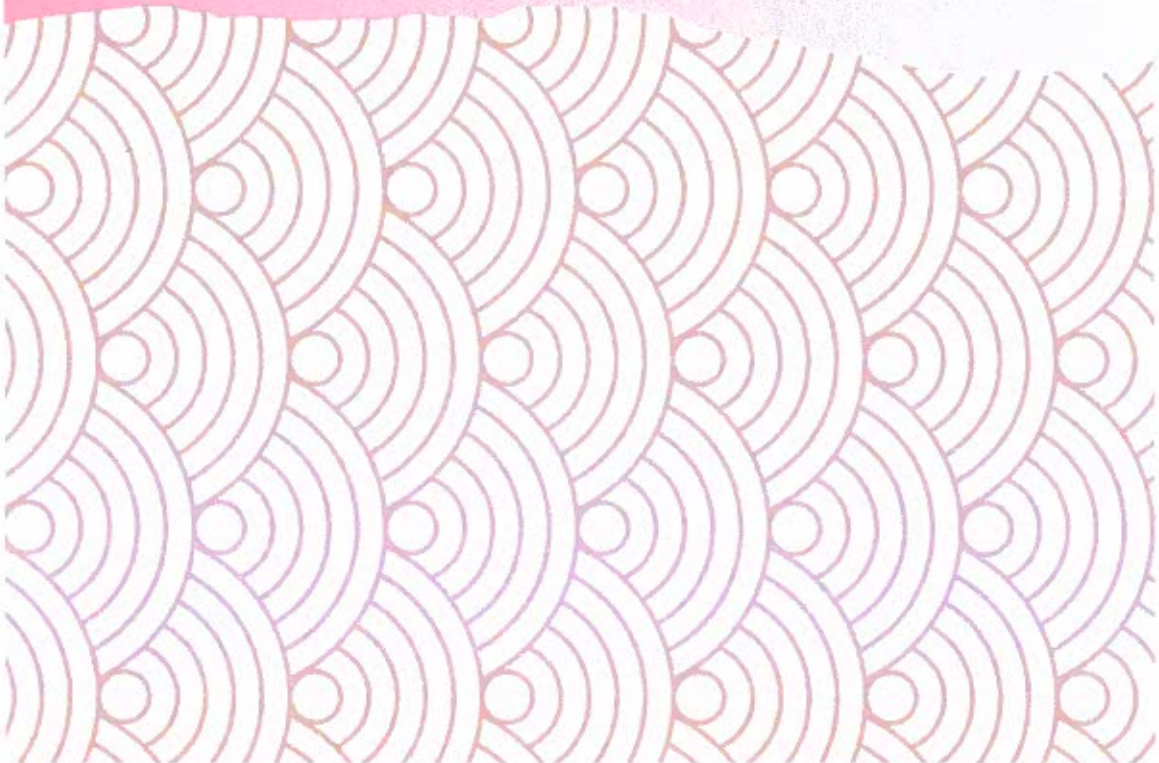




*Cross Bronx
Expressway*



The Cross Bronx Expressway

The Cross Bronx Expressway is an experience of twentieth century transportation and contemporary alienation. Cut out of glacier rock and surfaced in asphalt and concrete, the expressway is a six-lane canyon that wends its neighborhood-destroying way through the lower sections of the Bronx.

Commuters daily travel the stretch from the county of Queens right across to the George Washington Bridge, into New Jersey, without seeing, hearing, or caring about the people whose lives are centered in the homes, the storefronts, and the streets of New York City's poorest and most physically devastated borough.

Depending on the time of day, truckers speed or crawl from New England to New Jersey along this oil-streaked arroyo. Its banks are constantly littered by many empty, stripped shells of burnt out, rusted automobile carcasses.

Drivers from near and far make their way relentlessly along here seven days and nights a week without knowing the people under whose lives they pulse or through whose territory they traverse—unaware, unmoved, unconcerned about the dwellers of the high plateaus on either side of the gully.

That's how it was designed. That's how it works.

The early December sun in the penultimate decade of the century shone mercilessly into the windshield of his sputtering car as he headed out of Queens and onto the Throgs Neck Bridge. He was glad when the downward curve on the Bronx side put the sun behind his right shoulder. Now he only had to make sure not to look into his rear-view mirror and he would be okay.

What he'd just left behind at home was enough to keep him from wanting to look back, even if it hadn't been for the blinding light of the recently risen sun.

