AUTHOR OF *FORBIDDEN NOTEBOOK*

ALBA DE CÉSPEDES

HER SIDE OF THE STORY

A NOVEL

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ASTRA HOUSE

READING GROUP GUIDE

BOOK SUMMARY

As she looks back on her life, Alessandra Corteggiani recalls her childhood and youth during the rise of fascism, the resistance, and the fall of Mussolini, and the lives of the women in her family and her working-class neighborhood, rigorously committed to telling "her side of the story."

Alessandra witnesses her mother, an aspiring concert pianist, suffer from the inability to escape her oppressive marriage. Later, she is sent to live with her father's relatives in the country, in the hope that she'll finally learn to submit to the patriarchal system and authority. But at her grandmother's farm, Alessandra grows increasingly rebellious, conscious of the unjust treatment of generations of hardworking women in her family. When she refuses a marriage proposal from a neighboring farmer, she is sent back to Rome to tend to her ailing father.

In Rome, Alessandra meets Francesco, a charismatic anti-fascist professor, who ostensibly admires and supports her sense of independence and justice. But she soon comes to recognize that even as she respects Francesco and is eager to participate in his struggle to reclaim their country from fascism, this respect is unrequited, and her own beloved husband is ensnared by patriarchal conventions when it comes to their relationship.

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

1 As a child, Alessandra feels neglected by her parents, who are still mourning the sudden death of her older brother. She attributes any bad impulses she has to his mischievous spirit. How does this resentment toward an absent but idolized male figure, combined with her hunger for love and recognition, especially from her mother, set the stage for Alessandra's destiny?

2 From an early age, Alessandra is surrounded by women and develops a keen interest in their emotional and intellectual lives. From Eleonora, Lydia, and Sista in Rome to her grandmother and aunts in the country and Fulvia and Denise during the war, Alessandra monitors them all closely. How do these women's relationships, living conditions, and personal stories contribute to Alessandra's rage over the course of the novel?

3 While focused on telling "her side of the story," Alessandra also profiles two generations of men—her father and uncle's generation, who fought in the First World War, and Francesco, Dario, and Tomaso's generation, who get swept up in the Second World War. How do these generations differ in their political and ethical beliefs and how does that affect their thoughts about and attitudes toward the women in their lives?

4 Upon reading the first draft of *Her Side of the Story*, Alba's longtime editor (and friend) Arnoldo Mondadori said he found the ending unexpected and illogical. Alba replied that he didn't understand Alessandra because he was a man: "This confirms, once again, the thesis of the novel: that the congenital difference between men and women elicits a painful misunderstanding that nothing can bridge." How much of the action in this novel is provoked by a man misunderstanding a woman, in spite of her best efforts?

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

5 When it was first published, *Her Side of the Story* was considered experimental, combining, as it does, a variety of genres—coming-of-age, historical, political, feminist, realist, neorealist, and autobiographical fiction. In her diary, Alba wrote that Alessandra was "the only character in which I expressed myself fully," and while she was working on the book she often signed her telegrams to Mondadori "Alba and Alessandra." How does Alba use these different genres to add depth and complexity to women's lives as they are lived, told, desired?

6 Even as she tells her story, the odds are against Alessandra. Her actions appear as love riddled, though she inevitably saves herself, turning the gun away from her own temple. Is Alessandra's last act with Francesco an act of passion, mania, or destiny?

7 In the end, no one speaks up on Alessandra's behalf, except her grandmother and, begrudgingly, her father. In what ways does support from the people she loves continue to elude Alessandra? Why is her grandmother's defense of her important and how is the abandonment by her cohort of women significant?

8 Alba called *Her Side of the Story* a novel about a "great love and a great crime." Given what you know about Alba's own life, which relationship do you think she was referring to as a "great love" and who would she think committed the "great crime" in these pages?

