

INGMAR BERGMAN GETS A PARKING TICKET

For the last month I've been watching almost nothing but Ingmar Bergman movies. They're not a lot of laughs. The Criterion Collection has released most of the early Bergman from the late 1940s and early 1950s —titles like *Torment*, *Crisis*, and *Thirst* — and even in these early films you see those half-shadowed close-ups of women's faces; dark, frightened eyes staring directly into the lens. In their ribbed sweaters, the adolescent males are uniformly underweight and hopelessly tortured by love. And all those mirthless ministers! They stare vacantly at the empty walls of their churches, facing one more Godless winter. I watched *The Seventh Seal* again: Max von Sydow challenging Death over a chessboard at the edge of the sea. After awhile I don't even notice these movies are in Swedish.

It was in this state of psychological bleakness that I ventured into downtown Metuchen and got a parking ticket in the New Street lot behind Main Street.

When I pulled in, the meter still had seven minutes remaining. I entered the back door of Metuchen News, past the bleach, baked beans, Raid, Meow Mix, and the single can of chopped clams. (I imagined a desperate, double-parked consumer running in: "I need Raid and chopped clams! Fast!") I bought my Thursday *New York Times*, then walked three doors down to the Jewelry Doctor to get my pocket watch repaired. I like the sign outside the door: *Repairs While You Wait (in most cases.)* I thought real doctors should have the same sign. *Health Completely Restored (in most cases.)* "It's a nice watch," said Mike, one of the jewelry doctors. He wore a black tee shirt and an amulet around his neck in the shape of a spade playing card. The spade

represented that he was also a professional magician. (And, indeed, with his fellow conjuror Gino, he was about to perform the Vanishing Two Hundred Dollars trick.) My only consolation was that I argued them down from \$250. (“That’s \$200 unless I have to order a part,” said Gino.)

I cut through Pyramid Health, pausing to buy a bottle of CuraMed herbal pain relievers for Lynn who had recently reported: “Every single inch of me hurts.” And then, as I left, I saw Death standing in the parking lot, in front of my white Honda. He wore a yellow short-sleeved shirt with Metuchen Police stenciled on it, and he had a vacant, even despairing look. “*Vänta! Sluta!*” I called out. (The rest of this scene is in Swedish; I’ve translated for the ease of readers.) “Wait! That’s my car!” The paper ticket was already emerging from his handheld device.

We stood together in front of meter 905, as he grimly handed me the ticket, printed on smooth, thin paper: *185-35A (D) Parked Over Metered Time Limit (Off Street) Payable Amount: \$39.00.*

“Thirty-nine dollars! I missed you by *30 seconds*. I was right here. Look, I was shopping downtown. Thirty seconds and you’re telling me I owe \$39?”

“If you’d called out to me across the lot, I might have stopped. But now it’s already printed.”

“I *did* call out. So, you tell ’em you made a mistake. That’s possible, right? What would be so difficulty to tell them you made a mistake?”

He avoided my gaze, shook his head. “I’m not risking my job for that.”

“How would that be risking your job? Look, here’s the bag from the health food store. I’m a Metuchen resident! I’m supporting *local* merchants. And for that I’m getting charged \$39?”

For a second I thought he might soften.

“Look at the back of my car,” I finally said. “I’ve got a Metuchen PBA sticker! I support the police.”

The sun moved behind a cloud, and the policeman suddenly appeared enveloped in a black shroud.

I said: “I want God to stretch out his hand, uncover his face and speak to me.”

“Perhaps there isn’t anyone,” said the policeman.

“Then life is a preposterous horror!” I replied. “(In most cases!)”

And then, as Death moved on to ticket the next meter, I made one last bid for a reprieve, and, if not a reprieve, then at least for a memorable exit line. “What I wish for you is that someday, down the road, when you find yourself in this same situation, that the person you’re up against turns out to be significantly more benevolent than you.”

Death remained implacable.

As if this weren't enough, it's turned out that my watch needs a new main-spring. It will cost me \$250.

Lynn had a reaction to CuraMed, and I ended up buying that can of Raid after finding wasps on my front porch.

I should have stayed home and watched *Torment* again.