Chapter 1

An Eccentric Longing

*And the traveler hopes: “Let me be far from any Physician.”*

—W. H. Auden, “Journey to Iceland”

My first mother-in-law never forgave me for taking her daughter to an island in Papua New Guinea. She would find other reasons to dislike me in years to come, such as my uneasy relationship with stable employment, but I think the trip to Papua New Guinea got her started. It was 1975, the year Papua New Guinea—or PNG as many call it—gained its independence from Australia, and I was going there for at least a year to do research for a PhD in cultural anthropology. I’d been to PNG in 1973 for three months on Manus Island and nearby Baluan Island as an assistant to Ted Schwartz, my professor at the University of California–San Diego (fig. 1). But this was going to be my first solo effort, and I was just as scared of setting off alone as I was excited about it.

My stage fright helped me convince myself that going with me was a rare opportunity for Sarah (not her real name) that she would greatly enjoy. It was an honest mistake, but a bad one. Sarah had a BA in anthropology, she loved the ocean and was a good bodysurfer, and she’d gone backpacking in California’s Sierra Nevada wilderness with me several times. She hadn’t told me yet, however, that she didn’t really care for backpacking but was trying to learn to like it for my sake. Still, it might have crossed my mind that without a strong purpose or a real love of rugged outdoor living for its own sake, one could find life in a PNG village rather trying. The natural beauty of many villages comes with a number of discomforts, such as constant high heat and humidity; rather elementary cooking, bathing, and toilet facilities; many forms of itching; and travel only via muddy treks on foot, bumpy journeys in small boats, or both.

I’m not fond of itching, but the physical challenges that still keep much of PNG relatively secluded were part of its original attraction for me. Looking back, I think I found the physical challenges not just exhilarating but also comforting, because they gave me something I knew I could handle. I was not
sure I could do good research, finding the unspoken patterns beneath the surface of everyday life and reaching some understanding of people’s beliefs, values, hopes, and fears. If at the end of a day of observing, questioning, and listening all I had to show was a few clichés and some contradictory scraps of information, I could at least give myself credit for matching the steady pace villagers set over the bush trails and not complaining about the Spartan accommodations.

All this, of course, had nothing to do with Sarah, and I probably shouldn’t have dragged her into it. She and I did talk about research projects she could pursue on her own. With a little time and a larger object than being with me (I was rather preoccupied), she might have come to enjoy village life. Unfortunately, she met with a string of mishaps that sent her home in sorry condition within about three months of her arrival.

Sarah waited to join me in PNG until I had found a site for my research and arranged for work to begin on a small house for us; it was built, like other village houses, of timbers from the forest and palm-leaf thatch. The place that accepted me as its anthropologist, an identity that in those days meant nothing to many of its residents, was a village of just over two hundred people called Kragur. Kragur looks out over an apparently endless expanse of ocean from

Figure 1. Theodore Schwartz filming from the bed of an outrigger canoe near Pere Village, Manus Island, in 1973, on my first trip to Papua New Guinea. I’m in the background, adjusting my snorkeling mask. Photo by Geoffrey White.
the top of a cliff on the seaward side of an island called Kairiru (map 1), which lies about twenty miles by sea from Wewak, the main town in the East Sepik Province, on the north coast of PNG (map 2), which lies north of Australia (map 3). Kairiru is made up largely of volcanic rock, but this is mixed with sedimentary rock, the whole mass of which, some thirty million years old, was molded by seismic activity and erosion into its present shape, a vaguely conical mountain. Kairiru is easily visible from Wewak on a clear day. During the monsoon season, however, dark banks of cloud hide it from view from the mainland much of the time.

Sarah arrived at Wewak’s tiny airport in January 1976, about two months after we said good-bye in San Diego. I’d arranged for us to stay just outside town with a Papua New Guinean family I met soon after I first arrived in Wewak through a chance connection with a young Australian plumber and surfer, Bruce McGorkle (not his real name), who worked at the PNG Defense
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For base near Wewak. By the time Sarah arrived, Bruce had gone back to Australia, having lost his job at the military base due in part to suspicion—completely justified, I knew—that he was cultivating a patch of marijuana in the dense bush (what Americans would call jungle) along the road to the base. My association with McGorkle led to the Defense Force military police picking me up for questioning too, but on the whole meeting him was a stroke of luck. Not only had I never before ridden in the detainee cage of a military police vehicle, Bruce was good company, he knew his way around Wewak, he had the use of a truck, and before he left he bequeathed to me his coworker Leo Titus. Leo and his wife Elizabeth lived in government housing for public employees along the dirt road to the villages of Brandi and Mandi, not far from the provincial prison.

