

A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE CHILDREN A SCIENTIST TOOK HOME

Carleton Gajdusek won the Nobel Prize for his work on a disease in Papua New Guinea. But his biggest experiment was on the children he took back to the U.S.

By Rachel Aviv

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As a boy, Luwi Ikabala moved with Carleton Gajdusek to the U.S. “I am the son of one of the world’s greatest scientists,” Luwi said. Photograph by Tajette O’Halloran for The New Yorker

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Every weekday morning, Luwi Ikabala sets up a sewing machine beside piles of sweet potatoes and firewood at the main market in Goroka, in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Luwi uses a yellow cooking-oil cannister for a chair. On a good day, he makes enough money from hemming sleeves and mending torn clothes to buy a bag of rice. As he waits for customers, he reads novels, copying passages that he likes into his journal. His favorite author is Fyodor Dostoyevsky. He has kept a journal for the past forty years, giving the entries headings such as “Air of freedom,” “As I recall her—the past,” “About Weakness,” and “Who am I?”

Luwi often feels like the “poorest man that ever lived on this planet earth,” “a perfect example of a failure.” He approaches strangers on the street and asks about their problems, until he sees an opening to “touch them emotionally.” He offers advice and then they sometimes give him a little money. One journal entry, headed “Supposed to be somebody,” described an encounter with an old friend who’d seen him aimlessly walking the streets of Goroka. The friend didn’t understand why Luwi wasn’t doing more with his life. But “keeping up with my diary writing,” he wrote, made him “at least feel like I am someone—not too big—but someone in my own way.”

Luwi, who is fifty-seven years old, took up journal writing at the urging of the Nobel Prize-winning pediatrician and virologist D. Carleton Gajdusek, whom he described as “Father of America.” Gajdusek lived in Papua New Guinea while researching kuru, a fatal brain disease that existed only in the country’s eastern highlands. Until the

nineteen-thirties, the people there remained unknown to the outside world. Luwi and his friends used to crowd around Gajdusek's typewriter, their hands on his shoulders and thighs, as he documented their lives: the insects they ate, their moods, the way they sang to birds. Gajdusek wrote six hundred thousand pages of journals, beginning when he was thirteen and ending weeks before he died, in 2008, at the age of eighty-five. Luwi keeps a copy of the journal in which Gajdusek recorded his birth. "When I was born, Carleton was there to bring me out into the world," Luwi told me.

At times, Luwi feels the urge to write his story "slowly creeping towards my fingertips." After reading "My Secret History," a novel by Paul Theroux, which he'd found in a thrift shop, Luwi got chills. "How I wish to write a story similar to this," he wrote. He wanted to "put all that is in mind into form." Standing over his sewing machine at the market, where I visited him in May, he told me, "My story would start with childhood in a very, very remote area, where an unusual scientist, a man from far, far away, came to live just next to my house." But, as soon as he sits down to write, he finds himself falling asleep.

As Gajdusek entered villages in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, in the late fifties and early sixties, people called out in a high pitch, "White man is coming!" "People, come, come!" The children were jubilant, he wrote in his journal, but women stayed inside, peering out of their huts. Gajdusek ran a lab at the National Institutes of Health focussed on child development and diseases in what he called the "few remaining societies wherein civilization and the major religions of mankind have not yet set their pattern of imprint upon the social fabric in which the child is reared." He gave lollipops to the children and collected blood and urine samples from them. He also administered antibiotics and bandaged wounds. "Although the people are still current warriors and cannibals, they are well 'under control' and very cooperative," he wrote to Joseph Smadel, the associate director of the N.I.H.

One per cent of the Fore people, a community of some fourteen thousand in the eastern highlands, were dying each year of kuru; its name, in the Fore language, means “trembling” or “fear.” “It is so astonishing an illness that clinical description can only be read with skepticism,” Gajdusek told Smadel. The Fore said that the disease was caused by secret attacks from sorcerers. The victims would shiver, laugh excessively, and jerk their limbs; then they would lose the ability to stand or swallow. Most of them would die within a year. Ronald and Catherine Berndt, the first anthropologists in the Fore region, wondered whether the disease could be a psychosomatic reaction to contact with white people. Australian colonial officers had brought new tools, like steel knives and axes, as well as prohibitions—against armed warfare and cannibalism—to some villages. “Social or cultural events,” Ronald Berndt wrote, “may have far-reaching effects on the human organism itself, even to the extent of interfering so drastically with it that it ceases to function.”

Gajdusek spent part of every year in the highlands—he described it as Shangri-La, the place where he reached the “heights of human happiness”—and learned the Fore language. Luwi’s father and uncle helped build him a house about thirty feet from Luwi’s family’s hut, in Waieti, a hamlet on a mountainside, more than five thousand feet high, with clouds pooling in the valleys below. Gajdusek’s house had braided-bamboo walls and a domed roof, made of thatched cogon grass. On the wall, he taped a picture of John Enders—who’d won the Nobel Prize in 1954, for his work on polio—and a print of Titian’s portrait of Ranuccio Farnese, the Pope’s grandson, who looks too young for his lavish new cloak. “A chief’s son from my people’s past,” he explained to anyone who came inside.

A 2008 HIPSTER LOST IN THE SANDS OF TIME



Cartoon by Brendan Loper



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Gajdusek took care of kuru patients as they died, then persuaded their family members to let him perform autopsies, rewarding them with axes, blankets, and salt. “I did it at 2 A.M., during a howling storm, in a native hut, by lantern light, and sectioned the brain without a brain knife,” he wrote Smadel, after one autopsy. He performed some dissections on the same table where he ate his meals. “Some people said, ‘We’re not supposed to dig up graves—what is he doing?’ ” Luwi recalled. “And others were saying, ‘Oh, he came to look at the disease, let him look at it.’ ” Luwi’s cousin Rebecca Tarubi, whose father had assisted Gajdusek with autopsies, told me, “People would ask, ‘Where are the brains?’ And we would say, ‘Carleton put them in a

little bowl and took them to America.’ ” Luwi’s uncle Koiye used to take brain tissue and internal organs to a colonial aid post with an airstrip. Then the body parts were frozen with liquid nitrogen and shipped to the N.I.H., in Bethesda, Maryland.

Luwi and the other children followed Gajdusek wherever he went, and he often photographed them. “One of us would carry his film, another the camera case, and a third the tripod, and then we’d set it up,” Luwi said. “I had never seen my face before”—there were no mirrors or reflective metals in his village—“and when Carleton showed us his shots we would all be giggling at the type of faces we were carrying around. It was, ‘Oh, I have this kind of forehead, I have these kinds of big eyes.’ ” In one series of photographs, Luwi stands on one foot and sticks out his tongue; another boy wags his butt; a third boy cups his hands around his eyes as if he, too, is holding a camera. The children, who went barefoot and shirtless, tried on Gajdusek’s shoes and socks and examined the texture of his skin. “Me masta now,” one child told Gajdusek while dressed in his T-shirt and shorts.

The first time Luwi used a pencil and paper was at the encouragement of Gajdusek, who always brought writing supplies, along with marbles and tennis balls, when he came to Waieti and to other hamlets nearby. He collected hundreds of drawings by children in the eastern highlands who were holding a pencil for the first time in their lives. Having never been exposed to pictures, the children invented their own visual vocabulary. They did not initially compose human figures. Instead, they drew geometric patterns, almost as if “ ‘weaving’ or ‘braiding’ their way across the paper,” Gajdusek wrote. (The drawings are saved at the National Library of Medicine, along with hundreds of thousands of pages of correspondence, journals, and photographs.)

Gajdusek wrote in his journal almost every day, sometimes trailing off as he fell asleep, transcribing thoughts as they turned to dreams. In his house in Waieti, he kept books by Jean Piaget, John Locke, William Faulkner, Vladimir Nabokov, David

Hume, and Henry James. The “constant fingering through the stack of books and magazines I brought here,” he noticed, “has produced an aura about the word and writing which is so intense as to be bewitching.” The children began demanding lessons in numbers and the alphabet. They sat on the floor of Gajdusek’s house, using cargo boxes as desks. “Thus I come to study the ‘primitive’ and ruin it with my own sophistication!,” Gajdusek wrote in his journal. “Damn it!” When presented with blank pages, the children started drawing rows of even marks that mimicked the appearance of letters. In one drawing, a child covered a page with a sketch of a large book with lines of wavy strokes. Below it, four stick figures, arms raised, held the book aloft, like a sacred offering.

Luwi was about four years old when his mother began complaining of headaches and joint pain. “When sitting up, she trembles and is unsteady,” Gajdusek wrote in his journal, in 1972. “She claims that there is a roar like ‘water’ in her ears.” She became so weak that Luwi’s father hung a rope from a beam in their hut, directly over her bed, to help her pull herself up. Once, Luwi asked her to get him water, and she hit him with a stick, for bothering her. “That’s the only act I remember from the woman who gave me life,” he told me.

His grandmother had already died of kuru, a disease that mostly afflicted women and children. “They said we have to be fearful, because kuru sorcerers were moving around the community,” Luwi said. The sorcerers, it was thought, targeted their victims by stealing bits of their hair, clothes, nails, or feces, and wrapping them in a bundle with leaves. Then they said a spell, beat the bundle with a stick, and left it in muddy ground. As it rotted, the intended victim was supposed to simultaneously deteriorate until death.

