She was going on thirteen. Oh, beautiful Sunamei! A crescent was waxing into a half-moon.

“One, two, three, four....” A group of boys and girls, all dressed in long shirts that looked like oversized blouses or undersized gowns, squatted beneath a row of ritual pennants on the hilltop and counted the vehicles crawling one by one around the bend of the hill like beetles. There were four cars: one black, two blue, even a red one. In their wake were two buses and three huge trucks. In the trucks sat People’s Liberation Army soldiers, with guns in hand and bayonets flashing. It was scary. The children hushed up; even Geruoma, who was always laughing, frowned this time. Those naughty children often threw stones at trucks or intercity buses. Even the girls, aping the boys, tried to pee on the buses from above. But this time they did no mischief. They were too shocked. So many shining beetles and PLA soldiers carrying real guns. What a show. There was a saying, and it seemed to be true: in the outside world the more important the person, the smaller the car he drives, and the larger the house he lives in. Perhaps the tide of the great Cultural Revolution was pushing its way here.

The storm known as the Cultural Revolution had broken loose in the outside world when Sunamei was four years old. Since then, nine years had passed. She recalled how, when she was five, several Red Guards had run into her village.
Singing and shouting, they had gone from house to house and hung big posters on the walls. Stamping their feet and waving their hands, they had called on the villagers to rise up and make revolution. The grown-up villagers had responded with funny expressions as though suppressing a laugh. Who knew how to stand up and revolt? At least it had been a great party for the children. They had followed the Red Guards everywhere, singing, crying, shouting slogans. Some had even scooped red paint from the Red Guards' bucket and smeared it on their faces.

The villagers had prepared a dinner to thank the Red Guards. After the dinner, some Red Guards had asked a villager who knew a little Chinese, “What are you thanking us for?”

“For all the fun you’ve given our children. They don’t often get to see youngsters from outside.”

Not very pleased with this answer, the Red Guards took out their Little Red Books and read a sampling of Chairman Mao’s quotations. The villagers nodded their heads, and the one or two Mosuo who could read even joined in the chanting.

Then the Red Guards asked, “Do you understand what we’ve been reading to you?”

“No.” Those who had nodded now shook their heads.

The Red Guards seemed terribly disappointed. After assembling all the children, they gave each a red armband. Some children asked for extra ones. Then the Red Guards taught the children to mumble incantations like a Mosuo shaman as they thrust their Little Red Books over and over again into the air.

The next morning the Red Guards commanded the Mosuo, grown-ups as well as children, to persecute their commune cadres. The children balked, as did the grown-ups. They pretended not to understand the instructions. Even the few who knew a little Chinese became incapable of understanding a single word. Instead, the children sim-
ply stripped off their clothes and, plunging into Lake Xienami, paddled fiercely. Following the children, the Red Guards also jumped naked into the lake. In the water their skin appeared exceptionally white. Years later, many women still chatted about this in wonder and delight: "Oh, Ami! Those naked bodies were so white! As white as — oh my, whiter than milk. Even the blue lake could not stain them."

After their blissful bath, the Red Guards marched off singing songs from Quotations of Chairman Mao. The waters of Lake Xienami once again calmly reflected the sky in mirror-like tranquility.

Women took the red armbands from their children and used them as diapers. Even now, right beside Sunamei, the little sister on Geruoma’s back was wearing one of these diapers. The women were even complaining that the red satin did not absorb well.

After that bunch of Red Guards had decamped, the entire great Cultural Revolution became a story from far away. Horse drivers often brought laughable yet terrifying anecdotes about it into the village. Everyone loved to hear them. It was as if they were being charmed by ghost stories: they always listened with wide-eyed attention.

Now many more vehicles and soldiers were coming. Perhaps they wanted to force their Cultural Revolution onto the Mosuo village. Could the Mosuo possibly escape this disaster? Unlikely. The PLA soldiers were different from the Red Guards — they had real guns. Moreover, some big shots were also coming in their small cars. The children were excited and curious. They wanted those funny, terrifying stories acted out in their own village, right before their own eyes, and they wanted people they knew to be the actors.

The day before, a commune cadre had informed the villagers that the central committee was sending a team there. What was this central committee? They could make neither heads nor tails of such a thing. They were, however, quite familiar with teams. They had seen various teams. All those
teams were like clouds blown in from outside: some rained a few drops; some thundered; others neither rained nor thundered. All the clouds eventually blew away; the blue sky and Mount Ganmu remained.

As soon as a team arrived, they began holding daily meetings: a cadres’ meeting, a seniors’ meeting, a women’s meeting, a children’s meeting. It was as though their words could never end and their characters could never be exhausted in writing. They performed a lot of tricks: a wave of shouting, a gust of criticizing, a surge of vilifying. Then they would dust themselves off, happily departing with folders full of criticism papers, bags of peanuts, dried fish, and whole salted pigs. No one ever remembered what they said at these silly meetings. Those who had been criticized didn’t change a bit. No one felt a dismissed cadre had lost an arm and a leg or anything like that. Who wanted to be a cadre, anyway? Cadres were always having to stay up late.

