Is

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Liz Hicks aime les enfants et après la mort de son mari, elle décide de garder les enfants des parents qui travaillent. Elle partage avec le petit Max, son dernier protégé, une relation très spéciale.

The child laughs and bounds toward Liz. "Is," he calls. "It's Mackie!

His name is Max, but at only two he can't yet pronounce the x. First he was Mac and then he started to call himself Mackie. He was the one who also started to call the soft woman with gray curls Is.

Her name is Liz Hicks. She's a huge mountain of warmth, arms embracing the child with breasts he loses himself in when he presses his head against her. After Jack died, she thought of herself as "the widow Hicks," but no longer. Now she's Is.

"Hi, Max," she says. "Hi."

Another child to look after. Perhaps this one will be the last. It started when her mother kept on having babies and relied on Liz to help her with the younger ones. Then when Liz left home to marry Jack, it wasn't long before she had her own batch. She knew enough to put her husband in the other bedroom after there were three of them, but even three took up much of her life for over 20 years. And then three multiplied and there were the grandchildren. And the neighbour who said as her last child left for school, "You know, Liz, if you're lonely now that little Cass has gone off to kindergarten, you could look after ours."

Even though she hadn't wanted any more than three of her own, Liz loved children. So she looked after these children while their parents went to work. She liked the extra money, but more than that she embraced each one with warmth, loving their questing minds and sense of wonder. It never felt like an encumbrance and she didn't ever think she might have preferred to do something else. She could go on baking cookies and tending her garden. And when the children slept, she could read cookbooks, magazines, mysteries.

Then after the last neighbour's child started kindergarten, someone told her about Max. "He's a little fellow, a preemie. His folks are looking for someone special."

This child, this little whirlwind of energy and exuberance, delights her now. It takes something out of her to start all over with a new child, grow attached, and then find she is alone again. As long as Jack was there, she didn't feel bereft when each child left her. But since she's been a widow it gets harder each time a child is ready to go to daycare or kindergarten or both.

"Is, Is," the child chortles as he climbs down from her lap.

"Max," she says.

"Mackie."

"Mackie."

"Is, is," he laughs again. He runs toward the cat and starts to pet it.

"Gentle, Mackie," Is says.

"Gentle," the child repeats.

How many more? Liz wonders. This one is special because he was so tiny, so vulnerable when he was born. She didn't look after him until he was over a year old, but she saw the pictures depicting what his parents had told her. Proud parents. The father teaches physics and fixes old cars and the mother is a lab technician and a jogger. She says she hasn't started to jog again since Max was born, but she will soon. They are both tall with willowy frames and they bring her gifts on special occasions. A special brand of coffee, bath salts, a little, rubber tube to roll garlic cloves in to remove the skin. Sometimes Liz drives Max over to their house if Max's mother is going to be late and his father has to stay after school.

Max is still tiny. Although in every other way, you would never know. He's a curious and bright child and as physically dexterous at this stage as any of the others she's cared for. He looks at her with mischief in his eyes as he hurtles toward her again. "Is, Is!"

She laughs. He will delight her for the time she has with him. As each child has. Especially the three who arrived in quick succession after her marriage when she scarcely knew how to look after them, while Jack was out driving buses and streetcars. But she has a way with children. They love her. You can see that. And she loves being called Is; she loves the surprises each child brings.

Liz lives in a small bungalow across from the fire station on Howland Avenue. She's lived there for so many years she can scarcely count them any more although she and Jack started their life in a flat further downtown, in the Kensington Market area. She has always been happy in the bungalow. Sometimes in the winter it's cold, the insulbrick on the outside not enough to keep out the chill. The main part of the house is brick and that's a little better.

She's a huge mountain of warmth, arms embracing the child with breasts he loses himself in when he presses his head against her. After Jack died, she thought of herself as "the widow Hicks," but no longer. Now she's Is.

The child puts some blocks back in a big red plastic basket when the siren goes off. He runs to the window. "Fire," he yells. "Fire!"