Kuru had become so prevalent that in some hamlets there were three men for every woman. For a time, the Fore held almost daily mass meetings to try to ban kuru

sorcery. (Other illnesses were also thought to be caused by sorcery, but with a different technique.) “You men are trying to wipe us out,” a woman said at a meeting in 1962. A man asked, “Where will you find wives from in the future—if women are completely finished?” There were calls for sorcerers to come forward and repent. In one village, men confessed their acts of sorcery and then put their hands into soapy water, promising that they would never do such things again. But, when kuru deaths continued, there were doubts that the men had told the truth, and the meetings stopped.

Shirley Lindenbaum, an anthropologist working in the region with her husband in the sixties, remembers a neurologist asking, “What do adult women and children of both sexes do that adult men don’t do?” She and her husband responded, “They ate the dead.” Men generally abstained from human flesh, because it was thought to sap their strength. But Fore women and children ate dead kin as a mourning ritual; it was a way, as one Australian patrol officer put it, to incorporate the dead into themselves and “lessen not only the sorrow, but even the idea, of loss.” Lindenbaum and her husband began to suspect that kuru was somehow transmitted through cannibalism.



Waieti, the village in Papua New Guinea where Luwi grew up and met Gajdusek. Photograph courtesy U.S. National Library of Medicine

In the final stage of the disease, people often became incontinent and developed bedsores. “I can still sense the smell,” Luwi said. “The human body has a distinct smell that is unbearable.” His mother could not accept the idea of people caring for her as she grew increasingly helpless. One day, when she was alone in the house, she made a noose from beaten bark that she used for weaving bags. Lifting herself with the rope dangling over her bed, she hanged herself from the beam.

Luwi recalled being beckoned from the garden. Inside the house, adults were weeping. “My father sat me on his lap, took my right hand, placed it on my heart, and told me, ‘Your mother is dead.’ That I will always remember.”

There were dozens of children in the village without mothers. “I just joined in with the group that was already suffering,” Luwi said. A German missionary’s wife taught some of the older girls who had lost their parents how to care for the younger children, including infants. “They were just kids, about nine or ten, and they would come to us and act like mothers,” Luwi said. His father quickly remarried and had children with his new wife. Luwi forgot what his mother looked like, but people told him that he carried her face. Of her suicide, he wrote in his journal, “I have forgiven her for the courage she took.”

“**T**he researchers who came to partake in the kuru saga took not only the brains of the deceased kuru victims,” Luwi wrote, years later. “They even took the living children.” His uncle Mbaginta’o was the first of sixteen children from the highlands whom Carleton Gajdusek brought home to the United States. “Before Carleton, he had never in his life written a word,” Luwi said, of Mbaginta’o. “I think this was a study that Carleton took to understand the functions of the mind.”

The project was not conceived formally, but Gajdusek wrote declarations, documenting the transfer of guardianship on Department of Health and Human Services letterhead and had colleagues in his lab serve as witnesses before a notary. A section of his C.V. titled “Children (adopted from Melanesia and Micronesia)” listed thirty-six children whom he raised in the U.S., from the sixties through the nineties. Judith Farquhar, a professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago who’d begun her career working in Gajdusek’s lab at the N.I.H., said that one of her responsibilities there was to occasionally take the children grocery shopping and to medical appointments, and to handle paperwork for their school registration and vaccines. She felt that she was assisting with a “noble experiment,” though, she added, “it was nothing like a systematic experiment where you’d have a hypothesis and try to prove it.” Gajdusek framed his project in philanthropic as well as anthropological terms: he was studying “‘orchids’ of human culture—fragile and soon to be extinct, but revealing man and his condition as it may never be seen again!”

Gajdusek selected Mbaginta'o, he explained in a legal declaration, because he seemed the "most intelligent and adaptable to civilized society." Mbaginta'o came from the Anga people, then known as the Kukukuku, who lived in a more remote region than the Fore, surrounded by uninhabited forest and steep mountains. In a college essay that Mbaginta'o wrote years later, edited by Gajdusek, he described the first rite of his initiation into manhood. Awakened by bamboo flutes, he and other boys, some as young as seven, began saying goodbye to the women in their family, whom they wouldn't see again until they grew up. During the next three days, they were struck on the back with sticks, held animal hearts in their mouths, and went to a stream where a blade of cogon grass was stuck up their noses until they bled into the water. On the second day, Mbaginta'o wrote, "the young novices must suck the penises of the older initiated men in order to grow up fast. This homosexual act was to remain a secret of the men, and if it was told to the women, the teller would be killed."

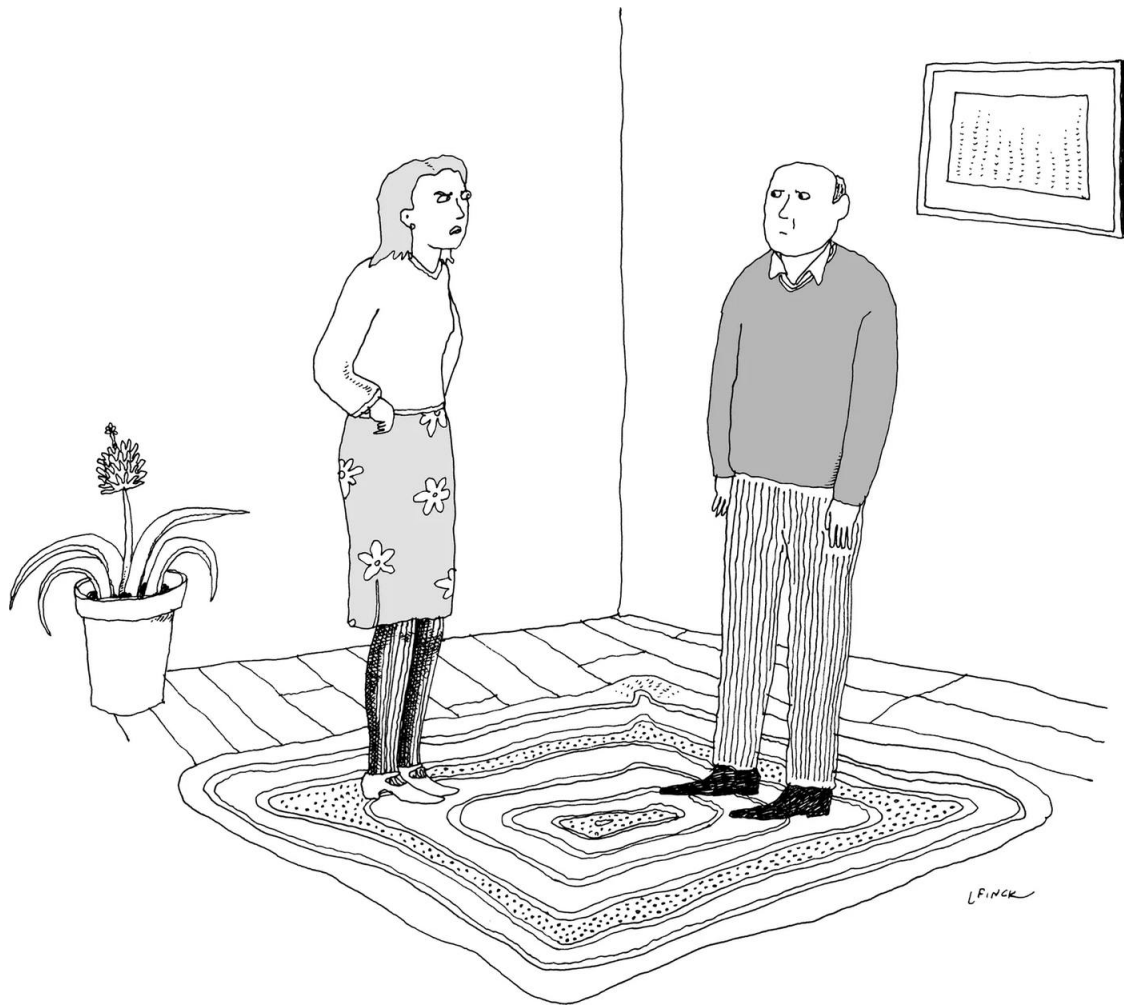
Versions of this initiation practice, which was largely abandoned by the nineties, have been described by anthropologists studying the community. "I have found here in the Western Kukukuku (and I believe that in the past, at least, it was true for the entire Kukukuku) a culture in which pederasty—or pedophilia—has been institutionalized," Gajdusek speculated, in a journal that was typed up by his staff, printed by the N.I.H., and distributed to hundreds of his colleagues.

Not long after his initiation, Mbaginta'o ran away from the Anga people. Both of his parents had died. He began living among the Fore, under the care of Luwi's grandfather, calling Luwi's mother his sister. It was there that he encountered Gajdusek. "He was first white man ever met," he wrote later. "He thought me his western worlds and confuse me in my bush life."

With permission from the Australian colonial government, which controlled Papua New Guinea, Gajdusek and Mbaginta'o left the country together in 1963, making a stop in Guam on the way, to visit an N.I.H. lab. Mbaginta'o didn't know his age, but Gajdusek guessed that he was eleven. In the hallway, they passed a morgue where a

white corpse was being loaded into a coffin. “Mbaginta’o stopped short at the sight of the body, and beheld it in such amazement that I too was amazed,” Gajdusek wrote in his journal. Gajdusek asked what was wrong, and Mbaginta’o responded, “*Wait man em i dai tu?*”—“The white man, he died, too?” It was only then, confronted with the corpse, Gajdusek wrote, that Mbaginta’o could “suddenly grasp the fact that I, too, belong to a race of mortals.”

