

Title: The Migratory Sewing Needles – its survival in XXI century

Author: Adriana Freire Nogueira

Origin: University of Algarve/ CECH- University of Coimbra (Portugal)/ CIAC –
UAlg

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present the result of the research on the belief that needles can enter the blood stream and go to the heart, provoking death, or that they cross all body, which is related to a certain craftsmanship (seamstress) that is disappearing nowadays.

The migratory sewing needles¹

The Nobel prized author J.M. Coetzee, in *The Slow Man*², wrote the following about the main character of his novel:

«As a child, he remembered, he has told the story of a woman who in a moment of absent-mindedness stuck a tiny sewing-needle into the palm of her hand. Unnoticed, the needle climbed up the woman's veins and in the fullness of time pierced her heart and killed her. The story was presented to him as a caution against treating needles carelessly, but in retrospect it reads more like a fairytale. Is steel really antipathetic to life? Can needles really enter the bloodstream? How could the woman in the story have been unaware of the tiny metallic weapon cruising up her arm towards her armpit, rounding the axillar curve, and heading south towards its helpless, thudding prey? Should he be re-telling the story to Ljuba, passing on its cryptic wisdom, whatever that may be?»

After reading this, his questions still popped into my head:

1) This story seemed to me a belief narrative. Does it exist only in South Africa (the native land of Coetzee) or also in other places?

2) Do people still tell this story («Should he be re-telling the story»)?

¹ I want to thank Prof. José Joaquim Dias Marques, distinguished Portuguese folklorist scholar, for all the help in the writing of this paper.

² London, Vintage Books, 2006, pp. 55-56.

- 3) Do people consider this story a true story?
- 4) Do «needles really enter the bloodstream»?

I started my work by interviewing people (from my acquaintances and people that I met in social events) and people that had something to do with the profession of seamstress and dressmaker. To finish, I interviewed a cardiologist. Some of my informers were also physicians, but their statements are, in a way, independent from their profession, as we'll see.

In the versions I collected, two major groups can be found:

- A) A non narrative statement intended to moralize, to make people adopt an action, a behaviour that is considered the right one: people (especially children) must be careful with needles.
- B) A story with the elements that make us recognize it as a legend, and moreover a living legend:
 - a. The main character is a real person (even when the character is simply identified as «a woman», it is said to be «a friend of a friend», «a person I know», «a relative of a person I know»...
 - b. The action really happened in a real place.
 - c. Informants consider it true or possibly true.
 - d. When it happened (before our time or in our lifetime).

The 1st group (A) didn't interest me so much, because it's just an advice, as many others we can find, with an implied moral, but without a narrative that supports it.

The 2nd group (B) interests me very much, because the informants didn't consider that story as a tale, but as a true story. Even informants who told me that they didn't believe it, made their statement in a way which was not very sure (they express that in brief pauses or hesitations).

An important source for legends of this type («be careful with your behaviour») is the internet, through e-mails. Every day we receive this kind of messages, but, until

now, I found none about the migratory needles. One hypothesis for the inexistence of e-mails with this legend can be because sewing at home is not a common activity anymore (in Portugal and in other countries).

In the blogosphere, in Portuguese language, I found the narration of this legend in Brazil. The author of that blog showed to be aware of the structure of a belief narrative: a story told in an appropriate environment (around a fireplace, for instance, or at those gatherings at night with family or friends), about something that happened to a person known by a friend of one of the narrators.

I also found that this story has been briefly analyzed by a physician, in the beginning of 20th century, almost in a folkloristic way.

Answering to the questions that I asked in the beginning of this paper, 1) if this narrative existed outside South Africa, I could say easily «yes». Informants from Portugal and from some Portuguese ex-African colonies (Mozambique and Cape Verde) confirmed they had heard that also. I found it also in Spain, Brazil and in the United States of America. I suppose that I'll find out that it exists in many other countries.

As for the second question (2) Do people still tell this story?), I found out that not so much as before. A female informant of 40 years old (a professional cook), admits that she tells her son to be careful with needles, but she doesn't tell him the whole story as she was told.

