I blame the hats. Mrs. Chin’s red-and-gold San Francisco 49ers watch cap pulled low over her toothless smiling face despite the late-September heat wave. The jangle of World War II combat medals as Antonio Anorico held his faded green fedora to his chest and bowed from the waist when I came through the examination room door. Annabelle Winters’ golf visors, a different pastel color for each day of the week, matched to her pressed sweatsuits and socks by the private duty aides her son hired for her comfort and convenience.

Can I admit that I never intended to become a geriatrician? That the hats seduced me, presenting as they did—as they still do—in a beguiling multiplicity of shapes and persuasions? That I’ve seen it all: beloved, greasy baseball caps, Oakland As or Giants mostly but sometimes Yankees or Cardinals; wide-brimmed straw hats pinned with painted silk flowers or tied with bright cloth ribbons; a triangular black hat with a wood-smoke smell and red pom-poms at the corners; yarmulkes, simple and black or satiny and intricately embroidered; exotic scarves wrapped around head and hair in accordance with tradition or with idiosyncratic flourish; the occasional cowboy hat or beret? Can I also admit that this list is only the beginning?

But how to explain the appeal of Edgardo Bustamante’s plaid caps, blue cotton in summer, green wool in winter, which he churned between manicured fingers as I cleaned the wound that had once been his wife’s upper buttocks? Or the allure of the famous sculptor’s 89-pound chemotherapy-ravaged wife trying to balance a 5-pound carved wooden wig on her bald head, the tendons in her narrow neck so taut and tremulous that I worried they’d snap?

And what about the details I omit when telling duly deidentified stories to friends and family? That Annabelle Winters wore not only pastel visors but also, at her son’s insistence, pink lipstick and inch-long glittery latex nails, the only ones on the maximum-assist, end-stage dementia unit of the nursing home where she lived. That Antonio Anorico, repeatedly homeless, was found frozen dead in a donut shop entryway one winter night as I drank sangria and feasted on small plates of garlic vegetables and lightly battered mollusks at a restaurant less than half a mile away. That I followed Mrs. Chin’s red-and-gold 49ers watch cap from the emergency department, where it was just visible over the rim of her pillow, upstairs to the medical floor, then into the intensive care unit, where it drooped from her granddaughter’s purse as I explained to the family that she was dying.

May I admit, too, that I love this work? That I have never, in years of caring for the ancient and frail, considered what a surgeon acquaintance once said he’d do if he had my job: Put a bicycle helmet over his head to contain the damage, bite down on the barrel of a 9-mm handgun, and pull the trigger. That if, on the other hand, my patients were like most of his—asleep during his most significant interactions with them, reduced to body parts in need of the carving with which I lose patience before filling each waiting plate at Christmas and the couture skills which interest me so little that I have a hamper of clothes that have waited months and sometimes years for a new button or hem—that then I might need an antidepressant, if not a handgun.

Instead, I exchange e-mails with Annabelle Winters’ devoted, unkempt son, though it has been more than a decade since her death. I keep the giant conch shell Antonio Anorico gave me on a shelf in my home. "Inside that one," he said, "you can hear my country." And I learned from a thank-you note sent to me on the anniversary of Mrs. Chin’s death that her children still take turns preparing and hosting the Sunday dinner she held weekly for most of a generation, and that all the relatives come and sit and eat and laugh with Mrs. Chin and her husband watching from twin photographs above the sideboard.

In truth, I prefer the hats to most other parts of medicine, which is good, because they just keep coming, each one by now familiar, and each one endangered, precious, and unique.

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