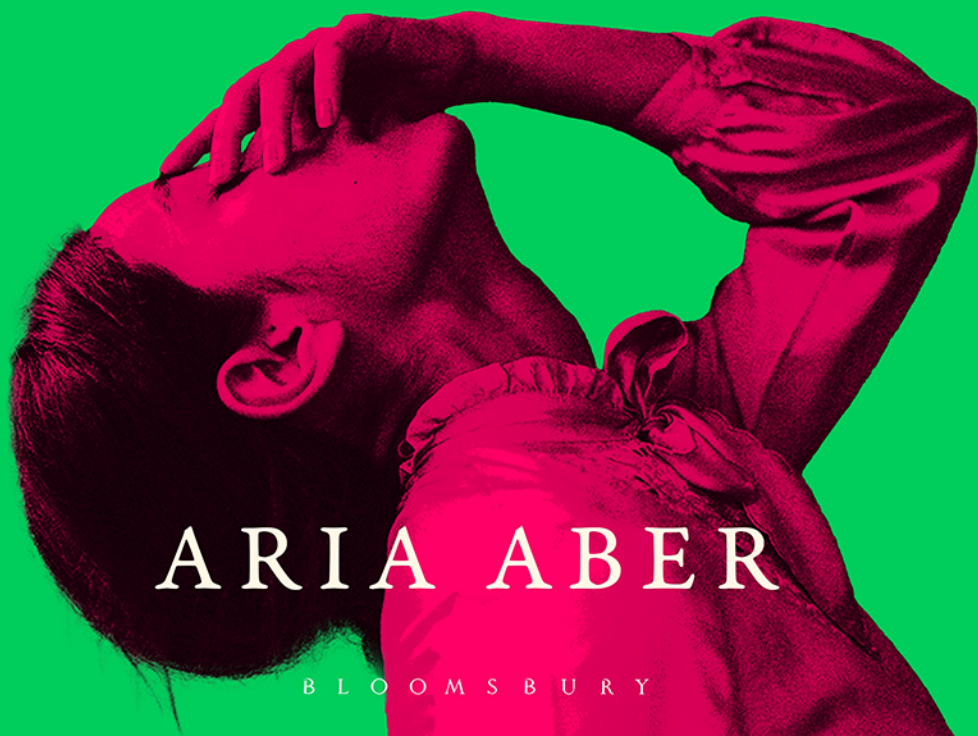


'Rarely has the wildness and bewilderment of youth been conveyed
with such richly textured heat' GARTH GREENWELL

GOOD GIRL

'Full of
style
and soul'
RAVEN
LEILANI

'A
no-bullshit
must-read
debut'
KAVEH
AKBAR



ARIA ABER

B L O O M S B U R Y

GOOD GIRL

ARIA ABER

B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G

LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland Limited,
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING and the Diana logo
are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in 2025 in the USA by Hogarth, a division of Penguin Random House
First published in Great Britain 2025

Copyright © Aria Aber, 2025

Aria Aber is identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This is a work of fiction. Names and characters are the product of the author's imagination
and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be: i) reproduced or transmitted in any
form, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by means of any
information storage or retrieval system without prior permission in writing from the
publishers; or ii) used or reproduced in any way for the training, development or operation of
artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, including generative AI technologies. The rights
holders expressly reserve this publication from the text and data mining exception as per
Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive (EU) 2019/790

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5266-7903-1; TPB: 978-1-5266-7904-8;
eBook: 978-1-5266-7911-6; ePDF: 978-1-5266-7908-6

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com
and sign up for our newsletters
For product safety related questions contact productsafety@bloomsbury.com

For Visar

Was he an animal if music could move him so? He felt as if the path to the unknowable sustenance for which he yearned was coming to light.

