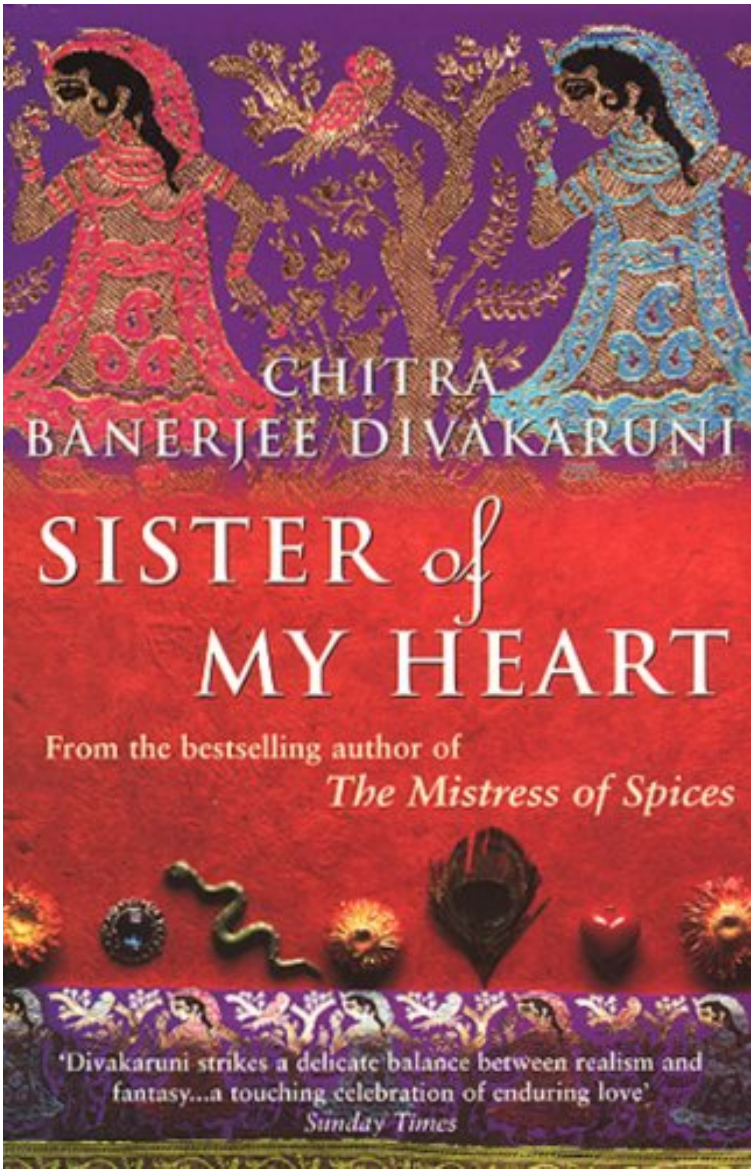
Sister Of My Heart



*Par Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni ePub | *DOC | audiobook | ebooks | Download PDF*

Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #242653 dans eBooksPubli le: 2010-08-17Sorti le: 2010-08-17Format: Ebook Kindle

[Download] Sister Of My Heart

Par Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni : Sister Of My Heart before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Sister Of My Heart:

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurBorn in a big old Calcutta house on the same night, the wild, tragic night their fathers were both mysteriously lost, Sudha and Anju are cousins. Closer even than sisters, they share clothes, possessions, worries, dreams - and three mothers, who preside over the matriarchal Chatterjee household. But when Sudha discovers a terrible secret about their past, their mutual loyalty is sorely tested. A family crisis forces the mothers to start the serious business of arranging the girls' marriages, and the inseparable pair are torn apart. Sudha moves to her new family'as home in rural Bengal, while Anju joins her immigrant husband in California. But nothing has prepared them for the pain, aswell as the joy, that each will have to face in her new life.Rooted in Indian folklore and steeped in the mysticism of ancient tales, this bright, jewel-

like novel shines its light on the bonds of family, on love and loss, against the realities of traditional arranged marriages, and the adjustments needed for modern life..comChitra Banerjee Divakaruni made an indelible impression on the literary world with her first novel, The Mistress of Spices, a magical tale of love and herbs. Sister of My Heart is less reliant on enchantment but no less enchanting as it tells the tale of two cousins born on the same day, their premature births brought on by a mysterious occurrence that claims the lives of both their fathers. Sudha is beautiful, Anju is not; yet the girls love each other as sisters, the bond between them so strong it seems nothing can break it. When both are pushed into arranged marriages, however, each discovers a devastating secret that changes their relationship forever. Sister of My Heart spans many years and zigzags between India and America as the cousins first grow apart and then eventually reunite. Divakaruni invests this domestic drama with poetry as she traces her heroines' lives from infancy to motherhood, but it is Sudha and Anju who give the story its backbone. Anju might speak for both when she says, "In spite of all my insecurities, in spite of the oceans that'll be between us soon and the men that are between us already, I can never stop loving Sudha. It's my habit, and it's my fate." Book lovers may well discover that reading Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is habit-forming as well. --Margaret PriorExtraitOne: SudhaThey say in the old tales that the first night after a child is born, the Bidhata Purush comes down to earth himself to decide what its fortune is to be. That is why they bathe babies in sandalwood water and wrap them in soft red malmal, color of luck. That is why they leave sweetmeats by the cradle. Silver-leafed sandesh, dark pantuas floating in golden syrup, jilipis orange as the heart of a fire, glazed with honey-sugar. If the child is especially lucky, in the morning it will all be gone."That's because the servants sneak in during the night and eat them," says Anju, giving her head an impatient shake as Abha Pishi oils her hair. This is how she is, my cousin, always scoffing, refusing to believe. But she knows, as I do, that no servant in all of Calcutta would dare eat sweets meant for a god.The old tales say this also: In the wake of the Bidhata Purush come the demons, for that is the world's nature, good and evil mingled. That is why they leave an oil lamp burning. That is why they place the sacred tulsi leaf under the baby's pillow for protection. In richer households, like the one my mother grew up in, she has told us, they hire a brahmin to sit in the corridor and recite auspicious prayers all night."What nonsense," Anju says. "There are no demons."I am not so sure. Perhaps they do not have the huge teeth, the curved blood-dripping claws and bulging red eyes of our Children's Ramayan Picture Book, but I