



**IN THE SHADE**

A SHORT STORY ADAPTED FROM THE NOVEL, ARCTURUS

BY M.J. MOLLENHOUR

**K**az turned the key to his office and swung the door open for the student to enter behind him. He kicked aside yesterday's now-empty box from UPS to clear the way for his visitor and cordially waved the fidgety, young man past the clutter to an oak side-chair. Habitually, Kaz glanced at the flashing, red voicemail-indicator before settling himself into his own chair and relaxing. Voicemail could wait. Between voicemail, e-mail, and "the" mail, there was hardly time for this male to answer it all. Mehdi Kazem was a busy man, whose world was about to shatter.

The student, a bright (but distracted) young man, had not fared well on the last test, and wanted to assure his professor that he could and would do better. Kazem smiled inwardly, and outwardly, and returned the fatherly assurance that he understood that we all have bad days. If some portion of the material gives particular trouble, the professor would be glad to answer questions about it. Next test in a week. No doubt, better then. This dance had predictable moves: the student prepared the way to make his pitch for raising his grade at the end of the term, hedging his bets in case the numbers did not match the aspirations. The teacher encouraged, but declined to commit to the easy way out. The student thanked his teacher earnestly and left.

Dr. Mehdi Kazem, Professor of Chemical Engineering at

M. J. MOLLENHOUR

Syracuse University, New York, next glanced at his stack of mail as he powered up his desktop computer. Quickly sorting today's mail entirely into the "unremarkable" category, he absently touched the telephone controls for voicemail as Windows came to life in its various stages before presenting the computer ready and eager for work. He fished out his wire-bound pad from underneath the layers to jot down the phone numbers, names, times, and notes.

Mehdi had perfected hiding in the open. He arrived from Iran in 1977. After achieving his master's degree in chemical engineering, he applied for employment with an explosives manufacturing firm and hired on as a process engineer. Good job, good pay, and he picked up his Ph.D. along the way, and on the company tab, too.

A contractor threatened with bankruptcy by a lawsuit had called his firm asking for technical support and courtroom testimony. No one in management wanted even to touch any project that might lead to the witness stand, but Mehdi's curiosity about the application of the product in the field drew him irresistibly. He embraced the opportunity, knowing it would further hone his cover and his skills. Not only did he travel to the construction site with the contractor and consult confidentially over the contractor's use of the explosives, but he also held 12 jurors' fascination at trial on the contractor's behalf. Mehdi had delivered his opinions, but with the energized qualities of enthusiasm and common sense language that the client would call "salesmanship" as he slapped Mehdi on the back and hugged him in spontaneous gratitude. Certainly, the other expert witnesses had contributed to the victory as well, but the grateful contractor had praised Mehdi openly when they celebrated and had written his boss thanking him for providing such a man to help during a time of dire need.

The trial launched Mehdi's career as a diving board springs the diver. Lawyers are always prowling for experts who not only prove

## IN THE SHADE

their technical proficiency, but who also speak to the public in a way that people can understand, and who possess the will to face the crucible of cross-examination from an obnoxious barrister. Mehdi, the recognized demolitions expert and respected academic, found himself in demand. His career blossomed, he delivered advanced seminar lectures, and he joined the International Demolitions Institute, serving on various committees and eventually rising to President. His alma mater noticed and invited him back to speak. The delightful trip garnered Mehdi more than just a chicken lunch and accolades. He had suspected—correctly—that the invitation doubled as a job interview, and was not surprised at all when the department head called him, played coy for a short bit, and then asked Mehdi to join the faculty.

Mehdi Kazem, a handsome, engaging, Iranian of 6 feet height and athletic build was smart, technically at the top of his game, and motivated. Very motivated. Before long, he made full Professor. The Professor had, indeed, grown in his profession, but his mission—and, therefore, motivation—remained always the same.

A potpourri of voicemail began. A Standards Committee meeting tomorrow cancelled. His friend, John Blackwell, down the hall, offered two spare football tickets, if Kaz and his son wanted to catch the game with John. A reply from the river-rafting outfitter in the Catskills announced apologetically that water levels still dwindled away too low to both excite and cushion the rafters from repeated beatings on the rocks.

Then, over the speaker came four innocuous words, spoken in a pleasant voice. Just four. Slightly accented Middle Eastern, but from what country, even he could not determine. The message was so brief. He touched the key that played it again. And again. And again. It was for real.

M. J. MOLLENHOUR

Dr. Kazem's head spun. He felt faint. It occurred to him how the world could turn in a flash. An auto accident. A telephone call. A doctor announcing a diagnosis. Life never the same again. This moment had arrived for Mehdi.

