



## HAMMAMAN'S PARALLEL UNIVERSES

It was a bright spring day and the parking lot's asphalt was beginning to warm. The lot served a football stadium and was enormous. The dome that had been set up in the lot was enormous too, almost as big as the stadium.

"Yo, Dayvon! I think it's called a teepee, not a peete!"

Herb sighed and looked ahead. He was maybe thirty men back from the dome's entrance now, still a ways to go but better than being a thousand back like when he'd joined the line nearly an hour before.

Red, white and blue trucks were buzzing around everywhere. About half were panel trucks marked SUPPLIES, and the rest were tankers marked AIR. The way they backed up to and took off from the dome made Herb think of bees worrying a big blue flower. The dome was basically a huge bladder of blue plastic tarp material contained within a cage of galvanized tubing. Air from the tankers kept the bladder inflated.

"That's what I said!" Dayvon shouted from behind Herb. "A peete!" He and his friend Tyrane had been carrying on a conversation across a dozen men in between. They started out talking about family, then they bitched about white people for a while, and then they compared notes on where they intended to go. Dayvon said he wanted to get himself a harem in Vermont. That surprised Herb, since Vermont had a mostly white population, but Dayvon said that Hammaman's found him a universe where the state didn't have any ofays in it. According to him some runaway slaves

got together with the Indians in Vermont hundreds of years ago and drove all the white people out. So he planned to go there and put together a harem of squaws in a teepee.

Herb wondered if Dayvon and Tyrane would have talked the same way in front of women and children. Transport days at the domes alternated between male and female and between children and adults. The brochure that came with the sign-up package said the alternating had something to do with the technology. There was a picture of a young, smiling family in the brochure, and the caption beneath it said that even though not everybody could jump at the same time, they could reunite on the other side.

The line moved forward and Herb accidentally kicked the heel of the man in front of him. It was an old Jew with a beanie on the back of his head. He scowled over his shoulder and said, "So to you I'm invisible now?" then he turned away muttering about the klutzy goyim.

Herb would be glad to get inside the dome. Once there he'd be able to line up with people of his own race. The brochure said the segregation was necessary on account of the technology, same as with the genders and ages, but a disclaimer made it clear that providing unequal service on this side of the jump was illegal. Depending on where you went though the rules could be different. You could even go to a universe where you wouldn't have to live with people of other races. Like Dayvon in his ofay-free Vermont.

Herb had read through his Hammaman's brochure until it was coming apart at the folds, and he knew from a section about the history of the company that its reclusive founder lived in Louisiana. That fit with the commercials, which usually featured Cajuns. The ads that ran on Herb's favorite hunting channel starred a recurring character

named Pierre. He wore grubby clothes and a Red Man tobacco cap. In the latest commercial he was paddling through a swamp in an old pirogue that trailed a line from a fishing pole. The chitter and rasp of swamp creatures drew you into the place, then after a moment Pierre paused in his paddling and looked at the camera. "It's me back again," he said with a thick Cajun accent. "If you tired 'a da hand you been dealt, cash it in an' come on down to Hammaman's Parallel Yuneeverse." He started paddling again, and the camera shifted to show him passing through a door frame that stuck up out of the water. Then the picture cut to a sleek black cigarette boat, one of the long speedboats that drug runners use along the Gulf Coast. And on the cut, Hammaman's official theme song kicked in. It was Johnny Mercer's big band version of "Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive." Pierre looked like a different person after the cut. From his swamp clothes he'd switched to a dark blue blazer and a white captain's hat with lots of shiny gold on the bill. He was standing at the wheel of the boat and grinning ear to ear as he skipped along the glass of an open sea. He looked at the camera again and yelled above the roar of the boat's motor. "Ah lahk mah new baby!" He waved a hand at the boat. "You could get one jus' lahk it if you come on down to Hammaman's! An' it don' matter if you a po' boy where you at! You pay whatchu can now, an' we fix you up wit' a good job on da odder side!" After giving the camera a thumbs up he roared away with Johnny Mercer singing, telling viewers to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative.

The cost for transport to a parallel universe was steep, but Hammaman's held to what it promised about partial payment now. Herb was glad they did, because that was the only way he could have afforded the jump. Even after selling everything he owned he didn't have enough to

cover the cost of his ticket. But he wouldn't mind working to pay off the debt. All he needed in order to be happy was beer and TV at the end of the day, plus two or three hunting trips a year.

