In the early hours of the morning, Koto was silent. The national television station had gone off the air. It happened there was no live broadcast of one of the European soccer leagues that were usually shown at that time of night in Koto. Those who had been at the weekly religious lecture at the mosque had long since gone home to bed, exhausted from the voluntary fasting they undertook every Thursday. And those who were not yet asleep, who were still tossing and turning anxiously because their minds were disturbed by life’s difficulties, had already forgotten the world surrounding their homes. Their awareness ended at the walls of their house, or the walls of their bedroom, depending on the dimensions of the problems that oppressed them.

Coming from Koto, Yuri Muhammad knew all about what went on in the village even though he had not lived there for more than 20 years. He had only moved as far away as Padang, where he had gone to medical school. That city was where he worked as a doctor. It was because of his knowledge of Koto that he had chosen this time to carry out his plan. Thursday night to Friday morning. Moreover, there was a full moon! It was perfect, he thought. Yuri Muhammad knew he had to find the perfect time. His plan was extraordinary. So the time to carry it out could not be marred, much less wrong.

Yuri Muhammad had chosen the time that best showed all, or at least a large part, of the nature of the people of Koto that he loved. It had to be in the early hours of the morning because he knew everyone would have locked themselves in by then. Thursday night-Friday morning because most of them would be more tired than on other nights because they fasted during the day and spent the evening at the mosque. There had to be a full moon because most of the people of Koto, including the ones who had just come home from the mosque still believed in ghosts, superstitions, and evil sorcerers who used the full moon for their nefarious deeds.

The people of Koto, Yuri Muhammad knew, had an interesting character that was a mixture of several different traits, a number of which were in opposition to each other. Many of these traits came from other parts of the world. Some of them were new and others had been introduced long ago. The people of Koto absorbed all of them and combined them to make a character that was hard to name. Yuri Muhammad had not seen that conflict when he was still part of village society, nor did he find it strange. At that time, like everyone else in Koto, he found it all ordinary. They were proud to be pious Muslims but, at the same time, adhered to a system of matrilineal inheritance. They did not feel it was strange, as Muslims, that they believed in the power of ghosts and sorcery to influence their lives and determine their fate. When he was little, Yuri Muhammad always heard the old people talking about how everyone admired and respected the head of one Koto family who had been a local representative under the Dutch and who had worked as a tax collector and enforcer of the law for the colonial government, even though they prided themselves on having been crusaders for independence. When the religious scholar Ahmad Parewa became the head of the Koto branch of the Communist Party, no one felt anything was unusual. When voting became part
of the experience of an independent Koto, and the village head announced the first election they were to enjoy, and at the same time explained, then stressed, coaxed, and finally forced them to choose a certain party, everyone simply accepted it. And to Yuri Muhammad himself, the name his parents gave him was the clearest example, his father was an admirer of Yuri Gagarin and Muhammad Ali. He didn’t know which name to give his oldest child, so he finally gave him both.

Arriving at the edge of the village, Yuri Muhammad drove his jeep directly to Munggu, the hill that overlooked the collection of houses, where his family’s burial ground was. They had been buried there for several generations. Yuri Muhammad’s hair stood on end every time he went there, be it day or night. His feelings for the place had been formed as a child, when he was only seven years old. It was not a pleasant feeling. In fact, it was frightening and horrifying. He had first been to Munggu when his grandmother, his mother’s mother, died. Of course, he had known before that that Munggu existed, but he only understood its significance when his grandmother was buried. That was the first time he went there. He recalled that his mother had made him. Everyone had loved Grandma Munah, not just the family but everyone in the village. Munggu had been crowded with mourners who wanted to pay their last respects that day. Of course, Yuri had to be there as well.

