

# THE VIRGINS

*Also by Pamela Erens*

The Understory

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JOHN MURRAY

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Once again for JDR, AER, and HER



**1979**



# 1

We sit on the benches and watch the buses unload. Cort, Voss, and me.

We're high school seniors, at long last, and it's the privilege of seniors to take up these spots in front of the dormitories, checking out the new bodies and faces. Boys with big glasses and bangs in their eyes, girls with Farrah Fawcett hair. Last year's girls have already been accounted for: too ugly or too studious or too strange, or already hitched up, or too gorgeous even to think about.

It's long odds, we know: one girl here for every two boys. And the new kids don't tend to come on these buses shuttling from the airport or South Station. Their anxious parents cling to the last hours of control and drive them, carry their things inside the neat brick buildings, fuss, complain about the drab, spartan rooms. If there's a pretty girl among them, you can't get close to her for the mother, the father,

the scowling little brother who didn't want to drive hundreds of miles to get here. We don't care about the new boys, of course. We'll get to know them later. Or not.

She turns her ankle as she comes down the bus steps—just a little wobble—laughs, and rights herself again. Her sandals are tapered and high. Only a tiny heel connects with the rubber-coated steps. She wears a silky purple dress, slit far up the side, and a white blazer. Her outfit is as strange in this place—this place of crew-neck sweaters and Docksid-ers—as a clown's nose and paddle feet. Her eyes are heavily made up, blackened somehow, sleepy, deep. She waits on the pavement while the driver yanks up the storage doors at the side. She points and he pulls out two enormous matching suitcases, fabric-sided, bright yellow. His muscles bulge lifting them onto the pavement.

I jump up. Cort and Voss are still computing, trying to figure this girl out, but I don't intend to wait. Voss makes a popping sound with his lips, to mock me and to offer his respectful surprise. After all, I supposedly already have a girlfriend.

“Do you need some help?” I ask her.

She smiles slowly, theatrically. Her teeth are very straight, very white. Orthodontia or maybe fluoride in the water. I wonder where she's from. City, fancy suburb? It suddenly hits me. She's one of *those*. I can see it in her dark eyes, the bump in her nose, her thick, dark, kinky hair.

“I'm in Hiram,” she says.

Let me re-create her journey.

She awakens in her big room at an hour when it is still dark, pushes open the curtains of her four-poster bed. Little princess. Across the hall, her brother is still sleeping. He's four years younger than she is: twelve. She makes herself breakfast: a bagel with cream cheese, O.J., and a bowl of Cheerios; she's always ravenous in the morning. She eats alone. Her mother, in her bathrobe, reads stacks of journals upstairs. Her father is shaving. He doesn't like to eat in the morning. He brings her to the airport but they say nothing during the long drive through the flat gray streets of Chicago. She hopes that he'll say he'll miss her, that he'll pretend this parting takes something out of him. She was the one who asked to go away, but in the car her belly acts up, she's queasy. She thinks she may need to rush to the bathroom as soon as they get to O'Hare. She wishes she hadn't eaten so much. If her father would act like he might miss her, is afraid for her, she could be a little less afraid for herself. She has practiced her walk, her talk, everything she needs to present herself. She is terrified of going somewhere new simply to end up invisible again.

One long heel sinks into the mud. The past days have brought late-summer rains to New Hampshire, and although the air is now dry, the grass between the parking areas and the dormitories is soft and mucky. This is a girl used to walking on city pavement, concrete. She laughs and pulls herself out. She is determined to make it seem as if everything that happens to her is something she meant to happen, or can gracefully control. She avoids the wetter grass

but in a moment she sinks again. “Oh boy,” she says. Her dress is long, almost to her ankles. I put down her suitcases and hold out my hand; she takes it and I pull. Her freed shoe makes a sucking sound. When I go over the sound in my mind later, it strikes me as obscene. Her suitcases are heavy, heavy as I’ve since learned only a woman’s luggage can be. It’s only a little farther to her dorm. She tells me that she’s an upper—what other high schools call a junior—and we exchange names. *Aviva Rossner*. She repeats mine, Bruce Bennett-Jones, like she’s thinking it over, trying to decide if it’s a good one.

She walks ahead of me instead of following, perhaps intending me to watch her small ass shifting under the white jacket. The wind lifts the hem of her dress, pastes it against her long bare leg. The Academy flag whips around above us and clings to the flagpole in the same way. The smell of ripened apples floods the air. We’re on the pavement, finally; she click-clacks to the heavy door and opens it for me. Strong arms on such a slender girl. Someone’s playing piano in the common room, a ragtime tune. Aviva starts up the stairs, expecting me to bring the bags. It’s strictly against the rules for a boy to go up to the residential floors. I go up.

Inside the dorm, the light is dim. The walls are cream-colored and dingy, the floors ocher. She counts out the door numbers until she finds hers: 21. I put the suitcases by the dresser, the same plain wooden dresser that sits in my room and in every student room on campus. Her suitcases contain—we’ll all see in the days to come—V-necked

angora sweaters, slim skirts, socks with little pom-poms at the heels, teeny cutoff shorts, cowboy boots, lots of gold jewelry, many pouches of makeup.

There's a mirror above the dresser. I catch a view of myself: sweaty forehead, damp curls. Aviva's roommate is not here yet. The closet yawns open, wire hangers empty.

"Thank you *so much*," she says.

I give the front door a push. It hits dully against the frame, doesn't shut. Aviva has plenty of time to do something: slip into the hallway, order me to go away. She regards me with a patient smile. I am going to slow down the action now, relating this; I want to see it all again very clearly. Like a play being blocked—my stock-in-trade. And so: I push again and the door grinding shut is the loudest and most final sound I have ever heard. Aviva steps back to lean against it and let me approach. She's a small girl and moving close to her I feel, for once, that I have some size. The waxy collar of her jacket prickles the hair on my forearms. Her neck is damp and slippery, and her mouth, as I kiss it, tastes like cigarettes and chocolate. I picture her smoking rapidly, furtively, in the little bathroom on the plane. Her hair smells a little rancid. The perfume she put on this morning has moldered with sweat and travel and now gives off an odor of decayed pear.

"Don't open your mouth so wide," she says.

My feet are sweating in my sneakers. My crotch itches. My scalp itches. She drops her hand and I see that her fingernails are painted a pearly pink.

She tilts her head against the door and laughs. Her thick curls swarm. I could bite her exposed neck. I do not want to get caught, sent home. I see my father's hand raised up to hit me and know I'm about to step off a great ledge. In a panic I reach for the doorknob, startling Aviva. I open the door carefully, listen to the stairs and hallways. "It's all right," she says, although how can she know this? But she happens to be correct. There's the oddest emptiness and silence as if these moments and this place were set aside just for us amid the busyness of moving-in day at the Academy. Aviva gives the door a bump with her ass to shut it again, but I insert myself into the opening and slide past her, fleeing down the stairs and out into Hiram's yard.

Cort and Voss are no longer sitting on the bench in front of Weld. A lone bicycle is chained to its arm.

Later I see Voss in the common room reading a *New Gods* comic book. "How was the chick?" he asks. I shrug. Big nose, I say. Too much makeup. Not my type.