He shook his head to regain concentration on the roadway and fished for the token to toss into the exact change lane basket. Scanning the toll plaza ahead he looked to see which lane had the fewest cars in line. His tendency to move to the right was instinctive after three years of traveling from Whitestone to Bergen County every day.

As he glanced across the roadway, the sun's glistening off the ice on the waterline caught his attention. There was the broken down, once-white stucco building with its eroded sign, "Bronx Beach." On the shore, where families once came with blankets and baskets for summer picnics, there were scattered garbage piles torn out of green plastic sacks by roving bands of mongrel dogs. Where oiled bodies formerly stretched out to tan in the warmth of the sun, now only scraps of an abandoned car's hood reflected the morning's rays into its broken windshield. Feet that once needed sandals to protect against shells today would require work boots to avoid the rusty nails in boards long ago pulled off the empty boathouse windows. The only showers left in the greying ruins were sprays of urine from man and beast relieving themselves in some amount of privacy before picking through the scraps or slugging down another shot from a brown paper bag.

But none of the early morning commuters knew of any of this. The only toll they knew of was their exact change. None knew the exacting toll that change had etched across the Bronx. The Expressway was built that way. That was the way it worked.

Likewise, the woman driver who cut in front of his car to get into the toll before him had no idea where he was coming from this December morning. Knew nothing of what he left behind, nor had to look forward to when he returned.

The bills were outrageously staggering. There was no way he could envision ever paying them. The home care for his elderly parent had been burden enough. But his wife's recent illness and her recuperation, now expected to take another six months, was more than he could afford.

He'd gone bleary-eyed watching C-SPAN rebroadcasts long into the night as he waited to give them both their allotments of medicines over the last several months. He'd had about all that he could take of the televised talk of catastrophic health care costs. Many of the congressional leaders in office sounded terrific. But they all seemed long on rhetoric and short on results now in 1987. He found himself wondering if Ted Kennedy's brothers could have done better. But no one would ever know. So why bother trying to figure it out? *Just to pass the time*, he had guessed in his inner musings. Of course, there was that TV special in late November about the anniversary of the Dallas assassination. That had probably gotten him thinking about the connection, as he watched the youngest brother speaking about health care in Scandinavia during the joint committee hearings on the aging.

It seemed lots of his ideas lately were generated by late night television. Though he had wished he had not allowed himself to see PBS' rebroadcast from two years before of Dustin Hoffman's sterling performance as Willie Lowman in *Death of a Salesman*. That had troubled him for days. It still did occasionally. Especially when he saw how close the choppy waters of the upper East River were to the roadbed of the Throgs Neck Bridge, as it turned and headed toward the tolls going into the Bronx. Exactly where the abandoned beach strand lay high and dry.

He threw his brass token into the exact change lane and started on through the plaza, bearing toward the left and the Cross Bronx Expressway. To the right, the huge rumbling trucks headed toward New England. He tried the radio again, as he had every morning for the last month. Still nothing but static. He just didn't have the money to replace the antenna. That was what it was. He knew. The quarter panel at the base of the antenna was shot through with rust. Rainwater had dripped through the hole and down the antenna wire for the last three years since it was last replaced. The connection under the dashboard rusted out and the contact points were corroded. Last time, when he finally found the part for the eight-year-old model, it cost twenty dollars. It would be an easy forty today, if he could even find the eleven-year-old part. And, with the way his luck was going, as soon as he fixed it, some kid would come along and snap it off for a zip gun. So, he turned the crackling radio off. His life had enough static in it as it was. He didn't need any more.

As he swung into the left lane, he glanced up into his rear-view mirror to see where the drivers behind and around him were positioning themselves for the run through the Bronx. That's when it happened. What he had been avoiding as much as possible for the last few weeks. He met himself in the eye in the mirror. And it all flooded in on him with a surging rush.

About two months ago he'd caught himself eye-to-eye while shaving. Things he hadn't seen in his face before, or at least he had not paid attention to before, were noticeable and bothersome. The lines at the corner of his mouth, the raven's feet at the side of each eye, and the tightness of his skin. It had been smoother and softer, he thought, not all that long ago. More than the calendar had worked its way into his complexion. And the changes, he had feared, were not transient.

