

## The Heroes and Monsters Among Us

By Gus Doiron

The old woman sat in her chair and read, then reread the letter in front of her for a very long time. During this, she did not speak, nor show any emotion to her visitor (who, in all fairness to him, may not have been looking for any). After appearing to read it twice, she took an additional amount of time to simply hold the letter itself, the way one would hold an old antique from their childhood, while they remembered what once was. Slowly folding up the yellowed paper, she returned it to its tattered envelope. Taking her reading glasses off, she looked at her visitor and began to speak.

“When I was a young girl, (many years ago, as you can undoubtedly see), I spent some time, of all places, in a town in Lithuania, my mother’s home country. Just how I came to land there isn’t really all that important. Let’s just chalk it up to naïve ambition that can only be possessed by youth.

I settled in a small industrial city named Tauragė, near the Baltic Sea. They were looking for nurses, and it was a big enough place to speak a bit of English while I honed my Lithuanian. My mother had spent time there, and it was here that I really began my nursing career, focusing more so on geriatrics.

It is frowned upon to become too attached to any of the patients or clients in our profession for obvious reasons, but there were two gentlemen at the nursing home I worked in that I quickly found quite intriguing, despite what our books and professors had taught us.

The first gentleman I’ll speak of was a man by the name of Armantas Hasan. I remember quite distinctly that of my first encounters with this demure little man, I thought that he may have possibly been the most frail and timid little fellow I had ever laid eyes on. Having rarely seen him stand, as he was usually in a wheelchair, I would suggest he stood about 5’3”, and weighed approximately 100

pounds. He had long matted hair, that, along with his scruffy mustache and beard, covered most of his face. To the point where it could be quite difficult to even know if he was talking, as he mumbled what little he had to say. Regardless of how recently he had been washed, it always looked matted.

Not that many of us would line up to wash him, as he always seemed to smell worse when he was wet. And it was only when one would remove his dark brown robe (an item of clothing he always wore regardless of the weather –even his spare robes were identical), that one would get a glimpse into a wild, unruly past that may have been. He had dozens of European prison tattoos, covering most of his arms, torso and thighs. Not to mention what would be well over a dozen scars from knives, bottles, branding, and from what I heard, even a scythe.

So, you can imagine the contrast between the old man existing, and the young savage that once was, all living in the same man. Tho he never really interacted with anyone, he had somewhat of a cult following, to the point of celebrity status. It wasn't due to his tattoos, or excessive facial hair. It was because he was, without dispute, the most insane wrestler to ever step into the squared ring of Lithuanian amateur wrestling.

Now, this wasn't the Greco Roman or freestyle wrestling you see in the Olympics. This was the scripted wrestling where there were "faces" as in baby faces, the good guys. And, "heels", who were the villains. (I've learned a great deal about the subject.) Armantas, although he was a heel, was always rooted for, because he was just so crazy. This was just prior to age of quality photography, but the stories were plentiful, even if some were a bit farfetched. For example, it was said that other wrestlers would feign insanity by eating a pretend piece of raw chicken-Armantas actually did it. Some of the more limber and acrobatic wrestlers would jump off the top ropes for a move- not Armantas . He would climb right on to the roof, if a shed or home were nearby, and one story even had him climbing the top of a church steeple for a jump onto an opponent. Imagine.

Then, there were the stories from the taverns in towns along his circuit. Known for breaking unopened beer bottles over his head and drinking the

remaining brew from the remaining upside down bottle, while shirtless and howling at the night sky, he loved to fight groups of locals as much as he loved to drink.

It seemed like every other week, a resident of the home would be sharing a story from Armantas's legendary past-

"I remember being a young boy, and seeing that man single handedly have a tug of war against five large men, and it be declared a draw."

"I remember being a young man, and seeing him fight a dozen men outside a tavern, before he was hauled away by his fellow wrestlers.

