Rope Swing
By: Katrin Abel

I'm riding out the virus from my temporary "park office" picnic table alongside the hike and bike trail and within view of the creek. Trail users stream past me by the dozen, seeking the choicest makeshift swim spots, the springs having shut down to Stop the Spread. Two young girls approach on a single cruiser bike.

"Hi…ma'am?"

I don't look up. Teenagers tend not to address me if they can avoid it, and it's embarrassing to respond in error.

"Ma'am? Sorry. Can we leave our bike here?"

I glance in their direction. They are beseeching, perhaps 13 or 14 years old, barely clothed, maneuvering the heavy cruiser, skinny and wobbly like bikinied fawns. I tell them to go ahead, but I'm leaving soon and can't stand sentry.

"That's okay. We just want to jump off the bridge. We'll be right back." They continue to struggle, fumble with the kickstand, sink into the mud, tangle in the weeds until my inaction shames me. I get up to reposition the bike sturdily onto the concrete pad of the picnic table and inform them that they are standing in position ivy. They shriek good-naturedly, thank me and run off. I return to the laptop to justify my existence on my telework activities reporting form, forgetting about them, absorbed in the remainder of the day's tasks. They return a little after six.

"Hi, ma'am! Sorry! We lost track of the time. Thanks for staying!" I smile vaguely and don't correct their misapprehension. They are dripping wet, chattering and laughing at their chatters.

As I help them retrieve their bike and inquire about their bridge-jumping, a slurred voice emerges too close. "Hey girls, want to see a cool rope swing?" I know of no rope swing in the area. The offer emanates from a grown, swaying man, barely shy of thirty. He is ruddy and pockmarked, an incipient beer belly bulging over the elastic of his shorts. He eyeballs the girls and keeps trying to entice them, hyping the sundry glories of the suspect swing.

"Uhhh, that's okay; we already jumped off the bridge," demurs the taller girl, the one who had been piloting the bike.

"Yeah, we're good," agrees the shorter one through more chatters and nervous giggles. "Sorry!"

The swaying man persists, the girls titter and hide behind each other, I glare but don't otherwise intervene. To him I don't even register except as an obstacle. He sways away eventually, shouting, "You girls are beautiful!" over his shoulder from a healthy distance.

The taller girl speaks. "Callie, you shouldn't say you're sorry when someone starts talking to you like that. You don't have anything to apologize for."

"Sorry!" yelps Callie, then claps her hand over her own mouth as her friend admonishes her again. "I mean, 'not sorry.' I'm not sorry!" I snort and try to nod sagely.

The girls and I stand for a moment in silence around the bike. "That guy's gross," I say authoritatively to the space between them, just to have it on record.

"Yeah, he was gross," Callie affirms.

Now settled into my assigned role, I tell them to be careful on their ride home. They hop onto the banana seat and teeter away. I wonder if they lied to their moms in order to escape to the creek during quarantine, each claiming to be headed to the other's house to finish their pre-algebra homework and fantasize about what it would be like to attend high school, if high school even started back up in the fall.

I imagine the ruddy drunk lamenting his failure to procure those fawns or bragging to his derelict pals that he would have succeeded if not for the interference of that wizened old crone. I see him as a mugshot-to-be. I see myself as Joyce Carol Oates on the beach. I see the girls as any number of her protagonists, too green, too soft, too vulnerable. I cannot see the virus, but it's out here, too, among us.