But for all that, it was his eyes and not the surface of his face that haunted him most. He remembered a time when his eyes were moist and when light bounced off them. Now they seemed drier and when light hit them, it got swallowed up and disappeared into some deep place he'd never known. The only things his eyes made him think of were the descriptions of black holes in space he'd seen a few weeks back on NOVA one night. They absorbed all energy. No light escaped their grasp. Everything disappeared to some other side of the universe, never to be seen, nor heard from, nor experienced again in the known cosmos. His zest for life was similarly gobbled up in both his eyes. They were no longer mirrors of his soul. They reflected nothing. They told nothing. They just took everything in. No comment. No response. Most fearfully, they took his own blank stare and obliterated it in one long, unanswering, unechoed gulp.

Two other features of his daily scenery also captivated him this winter. In fact, they mesmerized him. One was the waters that swirled below the bridges he drove across to work. The other were the frozen clumps of ice that clung like nature's acne on the outcroppings and in the crevices of the glacier rock that lined the Expressway's steeper walls.

The rounded edges of these bulky opaque ice formations showed how dull they had become in the cold. There were few sharp edges and no crystalline icicles to show they were fighting to melt back to water and run off. Instead, they were captured in place, trapped as victims of their circumstances. The sun's daytime warmth never truly reached them enough to start the flow. The air itself was also too cold and was whipped into freezing gales by the swift moving traffic and the more prevalent currents of chilled air sweeping from the numbing waters of the Hudson on one side of the Bronx to the ice-encrusted upper reaches of the East River in Throgs Neck at the other extremity of the borough.

The icy monuments clung to the glacial cliffs like bad memories of the earlier dark and frozen age that formed the rocks in the first place. He simply could not escape their attraction. He felt they mocked him. Felt they mimicked his misery mercilessly. It was to him as if the waters of his life had been dammed and frozen in their own cruel wintry fate. All the splashing possibilities of different ways to go, the freedom to choose naturally the path of least resistance, the natural desire to seek his own level and pool his resources accordingly; all these were stopped, frozen, captured, and displayed for anyone and everyone to see. They looked horribly like the amputated-above-the-knee stumps of the paraplegic spirit he had become. It was worse than just drying up. At least if he were dried and absorbed into the sands of time he wouldn't be on public display. He wouldn't have to keep up appearances. He could just wither into himself and save the last of his life for himself. But fate had not been so kind.

Maybe that was why the waters looked more and more inviting each week, at first, and now, each day. Each ride to work and back home for the last week he spent wondering which of these two embodiments of his lost spirit was calling to him more strongly—the rocks or the waters.

The waters of the Hudson and Harlem Rivers and Throgs Neck each were individual in their character.

The Hudson was broad and deep. Once in it, he imagined being swept past the Statue of Liberty and out through the Narrows would be pretty automatic.

In the Harlem River, the currents were more tricky, tortuous, but less reliable. He'd be bounced against the rocks that lined the shore and the stone breakwaters that dated back two centuries or more. The thought of being found later was so unappealing, that he would have forsaken that spot. But its deep-sided plunge between three metal and stone bridges, the corkscrew approach ramps, and the railroad below was the most dramatic to imagine. So, the river shores of High Bridge sections of the Bronx and Manhattan remained a locale alluring for the deed, but unsavory as an accomplished act.

Throgs Neck had its own advantages and setbacks. The outer walls were lower at the long curving sweep off the bridge as it headed toward the toll plaza. The arc could become icy enough on a wind-swept grey dawn to assess the tragic drowning unquestionably an accident. But the waters were shallow at that spot. The tolls were fairly close by. It was too risky. An emergency team might effect a rescue. The thought of not succeeding was abhorrent. It was easier to live with the indecision of doing the deed, as agonizing as that was, than to be plagued by the doubting glances of friends and relatives who would forever be uncertain of the accidental nature of the event.

That was the real problem. If Dustin Hoffman and Willie Lowman had taught him anything late in the darkest nights, it was this. Anything he did had to look like an accident. Imagining the sole difference between double indemnity and no insurance check at all was his planning and his execution of the event, in as flawless a way as possible, put added and unduly powerful pressure on the entire question.

