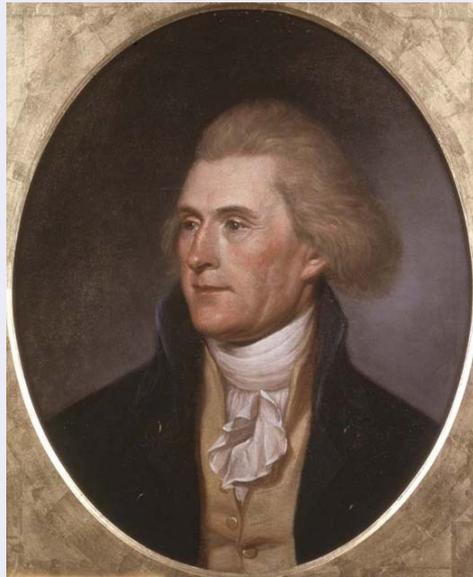


Thomas Jefferson Goes to the Supermarket



*A short story by
Barbara Pleasant*

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When he went on his morning walks in the woods, Thomas Jefferson often left the main path to follow a smaller trail that led to a dark mountain cave. It was always cool beyond the dim overhang, and he liked watching the bats that hung from crags overhead. One day he was surprised to see faint light entering the back of the cave, which he had always thought was mountain and rock. But the weather had been rainy, and a landslide could have created an opening on the other side of the mountain.

Later that night by candlelight, he checked his maps to see where such a cave might lead. The land surveys showed steep cliffs on the mountain's north side, but the view from such a vantage point might encompass all of Charlottesville. It was worth looking into, but planting season was under way, and his people were busy from dawn until dusk.

He tried not to think about it, but when he returned to the spot a week later, the light from the back of the cave seemed even brighter. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he took a few steps deeper into the rocky cleft. Fresh, cool air blew through the opening, which was taller than a man. He had come in the afternoon, his morning taken up with correspondence, and the late day sun illuminated the cave's new opening, lighting his way.

But when he picked his way through the cave to a tumble of rocks and loose soil on the other side, it looked like no landslide he had ever seen. Off to his right, enormous moving machines groaned as they pushed and scooped the soil like giant insects, the hillside crumbling under their force. He rubbed his eyes, wondering if he had hit his head without realizing it. He felt his forehead, but he wasn't hot with fever. The machines were still there.

Where was he? He didn't think he was dreaming, though he rather hoped he was. He moved away from the machines, to a shady place where he sat down on a log to rest. His wrist hurt like it always did, so he must not be dead, but what was this he was seeing? Down the hill, shiny metal boxes with black wheels rolled about and gathered on the side of the most massive brick building he had ever seen. They seemed to be carriages of a sort, but the building was not a military fort, because many of the people coming and going were women and children, and

the closest things he saw to uniforms were bright kitchen aprons worn by people who appeared to be workers.

There were so many people! There were many Caucasians as well as Negroes, some dressed in bright colors. He saw dark-skinned men wearing turbans, and a few elegant women with their heads covered with scarves. Consulting the map of the world he kept in his head, he saw people from Europe, Africa, India, Persia, China, and the tropical lands to the south. They treated one another with courtesy, which snapped him out of his reverie. Had equality really prevailed? It had been one of the great dreams of his youth. Maybe it had worked out.

After watching for an hour, he found his way back to the cave, and crept through the dim space to the familiar trees and boulders on the other side. He didn't trip once, which reassured him that he had not lost his mind. Idiots tended to stumble.

He was astonished and relieved to find everything at home unchanged. Sally welcomed him by squeezing his arm and taking his jacket, and he apologized to Martha for staying out so long. He could tell she was worried by the deep wrinkle between her eyebrows. Next time he planned to be gone longer than usual, he would warn her in advance. She was a good daughter who worked hard running his big house while seeing to her own family, and he did not want to cause her distress.

Besides, he was tired, ready to eat a good meal and consider the day's events in solitude. Then he could make plans to go back.



Charles Hensley was proud of his job of manager of the new Vital Foods store in Charlottesville. A hard-working perfectionist, he was always impeccably dressed, with his tie straight and his suit jacket buttoned. He could tell that some of the white country kids were afraid of him because he was black, but they would get over it, or they wouldn't. It was their problem, not his.

