

Amber Alert

Just like he had done every morning for the past twenty years, Roman Kopman got up bright and early to get ready for work when a reporter's drone-like voice spilt from the radio. At first, it barely penetrated his half-awake pre-shower brain. Then, he listened intently.

“The interstellar cigar-shaped object dubbed Oumuamua--which entered our solar system just over a week ago, seems to be accelerating. Traveling at a blistering speed of 26 kilometers per second, Oumuamua was first classified as an asteroid but later was found to have properties more akin to comets. Scientists are still unsure why it suddenly increased its pace. And while some believe it might be due to an engine powered by solar radiation, most think the wonky behavior is probably caused by a natural phenomenon such as solid hydrogen invisibly blasting the object's surface causing it to speed up. But whatever it is, the NASA has issued an amber alert should the object, or its potential passengers, pose a threat to us.”

The report stirred the embers of a premonition that had pursued Roman for the last few days. He could not exactly say why it touched a nerve.

To seek relief from anxiety in the tranquilizing ritual of activity, he showered, made the bed, opened a can of tuna, spread it on a slice of bread, added some Kraft mayonnaise but after the first bite the sandwich formed hard clots and refused to pass through his throat. His thoughts went back to the report as he tried to digest the avalanche of information together with the half-eaten sandwich.

He switched off the radio, put on his coat and picked up his briefcase. Outside, the early morning rush hour in the port city of Gdansk greeted him with the frantic blaring of car

horns. Around him, people, oblivious to the nip of winter and the smell of petrol fumes, milled along frost-covered pavements trying to reach their destinations. The sky was blue, without a single hint of a cloud and, despite the morning chill, the day would probably turn quite warm by noon.

It normally took him less than ten minutes to walk from his Kartuska Street flat to the old part of the city by the Wyzna Gate where the Amber Museum was housed. Some visitors found it somewhat uncomfortable when they discovered that it was located in the 14th century former Prison Tower and Torture Chambers. It was awkward to look at exquisitely crafted bracelets, filigree trollbeads, carved chess pieces and zodiac signs set in silver and platinum in the same place where five centuries earlier mediaeval psychopaths had forced their victims into confessing crimes--regardless of whether they were actually guilty or not. But despite its origin, Roman loved the building with its ornate gargoyle-covered roof and slim brick tower that held the best amber collection in Europe.

He passed a Costa Coffee and, despite the cold, bought a Frostino and a cheese croissant for lunch--anything to prolong the walk a few minutes and pacify his forebodings.

The guard at the museum door tipped him a reproachful wink.

“Late again, Mr. Kopman. The director will be cross.”

Roman ignored the rebuke and went straight to the second floor that held the collection he was responsible for. The objects in the display cases were remarkable--each laid out on a piece of black velvet in stark contrast with the amber hues: treacle-colored rings, toffee pendants, butterscotch necklaces, hickory amulets, leaf-shaped earrings in the warm tone of ripe tangerines. And the best of all – a 10-centimeter ochre carving of an unusual object, similar to a rocket about to take off and inside, clearly visible through the transparent surface,

a giant prehistoric insect, each of its parts easily recognizable: slender segmented body, a pair of wings, three pairs of long spindly legs, elongated mouthparts--preserved for eternity in the millennial Baltic resin.

And that was the very object that had been the source of his anxiety for the last few days. Despite the piece being locked up together with the jewelry and the rest of the artifacts in the case each night, every morning Roman found it marginally off center, the velvet slightly wrinkled, the nose-part of the carving pointing in different directions.

He was sure he was right and not simply going mad because he knew by heart the position of every piece and, if asked, he could probably even say how many grams it weighed and its approximate age. Not for nothing had he spent the last twenty years working as a guide in this very same room, explaining to tourists young and old the techniques used to carve the pieces and which part of the Baltic coast the organic fossilized gemstone had been formed.

He especially liked talking to kids who took his words seriously and listened to his stories with appreciation only small children knew how to show.

“So you see, each amber is unique. No two pieces are the same. If it is honey colored, translucent, it means that it was formed outside the tree, from resin that dripped down the bark or a branch and then got submerged into cold salty water for thousands of years.”

He would take a caramel--colored dragon which the kids loved and let them hold it for a few seconds.

“There are special doctors, nothing like the white-coated doctors that chase after you with syringes and vaccines, who practice a different kind of medicine. They call amber “sun

drops” or the “tears of gods” and they believe that if you wear an amber amulet it will protect you from evil spirits.”

He loved the look of awe on their pixie faces as they manipulated the dragon and caressed its sculpted surface as if trying to absorb its energy.

“Even the father of modern medicine, Hippocrates himself, believed that when ground into powder and mixed with oil or honey, amber turned into an elixir that could cure fever and stomach ache, alleviate asthma and cure infections.” He would select another piece, this time a dark cinnamon pendant set in gold, and let it dangle in front of the fascinated kids.