In America, they were greeted at the airport by Gajdusek’s friend Joseph Wegstein, a prominent computer scientist at the National Bureau of Standards. “He was dressed like a boy fresh from a British Colonial office, but instead of stepping out of British Colonial history, he was stepping across 10,000 years of time,” Wegstein wrote in a school recommendation. At the airport, Wegstein continued, Mbaginta’o “would not say anything but ‘hello,’ ‘yes,’ and ‘no.’ ” In a letter, François Jacob, a French biologist who’d won the Nobel Prize in 1965, wrote that Gajdusek had wanted to see “whether this boy, living in the wild forest, could be accustomed to the modern and sophisticated life.”



"They're in the closet, Gary. And this is the last time I tell you where we keep the skeletons."

Cartoon by Liana Finck



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Mbaginta'o enrolled as a sixth grader at Georgetown Day School. Wegstein tutored him in math three times a week. "His insecurity & anxiety directs him to hard work & quiet withdrawal & diligent attempts to help, to accomplish much, to please!" Gajdusek wrote. Wegstein, who didn't have his own family, prepared meals for Mbaginta'o, bought him clothes, took him sailing, and kept a journal of their time together when Gajdusek was away. After three months in the U.S., Mbaginta'o went with Gajdusek to see the Andrei Tarkovsky film "My Name Is Ivan," about a twelve-year-old orphan who works as a scout during the Second World War and is visited by

dreams of his childhood. Mbaginta'o soon decided that he would adopt a new name, easier for Americans to pronounce: from now on, he would be called Ivan.

Ivan learned rapidly for the first year and then seemed to plateau. One of his tutors suggested to Gajdusek, in Ivan's presence, that he "simply might lack the intelligence and ability to learn more." Gajdusek felt, he wrote in his journal, that Ivan "partly understood" the tutor's words, because he immediately became "repressed & tongue-tied." After the conversation, Gajdusek drove down the highway, sobbing. "I pale at the thought of Ivan's fortune," he wrote. "I foresee real tragedy in it for us both." Addressing Ivan in his journal, Gajdusek wrote, "Even your school mates rebelled at seeing you as a guinea pig!!"

Ivan seemed to understand that he had held more power when he was small. After he began to get acne, Gajdusek wrote that Ivan "cuddled up to me and coyly whimpered that he does not want to grow up, that he wants to stay a little boy. He is seriously hurt if I refer to him as an older boy, a young man."

Gajdusek felt increasingly oppressed by the depth of Ivan's needs—his "clueless pouts and 'hurt' expressions." Once, Gajdusek became annoyed that Ivan, studying for a literature exam, hadn't selected the books that he'd recommended. "I thus exploded, struck him several times and rammed home the truth that he is *not* graded in his school and is not the legitimate eighth grader he assumes himself to be," Gajdusek wrote. Another time, when Ivan resisted doing his schoolwork, Gajdusek told him that he was ready to "give up" and send him back home. "He cried so intensely & so pitifully, so completely overcome & with such body wracking sobs that I could not stop him," Gajdusek wrote. "He so lifelessly & wretchedly pleaded & sobbed—only getting out 'No Carleton, No Carleton, Plis, Plis, Plis Carleton, No Carleton, Plis.' " After another fight, Ivan ran off at night, and Gajdusek was so frantic with guilt, he

wrote, that at 4:30 A.M. he “walked quietly around the house inspecting the branches of the big trees to see if Ivan was not hanging from one.”

One night, Gajdusek took Ivan to see the Japanese film “Kwaidan,” a rendering of four supernatural fables. At a restaurant after the screening, Ivan told Gajdusek that he had been seeing people who reminded him of the ghosts in the film. “He was clearly frightened & disturbed & said this spontaneously, complaining that these were not dreams but occurred as visions in the daytime at his desk,” Gajdusek wrote. Gajdusek panicked, fearing that “the whole ‘experiment’ might suddenly disintegrate.” The “dreadful spectre of Mbaginta’o hallucinating & having delusions & progressing to fully demented schizophrenia,” he wrote, “loomed before me with all its implications . . . all my terrible responsibility.” Ivan had confided that in his visions he saw apparitions who were changing physically, growing ugly and old.

Frozen organs from people who had died of kuru were continually shipped to Bethesda: five sets of eyes; seventy-five brain specimens. “How strange to fondle the brain of the infant I so well remember,” Gajdusek wrote after the tissues of a one-year-old arrived. Ivan worked in the lab, both as a volunteer and, later, on the N.I.H.’s payroll, and held primates as they were injected with the extracts of kuru victims. Gajdusek had come to the idea of injecting animals after a veterinary pathologist noticed that the brains of kuru patients resembled those of sheep with scrapie, a fatal neurological disease transmitted through exposure to infected tissues. Gajdusek decided to test whether kuru could be infectious, too, a compelling possibility given the Fore’s mortuary rituals.

In 1963, Gajdusek’s colleague Michael Alpers, an Australian, had performed an autopsy on a child named Kigea. Alpers described her as a “wonderful young girl,” who, as her illness progressed, spoke “softly and shyly,” eventually only grunting. Liquefied parts of Kigea’s brain were put into a chimpanzee named Daisey. Within

two years, Daisey became apathetic, and soon her body trembled; then she began huddling, almost catatonic, on a shelf in her cage. Two other injected chimpanzees developed similar symptoms. “Do you think they look as though they had kuru?” Gajdusek, who was in Papua New Guinea, asked Ivan in a letter, in 1965.

Gajdusek and his colleagues concluded that kuru had been transmitted to the chimpanzees, and in a paper for *The New England Journal of Medicine* they announced the discovery of an infectious disease whose behavior could not be explained by existing models of contagion. Kuru had none of the typical signs of infection, such as fever or immune response, and it defied the expectation that sickness would follow soon after exposure. The research suggested that the boundaries of infectious disease had been conceived too narrowly, and prompted scientists to reassess how they approached other degenerative illnesses. A 2013 paper in *Pathogens* called the discovery “one of the greatest contributions to biomedical sciences of the 20th century.”

The kuru experiments, which won Gajdusek the Nobel Prize in 1976, put him in a position in which people around him rarely said no. “The more brains he acquired,” the historian Warwick Anderson wrote, “the more opportunities he had to build relationships with other scientists, to make them indebted to him.” During Ivan’s first seven years in the U.S., Gajdusek adopted five more children, from Fais, an island in Micronesia with fewer than three hundred people, and from Ulithi, a nearby coral atoll—both places where he had gone to do medical research. Ivan didn’t understand why Gajdusek kept bringing new children home. “It is disappointing me because you never told me about them,” he wrote him, adding, “However, it’s nice of you to bring them here and now so that they can replace me.”

By the time Gajdusek brought his fifth child home, Ivan was at Swarthmore College, where he had been admitted after several of Gajdusek’s friends wrote letters urging his acceptance. At the end of the first semester, a dean called Gajdusek and told him that Ivan could not continue. “The game is up,” Gajdusek wrote. “It is their hope, now that our game of playing with the savage is over, that he will happily become a savage once again to relieve them of all moral responsibility, & me too.” Ivan returned

to Papua New Guinea, enrolled in college, and then dropped out. “I know my life is crazy and I just don’t know how to communicate with anybody,” Ivan wrote Gajdusek. “I am very scared about my future life. I do not know what want to become.”



Gideon Waiwaime moved to the U.S. to live with Gajdusek. When he was sent back to Papua New Guinea, he wrote Gajdusek a poem that began, "This is the end of me but you live on." Photograph by Tajette O'Halloran for The New Yorker

Undeterred, Gajdusek took home a second child from Papua New Guinea half a year later. The German missionary who had settled in the highlands had started a Lutheran school, and Gajdusek asked him to find a good candidate among the students. “It would probably be advisable if his age was just 12 or under,” he wrote in a letter. “This would have the added advantage of half fare on the airlines and would further permit me to even contemplate bringing two.” Gajdusek eventually drew up a list of eight students, and then decided on the youngest child, a twelve-year-old boy. In Tok Pisin, the country’s main language, the boy wrote to his parents seeking permission. “A young master said he wants to take me to America,” he wrote. “He is not taking me to go for nothing. He wants to take me there and he wants me to go to the big school of the white men.”

In the seventies, in the wake of the Tuskegee scandal, a forty-year experiment in which hundreds of Black men with syphilis were studied without their knowledge and denied treatment, scientists began adhering to new regulations to protect human research subjects. But those rules didn’t apply to Gajdusek’s children, because he had incorporated them into his family. “How stupid I feel & how unable to reply, when people start to tell me how generous & how altruistic & how fine it is of me to bring the boys to America for education,” Gajdusek reflected in his journal. “I feel far more comfortable with those who worried, ask me for my real motives & my real purpose.”

In 1975, the year that Papua New Guinea gained independence from Australia, Luwi joined the second class of Fore children to attend a new government school in Purosa, a former colonial aid post, a day’s walk from his village. Before the lessons began, he said, “we went out into the bush, chopped wood, brought it back, and made chairs.” Gajdusek had given Luwi a copy of Webster’s Dictionary as a gift, and in his free time Luwi studied it. Some words he found perplexing, like “obliged”—it didn’t sound the way he thought it should.

As colonial administrators and missionaries had penetrated the highlands, the practice of cannibalism had ended and kuru had begun to recede. When new cases emerged, it was in people who had been exposed to the disease years before. “The scientists never cured anybody,” Luwi told me. “The only remedy they could find was telling people, ‘You have to change your life.’ ” He associated the end of the epidemic with the coming of churches and schools.