And that's why the rocks and the ice kept coming back to the forefront of his mind. Even with the concrete "Jersey walls" in place, there were still a few good glacier rocks quite easily reached at high speed to do the job accidentally. Two were at the base of steep inclines. He'd memorized the graffiti on each. On any given night with a suitable patch of ice and a minimum of traffic, it wouldn't take much. There'd be plenty of witnesses to say how the car just seemed to go out of control. How the driver fought the wheel but just couldn't recover in time. Why, some might even tell the investigating officers, standing out in the frigid cold, that his last act was to avoid two other cars heroically, before slamming into the cliff and collapsing the whole front end of the aging compact car.

Yes, he had gone over it time and time again. Twice a day, at a minimum, for two weeks. Some days he had even lapsed into it at his workstation when things were slow and his mind drifted back to the stack of bills, the groans in the night, the lack of smiles, the absence of physical intimacy, the glazed television screen, the persistent laundry, the endless shopping, and repeatedly fruitless trips to all-night pharmacies for the latest attempt to stave off what was gradually becoming apparently inevitable. He'd been through it step-by-step so many times, it all came back in a roaring flash flood when he caught himself eye-to-eye in the rear-view mirror this brutally cold Bronx Wednesday in December, with just about two years left before the last decade of the twentieth century.

He felt unprepared. Caught off guard. Yet totally committed and ready just the same. He was past the Throgs Neck. He decided he couldn't leave the car to jump off one of the bridges without giving up the claim to an accident. So, in one quick, blunt moment the decision for the rock was finalized. He'd set up two work meetings for the next day to leave clear signs that he expected to be there. He'd call to confirm his wife's weekend doctor appointment. And then, after working overtime to get ready for the hastily arranged meetings, drive into oblivion on the way back home this very night.

It was planned. That was the way it would work. That's the way it was.

He was halfway through the Bronx. He was coming up on Third Avenue and wondered when the last skeletal remains of the old elevated railroad would be torn down. Wryly he thought, "*Not in my lifetime.*" He looked back into the mirror. No look had ever horrified him more. His waiting until that night was no stalling tactic. His eyes, so utterly blank and listless for eight weeks now showed something new. Colder and deeper and more tightening than anything he'd ever seen or could have imagined before. It was his look of absolute despair and total surrender. The chill that went up his spine sped right back down it again. He felt an immediate need to get to a bathroom. And once there, he didn't know which end of him was going to explode first from the fear that seized his stomach and bowels.

He sped along, looking frantically to see if he could get over and catch an exit ramp up into the Bronx. Maybe a gas station or something would have a rest room. But he fought the urge and the panic. He imagined wasting time looking and finding nothing decent to use. A filthy washroom. One with no paper goods. One with a broken mirror to mock him in his soiled clothes. Then he would have to go home again. He couldn't stand it. So, he pushed on faster, hoping to find relief in a gas station on the Jersey side of the river, along Route 4.

He was emotionally distraught. Even though he had decided not to get off the road, he kept cutting across the two faded white lines to be in the right lane anyway. He was out of touch with himself. His mind said one thing. His body did another. He desperately searched for something to distract himself. Why didn't the radio work? It wasn't fair. He convinced himself, but the distraction was short-lived and ineffectual. He was still pre-occupied with the need to get to a washroom. He was struck with fear at the thought of his death, but totally convinced that he would inevitably take his life and his car into a wall that very night.

Why not do it now? The question surged out of his dark and fixed stare into the mirror. The disgrace of being found in his car with his pants messed was the only motive that something, some irrevocable sense of dignity even deeper within, found as a reason to stay on the road.

Two overpasses swept past, and he was heading into the longer pseudo-tunnels under the concourses that arched the Expressway. He then came up to the Yankee Stadium exit at Jerome Avenue. A spray-can-embroidered subway train crept overhead on the El. From some primal pit of pride, he refused to advance the hour of his demise. The light traffic of the early morning sped along without incident and a jet lurched by, climbing steeply to escape the City. He was closing the distance to the last exits for the Bronx, Amsterdam Avenue in particular, as he regained some control of his discomfort.

The surge of pride had dulled his fear enough to relax the need to evacuate everything he'd wolfed down for breakfast. He could almost sit up straight again but did so gingerly. Another cramp like that last one and everything would simply let loose. He felt a

momentary sense of calm and switched over into the middle lane, after checking his outside mirror. He didn't want to see himself in the rear-view mirror again, until tonight's final trip. He vaguely promised himself to eat very lightly at lunch and to skip the idea of having one last meal. That way he'd avoid going into the Route 4 diner with all its mirrors behind the counter and lining the wall by his favorite booth. He just didn't think he could stand seeing that look in his eyes again.

