The Dream

*Dreaming as the days go by,*

*Dreaming as the summers die*

- Lewis Carroll

*Miracles happen.*

- Anon.

An exceptionally foggy day and up ahead the traffic jam extended snake-like to the misty distance. Lights flashed, horns honked, wheels turned, and the hot white vehicle smoke mingled with the cold fog, while the sun, far away and powerless, shone a sick, ashen yellow.

Drivers, dressed in well-ironed suits and blazers, and hidden behind crumpled mufflers, flung abuses at each other, cursing the traffic jam which had apparently sprung up for no reason. They looked at their watches, tapped the steering wheel, and fiddled with their dashboard as they waited impatiently for the road to clear; wanting to be in the blessed air-conditioning of the office as soon as possible.

But Mr. Ravindra Sharma waited patiently for the light, far away, to turn green. He looked solemnly at the cars in front of him, keeping his hands diligently on the steering wheel. The car in front trudged ahead a few feet, and amidst a lot of honking and screaming from behind, Mr. Sharma, with great deliberation, proceeded to switch gears of his decade-old Maruti 800; in that interval, however, another autorikshaw overtook him and squeezed into the opening in front, so Mr. Sharma gave up the attempt, and returned to his leisurely study of the road ahead.

Today, like all days, Mr. Sharma had gotten out of his lonely bed at eight minutes past six, exactly three minutes, as always, after the alarm started to sound. Today, like all days, Mr. Sharma had trudged to his bathroom, examined the shower to make sure it had not suddenly started working, switched on the geyser, and waited patiently, standing right beside it, for the water to heat. Today, like all days he had looked at his collection of one suit and five pairs of shirts and trousers, and decided on the first one to come at hand. Leaving the house at seven, he had, as always, taken care to switch off the lights, made sure the gas stove was not on, and double-checked to see that the door was locked and the lock was in perfect working condition. At seven-thirty he had come across this traffic jam, as always, and had waited patiently for it to clear, as it always did, at around eight-thirty. At nine, he had ambled into his cubicle at office, arranged his briefcase carefully beside his chair, switched on his computer, and had started work.

Around him the world swarmed and swirled in the ever-changing mass of human emotion, fortune and misfortune, sorrow and joy. Ambitions were crushed here, prayers were answered there, love blossomed and withered and life went on. But Mr. Sharma worked away diligently at his computer, peering through his lenses at the file in front of him, then at the keyboard, then at the screen, letting his practiced fingers type what he had typed for five years now, doing what he loved.

Not loved, maybe, but love and passion were privileges, and Mr. Sharma didn't pay much attention to luxuries. His life, in his mind, was one single swathe of unchanging routine, one vast cloud of unblemished greyness, and Mr. Sharma thought he would rather keep it that way. Mr Sharma had no ambition for money, for the warmth of love, or for making a dent in the world so that it knew he
existed. Mr. Sharma had no ambition at all, to be precise, and so the world flew by past him, not caring for the stooped figure in a corner cubicle in an uneventful office, not knowing he existed at all.

“So, Sharmaji, how is it all going?” asked Mr. Tewari, sitting on the table, beside Mr. Sharma’s computer. Mr. Sharma gave his familiar smile. “Quite good, Tewariji. How are you?” But Tewariji was not a man of a few words, and making himself comfortable he put an arm around Mr. Sharma’s computer, as if it were a close friend, and babbled about his life, his wife, his kids, and his neighbour. Mr. Sharma listened patiently; he was all ears, as they say, and he nodded at the right moments and sniffed at the right points. The conversation done, Tewariji walked back to his cubicle, or to another hapless colleague who could hear his raving monologue, but Mr. Sharma didn’t care.

Mr. Sharma went on typing, and as the day wore on, the clock’s hands moved slowly towards one. At precisely one-thirty, Mr. Sharma got up from his seat, waited for the elevator, but it was full, so he walked six floors down to the canteen. There, as always, he had his plate of dal and rice, and one bowl of curd, and ate silently in the corner where he always sat, right by the window. Fifteen minutes later, he was up again, walking slowly but firmly up the stairs, and back into the office, back into the comfort of typing into his computer.

At five in the evening, Mr. Sharma shut down his computer, took his briefcase and walked out.

One might be forgiven for thinking that Mr. Sharma's life was abysmally uninteresting, that in the flowing river that was humanity this was one pebble that would probably lie at the bottom on the riverbed. Indeed, everybody who knew Sharma thought so. They liked Mr. Sharma, how very good, how very nice, but Mr. Sharma was not the romantic type, or the adventurous type, or the quarrelling type, or any type, for that matter; he just was, a clock that was perpetually stuck in one single hour, an indiscernible speck of permanency and dilapidation in the everchanging face of time.

But Mr. Sharma had a secret.

Mr. Sharma had a dream.

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The meadows rolled beneath him, the white summer clouds moved picturesquely above the snow-capped mountains far away, ahead. The wind was cool, pleasant, fragrant, and it blew low over the blades of grass till the little tiny flowers on the ground bowed in subjugation, bending before he who stood before him, the future King of this land.

