

# Collapsing Isobars

*"For I Am Knowledge and Ignorance"<sup>1</sup>*

By Thomas M. Ciesla, 2009

*It was an exceptionally pleasant Saturday morning; a cloudless sky, low humidity (for Houston), a slight breeze, and mild temperature. The weather inspired us to have an alfresco breakfast at a neighborhood restaurant. As we pulled into a parking spot, I noticed a woman sitting in a shadowy recess of this up-scale strip center. I'd seen her walking through the parking lot several times before.*



*She was an elderly woman of African American descent, dressed in a heavy coat and wearing a stylish hat. Surrounding her were two wheel-mounted upright suitcases and two over-stuffed plastic bags. As we walked past her, my wife and I gave each other uncomfortable glances. It was obvious this woman was homeless, the suitcases and bags containing all of her worldly possessions.*

<sup>1</sup> From 'The Thunder: Perfect Mind'; The Nag Hammadi Library In English. HarperSanFrancisco, 1988, E.J. Brill

*“She was just sitting there, crying when we walked up to her.”*

At the restaurant we ate in silence until my wife asked, “She’s homeless isn’t she?” I nodded in agreement, “I’ve seen her a few times this month.” As we were about to leave, my wife suggested we get some bread and pastries to-go. “For the old women?,” I asked. She nodded in agreement. “I was thinking the same thing,” I said, “Let’s get a coffee to go with it.” She was still seated in the shadows as we set the coffee and pastries next to her on the bench, “A little breakfast for you, darlin,” I told her. “Bless you!” was all she said.

In the car, my wife was visibly upset, “She was just sitting there, crying when we walked up to her.” I held her hand, “I know sweetie, I saw the tears on her cheeks, it must be difficult to be alone and homeless in this town.” The woman’s accent sounded Cajun, “She must be a Katrina victim.” In the days after Hurricane Katrina, Houston absorbed over a quarter-of-a-million people from Louisiana and Mississippi.

Weeks later I was back in the same strip-center to grab some lunch at a Tex-Mex restaurant when I saw the old woman again. This time I didn’t ignore her, “Remember me? How about some lunch? My treat.” She looked at me suspiciously. “Do you like Tex-Mex?” She nodded in agreement. Since she was still totting her bags with her, I suggested that we sit outside on the patio to avoid any problems inside the restaurant. We sat in silence for a moment, menus in hand, when I asked her, “What looks good to you?” No response, as she just stared at the menu. Watching her eyes it dawned on me that she might not be able to read, so I made a few suggestions, and she picked cheese enchiladas. To drink? Water, while I had my traditional Margarita. I extended my hand to her, “I’m Thomas. And you are...?” No response. We ate in silence, our eyes meeting only occasionally. As she stood to leave, I stood up with her and offered, “How about we meet here again on Friday at the same time?” Again, no response, she just collected her stuff and wandered off across the parking lot.

On Friday, I sat at the same table on the patio for about a half-an-hour, sipping on my Margarita and wondering if I’d made a mistake. I was just about to ask for the check when I noticed her in the distance, walking through the parking lot towards the restaurant with all of her bags in tow.

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She sat down without saying a word. We ordered the same meals; she had water, I had another margarita. I glanced into one of her plastic bags and noticed a bottle of Thunderbird wine. So, she wasn't a tea-totaler after all. Despite my attempts at small talk, it was another meal eaten in silence on her part. As we finished, she rose to leave and I stood up and said, "It was nice to see you again, Big Mamma. See you next Wednesday." She looked at me confused, so I explained, "Since you won't tell me your name, I'll just call you Big Mamma." By the look on her face I couldn't tell if she was amused or irritated by the name.

Seeing that bottle of Thunderbird brought back memories of meeting Big Mamma Thorton one afternoon. I was sitting on a park bench with some friends when a limousine pulled up and out stepped Big Mamma Thorton with a bottle of Thunderbird in her hand. She sat and talked for a while as she sipped from the bottle. Then after asking for directions to where she was doing her concert that night, we watched as she stumbled back into the limousine and drove off. I heard later that it was a great performance.

Wednesdays and Fridays became the routine for our lunches. It was on our tenth luncheon that Big Mama finally spoke. "I stepped on death yesterday," she told me matter-of-factly, "and now its smell is creepin' up my leg and I can't get rid of it." She pulled her coat aside to show me her lower left leg, which looked perfectly normal to me. "I'm afraid," she said. I tried to assure her that everything would be fine but she wouldn't hear of it, "I stepped on bad joo-joo, now troubles comin' my way."