But he did see the look. Again. Right then. Suddenly. Without any warning. And he almost drove right off the road. Ironically, if he had, he would have struck down the woman whose eyes were gripped with the same exact desperate glare.

He couldn't guess her age or national origin. She seemed old beyond the telling of years and devoid of any connection with her fetal past.

Wrapped against the cold with only a slim, worn out shawl draped across her slumped shoulders, the ageless woman shuffled down the side of the exit ramp in a pair of absurdly fluffy, pink slippers. Her red shopping bag was decorated with holiday greetings and a white star from a pricey store in Manhattan. Her grey overcoat traipsed down to her ankles but was open to the lashing winds. There were a few buttons, but she hadn't bothered with them. Her once-white gym socks had long since lost their elasticity and were bunched up atop the slippers, exposing her bare legs for a few inches before the torn ends of a pair of black sweatpants dangling below her knees. A plaid pattern wool shirt and grey sweater completed her outfit. She held the bag in her gloved hand. The other had only a palm covering. Her quivering fingertips were unprotected from the biting gale.

She was descending from the upper regions of the Bronx. That was not how things were supposed to be. But once despair reigned, rules and conventions of society counted for very little. In an instant her eyes locked onto his. In that moment he knew they were kindred, dispirited, soulless mates with a common fate. He panicked. He shifted his mirror so he could see her behind him. He tried, but couldn't break back into the right lane to pull over. And the last exit before the Harlem River was only a hundred yards away. He knew he'd never get over in time.

She reached the base of the ramp and turned toward the river. There was too much accumulated ice and debris on the cobblestoned shoulder of the road, so she stepped down into the edge of the right-hand lane and headed west. Cars swerved away. Horns blared. Voices cursed her out from inside their englassed warmth. And no one stopped. No one rolled a window down. Who'd want to catch their death of cold yelling at some bag woman from the Bronx.

He felt more desperate and less septic simultaneously.

A new urge rose from within. From that same pit in which the last vestiges of his pride and dignity resided.

Inexplicably he did not want her to do it. He forgot about himself. For the first time in a month. He pressed hard against the gas pedal and accelerated into the left lane. He was over the Alexander Hamilton Bridge and heading under the upper Manhattan high rise apartments that sat over the Trans-Manhattan Expressway and the first reaches of the roadbed leading to the George Washington Bridge. He edged to the right and made for the lower roadway approach. In his mind's eye he tried to remember the bottom of the bridge. Where were the emergency phones to reach the Port Authority cops on the Jersey side, by the tolls? They were in the center median along the Bridge. In paved openings only about

four car lengths long, between the concrete dividers that separated the east and westbound traffic.

He sped ahead to get to the first opening and could see it coming up sooner than he expected. He hit the brakes and skidded sideways on all the sand that had piled up along the side of the road after treatment of earlier snowfalls. The car jumped the slanted curbing and he fought it to an abrupt halt just a few feet from the divider.

If he hadn't stopped, the car would have crashed into, and perhaps right over, the divider. Over the other side was a several hundred-foot drop into the cold tides of the December Hudson. Only a chain link netting stretched across the base of the opening might have, perhaps, caught the car before it plunged headlong into the mighty river below.

He'd ironically never considered it. And right now, it was the furthest thing from his mind. But there it was, just the same, staring up at him as he huddled against the cold pole and reached for the rectangular box housing the emergency phone. In just moments he could alert the Authority police and they could be on their way to stop the old woman from jumping off the bridge toward which she was inexorably headed when he saw her last.

The frozen metal box was speckled with ice crystals from the howling river winds. He reached out and grabbed it. Immediately his fingers stuck to it. He gasped and struggled quickly to pull them away without tearing off his skin. That done, he bunched his coat sleeve to cover his fingers and snapped the latch on the box. It was frozen tight. It wouldn't budge open. He smashed it angrily with his forearm three times until it dented and sprung open. He knocked the cover ajar with his elbow and reached in for the plastic phone receiver, as a truck's air horn blasted at him for leaving his car hanging too close to the left lane. He reached into the box while shooting a startled look over his shoulder at the passing semi. Only air and loose wire met his probing grasp.

He stared into the box in disbelief. The phone had been vandalized. The metal protective cord was slashed and left with the useless phone wires dangling out in the frigid morning air. Furiously slamming the box lid shut, he raced back for the car and frantically began to fear the worst.

