," she whispers.

"Did you go out last night?" says Louise. "Annabel?"

Annabel watches her. Calculating.

"This is important," says Louise.

Normally she has patience for her CITs. She is practiced in guiding them through their first hangovers. Doesn't mind when they indulge a little on a night off. As head counselor this year, she generally turns a blind eye to behavior she deems harmless. Partakes in it herself, when the moment feels right. But she otherwise runs a tight ship; earlier this summer, the first counselor to fail to wake up on time after a night of carousing was banned from the next several parties, and that seemed to set enough of an example that no one has repeated the mistake.

Until now. Because last night, while Louise went out, it was Annabel's turn to be on duty. And Annabel, apparently, wasn't.

• • •

Louise closes her eyes. Runs through the events of last evening.

There was a dance in the community room: the end-of-session dance, which all campers, counselors, and CITs were required to attend. She recalls noticing, at a certain point, that Annabel seemed to be absent—she couldn't set eyes on her, anyway—but Louise is certain that she was back by the end of the dance.

Because at eleven p.m., when Louise did a quick head count, Annabel was there, along with nine campers—yes, nine—who waved to Louise sweetly as they said good night. She can still see the back of them, walking in little clusters toward Balsam.

This was the last time she saw them. Louise, assured that Annabel was in charge, went off on her own.

Next, she tries to picture the campers' beds as she tiptoed into the cabin at the end of the night, well after curfew. This would have been at—what—two in the morning? Three? Images return to her in fragments: Melissa R's open mouth, Amy's arm hanging down toward the floor. But Barbara herself is nowhere among these memories. Nor is the absence of Barbara.

A different memory asserts itself instead: John Paul, in the Clearing, as he windmilled his arms, first in her direction and then in Lee Towson's. John Paul with his rich-kid approach to the fight, brandishing his fists as if he were entering a ring. Lee wild and scrappy, still in his apron from dinner service. He made short work of John Paul, left him on the ground, blinking absently up toward the branches overhead.

There will be trouble today. There always is when John Paul gets the notion that she's fooling around on him.

For the record: she isn't, this time.

• • •

Annabel comes up for air. Puts a hand over her eyes.

"Do you know where Barbara is?" asks Louise. Cutting to the chase. There's not much time: soon the girls in the other room will

be waking.

Annabel looks confused.

"Van *Laar*," says Louise, and then she says it again, more quietly. "Our camper."

"No," says Annabel, and collapses backward on her bed.

It is then, of course, that reveille sounds over the speakers mounted on trees throughout the campground—meaning that on the other side of the plywood partition, eight twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls are reluctantly waking up, making their small noises, exhalations and sighs, propping themselves up on elbows.

Louise begins pacing.

Annabel, still horizontal, now watches her—beginning to understand the problem.

"Annabel," says Louise. "You need to be honest here. Did you go back out last night? After the campers were in bed?"

Annabel appears to hold her breath. Then she exhales. Nods. Her eyes, Louise notices, are filling with tears.

"Yes, I did," she says. There's a childish tremor in her voice. She has very rarely been in trouble in her life: of this Louise is certain. She is a person who has been told, since birth, about her value in this world. The ways she makes others happy. She is crying openly now, and Louise struggles not to roll her eyes. What does Annabel have to be afraid of? There's nothing at stake for her. She's seventeen years old. The worst thing that could happen to Annabel is that she might be dismissed, sent up the hill to her rich parents—who are friends, in fact, with the owners of the camp. Who are, at this very moment, guests at their house on the grounds. Meanwhile, the worst thing that might happen to Louise—an *adult*, thinks Louise, castigating herself—the worst thing that might happen is—well. Don't make too many leaps, she tells herself. Just stay in the present.

Louise walks to the curtain. Pulls it back ever so slightly. In doing so, she catches the eye of Tracy, Barbara's bunkmate, a quiet girl

who stands paused on the bunk's ladder in mid-descent, having noticed, apparently, the issue.

Louise drops the curtain.

"Is she missing?" Annabel says. Again, Louise shushes her.

"Don't say *missing*," says Louise. "Say she's not in her bunk."

Louise scans their little room, looking for evidence of their behavior last night. She gathers what she finds into a brown paper garbage bag: an empty bottle of beer that she drank on the walk back from the Clearing; the end of a joint that she smoked at some point; the vomit-filled potato chip bag, which she handles with two stiff fingers.