I had hoped we could travel to Kragur within a couple of days, but it was the heart of the monsoon season, with rain and wind so heavy and seas so rough that few boats were traveling to Kairiru and the other islands off Wewak. For about a week, on every day that was even slightly dry, Sarah and I walked from Leo and Elizabeth’s to the main coastal road and took one of the infrequent minibuses to Wewak to see if any boats were going out to Kairiru. We carried

Map 2. Wewak-area islands and coastline. The flying fish in these waters are not actually this big, but they are much more plentiful. A more detailed map would show the coastal road west of Wewak—much of which is unpaved and fords several rivers—and the roads from the coast to interior towns. Map by Diane Buric and Michael French Smith.
Our full rucksacks, ready to travel. We were looking in particular for the Tau-K, the venerable flat-bottom landing craft that, weather permitting, came and went a couple of times a week from St. Xavier’s, the Catholic boarding high school for young men on the near side of Kairiru.

The Tau-K finally made it in and returned to Kairiru the same day, tightly packed with cargo and passengers. We reached Kairiru after about two hours of pitching and rolling, soaked and chilled by rain squalls and the sloppy waves washing over the Tau-K’s sides. It is amazing how shivering cold you can get in the deep tropics when the sun disappears and you’re wet to the skin. The Catholic brothers who ran St. Xavier’s, mostly Australians, put us up for the night in their austere two-story residence, much in need of paint on almost every surface and, in places, its interior only rather casually separated from its exterior. It rained heavily most of the next day, so we stayed on another night. It rained heavily most of the next day, too, and the next. While

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Map 3. Papua New Guinea on the globe. Papua New Guinea shares the island of New Guinea with the Indonesian province of Papua (the western half of the island) and lies only about 150 kilometers (93 miles) from the northern tip of Australia, across the Torres Strait. Map by Diane Buric.
we waited for better weather, we learned a lot about Kairiru from chatting
with the brothers, some of whom had lived there for many years. During oc-
casional short breaks in the rain, we took walks to villages along the coast
near the school.

When there was nothing else to do, Brother William was always looking for
people to taste the liqueurs he concocted in the school’s chemistry lab, trying
out local plants as flavorings. There was also a large stock of musty paperbacks
in the open-walled, second-floor common room. I remember particularly en-
joying Leonard Gardner’s *Fat City*, described by one reviewer as a “sordid saga
of cheap hotels, cheap women, cheap dreams, and little or no fulfillment.”
Sitting and sipping liqueurs, reading, and looking out at the steady, dead-ver-
tical flow of rain gradually drowning the school grounds was diverting at first,
but by day three Sarah and I were getting very restless.

Kragur lies on the opposite side of the island from St. Xavier’s, less than
four miles distant as the crow flies but reached overland by a trail that climbs
about half a mile through dense forest to a pass just below the island’s highest
point and drops sharply down the other side. The Japanese military forces that
occupied Kairiru during World War II improved some sections of the route for
their own use, broadening it and cutting switchbacks in the mountainside. But
lots of rain had hammered the improved sections since the war, and other
parts of the trail went almost straight up and down through red clay and twist-
ing tree roots. I was already familiar with the trail, and on my own I would
have made the trip rain or no. I was hoping, however, that Sarah could have a
more pleasant and safer trip. There were some grand vistas, crystalline
streams, and cool forest glades along the way that she would enjoy much more
if she weren’t cold and wet. And if the trail were dry, she would be less likely
to slip and fall on her face on the way up, on her behind on the way down,
or—God help her—the other way around.

Finally, Stephen Umari and Agnes Munbos, a Kragur couple who had taken
me under their wings shortly after I arrived, showed up at St. Xavier’s to escort
us to the village, come what may. This was a rather dramatic gesture of hos-
pitality. Umari and Munbos had lots of other things to do and plenty of good
reasons to avoid monsoon travel. I already knew something about the com-
plexities of friendship and hospitality in Kragur. Generosity there walked hand
in hand with dark fears of the potentially lethal consequences of angering
others by either being too selfish or flaunting one’s prosperity. You might also
simply shame people by giving more than they could reciprocate. I knew that
by Kragur standards, I was rich and might look to some villagers like a poten-
tially powerful friend, not for any political clout I had or even for my present
comparative wealth, but for what they assumed was my esoteric knowledge of
how to obtain wealth. For his part, I later learned, Umari strongly suspected
I was a reincarnation of his deceased brother and thus in touch with a host of mystical secrets.