Yuri Muhammad had seen with his own eyes how Grandma Munah was lowered into the grave wrapped in seven layers of pure white shroud. He had not been able to sleep for several weeks because he kept imagining how it would feel to be buried under the earth on lonely Munggu. His child self was even more frightened when, that first night after his grandmother’s burial, he heard a dog howling far away in the dim light under the shadows created by the full moon. He had been to Munggu many times since. At first, his mother took him to visit or tend his grandmother’s grave. Later, as an adult, he continued to do those things because he wanted to. And each time he went there, the image of Grandma Munah being lowered into the grave and the howling of the dog at night came back to him.

“The dogs are howling because they saw a soul that just left its body,” the children whispered on the night Grandma Munah was buried. The people of Koto, from old people to young children, gathered to recite the Quran and pray for the dead woman. Yuri Muhammad could still recall the children sleeping together on mats in the living when the prayers were done. The more clearly they could hear the dogs, the more frightened they became. They cowered under their blankets, but the fear was coming from inside them. It could not be hidden under any kind of covering.

The morning he carried out his plan, Yuri Muhammad’s reaction was the same. His hair stood on end, but he was no longer a little boy. In many ways, he was no longer purely a child of Koto. His medical studies had changed him. Living away from Koto had made him different. The modern life in Padang that he had succeeded in embracing, with the considerable wealth he had obtained from his private practice, had made him view the world in a new way. Even so, the reactions and feelings of human beings are to some extent influenced by the nature of their childhood. But now, the fear quickly left him, and the hairs on the back of his neck returned to their normal state.

“How are you sure about this?” Yusni asked him yet again. “People won’t find out?”

“Don’t worry, Yus!” Yuri Muhammad told her as firmly as the first time she expressed her anxiety. “Look at that,” Yuri Muhammad went on, pointing to the valley that lay before them where the people of Koto lived. “Not a single light is burning. They’ve all gone to bed.” Yuri Muhammad’s words were punctuated by a dog’s howling. He smiled at
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Yusni in the soft moonlight. It was a smile full of confidence. Yuri Muhammad could see Yusni was frightened by the dog. He took her two hands. “Don’t be afraid, Yus,” he told her.

“But if Aunt Hamidah comes here tomorrow, she might see something is wrong,” said Yusni, referring to Yuri Muhammad’s mother. She was also sure Yuri Muhammad would not change his mind.

“See this,” said Yuri Muhammad, scraping the gravel underfoot with the sole of his shoe. “We aren’t going to dig up the grave. We’ll dig under this grave on the path. After we fill the grave back in with dirt, we’ll put the gravel back where it was. None of the plants on the grave will be disturbed. We won’t touch even a blade of grass. No one will know. That’s certain!” said Yuri Muhammad with confidence.

With the assistance of his gardener, Saimin, and his housekeeper’s husband, Sudiran, whom he had brought with him from Padang, he dug up Grandma Munah. Yuri Muhammad knew the two men wouldn’t say anything to anyone because they were dependent on him for their livelihood. Moreover, they had worked for him for years, and their loyalty had been tested. Using several flashlights, it was not hard to collect all the bones. Yuri Muhammad himself did it. He knew all about the human skeleton.

Before dawn, before the cocks crowed, before the people of Koto awoke to prepare for the early morning prayer, they left Munggu for Padang. They covered the distance, not more than 100 kilometers, in two hours, which was quicker than usual because there were few other vehicles on the road. Yuri Muhammad whistled to himself as he drove the car through the hills and valleys of the steep Bukit Barisan Mountains outside of Padang Panjang. He carefully steered along the narrow, winding road with its many sharp turns.

Every so often, he stopped whistling to say something to Yusni.

“Don’t you feel you’ve sinned against Grandma?” Yusni asked him at one turn in the road.

“Why?” Yuri Muhammad asked her casually.

“People say religion forbids you to dig up someone’s grave.”

“Who says?”

“People say.”

“What verse forbids it?”

“You always say things like that,” Yusni protested. “How should I know what verse?”

“So there is no reason.”

The road rose and fell in turn. Yuri Muhammad began to whistle again.