have a feeling they exist. Haven't I sensed their breath, like slime-black fingers brushing my spine? Later, when we are alone, I will tell Anju this.But in front of others I am always loyal to her. So I say, bravely, "That's right. Those are just old stories."It is early evening on our terrace, its bricks overgrown with moss. A time when the sun hangs low on the horizon, half hidden by the pipal trees which line our compound walls all the way down the long driveway to the bolted wrought-iron gates. Our great-grandfather had them planted one hundred years ago to keep the women of his house safe from the gaze of strangers. Abha Pishi, one of our three mothers, has told us this.Yes, we have three mothers--perhaps to make up for the fact that we have no fathers.There's Pishi, our widow aunt who threw herself heart-first into her younger brother's household when she lost her husband at the age of eighteen. Dressed in austere white, her graying hair cut close to her scalp in the orthodox style so that the bristly ends tickle my palms when I run my hands over them, she's the one who makes sure we are suitably dressed for school in the one-inch-below-the-knee uniforms the nuns insist on. She finds for us, miraculously, stray pens and inkpots and missing pages of homework. She makes us our favorite dishes: luchis rolled out and fried a puffy golden-brown, potato and cauliflower curry cooked without chilies, thick sweet payesh made from the milk of Budhi-cow, whose owner brings her to our house each morning to be milked under Pishi's stern, miss-nothing stare. On holidays she plaits jasmine into our hair. But most of all Pishi is our fount of information, the one who tells us the stories our mothers will not, the secret, delicious, forbidden tales of our past.There's Anju's mother, whom I call Gouri Ma, her fine cheekbones and regal forehead hinting at generations of breeding, for she comes from a family as old and respected as that of the Chatterjees, which she married into. Her face is not beautiful in the traditional sense--even I, young as I am, know this. Lines of hardship are etched around her mouth and on her forehead, for she was the one who shouldered the burden of keeping the family safe on that thunderclap day eight years ago when she received news of our fathers' deaths. But her eyes, dark and endless-deep--they make me think of Kalodighi, the enormous lake behind the country mansion our family used to own before Anju and I were born. When Gouri Ma smiles at me with her eyes, I stand up straighter. I want to be noble and brave, just like her.Lastly (I use this word with some guilt), there's my own mother, Nalini. Her skin is still golden, for though she's a widow my mother is careful to apply turmeric paste to her face each day. Her perfect-shaped lips glisten red from paan, which she loves to

chew--mostly for the color it leaves on her mouth, I think. She laughs often, my mother, especially when her friends come for tea and talk. It is a glittery, tinkling sound, like jeweled ankle bells, people say, though I myself feel it is more like a thin glass struck with a spoon. Her cheek feels as soft as the lotus flower she's named after on those rare occasions when she presses her face to mine. But more often when she looks at me a frown ridges her forehead between eyebrows beautiful as wings. Is it from worry or displeasure? I can never tell. Then she remembers that frowns cause age lines and smoothes it away with a finger.Now Pishi stops oiling Anju's hair to give us a wicked smile. Her voice grows low and shivery, the way it does when she's telling ghost stories. "They're listening, you know. The demons. And they don't like little eight-year-old girls talking like this. Just wait till tonight . . ."Because I am scared I interrupt her with the first thought that comes into my head. "Pishi Ma, tell no, did the sweets disappear for us?"Sorrow moves like smoke-shadow over Pishi's face. I can see that she would like to make up another of those outrageous tales that we so love her to tell, full of magic glimmer and hoping. But finally she says, her voice flat, "No, Sudha. You weren't so lucky."I know this already. Anju and I have heard the whispers. Still, I must ask one more time."Did you see anything that night?" I ask. Because she was the one who stayed with us the night of our birth