FRANZ KAFKA, *The Metamorphosis*

Part One

One

THE TRAIN BACK to Berlin took seven hours, and the towel in my suitcase was still wet from my last swim in the lake, dampening the pages of my favorite books. I took the S-Bahn and then the U-Bahn home to Lipschitzallee and walked past the discount supermarket, the old pharmacy, and the Qurbani Bakery with the orange shop cat lounging outside its door. In our building's elevator, an intimate odor assaulted my nostrils: urine mixed with ash. *Hello, spider*, I said, looking at the cobweb in the corner. The ceiling lamp twitched, turning alien the swastika graffiti. My key, fastened by a pink ribbon, turned in the old lock. Nobody was home. I kicked off my shoes. The cat meowed for food, its dander floating in the air. My room was merely all it had been for so many years: a suffocating box with a tiny window, pink sheets, and that Goethe quote I'd painted in golden letters above my desk. The popcorn ceiling seemed lower than before. I wiped the kitchen counters, walked into my parents' bedroom, opened their closet, and pulled out my mother's cashmere frock. Maybe I cried, maybe

I didn't. What I did was lie in bed and sleep until dark, covering my face with her dress.

IT'S BEEN OVER a decade now, but the colors of that summer day are as precise as yesterday: I was eighteen when I returned from boarding school, and my sense of melancholy was even more overwhelming than I anticipated. My cousins called me pretentious. The Arab boys who loitered outside the shisha bar sneered at me. *You changed*, they said, meaning my relative lack of vernacular and my newfound obsession with eyeliner.

Back then, I still wanted to be a photographer, a small Olympus point-and-shoot knocking around in my backpack. In my first days back, Berlin bloomed at the seams with rotten garbage. Ants crawled out of the sockets in my father's living room, a small street of them always leading up the wall and out the window; no matter how much poison we sprayed into the electrical outlets or taped them shut—they just returned. And though prophesied to soon be extinct, the bees were also everywhere. They covered the overflowing trash cans in the city, or you'd see them lazily dozing on outdoor café tables, where they fattened themselves on crumbs of sugar or lay unconscious next to jars of cherry jam. I brushed the dirt out of my hair and rinsed it from my face and all I could hear, even in the early morning, was the howling of sirens over the frenzied songs of birds, which chirped and chirped and chirped.

In August, I enrolled at Humboldt Universität for philosophy and art history, not because I wanted to study but because I wanted the free U-Bahn pass. And so I let the glittery, destructive underworld of Berlin sink its fangs into me, my solitude alleviated only

when I went out at night and got lost in some apartment with tattooed men and women who did poppers underneath a framed picture of Ulrike Meinhof. Then I went home, my nose bleeding, my hair smelling of cigarette smoke, and was confronted by that disappointed look on my father's face, my grandmother's suspended in a perpetual frown. I had been lifted out of the low-income district of hopelessness and sent to one of the best schools in the country, and yet here I was, my mother was dead, soon the city would be covered in snow again, and I was ravaged by the hunger to ruin my life.

AUTUMN WAS SHORT and humid, and then, overnight, it was winter. On the news, I saw middle-aged men with pearlescent smiles and young blond TV anchors in starched suits reporting about the financial crisis, the lack of jobs, the jammed Eurotunnel, snow collecting on the spires of basilicas in Northern Italy, and somewhere, everywhere, a missing girl, or an Arab man detained for terrorism, or a building with asylum seekers set on fire. In Berlin, the cathedrals' stained glass was covered with frost, and most days, I put on my red hat and my black coat and walked out into the crunchy snow to my job at the jazz café in Kreuzberg, the kind of place with red-painted walls and old leather seats, which tried to present a facsimile of a gone century. I served old German couples, and sometimes they were so close to me I could smell their shampoo, the salt on their skin, and despite myself, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up in desire. To pass the time, I imagined the men touching me while their wives watched. Instead, they ignored me or, when I bowed down to serve their burgers, asked which God I

believed in. How old I was. Where I was from. And occasionally one of them would trace my earring or touch my butt when I passed, and my body surged with repulsion.