He knew his job. Unlike the men who would drive the component delivery trucks though, who could only speculate later at the degree of their own complicity, Mehdi's task foretold the broader mission unmistakably. Mehdi would not awaken on future mornings, continuing life in the luxury of ignorance about his contribution to the cause. Combining a large quantity of diesel fuel with nitrogen-based solid fertilizer in the right proportions, with the most effective ignition-accelerators added, then coupled with the correctly specified detonating device, all tamped according to Mehdi's design left no room to rationalize.

My God! No! It could not be for real.

But it was. All this time! He felt sick. He opened the plastic bottle of water always at the right corner of his desk and drank deeply. He looked dully at it, this ordinary object in his hand, as if only it and he existed. He envied its soulless, material, innocence.

"Rio Vida" its brand name proclaimed: "River of Life" he understood the simple Spanish phrase to mean.

Ironic. Paradoxical. A message? A sign? A scathing rebuke?

His wife picked it up for him by the case at Sam's. He had not selected this life-sustaining water, nor had he seen this brand before. Perhaps he had seen it but not *perceived* it, not having arrived at the ford over the River of Death, or at least not having been ordered to unleash its floodgates, before today. Such cold waters they were, too.

"*Rio Muerte*," he counter-pointed out loud, "*Rio Muerte—River of Death—Death River.*" The sound of his voice, naming the grim river mocked him. (Mehdi had learned the language and visited

## IN THE SHADE

south of the border as a tourist to prepare himself for any mission requiring him to pass himself off as Latin.) Did Allah truly fate him to unleash a river of death? So proclaimed the four-word message.

Again, Mehdi stared down at the water bottle in his hand, avoiding the grim directive just delivered on his voicemail. Water: just a simple compound, but so vital to life, so common, so universal—so neutral, like the ocean, neither good nor evil, but simply a vast collection of molecules.

*Evil.* Was there such a thing? Some said not. He envied these American and European moral relativists. The dulled masses at least pretended that evil did not exist. No right, no wrong, just do what you think is right for you. Don't judge anything or anyone—until someone else's grotesquely evil deed butchered the people you hold dear. Where was the comfort of clinging to the belief that evil was mere superstition then? Evil is so to be feared that the West hid behind the construct that *it* did not exist; it was mere fable, they confidently asserted, and made up by men. The word should be archaic, dropped from use, the culture having moved on.

He envisioned the death—the *evil*.

Kazem's mind tottered. My God! My God!

Get yourself together!

Why the shock? Islam—Allah supposedly—had always required this of him. It's just that so much time had passed and, well, life had become so—ordinary. He felt a wave of guilt, thinking about the martyrs and the oppressed for whom life was not ordinary at all.

He looked around at the American things in his American office. The wave of indicting guilt reversed, a *tsunami* backwash sweeping over him like a combination one-two punch as he pondered his friend's generous offer of football tickets and his own impending betrayal of that friendship. Dr. Kazem stood slowly and steadied

M. J. MOLLENHOUR

himself at his window, hoping for solace there. He always found peace there.

Below his window, the sidewalk streaming toward his building split and continued to wind around both sides of the mulched flowerbed directly below his second-story office. He so appreciated its seasonal, changing beauty. He could not name the flowers but recognized the lush fig that anchored the center of this particular landscape feature. Squirrels flicked their tails and darted across the walkway; students strolled along the sidewalk both directions, as always. He recognized one of them approaching, an American girl who excelled in one of his research statistics classes. “Sadistics,” the students joked.

Was he sadistic? Was he evil? Were these young students evil? Yes, they were infidels, but were they *evil*? This tortured reverie rocketed to crescendo, and then veered to panic. He scanned the entire park-like quadrangle below for uniformed men who might be coming, even now, to arrest him. He briefly prayed they would.

Prayed? To Allah? Could he pray to Allah that the mission, supposedly Allah’s own, would abort, or that the Americans would thwart their plan? He looked again for the American agents; none appeared. Students joked with each other and the girls flirted with the boys, obviously flaunting their subtle power to *charm* (another word almost antique).

My God!

Another drink of the water with its mocking message. His throat felt so parched but the amoral water failed to quench his thirst.

His thirst for what? What did he thirst for? Blood? The blood

## IN THE SHADE

of these Americans? The blood of these students? The blood of John Blackwell and his sons?

