

Outlined in Black is about the German Gestapo arresting a young American woman in 1939. She escapes and is able to make a life for herself by taking the over-flow of wounded German soldiers into her home.

Outlined in Black

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OUTLINED
IN
BLACK

Du Sharboneau

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Chapter 2

The morning was dark but alive with the distant sounds of activity at the plants when she crept down the steps, squatted near a wall to urinate and then retrieved the bike. She pedaled slowly away from the building and the quiet area; then faster as she realized someone could run out from the darkness and grab her. By the time she'd reached a restaurant whose faint light she'd seen from way off, she thought she must have been breaking all speed records.

A few hunched figures sat drinking tea and talking quietly in the establishment. They briefly glanced in her direction as she walked to a booth in the corner. A waitress in a starched, green uniform sauntered toward her and took out a pad and pencil from her apron pocket. Thelma felt that this was going to be crucial because she would be getting looked at closely by a woman. She kept her voice low and mumbled as she ordered. There didn't seem to be a reaction or hesitation during the transaction; but when Thelma pulled the large bill from her pocket at the cash register on her way out, the woman paused looking at the money. Before the waitress could put up an argument about cashing the large bill, Thelma said she wanted to rent one of the upstairs rooms while she waited for her father who was supposed to meet her in town.

The waitress pulled the bill from Thelma's hand and said, "Wait a minute."

Thelma waited and worried. About five minutes later, the waitress came back holding a key with a number

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on it and the change which she handed to Thelma and pointed with her thumb in the direction to the door of the lobby.

Thelma hadn't intended to get a room until she saw that there was going to be a question about a young person with so much money, but it worked out well since she hadn't had any idea of what she was going to do. Thelma went outside to where the bicycle was leaning so that she could see it, and brought in the bike. She struggled with it up the long, dusty, carpeted flight of stairs to her room.

Once inside, she felt safe and secure for the first time in so long she couldn't remember when, probably years, she decided. For the last few years, her uncle had talked about nothing else but the treatment of the Jewish people by the Germans. With guilt and sadness, Thelma thought about her aunt and uncle and about what would happen to them and about the people she had been rounded up with heading for the army trucks. She stretched out on the bed and looked toward heaven, which in this case was a yellowed, cracked ceiling in a cheap hotel, and said a prayer. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and on down her neck making a dark splotch on the faded, pink chenille bedspread. She was more tired than she had thought. Every muscle seemed to sag like jelly; as though nothing would ever work again.

A short time later, Thelma awakened feeling better and left the room locking it behind her. There were things she needed to buy, but she wanted to remain as inconspicuous as possible while she shopped. This

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neighborhood would probably have second-hand shops; so that's where she would do most of her shopping, hoping to blend in with her worn cheap-looking clothing.

A bell hanging on the door of a shop rang when she opened it; but Thelma had picked out several items before anyone ever came to see who had entered. She paid for the things and went around the corner to a drug store where she finished buying what she needed before heading back to the hotel. Once there, with the door locked behind her, she dumped her purchases onto the sagging bed and fished through them. She then removed her jacket and sweater and began cutting her hair in front of the tiny, cracked mirror over the dresser. She had the most trouble with the back; it was a mess of jagged chunks. She knew she'd have to go to a barber to finish trimming it and dreaded the scrutiny she'd get, but she felt it would attract more attention the way it was.

She took all of her things with her when she went down the hall to the shared bathroom as she'd been afraid to leave anything in the room. Thelma put a bleach-treatment on her hair, took a bath in a dirty tub, rinsed out her hair, dried, dressed, and gathered up her things to return to her room. Once there, she prepared to pack the metal basket on the bicycle. A small piece of soap, toothpaste, comb and one pair of cotton boy's underwear went into an old canvas bag. She rolled that inside a man's rubber raincoat and tied it into the basket. The lunch bucket containing the knife and scissors was hung from a handlebar. This was an awkward arrangement, but

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would have to do until she filled the lunchbox at the restaurant in the morning.