(Example A) I always believed in this situation. Even today, when I deal with needles and my son wants to touch them, I always tell him to be careful - and my needles in the sewing box are always with a thread on - even if they are stuck in a pad or a cloth, they have always a thread - and I say to my son «don't touch» and be careful, because the needle must always have a string.³

A retired grammar schoolteacher, in her early fifties, when she was asked whether she had taught the story to her daughter, she couldn't remember if she had, although she believed she had, because she knew a person who had a needle in the

³ All informants here mentioned spoke in Portuguese and the translations are my responsibility.

hand.

(Example B) *I - ... I do not know ... I do not know if I ever said that but perhaps I did it. I do not remember if I taught her that... I do not know ...*

C – And do you believe in it?

[Silence]

I - I believe in it ... let me think ... I know one person who had a needle in here, for years and years.

C – When you say «In here» you mean the thumb.

I - Yes, the thumb. We looked and the needle never moved from the hand. She says she has a needle in there and we really touched, and it felt like there was a needle.

And we jump to the third question: 3) Do people consider this story a true story?

As this woman did, some believe in it, because they knew someone with a needle inside the body or they trust the person who told them the story as a true story.

In the group of the total believers, one of the informants told me that she knew the girl's father to whom this happened, but, unfortunately, she vividly denied giving me his name, so, I have not been able yet to get closer to the beginning of this narrative.

This informant is the only one that really knew the main character of the story. The informant is female, 43 years old, has a university education and works as a bank manager.

(Example C) *I know a true story, by chance, about a needle that has entered in a child, a baby, and stayed in the heart. This happened when she was a baby. She was operated... it was discovered at age 16, through radiography, and it was there all these years. A heart surgery was made, and the needle was removed.*

C – And you know this person, you know this girl?

I – Yes, I met her already an adult.

C – It was she who told you this story?

I – It was her father. I met the girl. The father is the builder of the building where I live. He has three children, to one of them, the daughter, this happened. This was a true story.

C – It was a sewing needle?

I – Yes, that entered.

C – And it was through the hands, the feet?

I – I do not know whether it was in the legs or the arms ... I do not remember. I honestly do not remember. It went directly to the heart and stayed there.

C – For years.

I – Years. (...)

C – The father of that girl told you this story ... and do you remember the purpose of what, why did he tell you that?

I – It is because he is a gentleman who in fact had no luck. The first, the eldest daughter...they had an accident, the couple had an accident with their children and the girl went... no good ... for her future...

Then the other daughter, as baby, that was pricked by that needle; then his son died in a motorcycle accident. I mean, basically, he was a man with so much passion for life ... we spoke of accidents...

C – And is this girl okay now?

I – I think so.

C – Now, is this girl more than 20 years old?

I – Yes, yes. She was about 14 or 15 years old when it [the needle] was caught ... by chance.

C – No one knew she had it there.

I – No, no. She lived and grew (...) I do not know if the needle had rust... but it was through another x-ray that it was detected and, in fact, she had even been opened and had a heart surgery.

In this narrative, the informant is really sure that the story is true. She couldn't remember whether the needles entered through the hands or the feet, but she didn't doubt that it happened, through the leg or the arm, to a person she knew, and in a particular place and time: it happened in Loulé (a town in Southern Portugal) and the

surgery was made at the hospital of the nearby town of Faro, a few years ago (less than 10).

My informant got acquainted with this narrative in a favorable environment to these stories: she had a huge car accident many years ago and she was unable to walk for a while. The theme of the conversation she had with her parents and the man who told the needle story (below) was about terrible things that happen to children. The people who took part in this meeting wanted to tell their horrible experiences and he, definitely, was the winner of the most unfortunate person (more than her parents, since all his three children suffered a horrific destiny). The morbid pleasure of these meetings, when adults compare disgraces among themselves that happen to them or to someone they know, are very efficient in the spread of these narratives, especially when there are youngsters listening.

In the version I got through the blogosphere, told by a Brazilian woman⁴, this environment also exists, stressed by the fact that sewing is mainly a female activity. The majority of the informants confirmed that they learned the story from their mothers, grandmothers or aunts, and some of them said they were descendents of seamstresses.

(Ex.D) I am the daughter of a seamstress (...). And the danger was materialized with spreading a story that really frightened with the very sight of a needle. I still cannot handle needles out of place.