FURTHER READING

The Postcard by Anne Berest

Hello Beautiful by Ann Napolitano

Lucy by the Sea by Elizabeth Strout

The Copenhagen Trilogy by Tove Ditlevsen

The Lying Life of Adults by Elena Ferrante

The Lost Daughter by Elena Ferrante

The Margot Affair by Sanaë Lemoine

Adèle by Leila Slimani

Family Lexicon by Natalia Ginzburg

My Men by Victoria Kielland

In Diamond Square by Mercè Rodoreda

The Artificial Silk Girl by Irmgard Keun

The Street by Ann Petry

Good Morning, Midnight by Jean Rhys

WAR DIARY
by Alba de Céspedes

The Paris Review

This translation of Alba de Cespedes' War Diaries by
Ann Goldstein was published in the Paris Review in June 2023

ALBA DE CÉSPEDES, 1965. COURTESY OF **WIKIMEDIA COMMONS**.

On September 8, 1943, Italy surrendered to the Allies, and the Germans, who had already occupied the north of Italy, immediately moved to take over the rest of the country. Just days later, they invaded Rome. Meanwhile, British and American forces had landed in the south and were slowly moving northward.

The writer Alba de Céspedes and her companion (and later her husband), Franco Bounous, were living in Rome. De Céspedes had been jailed briefly by Mussolini for antifascist activities; Bounous was a diplomat and did not want to collaborate with the Germans. As conditions in the city worsened, becoming more chaotic and more dangerous, de Céspedes and Bounous decided to leave. On September 23, "secretly, at night," they departed, "each with a suitcase," de Céspedes wrote to her mother, "thinking we'd be gone a few days, that Rome would soon be liberated." They escaped to a village in Abruzzo, east of the city, where they expected they would be able to wait in tranquility. But the Germans showed up, and they fled again, to a tiny village in the mountains nearby, Torricella Peligna.

This diary recounts the days between October 18, when they had to flee Torricella and go into hiding in the woods, and November 19, when they decided to try to get through the German lines to reach the safety of the Allied-occupied zone. De Céspedes later wrote, "Life had gradually become more unbearable, the Germans were coming at night, too. So we decided to risk it all and cross the lines, reaching the Anglo-American troops. And safety. We did that, walking at night, November 20" Guided by a local farmer, Fioravante, they managed to cross the Sangro river, which marked the German front line, and arrive in the Allied zone. From there they were taken in a farm cart to Bari, where de Céspedes began broadcasting for the antifascist station Radio Bari. Eventually she and Bounous moved to Naples and, finally, returned to Rome, after it had been liberated by the Allies in June of 1944.

—Ann Goldstein, translator

October 18, 1943

We were still asleep this morning, sheltering in the dusty, desolate tax office in Torricella, when we heard frantic knocking at the door. The pale face of Carmela, the girl from downstairs, appeared, animated by a new fear: "Quick, get out right away, the Germans have surrounded Lama dei Peligni and taken the men, all of them. Now they're on their way up here." We dressed in a few minutes, maybe three or four, not even taking the time to grab some clothes, and we were gone, Franco, Aldo, and I, rushing down the stairs. Someone was already shouting, "Here they are, you can hear the truck." We hurried along narrow stony streets, running amid other people running, me wanting to stop and catch my breath, then thinking, I have to make it, I don't want to leave the others, and I kept running, with a stitch in my side. Some young people were fleeing with their few possessions salvaged in a basket, and we all looked to see if the white ribbon of the main road was stained with the yellow of German cars. Ears strained to the faintest hum. Squatting below the level of the main road, we let some armored vehicles go by, then we ran, crossing it quickly, almost in a leap, and were finally on a path through the fields. Aldo said: "We have to get to the Defensa woods, no one will come and look for us over there." In less than three hours we had found shelter on Trecolori's farm, an isolated place at the edge of the big woods. Trecolori is a sly, monkeyish old farmer who lived in Pennsylvania for twelve years. He didn't have room for us; already, there were numerous relatives around the hearth who

had come from nearby villages to escape the raids, some sitting on sacks of flour, others crowded on the floor, looking at us silently. "You can sleep in a stable, five hundred meters from here. Anyway, it's just for one night."

We've been here now for five days. We're sleeping in a hut that's half stable, half woodshed, with straw pallets on the ground, and at night we light a fire. A broken-down door barely hides a view of the sky. It's very cold. Each of us sleeps wrapped in a blanket: even our heads are wrapped, to warm ourselves with our breath. Seven men are sheltered in this stable; I'm wearing pants and live with them like a comrade.