"He's pretty calm. Just don't give him orange soda to drink. It makes him REALLY crazy."

"I heard orange soda is the only thing that could calm him down."

"I heard he can turn invisible. He can't. Can he?"

Those stories about Armantas went on and on. But, as varied and fantastical the stories about Armantas were, there was at least some general agreement about one man, who also happened to be in the Lithuanian wrestling circuit, who could stop the little savage dead in his tracks. Which leads me to the next intriguing gentleman in the nursing home that I wish to speak about.

Romek Dovile had appeared to have remained a polar opposite of Armantas. A "face" for his entire wrestling career, he had retired long ago, to live in relative obscurity. A giant of a man in his prime, Romek still stood at least six foot three in the winter of his years. Whereas Armantas had faded from a small fire cracker to a smoldering shell, Romek, who once was renowned for his unwavering modesty, had actually become somewhat of a showboat in his later years. He would walk around the nursing home in a track suit, even going so far as to have a whistle at times, trying too hard too often to motivate people to "get active" and "feel the burn".

So aggressive was Romek's new personality, that his constant second guessing and belittling had basically put the run to the previous fitness coach who would organize the exercise program in the nursing home. Which was just great with Romek, as he now could wander around at will, pushing his fitness ideals on those around him, whether they wanted it or not. People learned quickly not to walk by him with a tray of food that would contain too many added sugars or trans fats, as he would indiscriminately flip their trays to the floor. Or, if a nurse or worker were watching, at least quietly threaten the uneducated dieter with future punishment.

Still square chinned and broad shouldered, he shaved every day after his two hour morning workout. He never really seemed to notice or care that nobody ever joined him.

The rivalry of these two wrestlers, throughout their career, would always carry on from the ring to the taverns. One story I heard was that the two actually fought once for three days, a moving battle that spanned five towns, to the point where, they were both on their knees, not able to even move their arms. (I had actually seen a newspaper article, written in Lithuanian, to confirm this.)

Armantas didn't even seem to notice that his old nemesis was in the building, but the situation wasn't lost on Romek. He absolutely despised Armantas. Romek would call Armantas every name possible, given the chance, and usually at the open gatherings where all patients were brought to the community room to play cards, or catch up, Romek would glare at Armantas from across the room while Armantas simply stared at the floor.

I remember, just prior to everything in my life being turned upside down, Dr. Wilhelm, the resident physician, passed away. Incredibly well respected by all he knew, he had special connections with all of the residents, perhaps most of all, with Armantas. Armantas would be signed out by the doctor for two or three days each month, for "undisclosed reasons."

Whereas most of the other people I broke the news to, would either express shock, or resigned acceptance that death had claimed yet another family

member, both Romek and Armantas surprised me in the way that they showed almost no emotion. With the same resigned expression which I now can tell you meant they both knew what was coming, they both curiously asked to see a calendar.

I was very surprised one day when Romek requested a favor regarding his perceived little foe.

“Helene,” he asked, “would you take a small little note from me to that fiend, that wretch, Armantas?”

“Certainly not,” I told him, as I did not wish to fuel any harsh feelings between the two.

“Allow me to start over,” Romek pleaded, with a smile on his face that was as fake as they come. “Would you please take a letter to my old wrestling counterpart, Armantas?”

It was only when he offered to let me read a note he rewrote, (he wouldn’t let me read his original), that I agreed to deliver it. Walking down the hallway, towards Armantas’s room, I took the opportunity to reread the note, which I can remember vividly to this day, as it seemed so unlike what Romek would send to a man he loathed.

“Armantas, my old friend! Hope this letter finds you well. We have much to discuss, about our long ago past, and the good doctor! Toodles!” -Romek

Armantas’s reaction upon receiving the note was less than interested. Barely glancing at me, he took the letter, and without opening it, stored it into his pocket on his robe.

