

The Planet That Didn't Care

Matthew Baker

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We were expecting some fanfare when we landed. After all, we had landed in the central plaza on the main street of the capital city, and our initial surveys from orbit had indicated the species that inhabited this planet had never before encountered extraterrestrial life. Presumably, this would be the most significant event in the history of their world. And yet the populace streamed past our ship without even a glance in our direction, clutching dark coats to their frames and battered satchels to their sides, hurrying off toward destinations unknown. We climbed atop a nearby fountain, announcing that our ship came from a distant galaxy, proclaiming that their species was not alone, but they continued to ignore us. We thought our translators might not be working, so we checked, but our translators were on. Although our crew wasn't generally given to melodrama, we had been looking forward to getting some attention—perhaps some parades, maybe some galas, signing photographs for admirers—and so admittedly we were quite embarrassed by our reception, or lack thereof. A drone issued us a citation for parking in a restricted area. Lacking any local currency, we had to walk to the government headquarters, which took the better part of the morning.

We soon discovered that the planet was home to a fantastically popular virtual reality. Members of the populace worked the minimum amount of time necessary to pay for food and shelter, thereby keeping the civilization running, and otherwise spent as much time as

possible in the virtual world. After explaining this to us, the ruling council of legislators—too anxious to return to the virtual world themselves to bother with us any longer—offered us a souvenir flag and then got back to work. We found ourselves being ushered out onto the street in a state of shock. Our civilization had created virtual realities of our own, of course, but none of our virtual realities had ever produced an effect like this on a populace. We couldn't imagine what could possibly be so captivating about the virtual world that this species had created. Admittedly, we were so curious that we talked of nothing else on our walk back to our ship. So there was a genuine sense of luck when, crossing an intersection in a shopping district, we happened to notice a hotel with a sign that advertised virtual reality facilities for those in town on business. By now night was falling, and natives were rushing through the doors of the hotel, already undoing the buttons of their jackets and removing the straps of their satchels, eager to return to the virtual world. Feeling somewhat shy, but also excited, we slipped into the lobby, hoping to experience the virtual reality ourselves. Yet because their species was quite different from our own, possessing several senses that we lacked and lacking several senses that we possessed, we discovered that we were neurologically unequipped to connect to the virtual reality, leaving us only to wonder what type of universe might lay within. The staff, as busy as the rest of the natives, refused to waste any time on our questions. Crushed, we returned to our ship to heat up a meal of leftovers.

From there we went ahead with the mission as planned. Unloaded the rovers from the ship, left the capital behind in a whirl of dust, and spent nearly a local year exploring the planet. The sights that we saw there amazed us. We rappelled into caverns that glittered with crystalline formations. We dove from waterfalls into lagoons that shimmered with bioluminescent waves. We encountered elegant winged creatures and magnificent scaled beasts and animals with branching antlers that posed briefly in the fog before bounding

off into the ferns. We ate on ridges padded with bright mosses. We camped in forests where the soil was covered with vibrant leaves. We crossed fields of glowing lava and crossed glaciers of sparkling ice and were startled by geysers suddenly erupting to breathtaking heights from colorful pools. We had journeyed to countless galaxies, toured planets of all varieties, visited wonders beyond number, and without doubt this was most spectacular world we had ever seen. Yet wherever we went, no matter how quaint the village or remote the town, we could not find a soul who considered the wonders of their planet preferable to their virtual world. Whatever meadow of wildflowers we stopped to picnic in, whatever beach of palms we stopped to sunbathe on, we never encountered a single native. We discovered a canyon of staggering beauty, and when we looked around, we were alone. Eventually we had seen everything, so we returned to the capital, where we loaded the rovers back into the ship. Then flew away, to no fanfare whatsoever, to explore a universe that had once seemed incomparably beautiful, and that now felt just so-so.

About The Author

Matthew Baker is the author of the graphic novel *The Sentence*, the story collections *Why Visit America* and *Hybrid Creatures*, and the children's novel *Key Of X*. Digital experiments include the temporal fiction "Ephemeral," the interlinked novel *Untold*, the randomized novel *Verses*, and the intentionally posthumous *Afterthought*.

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