We're attuned to the sound of a footstep, a rustling. If there's danger, if the Germans come down to raid the farms, someone—there's always a lookout—sends an agreed-on whistle, a word. The signal of alarm spreads instantly from shelter to shelter, all the way to us, here at the edge of the woods. Immediately, tumbling through the plowed fields, we reach the stream, cross it, go up into the woods, hide in the thicket of trees and brush. We stay there, silent, motionless, sometimes in the rain, for hours. I don't know how we'll manage if the cold gets worse. We don't have coats, not even a wool sweater. The English are still at Termoli: the battle is really fierce. Sometimes, around sunset, Allied prisoners headed for the Sangro river pass through the countryside like shadows. They want to reach their lines, but it's hard. We stop them, hoping for news. They're surprised to find down here, in the middle of nowhere, someone who speaks their language, knows their countries. Then we follow them with our eyes as they grow distant, and it's as if through them we were sending out a cry for help: Come! Free us! We have no comfort other than the news brought by mouth from Torricella, where someone hiding in a cellar listens to Radio London. Meanwhile the season is advancing—we'll have to build a shelter in the woods if we're going to spend many hours in the rain.

October 19, 1943

Peppino arrived last night running, terrified. He'd spent eight hours in a woodshed, scarcely breathing. The Germans showed up without warning in Torricella yesterday morning: they blocked the streets, seized all the men and loaded them on a truck, and drove off. Donato Porreca, the owner of the shop, tried to flee, but a machine-gun volley lashed him in the side, and he was killed instantly. Peppino described the agony of the women screaming as the truck left. Meanwhile the death bell tolled for poor Donato.

October 20, 1943

This morning we were all up at four, ready to flee. False alarm: it was a French prisoner passing through the fields, and a farmer fired in the air. Last night, while we were gathered around the fire at Trecolori's farm, we heard shots nearby and women's voices crying for help. A farmer arrived, running, with the message: it's the

Germans, they're shooting. With Aldo and Franco, I rushed down the slope above the stream, the branches and briars dense, almost impenetrable. Behind us a woman's crying could be heard, the lament of Sofia who was calling her husband. Around us other refugees were fleeing; a Russian shouted, "Where are you? Help me," and risked getting us all discovered. I could have killed him to shut him up. Down the steep embankment to the stream, grabbing a tree trunk, scratched by thorns, through the creaking thicket of branches. We exchanged words muffled by fear: Off with the raincoats, they're too pale, they can be seen in the shadows. Like blind men we went into the stream, the freezing water came to our knees; we crawled up the wooded embankment opposite on all fours. In the midst of the terrible fear I remembered stories I read as a child, the jungle stories. At every step you had to extricate your foot from the tangled vegetation of the undergrowth, make a pathway with your hands, eyes closed so that the thorns wouldn't wound them. Franco's eyes were protected by his glasses. At times I had a suspicion that we were doing all this for fun. I, Alba, couldn't truly be in such a grave situation, on the point of being captured by German soldiers, shot, killed. The entire experience seemed stronger than me, than my capacity to endure. Whereas at other times, in the silent, insidious darkness, the danger seemed to me so close that there was no escape, no possibility of flight. It was over, we'd been captured. The grim, distant barking of a dog made my distress more acute. And over all was the humiliation of having to flee like a criminal, sampling the life of a murderer or thief, though I had committed no crime, only dreamed that my own country could be free and civilized.

Some two hours in the woods. Cold. Occasionally we'd start moving again, climbing uphill to get warm. All around were the innumerable sounds of the nocturnal life of the forest: the voice of an owl, a slow rustling in the dry leaves, a darting among the branches. The three of us sitting on the ground waiting. Finally we heard a distant, low whistle: the whistle of friends. It was as precious as suddenly recovering the taste of life.

October 21, 1943

Nothing new. Inert and discouraging wait. The English don't arrive; according to the news from Torricella they're in Istonio. Mariuccia, a sly, skinny woman of ninety, serves as a link between the town and us. She brings the news in a note written by Don Peppe, the notary in Torricella, and hidden in her corset or her bun. A lot of airplane activity. We're starting to wear holes in our woolen socks, the only ones we have. Also the salt is gone. This morning, after long days, we went to wash in the brook. In the afternoon we studied positions for a shelter in the woods, choosing the most secure. The trees were illuminated by the setting sun, the fallen leaves were red and shiny. Clusters of pale cyclamens emerged from under the tufts of broom. I would have liked to make a bouquet, as I used to do in the woods in Ariccia as a child, but it seemed frivolous to be picking flowers while we were trying to choose the place for a shelter to save our lives. Franco and the others strained their ears at the crackle of a machine gun that could be heard coming from Montenerodomo, at the edge of the woods.

