

Unpotting Day

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I'd always thought that every child approaching age eight would look forward to their Unpotting Day, but on the morning of hers, Miu sank into the couch like a small boulder, arms crossed, defiance radiating from those beautiful oak eyes you gave her.

"I know, I know, you don't understand *why*. But how bad can it be?" I huffed a deep breath and attempted to placate our daughter, whose hands had now formed fists that pushed into the couch's cushions. "Everyone does it, Miu. People all over the world celebrate Unpotting Day. Children from every culture, every creed. When I was your age, I did it. Your grandparents too, we all—"

"Dad!" she snapped. "That's not a good reason." Her mien darkened as she buried herself deeper into the corner of the sofa. "Just because *you* had to do it doesn't mean *I* have to. That's not fair."

How wise this child was. You're surely responsible for that, too.

"No, you're right," I admitted, which only made Miu's stubbornness grow more entrenched. "But can you tell me why you're so against the idea?"

I saw her resolve dissipate into a cocktail of confusion and gloom. "Some kids at school," she said, suddenly less sure. "They said it's why Mom isn't here anymore." She turned away from me and glowered at the sylvan patterns on the armrest. "It's a *stupid* tradition."

As I watched our daughter stew, I recalled the things you had said on our first date, back when you were in your graduate program, back when I had this tradition of closing my eyes, clasping my hands, and whispering an appeal before I dug into my plate. I wasn't sure whom I was talking to in those moments. I didn't *believe* in anything. It was just something I did.

That night long ago, you studied me from across the table, curiously, patiently. Then you told me how, for much of history, rituals had served to bind people to invented identities, carving up humanity with invisible lines of ceremony. This self-inflicted cultural fragmentation masqueraded as excuses to feast, shop, and rest. We celebrated victors while erasing losers, remembered saints to oppress the damned, lined the pockets of the rich at the expense of the poor.

Most traditions served a shattered world, rather than a unified one, you said. Until Unpotting Day.

I was stupefied in that restaurant, not sure whether to be embarrassed by or offended on behalf of my innocently conventional upbringing. I remember thinking: why on Earth did I imagine it was a good idea to go out with an anthropology PhD candidate? Of course you'd find fault in everything I do, lecture me to death about some arcane historical quirk that few had ever pondered, show me ways of feeling inadequate that I had never known. I fully expected your next words to inform me that I was holding my spoon incorrectly due to my lack of acquaintance with classical Egyptian etiquette, or some shit like that.

But, to my great relief, that wasn't you at all. *I'm sorry*, you said, telling me you'd just come from a twenty-hour spell in the library. *My dissertation—it's all I can think about these days.*

Well, what could be the subject of this intoxicating research? I asked politely, hoping to salvage the evening. And with that, you proceeded to describe your thesis on the origins of Unpotting Day, your late nights in the archives uncovering how this universal human tradition came to be.

My curiosity was piqued. Like most children, I had performed the ceremony without stopping to wonder about the custom's birth. Nobody had ever told me where Unpotting Day came from; as far as I was concerned, no one really knew.

"Look, Miu," I said, sitting down on the couch. "I'm not asking you to accept it. I'm just asking you to listen. Let me tell you something." I held up my hands before she could blurt out an objection. "After I'm done, you can decide if you want to go through with it. Truly, it will be up to you."

I wondered if she might put up a fight, but Miu simply grabbed a pillow and hugged it to her chest. She met my gaze, glaring at me, daring me to be half as convincing as you.

"I realize the idea of it sounds stupid. How can one small rite of passage make you ready to befriend the world?" I smiled at the thought of our bountiful Earth, the enormity of it all, the rich complexity of interactions that await our daughter as she matures through life. "You're not alone in thinking that tomorrow-me will be just like today-me. But, believe it or not, Miu, there are certain moments in one's lifetime—and in the evolution of a planet—that can alter its course forever."

The tension in her shoulders evaporated. Her beautiful brown eyes widened ever so slightly. She's your daughter, after all—always ready for a good story.

I paused to sort through your words, digging through my memories of what you had taught me. What you had taught the world.