Why was he fated for such killing? Why could he not question his fate? He rebelled against the fate he had been taught to accept. What if his controller was wrong? A mistake! My God, let this be a mistake!

He keyboarded in the web site address he knew he was to check. There they were: GPS waypoints. He printed the screen, stared at the numbers and letters, and closed the web site, deleting the site address from his history.

Waypoints! Indeed!

Death lurked theoretical until it materialized at time and place, snatching a real, breathing human being. People could deal with death that way, much like these Westerners dealt with evil, sealing their minds from the future horror by concentrating on the now. Life, death, fate, power, planning, and the physics of pyrotechnic chemistry would all intersect at these waypoints, where Death would strike like a lightning bolt, suddenly, as if to crack from ghostly nothingness in the void of the sky, to burn into a selected, precise point in the real world.

A “waypoint.” A point where the way changed from life to death. A point where the River of Life forks and the River of Death begins.

Like Death and Evil, all of Mehdi’s skill stayed safely theoretical unless pinned to time and place. For certain people, fated by Allah, Mehdi’s know-how and ability to instruct would rip the time-space continuum, snatching these men, women, (and children) from their green America to Hell. Waypoints into which these people would wander would be portals into eternally-fixed damnation for these infidels, and Mehdi would prepare the portal for them! No comforting shade awaited them.

M. J. MOLLENHOUR

The *Saya-dar* gave Mehdi the waypoints.

The *Saya-dar*. Who was this man—or woman, Mehdi mused—who directed such fabric-of-time ripping power? The word, the name, fascinated Mehdi.

*Saya-dar*. Mehdi felt the cool shade implied by the name. Somewhere, though, the word got lost in the depths of Persian history or folklore. Like so much of his Persian home and history, Islam subsumed the coveted title. The simple, agrarian phrase, twisted a bit, now proclaimed a recognized Guardian of The Faith, a Protector of Islam. This *Saya-dar* spread his strong limbs and protective blessing over Islam, killing its enemies and mere faithless straphangers. Mehdi did not aspire to be known as a *Saya-dar* but saw himself as such, even without the acclaim.

Always, though, lurked a different and sinister “shade” of meaning behind this title. “Shade” also whispered of the underworld where disembodied but eternally tortured souls wisped about, lost. Ghosts. Not “friendly” either. *Saya-dar* had an alternative meaning, oddly, just as *shade* in English could mean either cooling relief from harsh sun, or a haunt. Mehdi wondered if *shade* came from Farsi’s *saya-dar*. Why was he thinking about this now?

Mehdi’s instant messenger interrupted his anguished, stunned meditation with a pleasant “ping.” John Blackwell was “I-imming” Mehdi. The ethereal, shade-like, message preview coalesced and called for “RMTMB” to get back with John fast. Those tickets were “hot” and John would offer them to other friends if his favored friend declined.

Blackwell joked with his friend, calling him “Kaz” or “Rimtimb,” taking off on the acronym “RMTMB.” Blackwell usually seized any opportunity to introduce his friend as “Ready Meddy the Master Blaster” or at least he would dramatize this humorous

## IN THE SHADE

introduction at less formal party circles. His friend was a “real blast.” He had a “short fuse” though. Blackwell’s good-natured jokes about Mehdi’s intriguing field had no end. The two friends played off each other at social gatherings, relaxing the guests while, at the same time, promoting Mehdi’s status. John devised new ones when it seemed that surely he had exhausted all possible puns.

The vaporous football ticket reminder-message preview in the lower right corner of the screen faded—like a “shade.”

Indeed, Saya-dar was as shade. Mehdi had never met Saya-dar. He assumed Saya-dar was a devout Muslim, a *Jihadist*, a *fadayeen* in Arabic. Mehdi assumed that Saya-dar hated the Americans, all things Western, and all things Jewish and Christian for certain. Mehdi’s own hatred, the same hatred that propelled him from his beloved Iran 30 years ago, had somehow quelled, fading like a shade.

At first, Mehdi had lived up to his name, *Kazem: a man who hides his anger*. Mehdi had succeeded in hiding his anger. Saya-dar sent him periodic messages, mostly updating the plan to take advantage of commercial technology advances, but Saya-dar never propagandized Mehdi, never preached, never railed on and on about the decadent West. Perhaps Saya-dar saw no need to sway or motivate the younger Mehdi who hid his hatred so well. The Shade was all business while the Mullahs were all hate. Hate.

What was hate? How could any man, Muslim or Christian or atheist, hold onto hate for so many years? Saya-dar’s hate seemed to pervade his shady soul so deeply that The Shade had no need to manifest it; he manifested his hate as The Plan, in its continuing evolutions and improvements. Recipients of the updates simply assumed the hate, perhaps like they assumed their own.