October 22, 1943

I'm writing on the rocks by the brook. We came to wash. Aldo and Trecolori are digging a shelter under a large boulder on the shore. We're tired, nervous, mute. Sometimes we enter the state of mind of the criminal who can't hold out any longer and hands himself over to the law. Peppino said I'm risking everything, but I want to go home, to San Vito. We take out our bad mood on the lack of food and the wretched bedding. If not for the ineffable solace of nature, life would be without dreams or joy, entirely harsh, to be endured, to be lived faithfully, with no escape.

I feel humiliated waiting to be freed by the English. Every day we wonder, almost impatiently, scanning the outlines of the hills: When are they coming? Reduced to waiting for the joyous arrival of foreign soldiers!

Later

I reread what I wrote above. It seems to me that I'm still bound to petty, limited principles. The fact that they inhabit a country divided from mine by a mountain range or the sea, that they speak a different language, shouldn't create an obstacle between us. A common civilization, a Christian solidarity, should bind peoples: with these considerations it becomes easy for me to accept their help, wait for their arrival. And yet, in spite of myself, in this relentless struggle, through this consuming defense of ourselves, I sense a struggle for my country, a consuming defense of my country, this, Italy, this and no other, the Italy that made my heart beat faster when as a child I merely heard the name: this is what I defend. These fields, these trees, these farms, these backward villages of a poor and defeated country are mine and I defend them as I can with my hatred, my flight, my torn socks, the darkness that frightens me. I left Rome with the sole desire to preserve my freedom, moving abruptly from my pink room on Via Duse to the sight of burned-down houses, caves populated by refugees for whom life is reduced to eating and sleeping, and now I resist precisely to defend this poverty of ours, this pain of being humans who are banished, hunted, humiliated, and defeated.

October 24, 1943

Nothing reassuring for two days. We're increasingly ragged, increasingly dirty. It's hard to glimpse the possibility of holding out still longer without being able to change, always sleeping in our clothes, so tired, so nervous. In the evening a mortal sadness takes possession of us: around five, when it's still day for those who live in cities, who can flick a switch, turn on the lights, pick up a book. Live. It's night for us, forced to the weak light of the hearth or to walking silently in the dark. The days are uncertain, tedious, humiliating. They die leaving each of us with a more profound weariness and no hope for the new day. In the depths of this dark valley no one helps us or enlightens us. Every bush is a threatening shadow, the donkey chomping in the

haystack is the sound of hobnailed boots on the path. It's the safest time: at night the Germans are unlikely to risk the woods, they're afraid of ambushes. And yet an invincible terror overwhelms us at that hour. Franco and I walk along the rocky path. We try to rediscover strength in ourselves. Instead we're frail, a negative thought is enough to crush us. We're motionless for hours, sitting on the ground, fascinated by the flashes from the artillery firing behind the mountains. Every day, we talk for hours about crossing the lines. Franco says: how is it possible with a woman? And Edoardo looks at Emilia—they often come to see us from the farm where they've found shelter—and repeats: it's not possible. That humiliates me, depresses me. I'm sure I, too, would make it; like theirs, my shoes are heavy, hiking shoes. I proposed to Emilia that we let them go alone, and then follow, the two of us, leaving an hour later, without their knowing.

Three women stopped by the stable. One was carrying a sick child in a basket on her head. A stomach abscess. She had heard that there was a doctor among us, they had walked kilometers, hoping he could operate. But Mario wasn't here, he was out looking for food. And, besides, he couldn't operate, he has only a pocketknife. They waited for him silently, their faces already grim. Mario said later that the child will die.

October 25, 1943

Franco had a very high fever yesterday. I gave him my straw pallet. We have no more candles, no matches. After sunset we move around the stable groping, as if we were blind. The dark is a nightmare, it seizes us by the throat. And the woods, with the trees losing their leaves, no longer seems to want to offer us protection. We have nothing, we can have nothing. Even an old shepherd is terrified and doesn't dare go to Torricella for medicine.