“As you can see, this amber is opaque and cloudy as it comes from resin secreted inside of a tree. But that’s not all – the resin from an oak, from a birch or from a pine will produce different types of amber. There are so many amazing things about this wonderful fossil.”

To finish his master class, he would always extract the strange rocket-like piece with the giant insect trapped in its core. He could hear the gasps of astonishment as he held it against the light displaying in minute detail the exoskeleton and the proboscis with something like a drop of liquid at the end.

“This one here is a prehistoric mosquito. We know it’s a female as it is only mosquito ladies that feed on blood. The males prefer flower nectar.”

“So mosquito boys are pansies!” one of the girls laughed and elbowed her friend.

“Not quite. In the natural world everyone has a role to play and generally both male and female mosquitos prefer to lick sugary surfaces. It is only when the female is about to lay eggs that she needs the protein contained in blood,” he explained patiently.

“This female here, let’s call her, Millicent, is thousands of years old, if not older. She must have got trapped in the resin right after she bit someone as you can still see a little dark-

colored drop on the tip of her proboscis and something like a little line of liquid inside it. She probably munched on a large animal like a mammoth or a sabre-toothed tiger or maybe even on one of our ancestors, Pete the Neanderthal or Harriett Homo Sapiens. But we will never know unless we drill into the amber and extract the drop and analyze it for its DNA.”

“Pete, the gentleman called you a Neanderthal,” another little girl squealed while the named individual sulked and pulled on her ponytail.

There was general laughter as the kids ran around the room buzzing like mosquitos and trying to bite one another. Roman watched them with delight - it was times like this that made his job worthwhile. They not only learnt about amber but also had a glimpse of human prehistory.

So when he saw the hardly noticeable changes in the position of the carved artefact, he knew he could not be wrong. Whenever he showed it to tourists, he always placed it in the same position, in the center of the cloth, the topmost triangular part facing the window. Yet for the last three days, as he opened the cabinet, it was moved ever so slightly so that no one but he would notice.

In the evening of the fourth day, the feeling of unease was strong enough for him to decide to try to catch the stranger who messed with his exhibits but took nothing at all. After he watched the news on Polsat (there was no mention of Oumuamua this time) and finished his second cup of lemon tea for the cold, he got dressed and left the flat for the museum.

The city was quiet. In winter, despite freezing temperatures, Gdansk usually remained bleak and bare--snow brushed it white quite rarely, and now it greeted him with a sheet of rain that slashed with a needle-point sharpness and blurred the contours of trees and

buildings. He walked fast trying to get out of the drizzle that was hesitating whether to turn into a heavy downpour or cease completely.

As he reached the Wyzna Gate he could clearly see the museum building--damaged in the second world war and extensively renovated from old photographs--in all its medieval glory. He looked up at the second floor and saw that although no lights were on, an eerie greenish glow filtered through the curtain-less window. He took out his keys, switched off the alarm and walked noiselessly to the exhibition room. It, too, was secured. He selected a silver yale and unlocked the door.

As he entered the room his first thought was that despite the 70 years of NASA denials, the Roswell incident had not been a hoax: standing by the display case there was a short grey-skinned hairless creature, with a large head, enormous almond-shaped eyes, wide nostrils and something like a slit where a human mouth should be. His three-fingered right hand was holding... the amber carving with Millicent the Mosquito trapped inside.

The creature heard him enter, looked up and blinked a few times with his (or her) lash-less eyelids. The mouth-slit issued forth an unnerving noise--it was unmistakably surprise.

For an instant, they gazed at each other – the fully-dressed middle-aged human and the grey naked alien. The stranger was amazingly built, as if put together haphazardly by a crazy surgeon, a Frankenstein maker, completely defying the laws of physics and human anatomy. He swayed softly on short spider-thin legs which seemed to have no bones, his belly was huge and swollen as if he had just gobbled up a baby elephant. His eyes, anthracite black, were big and curious. And although at first he thought the creature was completely hairless, he now noticed some thistledown silver tufts just under the chin, not unlike the beard on Tutankhamun's funeral mask.

The creature squealed again, and then out of nowhere there appeared a tiny box in his free hand. It crackled, coughed, and spat out some sounds. Then came a voice--similar to the synthesized, computer-generated baritone of Stephen Hawking, its amplitude and pitch processed through an acoustic filter.

“Need...amber... need...insect...” the box announced followed by a series of crackles and some more spitting.

The meaning was pretty clear. The alien was after the carving or, to be more precise, the mosquito trapped there thousands of years ago. What Roman could not understand was why he needed it. But just as he was about to ask, the box buzzed again.

“Mother sick... need blood...”