In 1981, Luwi was sitting in class when the headmaster of his school called his name on a megaphone. He and his desk mate, Iggy, were to report to the school office. Gajdusek was waiting there, to take them to the U.S. The headmaster had been reluctant to release them, but “I finally talked him into letting them go since I was now their legal guardian,” Gajdusek wrote in his journal. Two days earlier, Luwi’s uncle and Iggy’s parents had given their consent. Two other Fore children were also joining them. One, an eleven-year-old named Susanna, recalled crying when she learned where she was headed: “Carleton said, I will take you now, so I begin to cry more and so my mother said, stop crying so I shut my mouth.” In his journal, Gajdusek described her as “trickier than I expected.”

Luwi did not consider whether he wanted to leave. “He just picked us out of the room, and we were confused,” he said. “America was a country where no one could go except through some kind of miracle.” He had only a few minutes to gather his belongings in a cloth sack. The Webster’s Dictionary was too heavy to take, so he slipped it under a friend’s mattress as a gift.

Luwi’s cousin Rebecca, whose family he boarded with in Purosa during the school year, said, “I looked around and I didn’t see him, and I said, ‘Luwi? Where is Luwi?’ ” A classmate told her, “He’s fully gone. It was just that white man.”

Gajdusek drove Luwi and the other children to Goroka, where Ivan now lived. They spent the night at Ivan’s house. “We were Carleton’s new birds,” Luwi said. Ivan was

married, with two children, and worked as the curator of a small museum that collected artifacts from the eastern highlands, like masks and shields. He was skeptical of Gajdusek's plan. "I and my wife are really discouraging about you for taking too many new boys," he had written Gajdusek five months earlier. "We would like to know how much are you going to get benefits from all these boys?"

Ivan's daughter, Louisa, told me that her father had never spoken about his past. All she knew was that he'd been educated in the U.S. "My father doesn't tell a story about where he came from, where he went. He doesn't tell a story about anything," she said. When Louisa asked her father about his time in the U.S., he told her, "Just forget it."

Ivan took the children to the airport in Goroka and tried to give Luwi some advice about adjusting to the U.S., but Luwi doesn't remember his words, except that his grammar was "corrupted." Luwi felt sorry that Ivan hadn't learned to speak English better. On the planes that took him across the world, Luwi vomited much of the way.

Luwi and the three other children moved into Prospect Hill, a dilapidated eighteenth-century estate in Frederick, Maryland. Five of Gajdusek's boys were already living there. The house, which sat on six acres of land, had eight fireplaces, a gazebo, a volleyball court, and a swimming pool with a diving board, and was surrounded by hyacinths, wisteria, and cherry trees. There were no immediate neighbors and no telephone. Gajdusek described the living conditions as "haughty isolation." On Luwi's first day, Gajdusek gave the new children a tour of the N.I.H. "We were in a jungle of foreigners," Luwi recalled. The next day, Luwi started eighth grade at a local public school.

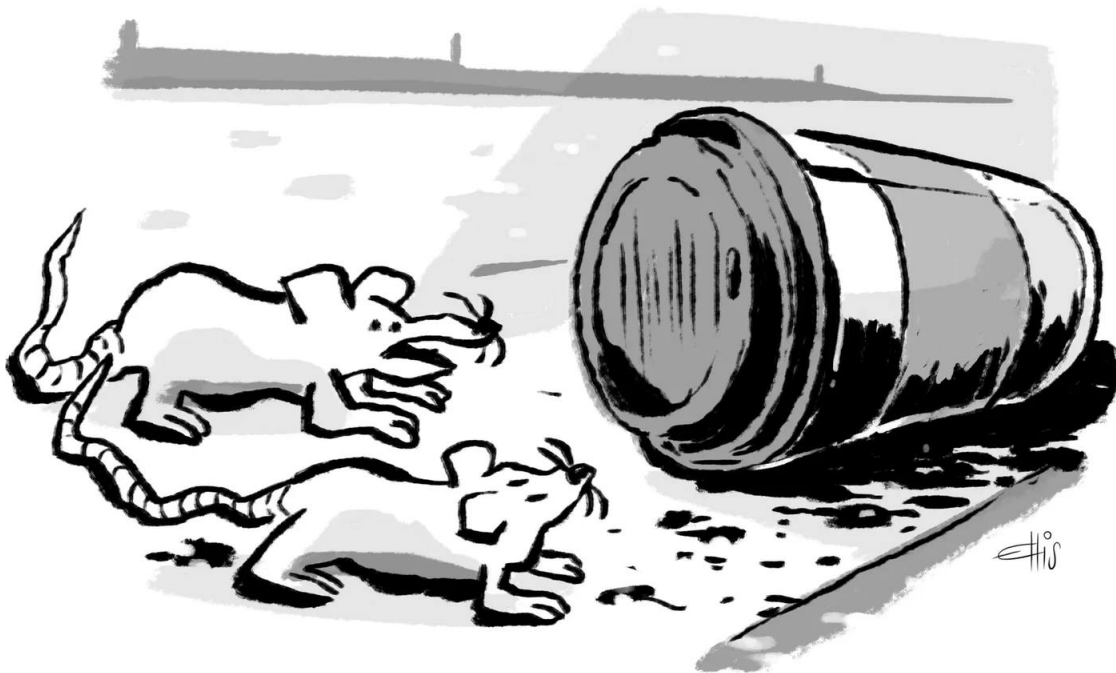
Wegstein, the computer scientist who had helped raise the first generation of boys, had developed Alzheimer's. A pediatric hematologist from China named Cheng-Ting Chin, who worked in Gajdusek's lab, moved into Prospect Hill. She asked Gajdusek to marry her, but in a letter he told her that he needed to be "free of

binding personal ties and commitments except to my kids—who are all prepubertal when I pick them—and even with them,” he added, “I want them as adults to reduce me to a memory alone.” The people he really loved, he wrote in his journal, were “the small fish whom I can handle, play with, behold with love and wonder and return to the sea.”

At the dinner table, Gajdusek sometimes read literature aloud for up to two hours. He had a standard list of authors that he pressed on his children: James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Maxim Gorky, André Gide, D. H. Lawrence. “Read & read & even take notes or, at least, keep a list of titles & authors & any comments you can make,” he wrote to one boy. He gave the children journals and then spent up to an hour at night correcting their entries. He compared himself to Lorenzo de’ Medici, the fifteenth-century Florentine patron, looking for his Michelangelo.

“At 10:58pm Gajdusek gave me this note book,” Luwi wrote one night, in a green cloth journal stamped with a Federal Supply Service stock number. He began entries the same way Gajdusek did: with the date, the time of day, and his location. “I was dreaming today that this notebook would be the most important book in the future in the History of Luwi,” he wrote, adding, “I don’t know what my wife and children will say if I give them this paper.”

Some entries read like an anthropological account of suburban American adolescence. On his first day of school in 1984—“George Orwell’s year,” Luwi noted—he observed, “Everyone said to me ‘Happy New Year’ and they also asked me what I got for Christmas presents and asked me also about how my holiday was. It was working good for me.” He internalized the frame through which Gajdusek saw his life. After a fight with Gajdusek about chores, he wrote, “(savages) (savages) (savages).” Luwi can’t remember if Gajdusek was saying that word, or if he had used parentheses because he was imagining Gajdusek’s thoughts.



*“The city has really changed. When I was a kid, that coffee cup
wasn’t there.”*

Cartoon by Ellis Rosen



[Open cartoon gallery](#)

“Carleton slap me on my chin couple of times, so I walked outside to the trash area and made a big fire and slept in the charcoal,” Luwi wrote after another fight, over who would do the dishes. The next day, Luwi kept to himself, looking through books about Papua New Guinea. One book, “A Study in Nascent Literacy,” comprised letters from his uncle Koiye, who had been one of Gajdusek’s most loyal helpers, travelling with him and carrying his equipment. Luwi considered Koiye the first person in Waieti to become literate. Koiye’s letters, composed when he was in his early teens, read like speeches that had been recorded. “You listen to my message,” the letters often began, as if Koiye were standing up to make an announcement at a gathering. He listed people who had died of kuru, expressed how much he missed Ivan, and asked for supplies: ballpoint pens, books, a blanket, a guitar. He ended the notes by saying “I am Koiye” and “That is all. My short message is over.”

Luwi showed the letters to the other children, and they laughed at Koiye's simple writing. "We took it as a joke," Luwi said. But he felt new respect for his uncle's metamorphosis. "He was learning to create a message out of thoughts," he said. That night, Luwi dreamed that he was back in his village, hunting. But he couldn't find any animals in the forest to kill. When he returned home, hungry, he wrote, "my father chased us and told us that a man who goes hunting doesn't come home without anything." The next day, Luwi had a similar daydream, but this time the disapproving patriarch was Gajdusek. After going to a store to buy cassettes, he wrote, "I walked back home slowly and dreamed that I was a very primitive boy, hiding in a cave after I saw Carleton."

Luwi got D's in algebra and woodshop, and his head almost "burnt down" when he had to stand up in his U.S.-history class and read aloud his paper about the War of 1812. "BOY DO I NEED HELP VERY MUCH," he wrote in his journal. But Gajdusek was often travelling, or busy with work. There were nights when no adult was at home. He and the other boys poured whiskey in their coffee in the morning, to keep warm as they walked to school. After Gajdusek stormed off one evening, angry that Luwi was being too noisy and hadn't done the laundry, Luwi wrote, "Good luck Carleton wherever you are out having a nice meal and maybe a glass of champagne but remember we depend on you."