"In the year 2024—that's over two-hundred-and-fifty years ago—the Corusceans arrived."

She gave a grunt. "Not this again!"

"Miu, I've barely begun."

"I know this story!"

"Alright," I said calmly. "Then why don't you tell it to me?"

Miu drew a sharp breath and recited the words from her favorite docuholo, the one they got you to host: "Eight massive space vessels, unknown in origin, entered Earth's atmosphere, descending from that inky night upon our blue-green mote of dust."

"That's right. Visitors from another world. Right here on Earth. Do you remember where they landed?"

Miu shook her head. She didn't know the whole story. Neither did I—until you told me, so many years ago.

Kenya. Iquitos. The isle of Borneo.

Utah. West Malaysia. Off the coast of Madagascar.

Northeast Australia. The shores of the Caspian Sea.

I had never experienced a first date quite like ours. My labsteak sat cold and untouched as I listened to you tell me about the day our planet changed forever, enraptured equally by the subject and the cadence of your voice.

Eight spacecraft, eight random locations. Their arrival threw the world into pandemonium. Militaries mobilized to counter imminent threats. Countries erupted into chaos. Financial markets tumbled. Stores were looted. The net crashed seventeen times in the first six hours of the Coruscans' arrival; technology experts blamed excessive video uploads.

I chuckled at the thought of mere 2-D media causing such massive disruptions, but I supposed everything was more fragile in the archaic information age.

For one brief moment, toilet paper became the new gold standard.

I choked on a sip of wine. That one had to be a joke, right?

And ordinary people—they had no idea what the next hour would bring. Can you imagine what it was like, to stand collectively on the edge of what seemed like oblivion?

I sat transfixed as you described the diaries and interviews you uncovered, documents recounting how everyday citizens had scrambled to put their affairs in order. *Some reached out to long-lost loves. Others instantly abandoned broken relationships. One Nepalese man, having never seen the ocean, jumped in his car and drove a thousand kilometers, thirty hours straight, to watch the sunrise over the Bay of Bengal.*

The most unexpected phenomenon, you said, was a marked increase in the accounts of random folks helping complete strangers. You thought these stories said something profound about the human condition: the time we never had enough of was just a figment of our priorities.

Not knowing when the aliens might strike population centers, the wealthiest migrated en masse to secondary homes and bunkers in the mountains, hoping their private refuges would sequester them from whatever apocalypse came next. Those less fortunate simply gathered whatever friends or family were nearby and held each other as they watched the frightening news unfold.

Time slowed as I listened to you describe the world's darkest days. Sitting on the edge of my seat with a white napkin folded in my lap, there was only one place I wanted to be, one story I wanted to hear, though I'd heard it a thousand times before. But never like this.

And now, all these years later, I was retelling it to Miu.

"The world was a scary place after the Coruscans' landing. It must've felt like eons to live through, but luckily the turmoil didn't last long. You see, when those alien spacecraft just sat there, not doing anything for days, then weeks, then months..."

"People got bored?"

I laughed. "In a way. People quickly traded the dread and panic that had initially consumed them for another stalwart of human nature: greed."

I told her what I'd learned from you over that fateful dinner: how the communities around the eight landing sites began to sell touristic glimpses of the Coruscans' massive spacefaring vessels. *The law of supply and demand knew no earthly bounds*, you said, stabbing a floret of roasted broccoli and twirling it in the air.

According to what digital records remain, the most viral social media posts were of individuals videographing themselves dancing in front of one of the eight structures from space. It was seen as a status symbol, how many spaceships one could collect on their profile. Children begged their parents to take them to see the nearest vessel. Travel companies competed to plan the most efficient personalized pilgrimages to all eight locations. Manufacturers modeled toys and keepsakes after the alien craft. Simply by landing, these extraterrestrial visitors had spurred brand-new industries into existence.