The lunch bucket banged and rattled on her way down the stairs the next morning. She asked the man at the desk in the lobby to watch it for her while she had breakfast. He asked her where her father was; not wanting to miss out on charging him for the room. Thelma put a sad, troubled look on her face and said that he didn't come and that she would go to her aunt's house to see if she had heard from him; it seemed to satisfy the man at the desk. Thelma continued on, leaning her bike on the lobby wall before entering the dining room with her hat pulled low.

After eating, Thelma had a waitress fill the lunch bucket thermos with hot coffee. Thelma wondered what she thought about the strong wine smell. The waitress only glanced up once before wrapping two sandwiches and a piece of cake in waxed paper and setting it in front of her. Thelma left her a small tip and went to the lobby where she retied the packed lunch bucket onto the bike basket before heading out of the building. She had no plans; but felt nervous and needed to get as far from town as possible, it didn't seem as safe to her as she'd thought it would.

It had been years since Thelma had ridden a bicycle. She enjoyed the feeling of freedom and independence it gave her as she pedaled along the two-lane road beyond the factories on the outskirts of town. There was very little traffic on the road she had taken and

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very few hills, but after a few hours on the bike, Thelma had had enough.

She knew she'd have to take it slowly the first couple of days. Her legs felt wobbly as she walked the bike down a dirt trail away from the road and toward an old barn. Even though she could afford the best room in any hotel, she needed the time alone to think things through. And besides, most hotel rooms had been taken over by the officers of the German Army. The less she saw of them, the better!

The night was uncomfortable and cold on a pile of dusty, decaying straw. She hadn't even thought of buying a blanket, but where she would have carried it, was a mystery. It might also have aroused some questions. She stood and shook off the dust before eating her second sandwich, the rest of the cake and drinking the now lukewarm coffee for breakfast. Thelma's legs still felt as wobbly as they had the night before as she mounted the bike at the top of the dirt trail and resumed her journey. She wondered how long it would take her to gain the strength and endurance needed to travel any distance at all.

Five days.

Five days is how long it took to gain that strength and endurance. Then Thelma could even pedal up a low grade without having to get off the bike and push.

Those were not easy days. After her first night in the dusty loft of the old barn, Thelma had started to look for cheap youth hostels along the road and had found some still open for the few people who traveled on bikes

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or hiked. Fortunately, the weather was pleasant. September days were some of her favorite times: soft breezes, gentle rains, the smells of grasses and leaves. Her strength had increased as she traveled on her bike.

Now, even though she had gained stamina, she didn't want to push herself and had made up her mind to stop for the night at the first hostel she came upon. With that in mind, she started watching for one around every bend in the road. She had just about given up on ever finding one, when she noticed a scrolled sign suspended by chains from a low, bare branch of a tree. Another fifty meters produced an arrow pointing into a graveled drive. As Thelma turned down the drive, she wondered how her appearance would affect the owners of this small tavern. Maybe, she thought, she should have bought some women's clothes, but she still had the problem of packing them.

She paused with a toe resting in the gravel for balance and almost toppled when a loud voice said, "Heil Hitler!"

Thelma actually jumped, extended her arm, gave the pledge and heard the soft laughter all at the same time. Two S.S. Officers were standing near a fountain on the upper curve of the horseshoe driveway smiling. Thelma looked up at another one closer to her; the one who had laughed.

Even in her fear, she decided he was the most handsome man she had ever seen; beautiful, in fact. He leaned toward her still chuckling from her reaction.

"Oh, did I startle you? I'm sorry."

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Thelma mumbled that she had been thinking about getting a room for the night.

“You’re staying the night? Where are your parents?”

“My parents are dead,” Thelma whispered and lowered her head glad of the chance to look away and confused, too, at the role she was supposed to be playing: woman or boy?

