Hello. My name is Vicki Laveau-Harvie, and I’m speaking to you from Sydney, in Australia. The book I’ve written is called *The Erratics*. It’s a memoir. It’s the story about six years of my life and six years in the life of my sister and my aging parents. It’s a book about the difficulties of family life, the challenges of aging. It’s also a book about resilience and hope, about the possibilities we all have to choose wisely and live well. I also wanted it to be about the moments that we come upon, even in dire situations when things are very bleak. Those moments of hilarity, those flashes of humor when you have to laugh out loud. When you say to yourself, “I couldn’t have made this up.”

I’d like to read the beginning of chapter one to you.

CHAPTER 1

My sister unhooks the chart from the foot of my mother’s bed and reads.

My mother is not in the bed. My sister takes her pen, which is always to hand, around her neck or poked into a pocket and, with the air of entitlement of a medical professional, writes “MMA” in large letters at the bottom of the chart.

MMA.

Mad as a meat-ax.

My sister learned this expression from me yesterday. She has latched on to it like a child wrestling a toy from another.

We have come to visit my mother, in rehab for a broken hip in this prairie hospital, a place that could be far worse than it is. It is set down here, plain and brown, on at farmland, but the foothills start rolling westward just outside town and you see them from the windows. They roll on, smooth, rhythmic, and comforting, until they bump into the stern and inscrutable face of the Rockies eighty miles thataway.

In summer the fields are sensible, right-angled squares of sulfur-yellow and clean, pale green, rapeseed and young wheat. In winter the cold will kill you. Nothing personal. Your lungs will freeze as Christmas lights tracing the out- lines of white frame houses wink cheerfully through air so clear and hard it shatters.
MMA, I say. They won't know what that means. You don't say that here in Southern Alberta, even in urban centers. It's a down-underism, an antipodeanism. Maybe they'll see that on the chart and give her some medication called MMA and kill her.

Do we care? my sister asks. She hangs the chart back on the foot of the bed as my mother wheels into the room, gaunt, her favorite look, with a black fringe and bobbed hair. Hats o for carrying that o at ninety. Her sinewy hands coerce the wheels of her chair forward faster than you are supposed to go if you need this chair.

She is wearing a hospital gown and a pair of fuchsia boxer shorts. Not hers. Obviously not hers.

She remarks that it is strange that she cannot have her own things to wear, that she must wear this strange outfit. We don't think to question. We believe in strange. We believe whatever. There's no other way to go at this.

We have run the nurses' station gauntlet to get to her. We have announced ourselves at the counter as her daughters, on our first visit to this rehab ward. We are her daughters, we say, when challenged about why we are in this corridor.

No, you're not, the nurse says, not even looking up from her papers.

But we are. We're sure.

No, she insists. She only had one daughter and she died a long time ago. Now she has none.

My sister cries out from the heart, startling me. Look at me, she cries. Do I look dead?

I don't think she is looking too good, but there is something more pressing. Why, I ask her, are you the daughter who gets to exist? Even if you're dead now. Not to put too ne a point on it but if anyone should get to be dead, it's me. I was born first.

The physio strolling by stops to ask who we are and what the matter is. We stare at her, wanting to say all that is the matter, wanting to unroll the whole carpet of what is the matter and smooth it out, drawing attention to the motifs, combing the fringed edges into some order, vacuuming the patterned surface until clarity emerges. We wonder how to begin.

They are saying, the nurse tells the physio, that they're the duchess's daughters. But she has no children.

You've got it wrong, the physio says. Little bird of a person, you'd never know it of her, but she had eighteen kids. Imagine, eighteen. And only one boy. Heartbroken she was. Told me herself. In tears. Oh, she had kids all right. Nobody around when you need them though.
I draw breath. I can work with this. See, I say to the nurse, there you go. We can’t speak for the others, but we’d like to see her.