“At the very least,” Yusni said, “it’s disrespectful.”

Yuri Muhammad didn’t answer immediately. He kept whistling. Yusni repeated her comment.

“I mean well,” said Yuri Muhammad in his own defense.

The road from Lembah Anai, past Padang Panjang, was straighter and flatter. The car sped along silently. Except for Yuri Muhammad, everyone was fast asleep, weary and exhausted. Yuri Muhammad woke them inside the garage of his luxurious two storey house at the northern edge of the city of Padang. When Saimin and Sudiran were about to leave, Yuri Muhammad gave each of them a month’s salary. They thanked him repeatedly, bowing again and again.

Yuri Muhammad was unconcerned about owning an opulent house amid the hovels that surrounded it. As was the case in other provincial capitals and large cities, the canyon that separated Padang’s rich from its poor was steep, deep, and wide. He know that. So he
used wisdom so that the effects of that gaping canyon would not detract from his enjoyment of the luxury city life he had to offer. First, he had built a towering concrete wall with spikes on top like a prison fence. Then, he developed a hobby that would allow him to live more securely. He kept several dogs, and not just any dogs but vicious German shepherds. As Muslims, Yuri Muhammad knew his neighbors were uncomfortable around dogs, and he took advantage of this. Finally, he increased his personal safety and that of his wealth by trying to be a generous member of local society. He was the major contributor in the building of the neighborhood mosque. Each Fasting Month, he invited the locals to break their fast at his house at least once. Naturally, he kept his dogs tied up when they were there.

So Yuri Muhammad was not hated by the people around him. They thought he was a good and generous doctor. His waiting room was always full. The neighbors didn’t care and didn’t want to know what Yuri Muhammad did behind the walls that surrounded his luxurious home. His office and pharmacy were on the first floor of the building. There was also a garage with two cars in it and the large room where he entertained the neighborhood during the Fasting Month.

Yuri Muhammad was comfortable living among people whose life was very hard because he felt the life he had was his right, the reward for his hard work. He had studied at the medical school for more than ten years, bowing to every whim of his professors that often made no sense. Some of them were cruel. To pass their courses, you didn’t just need academic ability, you had to be able to suck up. Yuri Muhammad felt he had had to compromise his dignity in addition to giving up his time, energy, and money to get his medical degree. Once he graduated, he had had to work in the hospital for several years under a popular senior doctor. He had had to accept the graveyard shift, from midnight till morning. He had had to struggle to make a success of his practice outside the hospital, until it finally brought him the results he was now enjoying.

Yusni worked in his office. She was his cousin and had been born and raised in Jakarta where her mother had moved when she got married. Yusni had gone to nursing school in the capital. When she graduated, her mother suggested that she work for Yuri Muhammad in Padang. That was the first time they met, and Yuri Muhammad had liked her immediately.

“It’s too bad,” Yuri Muhammad sometimes joked, “you aren’t Uncle Kadir’s daughter.” Yuri Muhammad was referring to their uncle, the brother of both their mothers.

“Why is that too bad?” Yusni asked.

“If you were Uncle Kadir’s daughter, I would marry you,” said Yuri Muhammad.

“You’re just teasing me,” said Yusni pinching Yuri Muhammad’s arm. Her mother had once explained to her that it was considered good to marry the child of a maternal uncle like Yuri Muhammad had said. But Yusni and Yuri Muhammad were considered siblings under traditional law. For that reason, it was natural that she stay at Yuri Muhammad’s house when she moved from Jakarta to Padang without her parents.

Yuri Muhammad took a week off from the hospital following the night they dug up Grandma Munah’s bones. He closed his practice, hanging a sign on the gate outside his house that gave the date he would reopen.

Yuri Muhammad, assisted by Yusni, was busy with the bones. After cleaning them carefully with hydrogen peroxide, he connected the bones with wire, screws, and glue to form a human skeleton. Yuri Muhammad then hung the skeleton from a steel bar attached firmly to its pelvis at the top and to a wooden base at the bottom.
“You’re too much,” said Yusni when the skeleton was finished and was standing in Yuri Muhammad’s office.