Later

I have a map of the area, and everyone comes to us to consult it. On the map, inset between three small circles that mark the towns of Buonanotte, Torricella, and Montenerodomo, and in a darker color since we're at an altitude of a thousand meters, you can see the position of these woods. Three small Abruzzo villages whose existence I didn't even suspect, and which I would never have known if this disaster hadn't befallen Italy. Now, however, I hear their names from morning to night, and the contours of these villages on the distant horizon have become as familiar to me as the faces of my father and mother. My life now exists in this delicate tangle of lines that the area of a fingernail could cover. My past, my fairy-tale childhood, my work, my travels, the people I've met—all that I've lived, in short, was to lead me here, to these woods. And my future, my safety are entrusted to these trees. My life is entrusted to the leaves that don't drop off, to the snow that doesn't fall. Books read, faithful friends are no longer of use to me, everything is now contained within the woods called la Defensa. *Defensa* in Spanish means "defended." On the big map of the world these

woods are a speck of dust and I am an infinitesimal part of it, and yet it's here that everything is decided for me.

No one knows that in this tangle of lines, in these woods in Abruzzo, there's a woman named Alba, and that she's still young and likes the colors of the sky and the woods, likes life immensely and still has many things to do and say, and yet tomorrow she may no longer exist.

No one knows anything. My mother is in Havana, and outside the door of our house there's a big palm tree, my friend. My mother thinks I'm in Rome and maybe she goes out and talks to her friends while I'm lying on the ground in the mud, hidden behind a bush, or I'm poking at the fire, blowing hard, and Franco is sick, shivering, in the grip of malaria.

Oh, I wish the door would open now, and someone would come in and say the war is over, no one will be killed anymore, we can go out, speak aloud, be seen, be free.

October 26, 1943

I can barely write in this shoddy, beat-up notebook. I have to take it with me every time there's an alarm, it's unwise to leave it in the stable. Tonight it was crushed between two plants near the cave dug by Trecolori. Yesterday evening, at six, the alarm. We fled to that cave, Franco and I alone, with the blankets over our shoulders. We were buried in the darkness. Franco had a very high fever, he was trembling as he lay in the gloom of the cave: a profound and tenacious dampness rose from the earth despite the blankets. No sound except the tumbling of the stream, which at first seemed to us a hoarse drumroll. We went back up after two hours. The Germans are getting closer. The circle tightens. This morning we were in alarm for three hours, first in the cave, then in the woods. We're reduced to nearly nothing. Franco has a fever again. They pass

October 28, 1943

The preceding journal entry was interrupted because of an alarm. The Germans were very close by. We fled into the woods, Franco feverish and extremely weak. We have no water, our underwear is torn, we have to jealously conserve the fire under the ashes because we have no more matches to light it again. The men are exasperated by the lack of cigarettes. Carmine, Trecolori's son, got hold of some tobacco leaves. They crush them and then roll the tobacco in the German-language leaflets that the RAF pilots drop over the lines. We're exhausted. The English are still distant, five kilometers from Vasto, it's said. Meanwhile the Germans are sacking the villages all around, tonight it was Montenerodomo's turn. Life has never been so serious for me. Only there's a great sweetness in the innocent candor of Aldo, who regrets not having a cake today, for his

birthday. Soon even the comfort of writing these notes will end; I have no idea how to get another notebook.

I'm writing on my knees while the others argue nervously and irritably about politics. The Poles came, too, three young students who for four years have been fleeing from town to town. We built two sawhorses from logs with the bark stripped off to sit on in the stable. Around sunset, people from all the shelters in the woods come to our hut, drawn by the warmth of the fire. There are Romanians, Russians, Yugoslavs, a German Jew, some former political internees. All bound by a human solidarity that abolishes borders and passports. We don't ask names or political stripes, we only read in the eyes of the others the need for help in getting through these brutal hours of life. Here, in this remote stable, at an altitude of a thousand meters, it seems to me that the Italy we wanted is truly being born. My heart races at this sudden discovery. Here, right here, in this stable, worn out, hungry, with nothing, nothing that resembles civilized life, we begin again to live in a civilized manner. The Russian talks about his country, the Poles about their literature, the Jew no longer stares at the top of the hill with tormented eyes to see if the Germans are descending from there.