In his journal, Gajdusek sometimes described sleeping in the same bed, naked, with his children, specifically the younger boys. Luwi said that Gajdusek commented on the growth of his penis and testicles and encouraged him to masturbate. Luwi couldn't categorize what Gajdusek was doing. "I just kept shut," he told me. "I could pretend that I was home, in the bush." His earliest memories of Gajdusek in Waieti also involved sexualized lessons. "He would take us to a safe place where we would feel free, and then ask us, 'What's the name of this thing?' " Luwi said. "He would ask about certain plants, the hands, the feet, the genitals. He would grab our balls and say, 'What do you call this?' "

Colonizers and anthropologists, too, often described foreign lands in erotic terms—as not-quite-real places where they fell in love with people’s differences, as well as their newfound freedom and power. “I run from my work, my associates, my ‘patterned life,’ to find myself—a self growing fierce and strange,” Gajdusek wrote. The scholar Anne McClintock likened the tropics to a “magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires.” But Gajdusek made these fantasies portable. When he brought the children home, he continued to imagine that an attraction to boys—he recognized that his sexuality made him “an aberrant individual of our species”—could be indulged without harm.

Gideon Waiwaime, who was ten when he came to live with Gajdusek, said that Gajdusek would give him a medical exam a few times a year and squeeze his testicles for a length of time that surprised him. “I just thought that was part of the examination process,” Gideon told me. “So I thought, We will just flow with it.” His roommate, who was older, advised him to “stay away from the old man.” Gideon said that when Gajdusek would pat the private parts of other boys, “We would make fun of it, like, ‘Oh, I saw what the old man did to you.’ ” He felt that being touched by Gajdusek was “part of the package of coming to America.”

Gajdusek often invited a dozen guests for dinner. “We cooked and prepared everything, like a restaurant for them,” Luwi said. Gajdusek kept a guestbook that was signed by people who visited his house, including the mayor of Frederick; the First Lady of Jamaica; Benoit Mandelbrot, the mathematician who coined the term “fractal”; Ho Wang Lee, who discovered the Hantaan virus; and Göran K. Hansson, who was part of the Nobel Assembly for more than two decades and eventually became its secretary. As a Nobel laureate, Gajdusek was entitled to nominate other doctors and scientists for the prize, and visitors jockeyed to be “on the list,” as Gajdusek put it. At the end of the meals, Luwi said, “we’d ask if we could make them coffee or get them ice cream.” Ephraim Katzir, a biophysicist and the fourth President

of Israel, wrote Gajdusek in a letter, “It was wonderful to see how you succeeded in transforming your ‘kids’ into a cooperative children’s society.”

Gajdusek was frequently invited to international medical conferences, and sometimes he took the children with him. On a trip to Italy, where he gave three lectures, he and Luwi both wrote down the make of the vehicle they rented, the time they checked in to their hotel, the straits they crossed in a ferry, the people who drove them, and the views from the windows—in almost identical terms. (Not all of Gajdusek’s children took to their diaries with enthusiasm. “My feeling was very questionable,” a boy from Tobi, a Micronesian island less than a mile long, wrote once. “I was not trying to remember anything.”)

Luwi and the other highland boys sometimes attended Gajdusek’s lectures about kuru, and Luwi sensed that their presence gave him more credibility. The children of mothers who died of kuru were at risk of developing the disease, too, since they had often taken part in mortuary feasts together. “It could already be in my system,” Luwi said. “So they would just do a study on me, and it would be a good study, because, instead of those studies they did on the chimpanzees, they will have a real specimen in Washington.”

During Luwi’s third year in the U.S., Gajdusek read Henry James’s first two novels, “Roderick Hudson” and “Watch and Ward.” Both novels are about “would-be benefactors” who are “basically sexually crippled, gifted persons,” Gajdusek observed. He was struck by James’s insights about “the sense of undeserved obligation, and imprisonment or slavery or mind washing” in youth drawn into a benefactor’s orbit. He copied several lines from “Roderick Hudson” into his journal. “May I learn ever better to produce freedom in adolescence & not bondage in all the kids I touch,” he wrote.

During high school, Luwi mostly disappeared from Gajdusek's journals. He appears largely in lists of boys: going to a museum; playing soccer; navigating jet lag; obtaining college brochures; talking to Gajdusek, as they drive sixty miles per hour on the New Jersey Turnpike, about people dying from kuru at home. The children dissolve into a collective. "We the lads of the Pacific / Our Island very wide," one boy wrote in a poem. "When the doctor came to visit, / We followed for the ride."

Gajdusek often wrote about the ways in which "relationships of long standing slowly fall apart and disintegrate from neglect or directly destructive action," adding, "This fascinates me and since I am increasingly a part of such alienations I look at them in awe." He noted, "It remains as always, the 'denouement' that are the problem."



Gajdusek in the Solomon Islands, around 1963. He later won a Nobel Prize for his research into kuru, a fatal disease. Photograph courtesy U.S. National Library of Medicine

Luwi became one such source of trouble. In the fall of 1986, he went to Paul Smith's College, in upstate New York, where he remembers being among only a handful of students who weren't white. He drank heavily and didn't do his schoolwork. After a

year, he flunked out. He told Gajdusek, “I cannot stay around this place anymore. I just want to go home.” Gajdusek, who recognized that Luwi’s year in college had “injured his ego,” bought him a ticket to Papua New Guinea.

The night before his departure, Luwi’s friends threw a party at a park and he stayed up all night drinking. When Gajdusek saw him early the next morning, he wrote, Luwi was “in tears & at times near to rage in inebriated disequilibrium, crying that I avoided him & ‘never talked with him.’ ” A few hours later, Gajdusek took him to the airport and waved at him from the departure lounge as Luwi cried. “I am very glad that he is off,” Gajdusek wrote.

That same day, Gajdusek’s newest ward, Daniel, arrived from Micronesia. He was nine years old, the son of a man who had been one of the first generation of boys from Micronesia to come to the U.S. “I am in love with Daniel!” Gajdusek wrote, two days after Luwi left. “He is a wonderful, bright & alert & non-demanding small boy.”

Luwi returned to Papua New Guinea feeling as if he had nothing to show for himself except for a “raw body.” He stayed at Ivan’s house, in Goroka, and worked at a store that sold food and tools. He didn’t want to talk about his time in the U.S. “The explanations we use in English are different from the native tongue,” he said. “In the native tongue, you have to collaborate with many, many words, and it could fall into a heap of words and still I cannot break it down.”

Luwi was disoriented by how much had changed in the years he was gone. “As in the States, money is becoming ‘everything’ here in Papua New Guinea,” he wrote to Gajdusek. He remembered an egalitarian way of living, but he discovered that *wantoks*—a Tok Pisin word meaning “one talk,” or people who speak the same language—no longer “give away garden foods for nothing as it was in the old days.”

Luwi's desk mate from the highlands, Iggy, had come back to Papua New Guinea with an American college degree, and he'd found a job in government. But most of the other highland boys returned "naked," as Luwi's cousin Rebecca put it. (One boy ended up settling in the U.S.) Sena Anua, who had gone to America a year before Luwi, had also failed out of college and returned to his village. "I was ashamed to present myself before my family at home," Sena told me. Gajdusek had given him and his siblings the "map of life," he said, but most of them "didn't find the gate to that land."

A few of Luwi's classmates who had stayed in the highlands became police officers, health professionals, and teachers, and Luwi felt that his prospects would have been better if he'd never left for the U.S. He decided to go back to school, at the Divine Word Institute, on the north coast of Papua New Guinea. Gajdusek paid the school fees. But Luwi was still drinking, and, after a year, his grades weren't high enough to continue. "I guess I am just a born failure or loser," he wrote Gajdusek. "I thank you very much for your efforts in trying to get me back on track but I just couldn't. He moved home to Waieti. In his journal, he called it "the back page." He married a cousin, but Waieti was different than he remembered. "Today, you could hardly hear a human sound of children playing or people chanting or singing," he told Gajdusek. Several families had moved to other villages or coastal areas. The center of Waieti had been taken over by wild grass.

Luwi occasionally travelled two days from Waieti to Goroka so that he could buy books from a thrift shop. "I laugh at myself," he told me. "Who do I think I am? What am I trying to prove?" He carried the books home in a military backpack. As he passed people on the road, he said, they'd call out, mockingly, "Where is that soldier man going?" He understood that what they meant was "You were in America, and now you are unemployed?" "The best thing for me to do was just to listen and walk on, because I cannot disagree with these people," he told me. In his journal, he

wrote, “I am doing nothing but planning a plan for a plan to carry out a plan—plan-plan-plan-plan-plan.”

Luwi was on the verge of declaring himself “ ‘UNFIT’ to live up to this society,” he told Gajdusek in a letter. But, he added, “my biggest hope and a dream that I always think of is of writing.” He asked Gajdusek to send him pens and pads of paper, and to share the titles of “books that have something to do with social aspects of human life.” Luwi wrote, “Just give me a name and I will take them up.” Sometimes, when the weather was dry, he spent nights in the forest, in order to catch birds of paradise, known for their extravagant, jewel-like feathers, which he sold. He made a hut there with a leaf roof, and, when he heard the sound of flapping wings, he shot at the birds with arrows he’d made from umbrella spokes. As he waited in the hut, he said, “I made a hole in the forest so the light shined in, and started writing. I put my mind to the pages of my journal, explaining myself to myself.”

By the nineties, Gajdusek’s lab had infected hundreds of animals with neurological diseases that resembled kuru. It had gradually become clear that the infectious agent in kuru and similar neurodegenerative diseases, such as Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and fatal familial insomnia, was a misfolded protein called a prion—a word coined by Stanley Prusiner, a neurologist at the University of California, San Francisco, who in 1997 won a Nobel Prize for his discovery. Prusiner had studied kuru and, after a visit to the highlands in 1980, he had brought Sena Anua to the U.S., as a favor to Gajdusek. Sena was nine. “Stan says he is amply rewarded by the experience of bringing him to his first elevator, first hotel, first zoo, first restaurant,” Gajdusek wrote in his journal.

