

Jill Birdsall

WHISPER HILL

Tim thought he'd find a brick for his mother around the back of the house. He needed to replace the one he'd kicked and broken on the hearth. He was sorry about this and wanted to find a good fit. No chips, no cracks. He wanted to give his mother the perfect brick to make up for what he'd done.

But on his way to the chimney, passing through a patch of dying lamb's ear at the rim of the coal chute, his foot slipped on a half-eaten pear and down he tumbled. That chute hadn't heard such rolling and rumbling since the last coal delivery a century ago. Like a rabbit hole, it swallowed all five-foot-eleven of him.

Down, down, down. Would it never end? After two or three full forward rolls, he managed to straighten. He sucked in the sooty air, tried to spread his arms, but the chute had narrowed and he dropped feet first, arms at his sides, as if the ground had been pulled out from under him.

He called: "Mom!"

Tim coughed the dust from his throat and screamed her name: "Mom!!"

"M-o-o-m!" He held the sound as long as he had breath.

Before nightfall on his sixteenth birthday, Tim's voice had dropped a full register, so low his mother could no longer hear him. Like an unexpected growth spurt, when sons thought to have reached full height suddenly grow another six inches, at thirteen everyone thought Tim's voice had settled where it would stay, the light timbre of a tenor, but at sixteen his voice suddenly dropped again, this time lower than a baritone, to the darkest bass.

This was all one enormous surprise because Eileen and Tim had been closer than most mothers and sons. He had come to her after much difficulty, specifically several close calls involving premature labor. She'd been limited to bed rest for months during her pregnancy, part of this time spent in the hospital on drips of various drugs meant to stop contractions. So, when Tim was born healthy, Eileen was ecstatic, until his father set an unfortunate example for his son by falling from their roof. He suffered a blow to his spleen

which claimed his life. Fell like an angel, Eileen said, only he flew down to earth instead of up to heaven. His death was swift, its pain but a moment in an otherwise comfortable life. She didn't speak of him again, except to say, now, that the tragedy of her husband's death when combined with a difficult prenatal history excused her sixteen years of adoring her son.

So how could it be, she wondered, that when he turned sixteen she could no longer hear his dear voice?

"Thank you for the great cake, Mom."

Only when he tapped her shoulder did Eileen realize he'd been trying to tell her something.

"Mom, thank you for the *cake!*" he repeated himself.

She studied his lips, but Eileen was no lip reader.

Tim felt as if he no longer existed. Sixteen wasn't thirteen, but it was still bad luck. Because he had a younger sister. And while his voice had become inaudible to his mother, each day his sister's grew more beautiful. Eileen said Bella's voice was musical. She had perfect pitch. She sang from when she woke in the morning straight through to evening. Singing was Bella's passion.

"Such a happy child," Eileen said, touching Bella's hair.

They hugged tenderly.

"You love me!" Bella said.

"I do!" Eileen said and hugged her again.

She heard Bella loud and clear.

Tim thought it might be a matter of focus. His mother could be tired or distracted. He might have turned sixteen, but his mother had just turned fifty. So he prefaced all he said with her name, hoping this might cue her.

"Mom. Mom? Mother!!!"

He bellowed throughout the house. It made no difference. . . .