Prince Ravindra stood with his brass staff, looking upon this scene, his eyes closed to the wind, his robe billowing out behind him. Yes, this was the land he lived in and loved.

But the Prince's brow was fraught with worry, and the first few years of his reign were tinged with disaster. The shadow of war was looming large; the kingdom was being threatened by forces much larger and stronger than they could have imagined, and everywhere in the country the atmosphere was one of gloom and hopelessness. With the King wounded and dying, it was upon him now to lead his people to victory, but the prowess of the invading armies was much too great.

“Your Excellency” muttered a voice, and the Prince turned to his General. “News just came in from the eastern border. We have lost the battle there, your excellency. Even as we speak, the armies are marching towards the capital.”
The Prince sighed. “Call a meeting of the council.”
The General nodded and left. The prince threw a wistful glance over the land, his land, lush and green and beautiful. Somewhere a bird was in song. Somewhere else a dog barked.

The dog kept barking.
The dog kept barking. Mr. Sharma opened his eyes and found himself standing, facing the open window, a few feet from the bed. He sighed.

He went to the kitchen and poured for himself a glass of water. Weird dream, he thought, but he had had this dream for so long it did not matter. But weird dream, he thought again.

A lot of people had asked him to get his sleepwalking cured. He had thought quite a number of times that he would go to the psychiatrist, but for some reason he had decided otherwise. It wasn't a lethal affliction so what the hell. He looked at the clock. It was five thirty. He walked back to his bed for that final half-hour of sleep before the alarm would wake him again.

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Saturday dawned bright and clear, the yellow sun piercing through the mist. The world awoke lazily to weekend plans and passionate hobbies, trips to India Gate and movies in the cinema hall. It was yet early morning, but soon every market from the malls in far-off Gurgaon to the more humble mandis in the arcades nearby would fill up with “stressed out” crowds trying to soothe their frayed nerves, or with fussy housewives trying to replenish their household supplies. Children would rush into nearby parks with cricket bats or plastic balls, trying to make up for lost playtime; their parents would resurrect failed plans and make as much use of the much awaited weekend as they possibly could.

Mr. Sharma woke up at the same time as everyday: five minutes past six. He brushed his teeth, had a bath, sat on a chair, and waited half an hour for the newspaperman to drop the paper at his door. Another half hour he spent over the newspaper and breakfast, and then he resigned to his bedroom, sitting on the bed and watching the day slowly take shape as the sun rose into the sky.

At ten in the morning he waited for the elevator to take him down eleven stories into the office on the ground floor, where every other week the managerial committee of the society had its meeting. The committee was almost defunct; the members no longer attended the meetings, and the chairman, though he came every time, was loath to do anything about the seepage, or the shortage of water, or the garbage dump behind the society, or the million other problems that had to be taken care of. But Mr. Sharma went to the meetings everytime, and as today, voiced his concern over the abysmal state of affairs, with a straight face, a calm tone and an even voice.

Mrs Misra, the only other person in the meeting today, was one of the few people in this world who thought anything of Mr. Sharma. Poor man, she always thought of him, and she wondered why people didn't pay heed to such a “harmless creature”.

Mrs Misra's views not withstanding, Mr. Sharma had nothing else to do that day, so he went back to his house, switched on the TV and watched the hero trying to woo the reluctant heroine as a familiar soundtrack played in the background.

The day passed on uneventfully. In the night then, the dream.
“Your excellency, from whatever reports we have from the border, their armies are much too large, and way too strong. We have already lost a sizeable portion of our troops in the battle along the border...”
“I agree with the General. This battle is beyond us, your excellency. We cannot win...”
“I suggest we surrender...”
“...The armies will be at the gates by tomorrow...”
“SILENCE”, the Prince's voice boomed. The oblong room, filled with the men from the highest echelons of power in the kingdom, filled with silence.
Prince Ravindra spoke slowly and deliberately, looking at each of the men in turn. Standing at the head of the table, he was intimidating, yet charismatic; all eyes turned on him, and were too awestruck and afraid to turn away.
“In no way can we allow defeat to so easily take away what is our own. This is your land, my friends, your kingdom, your cattle, your family. No matter how strong the enemy is, no matter how improbable the odds, we must fight, and fight we shall. If it's the last thing we do before we die, we will show them that stand before us what a formidable enemy we are; let them too know of our courage, let them too realize that ours is a force that will not easily go down.”

“But your Excellency, we are hardly matched! We have already lost more than half of the army, and as it stands they are at least ten times in number! Only a miracle can help us win!!” said the General.
The Prince smiled. “As they say, miracles happen.”

Through the pin-drop silence, the Prince continued. Strategies were planned, late into the night, orders were given, the troops began to move. In the shadow of the night, the kingdom would slowly prepare for tomorrow, for the fight till the end.

Mr. Sharma stood shivering near the window, and it wasn't because of the cold. The window was tall and wide, tall and wide enough for a man to walk through it into the city eleven stories below. And Mr. Sharma had sleepwalked right up to this window.

