

THE PARTITION



MAINLY, SHE WANTED TO BE LEFT ALONE. She didn't want a husband or a wife or a partner or a lover, she didn't want a companion or a pet or friends, she didn't want to be closer to her parents or siblings or relatives. She enjoyed her solitude, relished it. She had plenty to occupy herself—her work, her house and garden, her hobbies. She was not at all lonely. She was thoroughly happy, being alone.

This perplexed people. It seemed, even, to offend some people. They thought she had to be lying, dissembling some sort of psychological problem or prior trauma. They couldn't abide that anyone would actually choose to be alone.

There were many things about her that threw people off. First was her ethnicity, which people frequently believed was synonymous with race. Was she Chinese? Japanese? (She was Korean.) Subsequent was her nationality. Was she a North Korean or South Korean citizen, then? Or an immigrant? Did she have a green card? (She was a naturalized US citizen.) Then there was the question of her name, Ingrid Kissler. Was this an Americanization of her Korean name, something she had made up? Or had she once been married? (She'd been adopted by a white cou-

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ple from Chanhassen, Minnesota, at the age of two, from an orphanage in Seoul.)

Most confounding to people was her sexual orientation and gender identity. They rarely asked Ingrid about such things directly, but everyone wondered: Was she gay? Bi? Trans? Nonbinary? Her appearance baffled them. She could have been pretty in a conventional way if she wanted, but it was obviously something she did not want. She wore no makeup or nail polish or jewelry, and she kept her hair short, styled—or antistyled—in a nondescript shaggy bowl cut that looked self-inflicted. She donned the same outfit every day: Dickies industrial shirts and pants and Vans skateboarding shoes, varying only the colors of the matching sets of work wear: navy blue, charcoal gray, or black. She was small, five four, and slight, only a hundred and five pounds. She didn't have any real curves, just the slightest widening of the hips when viewed from certain angles, and she was so flat-chested, people sometimes assumed she was chest-binding. Her features were delicate, her skin pearly. She looked very much like a prepubescent twelve-year-old boy.

Five years ago, in 2010, when Ingrid began teaching at Libbey College in Ojai, California, she had been the subject of much curiosity, speculation, and gossip. For a change, however, the attention hadn't been ferried by an undercurrent of intolerance. Quite the opposite. Everyone at Libbey was extravagantly politically correct, and they would have welcomed whatever designation she might have elected. The last thing anyone wanted to do was intrude upon her privacy, yet her colleagues, students, and administrators really needed to know how to *refer* to In-

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