The line moved forward and the old Jew in front of Herb reached the door. He straightened his beanie and stood waiting. The door had a couple of LED squares on it. The one with a red X was lit, but after a few seconds the green checkmark blinked on and the Jew pushed past it. Herb moved forward and entered when the check gave him the go-ahead.

A man just inside the door asked Herb for his paperwork. He had a Cajun accent and was dressed in a red jumpsuit. Herb took his printout from a pocket and handed it over. The attendant scrutinized it and then poked at a handheld electronic device. As Herb waited he listened to the din of voices inside the dome. It was a low murmur punctuated by an occasional shout or laugh.

The attendant returned Herb's printout and directed him to the Caucasoid table, one of four tables in the middle of the dome.

Herb looked around as he walked across the floor of white plastic squares. They were the quick-assembling, interlocking kind. The brochure said Hammaman's could put one of the domes up in three days. No small feat, given the size of the things. Herb estimated that the interior of the one he was in was close to a hundred yards across, with sidewalls twenty feet high and a ceiling that rounded up to about forty. The latticework of the metal frame outside cast dark lines on the plastic, except across the top, which was white plastic instead of the blue used everywhere else. The white disc was about fifty yards across and flooded the interior of the dome with diffused sunlight.

A solid white wall ringed the inside of the dome. It was tall and had open doorways set into

it. The recesses were spaced evenly every few yards. They were red inside and identified by big blue numbers stenciled above them. The numbers ran from one to sixty-five.

Herb reached his table and got in line. A couple dozen guys were ahead of him. He looked to the left and right. The setup was just like in the commercials. He was in line at the Caucasoid table, the one for white people. It was between a Negroid table for blacks, and a Mongoloid table for Asians. Beyond the Mongoloids was a table for "Mixed and Miscellaneous."

The lines in front of the doors around the perimeter weren't as long as the ones at the tables. They were based on the jumpers' primary interests rather than race. Herb wondered which line was for hunters.

The dark-haired man ahead of him spoke over his shoulder. He said he wouldn't miss Dayvon and Tyrane. "Neither will I," Herb said, and the man turned around. Tattoos ran up his arms and into the sleeves of a Harley-Davidson T-shirt.

"You order with or without dark meat?" he asked Herb.

"Pardon?"

"You got any Negroids where you're going?"

"Uh, no, I don't. I checked 'no' on all the race boxes except Caucasoid."

"Me too. Look at them." The man gestured to the line of blacks. Several of them were shoving and threatening one another. "The Caucasoids and Mongoloids are nice and peaceful, and so are the ones in the mixed line. But the Negroids? Bunch of apes. And I can smell their feet from here."

A voice behind Herb said, "That's basically what they say about us." Herb looked back and saw that the speaker was a gray-haired man who held a briar pipe to his mouth. There was no smoke coming from the pipe but the bowl was

scorched.

“I ain’t nothing like them,” the tattooed man said.

“Not to outward appearances,” the other said, “but you are culturally.”

The tattooed man started to say something else, then just snorted and shook his head. But Herb was curious. He turned sideways in line so he could talk to both men, and he asked the pipe smoker what he meant.

“Well,” the man said, “blacks adopted redneck culture and. . . Oh.” He nodded to the tattooed man. “No offense intended.”

“None taken.”

“Then as I was about to say, the Africans who came to America as slaves needed to replace their lost tribal cultures with something new. And since most of them lived in the South, they tended to emulate the poor whites there. They watched and learned, and over time they developed a culture with both African and redneck elements. It was a regional culture before the Civil War but expanded after the former slaves were able to travel.”

The tattooed man said, “So you think I act like a nig. . . a Negroid?”

“I didn’t say that, but let’s do a quick comparison. Both black culture and redneck culture tend to, one, resent authority, two, mistrust education, and three, practice a Jesus-based religion.” He pointed with the stem of his pipe. “I think I see a crucifix there among your tattoos.”

The tattooed man rubbed a forearm and turned to face forward again. The line moved and Herb shuffled sideways so he could continue his conversation with the pipe smoker.

“You sound like a professor.”

“I used to be. Taught anthropology. My name is Muldane.”