He stood there for a while, getting a grip on himself. I should take care, he told himself, not to jump off in my sleep. He walked slowly back to his bed, crept back under the blanket, and went back to sleep, hugging himself tightly, as if his body had a propensity to run away. Which, in all fairness to Mr.Sharma, it had.

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Sunday, and out comes the city again, dressed in its best holiday clothes, the children running about, the parents all smiling, having fun on the outside even as the coming week gnaws at their minds within. The sun is bright, the day is clear, though it's a wee bit foggy; never mind, the sun will dispel the mist by noon.

Sunday, and it is a sin to be indoors, unless you are old, or ill. Such sunny days don't chance upon you so often in the winters, and everyone wants to get a piece of it; even the grandmothers are out on the verandah, knitting sweaters or cutting vegetables, letting the hot, benevolent sun bake their skin till it acquires a healthy tan.

Sunday, and it is a sin to do anything but enjoy. The past week is gone as hell, the coming week is
yet to come, and there is no time in the middle except this. So let's just rush to the nearby restaurant
and have a nice cozy dinner with the family, or let's rush off to the mall to hang out and window
shop, or let you and me rush off to India Gate and spend an afternoon together.

Sunday, but Mr. Sharma is in his apartment, in the darkness, sitting by the large windows as the
sunlight filters in and throws long shadows across the room. He sits on the same chair he has sat in
for every Sunday these past – how many?-years, in the same way: legs stretched out, one hand above
the other, placed on the lap. He stares at the same spot, perhaps, on the floor, as he has done for so
long. Occassionally his eyelids bat, an irritating fly hovers near his face, someone knocks on the
neighbour's door. But by and large this is Mr. Sharma's Sunday, and it will be till sundown.

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Prince Ravindra hacked and hewed as he rode on his horse, against the wind, his cape billowing
out behind him. His sword sloshed and swished as he fought brilliantly, the most courageous soldier
in the battlefield. Behind him his own army fought hard to hold back this enormous onslaught as
wave after wave of the invading army clashed against them. At a glance, the Prince thought he saw
a million of them, furious, violent, barbarians. He looked at his own army, diminutive, but holding
on somehow; yet they were backing up slowly, and soon they would be pressed against the wall.

“Retreat! Into the fort!”

The Prince gave the order and retreated into the fort. He watched as the gate was closed, and the
barbarians threw their body against the massive wooden gate, so that it shook under the impact.
He turned to the people, cowering, within.

“My friends!”, he said, his voice loud, unavering, firm. “Do not be afraid.” Another bang as the
gate quivered again. “We will fight to the very end. They,” he said, pointing, “shall soon be upon
us. But they underestimate our courage, our will to succeed. We will not take it lying down, my
friends, we will fight. We will fight to the death.”

“To the death!” shouted the soldiers in unison, and the gate splintered open, and the armies came
barging in. The Prince held his sword steady, and with deadly force, struck, and struck, and struck
again. Cries of pain filled the fortress, blood flowed like water. The barbarians were relentless, but
so were they. Two groups of soldiers stood beside the gate and engaged the flank, while the Prince
and what was left of his army stood resolutely in front, not letting anyone get past them.

The battle continued for several hours as more and more barbarians poured in. The army, as well
as the Prince, were tired, fatigued, but they held on. Held on with all their strength.

Till finally, the influx through the gate ceased.

The soldiers, dead tired though they were, screamed in joy.

Prince Ravindra smiled. He turned to his General, who stood by his side.
“I told you, didn't I?” he said. “I told you that ...

...Miracles happen”, whispered Mr. Sharma as he opened his eyes.

And found the white concrete of the pavement rise up rapidly towards him.
Monday morning, and the ritual continues. How many battles have we won? None. How many battles have we fought? None. So many of us will walk the streets today, as we have done for so many years past, thinking of what we will do, what we will achieve. So many of us will stand on that intersection, right across from our office building, and think of all those dreams, all those passions, all those ambitions we have nurtured, and will sigh wistfully at how they never come true.

Every so often, one in a million will achieve his dream. One in a million will become Beethoven, or Martin Luther King, or Abraham Lincoln. But it will not be us. We will be confined to battling the smaller battles of the everyday, living out the mundane. The ordinary.

We will be a Mr. Sharma in our own right.

And yet, we have our victories. We have our moments. Somewhere in what we might consider a futile life, a life without meaning, a life without purpose, fate is working its devious ways. And though we do not know it, ...

(Article in the Times of India, dated ---)

NEW DELHI A man sleepwalked out of an open window today and fell 11 stories, only to escape unscathed. At around 2 in the morning, Mr. Ravindra Sharma allegedly sleepwalked out of his window and fell to the ground. A pedestrian called the ambulance, but doctors examined Mr. Sharma to find that he had only received minor injuries. Dr. Sunil Pal, who examined Mr. Sharma, when asked for a comment, said, “Well, as they say...

...Miracles happen”.