My mother, grandmother, aunts and cousins taught me straight the needle story. They said, like in those secret stories that occupying the female circle of the clan, that, if a needle – which can happen in a household accident, how much eschatological it can be – penetrate the body, it would run through the bloodstream until it reached the heart. And they gave me examples of a girl, the daughter of that so-and-so, who was married to another so-and-so, and was relative to that guy that used to be a visit of the house of my grandfather ...

A Portuguese informant, female, 53 years old, university professor, also learned

⁴ <http://alfazema13.spaces.live.com/blog/cns!5015D6D78E41F0D8!1270.entry>. Page viewed the 24th October 2009.

the story from her mother (that used to make her dresses):

(Example E) *I – I remember very vaguely already ... My mother did ... you know ... sew and made clothes for me ... and then ... I remember she said that we need to be careful with the needles, because the pin had a little head, therefore, it could hold, but the needle, if it went into the body, it could go on as far as the heart and kill the person.*

C – And how many years ago have you been told this?

I – Around forty years ago... forty something... forty-seven, maybe.

C – (...) And you have never heard anyone else telling this story?

I – Well, my grandmother... I think it has also had passed from my grandmother to my mother.

In the majority of the versions, needles went into the bloodstream through the arms or legs, specifically hands or feet, although with small variations.

The version I have from Cape Verde was given to me by a young male physician (in his late twenties) that believes that it's easy to accept that as true, although his studies in medical school made him know the impossibility of this story. In his version, the needle was swallowed:

(Example F) *C – Our mothers used to tell these stories. So this story, did you hear it as a child or as an adult?*

I – As a teenager.

C – And what did they told you, specifically?

I – I was told that a lady who worked as a seamstress swallowed a sewing needle, and it ended in the bloodstream [the informant laughs].

C – (...) ... and this story was told to you by someone that knew the person to whom that had happened or was it just a generic story, whose character was unknown?

I – It was told by someone who knew that person.

C – Someone who knew this lady who swallowed the needle, not stung, swallowed.

I – Swallowed [laughs].

C – Yeah. Thank you. (...)

I – You're welcome. But back then I hadn't yet studied medicine, and it crossed my mind that it could be true.

C – So, it was only after you have studied in medical school that your opinion changed. So, do you think it's normal that people believe in that?

I – Yes, I think so.

An informant from Seville (Spain), physician at the Hospital of Faro (Southern Portugal), female, in her fifties, confirms that the story was told when she was a child, by her mother:

(Example G) I - Our mothers, when we were children, used to tell that we shouldn't play with needles, because they stayed stay right away in the blood, went to the heart and they could be trapped there, and we could die. It was a story they told...

C - And now do you believe that story?

I - I do not! [With emphasis]

(...) I saw, I've seen needles in the body, in the breast I've seen needles, stuck in the body (...) voluntarily ... (...) and never walked. They remain always there.

C - Stick and stay?

I - Stick and stay, of course. And never go into the bloodstream, ever. Never. At least, I have never seen them. I have seen them stuck there and remaining there. Inside, but they are there; they do not change their location.

Another variation of this story tells that needles enter the body, run all the way through it and get out at the same point. Let's see an example of that. The informant is a female nurse, 24 years old:

(Example H) C – What did you hear people telling?

I – So ... but this was a story I heard older people saying that, if you poked a needle, the needle will go through all your body and, at the end of a week, it will be at the same place. That's it, nothing else.

C – So it was not as dangerous as some people, because those people say that it goes into the heart.

I – I do not know; I do not know.

C – And at that time, did you believe it?

I – No.

C – Even in your childhood, you never believed?

I – No. It felt it weird.

The first mention I could find of this particular version goes back to 1906. In fact, in that year an article was published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*⁵, which quotes several versions of this legend and tries to show its implausibility. As we can infer, newspapers, back to 1906, were a source of the spreading of those stories, a source important enough to be mentioned in an article of a medical journal.