Hate. If not palpable, hate certainly was real. Every day, the

M. J. MOLLENHOUR

U.S. newspapers featured headlines about this Muslim or that Muslim blowing himself up for Allah. Hate *existed*. Hate moved. Hate drove. Hate—the kind of hate Mehdi read about and knew must be out there—escaped The Professor who had lived among the Americans for 30 years. He had imperceptibly come to see some of the Americans as *people* and not just *infidels*. If *infidel*, then they were de-humanized, then they were inanimate almost and, thus, could be disposed of like garbage. Only abject hatred could incite such a conclusion that people were garbage.

However, Mehdi could not see his friend, John Blackwell, as garbage. Could such warping hatred come only from Satan? Mehdi considered the ramifications for his own people, and for his mission. What if he were working for Satan? Hatred—Satan. They seemed to go together.

Mehdi reminded himself why he had come to America. One simple reason moved him then: position himself for the day he would be given a mission—a mission for Allah. Mehdi had lived in America, at this point, most of his life. *Most* of his life, for God's sake! Had The Great Satan infected his own soul, his faithfulness? Yes, certainly. Mehdi looked out his window again.

The girls on the concrete walkway swayed their hips alluringly. They were gorgeous. Their every movement, their just slightly-naked bellies, their curved shapes, their taunting-laughing mouths and eyes hinted at pleasures beyond a man's imagination. Their seduction not only drew weak men to the women; they drew the weak men away from Allah. The West was overrun with seduction. The West was seduced. The West, by now, was *willingly* seduced.

Mehdi's Mullah told him that America was The Great Satan. No higher calling wooed a man than to seek mortal combat with

## IN THE SHADE

The Great Satan. How better to challenge The Great Satan than to fearlessly plunge into its belly, and eat it alive from the inside out?

That had been Mehdi's calling and he strove to recall the fervor that had accompanied his calling—but Mehdi could not summon up that kind of hatred for the West any more. Hiding his anger became less difficult over the years, merely because Mehdi grew less possessed of it.

Regardless, here Mehdi was, a devout Muslim, living within The Great Satan, and now called on to take the sword to wound and kill citizens, residents, and, perhaps, his own friends too.

"Of course!" Mehdi concluded that America had insidiously seduced him too! This open land tricked him into believing that the infidel actually *mattered* other than to serve as an example to show the world Allah's chastisement. Mehdi stirred from his daze and decided to *do something* (even though his next action would not quite complete his mission).

This next step required some time. Mehdi opened 20 other sites, each of them from all appearances just another travel site where a family might post its pictures and captions to describe their holiday to friends, and to read others' similar posts. He could have used only one site for all 20, but, why compromise all operations by using a common site? He chafed at The Saya-dar's use of only one web site to get update data messages to Mehdi. He had always wished that The Saya-dar had e-mailed the others directly. Instead, Mehdi served not only to provide the recipe for 20 efficient truck bombs, but also as the communications link to pass on any changes to the weapons' composition, construction and delivery. Why could he not have merely e-mailed the Saya-dar who could then have posted changes to the 20? Mehdi suspected that Saya-dar had made him the link to avoid the personal risk involved in so much elec-

M. J. MOLLENHOUR

tronic communication but he had burned with shame at his own accusatory thoughts.

To each apparently innocuous site, he uploaded a GPS waypoint. One step remained—only one—and his mission was accomplished, regardless of what he set in motion. Others—his message recipients—would then accomplish their own missions, about which he would probably read in the news. Mehdi poised, slumped at his keyboard, unaware that his friend worried that he had not heard from Mehdi about the tickets. Mehdi thirsted.

John's emoticon-with-sound urgently chimed "last chance." Mehdi keyed out "cant thanx."

Enough! Before his western-infected will faltered again, he e-mailed 20 recipients a simple message devoid of any suspect trigger-words that might alert a data-mining sentinel. Other industrial or academic chemists would routinely check their own e-mail, as he had done, and their lives would forever change too, although he could not know who they were. He assumed they lived and worked close to the respective chosen bomb target waypoints. He sat back blankly, reaching unconsciously for the water bottle.

He drank deep from the cooling, life-sustaining fluid. Mehdi lowered the bottle, stared again at the jeering label, and imagined the bottle full of blood—the River of Death in his hands. The Sayadar noted the log onto the website by "The Professor" and relaxed at his own terminal, grinning.