Then you told me about what you'd been doing in the library before our date. How you'd pored over centuries-old journal articles and conference proceedings, investigating the scholarly debates about what the moment of the Coruscean's arrival meant for humanity. *Professors from around the world pulled out their proverbial crystal balls to predict how our collective psyche would change now that the Fermi paradox had fallen. None of them were right.*

I put my hand on Miu's shoulder, interrupting my retelling of your story to check: "Do you know what the Fermi paradox is?"

She shook her head again.

"It was a question posed by a scientist named Enrico Fermi, who lived long ago, before anyone knew for sure that there was other life in the universe. It puzzled those ancient people: How could our planet be so full of life, yet the rest of space seem so dead and empty?"

"But now we know we're not alone," observed Miu.

"That's right. The Coruscans put that mystery to rest—just not immediately." Miu shifted uncomfortably on the couch, as if she intuitively knew that the close of one question always opened ten more.

"In the beginning, folks camped out by the thousands, hoping to be the first to catch a glimpse of whomever was inside. As time went on, people's patience wore thin. Graffiti started to appear on the ship's hulls. Many began to wonder if these craft contained aliens at all. Rumors spread that the vessels were actually from Earth—experimental craft built by one of the more secretive countries, or a prank pulled by a psychotic tech CEO."

"It really was aliens, though," insisted Miu.

"Yes, and that was still the most popular belief," I replied. "Thing was, if they were extraterrestrials, why had they come? To gift us some awesome technology? Study our planet? Judge our worthiness of becoming cosmic neighbors? Take our resources? Conquer us? All of this became more and more unlikely with each passing year. Sooner or later, people came to the conclusion that they were waiting for us to make the right move. Testing us."

"Did we pass?"

"Ha," I said, recalling the way you'd put it: *We didn't even fail.*

As the waiter refilled our wine glasses, you mentioned how a tale by an ancient speculative fiction writer named Chiang, which was eventually adapted into one of those antique 2-D 'movies,' had probably inspired the governments of the world to assemble an international consortium of physicists and linguists to devise a way to communicate with our alien

visitors. I found this hypothesis strangely romantic: science fiction influencing actual science—who'd've thought.

When you said that experts had cycled through all manner of audio, visual, and tactile signaling to no avail, I offered my hypothesis: Perhaps our way of thinking was too complex for the aliens to understand? The shape of the smirk you gave me is still burned in my brain.

That's what some of the scientists at the time thought, too, so they developed bridge languages based on mathematics and physical constants. Nothing worked. Futile attempt after futile attempt to communicate, the human race threw the equivalent of planetary-scale tantrum. We cried with our radio bursts, wailed in every language we could come up with, even stomped with our bombs. Our polite door knocks became rabid attempts to break and enter. But nothing drew their attention.

According to your archival research, our interstellar visitors' stubborn refusal to acknowledge humanity had launched a brand-new campaign of desperation. It was no longer about cracking the enigma of *why* the Corusceans had come. It was simply about getting them to *notice* us. Who could be the first to grab their attention?

Sifting through news briefs from that bygone era, you found evidence of our greatest egos stepping up to the plate: heads of state rolled out red carpets; billionaires funded private think tanks; tech companies asked artificial intelligence for advice; a popular vocal artist even held a concert for one of those giant machines.

I'll never forget your solemn look as you said: *When no little green men walked out of those spaceships and demanded to be taken to our leaders, our leaders stood in line to volunteer themselves.* To use another anachronistic turn of phrase, all of them struck out swinging.

And then you got to the amazing part.

Three years after their ships were first spotted in the skies, the doors finally opened. One Coruscean exited each of the eight spacecraft, moved straight by the presidents, sultans, and chancellors of the Earth, past our barricades and quarantine zones, our throngs of tourists, our strapping armies...

And into the nearest forest.

I rubbed my eyes and smiled at Miu. "Do you remember what they looked like, from the docuholos you've watched?"

"Uh," she stalled, and I knew she was trying to figure out how to describe shapelessness.

"Like...blobs?" I nodded. "Big blobs, sort of see-through, with sparkles inside."

"Those flecks of light were due to bioluminescence."

"Bio-loo-mess-mens?"

I chuckled. Our little one could be so adorable. I wish you were here to experience her trying to learn big words.

