Research Misconduct in Three Acts
A Case Study
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Dramatis Personae

Narrator  Speaks the italic words, as needed
PostDoc  A belabored researcher with a tight deadline
Chum  A friend of PostDoc
Pie  PostDoc’s mentor/teacher/personal tyrant
Shadow  PostDoc’s teacher from years ago
Cat  Shadow’s cat

Act One

Hours after sunset in the common computer room of the humanities library. PostDoc is the only user. PostDoc is typing an old grant proposal into the computer. Chum enters and does a double-take at the sight of PostDoc.

Chum  Hey, are you slumming here? Isn’t the biomedicine library good enough for you anymore?
PostDoc  Startled. Oh, you. You surprised me. Listen, I don’t have time to mess around, okay?
Chum  Looking at the grant proposal. What, are you a medievalist now?
PostDoc  Very funny. It’s only ten years old. I helped write it.
Chum  Really? Good for you. But what are you doing with it?
PostDoc  Sighs; speaks quietly. Listen, I’m working on a grant and time is running out.
Chum  Are you telling me that you’re using a ten-year-old grant?
PostDoc  Much put upon. No, I’m just mining the background section.
Chum  A ten-year old background section?
PostDoc  Look, that grant was funded and five years later the approach turned out to be a washout. But now I’m eighty percent sure that I’ve figured out how to make it work. I breezed through the rest of the grant because I was so excited about it, but the tedious parts are really, really tedious. These five pages will make all the difference.
Chum  Looking over PostDoc’s shoulder. You wrote this ten years ago?
PostDoc  Not every word, no. I was just an undergraduate with an independent study on writing grants. I dug up all kinds of papers and organized them.
Chum  Well, good luck. Exeunt.
Act Two

Two days later, the day before the deadline for submitting the grant proposal. Pie’s office. PostDoc, one part excitement and one part fear, watches Pie looking over the grant proposal.

Pie 

Putting the proposal on the desk. I will never understand how you made those connections. I certainly didn’t put them in your head.

PostDoc 

Wary. I, uh, well, do you think I have a chance?

Pie 

Superior and bemused. Oh, you have a chance. Parts of it are excellent, as the curate said of the bad egg.

PostDoc 

Speechless.

Pie 

Humph. One thing is certain: You won’t have a chance if you don’t make the deadline.

PostDoc 

Oh, yes. Of course. Thank you. See you later. Exeunt.

Intermission

Act Three

Several months later. Shadow is reading PostDoc’s grant proposal. Cat is on Shadow’s desk along with a disarray of piles of books, papers, etc.

Shadow Hmm.
Cat Soto voce. (sneeze)
Shadow Hmm. Nice point.
Cat Starts grooming.
Shadow Heightened emotion. What’s this?
Cat Continues grooming.
Shadow Turns back to the Background section. Hmm. Do you know, Cat? This is strangely familiar.

Re-reads parts of the proposal. The telephone rings two, four, six times. What can this mean? Hmm. Yes, yes. Hmm.

The telephone rings again. Shadow picks it up. Shadow here. … What an odd coincidence this is. I was just now reading that proposal. … Late? … Deadline? No one told me anything about a deadline. … I’m that late, am I? Please forgive me. I haven’t been involved in writing and reviewing grants for years. … Am I that important? Surely you have a panel of reviewers. … I haven’t thought about this project since I retired years ago. … Well, thank you, I’m glad to hear that my work was at least interesting, if only due to its failure. … Oh, of course. You know, something odd: The proposal is strangely familiar. Who submitted this proposal? … Oh, yes, blind review. What a bother. … I have to say that – oh, my. It just struck me. A youngster helped me write that proposal a dozen years ago. Could it be PostDoc?

Silence. Hello? Hello, are you there? … Plagiarism? Now, that’s rather harsh, isn’t it? I have used a few phrases more than once and was never called a … Oh, I see. You think PostDoc plagiarized my grant. Well, so much for blindness. … Misconduct? No, that is ridiculous. … Serious? How serious can it be … Oh dear. Yes, I, well, I don’t know what to say. … Yes. Good bye.

Cat Sleeps on the desk. Exeunt.