She missed our Wednesday luncheon, but showed up that Friday minus her bags. "Where's all your stuff?," I asked. Tears started to well up in her eyes, "Gone, all gone." Someone had stolen her stuff while she slept in a nearby field. All she had was what she was wearing. To change the subject, I picked up a menu, "The usual?" She bit her lip for a moment and then asked, "Do they have fish tacos?" They did. "I'd like that, with black beans and white rice."

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After the food arrived, I told her how sorry I was that all her belongings were stolen. What was stolen? She said it was mostly clothes, shoes, soap, lipstick (though she wore none), but most importantly, all her family pictures. “Family?” I asked, “Where is your family?” No response. “Do you have family nearby?” A few moments later she said, “Gone, all gone.” I wasn’t sure what she meant by that, but decided not to pursue it. As we ate our lunch, I devised a plan to help her. When she rose to leave, I grabbed her hand and asked her to sit for another minute. “Meet me here tomorrow, same time.” She gave me that suspicious look again, “We don’t do Saturdays. Why you want to meet?” Letting go of her hand I told her, “You’ll see, just meet me here tomorrow.” As she turned to leave she paused and said over her shoulder, “My name is Alice.”

That evening I explained the situation to my wife, who apparently was reading my mind when she said, “We have to buy her some stuff.” Luckily, that same strip center housed a discount clothing store, a drugstore and grocery store. Though we were in a position to provide her with clothing and such, we weren’t ready to bring a stranger into our home. But there was an alternative: we could rent her a room at a motel not far from the strip center and provide a gift card for the restaurant next to it.

Before meeting Alice Saturday morning, we stopped by the motel and made the arrangements. At the Tex-Mex restaurant, my wife stayed inside while I sat on the patio waiting for Alice – I didn’t want to scare her away by changing the routine. She was a half-hour late as usual, saying nothing as she sat down. When she was settled in, that was my wife’s cue to come outside, “You remember my wife don’t you?” Alice made a move as if she was about to leave but I grabbed her hand. “It’s okay, we have a nice surprise for you.” I pointed at a store across the parking lot, “My wife is going to help you pick out some clothes – our treat. We know you lost everything and we want to help a little.”

Her reaction surprised us. She slapped the table, stood up and shouted, “I don’t take no charity!” The folks around us were all staring, “Sit down please. It’s not charity Alice, think of it as a loan. You can pay us back and it doesn’t matter how long it takes.”

After thinking for a few minutes, she agreed to the deal, "And I will pay back," she said, pointing a finger at me. I stayed at the restaurant and watched the two of them walk towards the store. Later, my wife called as they were checking out, my cue to bring the car around to the front of the store. I watched Alice in my rear-view mirror as she looked all around the vehicle. "Something wrong?" She opened her mouth but hesitated, finally saying, "I've never been in something like this. This is nice." She went on to explain that she never owned a car or even had a drivers license.

She walked to where she had to go and came to Houston on a bus caravan.



As we pulled into the parking lot of the motel, she asked, "What's this place?" I handed her a key, "You have a room here for seven nights," and then handing her the gift cards, "These are for that restaurant over there." She said nothing. After helping her with her shopping bags, my wife gave her a hug and handed her a pre-paid cell phone, "Here, this has a hundred minutes of call time on it. Maybe there's someone you want to call?" When my wife returned to the car she told me that Alice had tears in her eyes. It was the second time she saw Alice cry, but she couldn't tell if these were happy tears or sad tears.

The next Wednesday a strong breeze was blowing through the trees and pushing litter around the parking lot of the restaurant. That morning the weather station had news of collapsing isobars between high and low centers, creating tightly packed pressure gradients that drove these winds through southeast Texas. Alice was already seated on the patio when I arrived. I barely recognized her without her signature coat and hat. She was dressed in slacks and blouse combination, with a white sweater. Now, instead of looking homeless, she looked like a woman meeting girlfriends for lunch. Hooked on the back of her chair was the umbrella my wife insisted she get for protection from the rain, and the hot sun. She looked older to me. Without her hat you could see that her hair was mostly gray, and without the heavy coat and the scarf that was always around her neck, she looked thinner and her skin wrinkled. I guessed that Alice was in her sixties.

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As we ate lunch (more fish tacos), I asked how the motel room was working out. "I like watching TV," was her only comment. When I asked her if she had enough left on the gift cards for her meals, she nodded and said, "I only eat once a day, 'cept when I come here." Did she need a little cash – remembering the bottle of Thunderbird in her bag. No she said, my wife had given her some cash when they were shopping. When we were about to leave, I offered to drive her to the motel, but she said, "No child, I'll be fine." Then she placed the cell phone on the table, "I don't need this. No one to call, nothing to say." I suggested she keep it in case of an emergency, but she just laughed and turned to leave. I watched her for a moment as she walked away, her sweater fluttering in the wind. She used the umbrella like a cane as she favored her left leg. I considered going after her and insisting that I drive her, but then I thought better of it; she may have lost everything, but she still had her dignity.