"Is there anything else you wouldn't want someone finding?" she asks Annabel, who shakes her head.

Louise closes the garbage bag, folds it, makes it compact.

"Listen to me," she says. "You might have to be in charge of the campers this morning. I'm not sure yet. If that happens, you need to get rid of this. Just put it in the garbage enclosure on the walk to breakfast. It needs to be gotten rid of. Can you do that?"

Annabel nods, still green.

"Right now," she says to Annabel, "just stay here. Don't come out for a while. And don't—" She hesitates, searching for words that sound serious but not self-incriminating. She's talking, after all, to a child. "Just don't say anything about last night to anyone, yet. Let me think a few things over."

Annabel goes quiet.

"Okay?" says Louise.

"Okay."

She'll fold immediately, Louise thinks. She will unswervingly tell every authority figure everything that happened and everything she knows. She'll cry on the shoulders of her mother and father, who probably didn't even understand the poem they named their daughter for, and she'll be comforted by them, and resume her ballet lessons, and next year she'll be pipelined into Vassar or Radcliffe or

Wellesley by her prep school, and she'll marry the boy her parents have chosen for her—already, she has confessed to Louise, they have one in mind—and she will never, ever think of Louise Donnadieu again, or the fate that will befall Louise, or the trouble Louise will have, for the rest of her life, getting a job, getting housing, supporting her mother, who for seven years now has been unable or unwilling to work. Supporting her little brother, who at eleven has done nothing at all to deserve the life he has been given.

In front of her, Annabel gags. Recovers.

Louise puts her hands on her hips. Breathes. Slow down, she reminds herself.

She squares her shoulders. Pulls back the curtain. Begins the work of feigning ignorance and surprise for this small group of girls who—she swallows her shame like a pill—who look up to her, admire her, frequently come to her for advice and protection.

She steps into their room. Pantomimes scanning the beds. Furrows her brow in a show of confusion.

"Where's Barbara?" she says to them, brightly.

Tracy

*Two Months Earlier
June 1975*

Three rules were given to the campers upon their arrival.

The first concerned food in the cabins, and the way it was to be consumed and stored (neatly; tightly).

The second pertained to swimming: an activity that was not, under any circumstances, to be undertaken solo.

The third—the most important, as evidenced by its display, in capital letters, in several communal locations—was WHEN LOST SIT DOWN AND YELL.

At the time, this admonition struck Tracy as almost funny. It would be repeated later that night, at the opening campfire; its logic would be explained. But presented as it was in that moment, forthrightly, succinctly, by a tall male counselor who spoke the words without punctuation or emotion—the phrase made her look away, swallow a nervous laugh. WHEN LOST SIT DOWN AND YELL. She tried to imagine it: Sitting down right where she was. Opening her mouth. Yelling. What noise, she wondered, would escape her? What word, or words? *Help? Help me? God forbid—Please find me?* It was too embarrassing to consider.

• • •

Her father had paid her to attend.

This was what it took, after a week of negotiations that had concluded with a weekend-long standoff in her room: cold hard cash, a hundred dollars of it—fifty percent of which would be waiting for her upon her return.

What she had wanted to do with her summer was simple: she wanted to spend all day in the living room of the Victorian in Saratoga Springs that her family had rented each racing season for a decade. She had wanted to lower the blinds halfway and open the windows halfway and point all the fans in the house in her direction and lie on the sofa, only rising to prepare herself elaborate snacks. And she wanted to read: reading was the main thing.

This had been her routine for five summers in a row. She had hoped that the summer of 1975 would be no different.

Instead, her father—divorced from her mother for less than a year—had, in quick succession, gotten a girlfriend, a fancier rental house, and the notion that Tracy shouldn't lie around all summer with nothing to do. This was what he said to her, anyway, on their ride up from Tracy's mother's house on Long Island in mid-June. (She couldn't help but notice that he'd waited to reveal the plan until they were more than halfway to Saratoga.) The real reason, she thought, was so that she would be out of his hair for two months. So that he and the aforementioned girlfriend could have the run of the place without a sulking twelve-year-old underfoot. Why had he fought to have custody of her all summer, Tracy asked herself, if he was only going to turn around and send her away?

• • •

He hadn't even bothered to drop her off at Camp Emerson himself. Instead he'd outsourced that task to Donna Romano, the girlfriend,

still a first and last name to Tracy.

"It's a race day," her father said, when Tracy cornered him in the hallway, begged him to come. "Gotta drive down to Belmont. Second Thought's running at two."