while our mothers lay in bed, still in shock from the terrible telegram which had sent them both into early labor that morning. Our mothers, lying in beds they would never again share with their husbands. My mother weeping, her beautiful hair tangling about her swollen face, punching at a pillow until it burst, spilling cotton stuffing white as grief. Gouri Ma, still and silent, staring up into a darkness which pressed upon her like the responsibilities she knew no one else in the family could take on.To push them from my mind I ask urgently, "Did you at least hear something?"Pishi shakes her head in regret. "Maybe the Bidhata Purush doesn't come for girl-babies." In her kindness she leaves the rest unspoken, but I've heard the whispers often enough to complete it in my head. For girl-babies who are so much bad luck that they cause their fathers to die even before they are born.Anju scowls, and I know that as always she can see into my thoughts with the X-ray vision of her fiercely loving eyes. "Maybe there's no Bidhata Purush either," she states and yanks her hair from Pishi's hands though it is only half-braided. She ignores Pishi's scolding shouts and stalks to her room, where she will slam the door.But I sit very still while Pishi's fingers rub the hibiscus oil into my scalp, while she combs away knots with the long, soothing rhythm I have known since the beginning of memory. The sun is a deep, sad red, and I can smell, faint on the evening air, wood smoke. The pavement dwellers are lighting their cooking fires. I've seen them many times when Singhji, our chauffeur, drives us to school: the mother in a worn green sari bent over a spice-grinding stone, the daughter watching the baby, keeping him from falling into the gutter. The father is never there. Maybe he is running up a platform in Howrah station in his red turban, his shoulders knotted from carrying years of trunks and bedding rolls, crying out, "Coolie chahiye, want a coolie, memsaab?" Or maybe, like my father, he too is dead.Whenever I thought this my eyes would sting with sympathy, and if by chance Ramur Ma, the vinegary old servant woman who chaperones us everywhere, was not in the car, I'd beg Singhji to stop so I could hand the girl a sweet out of my lunch box. And he always did.Among all our servants--but no, I do not really think of him as a servant--I like Singhji the best. Perhaps it is because I can trust him not to give me away to the mothers the way Ramur Ma does. Perhaps it is because he is a man of silences, speaking only when necessary--a quality I appreciate in a house filled with female gossip. Or perhaps it is the veil of mystery which hangs over him.When Anju and I were about five years old, Singhji appeared at our gate one morning--like a godsend, Pishi says--looking for a driver's job. Our old chauffeur had recently retired, and the mothers needed a new one badly but could not afford it. Since the death of the fathers, money had been short. In his broken Bengali, Singhji told Gouri Ma he'd work for whatever she could give him. The mothers were a little suspicious, but they guessed that he was so willing because of his unfortunate looks. It is true that his face is horrifying at first glance--I am embarrassed to remember that as a little girl I had screamed and run away when I saw him. He must have been caught in a terrible fire years ago, for the skin of the entire upper half of his face--all the way up to his turban--is the naked, puckered pink of an old burn. The fire had also scorched away his eyebrows and pulled his eyelids into a slant, giving him a strangely oriental expression at odds with the thick black mustache and beard that covers the rest of his face."He's lucky we hired him at all," Mother's fond of saying. "Most people wouldn't have because that burned forehead is a sure sign of lifelong misfortune. Besides, he's so ugly."I do not agree. Sometimes when he does not know that I am watching him, I have caught a remembering look, at once faraway and intent, in Singhji's eyes--the kind of look an exiled king might have as he thinks about the land he left behind. At those times his face is not ugly at all, but more like a mountain peak that has withstood a great ice storm. And somehow I feel we are the lucky ones because he chose to

