

INTIZAR HUSAIN

Needles

SO SAD AND SILENT, once she began wandering aimlessly, she would simply wander forever, and when she made up her mind to sit down somewhere, there she would stay. The Giant asked her one day, "O Gulshan Khubi! What makes you sad?" Then she wept and said she felt melancholy when alone, and the Giant, feeling pity for her, took out a bunch of keys and handed it to her saying, "O lady, there are seven rooms in this castle, and there is a key for each one in this ring, and you are allowed to open six rooms, where you may entertain yourself to your heart's content. Do not, however, open the seventh room, for if you do so you shall only bring trouble upon yourself."

So when the Giant went out in the morning, she ventured joyously in the direction of the rooms, holding the keys with care. As she opened the rooms one by one, she encountered in each a new world. The first room contained so many diamonds and pearls that her eyes could not behold the sight. The next one was decorated with glittering attire; she tried on each of the many gowns and found herself comparable only to the sun and the moon. Another room offered her a garden in springtime where the flowers were pregnant with fragrances and the birds chirped incessantly. Thus witnessing the new world of each room she was joyous.

So the Giant went away every morning and every morning she ventured to the rooms, holding the keys. She would open each room one by one, behold their fresh and unique scenes, and be joyous. One day, however, she entertained the idea of opening the seventh room as well, but she remembered the Giant's warning and checked herself just in time.

Then it came to pass that she would unlock the six rooms every day and would think, after she had finished wandering through them, of the seventh room; but on the heels of that thought would follow the thought of the Giant's warning, and she would dismiss the idea of turning toward the seventh room. Sometimes her feet did carry her in that direction, but

on remembering the Giant she would turn back.

Then it came to pass that as soon as she opened the first room, the ritual of unlocking would trigger the thought of the seventh room. So she kept on opening the rooms and beholding the fresh and unique scenes, yet the picture of the seventh room would hover right before her thoughts and all the unique and fresh scenes would turn pale. But the Giant had forbidden her to open this room, and because of his forbidding she was afraid to open it, and because of his forbidding she felt drawn to it, for the forbidden fruits frighten us and draw us at the same time.

Suspended between fear and curiosity, the Princess would open the six rooms one by one, disenchantedly, and remain lost in the thought of the seventh room. The thought of the seventh turned all the colorful scenes of the other six rooms colorless, as though devoid of their essence, as if the essence of those scenes were locked inside the seventh room and she held the key to the seventh room and it was in her power to open it and the keys to all the rooms are always with us and the power to open them too is also within us and yet we don't open them and that power becomes our handcuffs. So she would arrive at the seventh door and contemplate opening it. A part of her heart said she must open it and see what secrets it might reveal. Yet the other whispered, Why invite trouble for nothing and be punished for doing something that was forbidden you!

Should I open it or should I not? was the question she struggled with every day. Every day she would arrive and stand there at the border of persuasion and dissuasion, and without having come to any resolution she would walk away from the door. She could not decide, and the dilemma pursued her. The seventh room beckoned to her like a question. She felt pulled toward it and ran away from it, like a person who is attracted to a vice yet tries to flee from it. However, now she was beginning to sense that the seventh room was walking beside her. Even when she ventured to the far corners of the castle or retired to her bedroom, bolting the door from inside, still she would feel as if the seventh room had sneaked in with her, or even inside her, and was now demanding to be opened.

Pondering whether to open the door or not, she would place the key in the lock as indecisiveness overcame her. The key to the lock was in her possession and to open it or not, too, was in her power and indeed what peace there is in powerlessness! and she cursed the day she had complained to the Giant of being lonely and taken into her own hands the power not to be lonely.

She had not brought the matter to any resolution, and yet when she walked toward the first room she found herself heading toward the sev-

enth room and when she tried to steer her feet away to the second room her feet carried her back to the seventh room and the key was in her control and her feet were not. So when she walked toward the first room she found herself before the seventh room and the seventh room swallowed her the way a blind desire consumes a person and she put the key into the lock the way a person accepts defeat from desire.

When she opened the room, she was extremely disappointed. There was nothing there. Ah yes, there was a man lying there as if dead. She was frightened at first sight, and backed away. But then curiosity as to who the stranger was and how and when he had come to be here got the better of her. Was he really dead? A thousand questions assailed her from all sides. Curious, she halted. Then it occurred to her that she should have checked to see if he was breathing or not. But as she approached, she stopped. She didn't have the courage to go any closer, though she felt she could not resist the urge to find out if he was dead or alive. Frightened, she touched his foot and discovered that it was warm; as she touched his sole, her hand also felt a needle. She plucked the needle out and wondered how it had come to be there. Overwhelmed with curiosity, she examined the rest of the foot and found more needles stuck in it. She was puzzled. Then she moved her hand up, feeling along his legs. They too were covered with needles. This puzzled her even more, and she was soon gripped by an intense desire to examine the whole body. So she searched the whole body, touching each and every part. The whole body was covered with needles.

Torn between curiosity and wonder, the Princess's fear dissipated. She felt compassion for the dead person. So she sat down by his feet and began plucking the needles out.

Although she had initially sat down to pluck the needles from the feet, she got so carried away that she kept on plucking them from the rest of his body—and what an extremely difficult task it is to pluck out needles stuck in flesh!—her fingertips were all bruised. However, she had set her heart on the task, and she remained sitting there plucking out the needles, for some tasks are such that they bring you pain and joy as well.

