

Ride before dawn

By Glen Donaldson

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We'd been reading a lot (make that too many) 'heavy' fiction submissions so when this one crash landed into our Inbox it was a like a breath of foul air. A Transylvanian aristocrat is stymied after 'a night out' by one life-threatening nail in his coffin after another. Call it spoof, call it vamp lit, call it what you want, you'll eat it up. Oh yeah, hold the garlic!*

QUALITY QUOTABLE:

He notices the signature yellow beams of the lampposts ahead. His bike tires commence vibrating to the uneven cobblestones beneath and he knows he is close. Instantly nauseous, he sniffs it before he sees it: pungent, sharp and spicy. A dozen or more restaurants all in a row - French, Italian, Greek - and everyone of them bathed in the vile reek of poisonous garlic.

Ride Before Dawn

None of us changes over time. We only become more fully what we are. Peddling his spindly pale legs like a demon possessed while his satin red cape assumed shape flowing in the wind behind, what ageless Count Orlak was was a fully-fledged vampire in a hurry.

With only minutes before the dawn sunrise would open like a flower on the horizon, the tardy night crawler had been forced to commandeer a bicycle left propped against the wall of an-all night

chemist shop in a bid to make haste back to the sanctity of his castle, which by his own frantic reckoning, was still at least a full kilometer away.

Vampires occur everywhere but in busy cities no one notices. The count was used to going about his business unnoticed and so It felt like it'd only been a mere few hours since he'd popped out for a bite to drink. Somehow time had managed to get away from him. When he'd decided to call in, without appointment, to a nocturnal dental clinic for a routine check-up and emerged several hours later with a mouthful of amalgam fillings – non-silver as per his patient request – the usually fearless masquerading fangbanger could sense the first pangs of alarm beginning to rise up in his throat.

Amid the still crisp air of a dying night but with precious time ticking down, the Count faced a difficult decision. Should he continue on his current route, a patchwork of strenuous mini-hills lying in wait for his already out-of-breath lungs or risk taking the short cut through the one place he and his kind had been warned never to traverse – Restaurant Alley.

In the end, with the melodies of the morning blackbirds and wrens just moments away and the devastating first rays of the sun about to dribble their light over the land like syrup on breakfast oatmeal, the choice was made for him. Bearing suddenly left along the bank, the panting Count leans forwards on the pedals, pushing down with all his body weight.

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Count Orlak, sweating profusely and beginning to noticeably shake, grips the bike's handlebars with one hand as he uses the other to cover his mouth and nose. Pumping the pedals with failing supernatural strength so fast the turning spokes are now invisible, he somehow advances past the

mirror-clad restaurant fronts. The outline of the castle rises before him as sky at that very moment changes from charcoal to soft dove grey.

He throws down the bicycle before it has even come to a stop, pushes open the heavy oak door and in massive strides ascends the tower staircase. His sacred sanctuary is lying in wait in the far corner.

Throwing back its velvet-lined top, the exhausted Count Orlak lays down inside and, in a well-practiced action, slides the coffin's cover back over top.

He is home just in time. Outside the sun rises as a canopy of gold, bidding the stars to take their nightly rest. The Count is due to appear before the Vampire Council in the coming nights. He vows he will not be late for the appointment. His lesson has been learnt, this night almost costing him his life. The final thoughts that enter his protruding cheek-boned head before he sleeps are "Just being alive can make you late for some things. The dead however are always on time."

...oo0oo...

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Write what you know? Tick! Elements of my world are scattered throughout RIDE BEFORE DAWN like diced cloves of roasted garlic spread across a pizza. I'm a cyclist. During the hot summer months, I'm often up and awake before sunrise. And I do love vampires! Well, vampire fiction.*

Bram Stoker's DRACULA (1897) occupies proud pride of place on my bookshelf; as does the excellent follow up to that book written by Stoker's great grand nephew Dacre Stoker, DRACUL (2018).

If the less than serious concerns of this story have a theme or message it maybe something as simple as "Don't be late". That may not be as weighty as tackling themes of prejudice, corruption or unrequited love but, it's something, right?

Because if ever there was a character who can't afford to be late, it's hairy-legged Count Orlak in RIDE BEFORE DAWN. Hope you all enjoy snacking on this one.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Glen Donaldson is an Australian author who believes the life of a writer has its prose and cons but the job of an editor is more rewording. He pens weekly at both **LOST IN SPACE FIRESIDE** and **SCENIC WRITER'S SHACK**.