The irony of the author of this article (in phrases like: «*a wonderful story*», «*a really talented correspondent*») suggests he doesn't believe in the story, curiously felt as an offence by other doctors, who later wrote to the director. Let me also stress the historical importance of this article, which at a very early date discusses a legend which clearly doesn't corresponds to usual legend prototype that used to get the attention of scholars by that time, I mean legends having a Medieval and/or rural background.

This article, better said: this Editorial, goes like this:

Every now and then in the newspapers there is a wonderful story of a needle that entered the body of a person many years ago and, after remaining there, giving absolutely no sign of its presence, makes its appearance at a more or less distant point and is removed. The favorite newspaper item is that it entered a finger of one hand and came out of one of the fingers of the other. When a really talented correspondent reports the story, the needle always comes out of the finger corresponding to the one which it entered on the other side. Occasionally, as was recently the case in the New York Herald, a correspondent suggests that such migrations deserve careful study, because they may point to some law of circulation within the tissues as yet imperfectly understood or perhaps not even guessed at in present-day medicine.

⁵ ((*JAMA*), 1906; XLVII (20):1659-1660.

A story that recently went the rounds was a variant on the old-time needle migration, because the traveling object was that interesting element of romantic detail—a serpent's fang. This, after having supposedly entered into the thumb of the right hand, came out on the left. Unfortunately for the most sensational part of the story the actual details showed that a portion of the fang had entered one thumb some years ago, and, its presence having been unsuspected and having created no reaction, —it was the fang of a non-poisonous serpent—gradually worked its way to the surface of the same thumb, producing a small inflammatory area in the process, and found its way out.

Of course, newspapers will continue to print such stories because it is copy that certain readers feast on with avidity... Occasionally, when needles have appeared in the abdominal wall there is no doubt that they have been swallowed, though sometimes such appearances are accounted for on the supposition that a needle may have found its way beneath the skin of the hand or the foot. Although there is no definite memory of such an occurrence at first, after the person has thought over the matter for some time, some incident is remembered that seems to suggest that such an incident may have occurred. Here is a chance for studies in suggestion and psychology as well as in surgery and physiology, but the subject deserves more accurate attention than has hitherto been given it.

This Editorial received a few replies in the subsequent issues of the *JAMA*, until its editor ended it at issue no. 24 (the original article was published in issue no. 20). These letters to the editor were from other doctors that asserted that the story was true, but reading their accounts one can see that there was no proof of migration through the bloodstream.

And now we arrive to the last question I asked in the beginning of this paper, 4) Do «needles really enter the bloodstream»? I can answer «yes», needles can enter the bloodstream, but, still, not the in the way as it is narrated in this legend.

I interviewed a cardiologist at Faro's Hospital and asked him the following questions:

- Can needles enter the bloodstream?

- If so, can they lodge in the heart?
- Can other foreign objects (such as glass debris, e. g.) enter the bloodstream?
- How does it work the so-called migration of foreign bodies?

He explained the way our blood circulation works and, basically, he said a needle (or a very small object, with a tiny diameter) can enter into the bloodstream, but, although it can go to the heart through the veins (never through the arteries), it can never continue, because the lungs would stop it.

So, a needle can get into the heart cavities, but the maximum it can reach, after that, it's the lungs. Nevertheless, when a needle gets into the heart, it usually gets there directly from outside. Migration has physiological rules, as the one I just mentioned – the lungs working as a filter – fact that would prevent a complete run around the body.

Recent articles⁶ studied these migrations and one of them⁷ even quoted what they called a «popular saying»: «FB walk to the heart», in a clearly acknowledge of this narrative in study, or, at least, of the «non narrative statement intended to moralize», mentioned in the beginning of this paper (since the medical paper doesn't mention a narrative at all).

This legend has affinities with the one mentioned in Brunvand's *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*, under the title «Earwig Stories»⁸. Here, we have an insect, this earwig, which enters through one ear and gets out through the other, as the version of the migratory needles that also cross the body and get off on the opposite side they have entered.

Magicians took advantage of the humoristic possibilities of this kind of migration legends. In the *corpus* I was able to gather, this kind of variation is present in only one version, that I called «the magic version» i.e., a magician used a variation of the migratory needles to his show. Here it's not a needle or a serpent fang, but a piece of

⁶ See notes 10 and 11.