Liz goes over and stands behind him. She has a slight heaviness in her chest and stops to breathe deeply until it goes away. She thinks these occasional sensations don't frighten her the way they likely ought to. One day soon she should see her doctor and tell Max's parents about them. She is afraid it might be time to give the child up before the child is ready to give her up. This isn't something she has ever done and it troubles her. But she knows it's what she may have to do.

The truck careens out of the nearby station and onto the street.

"Zoom," the child says.

He isn't a child who has the same thing about breasts that babies and toddlers often do. Although he likes how warm it is when he snuggles against Is. But after three months in an incubator, he didn't have the real sense of what it was that babies were supposed to do. He came into the world so early and so small, he could have been a small chicken. Or even a cricket. For his first three months, he was curled up in an incubator, but he couldn't swim around the way he did before he left that other place. Although it was so crowded with the fibroids that he was pushed to leave his watery womb early. He wouldn't have known that other babies have more room to move around in. He knew only that he wouldn't live if he didn't head down that narrow channel when he pushed his way through the big blobs around him. He slithered out quickly because he was so small, hearing the siren of the ambulance taking his mother to some hospital. It was after she was wheeled into a room with bright lights and voices that he appeared.

He got to lie on his mother's or father's chest for a couple hours each day with a little blue or yellow knitted cap on his head and all covered up with a blanket. It was called kangaroo care, so maybe he knew something about what it might be like to start life as a kangaroo. Although all his milk came to him through tubes after his mother pumped it into bottles, labeled, and refrigerated until used. Some day when he's grown up, he'll see a picture of the tub full of unused milk in little plastic bottles with orange lids that had to be thrown out because it only kept for so long and hear about how his mother cried when that happened. All that work she did so he would survive, all that pumping, only to see so much of her milk ultimately wasted.

"Is, Is," he says.

"Let's read, Max," she smiles.

"Mackie."

He likes the Maurice Sendak book with the character Max in it and the creatures that look like monsters. Everyone seems to have given him that book because of that character; they have the same name. He goes to look for it in the pile of books on the green rug in the living room. Some of the books his parents brought, others Is has had for ages. He finds another book he likes and hurries toward Liz.

"Paper," he says.

"The Paper Bag Princess," she reads.

Liz watches with glee as Max points to something on each page and says a word or phrase that is embedded in the text. He does this at home with his mother and father, too. If you listen to him talk in his crib at night, you would hear a long convoluted conversation. He says far more than just single words when recalling the stories he and Is, or he and his mother or father, read the previous day. None of them know about the rich pictures of forests full of Max's friends that the child dreams. Liz does know he watches her for clues to define the world. He watches everyone. When his mother picks him up in the Honda, he observes her turn on the ignition.

"CBC," he says.

"What?" his mother asks.

"CBC."

This is the radio station Liz listens to during the day. When he arrives in the morning, Andy Barrie is on Metro Morning, the same voice he listens to in the car before he

and his mother knock on Liz's door and his mother calls out, "Is, we're here."

When he pointed at the radio in Liz's kitchen, when he heard the same voice as the one in the car, Is smiled at him and said, "radio." But Max shook his head.

"CBC?" she asked quizzically.

Max doesn't know what CBC is, but his mother sometimes says that word and the voice on the radio does, too. When he lies in his crib at night after putting his parents through their paces (more milk, stinky diaper—he won't make it easier for them until he's ready. All this attention from Is and his mother and father is something he'll never get again he's heard his Daddy say, except perhaps as a rock star or a hockey player or a politician. Or as Big Bird or one of the characters he sees on television), he listens carefully.

His mother turns on the radio in the car, shaking her head. When they get home, he'll hear her tell his father, "Do you know what? Max asked me to turn on the CBC when we got into the car."