“It’s great, isn’t it?” said Yuri Muhammad.

They sat on the carpet in front of the desk looking at the skeleton. The only sound was the hum of the air conditioner.

“Now you have to keep your promise,” said Yusni seriously.

“What promise?”

“You haven’t told me why we had to dig up this skeleton,” said Yusni.

Before they went to Koto, Yuri Muhammad had only been willing to say that he needed Grandma Munah’s skeleton. And that he wanted Yusni to come with him to get it. When she pressed him, he only said that it was important. Yusni continued to ask, and finally he promised to tell her once they had the skeleton. Yusni had to go along with it. She had no other choice. She knew she could not force Yuri Muhammad to do anything. Her cousin was her employer. And Yuri Muhammad was about 20 years older than she was. So Yusni did as she was told and promised to say nothing to anyone. She thought it was all very strange but there was nothing she could do.

Yusni had seen a significant change in Yuri Muhammad since the death of his only sister a week before he decided to dig up Grandma Munah’s grave. When Marhamah, his sister, died giving birth to her first child who had also died, Yusni saw how sad her cousin was. He didn’t go to work and closed his practice for three days. He locked himself in his office in the house and wouldn’t let anyone in, including Yusni. This had never happened before. Then, suddenly, he decided to dig up his grandmother’s grave without a word of explanation.

“Oh, that promise,” said Yuri Muhammad, taking a deep breath.

“Now we have Grandma Munah’s skeleton,” Yusni prompted.

It was very late, and the street outside the house was empty. Yuri Muhammad was ready to tell Yusni everything. She was ready to hear it. She had been born and raised outside Koto. From time to time, when she was little and lived in Jakarta, her mother would tell about life in the village. But Yusni had not been very interested. Life in the metropolitan was much stronger and more influential than her mother’s stories. And now she was about to hear an explanation of the actions of a member of the village society her mother had often talked about, actions which seemed very strange to her.

“It all began when Marhamah died,” Yuri Muhammad began. “As you know, she was my only sister. So without her, our family would die out.”

“Die out?” Yusni wasn’t pretending to not understand.

“Our families are matrilineal. That means, even if I have children someday, they won’t be members of our family. They’ll be part of their mother’s family. In terms of traditional law, I mean. They’ll still be my mother’s grandchildren, of course, but they won’t be family in her home like her daughter’s children would. They would be the grandchildren of her house. And that can no longer be the case for our family.”

“But we have a big family,” said Yusni, who really did not understand now. “Your mother has several sisters. They all have children. They are all Grandma Munah’s descendants, aren’t they? How can the family die out?”

“You’re right. But like a tree, Grandma Munah was the trunk, then my mother, your mother, Uncle Kadir, and their other brothers and sisters are all branches. But the twigs are only the children of our mothers and their other sisters. And it goes on like that. Do you see?”
Yusni nodded slowly. She was beginning to understand. “So your mother’s branch will have no twigs,” she said cautiously.

“That’s right!” said Yuri Muhammad firmly but in a subdued tone.

“And that’s what you mean by ‘die out’.”

“Yes.” For a long time, Yuri Muhammad, his head bowed, said nothing. Yusni allowed him to collect his thoughts. “That’s why I am doing all this, Yusni,” he said at last, his eyes fixed on Grandma Munah’s skeleton standing perfectly still before them. “That tree has grown large with many branches and twigs. Now a twig is broken and will never grow back.”

Yuri Muhammad stood up, went to the chair behind his desk, and opened a drawer. He took out an envelope and returned to his seat next to Yusni. He took out the contents of the envelope: small squares of paper that each contained a name. The males were written on blue paper with the females on pink.

