

By Adaira Landry

A betrayal of trust

was a Black third-year medical student, fresh-faced and longing for guidance. The faculty member, a physician, was in his 60s, tall, white, and commanding. “How can we treat the patient’s infection, Adaira?” he boomed as our team made rounds on the ward. I listed answers, cashing in the hours spent with my nose buried in books. Our footsteps kept a brisk pace on the linoleum floors as he turned and gave me a slight nod. It was an expected brush of acknowledgement—no smile, no prolonged attention. Back at the workstation, I volunteered that I was interested in infectious disease. He offered to walk me through a related clinical research project. As a young Black woman student, I’d heard “I’m sorry, I’m busy” from potential mentors all too often. It would have been foolish to decline.

I hoped this project would make me a published author, a coveted accomplishment for any medical student. Over the next few months, we met regularly to develop a research plan. As a medical trainee, the presence of older white men in positions of authority is almost constant—so routine that he easily had my trust as a mentor, advocate, and sponsor. I saw nothing wrong.

And likely you saw nothing wrong. Until everything changed.

We had just finished a meeting to solidify the project idea. We exited the building to a sky covered in a thin blanket of clouds. As we were crossing the street to head to our respective cars, he stopped, turned toward me, and casually asked, “What are you doing after this?”

“Oh, I’m going shopping for a suit for an interview.”

He paused. “What color are you thinking?”

“I dunno. Probably gray?”

He stepped toward me and said, “Send me a picture of you wearing it.”

Suddenly I saw our relationship in a harsh new light. His smile was sly and he was standing closer than usual. He did not touch me, but there was an unsettled weight in the moment. I was distracted by my pulse, so I shifted my attention to the Los Angeles street scene. The yelling, the honking, the smog—that fuss was so much calmer in comparison. All I could think to do was laugh and walk to my car.

Over the next month, I replayed and processed the conversation. This wasn’t friendly flirting with an equal. He wielded obvious currency: support, mentorship, access. Older men don’t ask young women to send them pictures by accident; his agenda was clear. I felt naïve for only thinking about how



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More than a decade has passed since then. I did the academic dance: became chief resident, completed a fellowship and master’s degree, and obtained a faculty job at a wonderful institution. And I’ve come to see that the professor’s behavior is comparatively insignificant relative to the system that protected it—a system that still exists today and makes speaking out in scenarios like mine or worse feel dangerous.

Mentorship has great positive potential, but it is also ripe for misuse. Sometimes the abuses are blatant; sometimes the harm is more subtle. In all cases, mentees need to feel protected by their institutions to speak up. I can only imagine that what happened to me has happened to many others, too. But we will only know—and be able to take steps toward solutions—if people feel safe talking about it. ■

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our work would launch my career while in the background he had been scripting a different plot. I was drenched in disappointment that my vulnerability had been exploited.

I knew if I spoke out, someone would try to discredit me and support him. So I didn’t tell anyone, even friends or family, let alone report him. It wasn’t just my body I needed to protect; I also needed to protect my career and reputation.

But I’m telling you now: A faculty member exploited a relationship that should have been respected.

I lost what could have been a great opportunity. I stopped reaching out to schedule meetings, effectively ending the project before it had really started. I slid the incident under the rug and decided I’d move on to a new institution after graduating.