

I don't know what it was in the end, but something in me just snapped.

I needed a fix, although I wasn't really sure what was broken; I wasn't really sure of much any more. It had all seemed so clear in the beginning: use the science to help people, to look after them. After 20 years, it felt as if something had gone wrong, and things were about as clear as the row of urine samples on my desk; somehow, the ones wrapped in plastic bags always bother me.

A lot of things bother me these days: the letters from specialists I've never heard of, patients I've never seen before asking me to prescribe drugs I can't even pronounce; the GANFYDs\* that don't even seem weird any more because I've seen them all before. Most of all, though, it's the feeling that I'm just the monkey turning the handle on the organ, hoping that it won't fall off. I'm not sure that's what the monkey's meant to do, but the organ grinder went home long ago.

### WISE GUYS

So anyway, I left by the COVID-19 door under cover of a virtual PCN meeting, figuring that by the time anyone noticed the urine samples building up at reception I'd be long gone. I'd heard of a guy with the kind of clout I was after. I had to lean on some acquaintances I'd made on the dark web while sourcing HRT, and they set up a meeting with Fat Tony.

The place was in the wrong part of town and my directions had been vague, but I knew instinctively that I'd arrived: years spent picking up subtle cues in consultations have that effect. There was also a sign over the door. I went inside not knowing what to expect; the feeling that I'd been coshed over the back of the head definitely came as a surprise. Still, it turned out to be the result of having been coshed over the back of the head rather than a sub-arachnoid haemorrhage, so there are upsides to any situation. When I regained consciousness I was tied to an office chair, a feeling that was



oddly familiar. In the background I could hear the clatter of pans, angry voices, and what sounded like Verdi. The man opposite me pushed his plate of spaghetti and meatballs to one side, and gave me the look that a snake gives a mouse.

*'Please excuse my cousin Vince, he gets a little over-protective sometimes. Precautions, you understand. So, you think you want my help, but I gotta be honest with you, doc, you're better off without it. You think you wanna be resilient, but all that means is some wise guy gives you a pair of concrete boots and you ask him for a matching coat. Che idiota!'*

*'But what can I do, Don Antonio? I can't retire, and I've got to find some way of coping with all the work. It's the government, you see, the patients...'*

*'So it's busy and nobody cares. Whaddya wanna do, grow a beard and make sourdough? Fuhgeddaboudit! Show respect to the people you work with. Treat your patients good, like family, and one day they'll return the favour when you need it, or cut you some slack when things go bad. Nobody wants robo-doc, they just want someone they can trust to have their back*

*when they're sick. Now try some of this Barolo and Vince will take you home.'*

The Barolo was incredible, rich tannins with a subtle note of ...

... OK, so the wine was drugged. When I woke up I was back at my desk with a sore head and drool on the keyboard. The PCN meeting was still going, and I remembered that it was on the subject of resilience training. I bailed and went to make a cup of tea for the receptionist. The urine samples were looking a bit clearer already.

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*\*Get a note from your doctor, that is, a frivolous request for medical adjudication of a non-medical issue.*

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