“My parents are dead, too,” he said, then added with cheerfulness, “This is a nice bike you have.”

Thelma felt apprehensive. He moved closer as he said this and had covered her hand with his on the handlebars. She could smell whiskey now.

“It’s my uncle’s bike,” she continued in the way of conversation. She began to suspect that he thought she was a young boy although how he could was puzzling to her. She had thought, this close, she would look like a woman.

“Oh? And where are you going?” His voice had taken on a softness.

“I’m supposed to meet my aunt in Heindrixberg tomorrow. She gave me the money for a room tonight,” and was sorry that she had mentioned staying.

“Oh, so you will be staying tonight? How nice,” his whole demeanor became relaxed and he began rubbing his leg against her leg on the pedal.

The two officers called out softly to him to be careful. Thelma could see that it was almost too late for that. He did think she was a boy and he was totally mesmerized by that fact.

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Gravel flew and the purring of a powerful engine made the officer jump as though shot. A huge black car with swastikas painted on the doors and on the flying flags pulled into the driveway and parked beside the empty olive-drab open car already there.

The two officers near the fountain quickly walked toward the new arrival with the third officer reluctantly leaving Thelma and joining them.

Thelma watched as the party of officers and women exited the car and headed for the dining room entrance. She pushed off on the bike and slowly headed for the office in the back of the building around their cars. She could feel herself being watched and looked back to see the hungry eyes of the one officer staring at her. He smiled briefly then entered the building behind his friends.

This was dangerous business; not only for her but maybe more so for him as homosexuality was forbidden. Her thinking was interrupted by the appearance of an attractive middle-aged woman who had come through a side door and leaned toward Thelma hissing, "Get out of here! We don't want any of that business around here. I saw you! I saw you!" Thelma was around the end of the building and heading for the exit of the graveled drive before she even heard the woman retreat and the office door slam.

Her legs were shaking when she reached the main road; she ignored them and pedaled for all she was worth. He would come looking for her when he found out she wasn't staying at the hotel for the night. It might be hours before he found out or it could also be just a short time.

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She needed to put as many miles between the tavern and herself as possible and listen for any car coming from its direction. One of her problems was that she had smelled food coming from the kitchen behind the hotel as she had ridden past and now, those smells were there to haunt her!

Ordinarily, Thelma would have been terribly shaken by the harsh words of the woman and the look of hate on her contorted face. But this time, Thelma considered it a favor that she had come out of the office and driven her away. Thelma might have been tempted to stay, eat dinner, and hope the officer would forget about her. That would have been pushing her luck. Had he found her, he would have beaten her once he found out she was a woman. There was no doubt in Thelma's mind about that.

Now, it was beginning to get dark. Her stomach was empty. Her legs felt like lead. She shakily dismounted to push the bicycle up a small grade when she heard the motor of a car. Thelma hastily turned and headed down the steep slope towards the darkness and protection of a group of trees below.

Lights from the car hit the trees as it sped up the grade. Thelma saw the open car with a figure inside. She was sure it was him. She told herself that she better stay put. She was so tired that she needed a break and would wait for the car to return before heading out again.

It was almost an hour before that happened; then the car swerved over the hill at break-neck speed and careened away around the curves returning the way it had come before and out of sight. Thelma was sure he had

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headed into the next town of Heindrexberg hoping to overtake her on the road. She tried to remember other towns on this road. It had been a long time since she had taken a drive to this part of the country. People didn't do "pleasure driving" anymore because of the war effort.

She resumed her journey once more, a little rested and very determined. Pushing her bike up to the road, she pedaled down the middle of it since it was too dark to see well and made a right turn onto a narrow road with a sign saying Hamlin.

A few hours later, she coasted down a hill into the small, dark town of Hamlin. Thelma couldn't go any farther. Her joints hurt so badly from the hard bicycle seat that she had to get off and push the bike through the town while looking for a place to stay.