He prowled the store several times a day, moving oranges or grapefruits back into line in the fruit display, or checking the supply of disposable forks in the deli dispenser. His actions were intended to have a ripple effect, which they did. When he stopped to pick up something from the floor, an employee soon appeared with a sweeper.

It was a tough market with plenty of competition. Vital Foods was popular now because it was new, but Charles knew he would need more incentives to keep customers coming back. The free Saturday sushi tastings were doing well, but they needed to do more.

His marketing manager, Meaghan spelled with extra letters, was full of ideas that she picked up during the hours she spent doing social networking. She was a local girl with mysterious tattoos on the insides of her forearms, but she had trained at the company's New York headquarters and was supposed to know what she was doing. But she was different from other people he had known, more southern, and he struggled to trust her and to understand her mountain accent. He wished he knew more about what went on in her head, what she really thought. He could not read her, and it bothered him.

Back in August, when the white supremacists came to town soon after the store opened, she tailed him with her camera and posted pictures of him doing his job, or so he thought until he looked closely at the Instagram images, showing him among Vital Foods shoppers. There were many types of people, but he was often the only black person in the frame, and always the star. What was she doing? He decided to ask her about it.

“Well,” she said, hesitating before answering. “Mr. Hensley, can I be frank?”

“Please do.”

“Everybody with a brain knows how wrong those haters are, but what can you do? Light a candle? It might make you feel better to go to a store run by a respected Black man. I did it on purpose. Sorry if you're offended, please don't be. And don't fire me, either.” She made a small smile.

“I won't fire you,” he said, “But please, let's focus on the shopping experience. Can we do that?”

“Sure, boss,” she said.

Both she and Charles were burrowed in doing office work during Thomas Jefferson's first visit to Vital Foods.



For a week he had thought constantly of the things he had seen, or possibly imagined, and knew he must try to return, even if it was a descent into madness. After walking slowly

through the cave, he dusted off his boots, made sure his hair was tucked into its clasp, and strode toward the building. One of the metal carriages stopped to let him pass, and he tipped his hat.

He thought the building was a retail endeavor, which he should be free to enter if he conducted himself with proper comportment. He walked a few paces behind a young man, for whom the glass doors slid open with a whooshing sound. The young man took control of a wheeled cart, so he did the same. It was then then he noticed the light. Instead of becoming dim, as it was inside the great castles of Europe he had visited, inside the building was aglow from white objects that shone like shards taken from a full moon.

Standing amidst bins of enormous apples and perfectly blushed pears, he wondered again if he was dead, and was living in some version of Heaven. Soft music seemed to emanate from the air, with no musicians he could see, and there were exotic potted flowers in bloom, stacked into a pyramid. He walked slowly from one display to another, looking and reading labels, but afraid to test the realness of the fruits and flowers by touching them. Then a young man offered him a square of cheese on a tiny wooden stick. It was a rich, creamy cheese that tasted of Holland to him, and he was delighted to find his taste buds intact.

A woman and her daughter, who he guessed was around ten years old, thanked the young man as they took samples from his tray.

“He looks like Thomas Jefferson,” the girl whispered to her mother, who gave him a quick stare and then smiled.

“She says you look like Thomas Jefferson,” she said.

“I’ve heard that,” he said, touching his hand to the brim of his hat. “Good day to you, madam.” He turned and walked slowly down a wide aisle, following the smell of fish. He thought he might come upon some sort of fish pond, but instead found cleaned fish and prawns laid out on beds of crumbled ice. He moved on. Moments later, the little girl and her mother approached him as he puzzled over bright boxes of Cocoa Pebbles and Cheerios.

“Pardon me, sir, but my daughter wonders if you will pose for a selfie with her. You’re the guy from Monticello, right?”

“Well, yes,” he said, taken aback. “The guy from Monticello.”

“I thought so. We’ve heard about you, but never made it up there on festival days. You are really convincing!”

The little girl moved to stand beside him, and he clasped his hands behind his back, trying to appear presidential. The woman held a metal square object in front of her for a few seconds and said “great, great,” though he was not aware that anything had happened. After they said goodbye, he walked for a while through other parts of the store, posing for more selfies, whatever those were, and began to feel dizzy when he found himself among a thousand bottles of wine from places that did not exist. Where was California, and how did you pronounce it?