Yet even as I came to understand this subtle terrain better, I still found much of what my American countrymen would recognize as simple kindness in the way Umari, Munbos, and many other villagers treated me. Reading people’s motives is always tricky and frequently impossible, especially across cultures, and people’s motives are seldom one-dimensional. Even so, I often felt from villagers a basic sympathy with another human being far from home, not just in striking gestures like Umari’s and Munbos’ escort over the mountain but also in a quiet sign to come sit beside someone in a village gathering, a tone of voice, or the quality of a smile. A very practical sign of human sympathy was the sudden smack of someone’s hand on some exposed part of my skin, sending a mosquito to its death. I’ll also never forget esteemed elder Benedict Manwau’s habit of coming to get me whenever he was on his way to one of the rare village events at which beer brought from Wewak was served. A very thoughtful man was Manwau—and a keen judge of character.

Villagers of Umari’s and Munbos’ generation generally did not know in what year they were born. Umari knew only that he was a young boy during the Japanese occupation. Munbos had been born around the time of the Japanese invasion of New Guinea. So, Umari was in his forties and Munbos in her thirties. At six feet tall, I towered over them, especially Munbos, but their physically demanding lives had made them strong in a way most large, well-fed North Americans, even those who “work out,” would find difficult to imagine. Umari looked tough, an effect enhanced by the rough blue-black “UMARi” unevenly emblazoned across his bare chest (fig. 2). This was a souvenir of his days as a laborer on a coconut plantation, where young men passed some of their free time tattooing each other with makeshift tools. Munbos did not look tough, but her soft face and thin body belied her ability to work for hours in the pounding tropical sun and carry heavy loads on her back, leaning into the taut line around her forehead that balanced dense dead weights of firewood, taro, or coconuts (fig. 3). She did all this in the wake of bearing five children without, I believe, any modern medical assistance.

The rain had thinned to a light drizzle the morning we set out from St. Xavier’s for Kragur, but the monsoon torrents had already eroded sections of the trail to narrow, crumbling ledges and turned the red clay into a soup of miracle organic lubricant. Nevertheless, we kept our feet and arrived in Kragur muddy but uninjured. Within a few days, however, Sarah’s serious problems began. A group of women took her with them to one of the steep mountaine-side gardens where Kragur people grow taro, yams, sweet potatoes, and a variety of other crops. I stayed in the village talking to some of the older men, trying to figure out who was who and what was what in Kragur. Sarah
returned late in the afternoon, complaining that the backs of her legs were itching furiously.

The women said Sarah must have brushed against a noxious forest plant, but they didn’t recommend a remedy and I foolishly neglected to ask them what they would do if this happened to them. This must have been a very potent and crafty plant, because Sarah wasn’t exposing much leg. Women in Kragur, even little girls, didn’t wear trousers or shorts in those days and, both for modesty and comfort, Sarah was wearing what Kragur women usually wore: a broad length of colorful cotton wound around the waist, reaching to below the knees, called a *laplap* in PNG. The women may have assumed we had some powerful American medicine on hand, but they were wrong. We tried the two or three salves and lotions we did have with us, but the angry red welts kept getting bigger and spreading farther up her legs.

Sarah spent a night of misery, and the next day we packed our rucksacks and walked back over the mountain to St. Xavier’s. We were able to take the *Tau-K* back to Wewak the day after that and get a minibus to Wewak General Hospital, a cluster of low wooden buildings at Cape Boram, just east of town. An Australian doctor gave Sarah a strong antihistamine and advised us to stay close by until it was certain the welts were responding, so we checked into one of the inexpensive rooms at the Windjammer Motel, one of Wewak’s few commercial lodging places. The Windjammer’s economy quarters didn’t have air-
conditioning or private bathrooms, but we had a ceiling fan, our door opened onto a view of Wewak’s long curving beach, and cold beer was available in the beachfront bar. The bush bumps, as Sarah christened them, cleared up within a couple of days, and within the week we made the trip back to Kragur via the Tau-K and the mountain trail.

Not many days later Sarah came back from bathing in the stream, walking as if in pain. Kairiru is blessed with many fast-flowing streams, dropping from high on the mountain, through the forest, and down to the sea. At its western end, Kragur is adjacent to one of the largest and perhaps the most constant of these. Where it flows near the village, it is a composition of shallow rapids and slower-moving pools beneath a high forest canopy, framed by porous volcanic
boulders sprouting green ferns glistening with spray. The water is cool enough to deliver a slight shock if you submerge quickly and, in my experience so far, clean enough to drink without concern. I doubt Eden offered anything better. Kragur people are careful to bathe and wash clothes and dishes below where they take water for drinking and cooking. The main men’s bathing place is some distance upstream from the women’s. In the 1970s, men feared—and many still do—even the hint of contact with female effluvia, which they believed could cause life-threatening illness, often marked by chronic shortness of breath. Fear of what anthropologists David Lipset and Jolene Stritecky call the “mystical impurities left by the residue or odor of sexuality” is common in PNG. Both men and women may be subject to such pollution, but male precautions are frequently more obvious. The men’s bathing place was not only free of sexual pollution, it also boasted higher cascades, deeper pools, and greater privacy than the women’s bathing place. Questions of pollution aside, men generally take precedence over women in PNG. Sarah probably could have lived with this denigration of women and lack of convenience, but on this day she slipped as she walked across a broad, wet rock as she approached the women’s bathing area, and she sat down hard. The pain was sharp and immediate.