Herb introduced himself, and he and Muldane

talked. Or Muldane talked and Herb listened. The professor gave a mini-lecture on Masai mating rituals, then he got onto the topic of divisiveness. "A small number of people control the world," he said. "If the masses were to unite then we could easily overthrow them, so they keep us divided. They're masters of manipulation, and they've given us either/or societies. In America for example you're either for the Republicans or you're for the Democrats. You're either for or against abortion, for this war or that and so on. We're presented with wedge issues and forced to take sides. And the most effective wedge issue of all is race. It's the great divider because you can usually tell at a glance if someone's different on a genetic level. So our federal government keeps a heavy thumb on the race button. They say they don't of course, but then they give us things like affirmative action, preferential admissions policies in colleges and preferential hiring in employment. Those are divisive practices that make many of us feel disenfranchised, which creates tension. That's the way the people who control the world want it."

The professor seemed to run out of steam, but after he sucked on his pipe for a moment he asked Herb where he was going.

"To Louisiana. The swamp."

The tattooed man turned around and said, "Like in the commercial?"

"Yes. It looks peaceful. I want to get a pirogue and just enjoy the solitude, maybe hunt alligators and bear."

The professor chuckled and said, "I wanted to have a bit of fun with Hammaman's, so I set them what I thought would be an impossible task. I told them I wanted to study primitive cultures in Africa, but like both of you gentlemen I checked the 'no' box on Negroids. And to my surprise Hammaman's said they found a universe for me." He

chuckled again. "I bet they had to sift through trillions before they found an Africa without blacks. No telling what its primitive cultures will be like." He returned to sucking on his pipe and stared off into space, lost in thought.

The tattooed man reached the table and was processed. Herb watched as he handed his printout to a man in a red jumpsuit, who read and then typed something on a laptop computer. "So you goin' to . . . Fefan, Truk," he said with a Cajun accent. "Don't know where dat is, but Hammaman's'll git'chu dere. An' let's see . . . you five-foot-ten?"

"Yeah," the tattooed man said. "Why's that matter?"

"Folks in Transport will need to fine tune dependin' on how tall you are." The employee handed over a plastic card and pointed to a door. "Jus' take dis to twenny-fo' an' you be all set."

Then it was Herb's turn to be processed. He presented his printout and the man typed. He confirmed that Herb was five-foot-nine and then he said, "Hey, I know dese coordinates. Dis mah granny's ol' parish." He looked at Herb. "Why you wanna go dere, man?"

"Because of the commercial. I liked what I saw."

"Yeah, but dis here da swamp, not da ocean at da end 'a dat commercial."

"That's what I want, the swamp."

"Well, alraht den. You good to go." He handed Herb a card and told him to join the line at door number thirty-one. "An' be careful 'a dem gators when you git dere," he cautioned as Herb walked away. "Dey bite you on da ass, an' you ain't got no ass left!"

Herb went to his door. A jumpsuited man was on duty beside it, and a dozen or so customers were waiting to pass through. Several were dressed in ghillie suits—the puffy weaves of camouflage cloth



strips—and one wore hip waders and a necklace of duck calls. Herb was definitely in the hunter's line.

He studied the lines to the right and left. One was made up of whites and Asians. Each man stood reading a book. On the other side was a line of blacks and whites who were tossing a football around. Beyond them was a line of men with gas masks covering their faces. Probably climate alarmists, Herb thought, going to universes where they could eat soy burgers in solar-powered houses.

The man in front of Herb was tall and ghillied. His suit had lots of white in it. Herb asked him where he was going.

“To Alaska,” he said over his shoulder. “I want to hunt big game in a universe where Trump wasn't cheated out of his re-election.”

“So you think the election was stolen?”

The man turned around and scowled down at Herb.

“Hey,” Herb said defensively, “I think it was stolen, too. But not many people talk about it anymore. They're afraid to.”

“Well, you and I don't need to worry about that now, do we? We're leaving. So yes, I say the presidency was stolen. The theft happened on Election Day 2020, but the true overthrow of the government occurred during the certification of the electoral votes on January sixth, 2021. As soon as Republicans began to challenge the legitimacy of the votes, federal operatives disguised as Trump supporters staged a riot at the U.S. capitol. And then the complicit news media told us that the country had just experienced its most dangerous crisis ever. You remember all that.”

