
NIGHTMARE ROOM

I find out about the art installation, ironically, outside of a favorite coffee shop.

An acquaintance who works at the art museum asks me about the installation. “Have you been to see it?” She sounds excited to hear my answer.

“What installation?” I say. “What are you talking about?”

She’s taken aback by my surprise. She thought for sure I knew about it. She thought I would be thrilled to be featured in the groundbreaking installation for which the artist secretly videoed strangers in coffeeshops.

“Didn’t you sign a release?” She seems worried, brows drawn together above her honest face.

“No, I didn’t sign a release.”

Before she mentioned the installation, we were chatting, two acquaintances catching up. Smiling with her that morning, I felt the day opening up before me like the expanse of the table at the coffee shop where my laptop sat, ready for me to write.

Now, I'm not smiling. My arms are crossed over my chest. I feel like I'm closing in on myself. Even my body knows that something has gone gravely wrong. I need to figure out exactly what has gone wrong, and exactly how, so I know what I need to do to make things right again.

"Tell me everything," I say, trying to seem calm.

She describes the installation to me. As she speaks, I can see that she's also trying to keep the conversation normal, as though what's happening between us hasn't moved into the realm of the bizarre. As though she isn't describing a video clip of my face projected on a loop at a museum.

"The installation is called *Dream Rooms*," she says.

"What does it look like?" I ask. "How large is it?" I ask. "Where is it displayed, exactly?" I ask. I want to know all of the details, as though the details might soothe me.

The details don't soothe me. I'm trying to hide my panic, here on the patio of a local coffee shop, where I've abandoned my laptop and purse inside and don't care at all. I don't want this acquaintance to think that I'm overreacting to what she is saying to me.

But I'm deeply worried.

What I learn from her: Video footage of my face, captured by a stranger at a coffee shop at some point in the past, enlarged to the size of a picture window, is projected on the wall just inside the main entrance of the North Carolina Museum of Art. Footage of others is projected alongside me. Maybe I'm one of a dozen? She isn't sure. The projection is on a loop. Over and over, my face. Projected.

"What do I look like?" I ask.

“You look pretty,” she says quickly, as though my prettiness would reassure me.

“Am I wearing glasses? What about my hair?”

With these questions, I’m trying to figure out when the video was taken. I don’t wear glasses anymore. I’ve grown out my hair.

She doesn’t recall the details. *But she remembers that I’m pretty*, I think, doubting her compliment, now.

“I’m sorry I told you,” she blurts, sensing my obvious distress. “Please don’t be worried.”

I’m not sorry she told me. I would rather know things, even if they hurt.



THERE’S a theory in law called the thin skull doctrine. It goes like this. When you injure someone, you’re responsible for the injuries that you cause, even if the person you injure is more vulnerable to harm than an average person might be. For example, if you punch someone in the face who has a brittle bone disorder, you are responsible if their cheekbone shatters, sustaining more damage than a person would who didn’t have the disorder. In short, you must “take your victims as you find them.”

You can imagine the gruesome history of how the rule got its name—the crash of a carriage, a gravely injured woman, and a lawsuit.¹

The point is, because we can’t always be aware of the harm we might cause to other people, we must be careful with the people we live among. I’ve always liked the thin skull doctrine, despite its grisly name, because I believe it

encourages us to take care. It reminds us that we never know how fragile others might be, or how much others might be suffering, just under the surface of their skin.

AFTER MY ACQUAINTANCE tells me about the installation with the video of my face, all I want to do is see it. No: what I feel is more than mere want. I *need* to see it. I can't work. I can't think about anything else. I can do nothing except try to find out more about it.

Perhaps the installation won't be as bad as I imagine. Perhaps, it will be nothing.

After my acquaintance leaves—her face marked by uncertainty—I dash back into the coffee shop, back to my laptop, and search the installation online. Is my picture on the internet, taken by this artist? Did he publish video of me online?

I find the installation's webpage on the website of the museum. The webpage has a still photo of the installation along with a description and the statement of purpose. The still photo doesn't feature my face, but instead the faces of four other strangers. I wonder if any of the other four know that their faces are projected on the wall at the museum. I wonder if they signed releases.

I read the description.

Over the course of its 19 minutes, "Dream Rooms" shows 28 people, four at a time. While none of the subjects are in anything like a compromising position, they all appear to

be deeply engrossed with whatever is on their computer screens.

I am one of twenty-eight people. I do the math: dividing twenty-eight by four makes seven arrays of videoed strangers, one of them me. Dividing nineteen minutes by seven means that there is a two-minute, forty-two-second video clip of me projected on the wall at the museum.

I wonder at the word “compromising,” and the phrase, “compromising position.” As a person who works with words, I think about how the word “compromising” has changed over the years, decades, centuries. How what was considered compromising, even in my mother’s time, was so different than what is considered compromising today.

I wonder why the museum decided to tell readers that the video doesn’t depict people who are compromised, why they bothered to mention it at all. Why would anyone think that we are? Unless, when you are videoed against your will, you always are?

We who are in the installation against our will are not “in anything like a compromising position” in the opinion of the museum, or the artist, but how do they know? I think of how a woman might have left her husband, or a daughter might have hidden from her father, and now he, whichever he, would know where she is and what she is doing if he were to see her in the video. I think of how easy it is to compromise a person’s position when you don’t know how fragile a person’s position is.

I think of the word “position,” when paired with the word “compromising,” and how together, these days, they are lewd. And I wonder if the museum paired them in this