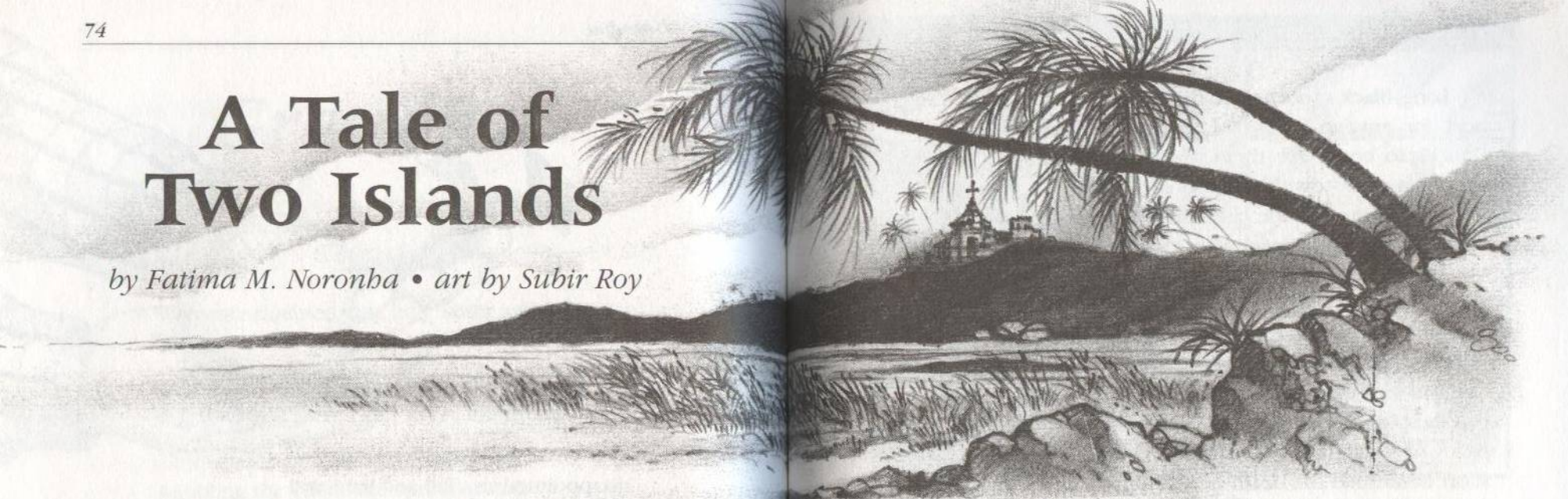


# A Tale of Two Islands

by Fatima M. Noronha • art by Subir Roy



ON EITHER SIDE of the river lie long rice fields. Or so they did, more than a hundred years ago, but there is some greenery yet. The river is now and was then, the Mandovi. If you stand today on the bridge, you can watch the sun dipping into the Arabian Sea behind Goa's capital city. All about you are the noise and fumes of continuous traffic, but if you turn round and look upstream, past the island of Chorão, to where the green begins to deepen, you see the enchanted island of Divar, where Conceição Barreto was born and grew to womanhood.

During the centuries when Goa was a Portuguese colony, this district was called *Ilhas*, the Islands. The Mandovi River and its tributaries formed a vast network of waterways around the hilly islands and among the rice fields and salt

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*Fatima M. Noronha's story is based on her own grandparents' courtship. The author herself lives in Goa and says that Divar is still an enchanted island accessible only by boats. Her short story "Ten Inches of Thread" appeared in the July/August 2001 issue of Cicada.*

pans of the flat stretches. The capital then was the emporium city of Old Goa, where all manner of trade flourished.

The Portuguese had come to stay in 1510, and during the next four and a half centuries of Portuguese rule, part of the local population of Hindus and Muslims converted to Christianity. Even now each parish in Goa has one day when its eligible members receive the sacraments, usually their first communion or confirmation. It used to be that a day was also chosen for mass baptism. All those baptized at a particular ceremony took on a Portuguese name and, often, their priest's surname.

Conceição Barreto was baptized in the big church atop Divar's steep hill. It was and is the only structure visible from a distance. A *pietà*, showing Mother Mary holding the dead body of her son Jesus, dominates its white facade. On that breezy hilltop Conceição often stood gazing over the tops of the mango, coconut, and jackfruit trees that hid the village houses, across the vast acres of rice fields between the village and the river on every side. The ramparts of trees at the water's edge defined her world.