I had nearly forgotten about the initial letter, when nearly two weeks later, Armantas requested that I take a reply letter to Romek. Before waiting for a response, he had it folded and sealed with melted wax pressed with his thumb. (Interestingly enough, Armantas’s thumbprint left an image that was either a long ago branded image of Jesus, or a version of him from his youth.) He asked me to respect their privacy, as this was a private matter.

So, this is how I became a courier of sealed messages back and forth between the two, for the next few weeks. Some days, I would travel back and forth, delivering upwards of four to five letters some days, other days, only one or two. All the while, between men that often would be only one room apart from each other.

It was perhaps three weeks after the doctor's death, that Armantas requested a strange favor. He wanted me to take him up towards the Jūra look off overlooking the valley after work that night. It was a popular spot for young and old alike to go enjoy some sea air and a scenic view. I tried to convince him to wait until the next day, when we could see better, but he wouldn't hear of it. He really had to go that night. He insisted so much, and this was the most interaction I think almost anyone in the home had ever had with him. I felt compelled to finally concede. It wasn't as if I had any plans after work anyways.

Despite the fact that I wasn't technically breaking any rules taking him out so late, he swore me to secrecy on leaving with him. When I was done work at ten that night, I changed, and went to his room. He had a level of restrained excitement to him that I don't believe I've ever seen in anyone before or since. I wheeled him out into the hallway, and outside, as if we were merely taking a cigarette break.

I helped him into my Lada, and we pulled out along the road headed towards the look off.

As we strained our way up along the steep switchbacks leading up to the top of the mountain, I noticed the clouds parting somewhat, allowing for glimpses of the hidden moon.

I remember mentioning to Armantas that we may get a break, and get a better view with the moon out to make the trip more memorable. He didn't respond, choosing instead to lean back in his seat, smiling, with his eyes closed.

We nosed into the deserted parking lot, and parked. Once I had his chair set up, Armantas settled himself into it, and I pushed him along the path. Even at night, the view was amazing. The valley below us gradually faded into a black

abyss, and somewhere below we could hear the Jūra river winding its way along its many banks.

I remember it being somewhat warm, and taking off my button up sweater and draping it over the handle bars of the wheelchair.

We came to a bench, and I stopped so that I may take a seat also.

We sat in silence for a while, until Armantas told me that he had just one more request.

“What would that be, Armantas?” I asked.

“Leave. At once.” He answered. Seeing my confusion, he added, “You don’t have much time.” And with that, he pulled out what appeared to be a bottle of orange soda. I remembered one of the many stories I had heard about him and this sugary treat, and asked if he was allowed with it.

“Nope,” was his simple response, with a tone to his voice indicating that orange soda was the LAST thing he was allowed to have. Before I could say anything else, he howled into the night sky, and smashed the upside down bottle against his head. He then began to drink the remainder of the bottle that was still in his hand. All this was quite vivid to me, for the clouds had parted, and the moon was unchallenged in its glow of the entire landscape.

Not knowing what had come over him, I rushed to Armantas to see if he had hurt himself, and I had just gotten to him when he flung himself out of the wheelchair and began to writhe on the ground in pain. He appeared to be having serious muscle spasms, or perhaps a seizure of some type, and I tried to comfort him as best as I could, given the circumstances.

It was at this time, I believe, that he grabbed my right arm with such force, it broke both my radius and ulna, the two bones in my forearm. I noticed the sharp pain, but what really caught my attention were his fingernails. They were a full inch and a half passed his gnarled fingertips. Thick and yellowish even in the moonlight, they looked more like grotesque claws. They certainly were not like this before.

I remember screaming, partly at the pain in my arm, but perhaps more so at his face when he looked up at me. His face had become somewhat elongated, and his skin seemed to be stretched back tighter. His eyes were sharp green, sunken into dark sockets. His face partly covered by the orange soda pop matted hair, he spoke to me the last words I ever heard him say.

“Run!” he growled.