“This is what I was doing in here after Marhamah died. These are the children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren of Grandma Munah. According to the matrilineal line.”

Yusni was stunned to see the squares of paper Yuri Muhammad held in his two hands. There were so many of them. “How many is that?” she asked.

“Two hundred and six.”

“Two hundred and six?”

“Yes, isn’t it great, Yus?” said Yuri Muhammad, his face glowing. His emotions showed clearly on his face, but Yusni did not know what emotions they were. Yusni also did not understand what Yuri Muhammad had tried to point out to her that was so great. But he continued to explain before she tried to guess.

“That’s as many as the number of bones in the human body!” he told her in a loud voice, as if he had just discovered something important. “We’re going to place these names one on each bone of Grandma Munah’s skeleton,” said Yuri Muhammad glancing back to the skeleton that stood frozen in front of them. Yuri Muhammad seemed even stranger to Yusni. Still, she felt a strange attraction to her cousin. She had long felt Yuri Muhammad was a fascinating man. Not physically however. He had a square face and a wavy hair he didn’t pay much attention to beyond drying it with a towel after he bathed. Yusni had always felt comfortable working with him and living in his house because Yuri Muhammad was always joking with her. He too her to restaurants, driving around the city, and shopping. And, what she liked best, it was hard to guess why Yuri Muhammad did what he did. To Yusni, that was his most attractive feature.

The pieces of paper they hung on Grandma Munah’s skeleton, trembling almost imperceptibly in the breeze from the air conditioner, horrified Yusni. They sat down again on the floor by the skeleton. It was past midnight. Yusni recalled the early hours of the night of the full moon when went to Munggu. She felt cold, maybe because of the air conditioning or perhaps from fear. Their shoulders touched, and Yuri Muhammad put his arm around her as he had often done when she was sad or upset.

“It’s so eerie looking,” said Yusni. She moved closed to Yuri Muhammad.

“My story isn’t done,” said Yuri Muhammad, ignoring Yusni’s comment. “About why I did all this.”

Yusni turned to Yuri Muhammad. “Oh?”
“Look at the names on the skeleton, Yus. Calm, quiet, without problems. But reality is different. Uncle Kadir is a cruel man!” Yuri Muhammad’s voice was cold but sure. Yusni saw hatred in his face and was amazed.

“But you often tell me,” said Yusni lightly, “that if I were his daughter, you would marry me.” She patted Yuri Muhammad’s shoulder jokingly.

Yuri Muhammad smiled slightly. “Not because of him, Yus. Because of you. I like you but I hate him.” They both laughed.

“How is he cruel?”

“It’s a long story, Yus. I couldn’t tell it all before morning. But I remember from the time I was very little, that he often hit us, his nephews. Grandma Munah had eleven children. Eight of them were girls. They all had a lot of children so Uncle Kadir had lots of nephews like me. He often hit us for practically no reason. If we got up late and were late for school. If he heard our mothers had scolded us. Naturally, mothers sometimes scold their children. If we got bad grades. He would say we were ungrateful, lazy, or had shamed the family. But that isn’t what I hate the most…”

“Not that?” Yusni interrupted.

“The emotional torment was worse! That was his greatest sin. And none of his nephews suffered as much as me. Actually, I was one of his favorite nephews. I rarely got the belt for things I did when I was little, but he did sometimes flick my ear. I was good in school and I never failed anything. My grades in math were always high. As you know, Uncle Kadir has several daughters. When we were in junior high school, they liked to study math with me. I often did their homework for them. And I was going out with one of them. Uncle Kadir was happy. My mother was even happier. So not only did he never hit me, he would give me gifts…”

“I don’t understand,” Yusni interrupted again.