His father will shake his head, too. "Mighty Max," he sometimes says. He already assumes Max is above average and nothing really surprises him. When he was little, he probably surprised his own parents also in the same way. But then Max's mother would have surprised her parents, too. Max wonders about Is. She's a bit more inscrutable because he never, ever stays there for dinner. He's never slept there overnight or eaten breakfast there either. He doesn't know what her softness is when she takes off her dress and puts on a nightgown. He's seen a pink one hanging on the back of the bathroom door when he's followed her in there.

Now in the car in the seat behind his mother, Max listens to the sounds of another set of voices and wonders what would happen if he drove the car. He doesn't know his feet wouldn't reach the pedals yet and that if he got down to push them he wouldn't be able to see the road. He likes sitting in the little car in the restaurant he sometimes goes to with his mother and father.

"Zoom," he says.

"What was that, Max?" his mother asks. Sometimes he can tell her mind is elsewhere. When that happens all he has to do is make a screeching sound or yell "Mummy!" and that far away expression leaves her face.

"Did you have a good day with Is?" she asks.

What does she think? All his days with Is are good. She's warm and sings, gives him cookies, and plays on the floor with him. Sometimes she does some cleaning or tidying, giving him a small broom so he can help her. The broom has a red handle and yellow straw with red string tied around it to hold the long strands together. He pushes or pulls it. Sometimes Is shows him how to use it, but mostly she lets him do what he wants with it unless he hits the cat.

"Max," Is says sternly then, "be gentle."

Gentle is a word his Mummy and Daddy use, too. He doesn't know what it means yet. It isn't the cat's name because there's a cat at home called Nosy and one at Is's house, too. Its name is Babes and it has gray stripes. Nosy is a tawny colour. No one calls them Gentle unless he jumps on them or hits them with something. He's figured out it's better not to because although his mother and father and Is never spank him, you can tell by the tone in their voices that he's done something he shouldn't. He pulls his Mummy's earrings sometimes, too, and she says "Gentle" then also. Anything he does that makes adults shriek brings that word again.

Gentle, gentle, gentle, Max. In his crib, looking up at the ceiling, he sings it. Be gentle, Max. Gentle, gentle, gentle.

That night when he's lying in bed, he talks about Gentle the cat, only it isn't the cat's name. He tells the story of the paper bag princess in his own way, with more words than he ever uses when someone is reading to him. He sings the nursery rhyme Is sang to him earlier. "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall," or something like that. He could call out "Mummy" or "Daddy" now, but he wants to talk to himself. To get ready to sleep so he can dream about elephants with vivid colours, about riding horses, about fishing in the stream for trout. Anything that he's seen in a book or on television he can dream about. Monsters, guns, flying saucers. Sometimes he has scary dreams after that. Some man turned up in his dream as a chimpanzee with a shotgun. He doesn't want that kind of dream. He hopes it's a morning when his mother will take him to Is on the way to her work. Or maybe his father will.

Now almost everyone who hears him call her Is picks up on it. Even the boy who delivers the groceries.

"Here I am, Is."

Liz knows she's lucky to have found someone to pick up her shopping for her although it's impertinent for him to call her by her first name,. He always called her Mrs. Hicks until he heard Max call her Is.

Max will be happy because she has his favourite, animal cookies. She takes them out of the larger box that the boy puts down on the kitchen counter.

"Hi, Max,'" the boy says.

"Hi, hi, hi, hi, hi," the child sings.

Liz thinks he's singing to a tune that just played on the radio, but she isn't sure. This child has all the innocence of every other toddler she's ever cared for, but at the same time he seems to know things from somewhere else. From where she has no idea. Where did he learn to whistle? His mother said he did that as soon as he found his voice at five or six months old. Before that, he didn't even cry; he was simply too tiny and without the lung capacity. But when he cried, a few days later he also whistled. And as soon as he could move around on the floor, he started to move to the rhythm of music. Some days he would start to dance on the rug when she played the piano.

"See Mackie dance, Is," he would say.