We had to go to Wewak again, but because of Sarah’s injury we couldn’t hike over the mountain. Fortunately, the Tau-K was to make one of its rare appearances on the Kragur side of the island that week. A group of villagers had chartered it to take them and many bulky burlap bags of taro to the mainland for a feast and exchange of food, part of the extended observations of a death some years before in a village not far from Wewak. Although the sea was calm and smooth that day, even the occasional light smack of the hull against a swell made Sarah grimace. At the hospital, an X-ray showed hairline cracks in her coccyx. The doctor prescribed a week of rest and a follow-up X-ray before we thought about going back to Kragur. So we checked into the Windjammer again.

Here I can either cut Sarah’s story short, or it goes on and on. The short version is this: Sarah recovered quickly from her injury, and we went back to Kragur. Then she came down with hepatitis. This took us to Wewak for several weeks, during which she improved only a little. While in the hospital she got a tropical ulcer on her foot that, in her weakened condition, resisted efforts to cure it. She also had a few bouts of high fever, which didn’t appear to be malaria but might have been dengue, then flourishing in the East Sepik. It became obvious that waiting in PNG for her to recover was pointless, probably dangerous, and that she had to go home. Her parents in Connecticut finally solicited the help of the U.S. State Department, which coordinated with the American consulates in Port Moresby (PNG’s capital, usually called simply Moresby) and Australia to arrange for someone to meet her with a wheelchair.
at each juncture of her trip. By this time her foot was so badly swollen—in a scary purple way—she couldn’t walk without a stick. She stayed with her parents in Connecticut until I got back, many months later. By then her foot had long since healed and the fevers hadn’t returned, but she still didn’t have all her strength back—and her mother had developed very, very serious doubts about my judgment.

My health suffered from that trip, too. I had had some gastrointestinal complaints during my 1973 trip to PNG with my professor and mentor Ted Schwartz, followed by a couple of bad bouts of two kinds of malaria working in tandem—*Plasmodium vivax* and *Plasmodium falciparum*—a few months after returning, even though I had taken my antimalarial medication faithfully. But, being young and still believing myself indestructible, I regarded the vomiting and diarrhea as very unpleasant but fundamentally trivial and the malaria as an anomaly.

One of the first things I noticed about Kragur was the comparative lack of mosquitoes. The Kragur side of Kairiru is so steep that there is almost no standing water, whereas the flatter St. Xavier’s side is home to swarms of mosquitoes as well as greater numbers of venomous snakes. In Kragur I slept comfortably without a mosquito net, as did most villagers. I also seldom bothered with insect repellent, except on my ankles on particularly buggy afternoons and when I went into the forest. In 2007 I met a medical researcher from the United States who was studying malaria in the East Sepik. He told me that his team had a hard time getting an adequate sample of mosquitoes from the seaward side of Kairiru, there were so few. But it only takes one.

I avoided malaria in 1975–1976, but I contracted dengue, which is also insect borne and that brought me low more and more frequently as the months wore on, with shuddering cold that seemed to emanate from my very bone marrow, followed by soaring fever, which on one occasion rendered me unconscious for about thirty-six hours. It took a couple of days to get up and around after each bout of fever subsided. I passed a lot of my recuperation days reading. A favorite volume was selections from the diaries of the Russian scientist and explorer Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay, who spent some twelve years in the 1870s and 1880s on the north coast of what Europeans then called simply New Guinea. It was morbidly enjoyable to read of his many attacks of fever, how he thought his Swedish assistant’s mind was becoming “disordered” by loneliness, and—in an editor’s epilogue—of Miklouho-Maclay’s ruined health, rapid decline, and early death on his return to Russia. My attacks of fever recurred at long intervals for several years more. I knew that my grandfather Harry French had contracted dengue and nearly died of it when he was a carpenter on a sugar plantation in Fiji around 1905, but I didn’t appreciate his story of this experience until I joined the dengue club myself.
I also got an infection in my knee that turned it overnight into a bloated, throbbing, red-streaked mass. Fortunately I had antibiotics with me that beat back the infection after a few days of lying on my foam mattress—badly gnawed by rats while I was in Wewak with Sarah—taking pain pills and smoking cigars to keep the flies at bay and cultivate a low buzz of my own. A few years later when I suffered from chronic exhaustion, my doctor finally discovered that I was entertaining a population of hookworms. This was, however, undoubtedly another anomaly. I still have some resident amoebas, but I’m told they are doing me no harm and that killing them would be harder on me than continuing to live with them amicably.