They go on talking. I like their voices, the hesitant Italian, the open discussions. Dear sweet country of mine.

October 30, 1943

Tonight a Sicilian student showed up, a thin young man with a boundless gaze behind large glasses. Voice and accent of Rodolfo. He was walking from Mantua, a month on the road, sleeping in haystacks, asking for a piece of bread at farmhouse doors. He stopped with us and looked in the direction of the Sangro, which he intended to cross under artillery fire. When I offered him soup he would have liked to devour it, but mastered himself to make the unusual pleasure last as long as possible. I invited him to stay; he hesitated a moment. He was exhausted, nearly ill, his bare, skinny legs of a livid white. "How much suffering," he said, "for all of us, because of a single man." There was no hatred in his voice, only the desolate, tortured resignation of the meek. He said goodbye to me soon afterward: having overcome his brief hesitation, he had decided to leave, heading straight to the valley of Buonanotte and the lines. He studied the map for a long time, as if he were reading a death sentence. Then he said: "If I live, I'll send you a card, give me your address in Rome." And he headed down the slope, leaning on his tall stick and moving unsteadily in the mud, his legs sticking out thin and pale from under his patched overcoat. I fear I will never get that card.

November 2, 1943

Days ago, in the devastation of Montenerodomo, the Germans destroyed Domenico's shop—the sergeant whose shelter is a dark, smoky cave a few hundred meters from here, and who sometimes prepares us a disgusting piece of mutton burned on the hearth. He has a tubercular wife and a son covered with a repulsive

rash. Today, while he was hiding with us in the woods, the Germans descended on his cave and carried off the pig, on a leash, like a dog. When we returned and Domenico found out that the pig was no longer there, he asked Annuccia for a flask of must and got drunk. Drunk, he wept and sobbed, rolling on the ground in the cow manure and calling his pig in a loud voice, like a beloved person. He has nothing now. He fought for many years of war: he was wounded, and is half-blind.

Now, while I'm writing, Sofia and Armida—Trecolori's daughters—in red dresses lighted up by the sun are digging a pit behind the house to hide the linens. They work briskly, without grieving, as if they were turning over the earth for sowing. They protect themselves from the war, as from a natural phenomenon, cyclone or hail. They don't know the reasons for the war, where Germany is, what Great Britain is. Here, even in peacetime, there were no newspapers, and, besides, they wouldn't be able to read them. Mail was distributed once a week. One day the card that called up Domenico arrived. They know nothing, they aren't to blame. And yet it's they who pay, with burned-down houses, stolen animals. They stare at the Germans in astonishment, with no understanding of why they are doing them all this harm. The Italian people of the mountains, of the remote hamlets, of the isolated villages aren't to blame. It's we, we who are guilty. And they welcome us, shelter us, we who have been, first and foremost, their enemy.

November 4, 1943

I'm worried about Rome, my son, Aunt Maria, my house. Countless objects that have followed me everywhere with their stories, their marks: a Madonna bought on the Lungarno, a book found in Venice. I'm living entirely in the past these days: Havana, Paris, Papa. I have a tremendous desire to return to being young and happy, not to hear talk of wars, soldiers, not to be afraid anymore. Tomorrow the young Poles will leave with Peppino to cross the lines. Peppino made the decision, but now he's depressed, drawn to and dismayed by the void he's casting himself into. This morning Mario brought good news from his rounds: the German retreat is supposedly imminent. I don't believe it. I no longer believe anything.

November 5, 1943

I want to write a long story that tells about these woods. Which appeared friendly at first: our salvation, our escape. And now they're our nightmare. They've become the mirror of our consciousness. To save ourselves we have to flee, at risk of our lives win the right to peace and freedom. We have no one to believe in, no one to follow. All Italy has taken refuge in us: each of us, inside, is all that remains of our country. A farmer promised me a notebook. The Poles are no longer leaving: the news arrived that you can't get through the lines. In the midst of these changing events the woods are unmoving. Oh, I've found the story of the woods!