As she was plucking out the needles, the Princess considered that the man was already dead, and even if she plucked all the needles out, what would she gain in the end? She reflected many times that she was pursuing the task to no purpose, yet as this thought returned to her again and again, her fingers kept on plucking out the needles. It was a strange, mysterious pastime that had no purpose in sight, and still she gave herself over to the task as though walking into water over her head.

While she was plucking out the needles, she at last came to wonder who the stranger was, and then she remembered a story told to her by her nurse in which a Prince, who lived in the Giant's captivity, exclaimed one day in a sad, bored voice that he was lonely. Then the Giant was overcome with pity for the Prince and, explaining that the castle had four corners, handed the Prince a bow and arrows and said, Go to these three corners, hunt, and amuse yourself. But be mindful, don't venture to the fourth corner or you shall bring troubles upon you, and the Prince ventured to the three corners. There he hunted and amused himself. One day, however, he was swayed by the desire to venture to the fourth corner as well. He immediately remembered the Giant's warning, but the heart is a crazy beast and will do exactly what is forbidden it, and the mind in its wanderings is just as stubborn, for it wants to tread the very path that is forbidden it, and the way of the eye, too, is strange for it only longs to see that which is obscure. So without thinking, without weighing the matter, the Prince ventured to the fourth corner. What he saw there was a lushly green and fruit-laden garden stretched to the horizon before his eyes and a deer, beautiful as a woman, sprinting about. The Prince pursued it, setting his arrow into the side-ring of the bow. In a little while, however, the deer disappeared and the garden too vanished altogether. All that remained was a voice coming from a direction unknown; its source could not be located. The Prince tried to guess the direction of the voice and thus solve the mystery. The voice kept pulling him toward it, and he had hardly traveled any distance at all when the voice too faded completely away. Neither a human being nor any kin of one, be it bird, mammal, flower or leaf, was in sight. Before him lay an infinite desolation, where only a river flowed. The Prince was thirsty. Putting the bow and arrows aside, he sat down by the bank. He dipped in his hand and scooped up some water. Suddenly he saw two extremely fair arms emerge from the water and lunge at him. He moved back with a jerk. But as soon as he had got away he fell down and fainted, and when he regained consciousness there was neither river nor invitation nor arms. He found himself in the castle with the Giant turning crimson with anger, and the Giant stabbed needles into him all over his body and locked him inside the room, and the Princess thought that this was the same Prince and that he would wake up after all the needles had been removed, but then she thought that that was only a story and with that thought she dismissed the notion of him ever coming back to life.

So if this body is asleep for forever, then why am I freeing it? From what pain? The Princess looked at her bloodied fingertips and could not

understand where her painful journey was leading her. Though she could not understand why she was suffering this pain, she kept on removing the needles and her fingertips grew yet bloodier, and she began believing again that the stranger would wake up and come to life after all the needles had been plucked out, and now as she believed this she wondered no longer, nor felt any suspicion. She simply believed this and started plucking them out even faster. She was absorbed in the belief that the stranger would be resurrected as soon as the needles were removed, and from this conviction she believed that the needles were being plucked from her own body. When we pluck needles from other's bodies we pluck them from ours as well. Then have the needles been stabbed into my body too? She was struck with wonder. She seriously considered when and how the needles had been stuck into her flesh. But she remembered nothing. We walk with the needles stuck into us and don't know when or how they ever got there.

She plucked all the needles out. Her fingertips were drenched in blood, yet her body was as fresh as a flower, and she viewed the stranger from head to toe. The needles had been plucked from everywhere on the body except for the head; a wave of warmth swept across the body. Seeing this, the Princess was happy. She considered what to do next and decided to remove the ones on the head as fast as possible to bring the work to completion so that the stranger might come alive.

The Princess removed the needles from the head as fast as possible and by sunset she had removed them all. Except for the last one: the one pinned into the brain still remained, and the Princess viewed the Prince's body that was slowly coming to life, and then she viewed her own and felt she was opening up, as though the six doors had been opened, and she felt she stood at the threshold of the seventh room. She froze in wonder, for a fear, under its own power, began to settle in her heart. She looked at the waking Prince with fearful eyes and reflected upon her own opening up, and she debated with herself whether to remove the needle from the brain or not.

The moment of decision was hovering before her again. She couldn't decide whether to pluck out the needle or not. Confused, she held the needle between her fingertips and then reluctantly let it go, and the waking stranger grew still.

Mournfully, she looked at the still body of the stranger, then cast her eyes upon her bloodied fingertips. Precisely at this moment the walls of the castle shuddered and the Giant entered the castle, thundering and roaring. He punished the Princess for opening the seventh room by bam-

boo-whipping her nine times twenty. After snatching the ring of keys away from her, he locked up all the seven rooms and retired to his bedroom, thundering and roaring.

Since that day the Princess grew despondent once again. So sad and silent, once she began moving aimlessly, she would simply keep moving forever like a top and would wander stricken with melancholy through the entire castle. And once she sat down somewhere, there she would stay, and she wept and said that her loneliness suffocated her and the Giant glowered at her with his eyes like hot coals and left her alone as always, walking off thundering and roaring. □

—*Translated by Moazzam Sheikh*