⁷ See note 10.

⁸ Jan Harold BRUNVAND (2002). *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*. W.W Norton & Company, New York / London: 128.

glass.

Pete Firman, a British magician, tells this story:

Seven years ago, my friend (...) was thrown through the windows. (...) Time passed, the scars healed. (...) A piece of glass has been left in his leg. (...) He went to the doctors, they CAT-scan, that revealed a small piece of glass on the soft tissue of his biceps. This was a really rare case. Something the doctors call «migration». You see, the piece of glass had literally pushed its way around his body from his leg up to his arm and it take nearly 7 years. (...) Let's do magic trick.

And he made a piece of glass to «migrate» from his own leg to his chest in 7 seconds.

In the video⁹, we can consider the elements that made me include it as a variation of the main version:

- It has a story, a narrative, which has a precise subject («my friend») and happened at a precise time («seven years ago»).
- The believe here is subverted, since it's presented as true what he's going to do, but the circumstances (a magician/comedian show) make us realize that what we have is the assumption of disbelief, when he pronounces the words «Let's do magic trick. »

To conclude, I'll highlight a few points:

- 1 – The informants believe that needles can migrate into the heart and remain there for years.
- 2 – Doctors interviewed as informants do not believe in that (that needles can migrate into the heart and remain there for years). They don't believe in migration at all or they do believe in migration, but short distances ones. They also believe that needles enter directly into the heart, but as the result of an accident or self-inflicted injury.
- 3 – This is a subject that called the attention to physicians since more than one hundred years. Even today, doctors show that they are aware of this believe (the bold

⁹ Excerpts from video viewed the 24th October 2009 at:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMmYeBFzMIM>

is mine): «Fixation of foreign bodies (FB), in the mucosa, can favor its migration, giving origin to **the popular saying: “FB walk to the heart”**»¹⁰

4 – The needles do migrate and there is a general disbelief about that, even among interviewed doctors and nurses. Needles (and pins) can be inserted through body tissue and can be swallowed.

In a relatively recent medical article¹¹ it is said: «It should also be considered that needles inserted into body tissue have a tendency to migrate from a distant part of the body via the venous route and eventually penetrate the heart». This statement became more interesting when compared to point number two, where doctors and nurses that were interviewed denied or were very suspicious about that possibility.¹²

5 – The informants make no distinction between the two kinds of beliefs that are present in these narratives:

a) the belief that a needle can enter and navigate in the bloodstream – and this is a reality, proved by medical cases profoundly studied, that many people, even doctors, don't believe.

¹⁰ MAMEDE, Rui Celso Martins et al., «Do foreign bodies migrate through the body towards the heart?», *Brazilian Journal Of Otorhinolaryngology* 75 (2) March/April 2009:195-9. Portuguese version: MAMEDE, Rui Celso Martins et al. «Corpos estranhos caminham pelo corpo em direção ao coração?» *Rev. Bras. Otorrinolaringol.* [online]. 2009, vol.75, n.2, pp. 195-199. ISSN 0034-7299. doi: 10.1590/S0034-72992009000200007.

¹¹ Sossio Perrotta, Angelo Perrotta, Salvatore Lentini, «In patients with cardiac injuries caused by sewing needles is the surgical approach the recommended treatment», *Interactive CardioVascular and Thoracic Surgery* 10 (2010) 783–792. <http://icvts.ctsnetjournals.org/cgi/content/full/10/5/783>

¹² Another example: Portuguese doctor, female, by her 50ies:

(Example I) C - *And at that time [when her mother told her] did you believe in it, when she told you the story?*

[Brief silence and hesitation]

C – *Do you believe that a needle can enter the bloodstream?*

[Brief silence]

I - *No [hesitant]. Hardly.*

C - *But at the time did you believe?*

[Brief silence / hesitation of the informant]

C - *And your mother? Do you think your mother believed?*

I - *Maybe she believed. Maybe she believed. In fact, for her to tell the story it was because she believed, if not, she wouldn't tell the story.*

b) the believe that a needle can enter and navigate in the bloodstream, circulate through all the body and get out at the same spot (as example H) or at the other side (like the example mentioned in the Editorial *JAMA*, from 1906).