Jumping in behind the steering wheel and racing the engine to get it warm again, he backed up to the end of the opening, to give himself enough room to get up some speed before diving out into the road again. He jerked his head to check the oncoming trucks and cars. Maddeningly they were speeding away from the curved approach ramp and accelerating to make it up the slight incline onto the bridge. He sat helplessly waiting at the top of the incline for a break in the traffic. Finally, it came, and he almost stalled the car out in his excitement. It caught and lunged forward into the fast lane toward New Jersey.

He knew there were two other such openings on the center median where phones were supposed to be. He concentrated so hard on seeing where the next one was located that he drifted into the adjacent lane slightly and almost sideswiped an upcoming panel truck. Only quick reflexes and a last-minute swerve by the truck driver averted a nasty accident and gave the old woman another chance to live.

From the exertion, his nerves, and being outside on the bridge, he began to sweat profusely. Through the fogging windshield he saw the next box. It was beaten in by a pipe or a baseball bat or something similarly blunt and powerful. The lid hung open to expose the remnants of the second useless phone. It drove him crazy. How much longer would he have to be able to help her? And what would he do if he found he were too late?

The last phone was at the end of the bridge. He decided not to waste time with it. Instead, he'd race the mile and a half to the first gas station on Route 4 and use that pay phone.

The glass booth was easy to see at the far end of the first station. He almost crashed into it as the car slid on the ice still packed down across the exit driveway, past the pumps. It wasn't an automatic tone emergency phone. He fished for change in his pockets and found none. All he had were dollar bills. The kid pumping gas was about thirty yards away and getting paid. He rushed over and demanded coins for "an emergency" while throwing a wad of singles to the kid, who stood dazed.

The quarter clattered into the bowels of the phone and the connection went through. He punched 9-1-1 and got an operator. "Police emergency line. Is this an emergency?"

"Yes, of course it is. She's going to jump. You have to stop her."

"This is a police emergency line. Where are you calling from?"

"From a phone booth at the Mobil station on Route 4, westbound, right off the G W Bridge."

"What is the nature of your emergency, sir?"

He couldn't stand how calm her voice was. He felt offended that she didn't sound as interested as he was. "A woman. She's going to jump from the bridge."

"How do you know that, sir?"

"I saw her, damn it. I know she's going to do it."

The trained and measured female voice responded, while writing coded numbers on a pad and scanning a screen showing her police cruiser numbers and locations. "How do you know, sir? Did you speak to her?"

"I saw the look in her eyes. You know the look I mean, don't you?" he pleaded.

"No sir, I don't. But that's not important. Where did you see the woman and what does she look like?"

"She's a 'bag lady.' And she's walking toward the bridge. She's got a long coat and stupid pink slippers..."

"Where is she, sir? I have to know where she is to send someone to help her."

"She was walking along the Cross Bronx in the right lane, from Jerome to Amsterdam Avenue..."

"How long ago, sir? You're all the way over in Jersey now, you know..."

"Don't tell me where I had to go to get to a working phone, you cop bitch. The phones on the bridge are broken. Why the hell don't you keep them fixed?"

"I have nothing to do with the phones or the bridge, sir. You'll have to call the Port Authority, now. The bridge is in their jurisdiction."

"Wait. Wait. I'm sorry. Listen. I'm desperate. I don't know the number there. Can you connect me? Please! It was her eyes. My eyes..."

"Sir. I'll connect you with the Port Authority now. Hold the line even though it may sound disconnected."

The wait was intolerable. It was, in truth, only eight seconds. But it seemed to him like forever. Had he angered her enough for her to leave him hanging? "*Where are you? Where are you?*" he asked through the deaf and mute receiver.

Then a connection clicked through and a tone sounded. The line was open and a tinny voice replied mechanically. "Hello. Thank you for calling the Port Authority of New

York and New Jersey. All our operators will be on duty at this number by eight o'clock in the morning. Until that time, all emergency calls should be made to the emergency number 201-646-9463 or by using the designated emergency phones in the yellow and red boxes located on all bridges, in all tunnels, and along the approach ramps." At that, the phone disconnected and went dead. The correct number wouldn't be repeated. And he didn't have the initial number to call again.