"Right. Like tiny stars inside their bodies, shining because of chemical reactions within the Coruscean's endosymbionts."

"Endo—?"

"Little creatures that lived inside of the Corusceans, in harmony with the larger organism."

She hugged the pillow harder as she considered this. “Like my tummy-helper bugs!”

“Exactly. Not just one being, but giant, mobile ecosystems.”

“So what did the aliens and their end-too-simba-yonts do?”

“Well, as they moved farther into those forests, they stretched their tendrils high into the canopies and deep into the ground.” I splayed my fingers as far as they went, then reached over and tickled Miu. She laughed and kicked and the pillow she was holding bounced to the floor.

“Their bioluminescent goo glowed for days among those trees.” I stooped to pick up the pillow and returned it to her open arms. “And then, without any warning, they oozed back to their ships, closed the doors, and left.”

She looked up at me with those eyes.

“Just like Mom?”

We decided to split a tiramisu for dessert that night, remember? You raised a spoonful of coffee-flavored goodness above your head as you described how their ships had lifted off into the sky, leaving humanity with a scientific puzzle that would take years of painstaking research to decipher.

What puzzle? I asked. Didn’t the story end when the Corusceans left Earth without a trace?

Oh, but there was a trace. Chemical studies of the soils where the Corusceans stood in those forests showed elevated levels of volatile carbon compounds. These were mirrored by intense amino acid signals in the trees themselves—as well as in the shrubs of the understory, the mycorrhizal networks of the forest fungi, and in the root bacteria that capture nitrogen from the air. It was like we’d found the molecular echoes of a conversation long past.

Sifting through a breadcrumb-trail of citations to reconstruct a web of papers from hundreds of years ago, you learned that, after vigorous debate, the scientific community concluded that the Corusceans had somehow chemically communicated with the forests. But not just any forests. Old-growth forests, the wisest of which were hundreds of millions of years old.

Kenya. Iquitos. The isle of Borneo.

Utah. West Malaysia. Off the coast of Madagascar.

Northeast Australia. The shores of the Caspian Sea.

We should have noticed the pattern sooner, but our fixation on ourselves blinded us to the idea that anyone would cross the cosmos to Earth for the purpose of talking to anyone but us.

The excitement in your voice grew with every word as you recounted humanity’s foolishness.

How presumptuous we’d been to think that alien visitors would look upon the endless forms of life on Earth and choose to speak to us—the infants of this planet! Earth is 4.567 billion years old. Life has been around, in one form or another, for ninety percent of that span of time. The first light harvesters emerged three-and-a-half billion years ago. Trees have existed for over four hundred million years, spawning riots of growth all over the world,

coevolving with their fungal partners and the denizens of the biomes they created. Most of the forests the Corusceans mingled with had been around for thousands of times longer than all of human civilization!

As I relayed these facts to Miu, she instinctively stared out the window at the redwoods. “Wow,” she said, full of wonderment.

“No one knows why the Corusceans took so long to leave their ships, but it’s probably because their sense of time is different from ours. A year to us is a big deal, but for trees or Corusceans, a year might feel like a minute.”

I paused to let her think about this: how differently the Corusceans perceived reality; how they had ignored our form of intelligence, brushed aside our kind of complexity, and headed straight for the forests; how they had communed with the trees—those silent sentinels, just standing there, with arms outstretched, leaves drinking sunlight, exhaling oxygen for the rest of the world to breathe.

And when Miu was able to speak again, do you know what she said? Our little girl asked, “What did they say? The trees. To the Corusceans. What do you think they *talked* about?”

Trying my best to rein in tears, I told her, “That question—that question is exactly what your mother’s research found. She dug up evidence of people all around the world wondering about that very thing. If the trees could talk to the aliens, what would they have said on our behalf?”

Miu looked at me, expectantly.

“The world was very different back then. Humanity was—” how should I put it? “—less responsible.”