come to us.Once I heard the servants gossiping about how Singhji had been a farmer somewhere in Punjab until the death of his family from a cholera epidemic made him take to the road. It made me so sad that although Mother had strictly instructed me never to talk about personal matters with any of the servants, I ran out to the car and told him how sorry I was about his loss. He nodded silently. No other response came from the burned wall of his face. But a few days later he told me that he used to have a child.Though Singhji offered no details about this child, I immediately imagined that it had been a little girl my age. I could not stop thinking of her. How did she look? Did she like the same foods we did? What kinds of toys had Singhji bought for her from the village bazaar? For weeks I would wake up crying in the middle of the night because I had dreamed of a girl thrashing about on a mat, delirious with pain. In the dream she had my face."Really, Sudha!" Anju would tell me, in concern and exasperation--I often slept in her room and thus the job of comforting me fell to her--"How come you always get so worked up about imaginary things?"That is what she would be saying if she were with me right now. For it seems to me I am receding, away from Pishi's capable hands, away from the solidity of the sun-warmed bricks under my legs, that I am falling into the first night of my existence, where Anju and I lie together in a makeshift cradle in a household not ready for us, sucking on sugared nipples someone has put in our mouths to keep us quiet. Anjali and Basudha, although in all the turmoil around us no one has thought to name us yet. Anjali, which means offering, for a good woman is to offer up her life for others. And Basudha, so that I will be as patient as the earth goddess I am named after. Below us, Pishi is a dark, stretched-out shape on the floor, fallen into exhausted sleep, the dried salt of tears crusting her cheeks.The Bidhata Purush is tall and has a long, spun-silk beard like the astrologer my mother visits each month to find out what the planets have in store for her. He is dressed in a robe made of the finest white cotton, his fingers drip light, and his feet do not touch the ground as he glides toward us. When he bends over our cradle, his face is so blinding-bright I cannot tell his expression. With the first finger of his right hand he marks our foreheads. It is a tingly feeling, as when Pishi rubs tiger-balm on our temples. I think I know what he writes for Anju. You will be brave and clever, you will fight injustice, you will not give in. You will marry a fine man and travel the world and have many sons. You will be happy.It is more difficult to imagine what he writes for me. Perhaps he writes beauty, for though I myself do not think so, people say I am beautiful--even more than my mother was in the first years of her marriage. Perhaps he writes goodness, for though I am not as obedient as my mother would like, I try hard to be good. There is a third word he writes, the harsh angles of which sting like fire, making me wail, making Pishi sit up, rubbing her eyes. But the Bidhata Purush is gone already, and all she sees is a swirl--cloud or sifted dust--outside the window, a fading glimmer, like fireflies.Years later I will wonder, that final word he wrote, was it sorrow?Two: AnjuSome days in my life I hate everyone.I hate Aunt Nalini for constantly telling Sudha and me about how good girls should behave, which is exactly the opposite of whatever we're doing at the moment. I hate the endless stories she insists on repeating about her childhood. I know those stories aren't true--no one could possibly be so virtuous, especially not her. Worst of all is when she makes up little rhymes with morals tagged onto them. Good daughters are bright lamps, lighting their mothers' name; wicked daughters are firebrands, scorching the family's fame.I hate her friends, all those waistless women with their hair pulled back in greasy buns who gather every afternoon in our drawing room to drink liters and liters of tea and eat too many sweets and show off their jewelry and knit sweaters with complicated ugly designs. And gossip, which is what they've really come to do.I hate Pishi when she puts on her patient smile and sits in the back of the hall on feast days, not participating, because widows mustn't. And if I tell her that's rubbish, why, just look