Ted Schwartz started doing research in Papua New Guinea in the early 1950s. He worked closely with Margaret Mead for many years and said once that Mead had told him that anthropologists got sick while doing field research because they didn’t really want to be wherever they were. I’m sure that unhappiness is not good for your immune system, but I doubt my dread that I would make a hash of my work in Kragur, fail to get my degree, and become a derelict sleeping in a cardboard box (my backup career plan) can account for all the invasions of microorganisms I suffered. I only met Mead once, but by all accounts she was extraordinarily sure of herself. In contrast, I have always lived with ambivalence. If Mead was right that wanting to be somewhere else makes you sick, I would have been sick a large part of my life.

The danger of disease in PNG, however, is real. Added to this, violent crime in towns and political violence, particularly in the highlands provinces, have been bad enough to dampen the country’s tourist trade for many years. When I stayed at the Windjammer again in 1981—before heading out to Kragur on my second trip there, a stay of only a few weeks—the front doors still stood open and there was no visible security. After that I didn’t pass through Wewak again until 1995. By then, things at the Windjammer had changed. Newer, heavier front doors had been installed and were kept closed, attended by security guards. Another guard patrolled the beachfront.

I spent about two months in PNG in 1998, thanks in part to an opportunity to serve as a lecturer on an American Museum of Natural History tour of the country, a rather posh affair that brought everyone back to cool, comfortable, modern lodgings at the end of each day and often for lunch as well. My wife Jana Goldman (her real name) went with me for the tour and then flew home. That was enough to give her some feeling for the place I talk about so much, without risking her health. She is an adventurous traveler, but I would never live it down if I nearly lost another wife.

After the tour, I stayed on in PNG to visit Kragur again. The few weeks I spent in the village that year went well. I stayed healthy, avoided questioning by the authorities, and found people for the most part pleased to see me and
ready to recount at length what had been happening since my previous visit. As soon as I got home and went back to work at the social research firm that employed me, I started wanting to go back to Kragur again. Life, however, can get very full. During the next few years my mother was hospitalized several times; Jana and I bought our first house and I rediscovered my ancestral love of moving dirt, making compost, and planting and pruning things; and it never seemed to be the right time to take a leave of absence from my job. But by 2008 ten years had passed, and I realized that only a few more ten-year intervals would run out my clock. Stephen Umari’s clock ran out in 1996, just a few months after I’d visited Kragur for a weekend sandwiched between travels to several parts of PNG on a consulting assignment for the World Bank. Agnes Munbos was still alive, and I was pretty sure she was still working in the gardens, even though I knew from occasional letters from her children that her knees were giving out and her back was sore; grandmothers in Kragur don’t retire. But if I wanted to be sure to see her and the other Kragurs who had been so extraordinarily kind to me again, I knew I’d be foolish to put it off.

I also had started to feel the press of time in my own life. I was healthier than I had been in years, but friends both here and in Kragur had been distressing me by showing signs of age and, even more inconsiderate, dying. Many men and women of Umari’s generation were dead. My oldest friend in the United States, acquired in the sixth grade, had had a heart attack; another dear old friend had died of cancer; and Ted Schwartz was over eighty and suffering from several seriously debilitating ailments. It was also getting harder to think of myself as in the bloom of youth, in light of my softening belly, badly sun-damaged skin, and the many painful reminders of old injuries in my spine and joints.

Theodore Roosevelt spoke of his 1914 journey down Brazil’s River of Doubt, when he was fifty-four, as his “last chance to be a boy.” The harrowing trip nearly killed him and certainly shortened his life; he died at sixty. This was hardly my last chance to travel to distant places, and for hazard it wasn’t even in the same universe as Roosevelt’s journey, but I understand the sentiment. On my last two trips to Kragur prior to 2008, I had sometimes felt I was in touch with a past time in my own life, a time when the whole world seemed as young as I was.