Roman understood that the creature could hear his thoughts.

“Where is mother?” He asked in his head.

The alien, whom Roman was starting to think of as simply AI, answered through the box and looked through the window at the sky.

“Ship...human call Oumuamua...”

Roman nodded his understanding.

“Mosquito bite mother...before... mosquito frozen ... mother need blood ...”

“So it was you who have been moving the piece all along, have you?” Roman asked silently.

“But why have you simply not taken it out?”

“Human object ... no teletransportation...” the box said.

So that was the problem! AI could come and go at will, traverse walls, rearrange his own molecular composition but he had now power over human-made objects. The 10-centimeter carving could not leave the room with him.

“No insect... no blood... mother die...” The triangular face took on an expression of unutterable sadness and the black eyes turned nearly liquid as if flooded by unshed tears.

Surprised by his own temerity Roman took one long step forward, but the creature retreated. The amber dropped on the floor as AI threw his hands to the eyes and looked at Roman from between the spread three fingers.

“Don’t be afraid,” Roman thought as he took one more step fearing AI would flee from the room the same way he had entered it.

“I want to help.”

And all at once the extraterrestrial relaxed, his spindly arms, quiet as homing doves, dropped peacefully to his sides. He looked straight at Roman and the moisture vanished from his enormous eye and was replaced by bewilderment and something akin to joy; fast, fleeting, but unmistakably joy. The mouth-slit quivered with effort as he strove to pronounce one word: help...

Roman moved closer and picked up the carved figure from the floor.

“We must get it out of here the traditional way then--thought the door.”

This time he spoke aloud and put the piece into his coat pocket.

“Just give me twenty minutes and then we can meet by the Poseidon fountain in the main square.”

The bewildered look on AI’s deltoid face was so funny that Roman laughed aloud.

“You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you? Poseidon? Wait a moment”.

He dug into his coat pocket and took out his mobile phone.

“Here, that’s what I’m talking about,” he googled the Poseidon fountain and showed the screen to AI who issued forth a kind of a burp which Roman took for agreement.

Just as he was putting away the phone the creature moved forward and took hold of Roman’s left hand. His skin was smooth, cold to the touch. It had a bluish tint and was slightly humid. It throbbed and trembled and for an instant Roman thought he thought he was holding the tail of a fish. He remembered the one and only time he visited an aquarium on his holiday to Montego Bay and swam with manta rays--the feeling now was uncannily similar.

The extraterrestrial brought Roman’s hand close to his chest, just above where human ribs would be, and pressed it gently to his body. The place where Roman’s hand was resting now turned transparent and inside he could see an oval organ, broader at the lower part and tapering towards the apex. It was beating and pulsating against the ribcage just like a human heart would beat, pumping some kind of liquid that the alien desperately needed for someone he called mother...

“Friend...” the mouth-slit whispered.

And before Roman could blink, the creature dropped his hand and was gone in a flash of disappearing molecules.

He checked that the carving was in his pocket, picked up the velvet cloth where the figure had lain, closed the lid on the display case and left the room, locking it behind him.

The next morning, he was getting ready for work as always, when once again he heard the reporter’s drone-like voice.

“And just as suddenly as it appeared, the object known as Oumuamua vanished last night shortly after midnight. Two helicopter pilots on different aircraft reported having seen it some 30 miles north from the Baltic coast. It hovered close to the water surface, one of the pilots said, but without the typical rotor wash or air turbulence caused by helicopter blades or moving engines. And before they could follow, it was gone. Faster than they’d ever seen anything move in their lives. So what was that cigar-shaped object? An intergalactic spaceship on a reconnaissance visit or simply an unexplained weather phenomenon? I am afraid we will never know. But one thing we can be sure of: all eyes now are now turning towards future discoveries and in the meantime, NASA has called off the amber alert.”

Roman switched off the TV, put on his coat and picked up his briefcase. In ten minutes, he would walk through the main door of the Museum but before, he would stop at Costa for a Frostino and, just to be adventurous, a hot cinnamon roll.

The doorman greeted him with the usual: “Late again, Mr. Kopman” but he ignored him. He was already wondering how the hell he was going to explain to the director that the finest piece in the second-floor collection was missing and the only person with access and key was he: Roman Kopman.

But the worry was short-lived--he smiled and ran up, taking two stairs at a time. It didn’t matter, because he helped save someone’s mother and somewhere, in a far, far away galaxy, millions of lightyears from the coastal city of Gdansk filled with the frantic blaring of car horns and the irate dash of pedestrians trying to reach their destinations, he had a friend, and it was a friendship that went beyond a simple handshake. His only regret was not having

J.B. Polk

had the time to ask if it was Al and his people who had built the pyramids--given the weird similarity of his tufty beard to Tutankhamun's. But now he would never know...