at Aunt N or even my mother, she only pats me on the cheek and says, That's sweet of you, dear Anju, but you're too young to understand these things.Once in a while I hate even Mother because she believes so much in me. It's like a rock in the center of my chest, her certainty that I'm special. That I'll make something beautiful and brilliant out of my life and be a fitting daughter of the illustrious Chatterjees.Most of all--when I allow myself to think of him--I hate my father. I hate the fact that he could go off so casually in search of adventure, without a single thought for what would happen to the rest of us. I blame him for the tired circles under Mother's eyes, the taunts of the children at school because I don't have a father. None of it would have happened if he hadn't been so careless and got himself killed.But never Sudha. I could never hate Sudha. Because she is my other half. The sister of my heart.I can tell Sudha everything I feel and not have to explain any of it. She'll look at me with those big unblinking eyes and smile a tiny smile, and I'll know she understands me perfectly.Like no one else in the entire world does. Like no one else in the entire world will.Early in my life I realized something. People were jealous of Sudha and me.At first I thought it was because our family's so old and respected. But it couldn't be that, because

everyone knows that we've fallen on hard times, and the bookstore that Mother runs is the only source of income we have left. Aunt N is always lamenting in her melodramatic fashion that she's sitting on poverty's doorstep, and it's a good thing that her dear parents are departed, this way they're spared from seeing their daughter's sufferings. It couldn't be our possessions--Sudha and I don't have many. There just isn't the money for that, in spite of the long hours Mother puts in at the store and her determination to get us whatever a daughter of the Chatterjees must have. (That's something else I don't understand. My mother's the most intelligent person I know, and the most efficient. Still, the store never seems to make a profit, and each week she has to go over our household expenses in her careful, frowning way, trying to cut costs.)But finally I've figured it out. What people hate is how happy Sudha and I are when we're together. How we don't need anyone else.It's been this way ever since we were born. Even before I could walk, Pishi has told me, I'd crawl down the maze of corridors looking for Sudha, both of us shrieking with baby laughter when I finally found her. We'd amuse ourselves for hours at a time, playing with each other's toes and fingers and hair, and when Aunt N came to take Sudha away we'd throw such tantrums that she retreated, complaining bitterly to Pishi that she didn't know why she'd gone through all the trouble of labor and birthing, because it was as if she didn't have a daughter at all.All through childhood we bathed together and ate together, often from the same plate, feeding each other our favorite items: the crunchy brown triangles of parothas, fried eggplant, spongy-sweet rasogollah balls. Our favorite game was acting out the fairy tales Pishi told us, where Sudha was always the princess and I the prince who rescued her. At night we lay in twin beds in my room, though officially Sudha had a room of her own next to her mother's, a dark ugly mausoleum filled with old oil paintings and heavy mahogany furniture. We whispered and giggled until Pishi came and threatened us with separation. And when we had nightmares, instead of going to our mothers for comfort, we squeezed into one bed and held each other.As we grew older, the nuns who ran our convent school were concerned at our closeness. It wasn't normal, they said. It would stunt our development. They put us in different classes, but all it did was make me sulk. And it made Sudha cry. At recess I'd rush to meet her in the playground, feeling as though the morning had been a pillow held down over my face. When I saw her swollen eyes, rage burned my skin as if it had been rubbed with chili powder, and I'd want to kill someone. That's when we started planning our escapes. At first we complained of stomachaches or headaches so we could stay home. When that didn't work with Pishi, we sneaked out of the school compound at noon, along with the girls who went home