He simply could not remember the number. He was too stunned by the recording to be thinking straight. He punched the phone three times in total anger, frustration, and helplessness. He hit it so hard he hurt his hand. Instinctively, he reached down with his good hand to cradle the injured one. He saw his gouged knuckles and caught a glimpse of his wrist watch. It was only ten minutes to eight. She couldn't wait another ten minutes. Maybe he was already too late.

Pulling the glass bi-fold door in and open, he ran as fast as he could toward the gas station office. He slipped a few times on the ice and looked almost fanatical to the attendants watching him through the plate glass window. They stiffened when they realized he was heading for them and not his car.

Bursting through their door he screamed, "I need the Port Authority number. There's no phone book in the booth. Do you have one? Do you know the emergency number?"

The kid who had given him change looked at him and fought the urge to burst out laughing at this guy. His face was red. His eyes were bloodshot. He had no hat or gloves and ... then the changemaker saw the blood streaming across the back of his hand. That stopped all thoughts of laughing. This guy just might be crazy. Who'd know what to expect if he were crossed or ridiculed?

"Yeah. Sure mistah. Number's on the wall. Right around the corner there in the garage. Red number. Right over the phone. Need change?"

"No. Thanks."

Digging into his coat pocket for another quarter, he looked up to catch the first three digits of the red number. It was amongst several others in pencil and ink on the oil-smudged square of the wall, with business cards thumbtacked as a frame at eye level. Right on the shelf above the number was an old, yet serviceable, radio for music and news in the garage for the mechanics. The sound of a radio without static came as a shock. The unmistakable clatter of a helicopter in the background of the radio's voice touched a subconscious nerve in him. He stopped in the middle of reaching the coin to the phone and fixed his eyes and ears to the radio.

"We have unusually light traffic on the lower East Side of Manhattan today. There are tie-ups on the West Side though. So, you've got these alternates. Swing around to the FDR Drive and come south to the Triboro, before heading up into Harlem ... or come down the Drive to the UN and cross over into the 50s. Out in the Bronx ... there's smooth sailing on the Sheridan and slow going on the east bound Cross Bronx around the Bruckner Interchange. Avoid the westbound Cross Bronx, though, if you can. Port Authority police are reporting a truck and pedestrian accident on the Expressway by the Amsterdam Avenue exit. Should take some time to clear due to the need for an investigation, due to a fatality. So, take the Major Deegan up to the Bridge if you still have that option ... or get off at Jerome Avenue and use the local surface roads to work your way over to the GW. More traffic and transit in six minutes at eight o'clock. This is the traffic watch helicopter ..."

He felt sick. He stared at the useless quarter in his hand. A fierce cramp seized his abdomen. "You got a washroom?" he almost shouted. The kid wished a car would come in for gas so he'd have an excuse to run out into the frigid morning air.

"Yea. 'round back. Key's right there next to the phone. Yellow one."

He controlled himself only until he got around the corner of the building. The cold air got him and he made a mad rush for the door. He fumbled with the key with his unsteady hands and barely got it in the lock before everything came crashing in on him. He just got inside, the door vacuumed shut quickly behind him, and he fell back against the locked barrier. He saw the clean urinal and toilet. There were all sorts of paper goods. And the mirror was still wiped clean from the night shift.

He shuddered. Everything hit at once. He chose the toilet and just narrowly made it there when he wretched up his breakfast and his frustration in hard, wrenching sobs. His eyes were filled with water and his nose dripped phlegm. There simply was nothing he could do about the attack of diarrhea that struck at the exact same instant. What he thought he feared most, happened. And he was utterly and totally incapable of doing anything about it.

He avoided looking in the mirror for the entire quarter hour it took him to do the best he could to put himself back into some presentable order. He was thankful that his overcoat was as long as it was. Otherwise, he couldn't imagine the walk to return the key and to get to his car.

Standing again in the phone booth outside, but leaving the door open to the morning's cruel wind and fresh air, he called his supervisor: "I won't be in today. I have the flu or something."

"Yea. I hear a lotta that's goin' 'round. Well, get over it fast. See ya tomorra."

He rested the receiver back and held onto it for all the emotional and physical support he could. He was unsure for a moment about whether he needed to get back to the washroom again or not. He decided against it. Just the thought of getting and returning the key again ...

Slowly, he made his way over to the car and carefully got in. He made sure the long coat covered the seat before he placed himself behind the wheel. He wasn't looking forward to this ride home. Nor having to explain. With any luck, they'd both be napping by the time he got there.