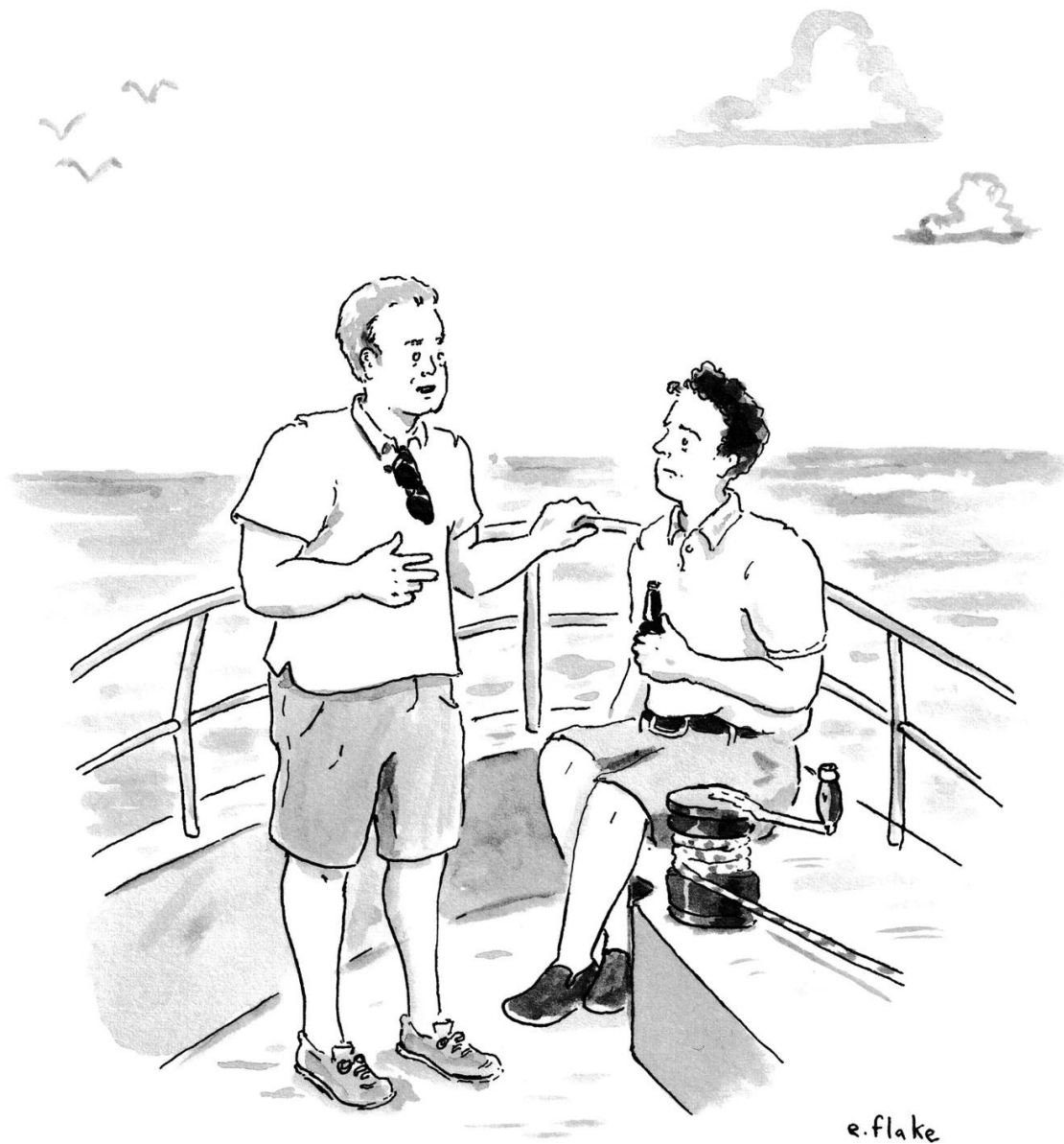
Mark Godec, a fellow in Gajdusek’s lab, said that, when he saw Gajdusek at the N.I.H., “he was usually surrounded by a half-dozen boys, some of whom looked no more than nine or ten.” Godec decided to read through Gajdusek’s journals from the

fifties, sixties, and seventies, which were stacked on a shelf. “They were right there, up above my desk,” he told me. He was shocked by the number of prepubescent children who Gajdusek seemed to think had been “flirting” with or “seducing” him.

Judith Farquhar, the University of Chicago anthropologist who had worked in Gajdusek’s lab, had warned Gajdusek years earlier that it would be better to privately print his more personal journals, rather than to rely on the N.I.H. to fund the process and to use its staff to transcribe and bind them. “Discussions that may look veiled to you look pretty transparent to me,” Farquhar wrote. When I asked what had concerned her, she said, “Well, of course, it was the threat of suspicions of sexual misconduct.” She said that as Gajdusek had aged, he’d kept confessing his sexual interests “to the point that all of us were completely bored by it.”

When Godec asked colleagues what they made of their lab chief’s behavior, he said, “it was clear that a consensus had been arrived at: this is none of our business.” In 1995, after working in the lab for several years, he brought a box of Gajdusek’s journals to Senator Nancy Kassebaum, the chair of the Committee on Labor and Human Resources, which oversaw the N.I.H. He had put Post-it notes on the pages where there were sexual descriptions of boys. Godec told me, “I realized I’m in the middle of a pedophile operation that has been run out of the N.I.H. by a Nobel laureate for thirty years.” (In the eighties, police in Maryland had investigated Gajdusek after at least one American man, the son of an N.I.H. colleague, complained of being sexually abused in the sixties, as a child, but the case had been closed when the police couldn’t find recent victims.)

The Office of Inspector General and the F.B.I. opened investigations. Frank Adelman, an agent for the O.I.G., began interviewing scientists in Gajdusek’s lab, but they were “terribly protective,” Adelman told me. “They didn’t see anything wrong with what Gajdusek was doing. They thought the man was a saint.” David Asher, a scientist who had worked in Gajdusek’s lab for twenty-five years, told Adelman, “Whatever Gajdusek has done, he has done it openly and with the full knowledge and consent of the management of N.I.N.D.S.”—the section within the N.I.H. focussed on neurological conditions.



“And, of course, my favorite thing to do with the boat is sail out to open water and scream, and scream, and scream.”

Cartoon by Emily Flake



[Open cartoon gallery](#)



By the early nineties, Gajdusek had nine children and young adults in his home, and he no longer believed his educational program was going to produce a “Rimbaud or a Baudelaire,” he wrote. “I am not a gardener who can prune out, rather an ecologist faced with preservation of the human wilderness.” Some of the children were getting into fights at school; others were shoplifting and drinking. They threw pool parties

that lasted until dawn. “I don’t want you to ending up like some of Carleton’s boys, who are now not doing any important things for themselves,” Ivan wrote to his daughter, Louisa, who was living in Gajdusek’s house. Ivan had also sent his son, named Carleton, but he was arrested for theft and, rather than face charges, returned home. Kelly Watson, a professor at West Virginia University who writes about colonialism and is working on a book about Gajdusek, went to high school with some of the boys at the time. She said that they had been known for the rowdy parties they threw. Gajdusek’s house was seen as a place to drink and do drugs.

An F.B.I. agent began trying to interview the children, but the only one who spoke freely was a twenty-three-year-old whom I’ll call Michael. He had met Gajdusek in Pohnpei, a volcanic island in Micronesia, when he was fourteen. His departure was arranged so quickly, Michael told me, that he never said goodbye to his parents. In America, Gajdusek quickly found ways to touch him. “Being a doctor, he could say, ‘Hey, come here. I need to check you, because you’ve got to make sure your medical is clear,’ or whatever,” Michael said. “I didn’t understand it. I was always finding reasons to explain it to myself.”

In his journal, Gajdusek described Michael as “aloof in a strangely disturbing way,” often “slinking into the house” without announcing his arrival. “I detect a certain rage,” Gajdusek noted. After a fight, Michael said he wanted to go home, explaining, Gajdusek wrote, that “he has always wanted to anyway, it is me who is holding him here.” By the time Michael was in college, Gajdusek acknowledged that the relationship was “pathological,” but he blamed Michael. “I keep hoping and praying that he will resolve his peculiar conflicts with me,” he wrote.

Michael agreed to secretly record a conversation with Gajdusek for the F.B.I. In 1996, he called Gajdusek at his lab and said that investigators had been trying to question him.

Gajdusek was about to leave for Paris for a conference on prion diseases, where he would give the keynote lecture. He told Michael that he should simply say that he was never molested.

“So you want, you want me to, like, lie to them?” Michael asked.

“Yes,” Gajdusek said. “Absolutely.”

“Well, now that I’m thinking about it, I wanna know why.”

“What?”

“I wanna know why you did it to me.”

Gajdusek switched to a private line in his office. “Look,” he said. “If you go on and talk to people about that, you’re gonna get us in so much trouble that you’re gonna close the life down for the kids at college, close my accounts down. I’ll have to go out of the country. Catch on?”

“Don’t you understand that what you did to me, you know, possibly has to do with a lot of why I’m so disturbed while I’m here in America?”

“I played around with my uncle as a kid,” Gajdusek said. “I played around with my brother.” He said that kids in Micronesia and Papua New Guinea did the same thing.