I FINISHED MY shift and walked to the most famous club in the city. Staggering past the tree-starved DDR-style council blocks on the Straße der Pariser Kommune, the wind slapping my face. The ghosts of the East were still present between the buildings, shadows filtering through every snow-covered crack. Now only foreigners lived in the high-rises, people who looked like me and who congregated in sweatpants in their courtyards, smoking cigarettes and chatting about casinos. The high-rises and council blocks were the same everywhere. I hated them. I hated everyone who had the same fate as I did. So when I walked past a group of Moroccan men on the corner of Rüdersdorfer Straße, I avoided making eye contact. Of course, once they computed I was no one's little sister, they whistled. They whistled and called me degrading names, because the philosophers were wrong and the meaning of life is not that it ends but that your one job on earth is to make everyone as miserable as your own sad self.

IT WAS HARD to keep my eyes open in such severe cold, and the line for the club was long. In front of me were two Spaniards in expensive clothing: black leather, dark platform shoes. They were of a different world than I was, and still, because of naïveté or boredom, I inserted myself into their conversation about Kate Moss's cellulite, and we bantered until they offered me one of their blue Nike

ecstasy pills for six euros. The blue Nikes had started appearing that summer and, according to safe-consuming websites, consisted of 183 milligrams of MDMA, probably laced with 2C-B—guaranteed to roll for ten hours, fifteen if you were lucky. I took only a quarter, washed it down with a gulp from their flask, and kept the rest for later. The Spaniards were turned away at the door, and I shouted a thank-you after them; then it was my turn.

THE GATEKEEPERS OF techno were unpredictable despots. Large and legendary as Cyclopes, they had fully tattooed faces, other lives in which they made art and literature, and, despite their intellectual curiosity, they liked to stand here in the snow exerting power based on prestige and exclusivity. Although I had been coming here since my sixteenth birthday, I had been turned away a handful of times. It always presented a gamble. Tonight I wore a cheap, oversized faux-fur coat and smelled like pizza grease and popcorn, but I was a girl, and so I smiled the dumbest smile I could come up with.

“Are you alone?” they asked, and exchanged a suggestive glance.

“What do you think?”

“Be careful out there, doll.” They waved me in. A girl can get in almost anywhere, even if she can’t get out.

THE BUNKER WAS a shock of steel and concrete, glass and chains, with sixty-foot ceilings. A wall of warm air and muffled techno battered me, and within a minute my dress was lined with sweat,

but the club was dark, and darkness was an authority to which I submitted. The music seemed to come from somewhere deep inside the earth, as if pulsating through the magmatic core—there was a logic to abrasive bass and insistent drum machines, but 138 beats per minute never cohered unless you were grinding your neural pathways to a prehistoric pulp, so I hoped for a swift high. I threw my jacket into the corner and climbed the stairs to the dance floor, every step under me vibrating to that familiar bass line. My legs still functioned, even if they were shaking: soft, soft lows, like seasickness. I pushed my way past a group of wannabe goth models, babes in chunky white sneakers, and emaciated, androgynous trendsetters in mesh and leather. Their bodies were warm next to mine; they smelled of patchouli. Photographs and mirrors were not permitted in these establishments, rendering my desire for representation obsolete. And yet, images reigned: The first time I came here, I saw a man in a safari hat with a toothbrush.

“Toothbrush?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, “I’ve been here for three days.” I saw him every time.

“What a high ponytail,” a young Black man in a dog collar whispered to me in American English. He wore contact lenses that turned his irises red, and when he smiled, there was the flash of golden braces.