for lunch, and spent the afternoon somewhere, anywhere, just so we could be together. We ate peanuts by the lake, walked through the animal market admiring the baby chickens, or rode the tram to the end of the line and back again just in time to meet Singhji at the school gate with our most guileless smiles.Somehow we'd believed we could get away with it. But of course our teachers complained, and the mothers called us into the study, that dank room filled with dog-eared ledgers and the smell of mildew, where we were summoned only when we were in real trouble. Aunt N insisted we should be given a good spanking, and even Mother, who's usually so reasonable--her face was white with anger. But when I explained everything, a strange, sad look came into her eyes. And although she told us that our teachers were right, and our education was too important to ruin in this way, the sternness left her voice, and she put out a hand to touch my shoulder.Later I overheard her telling Pishi that she worried about us. Loving someone so deeply was dangerous. It made you too vulnerable. And Pishi sighed and said, "Yes, we both know that, don't we?"The following morning Mother didn't go to the bookstore--something which hardly ever happened. Instead, she took us to school and, having waved good-bye to us, went into the principal's office. She never discussed with us what she said in there. But from the next week we were put back in the same class.All of this didn't make us popular at school, or later, when news traveled--as news always does in Calcutta--with our neighbors. "Oh those Chatterjee girls," people said, "forever acting like they're too good for our daughters. And Anju's mother, what was she thinking, indulging them this way? Nalini was right, a good beating would have taught them to behave. To obey rules. You simply wait and see, their troubles are just starting. Everyone knows what happens to girls with that sort of high-nose attitude."They didn't understand that Sudha and I never felt we were better than other people. It was just that we found everything we needed in each other. As Pishi says, Why go to the lake to fetch water when you have a well in your own house already?One time a neighbor lady said to me, "You'd better not waste all your time with that Sudha. You should be making friends with girls from other important families, especially those who have eligible older brothers with whom your mother could fix up a match for you." Then she'd added, in a low, confidential voice, "Why do you want to be around a girl who's so much prettier than you, anyway? Don't you know that when you're together people notice your bony legs and teeth braces more than they would have otherwise?"I

was so angry I couldn't stop myself from telling her it was none of her business. Besides, I didn't care if a bunch of silly people who didn't have anything better to do compared our looks. I already knew Sudha was more beautiful. Did that mean I should love her less?"So virtuous, aren't you, Miss High and Mighty," the neighbor woman said. "Watch out! The jealousy's going to hit you bad one of these days." She huffed away and I knew exactly what she'd go around telling everyone: what a junglee that Chatterjee girl has become, baap re, but what else can you expect when there's no man in the house.But yesterday was the worst of all.Yesterday Sarita Aunty, one of Aunt N's fat teatime friends who prides herself on her frankness, saw us entering the house hand in hand. Right away her eyebrows scrunched up in a horrendous frown. "Goodness," she said, "don't you girls ever do anything without each other? I swear, you're like those twins, what do they call them, born stuck together."I was about to say, So what if we are? But Sudha, who's the polite one, gave my hand a warning squeeze. Then she surprised me by saying, "Didn't you know, Aunty? We are twins."Sarita Aunty's nostrils quivered like an overwrought buffalo's. "Ei, girl, don't back-answer me," she said. "You think I don't know what's what? You're not even first cousins, let alone sisters. Your father was just some kind of distant relation of Anju's father's, nothing like a real brother."Odd, isn't it, how some people take pleasure in hurting others.I tried to say something scathing to shut her up, but I couldn't speak. If Mother had been there, she would have come