

The Big Shrug

When I was a kid, maybe twenty-two or so years old, I worked in a biology lab. I worked pretty hard, late into the night sometimes. One night, around two thirty in the morning, I was standing there holding a little plastic test tube,



fresh out of the centrifuge, with a goodly portion of purified virus splattered to its walls.

It was an unknown virus, what we called in the trade an adventitious agent. I had personally

38. EDOUARD MANET: THE LION-HUNTER (PORTRAIT OF PERTUISSET)

isolated that virus from a contaminated batch of cultured hamster cells.

My virology mentor, Professor John Holland at UCSD in La Jolla, minced no words in the matter of contaminated cultures. "Don't fuck around," he

would say, "with any advertisements agents. Bleach'em down ② the sink." But when this one had appeared, I didn't bleach it down the sink.

First I watched it. Then I cutlined it. Then I got a few pictures of it. Then I grew up a pretty big batch of it, and now I was putting it. It was interesting. Never mind why it was



39. ÉDOUARD MANET: PORTRAIT OF HENRI ROCHEFORT

interesting. It was as interesting as, say, a new girlfriend; somebody ^{whom you find so interesting} you'd like to marry, or ^{even after you've had sex with her several times}

But I wasn't alone that evening. There was another guy in the lab, a pleasant and equally hard working fellow named Chris Mack. Out of the blue, he asked me, whilst I was admiring my petted visions, "Hey,

RLH 2022

you heard about Milman's kid, didn't you?"

No. No, I hadn't. Milman's wife was pregnant. I just looked at Maack, expectantly. (3)



willkts 2002

1. ÉDOUARD MANET: YOUTHFUL PORTRAIT OF ANTONIN PROUST

"Died," he said.

"Of what?"

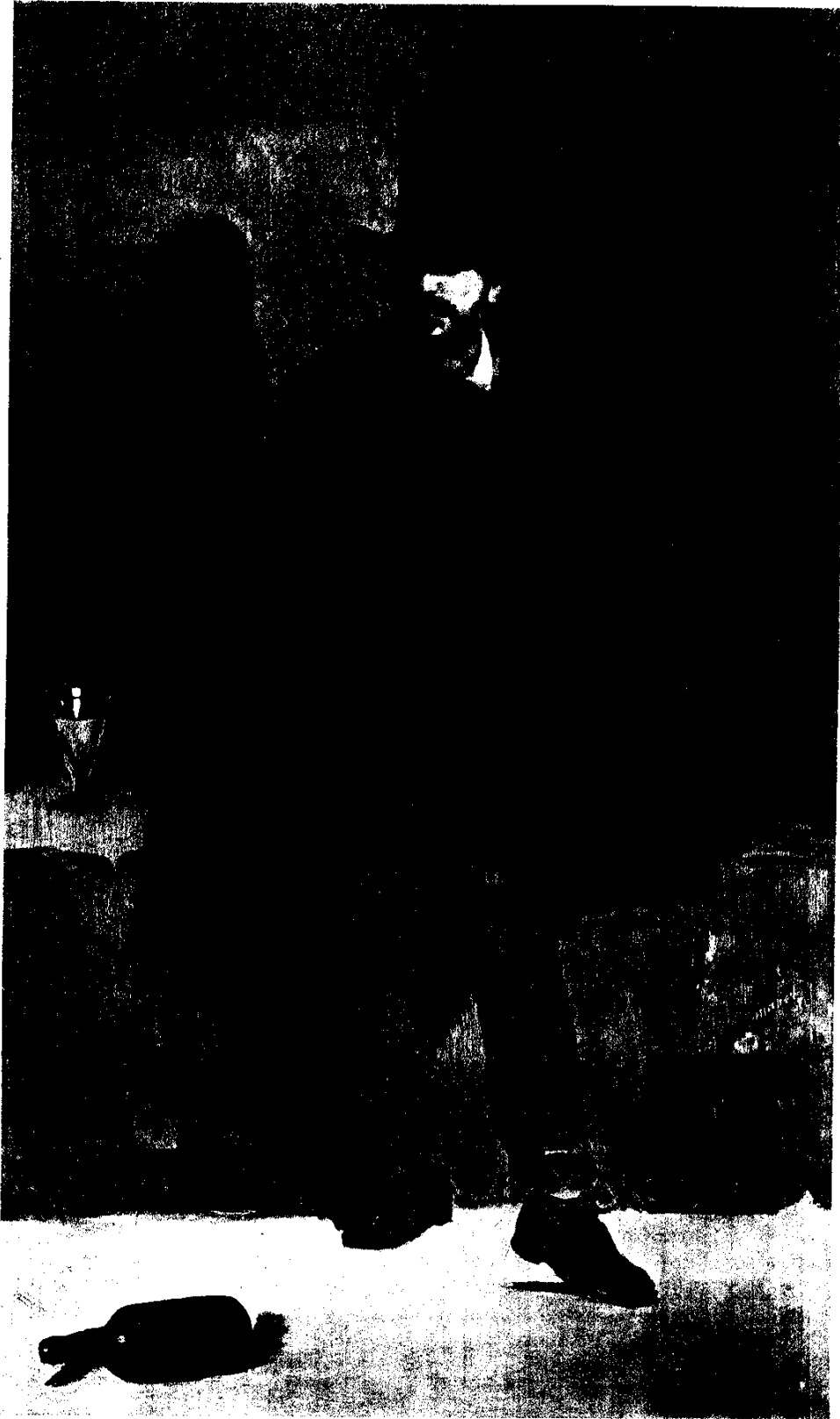
"I don't know," he said. "Something to do with the central nervous system."