The children still remembered those funny days. The strangest team was the one that had forbidden women to have babies. They put up posters that showed body parts and the formation of a baby in the womb. In neighboring Han villages they castrated women like pigs. They tried to persuade the Mosuo women to undergo castration, but no one would listen. The Han women had no choice except to scream like pigs being butchered. Dressed in white gowns, the men and women on the team stripped the women of their clothes, shaved their private parts, pressed them onto the broad slaughtering bench, held their hands and feet down, then used a shining little knife to castrate them. The innocent children got so excited that they jumped, stamped their feet, shouted at the top of their lungs. What a scene! The children were worried that the team wouldn’t stay long enough; adults prayed for them to leave for fear they would get really warmed up and turn their scalpels on the Mosuo women.

The members of the team also wished to leave as soon as
possible because they had their own families. Some male team members, seeking pleasure, stole into Mosuo women’s huagu. Afterward every one of them would give some gifts to his Mosuo lover and order her, “Don’t tell anybody about us. If you do, you’ll ruin me!”

Those Mosuo women did not understand why they could not reveal their joy to another person. “Afraid? If you were afraid you shouldn’t have come to me. We haven’t done anything shameful.”

At that point, the team members wished they could sew the women’s mouths shut. But instead they begged the women to tell no one— not a soul.

One night at midnight, little Sunamei bumped into a team member in her village. He was holding his shoes in his hand and tiptoeing as if stepping on thin ice. If anyone had said boo he would have tumbled down the stairs. When he met another team member on the path, the two of them told each other the same story: “I have been interrogating so-and-so...and we talked until late into the night.” They mentioned only men’s names. Why did they need to tell each other a man’s name? Sunamei had seen both of them coming out of a huagu. At big meetings, such men always demanded confessions and repeatedly shouted an eight-character slogan: “Leniency to the confessors, severe punishment to resistors.” Why wouldn’t they confess, then?

Women who had affairs with those team members chatted among themselves afterward: “Although he can’t speak our language, when he comes to play, he is certainly an old hand at it.”

“During the day his face is cold as slate. Who could have guessed that last night in my huagu it would smile and drip honey?”

So the team of the central party committee came to camp around Lake Xienami. Its members deliberately chose to stay in Mosuo villages. No one could guess what they were up to. Did they want to remove another batch of commune
cadres? Catch thieves? Castrate women? Who knows? The weather was fine; yet everyone’s face was cloudy. All the cadres from the production team were assembled in the commune courtyard. Each of them brought his own sleeping bag and no one was allowed to go out. They were kept at the meeting for three days and nights behind the barred gate. The children learned from the car drivers that the team of the central committee really did not have a single soul from the central committee on it. The Cultural Revolution group of the central committee merely nominated a provincial party secretary as the team leader and the chairwoman of the provincial women’s federation as the assistant team leader. It was said that they had come here to clear up the Mosuo mess. Two central committee members called Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan had really lost their tempers this time and had written a lengthy article of tens of thousands of characters, which asked, “In China, the most advanced and most revolutionary socialist country in the world, why haven’t we rooted out this most primitive, most backward, and most barbarous lifestyle?” Little Sunamei understood only the meaning of root out in this long sentence because she had begun to dig up grass with a shovel in the buckwheat field when she was very small. What did they want to root out?

The three-day (and night) meeting, in which the team leader asked Mosuo cadres to explain how the Mosuo matrilineal family was set up, amused and amazed the team members more than myths of goddesses. Young female team members blushed, male team members laughed with their heads shifting back and forth and their mouths hissing strangely. The Mosuo cadres at the meeting found this behavior most incomprehensible. “What’s so funny about our way of life?” they asked. Every Mosuo cadre felt angered and insulted. When the meeting was over, all those Mosuo cadres had become drawn and sallow, like young buds struck by frost. Each of them took several team members to
his village. Those glowing, ruddy faces turned to slate as soon as they entered the village. Among the five who came to little Sunamei’s village was Gu Shuxian. Gu brought with her a squad of PLA soldiers to guard her abode day and night. She was a fat woman in her forties who wore over her mouth a sterile mask that made her look like a donkey. Little Sunamei thought, “She must be afraid of what might happen if she let herself loose to snap a mouthful of highland barley.” Gu’s quivering flesh made her gasp at every step she took. She wore a soldier’s uniform, and a large Chairman Mao badge shone at her breast.

On first arriving in the village, Gu held a party meeting. It was already dark. Three party members and five team members, eight in all, attended the meeting in the pine forest along the mountain slope. A group of children in short linen gowns crept together toward the campfire. The children knew that the woman in charge was guarded by soldiers with pistols. Yet they neither thought they could be discovered nor believed the soldiers would really shoot them. They crawled to where they could hear the meeting and stayed put. They waited through two meals and did not hear anyone take the floor. The three Mosuo party members bowed their heads like sunflowers at night. The five team members were staring at them with round eyes, like toads squatting on lotus leaves. The children were getting tired but dared not leave. It was so quiet that the slightest movement would spook the meeting. Finally, Gu Shuxian could not bear the silence any longer. She ordered Suola, the Mosuo team leader, to interpret for her.