I reached for Miu’s hands and held her ten fingers in my own. “By that time, we had cut down thirty-five percent of the forests on Earth.” I curled three of her fingers into her left-hand palm to represent the fallen. “And we’d ruined eighty-two percent of what was left.” I closed the rest of her left hand into a fist, as well as four fingers on the right, so that only one lonely thumb remained untouched. She looked at it with a mix of shame and awe.

“The planet’s health was draining fast. We were polluting the air, poisoning the waters, messing up entire ecosystems on a regular basis, wiping out species so quickly that people began comparing humanity to the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs—the cause of another mass extinction.”

“How could people be so mean?” Miu asked.

“Not mean,” I said, “just careless. We couldn’t see past ourselves. We thought we were the most important thing on this planet, that everything else’s purpose was defined by our use for it. Trees grew to supply *us* with lumber; fish swam the seas for *us* to trawl; minerals sat patiently in hillsides, waiting for *us* to extract them. We spoke of the ‘frontier’ as land we could own and ‘wilderness’ as that which we would ultimately tame. We viewed ourselves as above the rest—until the Corusceans came.”

Waving at the sky, I said, “When those aliens looked down upon our planet from outer space, they did not see us the way we saw us: *humanity!*—and then the rest of the world. They did not view us as the masters of life on Earth, not even our planet’s spokespeople. Compared to million-year-old forests, what were we? Ephemeral, chaotic bags of flesh. Unworthy of the Corusceans’ attention.”

I looked back at our daughter. “It was only when we saw ourselves through those alien eyes that we realized how necessary it was to mend our relationships with the rest of the world. With the forests, the fungi, and everything else—including each other.”

Miu glanced across the room, and I followed her gaze to that holoimage of the three of us. The one on the bookshelf, taken four long years ago. She held my hand and I squeezed back.

“The way the Corusceans’ visit changed us was a story lost to the ages until your mother reassembled the pieces during her PhD. She argued that the aliens shifted something in people everywhere, made us think differently about ourselves—that was the crux of her dissertation. Through their neglect, the Corusceans filled us with...”

How had you put it that night, as you walked me home after dinner?

...humility on the one hand, grandeur on the other. They taught us that we exist as just one node in a vast network of interactions that is far greater than we could have ever imagined. Understanding these links showed us we were at once powerful and fragile, interleaved with the world in a shared ecological fate. We needed to find ourselves again, rediscover our place within the whole.

Walking by my side, you told me that in the years after the Corusceans departed Earth, basic science had drawn oodles of funding. Astrobiology, naturally, witnessed its golden age, but there were major breakthroughs in all fields. People studied chloroplasts with renewed ferocity to discern the phototrophic secrets of those microscopic marvels, laying the foundations for our global liberation from the shackles of fossil fuels. We discovered how to monitor fungal networks to gauge the health of ecosystems, how to make lab-grown meat more cost effective than slaughtering entire animals, how to harness energy from the humidity in the air, how to radiate infrared through windows in our atmosphere’s spectrum to cool our warming world—brilliant innovations that we take for granted today. Eventually, we even learned to speak the language of molecules.

What’s more, we reorganized our society around the precepts of limitless compassion, well-being, and global homeostasis—the values we hold today—letting go of a mindset of insatiable growth and instant gratification that ruled us for centuries. Market economics faded into a new field of forest economics.

But you know what’s ironic? you said as we approached my door. It’s that humanity had known its purpose all along. We’d just forgotten.

Before the rise of science and machines and computers, our ancestors in every corner of the world—whom the Coruscean generation called ‘Indigenous peoples’—had lived in reciprocity with nature since time immemorial. Their secret? An ontology of relationality: a way of treating the nature as a collection of more-than-human persons, each imbued with sovereignty and requiring respect; a way of valuing things not for their material properties, but for the way they involve themselves in lives and symbioses; a way of seeing ourselves as something deeply entwined within—rather than separate from and dominant over—the wilderness of the world.

With this as our credo, we would become caretakers once again.

I got up from the sofa to retrieve the holoimage of the three of us. I handed it to Miu, whose hands clasped its silver projector.

“Your mother’s research revealed the moments when humanity realized that we could no longer pretend to be isolated from our environment, pretend to be a civilization in a bottle, pretend we could shield ourselves from the global impact of our very existence.”