He left the store through the swishing doors and slipped around the corner of the building to rest in the shade. In his pocket he felt the sugar cookie wrapped in stiff paper given to him by the pretty young lady with blue eyes and chocolate skin who worked among the baked goods. He ate it as he entered the opening into the cave, which recent rains had made wet and muddy. The cookie was as delicious as any he had eaten in France.



Meaghan found Mr. Hensley on the quiet side of the store, going over shipping paperwork with the wine manager. When they finished, she led him aside and smiled. “You should tell me when you’re doing something like that Thomas Jefferson thing. That way I’ll be ready. Instagram and Twitter are all over it. We’re hot today.”

Charles pulled his phone from his pocket and tapped the store’s Instagram feed. There was a Thomas Jefferson impersonator smiling at a baby, smelling a woman’s bouquet of flowers, pointing at the live lobsters in the tank. Who knew you could do such a thing?

“It was just a trial, to see how it went,” he said, wanting to maintain authority.

“It went great. But I always heard you couldn’t hire that guy, that he only does gigs at historical sites, mostly Monticello. That’ll be a coup if you can get him back.” Meaghan raised her hand for a high five. She was already thinking of ways to engage TJ when he returned. She would definitely keep him in produce, where people got juiced up on colors and smells and tended to buy more before they headed to checkout. Besides, it was her favorite department. A few days before, she had placed bananas in a wooden bowl with a sign that said “Choose me, I’m single,” and it was getting a steady stream of posts and shares.

Every kid in central Virginia grows up learning about Thomas Jefferson, including Meaghan. She checked his bio on the net and saw that his birthday was coming up, so she decided to do an info blitz with the small chalkboards she had at her disposal to use around the

store. Often she used them to put up silly messages like “An avocado is the perfect gift,” but this time she would use them for historical trivia. She had a good hand for lettering. On the large board that could be hung above the store’s entryway, she printed a quote she thought would make a good opener:

“The movements of nature are in a never-ending circle.” Thomas Jefferson

Above the tomatoes she placed a sign saying that Jefferson had been one of the first American gardeners to grow them. Across the store in frozen foods, she hung a sign explaining his fascination with ice cream. She was on her way back to produce when she saw him standing by the news stand. Holy, moly, he looked like the real deal. She had wondered what she would say in this moment, but now she knew.

“Good morning, Mr. President. Welcome to Vital Foods.”

“Yes,” he said, trying to smile. He looked a little rattled, as if something in the headlines had disturbed him, and this much was true. The dates on the newspapers agreed that it was April, 2018! Yes, it was April, but he would be lucky to make it to 1818, not 2018.

“I can show you around if you want,” she said, holding one of the metal boxes and touching it with her fingers. “I’m letting Mr. Hensley know you’re here.” She put the box in her back pocket.

He followed her to the bakery, where she ordered frothy sweet coffees for both of them. They sat down at a small table, and he was grateful for the rest. In his pocket he carried a list of curiosities he had seen during his previous visit, because he needed reassurance that he had not imagined microwaveable potatoes or rollerball pens. But there was a new pile of rocks outside the cave’s entrance, and climbing over them had not been easy.

“I’ve been thinking that if there are particular products you like, we could work together to spotlight them for our customers. Your part would be completely spontaneous, of course.” The girl leaned forward as she spoke, and he had the distinct feeling that she was trying to sell him something. But the coffee was good, and she reminded him a bit of Martha, so he gave her a gentle excuse.

“I am not likely to return due to compelling matters at home,” he said carefully.

“I hope nothing serious,” the words came from a tall black man who took the empty chair at their table and extended his hand. “I’m Charles Hensley, general manager here. I’ve

been looking forward to meeting you in person. Did Meaghan offer you something to go with that coffee? This morning they're baking cross buns, for Easter."

So, Christianity had prevailed! He found this discovery deeply comforting, and he was more curious than shocked by Mr. Hensley's kingly presence. He had long hoped that the future would change in ways to allow his dark-skinned children to rise in society, though he didn't know how that could happen. He wondered where Mr. Hensley lived, what his house was like, who his family was.