“Why is it so hard to take a stand? A Communist party member must take the lead in everything. We’re not asking you to climb a mountain of swords or wade a flaming sea, but you must be trailblazers. Just think – everything is being done for your sake. We want you to live a decent, monogamous, legitimate life. What kind of life are you leading now? Only cavemen living ten thousand years ago
had lives like yours, so chaotic that a child knows his mother but not his father. This is the residue of group marriage. You are party members. Aren’t you ashamed of yourselves? This is far from the morality of a party member. We cannot put up with this anymore. Comrade Jiang Qing has given special attention to our team. Listen to the instructions of Comrades Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan on how to accomplish your great historical mission. In the shortest possible time, by force or by persuasion, you must drag our Mosuo kinsmen out of the stone age and into modern life with the rest of us!”

Bima, a twenty-year-old female party member, said in a thin voice, “During the year of the Great Leap Forward…they said the same thing. But later – ”

“What happened later?”

“The women and men who married ended up separating and returning to their mothers.”

“I can assure you that this year is not the same as ’58. If that year saw a storm, this time there will be a hurricane! We will not give up until we have carried the revolution through to the end!”

“I can take the lead in all things except – ” Bima stammered, “except in this kind of thing. I…I…I can’t take lead.”

“Then you’ll be expelled from the party!”

“So be it.”

“So be what? You will still have to get your marriage certificate, even after you lose your party membership.”

“I…I…” Raising her head, Bima suddenly found courage. “I don’t see why the members of the central committee should give a damn about what’s inside a man’s pants or under a woman’s skirt! We have been leading a decent, peaceful life, not a speck of chaos in it. No Mosuo has ever committed a crime, and none of us ever goes to court or picks a fight with her neighbor. Why are you forcing us to accept marriage? Why are you trying to separate us from
our own kin and break up our matrilineal families? We are not accustomed to living in a family of strangers, separated from our own mothers and maternal uncles.”

“Your head is on backward! Only monogamy fits current moral standards – can’t you get that through your head?”

Nobody replied. Gu Shuxian roared out, “Understand?”

The three party members shook their heads in unison.

“Listen to me!” Gu Shuxian took off her sterile mask. Bits of white foam sprayed from the corners of her mouth as she screamed, “Without a marriage certificate, a man and a woman cannot become legal spouses. Men and women who ‘sleep together’ (what a vivid term) are committing a crime. When they are caught by the team, if they repent, they may get their food ration reduced; if they resist, they will be declared undesirables and sent to jail to reform themselves there! Now hear what I say: Everything I just said becomes effective immediately. Let’s hold a mass meeting.”

On hearing this, the eavesdropping children crawled back to the village. Like an impatient bird with seven beaks and eight tongues, in broken phrases and fragmented concepts they all tried at the same time to tell the adults what they had heard at the meeting. In spite of the verbal confusion, the message was clear that no one was allowed to make axiao anymore unless they got marriage papers and entered into a one-husband, one-wife relationship. On hearing that the team was determined to break up their extended matrilineal family, quite a few men and women started to weep aloud. They had a hunch that this time would be even more disastrous than ’58.

At the mass meeting, Gu Shuxian read out loud the article by Zhang Chunqiao and Yao Wenyuan, which was immeasurably tedious, like the endless rumbling of a water mill. No one understood a word of it. Even Suola couldn’t translate it. But no one was really sleepy. Thanks to the young eavesdroppers, the villagers already knew the gist of the article. Such a lengthy article was made simple and con-
cise through the medium of children: a man and a woman cannot sleep together without official approval; also, when a man and a woman do not wish to sleep together anymore, they must go to the authorities to get a stamped, official paper. Otherwise, the officials will search your place and catch you.

After she had finished reading the document, Gu Shuxian asked the masses to discuss it. They sat through three candles, but no one said a word. Emphasizing each word, Gu repeated what she had said at the party meeting. Then she warned them, “Don’t try to test the law with your own body. Adultery deserves the most severe punishment. If you do not want marriage, just stay in your own home and don’t go out. Can you manage that?”

No answer. Perhaps silence was the best answer.

The older Mosuo rose first and exited the meeting place, followed by the women, the men, and the party members. The children brought up the rear. Gu Shuxian put on her sterile mask in a fit of anger and mumbled, “Let’s see who is tougher! Let’s see how long you can bear celibacy!”

She was going on thirteen. Oh, beautiful Sunamei! A grain of corn was about to bloom.

This occurred in the summer of 1975. A most peculiar, destructive revolution in China had already been dragging on for nine years, surpassing the length of the interminable anti-Japanese war of the thirties and the forties. If this could be called a flame, then the flame was dim but still smoldering. No one could really put it out. Moreover, these monsters who had illuminated themselves and burned others with this flame kept pouring oil onto the dying fire in desperation. So millions of Chinese were still being burned alive.