THE CLUB WASN’T really called the Bunker, but that’s what I will call it, because that’s how we experienced it: a shelter from the war of our daily lives, a building in which the history of this city, this country, was being corroded under our feet, where the machines

of our bodies could roam free and dream. A place like the Bunker attracted an eclectic mixture of gestalts, and I liked them all. But mostly I liked the strange bald men whose political affiliations, checking-account balances, and sexual preferences you couldn't categorize. They were from Detroit or Freiburg or Dublin; they spoke of Rilke and shared the last dregs of amphetamines with you at sunrise. Their eyes were large and full of secrets and a bit watery by the end of the night. They were the first to come and the last to leave. They were always here, the ones who actually used the dark rooms. You could tell by their leathery faces that they were professionals at this business of techno, of living a double life in the city's underbelly, because they truly didn't care what anyone thought. No audience for them, no performance: No, this was their life. Yet there was a tenderness to their carelessness. They had been partying since before my birth, since before the wall even fell. And, most important, they never judged you, no matter what kind of fool you made of yourself.

NONE OF MY friends were there. Not that I had many—I dumped Felix, my first boyfriend, the second I moved back from school, because technically I wasn't allowed to have a boyfriend, and he was bad in bed. And Melanie had moved to London to study textile design. The only people left were Anna and Romy, with whom I'd also gone to school and who moved to Berlin for university. Lately they'd been telling me to slow down, but they didn't understand the accelerating feeling in my chest, this race car of a heart that I couldn't stop. Anna had promised to come to the Bunker, but her text message predicted an arrival time of an hour from now. So I

did a line in the bathroom with this peroxide-blond girl whom I would never see again, then went upstairs to the other dance floor, where the house beat was slick with synth and soulful samples. I stood at the bar, hoping that my aloneness was not betraying my insecurity. I played with my hair, trying to look arrogant and unapproachable.

I noticed his smell before I saw him: pink pepper and smoke. There he stood, Marlowe Woods, all six feet three inches of him, wearing a battered leather jacket. I usually liked my men blond and severe or dark as tar, but Marlowe was neither, somewhere smack in the middle, with a square jaw and dimpled chin, the nose of an emperor. Greasy hair that fell in almost girlish waves down to his chin. I kept my composure when he put his hand on my shoulder, even though I was almost nauseous with attraction. He was chewing gum, and I noticed a small spider tattoo pulsing on the side of his neck. He stood with his back to the bartender, his elbows leaning on the counter. Looked at me from the side with a sly smile.

“Hey. I’m Marlowe.” Everybody knew who he was: the American writer who always carried speed. He had published a book in his early twenties, which was translated into a few languages. I had seen a picture of him in a magazine feature on Berlin artists. Though I couldn’t remember the details, I’d never forgotten his face in that glamorous photograph. Windswept and serious, a cigarette between his lips. The picture alone had exercised a strange pull on me; his blue eyes pierced the page with intelligence. I had seen him before, in some club by the water, where the sun turned the dance floor into a laceration of light and the sound was happier than here. Of course, he hadn’t noticed me. He was a prince who

moved through rooms as if they belonged to him, surrounded by a large group of friends, among them his blond girlfriend, who in my memory always wore a Sonic Youth shirt.

"I'm Nila." I shook his clammy hand, a surprisingly formal gesture.

"By the way, you lost this." He stretched out his palm and, in the strobing lights, I saw a small gray lighter.

"Not mine."

"Yes, it probably fell out of your pocket." I shook my head, and he laughed, his smile all gap-toothed and dimpled.

"Well, I think you should keep it." His breath warm against my neck, he slid the lighter into my tote bag, and there was this feeling of a pinprick in my heart.

"Okay," I said, unable to meet his gaze. "Do you have speed?"

"Can I buy you a drink first?"

TWENTY MINUTES LATER he pushed hard against me in the bathroom stall, everything sticky with grime and sweat. He stubbed out his cigarette on the wall right next to my face, and I believed I could smell the faint sulfur of scorched hair.

"I'm sorry, it's just so tight in here," he said. Against the visual noise of stickers and tags, I studied the rest of him: V-neck of his green shirt, golden necklace with a coin that refracted the light. So this was him, the glamorous man from the magazine. Grinning, he blew on my face, and I calculated how far I was ready to go in exchange for a line, but after he got out the little folded-up flyer of speed from his pants pocket, he only asked me where I was from.

"Berlin," I said, which was the truth. But he did the dreadful