November 11, 1943

Antonio Piccone Stella, who is living on the Tre Confini farm, less than an hour from here, came to see me. He, too, wants to cross the lines. How distant literature is. We talk only about this now; we're impatient, we can't endure the waiting. I want to go, too. Everyone says: She won't make it. And I foam with rage: I've climbed so many mountains, to so many mountain huts. I'm not afraid. Better to die here on the lines, better to be carried away by the Sangro. Emilia, too, has said she will follow her husband. Every day we calculate kilometers, trace routes on the map. The Sangro is swollen with the rains. You have to know where the banks aren't mined.

Later

They've cleared out Pennadomo and Fallascoso. The towns are burning, the odor of ash reaches us on the cold breath of the wind. The natural Germanic fury is unleashed everywhere. My thoughts turn constantly to America. It's as if emerging from these oppressive and treacherous woods I had no escape but a harbor in America, the white harbor of Havana.

November 13, 1943

There's a white ribbon on the door of Trecolori's farmhouse. Anna Maria was born, daughter of refugees. Around us the towns are burning, in Annuccia's house they are wailing and weeping for the women driven out of Pennadomo. And this child is born. Emilia and Edoardo wanted to flee this morning, then they gave up. One can't go, when everything around is so beautiful, when a new life opens up, with its endowment of dreams and hopes, when the maples in the woods are bright red, and the fields, with the shoots poking up, are green as in spring. One can't say: Tomorrow, perhaps, I will no longer see all this.

November 15, 1943

Every attempt to write is interrupted by the alarm.

We have no more strength. It's cold, pouring rain, the slopes are muddy, slippery, going down to Trecolori's farmhouse is an undertaking, we fall down and get up, discouraged. A little after four, we're prisoners of the darkness, blind, shadows. With the darkness comes an intense depression that thickens the air, like a suffocating fog. We're silent, humiliated around the hearth. What time is it? Always too early to eat, too early to throw ourselves clothed on our pallets. My clothes are a perfect imitation of a tramp's. I have no

underwear or socks to change; my raincoat, which still serves as a pillow, is black with dirt, mud, grime. Will I ever have another? Will I find my house again? And my books? And our life?

November 17, 1943

News arrived of a massacre at S. Agata. The Germans entered a farmhouse suddenly, seized the men, threw them against a haystack, mowed them down with machine guns. The women, all, were spared.

This possibility of being saved owing to the sole fact of being a woman humiliates me deeply. It seems to me that my solidarity with Franco, and our other comrades, can't be complete, since, at the last moment, I would be unable to sustain it. When we flee all together or are crouching down, holding our breath, it seems to me that mine is an easy game. I've decided, if they capture us, to shout, ceaselessly, "Down with Germany, long live Italy!" so that they don't take pity on me.

November 18, 1943

We can't go on. We have to decide. From this morning at seven we were in the woods, now bare of leaves, lying on the ground under the blankets. We returned to the stable, then went up to Annuccia's to beg from her generosity a bit of polenta, but soon afterward we had to flee again, still hungry. The Germans discovered our shelter. They entered the stable, dug around in the straw, were made suspicious by those pallets, and remained in ambush nearby, hoping to surprise us like animals returning to their den. We saw them from the woods; some of us were armed, it would have been easy to fire, we saw them very clearly, we saw their legs opening like scissors, they were an easy target. We couldn't shoot; if we had, after two hours other Germans would have descended to burn and destroy all the farms within a radius of two or three kilometers. We wouldn't have run any risk: we could easily move to the opposite side of the woods, camp there. But the farmers, those who have welcomed and protected us, would pay for us, as has happened elsewhere. The Germans would burn the farmhouses, kill even the women. We could only spy on them with hatred, the whole wood was still and silent, an immense eye that looked at them with hatred.