“Yes, I remember,” Herb said, and he thought of how America had begun its descent into tyranny just days after January sixth. Democrats and turn-coat Republicans joined forces to launch a war against the right-wingers they claimed were behind

“the insurrection.” Dozens of conservatives were jailed without due process, then dozens more, and then hundreds. And once the warrants were flying, the liberals began to turn on one another; if you called yourself a Democrat but didn’t support the persecution of conservatives, then you too risked imprisonment.

When the number of political arrests passed a thousand, a podcaster Herb listened to made a sobering prediction. He said, “America now has a despotic federal government, and the people who run it know they can never relinquish control. If they do they’ll be executed for treason. That means we’re about to see concentration camps. The government has no choice but to lock up its millions of critics. Hitler had camps, Stalin had camps, and they’re coming to the U S of A.”

So a lot of people were worried about the future, and then, like the answer to a prayer, Hammaman’s Parallel Universes appeared with its revolutionary new technology. The company’s transport centers began to spring up around the country and people felt hopeful for the first time in years. Hammaman’s offered an escape from uncertainty and fear.

The man in front of Herb stepped forward and handed his plastic card to the attendant. Herb leaned sideways and looked past the ghillie suit to the door opening. A red wall and red carpeting were just inside.

The attendant fed the ghillie man’s card into a slot on the wall, said, “Six-foot-three” into a lapel mike, and then gestured to the door. “In an’ to da raht,” he said with a Cajun accent. “Your destination,” he smiled, “she awaits you.” The ghillie man stepped through the door and disappeared to the right.

Herb moved forward and presented his card. Being so close to the door now he could hear music

coming from inside. It was Johnny Mercer's "Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive," from the commercials.

The attendant fed Herb's card into the slot by the door, radioed "Five-foot-nine," then smiled and said, "To da left. Have a good trip, man."

Herb stepped forward, turned left and started down the hallway. It was about three feet wide and completely red. Some little lights in the low ceiling provided visibility, but not much. Herb walked slowly. The carpet felt thin underfoot.

"Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive" faded out and then started over again. The hallway made a ninety-degree turn to the right, then one to the left. Herb sang along with Johnny Mercer under his breath. "You've got to ac-cen-tuate the positive, e-lim-inate the negative. . ."

He made four or five more turns, a couple of them one-eighties, and began to feel as if he were lost in a maze. He wasn't sure where he was going but it was away from the center of the dome. The noises from there faded, smothered by the music, and then he heard the faint growl of truck engines. He knew he was getting close to the dome's outside wall and he started to worry. Where was the transport room they showed in the brochure? Hammaman's better not try to rip him off. He'd sold everything he had and they better give him his money's worth.

He turned another corner and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the wall straight ahead. A ceiling light just in front of it illuminated the words TRANSPORT WAIT HERE stenciled in white letters on the red.

Herb stopped at the wall and stood waiting, wondering if he'd be told to go left or right. Hallways ran in both directions. After a moment he shifted his weight from one foot to the other and realized the carpet felt a little thicker than what he'd been walking on. And he couldn't be sure, but

he thought he heard a squishy sound below the music when he changed his stance. Could the carpet be wet? He was about to bend down to check when he saw some movement up high. Something wiggled, first to the left side, then to the right. He didn't know what the wiggles could be and turned to check out the one to the left.

He took a couple of steps and looked up. In the dark red overhead he saw what appeared to be the toes of a pair of boots sticking out over the edge of a platform, one toe to each side of his head. Then the outline of a head and shoulders leaned into view. A voice like a loud grunt said, "Here da hamma man!"

A powerful blow knocked Herb back and down. His head and shoulders hit the squishy carpet and he lay face up, looking at the light on the ceiling.

A man yelled, "He turn left, Baptiste! You owe me a beer!"

Herb couldn't move. He felt blood running down his temples and past his ears. He saw the pale faces of two men peering down from opposite sides of a platform directly above.

"Hail no I don't owe you no beer," a different voice said. "You whack 'im too high."

"Dat 'cause dey make a mistake on da five-nine. It trew mah swing off."

Somebody grabbed Herb's ankles. A door opened and he felt himself being dragged toward the rectangle of light.

A panel truck was backed up to the door. The truck's rear doors were open and Herb could see a pile of bodies inside, men with their foreheads bashed in. Just before he was thrown on top of the pile he heard Johnny Mercer sing about eliminating the negative.