The light was dim from the window of a shabby inn down toward the end of town. Thelma knocked and waited for a long time before a cranky man let her into the small lobby and then argued when she insisted on taking her bike into the room with her.

The room smelled like a combination of dust and vomit. It looked tidy, it wasn't cold, there was a bed; Thelma felt she had nothing to complain about. Very early in the morning, when something heavy ran across her chest and its whiskers brushed her cheek, she thought it was time to get up. She pulled on her clothes, flattened her hat down on her hair and quietly opened the door. All she could think of was getting out of there.

The early morning had a nip to the air but smelled so good after the room. She breathed in deeply and with

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one of the deep breaths, smelled coffee. The aroma came from across the street at a little rustic, white cottage eating house. Inside, she sat where she could keep an eye on her bicycle and ate one of the best breakfasts that she could remember, with people who were friendly. By the time she left the restaurant, Thelma knew where the barbershop was, what time it opened and that there was a bicycle shop in town.

After the hair cut, which made her very wary watching the barber's eyes in the mirror when she caught him studying her face while he smoothed out the clunks of hair on the back of her head, she found the bicycle shop and bought a new seat for her bike. The seat was wide and soft and came with a thick, sheep-skin cover. Thelma then retraced her route to the same restaurant and bought three sandwiches, two pieces of strudel and had a thermos filled with coffee before leaving town.

To say the least, the bike seat was a great improvement. Thelma stopped only once in the early afternoon to enjoy her lunch. Later in the day, she stopped again at a small run-down petrol station where she looked at a map and inquired about hostels in the small towns she would be passing through.

The old man in attendance gave her advice on the roads, people, traffic, eating places, as well as places to stay. She appreciated it all and as she pedaled away, he called out, "and watch out for the wild women, young man!" She waved back at him.

She was beginning to like being a young man. The independence it provided her was surprising. As a

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sixteen-year-old in America, she had had the desire to travel around and have adventures; it was out of the question, girls just didn't do that. She was frustrated by having the most widely acclaimed places to visit: wildernesses, beaches, mountains, and deserts and unable to go by herself. That was probably why the bike ride appealed to Thelma so much. She never forgot the danger of her circumstances, however, and the many military trucks which passed reminded her she was not in the Land of the Free.

The place to stay, described to her back at the petrol office, and what she was looking for after having ridden through the next little town, appeared to her beyond a long graveled driveway off the side of the road with a sign advertising dining and rooms. She dismounted when she reached it and pushed the bike to the bottom of the glassed-in porch which served as a lobby. Thelma felt the first drops of rain as she leaned the bike against the wall at the base of the stairs. She decided not to even try to take the bike in with her and removed the raincoat bundle leaving the lunch bucket behind in the basket.

Apparently the stern-faced old woman had been watching her from another window since she appeared so quickly just as the door closed behind Thelma after she entered.

"Yes?" she inquired suspiciously looking Thelma up and down.

Thelma dug in her pockets bringing out all the money she had left from the initial large bill she had

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broken. She spread it out on the counter and looked at the woman, "Do I have enough for a room for the night?"

The woman reached over and separated the bills taking the amount she needed, "And more," she said with a half-smile, "Is there anyone else with you?"

"No, I'm traveling alone," Thelma made it sound as though this were a big event, something special that she had gotten to do.

"That's nice," the woman said and indicated a door upstairs that Thelma should take when she handed her a key.

Each time she closed and locked a door behind her, Thelma would have a feeling of safety. But each time, she would also remember that she had run away to save herself denying her uncle and aunt who had been parents to her. She studied her face in the mirror. No longer did she have the skeletal look reflecting back at her as she had from her mirror when she'd been taken by the soldiers. Her face looked young again with a glow from her tanned cheeks. Her hair, cut short and bleached blond, became her. Her circumstances over-rode her pleasure at seeing herself and her feelings of guilt made her turn away from the mirror. She closed her eyes and prayed to God for protection for her aunt and uncle and to forgive her for not staying and trying to help them in some way, in what way, she had no idea.