Tonight we organized watches: every two hours two of us went up to the ridge of the farmhouse, as sentries, protecting the sleep of the others. But, just the same, the others can't rest. One thinks: and what if they fall asleep? Or don't see them? I had my watch with Franco and Edoardo, from two to four, it was a white night, foggy. Now Corrado and Aldo are out looking around. Franco gave up making himself a cigarette: he can't do it, there's too little paper. I have to protect this notebook from the smokers. We have nothing anymore, the woods are wet from the rain, we can't light a fire, there's only a lot of bitter smoke in the stable. We've even lost our only treasure, the pocketknife. I have to endure, continue to be strong. We're cold. Trecolori looked

at the sky and said that in two days we'll have snow: so the Germans will follow our tracks. Edoardo and Franco want to cross the lines. They still seem uncertain when they look at us, at Emilia and me, but I know we'll go. We have to go. Not to escape the Germans, not to reach the English: to win by ourselves, across the lines, over the torrential stream, the right to be free. Tomorrow Piccone, who wants to cross with us, will come. Edoardo and Franco went to talk to Fioravante, who will guide us for a stretch. Now they're studying the map, they repeat yet again the usual names: Monte Pallano, Colle dello Zingaro, and then that bitter and fascinating word Sangro, Sangro, Sangro … Then they say: Trenches positions mined fields—they trace the route. And I who have always hated these words, always hated war, never understood volunteers, heroes, now I, too, have been won over by this spirit, my only desire is to go toward all this. Maybe I won't get there, won't write anything else. But we have to try.

November 19, 1943

A few seconds to write. We're leaving to cross the lines. Franco, Emilia, and Edoardo are ready in front of Trecolori's farmhouse, I went back to the stable on the pretext of getting the canteen I'd forgotten but in reality to be alone, to write a few words. I'm wearing pants and my raincoat and, on top, pulled over my head through a hole made in the center, a dark blanket that will serve to camouflage me. The edges are pinned with two safety pins. It's really heavy, I don't know how I'll walk like this. Over my shoulder I have another blanket rolled up the way soldiers do.

All our friends have come down from the shelters to say goodbye. Tonino, nerves shattered, weeps uncontrollably leaning against a tree, the Russian rolls on the ground in pain from his ulcer. We shake hands, kiss rough cheeks. Worried, moved, they look at us as if seeing us for the last time. This morning we, too, were nervous, silent, we didn't speak to each other, we four, in order not to exchange impressions about the decision we'd made. And now instead I feel light, light, smiling, as if I were leaving on a festive journey. There's a little sun, in the doorway the cherry tree positions itself lightly, as in an arabesque. I wrote something on the wall of the stable with tincture of iodine, I wanted to be alone for that, too. I don't know what, exactly, "the lines" are, I'm afraid only of setting off the diabolical mechanism of a mine with my own foot. I have money hidden in my breast, I'll also hide the notebook. I want to write this, very clearly: I'm not afraid, I feel only this enormous, perhaps nervous joy. And the sense of playing a trick on the Germans, by fleeing, the desire not to be found here by the English, four healthy Italians, waiting idly. I feel only hatred and joy. If we were to die, our companions in the woods wouldn't even know it right away. My son, my aunt, would continue to live as if I were still alive. My mother—who can say when she would find out.

The sky is getting foggy. It's three thirty. Fioravante said that before dawn we should be at the Sangro.

Alba de Céspedes (1911-1997) was an Italian-feminist writer whose novel Forbidden Notebook, *was published earlier this year by Astra House, in a new translation by Ann Goldstein and with a foreword by Jhumpa Lahiri. De Céspedes' experiences of the war as described in these diary pages had a profound influence on the writing of* Her Side of the Story, *which will be published in November 2023, in a new translation by Jill Foulston and with an afterword by Elena Ferrante.*

Author photo by Mondadori Portfolio
via Getty Images

ALBA DE CÉSPEDES (1911–1997) was a bestselling Italian-Cuban feminist writer greatly influenced by the cultural developments that led to and resulted from World War II. In 1935, she was jailed for her anti-fascist activities in Italy. Two of her novels were also banned—*Nessuno Torna Indietro* (1938) and *La Fuga* (1940). In 1943, she was again imprisoned for her assistance with Radio Partigiana in Bari, where she was a Resistance radio personality known as Clorinda. After the war, she moved to Paris, where she lived until her death in 1997. A new English translation of her 1952 novel *Forbidden Notebook*, translated by Ann Goldstein and with a foreword by Jhumpa Lahiri, was published by Astra House in 2023 to great acclaim.

JILL FOULSTON is the translator of novels by Erri De Luca, Marco Balzano, Augusto De Angelis, and Piero Chiara. She lives in London.

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