

The Rare Air on Planet Teeny

by Gita M. Smith

I was 13 when the phone call came with news of Teeny's death.

Her Ma asked to talk to me, personally, but when she heard my voice she broke down in hard sobs, the kind that words can't get through.

She said a drunk driver was the cause, but I could not listen to the details about Teeny on the pavement under her smashed-up bicycle.

I just handed the phone to my Ma and went looking for a suitcase because certain things had to be rescued right away from Teeny's room: Our blood-oath pact required it.

After gathering up Teeny's treasures and diary, I turned my attention to her air collection, which had to be packed up carefully and taken away before some grownup decided to throw it out.

Half-pint Ball canning jars, each labeled in earnest capital letters, took up a whole wall of Teeny's bedroom.

Inside each jar was air she had collected from some place important to her: Six Flags over Georgia at the top of the ferris wheel; the back seat of Delmar Robbins' '72 Barracuda; a breath sample from inside Principal "Halitosis" DeLosis' office (the label contained a warning skull and crossbones).

Teeny had collected air from the ICU when her brother overdosed; from the graveside when her granny died (she had tried to scoop a jar under the coffin lid and capture the essence of the old woman's corpse, but the undertaker had body-blocked her at the last second) and from the front of the stage while The Temptations sang "My Girl."

One hundred and eight jars glinted down from their shelves, each with its own unique cocktail of oxygen, hydrogen, methane, cigarette smoke or aftershave molecules.

Ever since, when I think about Teeny, I pretend she's visiting another world with a half-dozen mason jars clanking around in her bicycle basket. The air out there is fresh and sweet and filled with birdsong.

There's no smell of peeling tires on pavement or gasoline or blood. Teeny is revered there as a scientist, and people come from far and wide to watch her chew Bazooka gum, scoop air into containers and label every one of them "PRECIOUS" and "RARE."