I’m not embarrassed to confess to you that at this point, my desire to help Armantas took a very distant back seat to getting myself the hell out of there.

Pulling my dress up with my good arm, I ran as fast as I could to my car, and jumped in. It was at this point that I realized that my keys were in my sweater pocket that was still hung on the back of Armantas’s wheelchair. Simply locking the doors to the car, and waiting inside was not going to be an option. Nor was going back to my sweater, where that thing, whatever it was, (for it surely wasn’t Armantas) lay.

I ran down the moonlit road as fast as I could, glancing back to see if the creature was in pursuit. I hadn’t made it far, when I tripped head long over a rock. The searing pain from my arm forced me to involuntarily shout out in pain, and I heard movement from back towards the car. I frantically got up, but before I could run again, the monster had moved at incredible speed and was upon me.

Hunched to the point of being nearly doubled over, it more hobbled than walked, with its front arms occasionally dragging on the ground. The robe, which only an hour before had covered an old gentleman in the winter of his years, and apparently also could hide a bottle of orange soda, was stretched and ripped, hanging in tatters off a form it had never been designed to accommodate.

As the creature slowly advanced upon me, I put my good, unbroken arm up in front as if to protect me. “Please ,no,” I begged, to no avail.

I sensed a slight movement to my left, and there was a loud BOOM that pierced the night sky. The creature jerked suddenly, as if something hit it in the

shoulder. With a blood curling shriek, it snarled towards from where the noise came.

“That’s enough of you, you wretched hound!” Romek Dovile exclaimed as he reloaded a musket that looked as if it were two hundred years old. He was dressed in an old Quaker outfit that was so out of place for that era and location, that in another situation, it would be downright laughable. The wide brimmed hat fit snug, but the white long sleeved billowy shirt and the knickerbockers that ended at his knees looked as if they were a size too big. Perhaps from when he was taller and thicker, in his prime.

Although the creature had not shown any recognition towards me, its growl towards Romek and the way it grudgingly cowered back somewhat indicated they were no strangers.

Being reloaded, Romek jumped off the large boulder he was on, and taking aim again, shouted, “If you want a dance partner, look no further, pooch!”

BOOM

The creature shrieked again in pain, being hit with enough force to almost be knocked over.

As Romek quickly reloaded his musket, the creature glared at him, then at me. Before I realized what was going on, it lunged towards me, landing a substantial bite in my hand on my good arm before leaping over the railing. Bounding down the ravine with super human leaps, it disappeared into the darkness below.

Right behind it, with leaps of equally impressive ability, was Romek. Passing by me, he glanced at my arm briefly with a look of concern. “We’ll need to talk,” he stated before he also bounded over the railing in pursuit of the beast, also taking thirty foot jumps.

Fading into the darkness, Romek shouted, “Wait puppy! I have more! Oh , yes! Its chow time!” as he fired another shot.

Every minute or two, there was another shot fired, but the sound got so faint, that eventually it was hard to hear.

Looking around me, alone, with the empty night showing no sign of what had just happened, I walked up to get my sweater and keys. I had just wrapped a bandage around my hand, when I noticed a car weaving its way along the switchbacks I had just come up.

A young couple nosed in not far from where I was parked, and through Armantas's slightly opened window, I heard a young woman say, "Let's hope the moon comes out, to make the trip more memorable."

In spite of myself, numb and sore as I was, I smiled. Not a happy, thankful smile, so much as a bitter, ironic one. Starting my car, I backed out of my spot, and left.

I decided then and there, that I had had enough of Lithuania. Not even bothering to get my meager belongings at my apartment, I drove away, and aside from refueling, I didn't stop for days, until I made it to a friend's place in Paris. After some time there, I made my way back home, and you know where my story goes from there.

I had often wondered what had become of Armantas and Romek, and now, because of this letter, I know."

With this, Helene attempted to return the letter to her visitor, but the restraints on her hands and feet prevented her from reaching far.