Her father was a jockey's son who'd grown up too tall to follow in his footsteps. He'd become an exercise rider instead, and then a trainer, and then an owner, the circumstances of their lives changing with each job. When Tracy was born, the three of them lived in an RV in her mother's mother's driveway. Now they lived in a new large house with a silver front gate in Hempstead, New York. Well, Tracy and her mother did, anyway.

"What will we even *talk* about," she demanded, but he only shook his head, put two imploring hands on her shoulders. She noticed suddenly that she was eye level with him: her own father. She'd recently gone through a growth spurt that put her in the vicinity of five-eleven and made her slouch vigorously whenever she wasn't in motion.

"This place is supposed to be top-notch. I mean really hoity-toity," said her father—the same two embarrassing descriptors he'd used when first breaking the news. "I bet you'll end up loving it."

She turned toward a window. Through it, she could see Donna Romano adjusting her bra, inspecting her reflection in the window of the car. It was a new Stutz Blackhawk with shag carpeting on the floor and an engine whose roar reminded Tracy of her father's voice. "Top of the line," he had said, when he picked her up in Hempstead. It seemed to Tracy that everything in her father's life was new. Rental house, girlfriend, Pekingese puppy, car. Tracy was the only old thing in his orbit; and even she was being cast out.

• • •

As it turned out, Donna Romano was a chain-smoker. In between drags she asked Tracy questions about her life that she'd clearly

been stockpiling for the very purpose of this trip. When she was not busy answering them, Tracy snuck glances at Donna Romano. She was extremely pretty. Normally, this would have gone far with Tracy. She loved pretty women. She loved the most popular girls at her middle school—though *revered* might have been a better word, since a large part of her actually despised them. Still, she was fascinated by them, perhaps due to the fact that, physically, they were her opposite, and thus seemed somehow like specimens she wished to examine, at length, under a microscope. Where most of her classmates had long straight hair, parted in the middle, Tracy's hair was large, red, and indefatigable. Where some of her classmates' freckles were delicate, Tracy's were so pronounced that she had been nicknamed Connect the Dots, or CTD for short, by a group of sixth-grade boys. She was supposed to wear glasses; she owned a pair that she never wore, which resulted in her squinting frequently. Her father once told her casually that she was built like a plum on toothpicks, and the phrase was at once so cruel and so poetic that it clicked into place around her like a harness.

• • •

The roads turned from asphalt to gravel to dirt. Ramshackle homes appeared every few minutes, their front lawns repurposed as graveyards for rusted-out vehicles. It was eerie, this contrast between natural beauty and man-made decay, and Tracy began to wonder if they were going the right way.

And then, at last, a sign came into view. *Van Laar Preserve*, it said. Their mailed instructions had indicated this was the sign to follow.

"I wonder why they don't put the name of the camp on the sign," mused Donna Romano.

Maybe it was so perverts couldn't find it, thought Tracy. This, she knew, was what her father would have said. Against her will, she

often heard his voice as a sort of narrative presence that underscored her life. That year—the first of the divorce—was the longest they had ever been apart.

The truth was that as a younger child she had been his shadow, had loved him unreservedly, following him everywhere, raising carrots, flat-handed, to the velvety muzzles of his favorite horses. Although she would have died before admitting it, Tracy missed him profoundly, and had spent the better part of her last school year anticipating a summer of being at his side.

• • •

The dirt driveway forked. An arrow to the right directed them to *Camp Emerson: Where Lifelong Friendships Are Made*. And then the trees broke open onto a lawn with several rustic wooden buildings in a row. In front of them was a lone counselor standing behind a folding table, from which hung a damp posterboard sign that said, unconvincingly, *Welcome*.

The counselor approached the Blackhawk with a folder, handed it to Donna through a window. Then he formally dispensed the Three Rules of Camp Emerson like a dutiful town crier—including the final one, the most important, a phrase that would echo in Tracy's head for days, for weeks. For the rest of her life.

When lost sit down and yell.

Tracy had difficulty imagining how lost she would have to be before the option felt correct. Her voice, it seemed, had been continuously decrescendoing since birth, so that by age twelve, she could scarcely be heard.

Very, she decided, at last. Profoundly, irreversibly, lost.

"You'll be in Balsam," said the boy, interrupting Tracy's thoughts. He extended a long arm to his right. Donna Romano tapped the gas, and the Blackhawk rolled forward.