to my rescue with one of her cool, calm sayings. Who are we to judge relationships, Sarita? Are we not all related in God's eye? But she was at the bookstore, and the words You're not even first cousins, let alone sisters pounded inside my head like hammers gone berserk.Aunt N looked as if someone had made her bite into a lemon. She's always going on and on about how much better things were in her father's house--servants and children knowing their place, even the cows producing, obediently, more milk than any of the neighboring cattle--until you would have thought she wished she wasn't related to us at all. But she doesn't like anyone else reminding her of her tenuous connection to the Chatterjees.Sarita Aunty went on triumphantly, "The two of you weren't even born at the same time, or under the same star either. Am I right, Nalini Di?"For a moment Aunt N acted as if she didn't hear the question. But then she couldn't resist the opportunity to be melodramatic. She gave a martyr's sigh and said, "You're quite right, because although Anju was born right at noon, Sudha"--here she looked accusingly at my cousin--"didn't come until midnight. What a labor I had with her! The pain was like a thousand jabbing knives! I screamed and screamed, and I was losing blood also. The midwife, a youngish woman, not experienced like the ones at my mother's confinements, was so frightened she said maybe they should send for the English doctor, although everyone knew he always cut open the mothers' stomachs and quite a few of them died of the fever afterward."We'd heard all this a hundred times. But Sudha looked up wide-eyed and said, as though it were a whole new story, "But he didn't have to do that to you, did he?""No . . .""That's because Anju saved you, isn't it?"Aunt N glared at her daughter. She didn't like being interrupted in the middle of an exciting story, particularly when she was the suffering heroine."Actually I think it was the lucky childbirth amulet I'd had the forethought to buy the month before from a traveling roja--""Tell what happened next," Sudha interrupted, surprising me again. Usually she's so quiet around her mother. "Tell about Gouri Ma."Aunt N clicked her tongue in annoyance and made like she'd stop. But after a moment she continued, because at her heart she loves a good story as much as we do."When your Gouri Aunty heard what was going on, she climbed out of bed. The midwife kept telling her she mustn't, because she'd lost a lot of blood too, but she paid her no attention. Somehow she walked all the way across the hall with Anju in her arms and put her face-down on my stomach. Anju lay there for a moment, draped over my huge belly--I was very big, even though it was only the end of the eighth month. I tell you"--here Aunt N gave another dramatic sigh--"I simply never recovered my figure afterward. Anyway, I guess Anju didn't like being there, because all at once she gave a loud cry, and right then I felt a contraction so strong it was like my backbone was snapping in two. Next thing I knew, the midwife was handing Sudha to me, saying It's another girl.""That's why Anju's my twin, don't you see?" Sudha said, and it seemed to me that she was talking to her mother as well as to Sarita Aunty. "Because she called me out into the world." And she put her arm around my neck, my usually quiet cousin, and smiled a brilliant smile that left the two women wordless.I couldn't have done it better myself.There are other reasons why I can never hate Sudha. Once I made a list of them.Because she's the most beautiful person I know, just like the princesses in the fairy tales Pishi tells us, with her skin that's the warm brown of almond milk, her hair soft like monsoon clouds all the way down her back, and her eyes that are the softest of all.Because she can put her hand on my arm when I'm ready to kick the world for its stupidity, and it's like a drink of clean cold water on a hot day.Because she believes in magic, demons and gods and falling stars to wish on, the way I never could.Because she's the

best storyteller, better even than Pishi. She can take the old tales and make them new by putting us in them. Us, Anju and Sudha, right in there among the demon queens and fairy princes and talking beasts.Because I called her into the world and, therefore, must do all I can to make sure she is happy.