The small bathroom attached to her room, had a claw-foot tub which was so big it nearly filled the entire

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room. Thelma undressed, piling her clothes in a corner and ran hot water into the tub. She soaked for an hour. She thought she heard the door to her room open but decided the sound had come from one of the other rooms.

She washed her underwear, socks and sweater in the bathtub and hung them over a towel rack above the warm radiator.

Wearing a large towel, Thelma picked up her clothes and headed back into the room. She was opening the old canvas bag to retrieve the boy's shorts when she stepped on something. There, beneath her toes, was her toothbrush.

A chill went through her as she realized someone had been in the room and gone through her things. She wondered why and if she could have somehow aroused suspicion. Maybe it was a disloyal employee who made it a habit of going through people's things, lifting just enough not to be noticed. She was glad she had taken everything else into the bathroom with her because she possessed enough money for someone to kill for!

As it got darker outside, she realized it had been a mistake to wash some of her clothes, they were still wet and she had wanted to go downstairs for dinner. She put on the pants, shoes and the jacket with nothing underneath, buttoning it up high. She put her hat on and quietly walked down the softly carpeted stairs to the hallway looking for the dining room. The sign in the lobby had said it was on the first floor.

Nothing was marked. All the doors seemed the same to her. Embarrassed at having opened a utility

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closet door, she became even more timid about approaching and looking behind others. A door at the very end of a narrow hall seemed promising. She opened it cautiously peeking behind it as she did and realized it was an apartment and because it was tucked in towards the rear of the building, probably belonged to the owner. Just as she pulled her head back and was about to close the door she heard a woman somewhere in the apartment ask, "How do you know?"

A man's voice answered, "Because I saw her stick her head out of her room and she didn't have anything on. She's a woman, all right!"

None of my business, thought Thelma and started again to pull the door towards her as the woman spoke again, "Then why would she be wearing those boys' clothes?"

Thelma caught her breath. They were talking about her! How did he know she was a woman? He had to have seen her when she was in the bath room; that was the only possibility. But there wasn't a window in the bathroom. Goosebumps raced along her arms.

"Don't do anything," the woman's quivering voice had a plea in it.

"I'm not going to hurt her. No one has said anything so far, have they?"

"No, but," there was nothing more to be said. Thelma figured the woman was used to losing an argument.

It got quiet. Then a chair was moved and Thelma closed the door using both trembling hands to steady it.

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She raced back along the route she had taken and as she approached the stairs, saw a tiny sign saying Dining Room at the other end of the hall. She hurried on to her room.

What was the man going to do? What could a man do so that he wouldn't get caught? She wasn't going to wait to find out!

Thelma raced into the bathroom grabbing her damp socks and sweater. She thought of looking for the peephole the man must have used to see her; then she thought about how horrible it would be to see an eye on the other side looking at her. She didn't think he'd had time to leave his apartment and get to wherever it was that he spied from. She thought he could also be looking at her in the bedroom.

She threw on the raincoat and put things into the canvas bag before slipping out the door, down the stairs and hall and exiting quietly into the rain. She moved out of the faint light thrown by the inn sign and put the bag into the bike basket all the while glancing up at the window to see if she was being watched. Another bicycle leaned against the side of the building. Thelma took the butcher knife from the lunch bucket and jabbed at one of its tires before storing the knife away and tying everything down. Then she began pushing the bike down the long driveway to the road.

From behind her, she heard a door close and she broke into a run staying along the muddy side of the long graveled driveway, trying to keep the sound down.

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Reaching the road, Thelma swung onto the bike and glanced back.

A man was on the other bike pedaling down the drive. She could hear the wheels on the gravel; then she heard the angry sounds of his voice. The bike was flung into the loose rock. She could hear him running toward her.