“I don’t know where you learned that from,” Michael said. “You’re the first one who did it to me.” He recalled how Gajdusek “did oral sex” on him “many times in different places.” He asked, “Didn’t you realize that I didn’t want to do it?”

“No, that I didn’t,” Gajdusek said.

“I was scared. You were hurting me.”

“Oh, I didn’t know,” Gajdusek said. “I apologize, and I’m very sorry.” He said that he wished Michael had told him earlier. “The story is . . . that I am . . . a person who has

a very difficult, great private life. I'm trying to find how to identify, and I tried to . . . transpose it like a priest or a nun to—"

"Carleton, I'm getting the feeling that you brought us here just . . . for your . . . own purpose," Michael said.

"Oh, Jesus," Gajdusek said.

"That's what I'm getting from you," Michael continued. "I don't know about the girls, but all the boys in the house—I know they tend to joke about stuff like that, and we're trying to keep it in the house, 'cause in some way we tried to protect you." He asked Gajdusek, "How long have you been doing this?"

"All my life," Gajdusek responded. But he said that he was as committed to his children as any American parent.

"You know, other people could make as much commitment and have good results," Michael said, adding that he had "studied carefully the statistics" and that only a fraction of the boys Gajdusek had raised were doing well.

"Well, I managed to take care of an awful lot of people who are grateful," Gajdusek said.

"They took care of themselves like we are doing right now," Michael said. "If you think taking care of kids is throwing money in their hands and—"

"I don't throw money around," Gajdusek said. "I give time. Time and attention."

"No, attention is the last thing you give to any of us," Michael said.

Gajdusek was arrested three weeks later, on his way back from the trip, during which he had received his twelfth honorary doctorate. He was charged with two counts of child

G abuse. Another boy from Micronesia, who had been eleven when he came to the U.S., had said that he, too, was molested. Not long after he gave a statement, though, his father and uncle went to Maryland to get custody of him and take him home. The boy retracted what he'd said.

Luwi told me that Tok Pisin does not have a term for “sexual abuse.” “Such matters are never openly discussed or thought about in our community,” he said. “We knew there were limitations, that Carleton had some ways of approaching us,” but Luwi did not consider himself a victim. “It would appear in my journals,” he told me. “I would have written about it.” His journal, he said, was proof of Gajdusek's character. Luwi understood Gajdusek to be a “child lover,” but he couldn't separate the attention he hadn't wanted from the attention that had made him who he was.

“I know I want to become like you—not in your big ways and your name, but in my own little way,” Luwi wrote Gajdusek, as soon as he learned of his arrest. “CARLETON IS ANOTHER KIND ALTOGETHER—HE IS LIKE AN IDOL, OR LIKE GOD.” He went on, “If I were the angel at the gates of heaven, deciding the fate of men, Carleton, you would pass through the gate on a mattress of comfort accompanied by a thousand angels with music that would just sweep you away into everlasting happiness in Paradise.”

At least ten of Gajdusek's adopted children also wrote letters of sympathy and support, but implicit in their praise was a different sort of injury. “I saw in you all I wanted to see and all I wanted to be,” one wrote. “For the rest of my life I've had to try to reconcile that with what I am.”

In his journals and in letters to colleagues, Gajdusek was self-righteous, arguing that what he'd done was “no more serious than lying on the grass or picking a dandelion,” and he cited the Anga initiation rites as justification. These ceremonies had brought boys into their communities, as part of a shared passage into manhood, but Gajdusek treated them as a timeless license for the acts that he'd committed privately, one boy

at a time. George Klein, a professor at the Karolinska Institute, in Stockholm, who was part of the Nobel Assembly for thirty-six years, validated Gajdusek's opinions, telling him that he wondered if "the Western world can 'catch up with you.'" He wrote, "I share your indignation about the typically Jewish-Christian-Moslem hypocrisy on sexual matters." Gajdusek was troubled, though, by how many colleagues wrote letters saying that they knew the charges must be untrue. "I thought better of my friends," he said. "They are dissimulating and lying."

In February, 1997, Gajdusek pleaded guilty. As part of his agreement, he would serve only a year in jail, at the Frederick County Detention Center, and he could leave the country upon his release. The prosecutor, Scott Rolle, told me, "The rest of the case fell apart when the potential victims were squirrelled away and disappeared back to the Western Pacific." Ivan had flown to the U.S. to retrieve Gideon Waiwaime and another child, who had both been placed in foster care following Gajdusek's arrest. After Gideon returned to his village, he wrote Gajdusek a poem that began, "This is the end of me but you live on."

Gajdusek enjoyed jail. "I find myself more productive and hedonistically lost in essay writing (thousands of pages) and reading and studying than ever before in my life," he wrote. His year of detention, he realized, could be his "longest and best Journal." He marvelled at the "great efficiency" of incarceration. The sink and toilet were just feet from his bed. Meals and mail were delivered to his door. "How the time in jail has flown by!" he wrote. "I have more books than I can use and access to inter library loan without leaving my seat."

The N.I.H. did not fire Gajdusek; instead, he was allowed to resign. Robert Gallo, an AIDS researcher and at the time one of the most widely cited scientists in the world, helped arrange an office for him at the Institute of Human Virology, at the University of Maryland, and invited him to join the editorial board of its journal. In jail,

Gajdusek continued publishing academic papers. He wrote in his diary that Gustav Nossal, the president of the Australian Academy of Science, had assured him that he was working to secure an appointment for him at the Australian National University. (The position never materialized.) E. Fuller Torrey, one of the country's best-known schizophrenia researchers, assisted with smaller matters, like checking to see if Gajdusek was permitted a twenty-pound copy of the Cambridge Shakespeare in his cell.

On the day of Gajdusek's release, friends, including the neurologist Oliver Sacks and the physicist Freeman Dyson, met him at the jail, along with four of the children he had brought up. "Whatever he may or may not have been doing, it was clearly not bad for the kids," Dyson said in an interview for a 2014 book titled "Great Minds." Dyson said that he had three heroes: Richard Feynman, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Gajdusek. "When he came out of jail, the first thing he said was 'They broke Oscar Wilde, but they did not break me,' " Dyson said. "So he is definitely a hero."

The evening of his release, Gajdusek took a flight to Paris, where a French research center, the Institut de Neurobiologie Alfred Fessard, had arranged for him to have his own office. The institute also published the journal he had kept the year of his arrest. It was titled "Ascent to the Zenith Was Magnificent: Denouement Was a Bit Difficult."

In 2011, Luwi learned of rumors in his village that he was a sorcerer. The wife of a local councillor, an elected village representative, had suddenly died. Luwi assumed that the woman had a disease that was never properly diagnosed. "There is a reason why people die," he wrote in his journal. But villagers said that he had caused her demise.

Despite the end of kuru, sorcery accusations had persisted, spreading to places where they hadn't previously been part of the belief system. In many regions of Papua New

Guinea, the accused were vulnerable, marginalized women, but in the highlands accusations were sometimes made against men who were seen as accruing unfair advantage or prestige, or who stood apart from the group. Miranda Forsyth, a scholar at the Australian National University who studies sorcery violence in Papua New Guinea, said, “Sorcery accusations are intensely related to jealousy, to the sense that some people have access to things that others don’t have. It’s a way of making sense of new inequalities in a society that had never previously had these differences.”

Luwi said that, after kuru ended, the first person in his village to be targeted as a sorcerer was his uncle Koiye. In 1993, Koiye, who had been living in Gajdusek’s abandoned house, was accused of using secret powers to cause another man’s death. A group of men shot him with arrows—three of them landed in his chest—and chased him out of the village.

Luwi, who moved into Gajdusek’s house after Koiye fled it, spent years keeping his distance from his uncle, so as not to attract suspicion, too. In his journal, in 2011, he listed points that had become the “base for my accusers”: he’d played cards with an unusual amount of money at the woman’s funeral; he’d been bitten by her husband’s dog. “Oh please God! Help me,” he wrote. “I am pure—innocence—not even a clue in the death!”

Luwi decided that it was no longer safe to go to funerals, where suspicions often festered. “Information gathered here makes up a strong support/base for accusations,” he wrote. But, in 2013, when a close friend died, Luwi, who had four children, could not stay away. He put his friend’s wooden casket in front of his house so that people could pay their respects. The coffin was covered with mud, and, before bringing it inside his house, Luwi cleaned it off with a bucket of water and a sponge. “This was my greatest mistake, which almost cost me my life,” he said. “The people who were looking at me as a sorcerer—it confirmed that I had killed this man, too.”



Luwi with his journal. He started keeping a diary more than forty years ago, at the urging of Gajdusek. Photograph by Tajette O'Halloran for The New Yorker

Two months later, Luwi was playing cards with friends under a tree when a man came from behind and struck him in the head with a machete. “The Day I was Chopped” was the next entry in his journal. The wound in his skull was five centimetres deep and twelve centimetres long. Lying in a hospital bed in Goroka, he wrote, “I still see the man running & jumping over my flower beds. I keep asking myself the reasons why I was chopped like a hog.”

Luwi was hospitalized for nearly three months and required several blood transfusions. He couldn’t understand how people could think that he, of all people, would practice sorcery. “I am the son of one of the world’s greatest scientists,” he said. “Carleton did not teach me to be a sorcerer.” In his journal, Luwi wrote, “If they still cannot figure out the kind of man I am, I have left them at the house more than 10 years of my diary records of my life. . . . That should help them to assess me more.” But his house had been looted, his belongings, including two decades’ worth of journals, redistributed or destroyed.