Let's skip all the details, about Milman's lab being the first place I'd seen the ravages wrought by my valuable adventitious agent, and all the rest of what would no

doubt be an interminable monologue. What happened next, very simply, was that a very great weight pushed down on my left shoulder.

It was so heavy it startled me, and I looked around, to see who was there. Nobody was there.

I tossed the test tube in a bucket of bleach, cleaned up my bench, walked out, and never went back. Some things, you just don't argue with.



R. K. S.
2002

2. ÉDOUARD MANET: THE ABSINTHE DRINKER

So what does that tell you about Ken Alibekov and the United States Government?

It tells you that if you've got a big enough shrug, you could shrug that off. It doesn't matter if that were the right hand of God himself, you'd shrug it off. You'd rewrap that viral pellet in the appropriate volume of buffer and keep on truckin!

③
That's where Alibek comes in. When it comes to deadly biological agents, he's the Devil's right hand



W. H. K. S. 2022

35. ÉDOUARD MANET: PORTRAIT OF ANTONIN PROUST

man. He worked in a lab — he was the Boss of a lab — where they made enough deadly agents of one kind or another, to kill all the humans on earth, every day. He worked hard, every day, the way scientists do, to make his preparations

more lethal per pound and more pounds per annum. A real sick dude.

And what was he thinking?

Nothing. He wasn't paid to think. He was paid to work.
"Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to prepare enough

powder to kill everybody."

But that's not what they told him, and that's not what he told himself. I don't know what he told himself.

I already wrote a stageplay about the Kary Alibek; it's called Modern

Biology,

and my favorite line is where the hero's nemesis, a quasi-governmental administrator sitting behind a desk in an office "with no flags," tells the hapless Nobelist-to-be that he has inadvertently supplied the Government with an important chunk in their germ warfare program. "No," says the



RW 2002

36. ÉDOUARD MANET: YOUNG COUPLE AT LUNCH ("CHEZ LE PÈRE LATHUILLE")

scientist, "I would never do that."
 the grants administrator cuts through all the chitchat with
 a witty riposte that I used without attribution, because I can't
 remember
 at all where
 I first heard
 it: "Doc,
 we don't
 want a
 vaccine. You
 give me a
 vaccine
 and I'll
 cook you up
 a batch of
 the disease."

But we
 have to
 stop there.
 We've visited
 the peaks
 + the valleys,
 from the
 Intervention
 down to
 amoral
 brilliant
 scientists
 just doing
 their job.
 There's always
 the danger
 that I'll



R. H. S. 2002

34. ÉDOUARD MANET: PORTRAIT OF GEORGE MOORE. PASTEL

talk about any of it at too great
 a length, and you'll get comfortable with it. Don't get comfortable
 with it. The U.S. Government has Alibek on the payroll! they made him
 a boss. I read it on the front page to the Wall Street Journal. 8/24/02

Let's switch gears entirely here, try to get away from (8) rehashing what's already been in the papers, no matter how personalized and idiosyncratic I can make it. Science, in that respect, is like jazz; if you don't know, I can't tell you; if you don't get what's incorrigible about Alibek, I give up. We'll just move on.

Let's talk about something that's so far under the radar screen it's never been in the newspapers. Oh to be sure, E coli 0157 has been in the papers, even made the front page, several times. The story



33. EDUARD MANET: GEORGE MOORE AT A CAFE

Kelly 2022

In the newspapers is always about the same — some store, or some chain of stores, sold some contaminated meat, or salad, or orange juice, or hamburgers, and some people got sick, and a few people died (that's why it makes the paper.) Front page news.

Here's the part they didn't tell you, and that forms the (9) subtext for interpreting the character of the Kenny Alibeks: Somebody not unlike Ken Alibek created that deadly bug. It's obvious. Look at the

picture. The green DNA is where the lab rat bacteria + the deadly bacteria are the same. The same!

Do you realize how unlikely it is for even a moderate stretch of DNA to be the same as another one? It's both astronomically + microscopically unlikely.

They're

practically clones. But what about the red stuff? Let me tell you what I think about the red stuff. I think some guy (or some doll) put the deadly red genes in there.

I just can't imagine why this person, this molecular biologist, this gene jockey, this genomic hot rodder, this Doctor Strangelove who loves to play with Death,



R. Alibek 2002

12. ÉDOUARD MANET: MAN PEELING PEARS (PORTRAIT OF LÉON LEENHOFF)

ever sat down on a stool at his lab bench and ⁽¹⁰⁾ did that. It wasn't for the glory; there would be no publications,

no credit, no career advancement, only total anonymity.

It was an experiment. That's it; that's the scenario,

that's the subtext,

that's the meta-text

too. That's all you need to know

about the mindset

of Kenny

Alievkov.

He's beyond nationalism,

he's beyond internationalism,

beyond ego; he's way beyond remorse, or even consequences. It's just "Let's try this" and "Let's try that" and "We can get money for this, or that."

Kenny

And believe me when that heavy hand ^{come} comes down to rest so hard on your shoulder, you ^{had} have to heave a mighty oh so mighty big shrug, didn't you?



11. ÉDOUARD MANET: PORTRAIT OF THÉODORE DURET

A. J. K. 2002



Transmission electron
micrograph of
E. coli O157:H7.
IDOPepper S. Hayes