Thelma hadn't waited out on the road to see what he would do. She heard him on the gravel and pedaled harder not chancing a backward glance which might topple her. The sound changed to the slapping of his feet on the black-topped road, but gradually grew fainter as she rode off. Thelma knew he could have caught her if he hadn't been slowed by the bike's flat tire.

She didn't slow down and she didn't stay on the road. Thinking he might have had a car parked behind the inn, Thelma took the first turn-off she found not bothering to read the sign or the distance of the town as she careened around the corner.

It was hard going against the rain on the dark road. There was only an occasional house showing a light that didn't quite reach the road. She pedaled for an hour all the while waiting for a car to catch up with her. No one was on the road. She slowed down and could feel the muscles in her legs burning from the strain she had put on them.

She was as wet on the inside as she was on the outside. Thelma could feel the cold air on her chest and was sorry she hadn't put on the wool sweater even though it was damp. Her bare feet were clammy and cold inside

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the boots and stuck to the bread wrappers around the money.

Thelma rode all night not passing another house or another cross road. Her mind went over and over the conversation she had heard and she wondered what it was she had ridden away from. Even if the man were a Peeping Tom, she could have tolerated that, but it had been something a lot more sinister than that or the woman wouldn't have been begging him not to do anything. And, he had chased her. That in itself made the situation dangerous and terrified Thelma.

No longer able to pedal, Thelma walked, pushing the bike until even that was too much. A large tree about 50 meters off the road was the only haven in sight and she took it. She leaned the bike on the back side of the tree, put on the cold, damp socks and sweater and curled at the base of the tree between two bulging roots. She slept sporadically between listening for cars and dreaming about the man chasing her.

Thelma awoke wet and cold. It was still raining as she pushed the bike to the road and began pedaling; resuming her unknown destination. An old truck passed and pulled to a stop in front of her. Thelma was so tired she didn't care who was driving the truck. As it turned out, the old man in the truck was a pleasant person concerned with getting a young boy out of the rain. He said his farm was down the road. A few minutes later, they turned into his driveway and his wife took over being concerned.

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Thelma was given an old bathrobe to wear while she rotated her wet clothes by a big rock fireplace. Then she remembered her bra and panties still hanging in the bathroom at the inn but she was glad they weren't with her; she wouldn't have to explain them.

The wife fed her soup and bread and milk, which she gulped down without coming up for air. It made the old couple laugh. She hated fooling them, but it was too late to tell them. They were enjoying their boy.

By late afternoon, she was on her way again. Warm and dry inside with the man's rubber rain hat on her head and her hat in the canvas bag along with all the extra food they had supplied her with after filling the lunch bucket. The wife didn't like the idea of a young boy drinking coffee but her husband talked her into it telling her how important it was on a rainy day. Thelma sincerely hugged them both before she left and now, as she rode along, tears filled her eyes thinking about them and about the importance of family.

There would be one small town between where they had lived and the place both the old man and his wife insisted Thelma should try for a job. They were sure she would be employed at the Veteran's Hospital in a town snuggled away in the rolling hills at the very end of the road. It had been there since the First World War and still housed soldiers who had fought in that battle. The couple was sure there would be an opening because it was so far from the large towns, they needed the workers.

As much as Thelma hated the thought of being around soldiers, she knew she couldn't avoid it and would

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just have to do the best that she could, however she could.

On reaching the next town, which was nothing more than a small hostel and grocery store, Thelma spent the night and left early the next morning. Her money from that one large bill she'd changed was almost gone and she dreaded having to explain away the next one she tried to use.

Thelma was no longer aware of sore legs or the fact that she was pedaling uphill most of the way until she stopped for a rest and looked back to discover she was looking downhill. Then she knew she'd finally gotten her bike-legs, almost at the end of her journey.

Outlined in Black is about the German Gestapo arresting a young American woman in 1939. She escapes and is able to make a life for herself by taking the over-flow of wounded German soldiers into her home.

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