By then, Gajdusek was dead, his journals documenting his physical decline preserved at the National Library of Medicine. “I carried my lifelong pederasty into my medical career and succeeded in both with very few failures,” he wrote, two months before he died. “Without protectors I would never have succeeded.” He had spent the last decade of his life living in Europe and travelling for lectures and conferences. “Yes, I have lived a full life and with all the weirdness and quirks of my health and my personality,” he wrote, “I managed to twist it into an adventurous, almost mythological one, and for that I can only rejoice.”

Luwi told his wife and children to consider him part “dead man.” They had been chased away from Waieti and had had to settle in a new village. Luwi’s source of income, a coffee garden, went unharvested. He stayed in Goroka, because he was not medically stable enough to be far from a hospital; he could no longer do physical

labor. He missed his children so much that he liked to imagine that they were sending him messages—“sang to me by the birds,” he wrote.

He was dizzy and wobbly when he walked. “I will always be ‘that man,’ ” he wrote in his journal. “There he is—yes, that’s him.” His vision was blurred, and his body throbbed. “I cannot relate all these pains to a more soothing example than that of the dying kuru patients that I had witnessed,” he wrote. “The pains I saw them going through and the laughs children had watching them stumble to ground.”

Luwi still has a photograph of his skull wound, taken three days after the attack, as well as the medical record of his hospital stay, inserted on the first page of his journal, a black leather notebook with a snap. He lives in a shack that he built on the outskirts of Goroka, hanging canvas over sticks to create a veranda. He sleeps on a strip of foam. He shares the space with his sixth-grade teacher, whose class he’d been in before he disappeared to the U.S. “I decided to take him in so that I could continue to learn from his feedback,” Luwi told me. “My teacher’s children say, ‘You two are a good father and son.’ ”

I had looked for Luwi after reading his American journals from the eighties, which were archived at the National Library of Medicine. The first time he and I spoke, using the phone of Antonia Mission, a reporter in Goroka who had helped me find him, Luwi brought his current journal to the screen. “Every year I keep completing one of these,” he said. He sat on a bench in the sun, leaning against a mustard-yellow cinder-block wall. He told me that he still gravitated to the authors Gajdusek had recommended, and he summarized an idea he’d taken from Dostoyevsky: “Happiness cannot be earned by a reasoned plan of existence,” he said, “but must be earned by suffering.”

About six weeks later, I flew thirty-three hours to Goroka to meet with him and other men who had been brought up by Gajdusek. Luwi was waiting outside the

fence of the airport, which is situated in the center of Goroka, its runway stretching almost as long as the town itself. He walked with a well-disguised limp and wore a cap that read “Jesus Is Lord, Christ” covering his wound. Sena Anua and Launako Wate, another man who had lived at Prospect Hill, were standing next to him. They had travelled several hours, by bus and on foot.

“May I openly express my feelings?” Sena, a subsistence farmer, asked me, on my first morning in town. “You are here on his scribbles,” he began, referring to Luwi. Then he told him, “You lead. I’m only here to back you up. I have never been proud, but I am proud of you, and I want you to know that I am behind you.” For the rest of the day, Sena, who had the bearing of a professor and seemed accustomed to an audience, wouldn’t say more than a sentence or two about himself. He, too, had a story he wanted to tell: Sena’s father had assisted Gajdusek with autopsies—he was known as the “thief man” or “grave looter”—and Sena, who had also helped kuru researchers with their work, felt that he and his father had not been properly credited. But he refused to share more than a few details. Understanding that stories are seldom told from more than one perspective, he didn’t want to diffuse Luwi’s claim. “I will explain, but only to a limit,” he said, when I asked him a question. Launako was even more deferential. In the course of six hours, he said just a few words.

Since the machete attack, Luwi had begun writing with a new purpose. After investigating why he was targeted—he believed suspicion first fell on him after a land dispute—he decided to “carefully assess and evaluate . . . my 17 years residency in my village,” he wrote, so that he could understand why sorcery retained such force. There are no reliable data about the number of sorcery-related attacks in Papua New Guinea, because victims and witnesses, fearing retribution, seldom report these crimes, and police officers often share the accusers’ beliefs. But ethnographers and aid workers say that attacks against suspected sorcerers have risen in the past half century, becoming more public and improvised, and no longer following inherited traditions. The hospital in Goroka where Luwi was treated published a report, in 2004, describing how an increasing number of families were requesting postmortem examinations, to determine if sorcery was the cause of a relative’s death (through the removal of organs, poisoning, or other means). “Who are the leaders—how we bury

our dead—it is time to look to dig up how we basically live,” Luwi wrote in his journal.

He believed that the kuru researchers had failed to address the problem their research was supposed to resolve. “The white men did not understand how sorcery is embedded in the system of life,” he said. The kuru epidemic had ended, but premature deaths continued; according to one count, one in eight children in the eastern highlands died before the age of five. Scientists had not offered a compelling enough theory of illness to replace the old ones. “America and the world can brag about the kuru studies and the many, many prizes, but what was the outcome of those studies?” Luwi asked. “They took a handful of us to America to be educated, but something could have been done for the community—they built no school, no clinic, no project for women to be who they can be.” He told me, “They took what they wanted and left us with an empty bowl.”

Gideon Waiwaime, who had been in the U.S. with Gajdusek for five years, said that once he was back home, in the Anga region, when people fell sick, the limits of what could explain it felt different: “It’s hard to say whether it’s a natural-born disease or they’re trying to kill you.” His father, after years of carrying Gajdusek’s belongings, had been accused of being a “poison man” and had had to flee their village. Then, when Gideon was working at a school in his village, he was targeted, too. He saw men running toward him with machetes. “They tried to catch up with me, but I was faster than them,” he said. He ended up escaping to Port Moresby, the country’s capital, but he couldn’t find work there.

It seemed to Gideon and Luwi that an uncanny number of boys who had worked with, or been brought up by, Gajdusek were labelled sorcerers. Perhaps some of the same qualities that had drawn Gajdusek to them, and that they had then cultivated in the U.S.—aspiration, independence, boldness—also made them recognizable as

sorcerers. “Those who do not comply with the village’s ideas or thoughts—the village has to find a way to eliminate them,” Luwi said.

After my visit, Gideon, who lives in a settlement near the Port Moresby airport, texted me that he had spent the day watching “dark clouds of smoke rising.” His brother-in-law had been accused of sorcery, and his home had been set on fire. Gideon heard that his own name was on a list of people marked to be killed. He stayed inside his house. “i am always locked up,” he wrote me. “My best way is to watch every step i take and not trust anyone, unless i am out of PNG then i will be free. all of us (Carleton’s kids) are not safe here.”

Luwi plans for his autobiography to be titled “U-Turn,” he said, “because I have been going, going, going, and then I decided to turn around and see how I walked.” He told me, “Carleton spent time observing us, but our people were also watching Carleton. So the story was both ways.” He said that Gajdusek used to walk in the graveyard in Waieti at night; Luwi still wonders what exactly he was doing. Some people, he said, theorized that “Carleton is one of our dead relatives, and now he’s here with us, communicating with spirits.” Luwi wanted to compile the villagers’ memories into a report, creating an archive of his own. He wrote in his journal, “I hope to interview every citizen of the village where Carleton lived the good part of his life—what they recall of Carleton in those days, where they went and what they did and how they felt about Carleton.”

Ivan had already died, in 2005, from an asthma attack. He went to the hospital in Goroka to use a nebulizer, as he had done many times before, but there was a shortage that day. “I am thinking about my life story and I will write about how you brought me up from a Primitive culture to the Modern world,” he wrote Gajdusek in a letter. “Maybe you can help me to write this story. What do you think?” But his

daughter, Louisa, said that, even at the end of his life, her father's past remained a mystery to her. "Only Carleton knew and wrote the story in his journals," she said.

Gideon was working on telling his story, too. "She left the land where autumn softly falls, / To seek the echoes hidden in my walls," he wrote in a poem after my visit. In the U.S., he'd identified as a writer—Gajdusek had mused that Gideon was "perhaps the only creative one of my dozen of younger kids"—but when he returned to Papua New Guinea, after Gajdusek was arrested, he lost his inspiration. Following our conversations, though, he began writing again—a memoir, as well as a flurry of poems, twelve of which were titled "Tribute to Carleton Gajdusek." Each of the tributes, written in the span of thirteen days, expressed different registers of ambivalent gratitude for Gajdusek's "sacrifice" for taking him in as his child. "What have you gotten out of this?" he wrote. "Have you made a perception of my story?" The poems captured the pain of being equipped for a life he couldn't have. Twice, he wrote, "I wish I were not myself to begin with."

Luwi also struggled with the sense that what he had lived through, though it had altered the course of science elsewhere—a third Nobel Prize, stemming indirectly from Gajdusek's kuru work, was awarded in 2002, to a Swiss chemist who'd determined the structure of prions—left little mark in Waieti and beyond. Years earlier, Luwi had fought to change the name of his children's primary school to Gajdusek Memorial Community School. His proposal was rejected. Still, he had other plans for stirring people's memories. Grass had grown over Gajdusek's house, and it had become part of the forest again. But Luwi had saved some of Gajdusek's old magazines from the place, as well as his gas cylinders and Coleman lanterns. "What can you do with things that have gone out of use?" he asked. "I'm thinking about storing them up for a museum—anything to help us remember that something serious happened on that mountain." ♦

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Rachel Aviv, a staff writer at The New Yorker, was a finalist for the 2026 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. Her books include "You Won't Get Free of It: Stories of Mothers and Daughters" (July, 2026)."