

**FIERCE JOY**



# FIERCE JOY

*a memoir*

ELLEN SCHECTER



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This book is for my family

Jim

Alex

Anna

Peter

Doris

Stanley

You lived it with me just the way I wrote it:  
day after day.

Thank you for never forsaking me.

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*What is to give light  
must endure burning.*

**Viktor E. Frankl**





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## PART I

# The Woman with Wings

*So teach us to number our days  
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.*

***Psalm 90:12***





## CHAPTER 1

# Something



### Fair Harbor, Fire Island

1988

IT'S AUGUST. NEW YORK CITY IS BAKING AND GLITTERING IN A HEAT WAVE. My husband, Jim, and I escape with Alex, six, and Anna, three, to Fair Harbor on Fire Island, for our two-week vacation. Our house, rented sight-unseen, turns out to be a ramshackle A-frame, where the key waits under the red geranium. It's cramped, with plywood walls, touches of mildew, and a hideous nautical decor. "It'll be fine as soon as the sun comes out," we assure each other. "The kids can play on the fenced-in deck, and we'll finally have time together to talk, read, even nap nearby. It'll be heaven."

Not quite. My left foot feels like a chunk of wood and can't feel the ground. Ignore it, I tell myself. Don't think about it. And don't tell Jim; it could ruin the vacation. He still knows nothing about it.

How can I keep ignoring it? Something's been going on for more than a year. This numbness. Painful tingles in my fingers and toes. A tiny white Christmas bulb flashing in my left eye. Hot spots on my left ear and arm.

We unpack, bring out the toys, make the beds, cook a quick meal.

"Let's go look for the deer," Jim says, just before the sun goes down.

"Great idea, but let's take them in the wagon in case they get sleepy." Our cottage comes equipped with a red Radio Flyer. We dress the kids in footed pajamas and dab their PJs and our clothes with mosquito repellent.

Buttoning, zipping, unscrewing the bottle—sparks of pain jab through my fingers and shoot up to my elbows.

I do have to pay attention to this, I think. It's getting more pronounced. I've been too afraid to go to a doctor, whether to find out something's really wrong . . . or that it's all in my head. Because the symptoms are so odd, I'm not sure which scares me more: really being sick, or imagining it. I definitely don't want to find out I'm a hypochondriac like my mother.

Jim swings Alex into the rusty wagon. Anna insists on climbing in herself, then Alex slides her back and puts his arms around her in a hug.

"Take a picture of this with your eyes," I whisper to Jim. "Peace."

"Enjoy it while it lasts," he whispers back.

I tuck blankets around them—ouch—and we set off into the thickening blue twilight, the wagon squeaking softly.

It's so peculiar, walking with pins and needles jabbing the bottoms of my feet. I have a great imagination—I write children's books and television programs—but who could make this up? So it must be real. Okay, okay, I'll call the doctor when we get home.

We pass people headed for parties, rattling ice cubes in their drinks. I remember how I used to watch the families when I came here as a hopeful single, thirty-two and aching for a husband and family. I wonder how we look to them now, both of us still looking younger than our years—thirty-nine and forty-four. I watch Jim pull the wagon, chatting and laughing with the kids, pretending to be a Nascar racer. Just the look of him made my insides jump at first sight: he's tall and slim, with compelling dark eyes, wavy black hair and a short beard with one narrow strip of white. I'm more than a head shorter and fit right under his chin when we hug. Which is often. He has duck feet and bowed legs that make the kids laugh. My long copper hair is also streaked with silver, my brown eyes shadowed by circles no amount of sleep can erase. People are always flabbergasted when I tell them my age, but my days of getting carded in bars ended after my first pregnancy.

Soon we're in pine woods, alone with the fireflies, each with its tiny golden nimbus in the gathering mist. As we near the spot where the deer might come, we stop. I bend close to the children and whisper, "We may see the deer soon, so we have to be perfectly quiet. Can you do that?"

Alex nods “yes” very elaborately, and Anna pretends to zip her lips. When we turn the next corner, Jim taps each of us, and points.

Just twenty feet away stand a small doe and her tiny twin fawns. They see us, too, yet all of us stand perfectly still in the deep lavender quiet. As our eyes open wider to the night, I see them even more clearly: the fawns with their tidy little hooves, trembling; their mother’s immense brown eyes, her legs slender as twigs. Her large ears skew toward us. Her head tilts toward her children, as mine does to mine.

Alex taps me. “Can I go make friends?” he whispers, his warm hands cupping my ear when I lean down.

“Yes, you and Annie,” I signal back after Jim nods “yes.”

Jim lifts them one at a time out of the wagon and sets them on their feet. Alex takes Anna’s hand and they walk slowly, slowly toward the deer. It’s like watching Hansel and Gretel without the witch.

The deer and the children study each other. One step, then another, till they are only about seven feet apart. Jim takes my hand, palm cold as snow as it always is in moments of deep feeling, good or bad. The children step closer. Another step. Another.

Then—the spell breaks. The doe and her fawns slip away into the pine brush.

They don’t run, they don’t show alarm—they just disappear.

Was I about to—disappear?



## **New York City, Riverside Park Playground**

**Autumn 1988**

“Push my swing, Mama,” calls Anna.

“Mine, too,” Alex says.

Something makes me so gray with fatigue that I feel welded to the ground. Pushing my kids on the swings takes all my strength. I can’t imagine how I’ll walk home.

“Push me higher, Mommy, I want to fly,” Alex sings out.

Damn it, I don’t want to be sick.

“Look at me, Mama—my toes touch the sky,” Anna sings back.

I don't have time to be sick.

"Watch me, Mommy!"

I want to push away pain and just see how beautiful our children are.

"Look at me, Mama!"

I will not be sick.

"Mommy, watch this?"

I refuse to be sick.

"Mama, look at me."

Damn it: I won't let anything hurt us.