This was partly a trick of memory. When I did research in Kragur in the 1970s, I’d already started to lose the youthful feeling of endless possibilities, and I would never want to relive the anxious fear of failure that drove me to stay on in PNG even as my health deteriorated. But that wasn’t all there was to it, and I say let memory work its magic on the worst of the unpleasantness. On my first night in Kragur in 1998, I woke up while it was still dark, realized
where I was, and felt I had stepped out of time into a place that I thought was lost to me. Planning for my 2008 trip, I sometimes feared I might find that what I thought was a living concern for Kragur was only nostalgia and the trip would turn out to be a bad idea. Nostalgia can be delicious, but it is a snack, not a meal. Well, if it turned out that there was no meal for me in Kragur, I didn’t have to go again. The next time I took a long leave, Jana and I could go somewhere cool and sanitary, where the sea breeze has a brisk northern tang, and they make good scotch and serve it with sharp cheese in cozy pubs where fluffy puppies doze on the warm hearth.

I also had occasional doubts about the possible physical toll of the trip. I was in “pretty good nick” for my age, an Australian acquaintance had told me. Even if he was just being nice, I could probably claim at least average nick. But parasitic diseases make better stories than recreations, so I planned to take more precautions than I had in the past. I wouldn’t tempt hookworms again by going barefoot and I would sleep under a mosquito net (a resolution I broke after a few days, the night air being so sweet). There are few other serious physical dangers in the village and the forest, as long as you don’t walk too close to the edge of the cliff, linger under a heavily laden coconut tree, fail to watch your step where the trail is slippery, or walk in the dark without watching for snakes. Kairiru’s snakes include death adders, but villagers say they are shy. And there are sharks in Kragur waters. Standing on the top of the cliff, I’ve seen sharks, including a smallish hammerhead, in the bay below Kragur more than once. But the beach is too rocky for casual swimming for people with tender feet, I don’t surf anymore, and in any case, no one can remember the last time a shark bothered anyone, including the children and young men who ride the waves in the bay on homemade wooden boards.

Disease aside, the greatest physical challenge is simply being able to put up with low-grade irritations, like working up a sweat before you even get back to your house after a delicious soak in the cool bathing pool, doing without furniture, occasionally having to go out in thunderous downpours if you can’t put off going to the outhouse, or going to the outhouse in a pouring rain and finding that a falling coconut has neatly holed the thatch roof directly above the squatting spot. (Inside Kragur outhouses are deep pits, covered with logs, except for the necessary apertures.) The danger of violent crime in towns is real enough, but I wasn’t planning to spend much time in towns, and I knew the rules for staying safe. These had always served me well, except for one quick, profane, but ultimately harmless scuffle over the contents of my pockets at a dusty outdoor bus terminal in Boroko, a suburb of Moresby.

Such cautionary memories were usually quickly followed by thoughts of how nice it can be to return somewhere after a long absence and see familiar, friendly faces. Walking along the sidewalk on Wewak’s main street the day
after I arrived in 1998, Kragur people in from the island whom I hadn’t seen in years greeted me with smiles and handshakes. It’s also nice to still know how to get around and to get the smile of recognition that you’re not a naïve newcomer. “Ah, yu man bilong longtaim!” a cab driver in Moresby said to me in Tok Pisin in 1998 when I used my own Tok Pisin to negotiate the fare. (His taxi had a meter, but it was spinning out of control.)

Tok Pisin is the principal lingua franca for the speakers of PNG’s hundreds of indigenous languages, and a man bilong longtaim is roughly an “old-timer.” Tok Pisin grammar mirrors many of the features of some types of indigenous PNG languages, but it has incorporated vocabulary not only from numerous indigenous languages but also from the languages of all the foreign explorers, traders, and governing powers that have stopped on the islands and beaches of what is now PNG. I start dreaming and talking in my sleep in Tok Pisin as soon as I’ve been in PNG a few days, or even a few hours. But Tok Pisin is changing rapidly, and it seems as if people generate new idioms almost every day. You can register every word someone is saying, but if you’re out of touch with recent usage, you may not know what the particular combination of words means. Tok Pisin is also incorporating more and more English words, especially in the towns. This can make it easier to understand, except when people use the English words to form distinctively Papua New Guinean idioms or when they use unfamiliar pronunciations. I lose the thread of conversations most often when people mix their Tok Pisin liberally with English words and phrases rendered PNG-style. When I quote Kragur people in this book, I’m translating from Tok Pisin, unless I indicate otherwise. (See the appendix for more on written and spoken Tok Pisin, including a guide to pronunciation.)