He has always danced, remembers even the funny little

fish come sailing up toward the circle and that he started to form when they got together. It has something to do with his mother and his father and little odd shapes they pass back and forth. He thinks the little circle was something that was just there inside his mother, and that the fish came flying toward it whenever his father sent them out to sea. He didn't know that he would be so cramped up and would have to leave early. He didn't know that when he did, they would have to put him in the clear little space ship with all the wires attached to machines where he could see his heart beat. He could see his heart stop and sometimes someone had to come along and make it start again. He hated the tube in his nose and pulled it out. Those nurses in white uniforms must have seen that he was able to breathe without it because they didn't put it back. They changed his tiny paper napkin and placed him in a little blanket in the space ship with his bum in the air. They wrapped him so he felt almost as if he were in the dark space except that it wasn't dark and he couldn't swim any more. As soon as he could get to water, he would start again. Somewhere, some day, he would swim again.

All of this Max knew, but no one else knew he knew.

"Is, Is, Is," he sings. "Is."

Liz wonders sometimes what she will do when Max leaves. She misses each child, but she's never met one quite like him. She's glad that she's had the good fortune to have this gift sent her way. He laughs and plays with her, following her across the blue-tiled floor into the sunroom, across the wooden hall into the living room where all the books are. He names things for her. Cat. Milk. Bottle. Nose. Hand. Knee. Mackie. She smiles with delight as she always does. When the phone rings, he follows her.

After a while, she says, "It's Mummy, Max. Do you want to say hello to Mummy?"

She hands him the receiver. He sits holding it, waiting. He doesn't know what he's waiting for. There might be a voice. He hears a voice say, "Hi Max."

"Mummy," he grins.

The voice is coming out of the part he has to his ear and he holds it away and looks at it. He can't see his Mummy, but he knows she's there. He sees a button and pushes it.

"Oh my goodness," Is says. "I think you hung up, Max." She starts to talk and Max can hear his Mummy's voice, still there. It didn't go away.

"I love you, too," he whispers. "Bye bye."

This is what he hears his mother say at the end of some phone calls. Only when he says it, he runs the words all together so they are like one word. And it doesn't matter if the voice is talking or not. Sometimes he just decides it's time to do something else.

"All done," he replies, beaming at Is.

Liz smiles at the child. "Mummy will be here soon."

She and the child are at the centre of what could be a painting filled with radiant light, she thinks. She's happy. Max is happy. Except on the horizon, you can't see the clouds gathering because when the artist painted, there were no clouds. Or perhaps the artist left them out. You never really know for sure, do you? You never know for sure what the artist saw. Or what the onlooker sees when looking at the painting.

When Liz dreams she doesn't dream of that place of long ago where she floated in water; she dreams of light. White light. In The Land of Is, everything is bathed in this light and she is calm. It doesn't feel so far away. She feels almost ready to explore it. Will there be fields of flowers, of wild grasses to wander in under the white light?

Liz isn't afraid of the white light, but she's terrified of what it would mean for Max if he found her in its rays. She sits down on the couch where he has fallen asleep and touches his silken red hair and rests while he naps beside her.

When Max wakes up, he looks up and sees Is beside him. She's asleep and he reaches out to awaken her. But she doesn't move. At first he thinks she's playing a game. All of his prescience hasn't yet grasped that at the opposite end from the calming sea where he floated at the beginning is a wide, open space filled with white light.

"Is," he says. He shakes her arm. He shakes her arm. He shakes her arm. "Is." He can't understand why she isn't warm.

Max sits down on the floor. It won't do any good to tug at her earrings or to bang against her.

"Gentle," he whispers.

Mary Lou Dickinson grew up in northern Quebec. After attending university in Montreal, she moved to Michigan. Then she settled in Toronto where she has lived ever since. She worked for many years as a crisis counselor. Her fiction has been published in the University of Windsor Review, Descant, Waves, Grain, Northern Journey, Impulse, Writ *and broadcast on CBC Radio. Her writing was also included in the anthology,* We Who Can Fly: Poems, Essays and Memories in Honour of Adele Wiseman. *Her first book, a collection of short stories,* One Day It Happens*, was published by Inanna Publications in May, 2007.*