"No, thank you, Mr. Hensley," he said. "I had only just stopped in for a newspaper, time being in short supply these days." He had begun thinking about the challenge of climbing back over the rock pile, and thought he should get moving. He rose to his feet.

"First let us show you something," Meaghan said. "It's about you."

Charles had already seen Meaghan's signs, so he knew to lead the man to the tomato display. She followed from a short distance, tracking them with her phone camera as the two men smiled at the sign while picking up and smelling several tomatoes. The nearby pineapples attracted Jefferson's interest, and Charles followed close behind him, wanting to make it into as many of Meaghan's shots as possible. Was he playing her game now?

At the newsstand they switched roles, so the last images came from his phone. He especially liked the shot of Meaghan and Jefferson from the side, shaking hands before the old man left the store with a Vital Foods shopping bag hanging from his arm. He hoped it went viral, but Meaghan said they would do better with shots of the two men. "It's the race thing again, boss, but in a good way," she said.

He knew she was right.



Energized by the coffee, Jefferson crossed the parking lot and climbed over an orange cloth fence to reach the woods. He stopped to rest in his usual spot and opened the carton of ice cream Meaghan had given him along with a wooden spoon. Moose tracks, indeed! Folded into the sweet frozen cream there were at least two forms of chocolate, plus a nut candy of some kind. He finished it off and started his hard scramble into the cave.

The cloth bag kept catching on rocks and roots, pulling him off balance, so he left it among the rubble and stuffed the folded newspaper into the back of his trousers. He remembered crawling through the cave's entrance, and had a vague memory of securing the newspaper under a stone in a dry corner of the cave and walking into the sunlight. Then everything went blank until he woke up in his bed, with Martha sitting beside him with a sewing project in her lap. He closed his eyes and opened them again to make sure it was her. His head hurt, just above his left ear. Had he been injured, or sick? That might explain the realness of the dream. He reached up to touch his head.

"What happened?" he asked, his voice hoarse.

"Oh, Papa! You're awake!" She wrapped her arms around him and kissed his cheek.

"It would seem so," he said.

He later learned that there had been an earthquake, a tick-tock of two seconds when the earth shook and everyone heard a loud rumble. A few pieces of dinnerware crashed to the floor, and then everything was still, and the birds started singing again. Three men were sent to look for him, and he was found on his favorite trail, out cold from being hit on the head by a falling tree limb.

Even after he regained his strength, Martha and Sally were a unified force on the issue of his walks. He could go out wandering only if he took one of the older children with him, who usually turned out to be good company. He especially liked the slight little boy everyone called Eddie. An inquisitive child, Eddie always did what he was asked, and listened attentively when lectured on things like the downward movement of water. Eddie was the right child to go with him to the cave.

As he had suspected, the dark back of the cave was filled in with rock, sealed off by a wall of boulders as it had always been. He told Eddie that he had left a journal in the cave before the earthquake, and to help him look around for anything that looked like bits of paper. They found salamanders, spiders and one pale scorpion, but not a shred of the 2018 newspaper he had hoped to find. He sat down on a rock to think.

The best explanation was that his experience had been a dream, it being the nature of dreams to weave together elements of real life in strange ways. Meriwether Lewis had written of moose-deer, which his mind had melded with ice cream to make moose tracks. The machines moving under their own power were odd, but the puffs of smoke they made could have come

from steam. Besides, you couldn't crawl through a cave and come out two centuries into the future on the other side. It was impossible, just like so many of the things he had seen.



Charles often picked up and read the shopping lists people left in their carts, which were rare finds now that most people kept lists on their phones. He liked looking at the handwriting, and the spelling, which gave him a link to the customer. He imagined their gender, their age, and why they needed almond milk instead of regular. The lists usually made sense, but this one had him stumped. On a piece of rough paper, like parchment, *rollerball writing pens*, *micro-waveable potatoes* and *kombucha* were written in elegant dark ink that resembled calligraphy, with other items added in wide pencil, or perhaps charcoal. *Protein bar*. *Avocado*. *Huggies*.

He folded the list and put it in the paper recycling slot near the front of the store. Then the thought crossed his mind that it might have belonged to Thomas Jefferson. Right.