Many Kragur people mix their Tok Pisin with English, and virtually all villagers mix Tok Pisin liberally into their indigenous language. Linguists call Kairiru people’s indigenous language simply Kairiru, although the people of the nearby islands of Kerasau and Yuo, parts of Mushu Island (also sometimes spelled Muschu), and a few small coastal areas on the mainland also speak it. Kragur people call their native tongue leiny Kairiru—Kairiru language—or sometimes leiny Tau. Tau, they say, is the original name for the island, while Kairiru is originally the name of the lake at the top of the mountain and of the supernatural being, with the head of a man and the body of a snake, who created it. When and how the confusion came about no one is exactly sure, but apparently early European visitors and mapmakers are at fault.

I blame my crumbling health and my declining spirit for my failure during my first stay in Kragur to learn to speak and understand more than very rudimentary Kairiru, although the prevalence of Tok Pisin in the village made it easy for me to give in to those weaknesses. By mixing the little Kairiru I knew into my Tok Pisin and occasionally responding appropriately to a remark made
in Kairiru, I sometimes managed to leave the impression that I spoke Kairiru. On my return visits, then, some villagers commented on how I’d lost my former fluency in their language in the intervening years.

I never went to Kragur thinking I could help the people of the village much in any immediate way. I went into cultural anthropology, however, not only because it is fascinating but also because I thought, if the people of the world would pay attention, anthropology could help them understand each other better. I have even hoped that economists and international development planners somewhere might read what I’d written and think a little more carefully about how their policies affected people who had their own distinctive visions of the good life and the future. Like any field of endeavor, anthropology generates its fair share of bosh and flapdoodle. Nevertheless, its larger effect, I think, is to make us wiser. I never, of course, expected Kragur people to accept my presence among them because it might benefit humanity in general. My basic ethical obligations to Kragur people are to answer honestly their questions about my own life and my intentions in Kragur and to strive to be fair and discreet when writing about their lives.

When I wrote my previous books about Kragur, I judged that discretion included concealing Kragur people’s real names, so I devised a system for assigning pseudonyms that still allowed me to use authentic Kairiru personal names. This was as much to protect villagers’ privacy within Kragur as to protect it from outsiders. Although very few resident villagers were literate in English when my first book came out, the number increases with each generation, and I have sent many copies of both my earlier books to Kragur people in the village and in towns. Most Kragur people familiar with the events I described in those books could probably discern people’s real identities whatever names I used, but the pseudonyms at least avoided overt finger pointing. More important for discretion than using pseudonyms, I provided only minimum identifying information, excluding even pseudonyms, when I wrote of people doing or saying things that I thought might possibly anger other Kragurs.

So far, the only complaint I’ve had about this from Kragur people is that some of the stories in the books would have been more interesting if I’d used real names. So I decided that in this book I would dispense with pseudonyms, while continuing to draw a veil over individual identities when a topic is too hot. To be certain this would be alright, I asked individual villagers if they’d mind if I put their names in my next book, explaining when I did so that I intended to keep people’s names out of stories that might stir up any feelings against them. Everyone I asked said to go ahead and some seemed quite pleased at the prospect. (A few may even now be wondering who they would like to portray them in the movie, but maybe I’m alone in that.)

I felt satisfied with this, until I explained my intentions to a couple of older
men of refined political sensitivity. People might say it’s okay to use their names, they said, but some who did were naïve about the possible consequences; not everyone might understand that there were malicious people who would take even the slightest excuse to cause trouble. Using people’s real names, one of these elders said, could even result in people dying. What he meant was that, as many Kragur people believe, anything that stirs up anger can cause people to die, either by inspiring someone to use death-dealing magic—that is, sorcery—or by dragging the powerful spirits of the dead into a quarrel. The latter happens when someone’s anger festers and the spirits of their ancestors finally decide to take revenge for the wrong, real or imagined, done to their living kin. I don’t believe that sorcery or spirits of the dead can kill, but I understand very well that for those who do believe, the suspicion that you have angered someone who has knowledge of sorcery or is inclined to hold a grudge can be powerfully unsettling, especially if you happen to fall seriously ill. It might even hasten your demise. I considered what these learned elders had said to me, and I decided that I didn’t want to risk anyone even speculating that something I had written was implicated in an illness or a death.

Then I began writing, and I changed my mind. One reason I did so is that some of the Kragur people I write about in this book are public figures well beyond Kragur; for example, some hold regional or national public offices or have been candidates for such offices. Their names and pictures have already been spread around Kairiru, other islands, and on political campaign posters throughout the Wewak area. I considered allowing the identities of the public figures to stay public while changing the names of other Kragur people. But it is hard to know where to draw such a line in times when national, regional, and village events spill over each other in ways they never did in the past. And to conceal the identities of those at the margins of wider events, I would have to conceal not only their names but also their relationships with more widely known figures—as supporters, opponents, friends, and family members. This would make for some very awkward writing and it would obscure large parts of Kragur’s story, because much of Kragur’s story is about relationships among people. In addition, I also want to give Kragur people un concealed credit for their intelligence, humor, generosity, and the other qualities that make it a pleasure for me to recall them by name (even though in a single short book I can’t mention everyone who deserves my applause). I started out in Kragur depending on the kindness of strangers, but Kragur people are no longer strangers to me, and it is hard to write about them as if they were.

