



# The Sleeping Man

FICTION

He wanted everything to be OK. Perhaps that was why he drove past the car, only glancing at it. It sat in a wide spot in the road across from his house, adjacent to an empty field.

by CHRIS FABRY

**S**EMI-TRUCKS BARRELED DOWN this shortcut between two interstates, and the highway department had recently repaved the road with a machine that ate the asphalt and spat out new road behind it. Vibrant yellow stripes were painted down the middle, and the road had a surface so smooth it deadened the sound of oncoming cars.

He had seen the car at about 10:30 that Friday morning, and he thought little of it. Motorists often pull off the road there to let impatient drivers pass. Some stopped to make phone calls or text or nap. Parents of children with tiny bladders used the area. So it was nothing out of the ordinary to see the red car with a silver shade over the windshield, the sun glinting. It was evident the occupant wanted privacy. Probably exhausted.

This is what he told himself because he wanted everything to be OK, meaning he wanted a plausible explanation for what he observed about his life.

So he kept the rhythm of that morning by sequestering himself in his office, trying to be productive. A phone call. Answering a few emails. It was a holiday weekend, and the kids were coming Sunday. There was a movie out he wanted to see, but he wasn't sure it was worth the investment of two hours. Age had a way of making these decisions more difficult.



## He wanted everything to be OK, meaning he wanted a plausible explanation for what he observed about his life.

By 2:30 he knew he was done, so he got in his car to go to the store to pick up things for Sunday dinner that honestly could have waited until later, but he wanted to check the boxes. Get it off his mind.

At the end of the driveway, he saw the red car again. It was parked facing the street, and the silver sunshade was gone, but he couldn't see inside from this angle. He noticed the front license plate had the word "Veteran" around the edges. As he passed the red car, he glanced at the driver who sat with his head tilted to the right, his mouth open.

"Asleep," he said aloud. *Good for him for pulling over. No sense driving when you're that tired.*

He had gone a mile before he thought of turning around. Something felt off. Wrong. Nobody naps for hours along that road. They take 20 or 30 minutes and then move along.

"No, he's asleep." And the conversation with himself continued. "When I get back, the car will be gone; he'll be on his way. Everything will be OK. Why do I let my mind spin this way? Why do I always think the worst?"

He shook his head and drove to the store and checked his list and methodically worked his way through the different sections. Hamburger. Steaks. Chicken. Frozen cauliflower. Fresh broccoli. Toilet paper. He found the flavored seltzer he liked that had no sugar or additives other than "natural flavors," whatever that meant. Seasoning for the meat.

All through the store, he couldn't get the man's face off his mind. *What was it that didn't feel right? Was it his color? Was his head tilted unnaturally? Could a person sleep in that position?*

He shook his head and retreated to frozen foods for a bag of triple-berry mix for smoothies.

"It's fine," he said as he passed the dog food. "By the time you get back, he'll be gone, and you'll laugh at this."

Triple-washed spring salad mix. Organic carrots.

He stopped next to the greeting cards. *Why did he park facing the street? Why not pull in and face south, away from the sun?*

He hurried to the front. A long line at the self-check registers. He found a cashier standing idle. The young woman scanned and bagged his items as if in her sleep, never looking up, stating the total and glancing at those queuing behind him. When his credit card was accepted and the machine dinged, she handed him the receipt and said, "Have a good day."

And as she did, she looked at him, and he wondered what she thought. Did she think anything? Did she judge him as OK, as he had judged the man in the red car?

He drove home in a daze, feeling a sense of dread. Each turn brought him closer, until he reached the main road with the bright yellow stripes and the smooth surface.

Ahead, red and blue lights flashed, and his heart sank. Then he saw the white Jeep in front of the sheriff's cruiser and sighed. *Probably caught him coming down the hill behind them. It's easy to go too fast down that hill.* And he smiled and felt relief. Maybe he would watch that movie. That would be a good mental break.

The road undulated, then rose, like a roller-coaster ride that slowly ascended before the steep, heart-racing drop. He crested the last hill and saw the wide section beside the road near his house.

He closed his eyes, literally closed his eyes as he drove, and prayed, *Please, God. Don't let that car be there.*

He opened his eyes and saw the red car, unmoved.

"Oh, no," he whispered.

He had wanted everything to be OK. And as he slowed, then pulled off the road into the dust and gravel, he still wanted the same. He wanted to see the man sit up and wave and drive away.

He stopped in front of the car when he saw the driver's side window. It was shattered from top to bottom. In the right corner, near the top, he saw a small hole, and his stomach clenched.

"Oh, no."

He edged forward now, swallowing hard, and stopped in front of the car, close enough to see the man clearly. Earlier he had glanced at him, not wanting to disturb his slumber. That concern was gone.

The man lay in the same position, his mouth agape, his head tilted to the right. But he was close enough now to see blood.

A sick feeling, something like paralysis, spread through his whole body.

*What do I do? I don't want my wife to see this.*

Instead of calling 911, he turned around and gunned the engine onto the smooth road with the bright yellow lines and raced back the way he had come. As he reached the police cruiser, the white Jeep was pulling away, and he slid to a stop in the gravel, nose-to-nose with the cruiser, and the officer got out quickly and met him between their vehicles.

"There's a man in a car just up the road," he said, his heart racing, his mouth dry. "I think he's dead."

The deputy squinted. "Where?"

He pointed and gave his address and mentioned the wide spot in the road and that people sometimes pull over there, but this was different.

"I didn't think anything was wrong," he said.

The deputy nodded and got back in his cruiser and sped away.

The man sat behind the wheel for a moment, wondering if somehow all his life had been driven by the desire to live in a world that was OK. He had a radical commitment to living a pain-free life, untouched by suffering, avoiding pain and all it required of you. Schedules and duties and work and weekends and trips to the store drowned the truth that no matter how desperately he wanted everything to be OK, it wasn't.

What if he had checked on the man sooner? Could he have helped? And what about the man's family? Was someone praying right then for his safe return?

He drove home, parked in his driveway, and walked to the red car and stood behind it. For some reason, he needed to be there, to stand guard. To keep watch.

For the man inside.

For the family broken by this event.

For those who had cared but were unable to make everything OK. ☹

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CHRIS FABRY is an award-winning author of more than 80 books, including his new novel, *A Piece of the Moon*, available now. If you have a dream to write, find encouragement at [heyyoucanwrite.com](http://heyyoucanwrite.com). Chris is also the host of Chris Fabry Live on Moody Radio.



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DEAR READER,

I often think of my stories as prayers, but this one is more of a lament. After a personal experience in May 2021, a Marine veteran told me the most important thing you can give a struggling veteran is your presence. It's the only way to defeat the enemy of loneliness and isolation. If you're a veteran who needs help, reach out now. The VA's Crisis Line is 1-800-273-8255 (press 1). Veterans Chat is available at [VeteransCrisisLine.net](http://VeteransCrisisLine.net). Veterans Text is available at 838255.