On Friday, Alice was once again seated on the patio when I arrived. As I approached the table she smiled – I had never seen her smile – as she brushed her hair away from her face. I suggested we sit inside today since it was so windy, but she preferred to eat outside, "I like sitting here." She seemed in unusually good spirits, even initiating some conversation by asking how my wife was doing. After a little chit-chat about the weather, she lowered her voice and leaned towards me, "I talked to God today," she explained, her eyes widening with excitement. I paused a moment. "Do you mean you had a vision?" "No, no, I talked to him just like we're talkin'." (*Uh-oh, Houston, we might have a problem*). "Where did you talk to him?" She gave a little wave of her hand, "He was sitting in the booth next to me, sipping on a Bloody Mary."

God's in a diner drinking a Bloody Mary? Okay, sure why not, "What did he look like?" "He was a lot younger than I thought he would be, and nice looking, for a white man." (God is a white man?) I could swear that Alice almost looked like she was blushing. Now I was curious, "How did you meet?" "He asked me if I was enjoying my breakfast, and he knew my name," as she nodded to emphasize the importance of it. "What else did you two talk about?" She smiled, "Oh, all sorts of things that happened over the years, he knew all about me. I asked him how he knew so much, he told me that he was God."

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(Hmmm, something smelled fishy), "And you believed him?" She turned her head in an almost movie-star pose, "Only God could know what he know. And he gave me real good news; he said there's a bad storm comin', but I'll be fine."

To change the subject I asked her if she wanted to stay another week at the motel, since tomorrow night was the last night there. I thought another week of air conditioning might be a nice thing. This time she reached out and grabbed my hand, "I'll be fine, child." As she was about to leave I tried once more to give her back the cell phone, but she just shook her head and walked away. As she made her way through the parking lot I noticed that she was using umbrella as a cane again, still favoring her left leg. That evening I thought about Alice and what it must be like to be in her shoes. No roof over your head, no friends, no family, no one to talk to – it must be a achingly lonely life. I remembered back to that time we gave her some pastries and coffee as she sat alone, the tears streaming down her face. She was alone in a shopping center filled with people – ignored, seemingly invisible – and I regretted not trying to help her when I saw her weeks earlier before that encounter.

My wife and I had made a pact with each other a few months earlier about being kind to strangers. One Saturday we were in a popular neighborhood to meet friends for lunch, walking around and window-shopping to kill some time. As we crossed the street, an elderly gentleman crossed with us, and mentioned something about the weather. When we gave him a quick answer over our shoulder; he tried to continue the conversation but we just kept walking, in a rush to meet our friends. It was later that evening that I realized that the man was probably lonely and desperately wanted to talk to someone. When I mentioned it to my wife, a sadness came over her and we both felt painfully guilty over our insensitivity. We could have paused for a little while and talked with that gentleman but we were too absorbed with ourselves. That evening we agreed we would both be more aware of those situations and not brush someone off. It was that experience that pushed me to engage in a conversation with Alice.

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That next Wednesday Alice was a no-show; I waited about forty-five minutes before giving up. Fortunately the winds had finally died down so it was a pleasant wait on the patio. That night, I thought of Alice as a rain storm swept through town with plenty of thunder and lightning; at least she had an umbrella. On Friday, again I waited, but no Alice. I started to worry about her: was she hurt, in a hospital, or in jail? I called the local police station and emergency clinic to see if they saw anyone that fit her description — but no one had. She never told me where she slept and there were just too many fields in the area to search.

The next Wednesday I went to the restaurant, but once again, no Alice. I asked the staff if they had seen her at the restaurant or even walking around the shopping center, but no one had. While I sat there waiting, I realized that after all these lunches I knew practically nothing about Alice. I surmised that she was from New Orleans, but she never told me where she was from. I didn't know her last name or what she did on the days we didn't have lunch. I didn't know how she was able to eat, where she slept, where she washed up. I didn't know anything about her except her first name and that she recently talked to God. On Friday when Alice was a no-show again, I decided to give up on our lunches. I wanted to believe that she was all right; believe that maybe she went back home. Part of me wondered, however, if I was foolish to dismiss some of the things she told me.

Maybe, Alice is far wiser than I am. Maybe a person can in fact step on bad 'joo-joo', or talk to God over breakfast and a Bloody-Mary. Maybe her personal isobars collapsed on that stormy night and took Alice down the rabbit hole one last time. Maybe. Or, maybe you can talk to God while having lunch on the patio of a Tex-Mex restaurant, or while crossing the street with an old gentleman.

I recall Mathew 25:35, *"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me."*

Just maybe.