Will this choice lead to people dying? I think not, of course. In this book I use an extra measure of my usual discretion in deciding when to identify people by name and how much to reveal about people whose names I withhold. Given the events I write about, Kragur people would find it easy to guess
from context the identities of most of the people involved, named or not. But even the most malicious will have to work hard to find reasons for anger in what I write that were not already available. Anyone who speculates that something I’ve written has caused an eruption of dangerous anger will be, I think, on extremely shaky ground.

In addition to practicing discretion, Kragur people also expect me to return the favor of their help and hospitality in more concrete ways. This is how things are done in PNG. When one receives a gift, one is expected sooner or later to return a commensurate gift. The kind of sharing Kragur people practiced when I first met them and that many still practice today isn’t as clear-cut as barter, in which people exchange things they explicitly agree are of equal value. In fact, in Kragur, as in nonmoney exchange in much of PNG, the parties prefer to leave things a little out of balance, so there is a reason to get together to give or receive generosity again. That builds long-term relationships, perhaps more valuable than a one-time heap of taro or smoked fish. This can sound rather cozy, but in PNG giving can also be competitive, part of elaborate and never-ending contests for prestige and political dominance.

I’ve never had to cope with such a contest, but the fact that I’ve never used money in transactions with Kragur villagers has made it trickier for me—familiar from birth with a world in which a host of disparate things can be expressed and compared in terms of money—to handle my obligations to villagers. I know how to calculate and negotiate money prices for things. But when I first went to Kragur, most villagers were adamant that there should be no buying and selling within the village. Based on their observations of white people, they equated using money with selfishness, and they were trying hard to maintain what they said was their ancestral custom of sharing food freely among kin and helping each other in gardening, house building, and other labor-intensive work instead of paying each other for labor in cash or kind. Many villagers in those days also held that being true Catholics, which most villagers professed to be, meant keeping commerce out of the village. Based on their observations of white people, they equated using money with selfishness, and they were trying hard to maintain what they said was their ancestral custom of sharing food freely among kin and helping each other in gardening, house building, and other labor-intensive work instead of paying each other for labor in cash or kind. Many villagers in those days also held that being true Catholics, which most villagers professed to be, meant keeping commerce out of the village. This made a virtue of a necessity, given how little money most people in the village had at their disposal. But it accorded not only with an indigenous ideal of generosity but also with what villagers had heard some foreign priests preach: people should put care for others and concern for their own souls ahead of the pursuit of money.

In any event, rather than pay for the help I relied on to live decently and to do my research, I gave away my stocks of rice, canned mackerel, flashlight batteries, and other store-bought goods—replenished in Wewak periodically—to those who became my teachers of local ways and who provided me with food that they had grown, caught, and hunted. My efforts to help in things like house building or gathering firewood were clumsy and of little real use, but
they did, I hope, show my goodwill. In the years since, I’ve helped a number of my closest collaborators pay their children’s school fees or the costs of marriages or funerals, and I’ve contributed to a number of village-wide improvement efforts, such as starting a village business development fund, erecting medical clinic buildings, and buying tools to repair earthquake damage. Even so, I wouldn’t be surprised if some villagers think that I’ve exploited them. But I do what I think is right, within the limits of what is possible and knowing that I’ll sometimes get it wrong. When I get it really badly wrong, I expect I’ll hear about it.

I like to think that my most important contribution has been to put a part of Kragur’s story down on paper for future generations. It looks like this is beginning to work out. I sent copies of my first two books about Kragur to numbers of individual Kragur villagers and to schools in the area, and I know that at least a few of the literate Kragur people have read them. In 1998, younger villagers who had read the first book, which portrays a period in Kragur’s life they hadn’t seen for themselves, were eager to talk with me about it.

As I prepared to leave for Kragur in 2008, I realized that there was always the possibility that this time I wouldn’t be as welcome as I hoped; that few people might care anymore if I come again or not. Some of my Kragur friends had written and asked me when I planned to visit again, so I didn’t really have a reason to worry about total rejection. I was probably more worried that I might not care anymore. In the end, I knew I’d just have to make the trip and see how it went.