She couldn’t stop looking at the three happy people in that holoimage.

“And it was because we finally saw ourselves through the eyes of the ultimate Other. An Other who came from out there,” I gestured to the beyond. “An Other whom we didn’t even know how to talk to...until now.”

With what seemed like great effort, she tore her eyes away from your image and locked them with mine. It was as if she were searching my soul, drilling into my sadness, feeling for the first time the depth of my regret. “Is that why she went away?” Miu asked. “To talk to them?”

Before you left, the only thing we could agree upon was that I needed to keep the truth from our daughter until she was ready to hear it. At the time, suffering an inferno of resentment, I could not have begun to imagine what that moment would look like. But the smoke had settled. This was it, clear as day.

I nodded. “Six years ago, telescopes found the Corusceans’ homeworld orbiting an orange star dozens of lightyears away. We don’t think that they communicate with radio waves or any other form of light transmission, but we do know that they signal chemically. That means we have to get close enough to touch.”

I drew my arm around our daughter’s shoulder.

“Because of her research on the Corusceans, your mother was chosen to lead the expedition to their homeworld. She’s on a ship now, sleeping, just three years into a three-hundred-year journey. When she wakes up, she’ll try to convince them, somehow, that we’ve matured as a species, that we’re ready to talk.”

A wave of fear passed over Miu’s facade, so I added: “Oh, I’m sure she’s fine. And I’m sure she can do it. Your mother was the most persuasive person I ever knew. The most brilliant and driven person, too. She always had to find the answer, solve the puzzle. And this was the grandest mystery of all: When we arrive at their world, will the Corusceans recognize us not just as humans, but as Earthlings? Will the Others finally see us, and by seeing us, redeem us?”

I sighed. “She was everyone’s top choice—everyone’s except mine—to go out there and make first contact.”

First contact.

My heart was racing as we stood outside the threshold of my apartment building at the end of the night.

Thanks to the Corusceans, humanity gained a planetary perspective, and in so doing, reclaimed a sense of reverence for all the interwoven processes we collectively call ‘Earth.’ This awakening, I believe, is the reason why we are here today. The reason why we’ve become stewards of this world, thriving in concert with our planet.

And so, to symbolize our reckoning, to remember our ancestral ways of existing, and to transmit this wisdom from generation to generation, we began celebrating Unpotting Day.

When people are born, they receive a potted plant from the region of their birth. They care for that plant throughout their childhood, and on their eighth birthday, they make a pilgrimage to their native forest.

They take the plant out of its pot, releasing it from the artificial walls we built for it, and put it back into the ground. Into the infinite possibilities of connection.

As the profundity of Unpotting Day's true meaning sank in, a pressing question condensed from the mists of my mind: So humanity has been performing Unpotting Day for hundreds of years but forgot that it was connected to the Coruscans?

You shrugged. *Origin stories fade and metamorphose with time. Do you know why some people tell children that a fairy will invade their homes at night to take their baby teeth away? Or why some enjoy dousing one another in colorful herbal powders at the beginning of spring?*

No, I admitted, but someone must know. Surely I could look it up.

And the reason you can look it up is because an anthropologist wrote up their research.

You smiled and touched my hand.

First contact.

Back to work, you said. And then you walked off into the starry night.

Our daughter, whose name you chose because it means 'seedling' in Cantonese, set the holoimage in her lap and looked toward the trees.

"Mom's unpotting herself," she whispered.

I was startled once again by this remarkable young mind, who in mere moments had divined what years of heartache would not reveal to me. The true nature of your mission was not to abandon us, but to unpot humanity from the lonely gravity well of Earth, reach for a relationship like no other, and plant our entire world in a new web of cosmic connections.

Outside, a gust of wind blew through the trees. Miu watched the branches wave, then looked up at me.

"I'll do the ritual," she said.

A smile spread across my face. "You will?"

She nodded. "I thought Unpotting Day took Mom away. But now I think it can bring me closer to her, too."

I held her tight.

"Happy Unpotting Day, Miu."