“Of course. Sorry, I’m going around and around,” said Yuri Muhammad. “I said he was cruel, didn’t I? To make a long story short, we dated for years. The whole family knew for sure we were going to marry. But in my first year of college, she was still in her second year of high school at the time, a man from the village came home. He was working in a bank in Pekanbaru. He came back, he said, because he wanted to marry a girl from the village whom he would then take back to Pekanbaru with him. It was the classic story about a man from the village who went to seek his fortune someplace else, Yus. He was a success there and wanted a village girl for his wife. People in the village are always beguiled by this kind of story. The girl he wanted was Yeti, my girlfriend. Since Uncle Kadir has always thought more about money and possessions than anything else, he married Yeti to this guy! And you what Uncle Kadir told me, Yus?”

“What?”

“I could have any one of his other daughters that I wanted! It was that easy for him! Marriage was just a survival strategy. It had nothing to do with the feelings of those involved.”

“But I still don’t understand,” Yusni said softly, frowning slightly. “What does all that have to do with Grandma Munah’s skeleton?”

“Oh, sorry, I’m wondering again. I was telling you about how my mother’s family was going to die out. And then I started on those bad memories. It doesn’t make sense, does it? But that’s precisely the reason, Yus: all my experiences and bad impressions of the family in Koto. My life, in Koto and when I was in school and working, taught me that bad
experiences are the best teachers. I don’t want to forget them. Grandma Munah’s skeleton, and all these names hung on it, will always remind me, and warn me.”

“You’re too serious!” said Yusni. She punched Yuri Muhammad’s shoulder as she often did. That never failed to make him smile.

“You’re right. But those very personal, bad memories are the main reason I want to preserve the tree of Grandma Munah’s descendants on her own skeleton.” Yuri Muhammad looked gently at Yusni. “I want to learn from their experiences. I want to marry you, Yus.” He took his cousin by the shoulder. Yusni turned pale. She didn’t know whether Yuri Muhammad was joking or if he had gone mad. The room was silent for a long time, as silent as the street outside the house.

“That’s impossible,” said Yusni almost inaudibly.

“Why is it impossible?”

“We are brother and sister.”

“We don’t have the same mother and father.”

“According to traditional law, we’re brother and sister.”

“But traditional law would allow me to marry a daughter of Uncle Kadir. What’s the difference?”

“Custom allows that.”

“Yus, people violate traditional laws and customs for all kinds of bad reasons. I want to violate them for a good reason. I love you. I have since we first met. I want to marry a woman I love. You know, Yus, Yeti was divorced by her husband after they had two children. Irreconcilable differences, she said. I was sorry but I vowed when Uncle Kadir told me Yeti was going to marry someone else that I would never marry any of his daughters.”

“But you still love Yeti. That’s why you never married.”

“Yes, until I graduated and began to work. Until I opened this office. Until I met you! And when Marhamah died, when I was locked in this room, I decided I wanted to marry you.”

“Because you love me?”

“And because I am sure we can live together. And so my mother’s blood will still flow in the veins of Grandma Munah’s descendants.”

“What about people in Koto?”

Yuri Muhammad told her about the people of Koto and their strange nature. About the religious scholar who became the head of the Communist Party. About them being Muslims but believing strongly in ghosts and sorcery. About them working with the colonizers but also priding themselves on having fought for independence. About the people of Koto who were proud of having a democracy and, at the same time, forcing others to vote a certain way.

Gaping, Yusni listened to it all in amazement. She smiled when she heard why her cousin was named Yuri Muhammad.

Yuri Muhammad and Yusni stayed up all night. Yuri Muhammad kept telling her stories, about Grandma Munah and the people whose names were hung on her skeleton and about the future he envisioned. It was uncomfortable sitting on the floor for so long, so they moved to Yusni’s bed and kept talking while lying there. Before the stories were finished, Yuri Muhammad and Yusni had made love several times. For the first time and because they wanted to. They had decided to marry and have a lot of children.
Rebecca Fanany has more than 30 years of experience as a professional translator and has done work for numerous publishers, government agencies, and corporations. In 2006, she won a National Endowment for the Arts Translation Grant, which was the first time this US government award was given for Indonesian.